Substituting Stories: Narrative Arcs and Pilgrimage Material Culture Between Lourdes and Csíksomlyó

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PILGRIMAGE PALIMPSESTS

Storytelling and Intersubjectivity Across Multiple Shrines, Sites, and Routes

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INTRODUCTION: SUBSTITUTION AND MULTISITED PILGRIMAGE RESEARCH

Practices of devotional healing had long helped make the Virgin Mary present and real to Emilia, a late middle-aged woman I met while doing fieldwork at the Our Lady of Csíksomlyó Catholic shrine in a Hungarian ethnic enclave in eastern Transylvania. I gradually learned that Emilia also knew about and was engaged with other Marian sites’ material cultures of healing, especially the Lourdes shrine in southern France. Lourdes is the Catholic shrine where the Virgin Mary appeared to a young French peasant girl, Bernadette Soubiroux, in the mid-1800s. Since then, it has become renowned for a spring with miraculously healing waters, bottles of which Mary’s devotees use in healing practices that have now spread around the world.1 Despite Emilia’s interest in Lourdes, she did not talk about it during my first visit to her home in a village a few kilometers north of Csíksomlyó. In early 2011, I arrived at Emilia’s village with a volunteer from the Radio Mária network, a global Catholic multimedia platform that had recently begun broadcasting from a newly built station at Csíksomlyó. Radio Mária Transylvania promotes devotion to Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, who is known by a statue in the shrine that performs healing miracles and who once appeared to a group of local Catholics during a Reformation-era conflict. Once a week, the network broadcasts devotees’ petitionary prayers and their stories affirming Mary’s miraculous interventions. Emilia welcomed us into her kitchen where, in response to the volunteer’s request for a story about praying to the Virgin Mary, she told us about an event from the mid-1980s when her daughter, Bíborka, was in first grade. Emilia’s sister-in-law had brought a handkerchief from Csíksomlyó to a hospital where Bíborka was receiving treatment for scarlet fever. The sister-in-law had rubbed the cloth on a miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary. When they placed it on Bíborka’s legs, the handkerchief relieved her pain.

A few months later, Bíborka drove me from her apartment in a nearby city to the village so that mother and daughter could recount the memory together. I heard not

only this story but also a second, this one about the Lourdes pilgrimage site. Initially we continued our conversation about Csíksomlyó, and when Emilia said she had taken away Bíborka’s pain, Bíborka offered an alternative explanation. This had happened, she explained, because she had “known” the handkerchief came from Csíksomlyó. Later, Emilia and Bíborka openly disagreed about how to characterize the material culture of healing at Csíksomlyó. When Bíborka called it a “tradition,” meaning that it was a Hungarian national cultural practice, Emilia interrupted her to say, “Marian spirituality is not a tradition.” A few hours later after Bíborka left to return to the school where she worked as a teacher, I then asked Emilia if she could show me the handkerchief. She left the kitchen and returned with a bottle of Lourdes holy water that a friend had given her. With no preparatory explicit comparison of the two shrines’ material cultures of healing, she simply dove into telling me another story about a miraculous healing. During a recent hospital stay, Emilia had been placed in the same room as a Romanian woman in great pain from kidney stones. She asked Emilia to treat her by massaging her with the Lourdes water, and Emilia recounted in dramatic fashion the way the water relieved this stranger’s suffering.

Emilia’s unexpected introduction of Lourdes into our conversation about Csíksomlyó brought to my awareness a new trend in Transylvanian Hungarian Catholicism. During my fieldwork, I found that the Transylvanian Hungarian Catholics most devoted to Our Lady of Csíksomlyó were also likely to be interested in the material culture of Lourdes and other Marian pilgrimage sites. This was the case even if they had never been to Lourdes. Pilgrims hailing from Csíksomlyó brought back bottles of Lourdes spring water, and women with deep attachments to Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, like Emilia, used this to heal friends, family members, and even strangers. During my time at Csíksomlyó, I met local pilgrims who had grown up making the annual Pentecost procession to Csíksomlyó and since then had visited places like Częstochowa in Poland, Medjugorje in Croatia, the Vatican City Rome,
Lourdes in France, Knock in Ireland, and had walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Interest in other Marian shrines’ material cultures of healing seemed to reflect Transylvanian Hungarian Catholics’ growing affluence, as well as their comfort with visiting far-flung pilgrimage sites. These Europe-trotting Catholics set examples for others by transforming once-in-a-lifetime experiences into repeatable rituals, and making knowledge of the material culture of other Marian shrines into a mark of religious authority. This trend toward “multiple pilgrimages” has not passed unnoticed in scholarly literature about pilgrimage. Typological categories like “national,” “Catholic,” “secular,” and “interfaith” pilgrimage sites imply that pilgrims are aware that other shrines have different reputations and target audiences. However, scholars’ arguments about how multiple shrines form “contexts” have gestured in directions that subsequent researchers have yet to go. In other cases, concepts like the “lattice” of itineraries in the Camino de Santiago and “networks” of Dutch Catholic shrines convey the open-ended connections linking pilgrimage sites but portray relationships between shrines from an implicitly bird’s-eye view. Ethnographic research addressing returned pilgrims at home shows that pilgrims rarely adopt this kind of detached perspective when reflecting back on their journeys. Emilia’s case illustrates this well, since she used her stories first and foremost in the context of domestic ties and a distant relationship with her adult daughter.

