

# INTRODUCTION



Quite a long time ago now, a friend returning from Venezuela gave me a statue of a naked black-haired Indian woman holding aloft a pelvis bone and astride a tapir. This image instantly fascinated me; first, on account of its strong erotic nature and, second, due to its aesthetics, reminiscent, in my opinion, of that of comic strips. My friend told me I was holding a statue of a certain María Lionza, one of the most popular divinities in Venezuela. She added that this kind of statue—made of plaster and approximately forty centimeters in height—was often used for performing possession rituals widespread across Venezuela, whose origins lie in a religious manifestation known as the “cult of María Lionza.” This seemed incredibly strange and intriguing to me, especially because at that time (in November 2003), Venezuela was a country I knew very little about and to which, to tell the truth, I had never felt any particular attraction. Shortly after, I made the acquaintance of a Venezuelan girl who gave me a number of religious holy cards (*estampas*) from her country.<sup>1</sup> One of them depicted the bust of a white or *mestiza* (mixed-race) woman donning a blue dress, wearing a crown, and holding a rose and a flag in her left hand, which bore the inscription: *Protectora de las aguas. Diosa de las cosechas* (Protector of Waters, Goddess of Harvests).



**FIGURE 0.1 • Statue of María Lionza as Indian Woman.**

Photo: Roger Canals.



FIGURE 0.2 • *Holy Card (Estampa) of María Lionza as Queen.*

Upon reading the prayer on the back of the card, I realized, much to my surprise, that this female figure was also called “María Lionza.” An Indian woman astride a tapir and a white or *mestiza* woman wearing a crown: was it really the same figure? If so, how is it that the same character was portrayed in two such different ways? And, in this case, what did this duality mean? Another question rolled around in my head: if these two images I had seen were actually of María Lionza, were there other representations of this goddess in Venezuela or elsewhere and what semblance did they bear? The appearance of this second version of the image of María Lionza only served to heighten my interest in this deity and particularly the forms in which she was represented.

I therefore decided to begin researching María Lionza and, one year later, I enrolled in a PhD program in anthropology on the cult of María Lionza in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. In May 2005, I visited Venezuela for the first time to start my fieldwork on this religious practice. A few days in Caracas were sufficient for me to realize that many Venezuelans attributed the images of the Indian woman on a tapir and of the woman wearing a crown to the same figure. Thus, when I showed the image of the Indian woman and the queen, the majority of people interviewed informed me that both referred to the same goddess<sup>2</sup> (*diosa*) but represented two different “versions.” During the weeks that followed, I conducted numerous interviews with esoteric art sellers, mediums,<sup>3</sup> followers of María Lionza, and artists representing the goddess. Thus, I could observe that María Lionza was imagined and represented in very different ways and, apparently, in a contradictory manner. For instance, some told me that she was a beautiful, sensual, Indian deity and showed me the print of a young woman of great beauty who bathed, naked, in a river near a waterfall, whereas others claimed that this goddess was the Venezuelan version of the Virgin Mary. Some described María Lionza as a white, affluent woman, identifying her with representations of a female figure with a penetrating stare, who possessed great material wealth, while others believed she was in fact a *mestiza* woman, daughter of an Indian chief and a Spanish woman who, during the Spanish conquest, tried to reconcile both sides and instill peace in the country. So then, who exactly was María Lionza? How was she represented? And what were her images used for?

But before delving into these issues, let me provide a short description of a ritual of the cult of María Lionza in order to give you a sense of how this religious practice works and of the challenges that one has to face when doing fieldwork on it. The ritual in question was the first ceremony I attended during my fieldwork. It is therefore a ritual that occupies a special place in my memory, and which marked me deeply both from a personal and intellectual perspective. It was May 2005. I had arrived in Caracas two weeks

earlier. An anthropologist from the Central University of Venezuela who had worked on the cult of María Lionza had provided me with the phone number of Rosa,<sup>4</sup> a spiritist who was part of a cult group that met regularly in a bar located in the district of Petare. I phoned Rosa and asked her if I could interview her. She suggested meeting the following day in Chacaíto, in the centre of Caracas. We went to a bar there and spoke for some time. I told her that I was interested in attending a ritual of the cult of María Lionza and she told me that she would ask for permission to see if I could attend the ceremony that her group planned to hold that Saturday night. “From whom do you need to ask permission?” I asked. “From the Queen,” she responded. “If she doesn’t give her authorization you will not be able to come.” “When you say the Queen, you mean María Lionza, correct?” I asked. “Yes, she is a queen, but she is also an Indian woman. It depends; she can appear as both.” That evening I received a call from Rosa confirming that María Lionza had given permission for me to attend the ritual. However, there were two conditions: I had to strictly follow the ritual rules that would be explained to me, and I had to promise not make dishonest use of the information I would obtain. Since Petare is considered to be a dangerous area, Rosa offered to collect me from my house in her car, a couple of hours before the ceremony, and take me directly to the place where the meeting would take place. I had to dress in white for the ceremony. That Saturday, around eight o’clock in the evening, Rosa collected me from my apartment in the center of Caracas. It was beginning to get dark. We left central Caracas to drive into the middle of Petare, a labyrinth of narrow streets built on the side of one of the hills surrounding the city of Caracas. The district is made up of a maze of brick houses piled one on top of the other. After some time in the car, we arrived at the group’s headquarters, located in the ground floor of a two-story house. Rosa introduced me to the group’s main medium. His name was José. He was a slim man, around 50 years of age, and appeared to be timid and distant. I made the most of the few minutes before the ceremony to meet the other members of the group, people of all ages. After a while, Rosa came to tell me that the ceremony was about to start. We went into a large room containing a magnificent altar measuring some two meters in height, where there were dozens of statues representing the divinities of the cult. At the very top, I saw the bust of María Lionza, depicted as a queen with white skin and black hair. José stood facing the images and the *banco*—his spiritual assistant, who was also his godson—stood behind him. José closed his eyes, began to tremble violently, and let out a scream. The spirit of a black slave from colonial times had entered his body. The spirit asked all the people present at the ceremony to introduce themselves. One by one, the members of the group approached the medium and gave him their hand, while uttering the word “amen.” My turn came. Before approaching the medium, Rosa asked

me to remove my glasses. “It is dangerous. The spirit cannot see himself reflected; you have to ask if you can wear glasses during the ritual. And one more thing: don’t look directly into his eyes either.” That was the first time I realized that the cult of María Lionza incorporated a set of prohibitions related to seeing and being seen. I removed my glasses and approached the possessed medium. He asked me who I was and what I was doing there. I told him. He told me that I could stay and gave me permission to wear my glasses, mentioning nevertheless that I had to avoid meeting his eyes. Once all those present had been granted spiritual permission, we sat on the ground forming a circle. For the whole night, José was possessed by different spirits from the pantheon: a slave, an Indian, a *malandro* (delinquent), a *chamarrero* (old healer), and more. Each time a divinity wanted to leave the medium faced the altar, looked intently at the images, and expelled the spirit that had momentarily inhabited his body to then welcome another. The members of the group explained their problems, doubts, or worries to the different spirits who appeared. These gave them advice or criticized them, depending on the case. After a few hours María Lionza descended. According to what one group member told me, María Lionza had appeared as a young Indian woman. During the possession, María Lionza spoke with a soft and calm voice. Speaking a very lyrical and archaic Spanish, she spiritually blessed all the members of the group, who in turn thanked her by singing the “Ave María” together. After María Lionza, the spirit of El Negro Felipe descended, an important spirit in the spiritual hierarchy of the cult. Until dawn, El Negro Felipe spoke continuously to the members of the group. He drank rum and chain-smoked. He spoke a markedly vulgar and often crude Spanish with abundant jokes of a sexual nature. The moment that most surprised me was when a young boy, about fifteen years old, approached the spirit to ask him for advice. He had to make an important decision in his life: either to continue studying or to join a group of young delinquents who were associated with car robberies and drug trafficking. El Negro Felipe was extremely severe with him: he had to keep as far away as possible from that group of delinquents and continue studying to carve out an honest professional life for himself. The boy, upset and with his head hanging, appreciated his words. Following this, the young boy expressed his wish to speak to the spirit about the relationship he had with his father. He explained how distance had grown between them over time. A series of arguments and disagreements had damaged the relationship and now they barely spoke. Whispering, I asked Rosa: “Do you know his father?” “Of course,” she said, “it’s José, the *materia* hosting the spirit of El Negro Felipe!” That statement has remained etched in my memory. About eight o’clock in the morning, the spirit of El Negro Felipe left. José recovered his soul. We had been awake all night. Visibly tired, the group members went to shower one by one, dressed, ate

