The Body of Mary: Embodiment and Identity in Modern Apparitions

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Abstract

In modern Marian apparitions, Mary's material presence is evoked for believers, who negotiate religious and other identities around her maternal figure. My contention, drawing from material theories of religion and postcolonial theories, and based on ethnographic fieldwork at one apparition site in addition to social scientific literature, is that Roman Catholic devotees of Mary negotiate identities along three trajectories. First, apparitions offer sites for individuals to articulate ethnic and national identities through devotional practices. Second, individuals bring apparitional messages and interpretations to bear on contemporary political concerns. Finally, sites afford opportunities for devotees to foster relationships with Mary as agent. Material and postcolonial theories illustrate how embodiment and presence inform devotees' identities as children of Mary.

Keywords

Our Lady; Mary; apparition; Catholic identity; material religion; postcolonial theory.

On Christmas Eve 2015, outside St. Joseph's Old Cathedral in Oklahoma City, USA, Adam Daniels, a self-described Satanist, poured paint over a statue of the Virgin Mary in a planned protest entitled 'Virgin Birth is a Lie' ('Oklahoma City' 2015). Christian groups were outraged and this story was covered by Catholic news sources like *Catholic Family News* and *Fatima Center*. David Homeney, a Catholic man, organized a well-attended counter-protest at the site of Daniels's protest, gathering with '50-60 Catholic men' to pray the Rosary, sing hymns, and parade down the street with a statue of the *Pieta* (Vennari 2015). Homeney's battle cry was inspired by the apparitions of Jesus and Mary to Marie of St. Peter in 1840s France, where Marie reported that Jesus presented her with the Golden Arrow prayer, to be made in reparation for blasphemies against him. In the Oklahoma City case nearly 200 years following those apparitions, devotees determined that prayers must also be made in reparation for what they

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perceived as desecration of the mother of God. In Homeney's words, 'public blasphemy requires public reparation, and so public reparation was to be made' (quoted in Vennari 2015). Groups like the international organization Fatima Center took up this call, making in their news coverage a 'Call for Reparation' from devotees in their own homes and local churches if they could not travel to Oklahoma City ('Oklahoma City' 2015). Marie of St. Peter's apparitions did not mention reparation to Mary; the Golden Arrow prayer is a response to blasphemy against Jesus. It is all the more striking, then, that the dishonored body of Mary was central in this situation, galvanizing dozens of Catholic men to travel across the country on Christmas Eve. This case – as part of the landscape of Roman Catholic devotion to Mary – reveals much about the relationship between devotees and the sacred body they encounter in apparitions, pilgrimage, and Rosary prayers.

Devotees outraged by the Oklahoma City case presume a materiality to Mary's body, even in statue form, which can be offended by use in a Satanic protest. Scholarship on material religion suggests that materiality is not derivative of devotion but central to it (Meyer et al. 2010). In this vein, devotion to Mary in her most material, embodied, and accessible form – in apparitions during which she appears, speaks, and even touches her chosen visionaries – evokes lively discourse about Mary's character, personality, and nature, offering fertile ground for exploring how sacred presence is imagined. Indeed, so lively is this discourse that desecration of a representation of Mary drew dozens of devout Catholics from their homes and families on Christmas Eve to defend her honor. When 'Our Lady' appears in the flesh, her embodiment directly impacts devotions, attitudes, and identities. Not only does Mary appear in embodied form before her faithful; devotional practices also produce the canvas for devotees' performances of gender, ethnic, and religious identities, expressions of pleasure and desire, perceptions of identity and aspiration (Orsi 1985). And practices themselves are embodied – enacted by bodies – so to consider what individuals are actually doing is to recognize how Mary's embodiment impacts her faithful children. In this way, bodies themselves become 'sites of knowledge and understanding' (Nabhan-Warren 2011: 383). Devotional practices centering on devotees' relationships with an embodied and present Mary, with whom they forge relationships central to their religious lives, reveal how identities are negotiated around this religious symbol. It is these themes that I explore here from a sociological perspective.

The Oklahoma City case, in the context of devotion to Mary, prompts the question at the center of this essay: How does the body of Mary in lived devotional worlds serve as nexus for identity negotiations? In order to explore answers to this question, I use ethnographic qualitative research among Marian devotees as well as theoretical tools to understand devotion. Beginning with my own research among devotees of modern apparitions, I apply theoretical tools to highlight nuances of such devotion. Specifically, I place the scholarship on material religion into conversation with postcolonial theories of identity, dovetailing the centrality of materiality for identity formation with the notion of relational identity construction in order to illuminate the impacts of Marian devotion in individuals within their local and global milieu. It is these theories that I use to interpret my sociological, ethnographic data. Devotees' encounter with the apparition produces the 'culturalization of religion' described by Driessen and Jansen (2013); that is, 'religious performance as identity politics and a sphere of

sociability' (92). For devotees, Mary herself is embodied on this earth, speaking and crying and bleeding, both warning and reassuring her faithful children. Her sacred presence, evoked through devotional practices, thereby provides a site for individuals to negotiate identities and to cultivate relationships with Mary.

