

Subaltern Speaks Episode 2 Transcript

Yasamin 0:06

Hello, hello, welcome to Subaltern Speaks podcast, episode number two. I'm your host, Yasamin Jameh. For this episode, we have a very special guest for you. Dr. Victor Rivas professor of Latin American literary and cultural studies here at the University of Toronto, and associate Chair of the Latin American Studies Program. In this episode, we will be discussing the syncretic spiritual cult of Maria Lionza, in Venezuela. So without further ado, let's jump in and introduce to you Professor Revas. How are you doing Professor Revas today?

Dr. Revas 0:54

I'm doing well. Thank you Yasamin.

Yasamin 0:57

Great. I guess the first place we can start this interview is, could you tell us a little bit about yourself what you do?

Dr. Rivas 1:07

Sure. I'm an assistant professor of Latin American culture, literature's contemporary, that means, the 20th century, 21st century, I look at literatures of what we call resistance, which are typically narratives that are counter to the status quo. A quick example would be guerrilla writing, which are typically people who have participated in the guerrilla warfare in Latin America and Central America, for example, in South America, in my particular case, I'm looking at the writers from Venezuela, who have both participated in guerrilla warfare. So the 60s 70s and 80s. And also in Central America, some of them even joined the Sandinista revolution. In resistance writing also has to do with Indigenous narratives that go counter to the status quo, again, what we call the official histories of alienation. And these narratives I look at then provided an alternative view of a perception of history of perception of even realities. And case in point might be the testimonies of I think, Rigoberta Menchu from Guatemala, she did win a Nobel Peace Prize for her writing, narrative writing, recounting her experiences as a Maya Indigenous woman, going through what time period in Guatemala and bringing her story then to the world at large. It is this narrative that then earned her the Peace Prize, because knowledge of these narratives became part of a world effort to ask the Guatemalan government to basically to, to start peace talks. So these are the types of narratives that I work with, in general terms.

Yasamin 3:20

Uh, well, that just goes right into the whole theme of this podcast, which is just challenging these, like narratives that we're so used to, you know, history with the capital age, though official histories. Because we, history also if it bleeds into culture and into religion, so we also would like to know, challenge, you know, the how people practice their spiritualities especially in the colonized, and especially in the places that have been colonized, and how, how they still try to maintain their culture, even when they're faced oppression from their colonizers and how they tried to resist in very subtle ways, oftentimes, so that, well, that leads on to our topic of the of today, which is Maria Lionza, so when I first approached you, you were very quick to recommend this topic. I had no idea who she was, that this practice even existed. But you, you, you were pretty quick to recommend it. So I just wanted to know, why did you think this topic was so suitable? And if you could go a little bit into who she is and why she's so significant?

Dr. Rivas 4:41

Sure. So part of what I was saying a moment ago, about the type of writings that I work with resistance, literature's resistance narratives. The one particular testimonial that I was working with in Venezuela, written by a guerrilla fighter, Ali Gomez Garcia, he had actually won a literary prize. It's quite a high ranking literary prize very, very important literary prize in Cuba. It was to honor the top narratives called testimonial, which are particular to Latin America. Even though testimonials are now recognized as world literatures their practice in different parts of the world, at that time, when this prize was given, in the mid 80s, in the Cuban government, and then Latin American intellectuals, were trying to establish testimonial to literary genre, what is particular about this, this testimonial is the first to understand that it's their testimonials have to be characterized as usually first person narratives, people who have lived through an experience, and they are able to talk about it. And their main characteristic is that they are true, they are verifiable, they are factual. And then also, they're urgent, they're meant to be dispersed and shared with the population at large, in order to bring that consciousness of a political situation to the rest of the world, again, to insert a, the communities at large that are involved in these type of conflicts, to find a resolution peaceful. What distinguishes this particular testimonial of this guerrilla fighter is that not only that he write about his own accounts, his own life story, but he also incorporated history that is going back to the movements of independence in Latin America, in particular Simone Bolivar, and Simone Bolivar as a, as a historical figure, is a character that he incorporates in his narrative. So now he's already subverting the genre itself as it was established in the 70s and in the 80s. By incorporating historical figures actually dialoguing with him, the person who's writing the narrative, as if he were a contemporary, of a guerrilla fighter that lived with the 80s in the 70s. So not only does he incorporate the historical figure from the Venezuelan and from Latin American official history, but then he goes on to incorporate two more characters, one from legend, just popular culture that represents the Afro Venezuelan communities. She's not a real character, but she is more of a compound character, a synthesis if you wish, of many different African, Venezuelan Africa, Latin American people, some real some legendary, some even mythical from I mean, this is a character that he also has a one on one dialogue in his narrative

