

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYRA RIVERA: POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN'S WRITING AND MATERIAL RELIGION

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Abstract

In this interview, Mayra Rivera talks about her own journey with literature and theology and what this relationship means to her. She talks about the distinct role that literature plays in a postcolonial context, and its ability to articulate painful losses, histories, as well as economic and environmental realities, with a particular focus on the Caribbean and South America, and the work of Sylvia Wynter, Edwidge Danticat, Mayra Santos Febres, Édouard Glissant, amongst others. This storytelling is often deeply theological and material. The nature of this entanglement, between storytelling, theology, materiality, and post/neo/de-colonialism, is explored in heartfelt detail.

Keywords: Theology; Literature; Caribbean; Postcolonial; Entanglement; Materiality; Feminism.

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to Professor Mayra Rivera for giving so generously of her time and enthusiasm, in respect of this interview that took place, virtually, in November 2020.

Alison Jasper (AJ): *So, my first question concerns the connection between literature and theology in your work. The journal Literature and Theology emerged in the 1980s partly as a response—in due time, you might say—after the Holocaust when theology still did not seem capable of saying anything in response. The original editors were attempting to look elsewhere for this, specifically, to literature as a place where people did seem, perhaps, more willing to engage deeply and in very nuanced and complex ways,*

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with questions of meaning and purpose, suffering, and salvation. How did you come to make your connection between literature and theology?

Mayra Rivera (MR): I think I found literature first. Literature was always part of my life. I have these very strong memories of my father teaching me to recite poetry. And then in school, learning not only how much I enjoyed literature but that literature was a site where we learned about Puerto Rico and that part of its history that had been erased from the history text books. After the US invasion in 1898, there was an attempt to rethink education and to change education to an English medium and to change what was taught in schools. I always joke that they forgot literature! Some of these changes were successful in making the narrative in the history books amenable to the interests of colonialism, but they forgot all that literature in Spanish, containing so much truth about history and about how it was experienced by people. So, there's this rich body of literature and poetry and I think that was part of the appeal to me—finding all these worlds.

AJ: How then did you move towards theology? You say, intriguingly, that you used to discuss theology with your mother who was interested in this in her own terms. But then you come to this through chemical engineering Did theology figure as the response to a need?

MR: Yes. But growing up and through these conversations with my mum, I never thought of theology as something you studied in school. I associated it with the domestic sphere. So, you talk to your mum and have a coffee and talk theology I remember there was an interest in this question of justification by faith, what does it really mean, salvation, grace . . . ? All these things were part of the everyday. But I never thought about it as a career. At that point I only thought about theology in relation to people who wanted to be pastors. And I didn't know any academics either! And I loved chemical engineering and enjoyed it. But after working in it for a while, I just started craving a different type of intellectual engagement. By then my mum had died. I was active in church and I started editing a newsletter that published theological articles so all those questions became alive again. So, I decided to take classes, because I missed those conversations. But eventually I realised I really needed to pursue this further and it's at that moment that I moved to the United States to study theology.

AJ: Thinking about the connections between literature and theology, I am intrigued that you said, in our preliminary conversation, that you became a theologian because you thought you weren't good or courageous enough to be a novelist.

MR: Well, I tell my students that, only half jokingly! I think the reason I find both of them, both literature and theology, fascinating is because of that way in which they try to imagine the world otherwise, or to imagine ourselves otherwise or taking us to different places. The energy in both of them, for me, is very closely linked.

AJ: *Did you write stories?*

MR: No. Just as a kid, but never seriously. I just have this admiration for the work that a novel does, the way in which some of its questions stay with you for so long, it shifts your perspective. There are so many instances of that. One that is closely related to theological questions, is José Saramago's, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*.¹ After reading it, I have never been able to see these stories in the Gospels in the same way again. And there is something here that I think has the potential for transformation and which I admire.