the traditional *arepas*, and left. José, without any particular signs of fatigue and holding a cup of black coffee in his hand, approached me, and with a slight smile, said to me: “Now you will have to tell me what El Negro Felipe said; I’m intrigued.” We went breakfast together and I explained him all the details of the ceremony that I could recall. He listened to me very carefully. He stated that he could not remember anything of the spiritual session for during the ceremony he was “not there,” only his body was present. He was especially moved when I referred to the episode regarding the relationship with his son. “It’s good that El Negro Felipe help us; we really need it.”

The ritual that I have just described is not a paradigmatic or exemplary case of the cult of María Lionza. It is simply a concrete episode of a rather heterogeneous religious practice that presents enormous variants depending on the cult group. Thus, for example, in this ritual, there were no drums or curative practices—two regular elements in the cult. Having said that, this ceremony presents some frequently recurring elements such as the descending of diverse spirits into a single medium, the importance of relationships, the use of tobacco and rum, references to Catholicism, allusions to the social and political context of Venezuela. Moreover, in this episode, two important details can be observed, which I shall analyze in depth throughout this book: the presence of religious images and their primordial role in the carrying out of religious ceremonies and the existence of a series of ritual rules regarding the gaze, seeing, and being seen.

## **About This Book**

This book is devoted to the study of images of María Lionza. Its aim is to analyze how this goddess is represented and the relationships established with and through her images. It focuses on the practice of the cult of María Lionza in contemporary Venezuela (2005–2015). Having said this, it also includes a chapter about the increasing presence of images of María Lionza on the Internet, and another on the practice of the cult of María Lionza beyond the borders of Venezuela—specifically in Barcelona (Spain), my native city. The relation between the cult and new technologies and its spread to other countries via migratory processes are two subjects that are playing a fundamental role in the current evolution of this religious practice, and about which, to the best of my knowledge, no in-depth research has been conducted to date.

Thus, this is a book about images of María Lionza. It is nevertheless important to point out that the analysis presented here is not limited to what could be called “religious images,” that is to say, to those material representations like statues or holy cards used by believers in the context of reli-

gious ceremonies with the aim of coming into contact with spiritual beings. Rather, by adopting a relational perspective, what I propose in this book is to establish a comparison between the religious images and other visual representations of the goddess, such as artistic works, craftwork, murals in public spaces, or digital images created by the believers themselves and shared on social networks such as Facebook. Likewise, I shall not limit my study to the interpretation of material images—that is, of those images produced on a material support, such as statues, drawings, and paintings—but I shall also include that which Hans Belting (2011) called “corporeal images” and “mental images.” The former refer to those images made visible through bodies—as occurs in cases of spiritual possession or, all differences considered, theatrical representations—while the latter refer to those images that appear in the conscience of a person without being the internal transposition of an external reference—such as dreams, apparitions, visions, or figures of the imagination. My argument, which I shall develop in chapter 7, is that, despite their heterogeneity, all of these images are materially or ideally inter-related, to such an extent that it is impossible to study them without taking the others into account. Thus, the collection of images of María Lionza make up a kind of network in which each representation takes on a meaning and a function through the relations it has with the others. This network should under no circumstances be interpreted as a static and set pattern—it is not a transcendent system or structure—but as a dynamic mix of relations in which objects, practices, and discourses meet. One of the main effects of this network is the constant updating of the images of María Lionza, as well as of their roles and meanings. The concept of “practice” refers to what the people do with and through the images of María Lionza (worship them, observe them, destroy them, offer them), while the notion of “discourse” refers to the set of interpretative regimes associated with the images of María Lionza and without which these images could not even exist—that is, they could not be recognized as images by a subject<sup>5</sup> (Jacques Rancière 2003).

Now we shall discuss the book’s subtitle, and more specifically the concept of “visual creativity.”<sup>6</sup> With this notion I allude to two different, although intimately interwoven, things.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, I refer to the processes of production of new images of María Lionza and to the resignification of preexisting ones. In this regard, my interest lies in understanding why artists and believers constantly experiment with the images of the goddess and why they put such effort into reinventing her representations. Visual creativity also refers to the construction of visual compositions—such as altars—or the reinterpretation of ancient images of the goddess. On the other hand, by visual creativity I allude to the creative nature of the act of looking within the cult—the fact that looking is much more than just receiving external impressions; it is a way of actively engaging with the outside world. Thus,

within the cult, seeing has to do with provoking reality and not only with contemplating it. My argument is that, in one sense or another, visual creativity is consubstantial to the practice of the cult. It is indeed through acts of visual creativity that the relation with the spirits—and with other individuals through the spiritual world—is established, maintained, and reinvented. Therefore, visual creativity reveals itself to be one of the crucial elements making the cult work and evolve.

The concept of creativity has been the source of several debates over recent years. A first distinction is that established among those authors who think that creativity is something that we are always doing (Hallam and Ingold 2007), that is, that is inherent to the unfolding of social life, and those who, taking artistic or religious activity as a reference, understand creativity as a singular act, aimed at producing an original idea or object (Steiner 2001). What I propose in this book is a definition of creativity that can be placed between these two extremes. In one regard, I understand creativity as the way in which the cult to *María Lionza* functions. Thus, I consider that novelty and improvisation are not exceptions in the cult, but rather they represent its own way of being and becoming. Having said this, it is important to bear in mind that this quotidian creativity is translated into a series of unique works and actions (art works, altars, rituals), that the believers and artists distinguish from acts of ordinary life and that require specific skills and knowledge. Unlike similar concepts such as innovation or production, the notion of creativity evokes the idea of the establishment of conditions that lead to the possibility of developing social life. Thus, creation is more than novelty: it does not simply mean producing something new, but is related with the idea of once again setting up the very foundations of how we conceive the world and act in it. Therefore, creation is linked to the notion of inception. And my argument in this regard is that acts of visual creativity in the cult have exactly this connotation: they are creative not because they are simply “new” but because they serve to re-establish the way artists and believers understand the cult and its main figures. Visual creativity is therefore one of the privileged ways in which the relationships between spirits and individuals (and between individuals themselves) are negotiated and updated.