and inside a testimonial. To add to that, here he has another character a female character, who represents the Indigenous populations in this character coming from Indigenous myths is Maria Lionza, Maria Lionza is a considered for the general terms of general purposes, but it also is considered an Indigenous character, who represents a part of an Indigenous myth that has revived sense before the times of the conquest in Latin America, in particular to the area of Venezuela. Maria Lionza, has several, several different iterations in terms of her origins said in one story, to be the daughter of a classical leader of a particular group or tribe in the northwest part of Venezuela. The story according to that iteration of that version, that stays close to the Indigenous myth is that her name was Jada and that she was the daughter of the of the leader. For one reason or another, these are always variations, she is threatened and sent away to go live near a mountain in the current state of Yaracuy City Venezuela today. Part of the legend for the myth rather says that she is looking into a lake a deep lake and an anaconda, a giant snake comes out of the water and devours her. And while she is inside of the snake, she appeals to the spirits of the mountain of which she was sent to her father, to please release her unharmed. Apparently the spirits of the mountain respond and they cause the giant snake the anaconda to swell up and burst that's liberating Maria or rather, Yara, in this case, Yara, before she becomes Maria. And then Yara is going to be assimilated by the mountain and becomes the spirit, the queen, rather, of all the spirits of nature. So this is the Indigenous aspect of the legend, but it has other aspects too.

Yasamin 10:48

Right. So we can jump into that as we go forward. So that's her backstory. She was her Indigenous name is called Yara. And I assume she became Maria Lionza later after the colonization of by the by the Spanish. But before we jump into that I kind of wanted to talk about at what point is there a point in history where, like historians or anthropologists can pinpoint to where her worship began?

Dr. Rivas 11:24

Yeah, it's a it's a bit of a of a complex story, but the what we call it now, the myth or if you wish, now the today it's called a cult, and it has different explanations, but the myth of Maria Lionza the legend, if you wish, has existed since colonial times. So colonial times, we're talking about the 16th century 17th century all the way up to now to the present becomes prominent when, when in the towards the end of the 19th century, especially in the beginning of the 20th century. When people are talking about the story, people are going in pilgrimages to the area of Sorte in the State of Yaracuy, and different anthropologists in particular, Angelina Pollock is another anthropologist also Daisy Barreto, both have studied extensively the cult of Maria Lionza, and Angelina Pollack, states in the 70s. That the early 70s, that the cult moved from the remote state of Yaraqy, which was a rural area, to the capitals to the urban areas of Venezuela, due to the advent of the oil industry, so oil exploration and then oil exploitation and the settling of oil camps and oil centers. And then the administrative centers in the, in the capitol, for example, in Caracas or the other regional, big cities, went to the east of the country. And so these big centers would be the place for the oil workers, their families, anybody working

in the oil industry would move to from the rural areas they would bring with them the story of Maria Lionza. In the 1950s that occurs that the dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez actually incorporates or if you wish sanctions, by their actions, the cult of Maria Lionza are already present in the in the urban setting of the capitals, Caracas to the effect of the 1950s is the one the very famous architect named Alejandro Colina is commissioned to create a statue of Maria Lionza, there were supposed to adorn the entrance to the university, the Central University of Venezuela, University of Central de Venezuela. So the statue was larger than life larger than just down to it. It's almost a real person in the half. Quite a large statue is quite famous there. There are multiple images and reproductions of different sizes, postcards of this particular monument that I'm talking about. This is one it was cast. And the original version was set at the at the entrance, one of the main entrances to the University of Central Venezuela, downtown Caracas by the way, which is itself now declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. So that statue be there but then they moved it on because there were too many, too many interventions of devotees to the to the cult, to the religion. Coming to the, to the statue and performing their ceremonies and their rights to statue interrupting the flow. Also, there was most likely some idea within the government that even though it had they had sanctioned this, that maybe there was too much disruption, and maybe some a little bit of fear that perhaps the populace would move more towards that belief system than the official Catholic of the nation. The statue then was moved to the to in between the highways in east side of Caracas in the Capitol. So now it's there, there are a couple of copies of that statue. The statue represents an Indigenous woman who is not wearing any clothing. And she's holding up above her head two arms outstretched above her head, a large basket will look we'll look at a basket a flat basket full of the fruits and vegetables, there will be native to of course to Venezuela. And then she's mounted. She's riding a giant taper and that's the iconic representation of Maria Lionza, as represented by the statue of Alejandro Colina. Which he has many different other representations which we can talk about just a moment.