Apparitions: History and Observation

The time period beginning with the 1839 Rue du Bac, France visions of St. Catherine Labouré to the present has been dubbed the Marian Age (Zimdars-Swartz 1991). This age features much higher numbers of reported Marian apparitions than any other time period, with serial apparitions being reported by a range of visionaries, and containing apocalyptic themes of warning (Apolito 2005; Bromley and Bobbitt 2011; Zimdars-Swartz 1991). The Mary who appears in the Marian Age is characteristically a self-sacrificing and suffering mother who protects her sinful children from the well-deserved wrath of an angry father, appealing to her children to obey God to avoid punishment and to appeal to the mercy of Jesus. In other apparitions, Mary is quite powerful, such as in the 1940s Lipa, Philippines apparitions to visionary Teresita Castillo, where Mary identified herself as the Mediatrix of All Grace, a controversial title that elevates Mary's importance in human redemption (Castillo n.d.). And the Virgin of Urkupiña, Bolivia, an 18th-century apparition, both grants favors to modern-day pilgrims and causes misfortune if they do not repay her favors when she grants them (Derks 2009). Not meek, passive, or benign, this mother is instead more traditionally God-like in her vengefulness.

To explore questions about embodiment and identity among Marian devotees, I draw from my own ethnographic fieldwork at one apparition site in rural Maryland as well as social scientific literature regarding other apparitional cultures globally. My ethnographic fieldwork, part of a larger project dealing with Catholic identity, incorporated networking and interviewing among Catholic women and men in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where visionary Gianna Talone Sullivan's apparitions of Jesus and Mary have been ongoing since she moved to the area in 1993, and prior to then in her native Arizona. Though belief in the apparitions persists, the Baltimore Archdiocese has taken a stance since 2003 that they do not show evidence of being supernatural. From 2010 to 2013, I attended Mass several times per week in town at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, the Basilica, and the Glass Chapel at the National Shrine Grotto of Lourdes, as well as networked with local Catholics at two Catholic bookstores in town. I conducted loosely-structured interviews with twenty-five middle-aged and older women and men who identify as Catholic, who currently live in or near Emmitsburg or have attended prayer meetings during which Gianna received an apparition. Many interviewees are highly committed in terms of Mass attendance, consumption of Catholic media or books, and practices like Rosary prayers, pilgrimage, and Eucharistic Adoration. My interview questions focused upon the impacts of the local apparitions on believers' practices as well as how supporters negotiate non-support among parish and diocesan leaders. Since 2013, I have attended Mass or prayer meetings in Emmitsburg a few times per year and maintained contact with several key informants. My fieldwork suggests that in Emmitsburg as at other apparition sites, the most ardent supporters create

a sense of Catholic identity in relation to Mary as a real presence, a guiding mother, and proof of their Catholic loyalty.

Since the Marian devotional community is increasingly global, I have incorporated additional social scientific data from apparition sites of the Marian Age as well as devotional discourse related to those apparitions. Sites such as Lourdes, Fatima, and Medjugorje are popular the world over and have garnered interest among ethnographers, historians, and others whose work I use to contextualize my own research in Emmitsburg. Lesser-known sites in Rwanda, South Africa, and Garabandal, Spain are indeed known within devotional networks, and information and history about apparitions there are available on devotional websites. Devotees exchange information about these apparitions through these informational websites. Since 2014, I have regularly monitored several facebook pages associated with Marian Age apparitions or containing frequent references to those apparitions, including Mary's Miraculous Medal Family, Defend Pope Francis, Catholic and Proud, Medjugorje, and Message of Garabandal, in order to keep apprised of sites popular within these loose devotional communities. These sites, five of the hundreds of devotional sites that link to one another through the Internet, represent significant online networks with members in the tens of thousands and even more 'likes.' I have read hundreds of postings on various dates and coded them for political, social, devotional, and theological themes. I found similar themes to my ethnographic fieldwork, including references to specific Marian apparitions; discussion of priestly investigation of particular apparitions and Church decisions about their authenticity; and political topics commonly found in apparitional messages, including abortion and government overreach associated with apocalyptic fears of the Beast from the biblical book of Revelation. Where posts in my sample included links to blogs, Catholic news stories, or websites, I followed those links to explore content. Surveys of online discourse, social scientific literature on Marian Age apparitions, and my ethnographic data in Emmitsburg all illustrate how apparitions of Mary act as sites for identity negotiations among devotees, so I draw from this empirical data as I explore the ways that the body of Mary plays into believers' identities and relationships.