In this regard, there is no doubt that the strength of the figure of *María Lionza*—the fact that she may be present in very different social milieus where she plays a variety of roles—resides, at least partially, in her capacity to be imagined and represented in a variety of forms. Thus, what characterizes the goddess is an endless capacity to become or, as Michael Taussig would say, her permanent “possibility for figuration” (1997: 169). It is for this reason that in this research on the images of *María Lionza* I shall focus less on analyzing how *María Lionza* is actually represented (which would be impossible, given the number of images of her that circulate physically and on the



Internet), and more on discussing the permanent process of representing her. It is the meaning of this incessant emergence of new images that I would like to grasp in this book. In short, my aim is to approach images not as an outcome but rather as a potentiality.

Thus far, I have underscored the notion of creativity. However, creativity never arises from nowhere. That is to say that images of María Lionza in one way or another, are always linked to the historical and cultural period in which they appear. This is why in this book I shall discuss the political, economic, and social context in which the images of María Lionza have been made, used and, sometimes, destroyed. Moreover, it is important to note that “new” images of María Lionza, even the more groundbreaking ones, are always, at least from an external point of view, a reinterpretation of previous ones—that is, images are always images of previous images.

Having said this, allow me to at this point clarify the concept of “context,” a notion greatly misused in anthropology and social science in general. We tend to think that images are found in a particular “context” in which they receive significance and function. From this perspective, it is said that it is important to know the “context” in order to understand what images mean and do. Inversely, the study of images becomes interesting because, through them, we can gain a better understanding of the political, social, and religious “context” of the historical moment in which they emerge. I consider this to be an erroneous approach, and one of the purposes of this book is to explain precisely why. In short, the problem is that this approach opposes images and context as two separate and distinct domains. Context appears as the static décor or the transcendent sphere in which images are placed. The relationship established between them is therefore that of a mutual reflection. Images reflect the context just as the context projects itself onto the images. However, between images and context there is no relation of opposition. One does not stand in front of the other. Images actively participate in the ongoing development process of social life in which we are all involved. Images are not in “a context” for they are constantly creating it.

To illustrate this idea, I shall use the example of the most well-known image of María Lionza. In 2004 the monumental statue of María Lionza situated at the entrance of Caracas suddenly broke into two halves, apparently without any human intervention. This incident had a great impact on the Venezuelan population. Many Venezuelans—followers of María Lionza and not—interpreted it as a sign of the increasing polarization of the Venezuelan population due to the strong rivalry between Chavists and non-Chavists. The breaking of the image was seen, metaphorically and literally, as tantamount to the breaking of the social body. As a consequence, a violent debate about how this incident should be interpreted arose in the press and in day-to-day discussions. The opposition opined that, by committing this

sort of iconic suicide, the goddess sought to convey the idea that the Chavist administration was dramatically dividing Venezuela into two blocs. Chavists interpreted this accident as proof of the damage that the opposition was inflicting on the nation's unity. It is clear that this episode cannot be fully understood from the above-mentioned image-context paradigm. Indeed, the broken image (and the debate that it triggered) was not just reflecting the existing political tension in Venezuela in 2004: it was fostering it. Between the political context and the image there was no external relation of opposition, complementarity, or causality, but rather an intrinsic relation of correspondence (Ingold 2013).

One of the other goals of this book is to establish a dialogue between the cult to María Lionza and other religious practices with which it is connected, either in terms of familiarity (Umbanda, Santería, Dominican Spiritism) or in terms of clear opposition (Evangelism, Pentecostalism, official Catholic Church). The approach of this book is that the ensemble of religious practices that we usually call “Afro-American religions” or “Afro-Latin American religions” must be studied in terms of continuity and not in terms of rupture. Indeed, when we look at the specific ritual practices, we see between these religious manifestations that there is a constant process of appropriation and re-signification of objects, practices, and discourses that make it difficult, if not impossible, to study one without taking the others into account. Of course, these processes and exchange of elements are not homogeneous, nor do they spark the same opinion among believers. Thus, while some followers of María Lionza—usually called *espiritistas* (spiritists)—argue that their cult is compatible with Cuban Santería, others strongly affirm that these two different religions are completely unrelated. Needless to say, the exchanges between religions are linked to political processes and economic and migratory dynamics. Thus, the rise of Cuban Santería in Venezuela after 2000 is connected to the political agreements between the administration of Hugo Chávez and the Cuban state, which brought many Cuban citizens to Venezuela.

From a methodological stance, this book is essentially based on fieldwork carried out in Venezuela and Barcelona between 2005 and 2015.<sup>8</sup> During my fieldwork in these respective places—in which, as I shall explain below, audiovisual techniques played an essential role—I had the opportunity to interview mediums, artists, and esoteric art vendors, as well as to attend countless religious rituals, many of which included episodes of spiritual possession. From a historical analysis stance, most notable were the interviews conducted with elderly people residing in San Felipe, capital city of the state of Yaracuy, in the central western region of Venezuela, and one of the most important centers as regards the practice of the cult of María Lionza. Through these conversations, I was able to obtain very valuable information

about the practice of this cult in the middle of the twentieth century. The archive material that I shall discuss particularly in chapters 1 and 2 comes from Venezuelan institutions such as the Fundafolk Foundation, the Bigott Foundation, and the National Library of Venezuela (Caracas).

## **An Underexplored Cult**

By adopting a relational approach toward the images of María Lionza, this book endeavors to contribute to studies on Latin American and Caribbean religions, on the one hand, and to visual anthropology on the other. I shall proceed to give more details regarding how this book positions itself in relation to these academic fields.

Regarding the former, it is worth noting that unlike similar religious practices from the same cultural area—such as Cuban Santería, Candomblé, Vodou, Umbanda, Palo Mayombe, and the divination cult Ifá—the cult of María Lionza has to date received little scholarly attention. I would like to put forward at least two main reasons that can explain this fact. The first is that, contrary to the religions mentioned above, the cult of María Lionza never formed part of the so-called Afro-American or Afro-Atlantic religions (Johnson 2014), that is, of the set of cults originally practiced by the population of African origin brought to the American continents during slavery. Indeed, as I shall develop in chapter 2, the cult of María Lionza has its origins, on the one hand, in the indigenous belief in maidens dwelling in waterfalls and associated with fertility and the occult forces of the forest, and on the other hand, in Catholicism—especially in the cult's relation with the Virgin Mary, the worshipping of the saints, and the use of statuettes during ceremonies. It was not until the 1960s, when the practice of the cult spread to the main cities of Venezuela, that it began to incorporate some elements from Afro-American religions, mainly from Cuban Santería (Pollak-Eltz [1972] 2004: 5). This lack of original Africanness rendered this cult less interesting for historians and anthropologists dominating at least the first part of the twentieth century, who were interested in finding African retentions in the new world. In general, the perspective of these intellectuals was based on the idea of purity and ancestry: their main commitment was to find continuity between Africa and the African-American culture.<sup>9</sup> The works of these scholars established an intellectual corpus on Afro-American religions, which had an important influence within academia and even beyond it. Their contributions fostered new research, sometimes to reaffirm their theories and sometimes to contest them, thus contributing to making Afro-American cults known, visible, and valued as a subject of anthropological research. In many cases, such as in Candomblé (Sansi-Roca 2007) these studies repeatedly provoked a process

of objectification and appropriation of Afro-American religions by the practitioners themselves, thus creating a circle between academia and popular practice that we are only starting to get a glimpse of now in relation to the cult of María Lionza.

