



# IN THE REALM OF THE BOSSBITCH

AN ESSAY BY KATIE CERCONE



From underground raves to appearances on the main stage of global internet culture the goddess embodied within the Female MC reminds us to sing, dance and listen to her essential stories. From Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill and Rah Digga to Lil Kim and Nicki Minaj, women in hip hop embody the contemporary archetypes of Goddess Worship. Our High Priestess of the beat; the Female MC is archetypal and trance inducing. She reigns over and is beyond language. Staking her claim within the initially male dominated world of hip hop, she is becoming increasingly visible and taking many different forms. The work of artists Noelle Lorraine Williams and Marcia Jones underscores the parallels between hip hop - a holistic folk art born in the South Bronx in the 1970s amongst Black and Latino youth - and spiritual lineages outside the mainstream. Female MC's new to the scene, such as Angel Haze, and those associated with Brooklyn's queer underground, including BONES and Cunt Mafia, have built on earlier



For male and female artists alike, hip hop's reach now encircles the planet, staining the world with a transnational, spiritual swag; an honest speech aimed at power structures speaking truth to power that far exceeds its original local resonances. The nation language of hip hop, an earth-based wisdom vernacular, has many links to shamanist blending dialects from around the world. Like a "howl, or a shout, or a machine gun or the wind or a wave," it is both contemporary and ancient.<sup>[i]</sup> Shamanism – an umbrella term for a variety of spiritual practices involving dance, song, ritual and the imbibing of medicinal plants to achieve altered states of consciousness and access to the spirit world. It exists across cultures as a subterranean, "exotic" discourse framed against the mores of the modern patriarchal state apparatus. Hip hop is a vehicle for the expression of a supernatural political protest drawing on the powers of ancient cosmic medicine.

What does it mean to be a female shaman, rapper, verbal medicine woman; one who liquidates the frozen languages of patriarchal culture into glittering spectacles and cryptic mystical syllables? According to anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, the local shaman is a wo/man, "a poet who replenishes selfhood at the abyss of the maternal."<sup>[ii]</sup> In her ethnography (1979-1986) of a medicine women known as *Diamond Queen*, Tsing wrote about shamanic society at the fringes of the Indonesian Islamic state. She describes the female shaman as one who "reconnect(s) people to health-maintaining social and cosmic networks."<sup>[iii]</sup> Like the Female MC who mirrors male characteristics of dominance, Tsing explains that the Diamond Queen, rather than define herself as being "against power," chooses to perform opposition through "mimicry, hyperbole and distortion of her [own] attempts to get closer to power."<sup>[iv]</sup> Tsing emphasizes that shamans are border-crossers, ambiguously situated between typical gender constructions, often empathically using a dual perspective. This epitomizes cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldua's utopian "consciousness of the borderlands." Shamanic leaders, within and across the interests of nations, classes, local communities and gender, claim their bodies as a site of cultural production at "the crossroads of power and difference."<sup>[v]</sup> Hip hop as neo-shamanic ritual is

sacred medicine upending colonial imperialism's spectacles of violence and



Spitting rhymes represents the first principle of shamanic power: using words to “build a framework of perception” thus creating an “empowered cognitive space.”<sup>[vi]</sup> Talk is a profound type of political travel “intended to defend a community.”<sup>[vii]</sup> The storyteller defines the aspects of power on which her agency depends, and the “glorified body of the chant” emerges as a symbolic living entity for all who listen. Hip hop’s call and response is musical strategy in which audience and listener become a “unified whole” and “the audience’s linguistic and paralinguistic responses are necessary to co-sign the power of the speaker’s rap.”<sup>[viii]</sup>

The shamanic impulse in hip hop has many visages. One face responds specifically to the complex effects of the institution of slavery on subsequent generations of women. For centuries, Western society, including leading religious and political institutions in the United States, has pitted itself *against* the “Dark Female Continent” of earth-based Goddess wisdom. From colonial times through the present, any trace of Black Female Divinity equates to “a threat to the [White] empire.”<sup>[ix]</sup> The colour black, associated with death or evil in Christian iconography, was in old Europe the colour of fertility and the soil. Today’s feminist archeo-mythologists such as Marija Gimbutas equate the Black Madonna with the Earth Mother.<sup>[x]</sup>

Artist Noelle Lorraine Williams, observes that there remains to this day a disconcerting lack of Black Madonna/ Female Goddess figures within African American women’s religious culture and history. In her work, she positions the Female MC as just such a figure, and is careful to tell her whole story in all its complexity.<sup>[xi]</sup> One of Williams’ art works is “Latifah, Lauryn, Rah Digga: Newark’s Babylon Sisters, Spiritual Battleground,” a lecture on the Female MC she performs dressed in a 6ft. long hand-beaded golden “titty apron.” The construction and materials of her apron juxtapose associations of the stereotypes of the “Mammy” versus the “Vixen.” Claiming the auction block as the first black performance space Williams explains, “You’re standing on a piece of stone. People are coming up to you and sticking their fingers in your

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auction block to MTV.