A Theoretical Lens

Marian devotion serves as a point of exchange for beliefs, attitudes, and practices that comprise identities. Modern apparitions engender debates about the body of Mary; the question of any particular apparition's authenticity is in itself a question about whether Mary is indeed embodied on earth. Yet this embodiment – indeed, materiality in general – has sometimes been ignored in scholarship as anathema to religion, according to social scientists Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (2012). But there is a material context to beliefs, attitudes, and understandings, a material nature to our religious symbols, practices, and beliefs that is not prediscursive, but materialized through those same practices and meaning-making (3). In short, materiality is not merely an expression of religion, but produces religion and is religion (Meyer 1995; Meyer and Houtman 2012; Meyer et al. 2010). Along these lines, Willy Jansen and Grietje Dresen (2012) find that bodily metaphors are models of and for religious experience;

not purely symbolic, they prescribe subject positions. The entirety of religious worlds, as a component of *habitus*, encompasses 'structured structures pre-disposed to function as structuring structures,' according to Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 53). That is, religion as an institution, set of beliefs, series of practices and devotions, and community of people – all are as much determined by as they determine the lived experiences of those who engage them. Marian apparitions therefore offer an intriguing example for considering material dimensions of religion. The Catholic men who traveled to Oklahoma City on Christmas Eve illustrate how the perceived materiality of Mary's body can galvanize action. Their response is rooted in material, sensorial experience: reading about the protest, feeling outrage, kneeling and praying the Rosary in the cold Oklahoma winter air, singing and waving a banner, conveying a statue of Mary along the street. Their embodied practices that night reinforced for these men roles, if not identities: roles as heroes for Mary, defenders of her honor, lay leaders of the efforts to make reparation for blasphemy against her. These roles became materialized through religious practice, prescribed through the religious community that they sought to protect. Mary's embodied presence is materialized through devotional practices and meaning-making endeavors (Meyer and Hautman 2012), and conversely, these practices undergird devotees' identities.

In Marian devotional worlds, relationships with the Blessed Mother are of paramount importance; several of my Emmitsburg interviewees, for instance, noted that they *know* Mary rather than simply *know of* Mary. But as the Oklahoma City case makes clear, many other relationships are woven into devotion. There are relationships among devotees in a global Internet network who offer information about apparitions and share interpretations of messages. There are also contentious relationships between devotees and apparition non-believers, which galvanize action, encourage bonding among devotees, and provide sustenance to movements on Mary's behalf in favor of her chosen causes. These relationships, steeped in contestations over cultural, political, and spiritual power, call for analysis equally sensitive to the impacts of power. Here, the postcolonial theories of Homi Bhabha provide fruitful ways of understanding apparitions and the power dynamics inherent in them.

I draw from Bhabha's writings about postcolonial identity, which can be usefully employed to reveal dynamics of apparitions. Bhabha sees, in the colonial context, that cultures and identities emerge through relational processes. He sees culture as a hybridized and ambivalent creation of discourse about cultural differences, especially unequal access to power (Bhabha 1985). Derrida's neologism *différance*, which Bhabha borrows, underscores the ways that identity is based on differences between colonist and colonized, but also upon the deferral and repetition of colonial identities formed through that relationship (Bhabha 1994). The result is new, hybridized identities and cultures resulting from encounters between peoples. Bhabha's attention to relationships built on notions of difference can illuminate some dynamics of devotional worlds. Devotees negotiate networks of relationships – with Mother Mary, with fellow devotees, with apparition detractors, with Church authorities, with non-Catholics – that are complicated and ambivalent. Bhabha's theories hint toward some of these ambivalences resulting from negotiations of congregational, ecclesiastical, and social power. To be clear, I do not suggest that Marian devotees are a subjugated group as a whole, but rather, I employ Bhabha's theories to illuminate how relationships of power shaping colonial contexts may be similar to

processes that shape devotional worlds, particularly the ways that individuals negotiate and understand their identities as Mary's children.

Material and postcolonial theories offer an approach to Marian apparitions as embodied and relational experiences. Read through the lenses of material and postcolonial theories, devotion to Mary demonstrates the ways that her embodied presence serves as nexus for processes of identity- and power-negotiation. Dovetailing these theories, as I have done here, promises to bring together concerns of materiality, relationship, and power: all determinative factors in lived religious worlds. My contention, drawing from material theories of religion and postcolonial theories and based on ethnographic fieldwork, is that this happens in three ways. First, devotions highlight themes of ethnic sameness and difference, both bounding ethnic identities and bridging ethnic and national demarcations. Second, abortion politics are a major factor in political identities for devotees, with apparitional messages and Mary's role as mother acting as a nexus for individuals' negotiating social and political changes. Third, devotees see Mary as having agency, though investigating the relationships through and by which devotees believe Mary is an active participant in the world reveals their work in negotiating relationships as her children.