Looking back on my meetings with Emilia, I recognized a familiar process that scholars have documented through research on pilgrimage-going Catholic communities around the world: Pilgrims, most of them women, make the saints present by using devotional technologies to heal themselves, each other, and family members. These same women then receive encouragement from the Catholic Church to produce “devotional memory,” or the narrative construction of biographical history within the framework of devotional cultures of storytelling about saints’ miracles.\(^6\) However, by reflecting on Emilia’s interest in both Csíksomlyó and Lourdes, I became aware of an additional nuance that complicates this definition of devotional memory. Emilia’s memory of healing in Mary’s presence relied on an act of substitution. Just as Emilia switched the Csíksomlyó handkerchief with the Lourdes water, she also switched from a story about her daughter to a story about healing the Romanian woman. I was left with three puzzles. First, I sensed that Emilia and Bíborka’s disagreement had revealed some kind of strain or tension in their relationship to which Emilia had responded with this act of substitution. But what was this tension? Second, although the sick women in the two stories were clearly similar, they were not equivalent—the former was Emilia’s Transylvanian Hungarian daughter and the second an adult Romanian stranger. So I wondered what was it about how Emilia perceived the two stories that allowed her to substitute one for the other? Third, I puzzled over the process of comparing shrines itself. Emilia substituted a story about Lourdes for one about Csíksomlyó. This act didn’t seem to be a conscious act of comparing two sites, if consciousness is necessarily accompanied by linguistic reflection. But nor was it an unconscious response, since Emilia clearly chose to show me the water.

In the introduction to this issue, “Introduction: Palimpsests and Pilgrimages,” Kate DeConinck and I identify substitution as one way that pilgrims situate themselves within this trend toward visiting multiple pilgrimage sites or making repeat visits to the same shrine. We compare substitution to palimpsest-making in order to

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highlight how palimpsests raise some of the same conundrums: At its simplest, we note, a palimpsest is made by washing away an original text and overwriting another text on top of it. Like in Emilia’s act of substitution, the secondary text of a palimpsest is neither an act of creation out of nothing, as if the original never existed, nor completely determined by the original. The palimpsest text is at least partly shaped by the original’s pattern of indentations, marks, and traces, which reflect the original author’s writing style and penmanship, even as the secondary author crafts a new piece of writing. Also, in both Emilia’s substitution and the process of palimpsest-making, the author constructs the secondary text so as to make it conform in some manner to the first. For palimpsests, this is true even if only by virtue of the fact that the new narrative has to fit and be legible on the original’s page. Palimpsests and substitutions therefore raise similar questions: How to situate the process of textual creation vis-à-vis conscious decision-making and reflexive response, as well as how, in the lived experience of this process, subjects perceive the similarities and differences between the two texts.

A solution to these puzzles comes from philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who discusses substitution in the course of developing a theory of embodiment in his early monograph, The Structure of Behavior. For Merleau-Ponty, the substitution

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of one bodily gesture for another, as in cases when a person must adjust to a severe arm or leg injury, is the primary instance of this phenomenon. Merleau-Ponty looks to cases of soldiers who have lost limbs to illustrate the lived experience of substitution. Against the idea that a substitution amounts to slotting in an equivalent gesture, he argues that an amputee’s style of movement is not “a simple preservation of...normal walking; they represent a new mode of locomotion, a solution of the unexpected problem posed by the amputation.”

“It is accomplished,” Merleau-Ponty continues, “only through the pressure of external conditions.” Soldiers who have lost limbs will go on walking as before until they must consistently move across a texture of ground that impedes movement. That is, subjects only perform this act of substitution generating new gestural styles when social conditions make it a matter of existential necessity to do so. Thus, one external social condition lies where the body moves over and encounters the world’s material qualities. Finally, Merleau-Ponty’s argument highlights the ambiguous relationship between substitution and conscious decision-making. An insect shows its inability to consciously reflect when it instinctually tries to free a trapped limb rather than find a substitute gesture—to use a free limb—to accomplish a task. Human subjects distinguish themselves from unreflective insects by, after first trying to free the limb, eventually coming up with gestural workarounds for trapped appendage. But they do not do so by consciously and linguistically comparing this new way of accomplishing the task with the old. The substitution of gestures, Merleau-Ponty concludes, is “a directed activity between blind mechanism and intelligent behavior.”