Within African cosmology, as in shamanism, to dance is to embody spirit. Sexuality, trance, and the healing use of vital sexual energy in dance cohere in shamanic activity<sup>[xiii]</sup> as in hip hop; despite the way in which white colonial imperialism and slavery have served to truncate and distort the purest expressions of diasporic African transcendental culture we perceive spectrally in popular music today. Artist Marcia Jones explores Yoruban Undergoddess of Love and Intimacy, Oshun, as a “displaced” figure within popular culture. Jones correlates the way rappers worship the female body in strip clubs to the way men of the Vodun religion pray at the foot of an altar, “The way they would put money down – call me twisted – but, they made it rain on these mothafuckin altars.”<sup>[xiv]</sup>

Williams began to research the female MC when she noticed the disconcerting lack of airtime women garnered in her native Newark, New Jersey; despite its rich history of local, commercially successful iconic female rappers like Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill and Rah Digga. Through studying their autobiographies, public interviews and lyrical stylings Williams began to assess the “liberatory” potential of the various spiritual leanings characterizing their first albums. During that earlier era, many hip hop folks were embracing spiritual paths as “symbols of black determination and power.” Williams’s aim is to articulate a black aesthetics of spirituality beyond the realm of commercial strategy and integrate African American Women’s history into public record without erasing or diluting its many nuanced facets.<sup>[xv]</sup> Her work highlights how even today the black Female MC remains doubly marginalized as female in a male dominated industry, and black in a white male dominated (heterosexist) marketplace.

The Female MC’s epicene frippery and raunchy language anchors her to the

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tiresome stereotypes yoking historical legacies of sexual slavery from the ongoing pulse of the entertainment industry. Recall MC Angel Haze rapping “Rather be a dick than a swallower,” a riff of Kanye West’s *New Slaves*. A commercially successful female MC must be nasty enough to talk about oral and anal and pretty enough to pass as Barbie. In contrast to Angel Haze, Lil Kim takes a different tack, in her song, “The JumpOff,” co-written by Christopher Wallace, she outwardly boasts of her oral skills, “the ill deep throat.” Lil Kim sings about herself as Miss Queen Bee, a “Black [Panther] Barbie dressed in Bvlgari” there to “Spread love... that’s what a real mob do.” She adds, “Her presence is felt like a Black Panther movement,” linking previous movements of guerilla-style black protest with the subversive style, posturing and collective empowerment of today’s hip hop nation. Within Lil Kim’s speech exists a clear commitment to radical unity, love for the crew and the local community – “If ya rep for ya hood than make some noise!” Chosen family, crew and regionalism in hip hop are about territory and belonging. Williams observes that successful MCs shout out to the holy lands of hip hop the “real places of black consciousness,” calling out “Brooklyn!” or “Bronx!” in their rhymes.

Above all else a shaman must draw and hold an audience, particularly when it comes to “claiming space in the capitalist engines”<sup>[xvi]</sup> of America. Tricksterism and visual distraction lure and mesmerize a crowd. Shamans commonly adorn themselves with mirrors and bells to immerse their patients in audio-visual medicine, a “mystical union of glittering light and shimmering sound.”<sup>[xvii]</sup> Given the use of shiny objects in shamanic practice, can we reorient bling toward the post-colonial toil of mind-body-soul emancipation? Within the mirage of bells, whistles, booty and bling, the audience of the Female MC are mesmerized and open to the therapeutic value of gender and racial mimicry. In pre-patriarchal religions, the gender-blending “queer” body was highly honored in society as a seer, healer, and transcendental figure. Pop artists who innovate (look at A\$AP Rocky as next wave Harlem Dandy, or Nicki Minaj’s male alter ego, or Miley Cyrus as a butch dyke ass-worshipper, or the growing underground scene of “queer” rappers like Le1f, House of Ladosha and Mykki Blanco) embody this Goddess-trickster archetype, always socially ambiguous and always politically astute. Since the male aspect is currently privileged, the Female MC, as contemporary shaman, must use her “masculine” reputation for sexual assertion,

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MCs are allying themselves with prominent male rappers and gaining privileged access to male-exclusive realms. A good female MC must be red siren and angel Barbie, alpha dog and sex kitten, black tramp and platinum mammy. She is *the* BossBitch passing around patriarchy like it's a blunt.