Boundaries Both Reified and Bridged

Devotees forge religious identities in relation to those around them, both Catholics and non-Catholics, both heavenly and earthly. As Meyer (2012) reminds us, the 'shared partaking in religious mediation sustains collective identities' (30). While devotees develop identities in reference to Mary, they also understand them in reference to apparitional communities. The camaraderie at pilgrimage sites, the *communitas* at public apparitions, the outrage at the desecration of Mary – all are shared opportunities for devotees to situate themselves among their sisters and brothers under Mary's maternal cloak. Descriptions of Mary in embodied form often highlight ethnic difference, an important detail of apparitions that serves both to bound ethnic identities of devotees and bridge ethnic and national identities. Francesca Zackey, a South African visionary since 2007, describes Mary as 'the most beautiful woman I have ever seen...She has caring ice blue eyes' (quoted in Bega 2013). Gianna Sullivan of Emmitsburg describes Mary as having 'long, flowing dark brown hair, creamy skin and deep blue eyes' (Borgman 1994). Alphonsine Mumreke of Rwanda described her apparitions, which began in 1981, as featuring a Mary who 'was not white as She is usually seen in holy pictures. I could not determine the color of Her skin, but She was of incomparable beauty. She was barefoot and had a seamless white dress, and also a white veil on Her head' (quoted in Tardif 2001). Descriptions of Mary depend upon difference – in this case ethnic difference – if only indirectly, a point that becomes clearer through comparison. Zackey and Sullivan both provide qualifying adjectives about the color of her eyes as 'caring ice blue' and 'deep blue,' while Mumreke, by contrast, offers a much more ambiguous description of her vision, unable to discern skin color.

Mumreke's uncertainty, compared with Zackey's and Sullivan's greater detail, support Bhabha's notion that in colonial contexts, difference is paramount (Bhabha 1985). There is both the difference of the colonizer and colonized,

subject and object, black and white, powerful and disenfranchised. Identities are set in place by virtue of the difference created to delineate between colonial subjects. The hegemonic categories seem objective and natural, thereby prescribing norms relating to ethnic and national identities – norms based on sameness as well as difference. The descriptions of Zackey, Sullivan, and Mumreke reflect ethnic identities of the visionaries or culturally-specific beauty ideals. The visionaries' descriptions obliquely acknowledge ethnic and national boundaries while reifying them in the face of pluralism and hybridity in modern contexts. Over difference and ambiguity in a globalized world, sameness and certainly must be asserted through the body of Mary. For Bhabha (1994), hybridity results from hegemonic interactions between societies, making identities ambiguous and contentious. A new, hybridized culture and ambivalent identities result through these interactions. Modernization is not a smooth process, but one marked by 'ruptures, ambivalence, and tension wrought by cultural transformations' (Go 2013: 60). Mumreke's ambiguous description directly reveals this tension, while Zackey's and Sullivan's descriptions do so through their missing ambiguity.

Most devotees lay eyes on Mary only through the many versions of her described by various visionaries. Their preferences for particular apparitions reveal again how identities are shaped by notions of difference. Within the Emmitsburg apparitional community, many individuals are proud of their Italian, English, or Polish ethnic backgrounds, and many individuals of European descent have expressed particular devotion to European apparitions and saints. Jenny, for instance, explicitly told me that she likes St. Faustina 'cause she's Polish descent, and I'm Polish descent.' I found it unusual in my fieldwork to hear people express devotion to a saint or apparition with an ethnic or racial background different from their own, though only Jenny explicitly acknowledged this preference.

Identity, for Bhabha, is based not merely on difference. He uses Derrida's term *différance* to describe both difference as well as 'displacement' (Bhabha 1985: 151). Identity is not self-representing, but rather can only be represented through reference to the difference of the other. In this context, identity is enacted; Bhabha (1994) refers to 'vernacular cosmopolitanism,' or the notion that identity is based on actions, rather than on any sense of belonging or any concrete category (xviii). Agency, for Bhabha, often comes in the form of articulating difference (2). In this vein, devotees enact ethnic, political, and religious identities through their devotions and practices around the symbol of Mary. Michael Pasquier (2006), in his research among pilgrims of Our Lady of Tickfaw, site of a miracle-granting Louisiana shrine, found that some pilgrims expressed anger that a home-grown apparition was less popular and less respected than apparitions outside the United States. This research suggests, as does my own research in Emmitsburg, the tendency for devotees to be drawn to sameness, in this case congruence in nationality. At Tickfaw, difference is articulated explicitly through pilgrimage and devotion to a local instance. Both the devotional practices and the verbalized preference for a local site highlight difference. American pilgrims place the Tickfaw Marian shrine both in the same category as other, more popular apparitions outside the US as well as highlight her differences as a lesser-respected Mary. In a United States context increasingly characterized by nativism and racism, this preference for ethnic sameness indicates a tendency toward maintaining hegemonic divides.