Fiona Darroch (FD): *One of the questions we had when writing the abstract for this special issue is what function this classification has and what problematics it engages with or operates within. You were just talking about decolonising the curriculum and your ability to engage with this and see and feel that, as a young person. And I suppose that connects nicely with why this theoretical distinction is so vital. So, do you think the category 'postcolonial literature' is always appropriate/useful?*

MR: I tend to treat labels of movements lightly. But I think it's crucial because it allows us to connect some of the questions and concerns that arise from particular contexts—in my case I'm thinking about the Caribbean—with postcolonial literature from other places. It expands and deepens my understanding of the complexities of that experience. So, I think it *is* crucial. I also always clarify that I don't mean that it is a period *after* colonialism—that is a confusion that many people have—that it is more about the questions that we ask, that we have to wrestle with. And for some communities that have experienced colonialism, this is a present reality: how has it shaped us? In some cases, like Puerto Rico, how does it continue to shape us and how do we negotiate our sense of being when that relationship with the colonial power is so present and so formative? In postcolonial literature we get writings by people who can relate to some of the questions even if we address them differently, as we must. There is something invaluable about that connection across experiences.

FD: *You mention Arundhati Roy's novel, The God of Small Things.² It blew open my world as a young woman, first going to university. I was really interested that you mention that text as well.*

MR: And for me too. Up to that moment I never read literature in English. I moved to the US but I kept reading my novels in Spanish because it was a way of feeling at home and to get lost in it. But someone gave me this book at that time when I was ready to read a novel in English and I absolutely loved it. It was a good companion for that part of my life.

FD: *I suppose these questions are really a chance to capture the importance of your work to the aims of this special issue and those interconnecting themes. So, a central concern for us is how so-called 'postcolonial' women writers are attuned with issues of materiality and so-called 'religion'. In your recent article in Literature and Theology³ With reference to Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, and Derek Walcott, you write:*

their writings have specific tonalities, and sounds, images, and themes; they are attuned to how colonialism and slavery mark our memories, languages, and bodies, indeed how past injustices return like the waves that caress and sometimes threaten our shores. This poetics does not look to the heavens, but rather to the world around us.⁴

I think I have been trying to articulate that for about 15 years! So, the question coming out of that is whether you would be willing to give some examples from your own reading of postcolonial literature and how these themes are entangled?

MR: I wrote about this entanglement in relation to Sylvia Wynter's novel, *The Hills of Hebron*⁵ (see my 'Where Life itself Lives', in *Beyond the Doctrine of Man*).⁶

In *The Hills of Hebron*, Wynter tells the story of a Jamaican religious community seeking a way of life that supports their humanity, in the context shaped by colonialism and racism. Throughout the novel, the particularities of the geography, climate, and vegetation of the island, as well as the most ordinary phenomena, acquire theological significance.

A single drop of water trickled into the dry soil, was quickly absorbed, "like water spilt on the ground and never to be gathered up . . . !" Where had she heard that? It must have come from the Bible. Everything came from the Bible.⁷

The words shape the community's world—not only their social world, but also the landscape around them and even their bodies.

I mention Sylvia Wynter first perhaps because I engaged with her closely very recently, precisely on this question of how she's thinking about the connection between materiality, being, and religion.⁸ And in that novel she's following the struggles of this community—it's a kind of millennial community in the Caribbean, based on a couple of actual historical movements. But what I found most striking about this novel is how it weaves together the struggles of the community with the physical ecological environment, but also that the way out, the salvation if you will, ends up having very much to do with how they engage and deploy their creativity in making things. It's an incredible novel. One of the characters is a preacher who has this particular gift of, as he describes it, 'to lift the magic of words from the printed pages of the Bible'.⁹ Wynter writes some of his sermons in which he places, for instance, the story of Moses and the burning bush right around them. He encountered God in a burning rhododendron bush, though, unlike the patriarch, he had no shoes to take off. And then there's this connection with climate. The climate around them sometimes responds to their states of being—sometimes it doesn't!—and then finally they find a way of connecting to the world differently by connecting to their trade differently which takes them back to their ancestors in Africa

and their practices. By carving the way the ancestors did, they are able to claim a part of their being that is the source of hope. And their religiosity to that point had been just an imitation of the missionaries' religion and from that point they begin to re-envision it, even to rewrite, to invent new songs, new hymns that they can sing together. I think it is just such a rich story that can make us aware both of the specificity of the place and the natural elements as forces that are shaping the community itself. I think that's a wonderful example.