Thus, for instance, in the case of Brazil, there is a long and solid intellectual tradition surrounding the subject of Afro-American religions. Most notable in this tradition are, for example, the studies by Nina Rodríguez (1906) about possession rituals, or, subsequently, the works of internationally recognized authors such as Melville Herskovits (1941, 1956), Roger Bastide (1960), Pierre Verger (1968) or, more recently, J. Lorand Matory (2005), Paul Christopher Johnson (2002), Roger Sansi-Roca (2007), and Stefania Capone (2010) about Candomblé, among many others. Based on this intellectual background, great interest has developed in Umbanda in recent years (Giobellina and González 2000; Hale 2009; Espíritu Santo 2016). Umbanda is a religious expression that shares similarities with the cult of María Lionza but that, unlike the latter, is better-known and has a greater presence in academia. Similarly, as David Brown has argued, “Cuban Santería—also known as the *Regla de Ocha*, *Regla de Ifá* or Lucumí religion—has been studied since the last [nineteenth] century in Cuba and in the 1940s in the United States from diverse disciplinary perspectives and thematic bases” (2003: 3). The initial boost enjoyed by these studies at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly at the hand of Fernando Ortiz (1937, 1939) continued during the pre-revolutionary period with the contributions of other Cuban researchers (Cabrera 1983; Lachatañeré 1942). From the United States, disciples of Herskovits such as William Bascom (1950, 1972) also undertook relevant research into Santería before and during the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to highlight that from the 1970s onward, salsa music produced in the United States contributed to disseminating Afro-Cuban symbols on an international scale, and in Venezuela as well. It was from the 1970s on, and from the 1990s in particular, that we witnessed a boom in works on Santería, both regarding those referring to its practice in Cuba, and other parts of the Caribbean, the United States, or Europe (Brown 2003; Carr 2013; Wedel 2003). As a result, Santería is a well-known and visible religious practice, which today sparks an evident intellectual fascination and is currently the subject of several debates and studies. This interest in Santería has contributed, indirectly, to boosting research into other Afro-Cuban religious practices such as the cult to Ifá (Holbraad 2012), Palo Mayombe or, to a lesser degree, the Abakuá cult (Moret 2014; Palmié 2013). Another case deemed of worthy of study within the family of Afro-American cults is that of Haitian Vodou. Like Candomblé and Santería, Vodou also enjoys an established intellectual tradition. The first texts date back to the late eighteenth century and were written by French missionaries and administra-

tors. However, the contributions by Herskovits ([1937] 2007), Maya Deren (1951), and Alfred Métraux (1958) were responsible for bringing international renown to this religious practice. Outside the academic sphere, Vodou has been a recurrent theme in cinema and television, often characterized as a demonic practice, like a type of black magic. The volume of publications about Vodou is also considerable (Fandrich 2007; Laguerre 1989).

In short, the so-called Afro-American cults have been the subject of continuous scientific production throughout the twentieth century, which today translates into a considerable presence in terms of conferences, academic publications, and doctoral theses. This contrasts greatly with the attention received by the cult of María Lionza, a religious practice that has developed in an almost clandestine manner throughout the twentieth century, eclipsed in academia by the Afro-American religions, the study of which benefitted from the long tradition of works devoted to African religions.

But the cult of María Lionza has been absent not only from Afro-American literature but also from the literature referring to the indigenous communities of Venezuela (Coppans 1980, Henley 1982; Orobitg 1998). This is the second factor that helps to understand the low number of scientific works dedicated to this cult. If the cult of María Lionza has not attracted the attention of indigenists it is because, despite its clearly indigenous origins,<sup>10</sup> this religious practice is undoubtedly a product of cultural and demographic *mestizaje*,<sup>11</sup> of accelerated urbanization processes and social segregation as a result of the industrial development of Venezuela, and has very little to do with the actual religious practices of the indigenous communities of the country.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, many followers of the cult of María Lionza define their religion as an indigenous cult. I shall tackle the connotations of this statement in political and identity-related terms in chapter 2. However, it should be acknowledged that during the 1940s and 1950s, a group of distinguished Venezuelan artists, folklorists, and linguists (Gilberto Antolínez, Hermann Garmendia, Alejandro Colina<sup>13</sup>) linked to the cultural movement known as *indigenismo* produced a considerable number of works on María Lionza. Still, these intellectuals were only interested in María Lionza from the perspective of the myth—and not as a contemporary religious practice. Their goal, with a clearly political dimension, was to prove that María Lionza was originally a pure indigenous religion that became corrupt through the uncontrolled practice of the cult by urban people. Their intellectual obsession was to find the original version of the myth of the goddess while their vision of the Indian was a mythical and idealized one, close to what Ramos has called the hyperreal Indian (1994). It is mainly this vision of the Indian that we see today among practitioners of the cult (Canals 2012a).

Therefore, historically, the cult of María Lionza has found itself in a type of intellectual void, ignored by Afro-Americanist researchers and indigenists

alike. It is also important to mention that Venezuela—unjustly, I would say—has traditionally been a country that has been studied very little by anthropologists. It is likely that this lack of works can be explained, at least partly, by the predominant vision during the majority of the twentieth century of Venezuela as an oil nation, headed toward a process of modernization and Americanization of its way of life, which would uproot it from its indigenous and Afro-American past. Still today, the number of ethnographic studies dedicated to Venezuela is very limited, if compared for example with countries in the Andes region (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador), Central America (Mexico, Guatemala), or other countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or Chile. Having said this, it is important to recognize that from 1999 onward, the year in which Chávez won the first presidential election, an unprecedented international interest in Venezuela emerged. From that moment on, a considerable bibliography appeared in social science, referring to the president and the Bolivarian revolution (see, for instance, Martínez and Farrell 2010). The majority of these texts focus, however, on the figure of President Chávez, and adopt an economic and geopolitical perspective. Abandoning the supposed scientific distance, many of these works openly state whether or not they support the revolutionary project.

The cult of María Lionza has thus been explored very little throughout history. However, there are some exceptions to this oversight. At the beginning of the 1980s we began to witness the emergence of a new interest in the cult of María Lionza, both from Venezuelan scholars, and international anthropologists. Regarding the former, most notable are the works of Daisy Barreto, Jacqueline Clarac de Briceño, and Angelina Pollak-Eltz. In her work *Genealogía de un mito* (1998), Barreto provides the most rigorous study on the historical formation of the myth and the cult of María Lionza. Based on archaeological and linguistic evidences, she defends the idea that there is a “cultural filiation” between the actual practice of the cult and the pre-Hispanic indigenous communities of the central-western region of Venezuela. From this starting point, her main objective is to describe the process through which María Lionza become a national icon of the country. She describes how, during the 1940s and 1950s, an elite group of local artists and intellectuals used the figure of María Lionza to redefine the identity of the nation and building it upon its indigenous past. This intellectual endeavor was strategically re-appropriated by several governments and especially by that of Marcos Evangelista Pérez Jiménez<sup>14</sup> (1953–1958), who established María Lionza, represented either as an Indian woman or as a white queen, as one of the main symbols of the nation—alongside Simón Bolívar. In doing so, Pérez Jiménez established a symbol that was capable of concealing the cultural and demographic diversity of the country under an ideology of modernization and *mestizaje*. As I shall explain throughout this book,

these institutional symbols were quickly reincorporated and afforded new meanings by believers in the cult of María Lionza, among whom there were many artists, soldiers, and politicians who, while condemning the cult and calling it superstition and black magic, were practicing it in secret. In short, Barreto sheds light on how historically, in the relation between the cult, the Venezuelan state, and the urban intellectual elite, there has been no relation of opposition but rather one of mutual, although not explicit, appropriation.