Ethnic, cultural, and national boundary lines are drawn anew in a globalizing world, for instance, in pilgrimage contexts where religious objects and pilgrims bridge time and space (Notermans and Jansen 2011). Devotion to Mary, similarly, may establish new boundaries along political and theological lines rather than along ethnic lines. Darly Chagas, a contemporary Brazilian visionary, typically sees Mary as the Immaculate Conception – that is, as she was described by St. Catherine Labouré at the 1830 Rue de Bac, France apparitions (*Our Lady's messages* n.d.). Chagas's use of the title *Immaculate Conception* reveals both a theological emphasis on Mary's purity as well as an alignment with this popular and well-established apparition. Legitimacy and respectability are to be gained in aligning newer and older apparitions, and in strategically utilizing national and theological boundaries as well. According to Brazilian anthropologist Cristina Rocha (2008), Brazilians tend to see modernity 'as something foreign, something which Brazil is perceived to have lacked, and thus had had to import from metropolitan centres of power' (153). In apparitional contexts, the popular French apparition would lend legitimacy and respectability to newer apparitions, as well as illustrate how theological concerns bridge national and ethnic boundaries. In Emmitsburg, Melissa, a white non-Latina woman, also demonstrates how practical concerns inform her devotions. Melissa has particular devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Latin America, because of her reputation for helping with fertility problems. At one point in her life, Melissa said, 'In my head I knew, if I just can touch this image [of the Virgin of Guadalupe], I will get pregnant. And that's exactly what happened.' Despite the tendency I observed in Emmitsburg for individuals to prefer saints with the same ethnic background, Melissa has a strong preference for a version of Mary who is ethnically different than herself but responsive to Melissa's desire for children of her own. Cultural factors similarly inform devotion among Filipino Catholics, who tend to display an 'overtly sentimental emphasis on her maternal dimension (as opposed to, say, her perpetual virginity),' according to historian Deirdre de la Cruz (2015: 222–223). The description of the apparition, the appearance of Mary's body, and the qualities ascribed to that body reflect the ideals most important to devotees. Ethnic and national boundaries are buttressed by some devotees, while practical and theological concerns are emphasized in the devotions of other individuals and communities.

Globalized communication networks, facilitated by the Internet, will produce more and more interest in apparitions and saints that do not follow typical ethnic or geographic demarcation lines. As devotees more easily are able to access information about apparitions, find news articles and priestly decrees, read apparitional messages in translation, and triangulate apparitions around the globe to discern authenticity for themselves, they will continue to reshape traditional ethnic and cultural boundaries. Bhabha (1994) discusses hybridization as one consequence of colonial encounters. Cultures do not pre-exist discourse, but emerge through encounter – and this encounter represents something new. The embodied Mary will be present in a thousand local forms, as well as bridge these particularities. Plurality, characteristic of the modern world, offers multiple identities for all individuals as well as possibilities for contesting norms in the ways that Mumreke and Melissa do (Bhabha 1994; Tweed 2010). Apparitions serve as obvious points at which to view plural identities because devotions ultimately illustrate how people use Mary as they navigate multiple and hybrid identities in a globalizing world.

Mary's Maternal Body

Abortion politics, about which apparitional messages have much to say, serves as a central issue for devotees to express political identities and to negotiate social and political changes relating to women and families. While there exists a great deal of variation among the many apparitions of Mary, motherhood is her central quality and related political issues are contested over the maternal body of Mary. Her role as mother grants her authority to speak against abortion in apparitional culture. Many apparitional messages convey politically and socially conservative stances, with opposition to abortion being one of the most common in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The apparitional messages from Emmitsburg, Maryland, Bayside, New York, and Conyers, Georgia have all mentioned abortion; in Conyers, for instance, one message from March 21, 1991 declares, 'I am the Mother of God and your loving mother. I am very sad that mothers continue to murder their babies within their wombs' (*Ten Commandments* n.d.). The Netherlands-based Marypages.com, featuring information about several modern apparitions, also contains links to pages titled 'Abortion...No!' and 'Rosary for unborn Babies.'