Yasamin 16:46

So I personally when I was researching, I saw the depictions of her I've seen her like in with like your more European clothes, more biblical clothes with the robes. So not as she's represented in the statue, like, basically nude. I've seen her. It's like green eyes, like her green eyes are very striking and almost like all the portraits, and then I've seen other portraits where she's like more in Indigenous clothes and more stereotypical, like, Indian clothes. So I was wondering why all these like, different depictions, is it because there has been an attempt to whitewash her perhaps like they tried to make her look like some sort of like Cinderella, some sort of European princess, or is it just because there's so many different versions of this story? Because I've even like I when I was reading I heard there's like some stories that say she wasn't actually Indigenous, she was a mestiza. I don't know if that's, to what extent that is true. But anyway, that just goes to say there's a lot of things that people are saying throughout the years. And it's a complex situation. So I wanted to ask you about that and see how much of it is just because of the varying accounts? Or how much is due to like maybe whitewashing due to the colonization, they have to make her look more European, more like the Virgin Mary, in order to like, bring it in line with the Catholic Church?

Dr. Rivas 18:20

Well, to answer that, you're right, Yasmin, it is a very complex narrative, very complex story. Maria Lionza, as we said, at the onset, is represented through many different narratives, many different versions. Again, what we said at the beginning is that is that her original representation has to do with an Indigenous maiden, I guess, to use this word, princess, of course, she's the daughter of the leader. And we find a situation with the anaconda that she becomes the queen of the mountain, that's how she becomes the, the, the, the leader of, of the animals, the ruler of the flora and fauna of the area. So she becomes important as a deity, the goddess if you wish, there is important if we understand it to Indigenous beliefs in the area, when they're trying to relate to nature, so she is considered a goddess of nature. With the conquest and with colonization, of course, you get the introduction of the Spanish in particular, this region of Venezuela. And the story of Maria also then becomes syncretized. So when we talk about this religion or cult depends on the point of view, it is referred to and explained as a syncretized, religion or cult, because in fact, it does bring in elements of not only the Indigenous myth, but also brings in elements of Christianity in particular Catholicism brought in by the Spanish conquistadors and colonizers of the area, and then eventually brings an element of the Afro Venezuelan to use the term today. The people who were brought in by the Europeans for the slave trade, they brought in elements of their own cultures, mostly from Western Africa. So these three cultures, these three groups contribute now to the current understanding, and the current iteration version of Maria Lionza today. It also explains the name and the question you're asking, yes, I mean, about the representation of Maria. And so if at first during the Indigenous recounting of the myth, or the legend, she's the daughter, she will be represented as an Indigenous woman. When, when Alexander, in the mid 20th century, represents her he is trying to be faithful to that, to that notion of representation, because the Venezuelan government in the mid 20th century, like many other governments in Latin America are trying hard to, to recover and be proud of an Indigenous past. So not to minimize the European legacy, but to say, hey, here we are, we do have an Indigenous past, let's recognize that. So that's in the mid 50s of the 20th century, in when the Spanish come into contact with Indigenous population, they will start modifying the story. Here's where the name of Yara changes. Yara now is going to be represented in stories that vary from that of the lake, or the river, which is swallowed up by an anaconda to have been maybe a mestiza would have been the child of a European person and an Indigenous person. So here she is, now represented with perhaps a darker skin, a bronze skin perhaps, but also her eyes were either green, or blue, typically green, and possibly even blonde blondish hair. So this is a representation of her. And it will tag on to the story of the Indigenous princess there was swallowed up by the anaconda. She's liberated by asking the mountain spirit to help her. And so a lot of that will be incorporated into the story of the mestiza in another story says that she was indeed Spanish and she came over and one of the ships in the 1700s. And she was named Maria Lionza, and she has a very lofty name. But also the question of her name, that legend perhaps it is an attempt to not only syncretize, but also to accommodate what would be a goddess that would be appealing to a change in population if at the beginning it is Indigenous. As the decades and centuries come along, the identity will probably switch to mestiza. At one point she becomes quite European, by Spanish. And then as the cultural mores and the cultural expectations

change, she will go back to being mestiza and Indigenous as what happened in the 20th century. Now she's more Indigenous and what you see today are for example, in paintings or, or cards, little, little wallet size cards that show her image as a very European looking, woman, long blonde here wearing a crown in a very European fashion, green eyes for a very prominent. Yes, but you also see the Indigenous representations too, which are more coming back into favor.

Yasamin 24:31

Yes, for sure that we're going to talk about it more later on when we talk about the politicization of Maria Lionza. Well, that's very interesting how you said that her representation changes sort of how the demographic of Venezuela change over the times. Obviously before Europeans it was Indigenous, then, of course, the Europeans came and the European mixture was introduced to Venezuela. And then she became more European. I don't know how maybe, perhaps I know like Venezuela had a lot of European immigration and like the early 20th century, maybe that perhaps I don't know, that might have influenced. So well, that's very interesting how Maria Lionza kind of represents Venezuela as a whole. And when I see her when I was researching, of course, I see her, like her shrines, and how, like, pictures of her she's alongside her are two other figures. One is a Black person, African person, and another one is an Indigenous, you know, warrior with the spears and everything. So, I was wondering, who are these people? And why are these so significant? I mean, I personally found it very curious how, like all the three races were included somehow in this like trinity. The three races that basically make up the Hispanic culture as a whole, the African the Indigenous, European. So yeah, just if you could go a little bit into that about what those three figures represent.