In the following essay, I use Merleau-Ponty’s theory of substitution to give an account of Emilia’s devotional memory, which takes shape through a process of substituting a story about Csíksomlyó with a story about Lourdes. In Part One, I give a brief account of the history of class mobility in the area around Csíksomlyó from the 1970s until the present. I also describe Radio Mária’s influence on devotional storytelling in early twenty-first-century Transylvanian Hungarian Catholicism. I use this social context later in Part Two to address the question of what differences

8 Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, 39.
9 Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, 39.
10 Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, 40.
between mother and daughter that devotional storytelling had revealed. I show how class-mediated habits of movement came together with alternative scientific and devotional notions of cause and effect to bring Emilia face-to-face with the possibility that Bíborka might have rejected her bond with the Virgin Mary.\(^\text{11}\) In Part Three, I turn to the theme of multiple pilgrimages. I describe the act of substituting a story about the Lourdes water for the Csíksomlyó handkerchief. This shows that Emilia adopted a pragmatic attitude toward the two shrines; she perceived first the narrative flow into which these stories launched her in the process of telling them. Thus, Emilia did not so much substitute narratives as narrative arcs: It was the perceived congruence of their narrative arcs that allowed Emilia to substitute them. In the conclusion, I use this insight to offer suggestive remarks about the Marian context of this substitution, pointing to ways that scholars might understand the relationship between different manifestations of the Virgin Mary.

**TRANSYLVANIAN HUNGARIANS SPEAK OF CLASS**

The year 1968 marked a turning point in the Ciuc Valley. That year, the Romanian Communist Party made newly formed counties a basic unit of industrial and urban investment. Funds for a program of urbanization and industrialization flowed through county seats, and the new county seat of Miercurea Ciuc, at the center of the Ciuc Valley and adjacent to Csíksomlyó, became a locus of social mobility.\(^\text{12}\) Miercurea Ciuc’s population remained largely Hungarian because the county’s new industrial labor force was drawn from the surrounding villages.\(^\text{13}\) The city also provided opportunities for social mobility, especially through academic achievement.


\(^{12}\) The stated goal of these twinned transformations was to establish the new counties as “complex socio-cultural and economic units” including cities, industrial and commercial centers, cultural institutions, and transportation routes. Csanád Demeter, *Területfejlesztési- és modernizációs politika Székelyföld elmaradott régióiban [The Politics of Regional Development and Modernization in Backwards Regions of the Szekler Land: Harghita and Covasna Counties in “the Multilaterally Developed Socialist Society”]* (Ph.D. diss. Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania, 2009), 35-40, 105.

Miercurea Ciuc hosted the most prestigious educational institutions in Harghita County, which, in turn, provided means for improving one’s position by obtaining political capital vis-à-vis the Party. After the extension of compulsory education in the 1980s and the expansion of professional schooling in Miercurea Ciuc—especially for women—gaining access to urban educational institutions became a widespread desire among both rural and urban residents. Transportation infrastructure was a key factor in fostering patterns of movement between village and city after 1968. In addition to tripling in size, Miercurea Ciuc expanded each day with the arrival of large numbers of commuters from the surrounding villages.

I encountered a number of women like Emilia who also commuted to work during this time period. These women, who traveled back and forth between village and city, were married and had husbands who also commuted. Women tended to commute because they lived close to their urban workplaces or had access to transportation infrastructure. Since the upper echelons of socialist industry and government demonstrated their privilege by living in the cities where they worked, commuting was associated with lower-level workers.

In the years since the fall of socialism in 1989, encouraging Transylvanian Hungarians to interpret lived experience in ethnic terms has been an overriding concern for this ethnic minority community’s elites. As Rogers Brubaker found during his ethnographic research in the Transylvanian city of Cluj, many Transylvanian Hungarian activists, journalists, clergy, and teachers are culturally equipped and politically inclined to foreground the issues of ethnicity and nationhood in their conversations. Minority elites in the Ciuc Valley also shape dominant public discourses about intergenerational relationships. With the survival of the ethnic community in mind, they have made marrying other Hungarians the primary criterion of a good life and have developed an elaborate moral language that parents use to...
evaluate the ethnic significance of their children’s lifestyle choices. Transylvanian Hungarian elites’ public discourse, in contrast, universally praised a rising class position indexed by urban or suburban residence, educational success, car ownership, and leisure travel. The precedent for this discourse was set by official Romanian Communist Party propaganda that in the 1970s and ’80s had associated urbanity with self-confidence and consumer savvy. Communist Party publications like the Hungarian-language magazine, Woman Worker (Dolgozó Nő) published articles about a rural father who, upon receiving his young adult daughter home from a city school, “was untroubled to see that his daughter smiled with such an urbane self-confidence.”¹⁷ But in the late 2000s and early 2010s, I rarely encountered messages like these that addressed class in any way, even if just to dismiss parents’ anxieties like this. In my experience, the way that official discourse limited parental critique to the domain of ethnicity left parents with few publicly acceptable avenues to express class-based anxieties about their children’s new tastes and religious practices.