And I also think a lot about the prominence of the sea in Caribbean literature and the sea not just as the background. I think it's interesting that writers talk about the sea as connection and a place where remnants of their ancestors live. I mention Mayra Santos Febres' book, *The Boat People*.¹⁰ She is talking about migration and the people who die in the attempt to cross to the US or to other islands in the Caribbean. She imagines a kind of heaven or afterworld life where they are able to have their own existence under the sea. That's a very interesting way to think about the effects of the sea.

In Edwidge Danticat's story 'Children of the Sea', the story that opens the collection *Krik? Krak!*,¹¹ offers a first person account of a young man's voyage at sea.¹² He is escaping violence in Haiti and hoping to reach the United States. At sea, the usual markers of direction and time are lost; time is marked only by the rhythm of his daily writing. He seems to be temporally suspended as much as physically, if precariously suspended over the watery abyss. He is far from the events taking place in Haiti and the US. 'I can't tell exactly how far we are from there,' he writes. 'We might be barely out of our own shores. There are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one.'^{13,14} But it is not passive material.

In *Claire of the Sea Light*, Danticat writes:

'Hearts fell into the sea. So much had fallen into the sea. So much could still fall into the sea, including Msye Caleb, who fell in that morning, and all the men like her father who went there to look for fish And this is why she sometimes wished the sea would disappear. If the sea disappeared, she would miss its ever-changing sounds: how it sometimes sounded like one long breath. And sometimes like a cry.'^{15,16}

The story continues with a beautiful description of all that would be lost if there was no more sea. And I read it as expressing the way I feel when I read in Revelation that vision of a heaven where there is no more sea. (Rev. 21:1)

The sea is always there in Caribbean writing. You never forget that the sea is all around you, that the sea mediates that relationship between the island and the United States, back and forth. I think these are images that become

prominent in Caribbean literature because they do shape our lives. Antonio Benítez Rojo said that the people in the Caribbean are ‘people of the sea’.¹⁷

AJ: *Do these stories, so familiar within postcolonial literature in connection with the passage of slaves across these Caribbean seas, also resonate with you as a theologian with biblical references to Sea or seas? Perhaps to the passage through the Red Sea or to the calming of the Sea of Galilee?*

MR: One thing I’ve been thinking lately because of what I’m working on, has been the connotations of the sea in the heavenly world of the book of Revelation. I’ve also been wondering about the ambiguous connections of the sea with creation stories. Writers have connected this birth of Caribbean people from this sea from the depth of the abyss from this middle passage. That emergence is a beginning. I’ve mentioned Derek Walcott’s poem ‘The Sea is History’.¹⁸ It is an ambivalent return to many biblical stories, beginning with a creation story, and placing them in relation to Caribbean history.

FD: *Going back to the abstract . . . there’s always an urgency to these issues and I think this last two years in the Euro-American political climate has added an urgency to our questions about, well the sea actually and the stories that are lost and contained within the sea. So, in the light of that conversation, in what ways do your own theological reflections and readings of postcolonial literature help you to tell this story—your story—of the current US political landscape.*

MR: I always, implicitly, if not always explicitly, think the postcolonial through the lens of Puerto Rican history and through the lens of the Caribbean, which means that the US political landscape is always there. There is a strong political presence of the United States in the existence of the Caribbean, Latin America too. There was this very popular song by a Panamanian singer-songwriter that was an allegory of sorts, telling people to be aware of the sea, to continue our conversation of the sea, to be aware because there’s a shark around the coast surrounding us. And we all know who the shark is! So there’s a lot of that sense of presence that doesn’t necessarily have to be named but that is very much part of what people are thinking about in postcolonial literature and in the critique of the persistence of the ways of thinking and ways of being that have their roots in colonialism and that persist in our lives.