Furthermore, in the text *La enfermedad como lenguaje en Venezuela* (1996), Clarac de Briceño focuses on the healing rituals within the cult. She defines the cult to María Lionza as an example of popular medicine (*medicina popular*). She shows how, within the cult, there is no clear distinction between what could be called, from an occidental perspective, “physical” illness and “mental” illness (Clarac de Briceño 1996: 33). Problems in the body are associated with spiritual causes and vice versa. Moreover, an individual’s health problems are inevitably linked to social or collective factors, such as the breaking up of the family, loss of employment, or an individual’s negative social relations. In other words, illness lies within a framework of contextual phenomena. What is interesting is that between the cult of María Lionza, where healing rituals abound, and official medicine, there is no oppositional relationship, but rather one of complementarity. The cult incorporates a multitude of doctors’ spirits (the most renowned is José Gregorio Hernández) as well as techniques from hegemonic medicine, such as pharmacopeia. Many official doctors refer their patients to mediums from the cult when they realize that they cannot tackle illnesses of a spiritual nature.

Finally, in her book *María Lionza, mito y culto venezolano* (1972), Pollak-Eltz defines the cult of María Lionza as utilitarian, hybrid, and syncretic, three concepts that we find regularly in the literature of the cult and that I shall discuss in the second chapter of this book. She suggests that the cult has historically served as a refuge for the excluded sectors of Venezuelan society (prostitutes, Afro-descendants, homosexuals, or poor people, among others). This was the case especially from 1940 on when the cult spread to the main cities and social inequalities were reinforced. From a similar perspective, Elisabeth Nichols (2006) maintains that the cult of María Lionza has historically been a sphere of empowerment for women in a country like Venezuela, which has a strong patriarchal structure. Thus, according to the author, the cult of María Lionza has been, beyond social classes and ethnic differences, one of the strategies “that women have pursued in Venezuela as a means for challenging the ‘hierarchical’ orders of society” (2006: 76).

Other Venezuelan researchers have also taken interest in the cult of María Lionza. Such is the case of Bruno Manara (1995), who provides a wide collection of versions of the myth, Nelly García Gavidia (1987), who analyzes the role of tobacco in the rituals, or Angelina Pollak-Eltz and Yolanda Salas

(1998), who focuses on the relation between the cult of María Lionza and Latin American Pentecostalism. It is also important to highlight the works of Michaelle Ascencio (2007, 2012) who tackles, among other subjects, the relation between the cult to María Lionza and Afro-American religions, especially Cuban Santería. Young Venezuelan researchers such as Anabel Fernández Quintana (2016) and César Escalona (2017) are contributing new perspectives on the current practice of the cult of María Lionza.

It was also during the 1980s and early 1990s that a number of international scholars began to take interest in the cult of María Lionza. One of the main figures of this wave was Michael Taussig (1991;1997). His focus of interest was the relationship between the cult of María Lionza and the Venezuelan state. He argues that the cult of María Lionza should not be interpreted as simple opposition to the Venezuelan state, but rather as a structural part of it. His position is that between both there has historically been a dialectical relationship, that is, a relationship of opposition based on an implicit logic of mutual dependence and influence. Adopting a Hegelian approach, Taussig argues that the Venezuelan state—symbol of reason, order, and modernity—has needed the Other, that is, the irrational, the mythical, and the primitive, in order to define and to reproduce itself. In Venezuela, this Otherness has been embodied by the cult of María Lionza, which appears as the negative force that helps to perpetuate the state. Not only is there a mutual dependence between the state and the cult, but Taussig goes one step further and affirms that they operate in rather the same manner. Thus, he shows how, in a similar way to the ceremonies in the cult of María Lionza, the modern Venezuelan state has operated as a magical entity, a mystical one (1997: 125), able to transform reality with its sacred rituals—a theory that we also find in the book, with an almost identical title, by Fernando Coronil (1997). Likewise, Venezuelan citizens are continuously possessed by the state—that is, by its values, historical heroes, and moral principles—in the same way that mediums of the cult of María Lionza are possessed by the spirits of the spiritual pantheon. Inversely, the cult of María Lionza has developed not in opposition to the Venezuelan state, but by adopting some of its main principles. This is evident in the introduction into the cult of historical figures from Venezuelan history (Juan Vicente Gómez, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, Simón Bolívar, and even Hugo Chávez) as well as an intensified nationalism that reigns in its interior. The hierarchical system of spiritual *cortes* that gives order to the spiritual pantheon, and the strict rules in the cult as regards spiritual permission to participate in the ceremonies, could also be interpreted according to Taussig as examples of the mimetic relation that has existed in Venezuela between political power and popular religious practice. This mutual dependence between the cult and the state is epitomized by the duality of María Lionza and Simón Bolívar, who constitute a symbolic couple of



the nation. The goddess would symbolize the forest and the body whereas El Libertador would evoke the idea of rationality and urban life. Thus, both figures would oppose one another as Nature and Culture do. Actually, what Taussig ends up with is a conceptualization of the hidden logics of the modern state in general rather than an ethnography of the cult of María Lionza. Thus, in the cult of María Lionza and its relationship with the Venezuelan state, Taussig finds a paradigmatic clarification of the “inarticulable magic and sacred design of the modern state” (1997: 37).

On the other hand, the works by Francisco Ferrándiz (2004) are of special relevance for he was the first to profoundly tackle the question of the body and the senses within the cult of María Lionza. He argues that the cult includes a complex universe of colors, textures, smells, and sounds, which are a fundamental part of it. But, more importantly, he shows how, through spiritual possession, the body reveals itself as a political arena for subverting ordinary roles of sub-alternity and gaining agency among marginalized people. His work is based on a rich ethnographic account among young mediums in Caracas. He focuses on two sorts of spirits present in this cult, which began to acquire a great presence while he was doing fieldwork in Venezuela in the mid-1990s: the spirits of Vikings (*vikingos*) and those of delinquents (*malandros*). Both are spirits of great strength, who usually exhaust the medium hosting them, often to the point of causing self-injury. With regard to the former, he shows how followers of the cult of María Lionza took inspiration from the way Vikings were represented in the cinema, in comic strips, and on television, to create the spirits’ aesthetic. Thus, he points interestingly to a permanent passage between the images of the media and the corporeal images that we find in the ceremonies based on spiritual possession. Regarding the spirits of delinquents, Ferrándiz convincingly interprets them as both an expression of the generalized violence and poverty in Venezuela and as a strategy for tackling it. An interesting point underscored by the author is that the delinquents’ spirits are not judged in the cult as necessarily bad spirits. On the contrary, they are essentially seen as victims. Believers think that the spirits of delinquents can receive a type of spiritual pardon for the evil they committed in life if they help the living in spiritual ceremonies. Ferrándiz interprets this dynamic as a strategy to rewrite history from the point of view of those that were traditionally excluded from it. Finally, from an economic point of view, Ferrándiz shows how spiritism becomes an informal strategy of survival (*rebusque*) in a political context marked by high rates of youth unemployment, a topic Yunis Narváez Díaz (2005) also tackles.