Mary is further associated with pro-life movements more generally. Priests for Life, a New York-based pro-life activist group, sells a statue called 'Mary, Mother of the Life Within' to

[remind] us that the Blessed Virgin Mary, as Mother of the Author of Life, is also the spiritual mother of every new life that is conceived. She therefore is a loving support to every mother, assisting her to recognize in her child a reflection of God's love, and helping her to overcome every temptation to reject that child. (Priests for Life n.d.)

The three dimensional representation of Mary's body – the statue sold by Priests for Life – posits her as a model for women, an ideal woman who chose motherhood by her fiat. Even her title – Mother of the Life Within – gives her an identity through her capacity for mothering. Apparitional messages, interpretations, and devotees themselves bring Mary's maternal body into abortion politics, as evidenced by these devotional movements, making much of the materiality of Mary's body as God-bearer. Representations of a pregnant Mary, as many devotees presume Our Lady of Guadalupe to be, for instance, become symbols in anti-abortion movements the world over (Samson 2013: 41). In other movements, devotees interpret Mary as identifying with the physical pain they feel. Anthropologist Judith Samson (2012) finds in her research within Lumina, a US-based post-abortion ministry, that women see the Black Madonna of Częstochowa as both understanding their pain and as the center of a pilgrimage site for processing their trauma (41). The scars on the cheek of Mary as she is depicted in this famous Polish icon are seen by devotees as evidence that Mary too has experienced pain, and that the scars parallel the scars of those nations that permit abortion.

Such interpretations and uses of Mary's body, in turn, prescribe the pro-life politics that devotees view as morally right. Their political identities, in some cases dominated by their pro-life activism, is linked to Mary as an ideal mother who helps other women to become mothers too. Marian apparitions play into culture wars within the Church institution as it grapples with questions of liberalizing and modernizing the church or maintaining the status quo and conservative mores and attitudes.

Anthropologist Willy Jansen (2012) describes in modern Europe social, political, and religious change, observing 'the reshaping of sociocultural core values regarding gender and sexuality, the contesting and reformulation of national and other geographical identities, and the shifting religious landscape' (2). The transnational nature of anti-abortion movements, with Mary as a central symbol, has been explored by Samson (2012) as well. Additionally, discourse about abortion and reproductive rights illustrates how core values about gender roles, family structures, and women's autonomy are highly contested, particularly in the wake of progressive policy changes. Catholic devotees emphasize Mary's ideal motherhood as a means of responding to these broader social and political changes as well as articulating their (conservative or liberal) political identities. Jansen sees religion not merely as 'nodal points in extensive European networks that enable conservative groups to spread their call for a restoration of the Catholic faith by rejecting abortion, gay marriage or extramarital sex' (8). Nor does she see these sites as full of feminist possibilities. Rather, in her analysis, what people do at sites constitutes what they are (6); people enter into the changing world as agents, negotiating their identities, when they engage religion. Devotees emphasize Mary's motherhood as well as particular apparitional messages that reflect and inform their own political and social attitudes – attitudes that position them as, typically but not always, religiously and politically conservative Catholics.

In Jansen's view, religious practices could reify societal roles or norms as well. In the context of rural Italy, Marco Fabbrini (2017) found that gender-segregated ritual practice 'polarizes the genders' as a way to '[reaffirm] via social and symbolic devices' the gender hegemony (73). Devotion to Mary in other places also serves to re-entrench gender roles and norms, tying femininity to motherhood and masculinity to savior. Priests for Life and the counter-protestors in Oklahoma City not only hold politically conservative attitudes; they literally enact traditional gender roles by sweeping in as Catholic warriors fighting to preserve the uncorrupted nature of Mary's body and motherhood for all women. Apparitional culture offers a site for individuals to both articulate and embody their attitudes regarding broader social concerns and thereby their political identities.

Contestation over these core values, cultural shifts, and political changes speaks to inherent instability, however, into which Bhabha's (1985) understanding of authority offers insight. Political activism, such as that among Marian devotees against abortion, is an expression of identity in cultural flux. For Bhabha, colonial authority entails 'a double vision' in which 'the field of the 'true' emerges as a visible effect of knowledge/power only after the regulatory and displacing division of the true and the false' (152). Authority and truth are created through power relationships. Culture wars, political parties, and the debate about reproductive rights – all are conflicts out of which emerge the notion of ultimate good and justice. When, as in abortion debates, Mary expresses the sentiment that she did to visionary Nancy Fowler of Conyers, 'I am very sad that mothers continue to murder their babies within their wombs,' this apparitional message implies a division of true and false, or more aptly here, good and evil. And in the apparitional message, Mary claims this truth by virtue of her authority as 'the Mother of God and your loving mother' (*Ten Commandments* n.d.). The rightness of an anti-abortion stance, for believers, is taken for granted upon the authority of Mary's condemnation of it. Her authority results

from the dichotomous debate in which there is only rejecting or loving 'babies within their wombs,' and the assumption that Mary would choose motherhood for herself and for all women. Jansen's (2012) notion that practices constitute identity is thus complicated by Bhabha's (1985) understanding of authority.