At this moment I am working on a book on catastrophe and ecology and part of what I’m working on there, is how these political practices that are also economic policies have impacted on Caribbean ecology. In 2019, Puerto Rico was ranked number one in terms of environmental effects: the region of the world that had faced the most damaging effect of climate change. And of course, there have been many other catastrophes since. But to think about how these political-economic policies leave a material imprint in particular regions, making them more vulnerable, but also at the forefront of experiences and awareness of ecological catastrophe. That’s very much the case in the

Caribbean, as in other island countries in the world. And I'm engaging in this work not only through theory and literature, but I'm also using visual art produced in the Caribbean that responds to these questions. And, interestingly, I'm paying particular attention to how they mobilise theological themes for this: themes of creation, of end of the world, of ritual as practice of presence. Like in my previous book, I'm thinking about the accumulation of history in the material environment, but this time with more explicit attention to ecology.

AJ: *Feminist figures have been important for all of us. In Poetics of the Flesh,¹⁹ you refer to Luce Irigaray and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.²⁰ We take as a given, an intersectional context, nevertheless, can you say a little about what you take from these and other feminists in particular?*

MR: I think that more generally what I want to signal with Irigaray and other feminists is that they were producing significant challenge and shift in how we think about theological language, highlighting how important and formative are the language and the metaphors that we use in theology and in philosophy and how incredibly important it is to think about our language. And I think we could even connect that with another related feminist argument—in relation to language—of the critique of transcendence as immateriality and in the turn to materiality that occurred early on with feminist theologians in relation to the body but also thinking about the cosmos as the body of God, for instance. That is a crucial moment of turning also beyond the human and trying to use metaphors of the planet to think about the divine; that's the crucial move that happened very early on and was very important and central in feminist theological thinking.

AJ: *That metaphor of the body of the world or of the cosmos as a configuration of the divine tends to lack credibility within the institutional context where it can still seem very radical or 'unorthodox'. I'm interested in how you respond to that kind of objection.*

MR: At this point I consider these arguments very mellow. For example, Elizabeth Johnston's *She Who Is*²¹ is a text I've taught many, many times and it always surprises me when someone says 'that's so radical!'. So, I don't know what to say about that! It may have to do with my own way into theology, which was grounded in everyday life. For me, these theologians write liveable theology. If you think about Ivone Gebara, who's also been important for me, she writes this mode of theology. She describes salvation in the midst of existence, as 'a moment of peace and tenderness in the midst of daily violence' or 'a novel that keeps us company, a glass of beer or a cup of coffee shared with another'.²²

FD: *Going back to the planetary link and to your work in Planetary Loves,²³ we'd be interested to know more about how postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak combine and come together in your own theology and reading of literature.*

MR: I might say that when I was reading Spivak and [Edward] Said and [Homi K.] Bhabha in grad school there was an odd sense of recognition but more in a kind of existential sense! That even though I couldn't understand what they were saying, often I could feel the weight of their questions. And eventually I found the work of decolonial theorists Walter D. Mignolo and Maria Lugones²⁴ and others who have become very close companions at this point for me. They write about the history of colonialism in relation to the Americas and thinking explicitly—although this is true for Spivak too—about the role of the scholar as someone who also works for transformation. I think that their work has been important as a way of not only explaining how colonialism works, or what its legacy is, but also in trying to provide a model for reading canonical texts in ways that surface how colonialism is woven through the text and through the ways of conceiving the world. And Spivak and Lugones in particular examine how gender and colonialism are inextricably linked. So, I think Spivak and Lugones are crucial for thinking conceptually about how it is that colonialism has left its imprint in how we understand gender. And [Édouard] Glissant . . . I've lived with him for a long time now and tried to learn from his various experiments. He tries to think about how to pay attention to and relate to materiality and to the specificity of place and about how that shapes writing. Materiality becomes part of the creative process for him. He is someone who is very attentive to the practice of writing and his very capacious sense of what is poetics, has been very, very important for my own work.²⁵ So, I would say all of them have continued to be very influential not only because of their own critiques, but also because of what they model in terms of how to read and write.