At the same time, the new Transylvanian branch of Radio Mária was opening up new opportunities for Transylvanian Hungarian Catholic women to speak about intergenerational relationships in public. The World Family of Radio Mária is one of the most successful institutions of the “New Catholic Evangelization,” a movement to revivify “cold” European Catholicism and attract lapsed Catholics back to the Church.¹⁸ From modest beginnings in Italy in 1987, Radio Mária has expanded to include branches in fifty-five countries on six continents. Radio Mária Transylvania is the branch serving Hungarian-speaking Catholics in Romania, and one of its most popular outreach tools is a weekly prayer call-in show from Csíksomlyó.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Dolgozó Nő*, July 1975, p. 11.
¹⁹ Gabriella Fábián, “Radio Maria Transylvania and its influence on Individual and Community
During this broadcast, devotees call in and read their prayer request to the Virgin Mary over the air. While other devotees listen, people send prayers by email and text message, show up in person, log into an online bulletin board, upload sound files to the Radio Mária website, and generally use speech and writing to engage their devotional relationships with the Virgin Mary. I also observed Radio Mária volunteers encourage this practice by personally recruiting members in Ciuc Valley villages, as was the case when I showed up in Emilia’s village with the volunteer who invited her to speak about healing Bíborka with the handkerchief from Csíksomlyó.

**CAUSE, EFFECT, AND CLASS**

Emilia’s story about one of Mary’s medical intercessions was quite typical insofar as, within its narrative frame, it focused on a devotional object that mediated Mary’s presence: a cloth handkerchief that Emilia’s sister-in-law had touched to the statue of Mary in the Csíksomlyó church. To provide a fuller rendition of Emilia’s story, she told me that Bíborka had become ill with scarlet fever in the early 1980s. Bíborka was in first grade. Their village physician prescribed a medication that had gone bad, exacerbating Bíborka’s condition. Bíborka’s parents wanted to take her to a hospital in the city of Miercurea Ciuc, but this was a period of extreme gasoline rationing in Romania. They would have had to wait several days for an ambulance to come to their village. A family member worked at a state company and arranged to obtain gas from the firm’s ration. At the hospital, Bíborka’s condition worsened until she was in extreme pain. A nurse urged Emilia to turn to Mary, and Emilia’s sister-in-law offered to take a handkerchief to the miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary at the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage site. Emilia laid the handkerchief on Bíborka’s legs and abdomen, which relieved her pain immediately and allowed her to rest.

I present Emilia’s story in this summarized form to highlight the familiar contours of a medical petitionary miracle. As in other examples of Catholic petitionary prayers, Emilia’s narrative begins with an illness that quickly becomes dire.20


Emilia's anguish about Bíborka's condition reflects not only a mother’s love but a widespread social expectation in Catholic communities that women have a moral obligation to protect their family members’ health and well-being. Emilia made sure to tell me about the Romanian state’s rationing of consumer goods during the 1980s. The penuriousness of the Romanian communist government in its drive to reduce foreign debt remains vivid in the minds of many ordinary people in the Ciuc Valley. Emilia’s inability to get gasoline exacerbated her desperate situation. Finally, the women who flocked to Emilia’s side for support beat a well-worn path of other Catholic women who assist to each other through and in the presence of Catholic saints and complexes of devotional practices. This summary presents the narrative in a manner that may be familiar to many scholars of petitionary prayer: one voice adumbrating a series of dramatic events leading to a positive outcome. Thus, as Robert Orsi has pointed out, women's narratives of petitionary prayers are often constructed by interweaving multiple voices. Indeed, Orsi’s research on American Catholic women’s devotion to St. Jude shows that stories about Jude are stories by women who help each other tend to ill family members in the presence of this saint.

What scholars of petitionary prayer have been less inclined to explore are the voices of the healed in these narratives: the children like Bíborka who often speak, although their voices are mediated through the narrators. These family members are also vehicles for divine presence insofar as they experience miracles on and in their bodies. In a study of a Transylvanian Catholic canonization process, I noted

23 Orsi, Thank you, St. Jude, 121.
24 Orsi, Thank you, St. Jude, 89-94.
the case of a young adolescent whose mother narrated his experience of healing to promote the candidacy of a Catholic bishop for sainthood. I observed this teenager use forms of physical refusal and avoidance to grapple with the role his mother, in the presence of Mary and with the help of her parish priest, made for him in this narrative. I wanted to compare his case to Biborka, an adult woman in her late twenties, taking into account their gender positioning, life cycle stage, and other factors. As a matter of fieldwork method, I sensed exploring this dynamic would require bringing Biborka and her mother together for another telling. I was curious to see how Biborka felt about the way her life had been braided into the story involving Emilia and Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, even though I was aware from my earlier experience that, for the family members involved, this could reveal troubling domestic tensions. As I went home from Emilia’s kitchen the first night we met, I wondered how to arrange something like this.

Even the process of getting to this joint interview revealed class-based differences and sources of tension between Emilia and Biborka. During a lull in my fieldwork several months later, I called Emilia to ask for Biborka’s cell phone number. Biborka, it turned out, was a high school teacher in a village at the northern edge of the valley. Like many teachers, she lived in the city and commuted to her job. I also learned she was unmarried and lived in an apartment complex in the city center. These details already suggested to me that Biborka possessed a different class “taste” and style of mobility than her mother. During the communist period of the 1970s and ’80s, Emilia had commuted in a government bus to her textile factory, while Biborka owned her own car, which she used not only to get to her job but also for international leisure travel. This was the car Biborka used to pick me up so that we could visit her mother. She pulled into a grocery store parking lot, and we set off at a good clip on the Ciuc Valley’s main northbound highway. We weren’t headed to her parents’ village, though. Biborka agreed to take me there, but first we

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had to go to her school. She spent most weekends in the city or traveling, which meant that we would have to visit on a weekday. And during the weekdays, she only had an hour for lunch. Bíborka met me in the school library, apologizing for how little time she would have for this interview. She apologized a few more times as we drove through her village. Finally, we stopped in front a high pale-green gate. Bíborka’s father, after a few minutes of waiting, opened it for us, and we followed him in to the kitchen where we met Emilia and Emilia’s mother-in-law.