Mary's Presence in Relationships

But Mary is not a pawn to be used to suit political stances. Devotees invest Mary with agency, forging relationships with her by which they negotiate their spiritual identities as her children. For Bhabha (1994), the relational nature of identity leads to splitting; 'to exist,' for Bhabha, 'is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus' (63). Individuals enter into relationships with Mary with a particularly tangible imagining of her embodied form. Devotees believe that she speaks through appearances, messages, and miracles to influence world events and change the course of history. For instance, with respect to the Medjugorje apparitions, writer Mathew N. Schmalz (2015) warns, 'While we may ignore her messages at our own peril, it is more important to understand appearances of the Virgin Mary as part of an ongoing, and very much alive and active relationship, she has with all of us as the Mother of God.' Schmalz expresses the sort of reciprocal relationship that many devotees feel they have with Mary, one in which commitment, favors, and trust are exchanged between Mary and her human children. In Emmitsburg, interviewee Ralph explained his dedication to Mary: 'Let's put it this way: the Blessed Mother always kind of took care of me my whole life.... Mary's always been kind of guiding me, and even after all this time when I came back to [Emmitsburg]. So without her, her guidance and protection, I don't know where I'd be.' Modern apparitions offer Mary in embodied form, a personal 'mama' who by her presence is able to help individuals in any facet of their lives.

Devotees imagine the agency of Mary as they debate her meanings and interpretations and chronicle the very facts associated with apparitions (Apolito 1998; Zimdars-Swartz 1991). As Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (2010) write, we see the finished, polished product of the apparitional message, but do not see the 'negotiation among various interested actors: the visionaries, the religious officials of different kinds, the public and even Saint Mary, who is frequently asked further questions to clarify her message by the visionaries' (80). The negotiations that Jansen and Notermans describe are, at their roots, relationships between and among the many actors involved in apparitional movements, including the millions who have appealed to this apparition from the present time back to the very first apparition in Garabandal in 1961. These relationships produce the narrative of the apparition as well as convince devotees of Mary's independent agency. The relationships between Mary and her faithful children bring about the genesis of presence described by Meyer (2012), or the 'creative process of fabricating, bringing about or making happen' the presence of the divine (22). It is the work that goes into the embodiment of divine figures, the generation of Mary's presence on earth, and the affirmation of her agency through practices and relationships. Mary's material presence, according to believers, makes such relationships real to them.

The agency attributed to Mary, in other words, relates to the practices of believers. In one case, Nigerian visionary Bishop Oliver Doeme describes a reciprocal relationship with Mary, one in which prayers to Mary would help to eradicate Boko Haram, per a 2015 vision (Holdren 2015). This sort of prophecy is common in apparitional culture; devotion and prayers will yield protection from Mary or reprieve in judgment from God. Steve Skojec (2015), a writer for the website *One Peter Five*, explains what he facetiously calls 'a fascinating coincidence' following Bishop Doeme's visions. Referencing news articles by both *Radical Catholic* and the *Wall Street Journal*, Skojec attributes to Mary fewer Boko Haram abductions as well as military inroads into Boko Haram strongholds. Skojec's sarcastic description of this 'coincidence' stems from his certainty that Mary, as an agent actively engaged in the world, has weakened Boko Haram and calls upon her troops to take up her Rosary as weapon.

Paying attention to materiality and presence, we see in this case that Mary intervenes against the horrors of Boko Haram through a series of practices on the part of devotees. These often begin with Rosary prayers, which immediately precede many Marian apparitions according to visionaries; then there is the conveying of an apparitional message; finally there is the interpretation of messages and their application to global events. Devotees, by appealing to Mary who appears regularly on earth – to her chosen messengers, at least – generate Mary's presence and create what Anna-Karina Hermkens et al. (2009) term cogent connections, or relationships with divine figures. Devotees 'invest power in Mary and make her present' as part of their efforts to cultivate cogent connections that are 'convincing, compelling, and potent' (8). Both Mary's presence on earth and her availability as mother to her faithful children are crucial in devotion. Violent events and natural disasters create despair, but for devotees to grant Mary agency is to capture a degree of control as they negotiate exactly how Mary is coming to their aid. They have a powerful ally in Mary and therefore regain some certainty that calamity is not meaningless and humans are not alone in this world. Mary empowers her devotees, who through their devotions generate presence as Meyer (2012) describes it. Mary's very real presence on this earth makes possible close relationships with her: religion itself is a 'reticulation of relationships' between heaven and earth in materialist approaches (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). With some exceptions, devotees tend to see Mary as accessible and loving, easier than Jesus or God the Father to imagine themselves in relationship with, a mother figure who is both confidante and moral compass.

