

Roger Canals, *A Goddess in Motion: Visual Creativity in the Cult of María Lionza* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 202 pp., \$120 (cloth).

Roger Canals is an anthropologist specializing in Africana religions and visual anthropology. Recently he published this comprehensive work about the practice of the cult of María Lionza in Venezuela, based on extended and multi-sited anthropological fieldwork carried out in both Venezuela and Barcelona between 2005 and 2015. The cult, embracing a pantheon of many different spirits, refers to “a multiplicity of purification, divination, healing and initiation rituals” (52). In his book, Canals aims to analyze how the goddess María Lionza is represented and how relationships are established with and through her images. Canals makes a comparison between the religious images and other representations of the goddess, developing the argument that all images, despite their heterogeneity, are interrelated “to such an extent that it is impossible to study them without taking the others into account” (7). The study is focused on the practices of the cult, forming a dynamic network of representations of the goddess which results in a constant production and re-signification of images. The relevance of the research is on the one hand formed by focusing on this previously neglected visual dimension of the cult and on the other hand by correcting the absence of the cult in literature referring to Africana and indigenous Venezuelan communities. Through this Canals endeavors to contribute to studies on Latin American and Caribbean religions as well as to the field of visual anthropology.

*A Goddess in Motion* is organized into seven chapters. Although the order and connections between the chapters are not entirely clear from the start, the structure gets stronger as the book proceeds. Chapter one introduces the figure of María Lionza through the various versions of her myth. The original indigenous myth became popular in the 1940s in the context of indigenist movements and as part of a national exaltation project led by President Marcos Jiménez in the 1950s. The myth has since been reinvented by many different people with various objectives, resulting in a moral (benevolent/wicked), ethnic, (Indian/white/*mestiza*/black) and feminine

(mother/mistress) plurality of María Lionza. Canals demonstrates the mutual influence between the textual and visual domain, providing a theoretical basis to the material religion framework in which the book is situated.

Consequently, chapter two describes the dialectical relation between the myth and *mestizo* cult, which is defined as “Afro-Americanized” because of its indigenous origins, contributions from Catholicism, and incorporated elements from black culture. Here Canals characterizes the cult’s past and present. Chapter three is dedicated to the images of María Lionza in the ritual context. Theoretically it is the most dense part of the book, however perhaps also the most superficial. Canals begins by describing the two most widespread representations of the goddess—the white or *mestizo* queen (derived from Catholic saints) and the Indian woman astride a tapir. Consequently, Canals develops two paradigms concerning the ritual statues: the images form the bridge for communication with the spirits in the hereafter, while at the same time divinities are directly present inside the images. Although Canals’ informants state that the images do not possess any divine value, Canals writes that “the images are no longer a channel of access to the divinities, but the divinities themselves . . . They are confused with it” (87). The reason for this emic/etic divide, whereby Canals seems to disregard his informants’ statements by contradicting them with his own scholarly analysis, is unfortunately insufficiently accounted for. Moreover, Canals does not critically reflect on the Protestant conceptualization of religion that seems to influence the informants’ words. While they express the absence of divine manifest power inside the images, which suggests an anticipation towards the known expectation of what is considered as “morally good religion,” Canals does not deal with the history, impact, and necessary corrective of the longstanding Protestant bias in religious studies. Canals’ analysis is therefore somewhat inattentive, especially since his subject deals extensively with the field of material religion. Besides this, the ambiguous differentiation and identification between images and divinities is theoretically explained through the idea of the “double regime”: two inseparable components of the image referring to its immediate (identification) and complex intentional nature (the statues as a cultural product). Although the relation between the “material image” and “mental image” through mimetic power is a relevant perspective on this ambiguity of identification, the application of the theoretical model is rather simplistic. A slightly fuller

integration of theory and empirical data would have prevented the feeling that at times the used theory is not absolutely necessary in order to better understand the case.

Chapter four is about art, and it therefore shows several of the most interesting pictures throughout the book. Two arguments are made. Firstly, there is a vast and varied number of works inspired by María Lionza: she is constantly reinvented through diverse aesthetic canons. Secondly, many artists attribute religious meaning to their creative process, while believers conceive of religious ritual as an art practice. Chapter five brings all of Canals' previous arguments together. After focusing on the material images, this chapter deals with corporeal and mental images of the divinity via bodies, dreams, and apparitions. Canals argues there is a close dynamic relation between the different images. Subsequently, chapter six demonstrates the vast amount of sources – in the form of multiple fieldwork sites both on- and offline – that Canals draws upon, which shows an impressive spectrum of knowledge. The flexible, dynamic, relational, and *mestizaje* nature of the cult allows for its adaptability to new contexts, which is why the cult of María Lionza has become a global cult. Migratory processes, the internet, and the esoteric industry (i.e. shops where statues of gods and required products for rituals can be purchased) are three factors that contribute to this global reinvention. The case of Barcelona illustrates how the images can take on new meanings and functions according to local criteria.

Chapter seven is the best-integrated part of the book. Various lines of investigation coalesce here. The difference between the intrinsic and extrinsic plurality of María Lionza is discussed, referring to the various ways in which the goddess is represented and to other divinities with which she is identified. The material, corporeal, and mental images are to be found in the cult, in art, and in public Venezuelan space, acquiring their meaning on the basis of the relations they maintain with each other. Therefore, Canals argues that the sets of representations constitute an "open, complex and dynamic network" (176). On a broader level, Canals advocates for the tracking of movements of images, because besides meanings, practices, and desires (hereby referring to the works of Panofsky, Gell, and Mitchell), images also have experiences: they constantly evolve and change as a result of the encounters between individuals, practices, discourses, and images, understood as a "relational fabric." This is an insightful theoretical contribution to the existing literature on the anthropology of images. In the conclusion Canals

highlights the cult's visual creativity, "the constant exercise of updating the visual mediations between believers and spirits" (179). Therefore, what has remained stable in the cult is its openness to change: the nature of the cult is its state of permanent reinvention.

*A Goddess in Motion* is an interesting monograph based on well-founded research. The aims, methodology, embedded theory, and arguments are all explicated in a clear, thorough way which makes the book very accessible. The basic style however also causes a certain contradiction. While the terms "dynamic," "dialectical relation," and "complexity" are overly present in the book, the information is presented in a rather static way: repetitions of the exact same combinations of words and the almost too clear-cut divisions of chapters and sub-headings make this work slightly less attractive. Nevertheless, Canals provides an elaborate account of the open, creative network of images within the cult of María Lionza. This work does justice to a dynamic material reality of religious practice and experience. By describing a relatively unexplored and fascinating current religious practice, Canals contributes to the study of religion in Venezuela in an academically and socially relevant way. Furthermore, his wish to contribute to the changing opinion about the cult so that it acquires "the recognition and respect that it deserves" (184) shows Canals' passion for his research subject, which adds to the book's strength.

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