Where, you might ask, do dicks and cunts fit into a neo-shamanic spiritual lexicon? Profanity invites abjection, a rebellious antidote to our American puritanical Christian value system. Philosopher Julia Kristeva's writings on abjection help define the practices of shamanism as a "site of power and danger for the symbolic, the paternal law." We associate dicks and cunts with "clean and proper body boundaries undone."<sup>[xix]</sup> Char Johnson is a Bushwick-based female MC known as BONES and formerly one half the lesbian rap crew Zebra Baby. Best known for her raunchy, sex-saturated lyrics like "Leave your pussy on the pavement and your ass in the bed" (from the track *Bitches Get Stitches*), her lyrics are often misread as misogynist both by conservative feminists and the mainstream public. As one of the very few out, black, strong female MCs in the game, her primary motivation in her work is having her voice heard. BONES claims that misogyny veils an insidious double standard censoring dykes who talk about sex in real terms. "I'm talking about what's happening in my fucking bed, with my life."<sup>[xx]</sup>

Long Island born Italian-American Contessa "Cunt Mafia" Stuto, also a Bushwick based Female MC, describes her pinnacle moment of feminist awareness as when she opened for a Flatbush Zombies show and they told her not to say the words "cunt," "whore," or "whorehouse." Contessa observes, "[The Men] they're saying the n-word constantly, 'whore,' 'ho,' 'fuck this bitch' ... I was told not to curse, not to say my name." Women are reclaiming the words that have been used to put them down. It very much challenges the unrestricted boys-club mentality in rap in the same way hip hop threatens racial privilege and power. Cunt Mafia's work is about a New World Order of radical equality, and she states, "I use misogyny back at misogyny."<sup>[xxi]</sup> The BOSSBitch also rules over the realm of humor. "I like shit that makes me laugh," says BONES. Contessa explains how by making fun of herself she gains the respect of her audience and self-heals. "I

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room.” Shamans use puns and jokes to distract their clients and allow them to “participate in the hard work of admitting some responsibility for their problems,” ultimately empowering them to heal.<sup>[xxii]</sup>

Owing to the mass mediated, largely *visual* natures of global internet culture, pregnant with black female divinity in the spectacular, gendered power relationships are showing signs of a cross-cultural shift.<sup>[xxiii]</sup> Archetypal images of the Goddess appeal to the non-verbal right brain responsible for the comprehension of cries, gestures, touching and body stance we see in hip hop. While the power of the internet is undeniable as a type of transnational, feminine, utopic space – where we begin to let ancient archetypes slip into our everyday ways of seeing and being – we must not forget that the *real* medicine of hip hop dance is grounding.<sup>[xxiv]</sup> *Your ass is in what you sing.* What if your ass is HYPERREAL?

Nicki Minaj’s butt implants recall the “scientific study” of Saartjie Baartman aka The Venus Hottentot’s “oversized” posterior and genitals by libidinous white male doctors of the early twentieth century. Minaj’s image also recalls the worship of Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic “Venus” idols occurring some 20,000 years ago. In these ancient configurations of the “Venus” Deity,<sup>[xxv]</sup> oversized buttocks are a metaphor for fertility. Regardless of what she calls Nicki Minaj’s willingness to parade as a “pale, plastic, Venus Hottentot Barbie,”<sup>[xxvi]</sup> theorist Kismet Nuñez writes about Minaj as *Elegba/Esu*, the African God of interpretation. Citing her chameleon fluidity and high gloss expression of black feminist (and queer) possibility,<sup>[xxvii]</sup> Nuñez calls out Minaj “...as diasporic black, as radical, and as speculative.” Call it shamanic or call it showbiz, the glittering alchemy seeded in Minaj’s larger than life persona shifts a certain type of virtual Afrofuturism into high gear.