The works of Ferrándiz interestingly complement those of Barbara Palacio. In an important article titled “It’s All to Do with Words” (2001) she shed light, not on the bodily dimension of the rituals, but rather on the discursive one. Her main idea is that the cult includes a complexity in terms of discursive

sive expression that would have been overlooked as a result of the emphasis placed on the corporeal element of the religious ceremonies. The discursive complexity within the cult manifests itself in a variety of ways of speech. For instance, she argues that every single spirit is characterized by the way he or she speaks and by what he or she says. Thus, spirits of Indians usually speak what the believers call “Indian” and talk about the resistance against the Spaniards. Moreover, she notices that within rituals the words that spirits utter through the body of the medium—their advice, criticisms, and political opinions—have a strong impact on believers. The words spoken by the spirit matter enormously, and thus spark concrete actions among believers. In this regard, she adds that, contrary to what is usually thought, spirits talk not only in terms of subversion in a non-conservative, counter-hegemonic, and rebellious way—as the theory of Pollak-Eltz seems to suggest—but rather to reinforce Christian morality and middle class values. So, Palacio convincingly proves that an ethnography of spirit possession cannot be limited to analyzing what spirits do through the bodies of the mediums, but must also pay attention to what they actually say.

In addition to these works dedicated specifically to the cult of María Lionza, we find sporadic references to this religion in articles and books dedicated to Afro-American cults (Briggs 1996; Reid Andrews 2004; Van de Port 2006), Latin American *mestizaje* (Wade 2005), the history of Venezuela (Coronil 1997), and more general anthropology books (Augé 1997). The cult of María Lionza is also evoked in a multitude of esoteric books (Blanco 1990) and on websites of dubious or no scientific value.

It is important to mention that none of the existing works on the cult of María Lionza specifically tackles the question of its visual dimension, although most of them make references to it, especially with regard to the origins of the statue originally made by Alejandro Colina (see figure 1) and the proliferation of religious statuettes used during ceremonies. This book seeks precisely to fill this void by providing a rich account of the images within the cult based on an extensive and multi-situated ethnographic fieldwork. In this regard, I would like to point out that, from a methodological point of view, one of the originalities of this work is that it is the fruit of research conducted using visual means—namely video and photography. To the best of my knowledge, only Ferrándiz (1996) has seriously risen to the challenge of studying the cult with visual means and approaching the role of the gaze within the rituals. In this book, I would like to further explore this direction, since, as I shall develop in chapters 3 and 4, I am convinced that the use of visual methods can make a considerable contribution to an original understanding of this religious practice by providing a set of data and insights that may not have been otherwise obtained. In this regard, this book should be considered part of a broader project on the cult of María Lionza from the

perspective of visual anthropology, which has led to the production of several ethnographic films and a website on this topic.<sup>15</sup> I encourage the reader to confront these visual productions about the cult and to establish a critical dialogue between them. This point leads us to the question of how this book situates itself vis-à-vis contemporary debates on visual anthropology.

## Anthropology and the Visual

The cult to María Lionza can be approached from many different angles. In this book I have chosen to approach it from the perspective of visual anthropology. As Jean-Paul Colleyn has argued (2012), visual anthropology should not be conceived as a distinctive academic field *sensu stricto* but rather as a “crossroads” (*carrefour*) in which diverse practices, theoretical approaches and academic traditions converge—history of art, anthropology, semiotics, cinema, photography, among others. Likewise, Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby demand in their book *Made to be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology* (2011) that visual anthropology be understood in the broad sense, and not limited to the narrow field of ethnographic film and photography. Rather, they propose that visual anthropology be defined as an anthropology dealing with “the inescapable entanglement of the visual in all areas of life, from the spontaneous act of seeing to the deeply considered artifice of film and art” (2011: 16). In line with these perspectives, in this book, I understand visual anthropology to be a branch of anthropology that includes four different yet intimately connected areas of inquiry. First, visual anthropology is concerned with the study of images, understood as visual signs. Thus, visual anthropology explores the cultural and social life of different kinds of pictures (religious icons, artworks, advertising, photography, and others). In this regard, the image is considered to be the object of study of visual anthropology. The specificity of anthropology compared to other disciplines tackling related issues—such as visual studies or art studies—is its insistence on grasping, through the ethnographic fieldwork, the relationships that we establish with and through images. In other words, what interests us as anthropologists is how we interact with them and how they shape the relationship that we establish with others. Second, visual anthropology encompasses the use of visual methods in ethnographic research. This is the field that has produced an amount of works in recent years from different disciplines (Banks 2007; Spencer 2011). Let us specify that when we talk about visual methods we are referring to a range of strategies that go far beyond the use of the video and the photographic camera on the field. Thus, for example, anthropologists and artists are increasingly using drawing or painting as a means for ethnographic research. Moreover, film and pho-

tography can be employed in very different ways and for different purposes. We can film to make a video but also to record important events in order to subsequently discuss them with their protagonists, thus engaging in a process of video-elicitation. Visual methods do not only mean creating images on the field; these methods may also refer to the use of preexisting images to provoke ethnographic situations. During my fieldwork in Venezuela and in Barcelona, for instance, I endeavored to compile as many images of María Lionza as possible and to gather comments from followers of the cult, artists, craftspeople, and people on the street. I asked them to choose which image they deemed to be the most faithful image of the goddess and why. The debates that these images generated were of great value to me and shall be mentioned throughout this book. The third field of visual anthropology concerns what we could call visual writing, that is, those modes of publishing and disseminating the anthropological knowledge, including a variety of visual strategies. Visual writing includes not only ethnographic film and photography but also the production of websites, drawings, animated films, and exhibitions. These strategies enable us to combine images with text but also other sensory experiences such as sound and smell. Historically, the main debate that has surrounded visual writing is the relation between image and text. It has been claimed that, when writing visually, images should not be treated as a mere illustration of a previous text, but should acquire a certain autonomy, complementing the text (if there is one) and providing an original knowledge that cannot be reduced to the textual regime. In short, the relation between text and image should not be based on a relation of subordination but on an epistemological complementarity. Finally, visual anthropology is concerned with the study of visibility, understood as the cultural and social dimension of vision. Thus, vision is approached not in its pure physiological nature but rather as a cultural and social practice, as an intentional and skilled engagement with the outside world. This interest in visibility includes, on the one hand, the study of how people actually see—and, more precisely, on the processes through which they learn to see in a specific way through a process of visual socialization. On the other hand, visual anthropology analyzes the meaning of the act of seeing and being seen in each historical or cultural context. Thus, it strives to respond, through specific ethnographic cases, to questions like: What can be seen and what cannot be seen in a specific cultural context? What is the status of vision vis-à-vis the written text in a specific historical period? What does it mean to look and how do visual interactions between individuals take place in a specific social milieu? Thus, concepts like “regimes of visibility” (Van Winkel 2005) or “scopic regimes” (Jay 1988) point to the idea of the more or less explicit existence of a set of principles—of a political, cultural, and social nature—that determine the meaning of the act of seeing and being seen.

One of the objectives of this book is to bring together the four abovementioned fields of visual anthropology—the image as an object, the image as a method of research, the image as a mode of writing, and the study of visuality. With this approach, my aim is to reassemble the visual in anthropology, and to do so in relation to a specific ethnographic case. More specifically, my aim is to make it apparent that the different areas of visual anthropology mentioned above are inextricably linked, to such an extent that it is difficult to tackle one of them without referring to the others. Furthermore, my argument is that visual anthropology needs to be reassembled within the whole anthropological project, that is, that visual anthropology should cease to be considered as a sub-field or a specialty, and begin to be seen as a structural part of the anthropological endeavor. In this regard, I am convinced that the study of the visual (in the broad sense of the term) can make important and original contributions to the main debates in current anthropology and specifically in the study of contemporary religious practices.