AJ: *We enjoyed reading your chapter on the post-resurrection appearances in Planetary Loves with its reference to haunting.*²⁶ *We've been talking about its connections with witnessing and with your ghosts that have an ambiguous relationship with the past—they are about suffering but also about energising.*

MR: I really enjoyed writing 'Ghostly Encounters'. It emerged out of disparate images that have stayed with me from literature, particularly Latin American literature, where images of people wrestling with the past were so prevalent. And so the connection seemed to suggest itself in that sense of, aren't Christians also people who are wrestling with the past, and not only the actual death of Jesus, though that is a powerful image, but also that sense of all existence, all of the ways in which we think about the collective past more broadly? How do we witness the catastrophes of history and the accumulation of suffering but also the accumulation of hope and remembrance. I think that reading literature as haunting, including the biblical literature, became a very interesting way to address these questions. What if writing the story like the Gospel of John is a way of wrestling with those memories? For me another thing that is important is how these experiences of haunting connect to each

other. We could read the story of a community as an exceptional experience, or we could follow Johan Baptist Metz and think about it as something that connects and makes possible the connection of many stories and witnesses to many stories—connection, not generalisation.

AJ: *So that links well into the next question because as you have described it, the biblical text is a kind of literature and literature is a kind of theology . . .*

MR: That's the way I think about both.

AJ: *There are theorists who feel disciplinary descriptors as boundaries is an unhelpful way of thinking, but as a theologian perhaps you would still want to make some distinction? Or equally you might not?*

MR: I would say that I respect the many ways in which scripture is read and the many ways in which theology is understood. I used to tell the students when I taught a class on theological method, I think there are many ways of doing theology—historical or dogmatic or constructive—and I consider all of them theology. But as I said before, what I do is to engage these works—biblical writings, theological writings or literary writings—with a particular set of questions and a particular set of sensibilities. I am very often drawn to my research by a particular question that is more—I was going to say, more existential or real life, but I don't know that it's *more*, it's just that it's stated in particular terms. For instance, in *Poetics of the Flesh* I was trying to think about, so how do we understand the relationship between ideas and the materiality of our bodies?²⁷ That's the starting question and then I turn to theological sources in that book to help me think. I think with them. I try to imagine that world and see what they can teach me about these questions. The same with this book I'm working on now. It came with this question of, frankly, the pain that it causes me to think about the ecological catastrophe in Puerto Rico. I had to think about, imagine, something like chunks of the island falling into the sea. So, I begin there but then I look for sources to think with.

AJ: *How do you see your contributions to theological thinking functioning in the material world of church and politics, when theological and biblical reading and interpretation—applied to such important questions as ecological catastrophe—can often become divisive?*

MR: It always saddens me when I see such readings of the Bible. I do return to the Bible a lot but find such complexity. In some texts there's a lot of beauty and many challenging ideas and not that much certainty. Even when I was reading Paul for the *Poetics of the Flesh*, at the end of it, I was saying, 'So *what* do we think about Paul after all?' It is complicated and sometimes so specific and so rich. It makes me sad because we could say 'there is so much to engage with here' and yet so little gets discussed. But I think, may be, the question here is audience. For me the place at which my work touches down, is in my teaching with a very diverse group of students. I teach across programmes at Harvard with students in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and also students

who are in the Divinity School. In the Divinity School it is a multi-religious programme too. So, my imagined sense of who my writing encounters is not very different from my students, who are curious and interested and want to engage in the problems of the world in bringing the resources of their religious traditions to bear on them. But also very often I teach classes—like one I just finished today—that have about half of the students in religion and half of the students not in religion but who are interested in discussions of catastrophe and coloniality. Toward the end, two of the students who were not in religion told me that one of the things they appreciated in the class was to be exposed to the ways in which Christian texts could help us think about questions of climate change, and the end of the world as a result of climate change. So, I think that more of my conversations are for those who are interested in how religious traditions can help us transform the world.

FD: *I've told you a little about my interest in the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,²⁸ and would welcome your thoughts on that. But more specifically I'd like to think with you about the way (in Americanah) Adichie uses the genre of blog writing and how that functions in her storytelling. I've spent time thinking about the way in which that type of blog writing is considered 'transcendent', because it is beyond the real world, held in the 'ether' of the internet, and about the dangers of making that assumption. The character of Ifemelu makes that journey, engaging with the possibility of this space in America to explore painful issues to do with her own racialised and gendered body. At the end of the novel, she carries on writing her blog but is situated physically back on the other side of the world in Lagos. There is so much going on in that novel for me for which your work acted as the perfect bridge. So, I'm asking about the possibility of virtual narratives, and particularly at the moment when computer screens are our dominant medium in our exchanges with other humans. Are there any possibilities within that?*