The 'reticulation' described by religions scholars Meyer et al. (2010) carries another connotation, which can be seen in relief when we see these relationships through the lens of postcolonial theory. Writing about postcolonial settings, Bhabha (1994) asserts that both the colonized and colonizer are partly produced through notions of the sameness and difference of the Other, which enables subjects to trace the boundaries of their own identities. What is more, the 'colonial presence' is 'split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference' (Bhabha 1985: 150). Authority is ambiguous, just as it is in apparitional contexts due to the uncertainties regarding authenticity and the negotiations surrounding any apparitional event. These negotiations are both a reticulation of relationships and repetitive negotiation of apparitional authority. The matter of the apparition and Mary's messages to her visionaries are considered, by believers, authoritative; these are communications from heaven. Yet as Jansen and Notermans

(2010) point out, negotiations underlie these messages and their negotiations. From the initial subjective experience of the visionary, then to the interpretation and application of apparitional messages to current events, and finally to the repeated invoking of Mary to intervene in global affairs, we see relationships generating presence and repetitively asserting Mary's authority in this world. For instance, visionary Oliver Doeme speaks with a journalist about his visions, where blogger Steve Skojec triangulates the apparitional messages with news reports about a weakening Boko Haram, thus authenticating the apparitions and providing evidence that Mary came through on her word. In this case are both the nodes of relationships, as described by Meyer et al. (2010), as well as repetition within this web of relationships, as pointed out by Bhabha (1985). Apparitional messages are, from different perspectives, both original communications from heaven and repetitive assertions of divine authority that serve to empower the interpreter. By destabilizing apparitions, we see the negotiations involved in forging relationships with Mary, granting her agency, and establishing the authority of her messages.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have placed scholarship about religious material cultures into conversation with postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's ideas regarding identity, relationality, and authority. By bringing these two strands of scholarship together, I explore themes of power, relationship, and materiality in lived religious worlds and illustrate how embodiment and presence inform devotees' identities as children of Mary. These negotiations occur at the sites where her body has literally touched earth according to visionaries, as well as in discourse about apparitional messages and interpretations. Using ethnographic research at a local apparition site in Maryland, social science literature about apparitions of the Marian Age, and investigation of online devotional websites, I find that apparitions of Mary are sites for devotees to negotiate ethnic, political, and religious identities.

Individuals display devotional preferences for apparitions marked by ethnic sameness, revealing both the centrality of material details about Mary's body in apparitions as well as the importance of difference for establishing identity. Yet devotees also bridge ethnic and national boundaries out of theological or practical concerns. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the inherent instability of *différance*, with its displacement and deferral of identity tags, both indicate that devotees themselves are negotiating sameness and difference and thus their own ethnic identities. Further, Bhabha's concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism suggests that it is, importantly, through their religious practices centered around Marian devotion that individuals are making these negotiations. Further negotiations around the body of Mary can be seen through abortion politics, in which apparitional messages prescribe political identities for devotees around this issue. Materialist theories point to the Mary's role as nexus for negotiating social and political changes in the modern world related to women and families. Moreover, Bhabha's theory of colonial authority can be applied here to underscore how relationships between Mary and her devotees – and between devotees and those who disagree with their political stances – help

to establish Mary's authority in speaking as a mother against abortion. Finally, negotiations of identity occur around the figure of Mary – granted agency by devotees – through their relationships with her which create a sense of presence and foster important relationships as tools for establishing the authority of Mary as a heavenly actor who speaks definitely on social and political matters and, more importantly, makes things happen in response to pleas and prayers from her children. Devotees' relationships with Mary give them identities as her children and invest her with agency and authority.

Lacing together material theories of religion and postcolonial theories, as I have done here, affords understanding of the ways that devotees negotiate identities around the figure of Mary. Attention to material details about apparitions – including ethnicity and nationality – when combined with emphasis on difference (and *différance*) highlights the ways that sameness and difference are employed when individuals conceptualize and express particular religious identities. In other political arenas, material representations of Mary as well as references to the materiality of her maternal body are frequently invoked. Here, postcolonial definitions of authority as stemming from relationships help to illuminate the devotion to Mary at the core of the lived religious worlds of her faithful as well as how those relationships establish Mary as an authoritative agent determining the attitudes of her faithful. Apparitions are such fruitful sites for exploring body politics because they afford space for devotees to encounter devotional worlds and Catholic teaching about Mary, while shedding light upon the actions of devotees as they interpret meanings, engage in devotional practices, and express attitudes about their worlds.

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