After some pleasantries and coffee, Emilia began her story. I noticed immediately, though, that the atmosphere was very different than during my last visit. At that time, the Radio Mária volunteer had projected a patient, affirmative, and serious attitude as she listened to Emilia’s narrative. I recognized this style from my time in the Radio Mária broadcast booth: It was the gently encouraging response volunteers used on the air when they greeted devotees who had called into the weekly petitionary prayer program. On that evening, several months before, we had conveyed to Emilia that narrating her relationship with her daughter, Bíborka, in the presence of the Virgin Mary was a compelling and valuable practice. Now, in contrast, it was not at all clear that everyone in the room understood devotional storytelling in this way. As Emilia began her story, Bíborka and her father were chatting about our trip from the school. A little later, Bíborka got up to help her father bring in some firewood. Bíborka and her father seemed only to be acting as one might expect in a typical Transylvanian rural kitchen. These are the busiest rooms in a house; people cross in and out, interrupt with requests, and jump in and out of conversations. However, Emilia did not welcome these behaviors on this occasion. “Don’t shout,” she said, quietly but firmly. And she turned around to face Bíborka and her father for emphasis. Emilia was not only objecting to a perceived interruption. Her demand also manifested a deeper conflict set up by Radio Mária’s growing influence in Transylvanian Catholic devotional culture. Emilia seemed to perceive that the proper way to accept the gift of sharing a miracle story was quiet and focused attention, the kind of attitude Radio Mária’s volunteers embodied when receiving callers’ petitions during the weekly call-in show. In contrast, Bíborka needed some persuasion to pay attention to Emilia’s story in the manner of a Radio Mária volunteer. On the drive to her village, Bíborka’s apologies had alerted
me to the fact that she did not perceive devotional storytelling as a compelling way of fulfilling her familial obligations. During the story, her distractibility sent a similar message. Similarly, expressing boredom and doing chores, it seemed, were the equivalent of the young teenage boy’s physical struggle to escape his mother’s grip when she tried to display his body as a sign of a miraculous healing. Both Bíborka and the boy seemed to be uncomfortable with the role that their mothers and Catholic devotional culture had given them as miraculously healed subjects. For Emilia, it also sent the troublesome signal that Bíborka perhaps did not acknowledge the value of having a relationship with the Virgin Mary.

It was in their commentary about the miracle story that Emilia and Bíborka came close to explicitly naming tensions over their different class tastes and styles of mobility. Emilia recalled laying the handkerchief on Bíborka’s leg and then put these words in Bíborka’s six-year-old mouth: “And Bíborka said, ‘Mom, leave it on there because it doesn’t hurt.’ And when the handkerchief was on her then the pain disappeared.” At this statement, Bíborka turned around. She cast doubt on Emilia’s memory: “Well, well,” she hesitated, “I don’t remember concretely saying ‘Leave it on me.’” She then reframed her mother’s statement about the handkerchief. “What I remember is that something happened. It’s possible that knowing she brought it from the statue, simply knowing that brought me relief. Today, now that I’m an adult, that’s how I see it.” Bíborka seemed to feel that her mother, by sharing this memory, was making a claim about the handkerchief’s miraculous causal powers to relieve suffering. Bíborka continued with her intervention by explaining her own position on this question:

The fact that my aunt brought the handkerchief, it brought a kind of relief [megnyugvás]. It was a different kind of the same effect brought on by a pain reliever [fájdalom csalapító]. That they brought this handkerchief from the Virgin Mary, my experience of joy at this, removed the pain.

Looking at Bíborka, I sensed her searching carefully for the right words. She paused before “relief” and “pain reliever,” emphasizing these concepts. She was denying neither her experience of relief nor its connection to her aunt’s act of
touching her with this handkerchief. Rather, she seemed to offer the claim that her relief had been caused by her knowledge of where the handkerchief came from, not the handkerchief itself as a medium of the Virgin Mary’s presence.

Bíborka’s comments index the vexed relationship between scientific “causal” and religious “participatory” worldviews, a topic of perennial interest in the ethnographic study of religion. In his study of anthropology’s contributions to the science-religion debate, Stanley Tambiah gave this ideal-typical characterization to clarify the differences between these worldviews: On the one hand, scientific causality holds subjects and objects apart. When effects in the objective world correspond to a subject’s desired outcome, the scientific worldview seeks out intermediate causes that have intervened between subjective wishes and objective effects. On the other hand, participatory worldviews affirm a unity between subjects and objects that discounts intermediate causes. Subjective desires are sufficient for bringing about objective effects. Tambiah’s most evocative move was to recast the science-religion encounter in intersubjective terms. Before, anthropologists had approached scientific and religious worldviews as metaphysical entities—different constructions of reality. Anthropologists tended to treat public debates about science and religion as conflicts between clashing and incommensurable constructions of causality. In contrast, Tambiah observes that these debates arose out of anthropologists’ worries that religious worldviews “would exercise to the utmost our powers of empathy and translation.”