### **Material, Corporeal, and Mental Images**

The main objective of this book is to explore the relations that individuals create with images and through them in the context of the cult of María Lionza. However, what is an image? The word “image” holds a multitude of meanings (Aumont 1990, Jenks 1995, Mitchell 1994), which point to rather different things. A first semantic distinction is that which distinguishes images directed at just our intellect, like when we speak about the power of certain words to “make a picture” and images “which have a visible form,” that is, “visual images.” It is the latter use that I would like to emphasize here. Moreover, visual images of María Lionza enter the category of “representative image” in its most common sense: the general definition of representation (or sign) carries with it the idea that it features something that is not there; that this thing, from our perspective, is “real or imaginary,” that is, as far as we grant it an existence in the world or not. In other words, the representative image has a referential approach, namely, it seeks to recreate or evoke something that lies elsewhere—the image can be defined, as Sartre (2012) would say, as the presence of an absence. Therefore, when I speak of “image” in this book, I am referring to a specific type of image: the representative visual image. It is for this reason that, bar a few exceptions, I shall use the terms “image” and “representation” as synonyms.

There are a countless number of images of María Lionza, whose characteristics greatly differ from one another. At first, this set appears to be an extremely complex, even chaotic, whole. Therefore, the creation of a taxonomy of images of the goddess is essential before moving on to interpret them.

Evidently, several possible criteria for classifying images of María Lionza are possible. I have decided to classify them according to their support, in other words, according to their transmission medium. The notion of “support” holds great significance for the anthropology of images. According to Belting (2011), every image is necessarily incorporated in a support or transmission medium, precisely to make their visibility possible; even our mental or inner images. As far as experience is concerned, the image always appears on a medium or support and is inseparable from it. Yet, from the point of view of analysis, image and support are not identified with one another. The image is not reduced to its medium: it is somehow visible through it and, in fact, this serves as the basis for its presentation. Two examples may help this distinction to be understood.

Let us suppose we are looking at a family album and we stop at a photograph of one of our loved ones. The photographic paper and the traces of light-sensitive chemicals are the supports of this image, the instrument through which it is presented to us. However, looking at this picture, we are not aware of perceiving chemicals on a piece of paper, but rather of seeing the face of this loved one. It is as if such a familiar face appears to us through the photograph—as it could have on other supports. Another example, this time belonging to another technique and taking a reference that is not drawn from first-hand experience: if we look at a statue of Poseidon carved in marble, we know that it is indeed a piece of sculpted marble we are looking at, which does not prevent us from recognizing that it is a portrayal of the Greek god in marble—hence his image—which is given to us to see.

The image, therefore, always appears through a medium, yet it surpasses it. This necessarily takes place upon the perception of the image, that is to say, at the time the image becomes an image for a subject. This moment of perception appears to be the prerequisite of the image itself. In fact, for an image to be created as such, an act of animation is required that transfers it to our imagination by detaching it from its support-medium. Every image is therefore closely correlated with an onlooking body and an observed medium, with a support that makes the image visible and a subject who looks at it and who, so to speak, captures it “through it.”

Following Belting’s classification, we might say that from the point of view of supports, there are three types of images of María Lionza: material images, corporeal images, and mental images. Material images are those that are produced by humans on solid materials, such as paintings, sculptures, frescoes, prints, or posters. These constitute images that belong to several spheres of Venezuelan society: religion, crafts, art, or advertising, to name but a few. Digital images are also a special type of material image. If I speak of corporeal images it is because María Lionza is embodied or represented physically, by mediums during possession rituals and also by dancers and

theater, film, or soap opera actresses. Admittedly, we cannot handle the visible corporeal image during a possession ritual in the same way as the one offered by an actress. In the case of possession, the spirit of *María Lionza* is supposed to temporarily replace that of the medium, whereas on stage, the dancer or the actress plays a role she has rehearsed in advance. Whatever the case, what must be remembered is that *María Lionza* is not only visible in objects, but also in bodies. Finally, many believers, whether practicing the cult or not, claim that *María Lionza* can be seen directly in a dream or during an apparition of the deity. This is what I call a mental image of *María Lionza*. Indeed, somehow, every material or corporeal image is, in a manner of speaking, also a mental image, in the sense that every image produced on a solid or corporeal support is only perceived as such when it is seen by one or several subjects. Nevertheless, I shall use a much narrower meaning of the term “mental image,” which will denote the images that appear in consciousness and not as a result of perception—more or less immediate—by the mind of an external object or body through a sensory activity.

I therefore propose conducting a comparative analysis of different images of *María Lionza*. But what kind of comparison does it entail? In other words, which elements in the different representations of the goddess must be compared? In this study, on the one hand, I shall compare the appearance of *María Lionza* in each representation. More specifically, I shall interpret the ethnic traits, the moral components, and the vision of femininity conveyed in the different images of the goddess in order to grasp all the symbolic complexity of the figure, marked by her multi-faceted and changing nature. Second, I shall compare the roles played by the different images of *María Lionza*. The question of the image’s function, essential for anthropology, takes us back to notions of context and viewer that I mentioned earlier as regards the concept of support. Indeed, every image performs one or several functions in a specific historical and cultural context and in relation to a given number of individuals who observe it and, possibly, increasingly establish another kind of relationship with the image. As a matter of fact, if we accept that anthropology is fundamentally the study of social relations and their mediations, the whole point of this research is to determine the social and symbolic relationships constituted around representations of *María Lionza*, that is to say, to see people’s interactions with the images and through the images and determine the roles given to them. At the same time, I intend to explore the possible links between these two paradigms of interpretation, that is, between the aesthetic aspect and the functional dimension of the image of *María Lionza*. For instance, when a group of believers wish to invoke *María Lionza* to perform a healing ritual, with which representation of the goddess do they interact? With that of a white woman, a mestiza woman, an Indian woman, or a black woman? And when scriptwriters for a televi-

sion channel plan to make a TV film about this figure, from which model do they draw inspiration? In short, it is a question of determining whether a link exists between María Lionza's appearance and the role played by her representations.

Furthermore, by focusing on religious images—that is, visual representations of supernatural beings—this book follows a long tradition in the study of fetishes or icons, which is as old as anthropology itself and which ultimately goes back to the studies by Edward B. Tylor (1871), Marcel Mauss (1924), and Lucian Lévy-Bruhl (1927). In all these authors' works we find the basic idea that religious images appear, from the believer's point of view, to be both identified with and differentiated from what they represent, that is, they maintain a relationship both of identity and alterity with the supernatural beings (spirits, gods, souls) that they depict—they are both indexes and icons to use the terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–58). This intrinsic ambiguity or contradiction of religious images—that is, the fact that they appear as objects acting as subjects—has been tackled by a wide range of scholars. Studies on religious images have also been used for posterior analyses on the nature of artistic works and objects in general (Gell 1998; Miller 2010). This debate around the religious image will be the focus of the third chapter of this book. The contributions of W.J.T. Mitchell, David Morgan, and Birgit Meyer are of particular importance in the conceptual framework of this book, as regards the anthropology of images. In his book, *What Do Pictures Want?* (2004), W.J.T. Mitchell has proposed the study of images as vital signs, that is, as living objects with desires, will, and intentions. Thus, according to Mitchell, images do not only stand before us—as a passive object in front of an active subject—but they also want something from us or move us to interact physically with them. As I shall show throughout this book, the image of María Lionza often appears as a somatic image, that is, as an image having (and producing) bodily and emotional reactions. Second, in a classical work on popular religious images, Morgan has focused on the idea of visual piety, understood as the visual formation and practice of religious belief. He has shown how “the act of looking itself contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief” (1998: 3). According to Morgan, looking, as a part of a broader bodily experience, is a way of enhancing the immanence of the spiritual referent “through the image” (1998: 43), that is, it has a strong relational nature. Thus, visual piety must not be understood in terms of contemplation and disinterestedness but in terms of interaction and strategic participation. Likewise, in the work *Religion and Material Culture*, Morgan rejects the understanding of religion qua prescription as it reduces a religion to a body of “assertions demanding assent” (2010: 2). Instead, he demands an understanding of religious experience, which enhances its ma-