And finally, in response to your own reflection about teaching, there's a postcolonial theorist, Arjun Appadurai; he's written an article recently about migrant stories contained within virtual archives and so the internet is becoming a location for stories that don't fit or belong in physical or territorial spaces.²⁹ Because there are no national boundaries to the internet, it manages to get beyond some of the geographical boundaries that restrict individual stories from being told. But at the same time we need to be very careful and cautious—and Appadurai is being very cautious—about that sense that we can transcend those imperialistic structures that manage and govern and control our cyberspace as well as our physical space. But maybe there is some opportunity?

MR: There's so much to talk about! I love works that mobilise the links between the tactile, auditory and the visual perspectives, and reminds us of how easily disconnected representations become reified.

And before I forget, I want to recommend a book. I don't know which genre to place it in. It's called *M Archive: After the End of the World*, by Alexis Gumbs.³⁰ It's set in a post-apocalyptic world but she has these very poignant

meditations. One of the stories is about the Kingdom of Google. And it's fascinating. There was a time when there was a rebellion against the Kingdom and people started 'making a tangible and dirty archive of the clean digital world'.³¹ It's a very strange and evocative book, full of biblical references. It's beautiful.

I was going to say that, in relation to the archives, there has also been an initiative in relation to Caribbean archives, because people find themselves trapped between collecting documents in archives that may be precarious and that means that things can be lost, or having them in American universities, where they can be inaccessible. So, there's been a movement to try to create public archives in the islands. I sympathise with the need to consider how we can preserve these archives, and agree that there's no outside of these regimes of power.

In thinking more broadly about the experience of, all of a sudden, finding our existence so tied to our computers. My hope is that this time of only virtual communications will rekindle our desire for embodied sensuality and relations. Some people have already found or re-established their connections with their place. We are staying closer to home and it may allow us to pay more attention to what is around us. I am hoping that our writing will reflect not the limited environment of virtual life, but rather our sense of desire for the proximity of other bodies. I have a new appreciation for being in the classroom with students. I have realised how much the sound of the students' bodies moving on their chairs, or the smell of their coffee, or colours of their clothing, were all part of the space of teaching. I miss that. And I keep hoping for two things. One is for writers to write about this, to give a glimpse at some experiences that could be very helpful to remember in the future. To remind us how it felt. But I also hope that we find ways to rekindle a sense of the value of embodied experiences of each other. In that same book I mentioned there a scene where the characters add touching each other's hands to their ritual, 'a tradition newly sacred after the memory of the epidemic'.³² This a prescient book in that sense. But the very idea of creating a ritual for it is because they had realised how important touch was. So, I'm imagining and hoping that as a society we take this as a learning moment rather than trying to rush mindlessly to the end.

FD: *We are bearing witness to something quite startling and how we capture that. And also how we survive. We want to pause and capture, but at the same time the domestic reality of the times is quite overwhelming!*

MR: Yes, survive it, but learn from it as well.

And it's interesting that you mention Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, because in my experience of reading it, it reminded me so much of when I first moved to the US. And I was thankful for a book that captured that sense of being unsettled and being seen through a lens that I didn't quite understand—being really trapped in the way I was seen, as if there was a screen in front of me and

I could only be seen through that screen. I admire the way she's able to capture that puzzlement.

FD: *I've been using her TED talk 'The Danger of a Single Story'³³ for my students this semester and it's helped them engage with the subject of hermeneutics and the politics of representation. I showed it in the first week of the course and this is us coming into the last week and we were still talking about it today in one of our concluding sessions; they were using her language because it has articulated something that is complex and often intangible.*

MR: Spivak has this phrase that I remember a lot. She's talking about the importance of literature and she talks in terms of how the significance of that unique story that is not generalisable. How do we think of ethics in that way? That single story that we cannot generalise but that teaches us something so profound.

FD: *Yes. And it's writers like Adichie and Danticat and so many others—and you've also said this—who've always been the guides in helping me access those theoretical concerns. And it's a gift to be able to capture concepts so clearly in fiction.*

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