Anthropologist Michael D. Jackson takes this point a step further by noting that anxieties about contradictory worldviews are often indexes of disturbances in the field of primary interpersonal relations. Jackson’s observation clarifies what is at stake in Emilia and Bíborka’s debate about Mary’s intervention:

28 As Stanley Tambiah notes, the earliest anthropologists including Tylor, Frazer, and Levy-Bruhl were preoccupied with trying to explain one in relation to the other. Stanley Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86-90.
29 Tambiah, *Magic*, 86-90. In the field of Catholic history, scholars have argued that Catholic public intellectuals used debates about science, miracles, and cause and effect to “modernize” European Catholic cultures. In dramatically-staged public spectacles and debates, they used modern sensational and sentimental styles of storytelling to paint scientific critics of miracles as coldhearted. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions*.
Through the medium of the science-religion debate about causality, mother and daughter were naming and negotiating the way Bíborka’s class position and habits of taste were putting into question their ability to understand and empathize with each other. They were registering, in Jackson’s words, a disturbance in the “empathic bonding, synchronous interaction, and mirror-imaging” that had characterized their “intimate interpersonal world.” Indeed, a later comment from Bíborka’s grandmother suggested that family members were grappling with this intersubjective disturbance not only via the science-religion debate but also in terms of Bíborka’s style of everyday mobility and class-based preferences. Bíborka left some school-related paperwork behind after she departed our interview. When Emilia discovered the folder on the table, Bíborka’s grandmother exhaled and said, half pityingly but also slightly judgmentally, “Oh, poor little one, she rushes too much!”

Emilia was aware that her intersubjective synchrony with her daughter was being stressed. After Bíborka left, I asked her to reflect on their debate. She started off by casting their debate as a sign of her daughter’s different way of thinking:

Biborka, you know, with this kind of mind, now, all grown up, she thinks totally differently. But then, at that time, she was a six-year-old child. We raised her religiously. She knew where to go for help from the Virgin Mother, for the Virgin Mother’s intercession. She knew all of this.

Although Emilia begins by explaining the exchange as a conflict between childlike and adult ways of thinking, the end of her statement leads away from this conflict-centered interpretation. Emilia uses Bíborka’s words to preempt a more problematic interpretation of their disagreement: that she did not give Bíborka a proper Catholic upbringing. Bíborka may believe in a psychosomatic cause-and-effect relationship between the handkerchief and her decreased pain, but this belief is at least a sign that Emilia had exposed her to Marian devotional practices, which would have imparted the knowledge necessary for her to experience such a psychosomatic response. Interestingly, Emilia’s interpretation of mature and childlike ways of thinking features the same psychoanalytic categories that Tanya Luhrmann uses to

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32 Jackson, Minima Ethnographica, 12.
describe how American Charismatic Christians strive to return to an infant-stage state of mental openness to the world. Like the subjects who hear God speak to them from outside their minds, Bíborka had once felt that the barrier between her mind and the outside world was porous. But where Luhrmann has argued that Christians seek to change their experience of the world rather than explain it, Emilia uses explanations to change her experience of her relationship with Bíborka. Emilia demonstrates a creative response to the situation by using a key theme of Bíborka’s story to reaffirm Marian devotionalism as valuable domestic labor. In these types of interpretive moves, we can see how this conversation had brought to Emilia’s awareness her different class position, and how she understood this difference through the lens of her obligation to provide Bíborka with a Catholic upbringing.

**SUBSTITUTING A NARRATIVE ARC**

Eventually, I asked Emilia if she could show me the handkerchief. Emilia left the room, returning a few moments later not with the handkerchief but rather a small plastic bottle of water. The bottle in her hand, she explained, was from Lourdes; she had used it to relieve pain on another occasion. Without missing a beat, she launched into another story about using a devotional object. The previous year she had been suffering from kidney stones. She went to the hospital for an operation, but the doctors were unable to remove all the stones. She was in severe pain: “I couldn’t even turn over on my back. My kidneys were hurting so badly, you can’t even imagine it.” She asked her husband to bring her the Lourdes water from home. She then drank from the bottle and massaged herself with the water. “About an hour and a half later,” Emilia recalled, “after my husband had gone home, I turned over onto my back. I felt almost immediately that my pain had gone away.” She concluded the story with the claim that it affirmed the causal relationship between devotional objects and pain relief: “This was the effect of the Lourdes water. For sure. One hundred percent. It took away the pain.”

