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Book Review: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24(4): 860-861

Canals, Roger. 2017. *A Goddess in Motion: Visual creativity in the cult of María Lionza*. Oxford: Berghahn

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A Goddess in Motion is a detailed account of how images and visuality operate in the cult of María Lionza, a popular deity in Venezuela. Based on extensive fieldwork with mediums, believers and artists, Roger Canals artfully traces the great complexity of the iconographic and visual practices that surround the goddess and her devotion. One of her most challenging aspects is her multiplicity of representations: she is frequently depicted as a sensuous indigenous woman astride a tapir; a white or mestiza queen who resembles the Virgin Mary; and, less frequently, a black [END PAGE 860 / START PAGE 861] woman who aesthetically echoes Afro-American deities. A primary characteristic of her worship is possession, however, as the book carefully describes, this is just one of the many practices through which she may be engaged. The central argument of the book is that visual creativity – the ‘constant exercise of updating the visual mediations between believers and the spirits’ (p.179) – is a fundamental mode of the cult’s practice, one that affects all other aspects of this religious following. Drawing on Belting’s *The Anthropology of Images* (2011, Princeton University Press), Canals emphasizes the distinction between an image and its ‘support,’ the medium through which the transmission of the image to viewers takes place. This distinction is crucial for Canals’ analysis, as he shows how images of María Lionza always exceed the historical, aesthetic, material and ritualistic frames in which they are encountered. Throughout the book, these two concepts – visual creativity and the image/support distinction – are used to explore the meanings, uses and effects of different kinds of visual expressions of María Lionza.

The analysis progresses by comparing different types of images, such as the goddess of the nation found in public sculpture, or the intimate benefactor found on a prayer card. The most important images to María Lionza's devotion are altar statues, which are essential during possession rituals. The discussion of ritual images is counter-balanced by a consideration of works from the artistic sphere in order to show how these representations connect to, but also diverge from, properly religious imagery. Canals' image/support distinction becomes most significant in Chapter 5, where he analyses bodies, dreams and apparitions as corporeal and mental images that are themselves connected to the material images discussed in the preceding chapters. The final section of the book addresses the globalization of María Lionza through the internet, international commerce and migration, which leads directly on to a refinement of the book's central argument: by analytically separating images from their supports, we can better understand the networked and 'nomadic' nature of such affective and polysemous religious imagery.

Overall, the book is a very effective analysis of the visual culture and visibility of the María Lionza cult. Canals' arguments about the relationships between the different kinds of images and what these mean for people's practices are convincing and will be of interest to visual anthropologists and other scholars of visual culture. The chapters on ritual and immaterial images strike me as particularly insightful and certainly point to new challenges in visual research. The passages describing ritual practices are also especially evocative, and the reader can sense the author's deep knowledge and experience of these events, which he has gained through his extensive fieldwork. Throughout the book the writing is clear and straightforward. In his discussions of theoretical works on images and visibility, Canals adopts a patient, explanatory tone, which makes this book ideal for teaching on visual anthropology courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, especially if combined with

the ethnographic films and website that he has also produced on the subject. The book could have benefitted from more comparative analysis with the visual practices of other religious traditions, especially Catholicism, which Canals notes is integral to the contemporary devotion of María Lionza. This would have allowed readers to get a better sense of what, if anything, is unique about the cult's connection between visibility and the goddess' power, and would have made the book more relevant to scholars of religion more widely. Likewise, the chapter on the goddess in the artistic sphere could have been more robustly connected to debates about the agency of artworks, and the role of religion in the development of the arts qua art. However, neither of these seem to be grave omissions, but rather suggest other dialogues that Canals could enter into with his material. *A Goddess in Motion* is visual ethnography at its best: it combines serious analysis with visually evocative descriptions, which together capture the complexity and significance of its subject.