terial, corporeal, and experiential dimension. As he says: “belief shows itself to be a corporeal assumption or expectation, the cognitive predisposition of an embodied epistemology” (2010: 9). Finally, it is important to note that after the 1990s a set of works exploring the relation between religion and new technologies appeared. One of the questions tackled in these is that of the reasons explaining the ease with which religious phenomena have incorporated technological developments. Meyer contributes a response to the debate based on the concept of “mediation” (2009; Meyer and Moors 2006). She argues that the goal of religion as a social fact has always been to weave relations, or, in other words, to mediate. Thus, religious rituals must be understood as an effort to build bridges either between the profane world and the sacred world, or between different individuals and groups. According to the author, the definition of religion as mediation allows us to gain a better understanding of the reason why religious movements have adopted the media (television, radio, Internet) so smoothly and successfully to spread their messages and attract new followers. The media is not something added to religion, but it expresses the essence of religion itself. With this approach, Meyer makes a stand against “rupturist” theories, which uphold that the inclusion of new media by many religious movements has led to a radical change in these organizations—regarding how they perceive themselves and how they operate in relation to the others. The approach proposed by Meyer will help us, in chapter 6, to gain a better understanding of the current use of new technologies utilized by the followers of *María Lionza*.

## **Structure of the Book**

This book is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the different mythical and historical versions of the origin of *María Lionza*, while the second is dedicated to the cult of *María Lionza*, focusing on its history and its contemporary practice in the context of post-Chavist Venezuela. The third chapter focuses on the religious image. I shall particularly emphasize the study of religious altars, analyzing their appearance, their purpose, and the effects they have on the ritual and on the day-to-day life of believers. Chapter 4 analyzes some of the art works inspired by the figure of *María Lionza*. As I shall demonstrate, in the case of the cult of *María Lionza*, the artistic sphere and the religious sphere are closely linked: believers incorporate and reinterpret the work of artists for religious purposes while the majority of artists conceive their activity as a religious ritual. However, *María Lionza* is not only depicted in paintings, statues, and holy cards, but also through corporeal representation—spirit possession, theater, and artistic performances. Thus, chapter 5 is dedicated to the comparative

analysis of these different types of corporeal images in contrast to mental images, that is, dreams, visions, and apparitions, which play a key role in the cult and in the artistic production surrounding the goddess. Chapter 6 focuses on the presence of the cult of María Lionza beyond Venezuelan borders (mainly in Barcelona) and on the presence of this religious practice on the Internet, especially, on social networks such as Facebook. In the seventh chapter, I put forward a theoretical framework to interpret the set of images of María Lionza, as well as the relations that these maintain with myth and ritual practice.

## Notes

1. According to the majority of believers to whom I have explained this anecdote, the fact that I received an image of María Lionza as a present and that soon afterwards I met a Venezuelan girl who gave me holy cards is no coincidence. The interpretation by the believers is that María Lionza was trying to contact me through her image because she wanted me to study her cult. Therefore, according to the believers, I did not decide to study María Lionza of my own accord; rather, the goddess encouraged me to study her cult.
2. Believers of the cult of María Lionza often refer to their divinity as a “goddess.” However, this term may be ambiguous, because it seems to suggest that María Lionza is conceived as a transcendent and all-powerful being with a mythical origin, when in fact, the majority of followers in the cult interpret her as the spirit of a historical person who lived either at the time of the conquest or during the colonial period. As a spirit, María Lionza is a goddess who is very close to human beings, not in an inaccessible afterlife, but on a plane of immanence.
3. In the cult of María Lionza, the medium or *materia* is a person who is capable of expelling their soul and hosting an outside spirit in their body.
4. Throughout this book I will use pseudonyms. I will also change the names of the cult groups.
5. As Jacques Rancière states: “Forms cannot go without words, which install them in a field of visibility” (2003: 101). This is the same as saying that the visual register and the textual or conceptual register are inevitably linked, without however being a direct transposition of the other.
6. In his magnificent book on Santería, David H. Brown also uses the concept of “visual creativity” at times to refer to processes of incorporating new iconographic patterns into Afro-Cuban religions. In this regard, throughout his book the author uses the concept of innovation, understood as a “conscious decision by individuals and groups” to restructure and reconfigure their ritual practices (2003: 10).
7. In this book, I focus on visual creativity, although there could be other modes of creation within the cult such as acoustic or discursive ones. Actually, all these forms of creation are mingled and, whenever possible, I shall try to establish connections between them.
8. The most extensive fieldwork I conducted in Venezuela was between 2005 and 2007. Since then, I have spent several periods in the country to update my observations. The

- systematic fieldwork in Barcelona was carried out between 2010 and 2015. Between 2013 and 2015, I focused on studying the presence of the cult of María Lionza on the Internet.
9. The topic of Afro-American culture has given rise to countless debates. The classic text by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1976) highlights the ethnogenesis processes and the uniqueness of the Afro-American culture in relation to the African culture. This work has been the subject of many commentaries, including those of Palmié (1995), Brown (2003) and Matory (2005), among many others.
  10. According to the majority of researchers, the origin of the cult lies in the Caquetía and Jirajara people from the interior of Venezuela, part of the family of Arawakan communities (D. Barreto 1990; O. Garmendia 2012).
  11. The term *mestizaje* can be defined in several ways. In a general sense, it refers to the encounter and fusion between different ethnic or racial groups. It also refers, as Peter Wade argues, to an ideology that developed in Latin America during the twentieth century, “involving a process of national homogenisation and of hiding a reality of racist exclusion behind a mask of inclusiveness” (2005).
  12. Thus, the connections between the cult of María Lionza and the different indigenous ethnic groups in Venezuela (Pume, Warao, Yanomami, and Pemon, among others) are difficult to establish. In fact, it is even difficult to speak about “indigenous cultures” in Venezuela, as a homogeneous and coherent group since, as pointed out by Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández (2015), the differences between these communities are huge.
  13. For more information about Gilberto Antolínez and Hermann Garmendia see chapter 1. I analyze the work of Colina in chapter 3.
  14. Marcos Evangelista Pérez Jiménez (1914–2001) was a Venezuelan military officer in the army of Venezuela. He was the president of the country from 1952 to 1958.
  15. The films that I have made in relation to the cult of María Lionza are: *A Glimpse into the Mountain of Sorte* (CNRS-IMAGES, 2006), *The Many Faces of a Venezuelan Goddess* (CNRS-Images, Cellule Audiovisuelle du IIAC, 2007), *The Blood and the Hen* (CMRS-Images, 2008), and *A Goddess in Motion: María Lionza in Barcelona* (Wenner-Gren Foundation & Jordi Orobitg Produccions, 2016). I also would like to invite the reader to browse the webpage: [www.marialionza.net](http://www.marialionza.net).