The next day, Emilia continued, the hospital assigned a Romanian woman to be

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her hospital roommate. The woman was in severe pain, also from kidney stones that were not responding to medication. Emilia carried her bottle over to the woman's bed and asked if she believed in Mary. The combination of Mary’s presence in the holy water and the woman's need helped Emilia ignore any denominational boundary. This surprised her: “I didn’t even ask her if she was Catholic or Orthodox. I just asked if she believes in Mary. And she said yes.” The woman drank from Emilia’s bottle. Emilia then poured water onto her hands and massaged the woman’s side where she was in the worst pain. Within a half-hour, Emilia reported, the woman was asleep. The woman cried when Emilia was preparing to leave later that day. “Don’t go,” she pleaded. “You are healing me. But not you—Mary.” Finally, Emilia concluded with a comparison between her healing and the Romanian woman’s experience. “She drank from the water and was massaged just like me. And this happened to both of us. Her pain disappeared.”

In this story about the Lourdes water, Emilia substituted one narrative for another, but she was able to perform this act of substitution not because, for her, the two tales were similarly shaped objects. In both stories, Emilia described a subject’s unbearable pain, exacerbated by physicians’ incompetence, that family members came together to relieve. In the former, she talked about female kin who understood the severity of Bíborka’s illness and coordinated their actions—carrying a handkerchief from Csíksomlyó—to address this crisis. In the latter, Emilia’s husband grasped his wife’s pain and rushed home for the Lourdes water. She emphasized family members’ coordinated attunement and synchronicity enacted in this effort to mobilize help through rural Transylvanian Hungarians’ kinship networks. Finally, Emilia insisted on the devotional objects’ causal powers. In the second story, this affirmation becomes explicit and Emilia uses the language of her daughter’s scientific worldview to explain her position: Emilia uses the word for “effect” [következmény] and invokes statistical and measurable “degrees” of doubt when she insists that the water, “one hundred percent,” [száz százalékos] relieved the pain. The two stories follow a similar arc: Pain and illness challenge, but ultimately reaffirm, a family’s intersubjective empathy.

Although Emilia’s new story employed a similar patterned flow as the original, she
also replaced parts of the first narrative with elements that were clearly dissimilar. Looking at these divergent elements shows Emilia’s effort to balance the subjective experience of acceptance and hope that, as Robert Orsi and others have argued, often characterizes Catholic devotees’ domestic relationships in changing societies. In the second story, Emilia tends to herself and a Romanian woman of unknown denominational affiliation. This ethnic and denominational difference seems to augment the alienation that divides the sick and the healthy solely by virtue of the isolating experience of pain, which makes illness, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, a “complete form of existence.” The ethnic and religious boundaries that divide the Romanian woman from Emilia seem to stand in for and augment the significance of the class differences that divide Emilia from her daughter. With the Romanian woman, Emilia crosses boundaries that, in my experience of speaking with Transylvanian Hungarian religious and political commentators, many authoritative figures liked to construe as incommensurable worldviews that would undermine any basis for empathy. Simon Coleman has argued that prosperity gospel evangelists like to create religious and ethnic others only to build bridges to them. Emilia’s experience shows that, among Christian subjects, this tendency is not isolated to Charismatic Protestant denominations. While Coleman calls attention to missionaries’ penchant for crossing cultural borders, Emilia used one such cultural difference to gesture toward the possibility of reaching across a class boundary. On one level, her story questioned the impassability of the boundaries that prevented her from empathizing with the Romanian woman’s pain. But on another level opened up by her act of substitution, the story also allowed her to imagine crossing a boundary that was currently impeding empathy between mother and daughter. Not simply a despairing resignation to the fact of these differences or a retreat into a subjective world of fantasy in response to a recalcitrant reality, Emilia’s story about the Lourdes water conveyed a sense of acceptance tinged with hope. Robert Orsi writes that Catholic healing stories often construct devotees as “dynamically poised between acceptance and acknowledgement of reality on the one hand, and hope.

and desire on the other,” and Emilia seemed also to both accept her daughter while questioning the permanent reality of their differences by using the Lourdes water to imagine herself crossing a similarly impassable relational boundary.\(^{38}\)

Based on this case study of Emilia and Bíborka and drawing on this juxtaposition of the two stories, we have at least illuminated a few basic characteristics of substitution. We can at least say that substitution involved two stories with significant similarities but equally important differences. What, then, made the second narrative an appealing substitute? This comparison confirms what Merleau-Ponty has to say about the primary “existential meaning” of narrative in his later magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*: By situating storytelling in the primary context of gestural expression, we can see that when subjects take up and use the cultural object that is a story, they first gear into a narrative’s style and are thereby taken up into its internal momentum. The act of narration, Merleau-Ponty argues, immerses the subject in and establishes a pattern, cycle, momentum, or thrust that tends toward completion.\(^{39}\) Substituting is not a matter of mechanically slotting a similarly shaped event into a ready-made cognitive category. What makes a story available for substitution with another is a felt congruence between the two narratives’ momentums and the ends toward which they direct storytellers. Emilia did not substitute a narrative; she substituted a narrative arc.