Dr. Rivas 26:26

Well, as we said before, the cult or the religion of Mario Lionza is considered syncretic. And as we explained earlier, syncretism, this case is the confluence of different religious beliefs, in some might be more dominant over the other and so you do have elements of Catholicism of Christianity, the whole pantheon of saints, you also have elements that came in from the Indigenous beliefs, and then you also have the incorporation during the colonial times of the African beliefs those that came from mostly the western part of Africa as we said earlier. In the case of the African belief, they brought in also a belief system that was pantheistic that is multiple, multiple gods. You will see that that the African God, in particular from the Yoruba people, would be the God that could be represented as well by the Catholic saints, for example, to then express the powers of the gods that were part of that Yoruba Pantheon. In the case of Maria Lionza, she incorporates elements that will be related to Santeria, most likely, most particular, in the way in which the different African deities will also be represented by the saints in the Catholic religion. So going back to your question, the image that you are referring to, that's where you see the bust of Maria Lionza. And then on either side of her, you'll see, for example, the bust of a Black person in this case, his name is Negro Felipe is supposed to represent, obviously, the African element of the population, Gualcaipure would represent the Indigenous right there. In that trilogy, you have represented the background of what would be

the entirety of the makeup of, in particular the Venezuelan population, but also representative of Latin American populations as a whole. What is missing obviously, as the Asian element rises the Asian contribution, but this is an older representation coming again from colonial times and these were the three main groups if you want to use ratio, distinctions if you wish to use racial distinctions. This is the stereotype. Negro Filipe will be representing a synthesis of so many real and legendary characters coming out of Venezuelan society. Gualcaipure is perhaps the best known leader of his own group of Indigenous people, his own tribe. And these two people are going to be represented there with Maria Lionza, they will be known as the three powers. They were themselves leaders of resistance against the, against the colony against the Spanish. So the stories are like I put all their stories of so many other Indigenous leaders who did fight as strong as they could, right. A synthesis of that same kind of resistance that people are trying to remember and incorporate into the official histories, beginning in the in the 19th century, especially after the wars of independence.

Yasamin 31:29

Yeah, how did these Venezuelans, these individuals, how do they reconcile that with their belief with their Catholicism? Because, like, in a lot of interviews that they do, like the journalist or whoever historians go and ask the participants, they say, 'Oh, well, do you believe in like Jesus? Do you believe in Catholicism? And they say, yes, of course, God is first like, and then like Maria Lionza is the second thing we believe in', so how do they reconcile with also being good Catholics, basically,

Dr. Rivas 32:03

Is a great question. Great question. As to it's the central question of so many research projects. And the idea of reconciliation has to do with the belief system, as we talked about earlier, the religion and morality also incorporates the idea of cults. And in each cult, we might even have, actually, you even have a cult that's called the celestial cult. And your cult that we have all the different characters that would normally comprise the Catholic and if you wish, the particularly the Christian saints, headed by the Virgin Mary, headed by Jesus Christ, headed by different characters. So they have an accommodation, there is an accommodation within this religion that will not exclude. So they're not rejecting the Catholic the Christians, the larger Christian element, and the belief system that is so important for Venezuela. Venezuela is officially a Catholic nation. You look it up and officially religion will be Catholic. The official religion will be Catholicism, but it allows, as a matter of fact, one of the first aspects that must be considered is that a person has to believe in Christianity has to believe in the elements of Christianity. So you have to believe in a god you have to believe in perhaps the idea of the Trinity you have to believe in Jesus Christ, and all of these are not in congruence, that is they're not incompatible to any accommodated religion. So this concept of accommodation is important, because it is one that is not meant to reject you said a moment ago, but it's meant to incorporate to allow for different belief systems to come in. Earlier we said that there are elements of the Yoruba peoples. There are elements of the practices of Santeria and the system of Santeria that are reflected through these cults there are elements of Spiritism right, Spiritism we have again the

complexity of African cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, then you have what is believed to be the original mythic element of the Indigenous cultures.

Yasamin 35:14

Thank you for listening to the second episode of Subaltern Speaks. Your support is invaluable to us. The next upcoming episode will be part two of my interview with Professor Revas, where we will discuss Maria Lionza's influence and shaping Venezuela's post colonial, national and spiritual identity in the 20th century, as well as how studying her can serve as important for approaching the role of colonization on the spiritualities of subaltern peoples in a more critical manner.