Much like Nuñez’s description of Minaj’s fictional characters, Williams calls

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Hine's "culture of dissemblance" theory, which explores the ways African American women are forced to enact various environmentally contingent personas in order to, "ward off rape, to ward off sexual violence." Williams explained how up until the late seventies it wasn't conceivable, by law, that a black woman could be raped. *In an effort to peel away the various personae of the Female MC*, Williams is designing a series of Topsy-Turvy dolls. Based on the soft folk toy of slavery/reconstruction, the two-headed dolls are traditionally black on one end and white on the other. Williams's Female MC Topsy-Turvy set will feature Queen Latifah as a little girl/military commander, Rah Digga as a fighter/rap alias "Harriet Thugman" and Lauryn Hill as a Black Madonna/Siren.

Within the context of shamanism, often read by critics into Williams's work, masks are a channel of the spirit, a "symbolic prism" of everyday life.

Today's global wave of music television amounts to Goddess worship *par excellence*. The word "thug," now reclaimed by hip hop nation language, was originally a term coined by bloodthirsty British Colonials to describe followers of Kali, Black Warrior Goddess of time and change. <sup>[xxviii]</sup> The internet is all thugs gone wild saying "Twerk, or go to hell." It's spreading the embodied freedom encompassed in hip hop's interdynamic gestures of power and praise, it's dreamy symbolism and insignia of the clan. The internet is proof that the universe is made up of songs and stories, <sup>[xxix]</sup> and that the most powerful stories, sung by the most powerful prophets, will cohere in lands near and far. If the neo-minstrelsy of the American hip hop glitterati is putting the whole world into radical sleep through the trinity of beats, booty and bling, how can we shift the discussion toward right-brain comprehension and Goddess worship in virtual Pangea? Are rap game gender-fuckers opening doors for new forms of embodiment via fan mimicry? Is the Black Warrior Goddess rearing her fierce head through the slippery, local-global communities of the web? Don't believe me? Just watch.

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- [i] Kamua Brathwaite quoted in H. Samy Alim "Bring it to the Cypher: Hip Hop Nation Language," THAT'S THE JOINT: The Hip Hop Studies Reader Murray Forman & Mark Anthony Neal, Eds., 2012, p. 531
- [ii] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. In the Realm of the Diamond Queen 1993, p. 194
- [iii] Tsing, *ibid*, p. 191
- [iv] Tsing, *ibid*, p. 27
- [v] Tsing, *ibid*, p. 21
- [vi] Tsing, *ibid*, pg. 97
- [vii] Tsing, *ibid*, pg. 100
- [viii] Daniel and Smitherman cited in H. Samy Alim "Bring it to the Cypher" *ibid*, p. 538-9
- [ix] Melvin Gibbs. "ThugGods: Spiritual Darkness and Hip Hop," Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture, Greg Tate Ed., 2003, pg. 86
- [x] Marija Gimbutas. The Language of the Goddess 1989, p. 145
- [xi] Noelle Lorraine Williams interviewed by Katie Cercone, September 11, 2013, New York, NY
- [xii] Based on Noelle Lorraine Williams reading of Saidiya V. Hartman's Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America
- [xiii] Barbara Tedlock, PhD. The Woman in the Shaman's Body, 2005, p. 91
- [xiv] Maria Jones. Displaced Oshun Theory, Artist talk, posted by the MEKtext Network on Vimeo.com, October 17, 2013
- [xv] Noelle Lorraine Williams, *ibid*
- [xvi] Noelle Lorraine Williams, *ibid*

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[xviii]

Tsing, *ibid*, p. 196

[xix]

Julia Kristeva quoted in Tsing, *ibid*, p. 179

[xx]

Char Johnson aka BONES interviewed by Katie Cercone, September 10, 2013, Brooklyn, NY

[xxi]

Cunt Mafia aka Contessa Stuto interviewed by Katie Cercone, July 31, 2013, Brooklyn, NY

[xxii]

Tedlock, *ibid*, p. 27

[xxiii]

Leonard Shlain. The Alphabet and the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image, 1998

[xxiv]

Fred Moten. In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, 2003, p. 39

[xxv]

Gimbutas, *ibid*, p. 163

[xxvi]

Kismet Nuñez. "Scrying Nicki Minaj, Stupid Hoe, and #Afrofutures" posted on <http://nunezdaughter.wordpress.com/> January 29, 2012

[xxvii]

Kismet Nuñez, *ibid*

[xxviii]

Melvin Gibbs, *ibid*

[xxix]

Poet Muriel Rukeyser said the universe is composed of stories, not of atoms. Physicist Werner Heisenberg declared that the universe is made of music, not of matter (from Rob Brezsnay, [Freewillastrology.com](http://Freewillastrology.com))

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