Merleau-Ponty’s account of gestural expression also illuminates why Emilia never explicitly compared Csíksomlyó to Lourdes. In this way, substitution is quite different from the act of reflective comparison offered by the volunteer caretaker at Lourdes who, in Michael Agnew’s essay in this volume, disparages the Catholic apparition site at Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He justifies his commitment to caring for the sick at Lourdes by arguing that this shrine’s material culture is more Christ-centered, and Medjugorje is more Marian. The former encourages moral acts of care, and the latter features powerful divine interventions, like when Mary turned his string of Rosary beads a shade of yellow during his visit to Medjugorje.\(^{40}\) Emilia’s substitution invites a similar comparison, but that is all it

\(^{38}\) Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude*, 173.


\(^{40}\) Michael Agnew, “This is a glimpse of Paradise”: Encountering Lourdes through serial and multisit-
does: invite. On the one hand, the substitution did not include any explicit linguistic reflection. She did not stop first to speak aloud her plan to substitute the two stories. Nor did she say anything about how Lourdes is similar to or different from Csíksomlyó. She substituted the Lourdes water and its story for the Csíksomlyó handkerchief and its narrative, but without consciously justifying this act and without using words to compare the two shrines. On the other hand, we cannot say that this substitution was the working of what Merleau-Ponty called a blind mechanism, whether the causal factor was a personal act like my request or a social force like the emergence of a middle-class in the Ciuc Valley in the twentieth century. Emilia’s new story was rather inchoately strategic and directed to an implicit end, a practical action whose purpose remained tacit insofar as it was realized through action’s own completion.

CONCLUSION: THE MARIAN CONTEXT OF SUBSTITUTION

In this essay, I have explored how an act of narrative and material substitution allowed Emilia to situate herself and her domestic relationships vis-à-vis Transylvanian Hungarian Catholics’ growing interest in visiting multiple shrines. I focused on Emilia’s substitution of a story about a healing handkerchief from Csíksomlyó for healing water from Lourdes. This case involving two Marian shrines also raises questions about the Marian context of her act. On what basis did Emilia see these two manifestations of the Virgin Mary as substitutable? What was it about Mary that allowed Emilia to view the two “Our Ladies”—of Lourdes and of Csíksomlyó—in the same light? These questions are made all the more pressing by comparison with the pilgrim in Michael Agnew’s article, who takes the Virgin Mary of Medjugorje and Lourdes to act in a similarly interventionist manner. Lourdes is different from Medjugorje because of the influence of a different divine being—Christ—who adds a dimension of moral care to the former. For this pilgrim, it would undermine his moral commitments to substitute a story about Christ and caretaking at Lourdes for one about Mary and a miracle at Medjugorje. This was not the case for Emilia’s commitment to fostering her daughter’s Catholic faith.
and devotion to Mary.

I am responding to these questions in this article’s conclusion because, in the absence of ethnographic evidence, I can only offer surmises about how Emilia viewed Our Lady of Csíksomlyó in relation to Mary’s manifestation at Lourdes. Emilia did not offer any explicit statements about the figure of the Virgin Mary. She did not demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the sites’ histories and, in particular, the different ways that Mary first appeared at these shrines. She did not speak about, for instance, the fact that Our Lady of Lourdes appeared alone to one adolescent girl, Bernadette Soubiroux, whereas Our Lady of Csíksomlyó appeared to a group of local Catholics mobilized to defend themselves against the army of an invading Unitarian nobleman. Emilia also avoided differentiating and identifying the handkerchief and the water by reference to their historical meanings or material qualities. Despite her silence on this topic, we might draw a tentative conclusion based on my argument that Emilia sensed that her two stories’ narratives arcs were congruent and that it was on this basis that she substituted the one for the other. We might say that these two Marys became substitutable within the framework of Emilia’s practical attitude of putting Mary to use in negotiating her strained domestic relationships. What becomes clear is that Emilia was not so much substituting one Mary for another but rather flows or arcs of practical action, centering on the creation and crossing of boundaries, that these two Marys and their material cultures of healing make possible. For Emilia, remembering encounters with the Virgin Mary was a little bit like opening a drawer full of devotional objects from different shrines. The objects all invited a similar general set of actions relating to devotional healing.

My visit to Emilia’s home with the Radio Mária volunteer was, for Emilia, an invitation to remember—an invitation that was made both attractive and authoritative by Radio Mária’s increasing influence in Transylvanian Catholic communities.

41 This is what sets Emilia apart from the American Catholic Holy Land pilgrims with whom Hillary Kaell conducted research. For American Catholics, souvenirs mediate pilgrims’ sense of knowledge-based transformation and growth on their return from their journeys. By setting souvenirs out for display, they invite inquiries about the objects. They avoid forcing uninterested guests to listen to their stories while still inviting curious guests’ inquiries about their experiences abroad. Kaell, Walking Where Jesus Walked, 235-60.
The Csíksomlyó handkerchief named differences that had disrupted intersubjective bonds in Emilia’s life, and remembering this object seemed to surface these differences. While Emilia and Bíborka were inclined to find middle ground in their debate about cause and effect, they seemed stifled by their differing approaches to mobility and taste. Emilia turned to another object and a similar story—the Lourdes water—that allowed her to make an oblique commentary on her relationship with her daughter.

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