

OUR LADY OF THE ROCK

Vision and Pilgrimage in the Mojave Desert

BY **LISA M. BITEL**

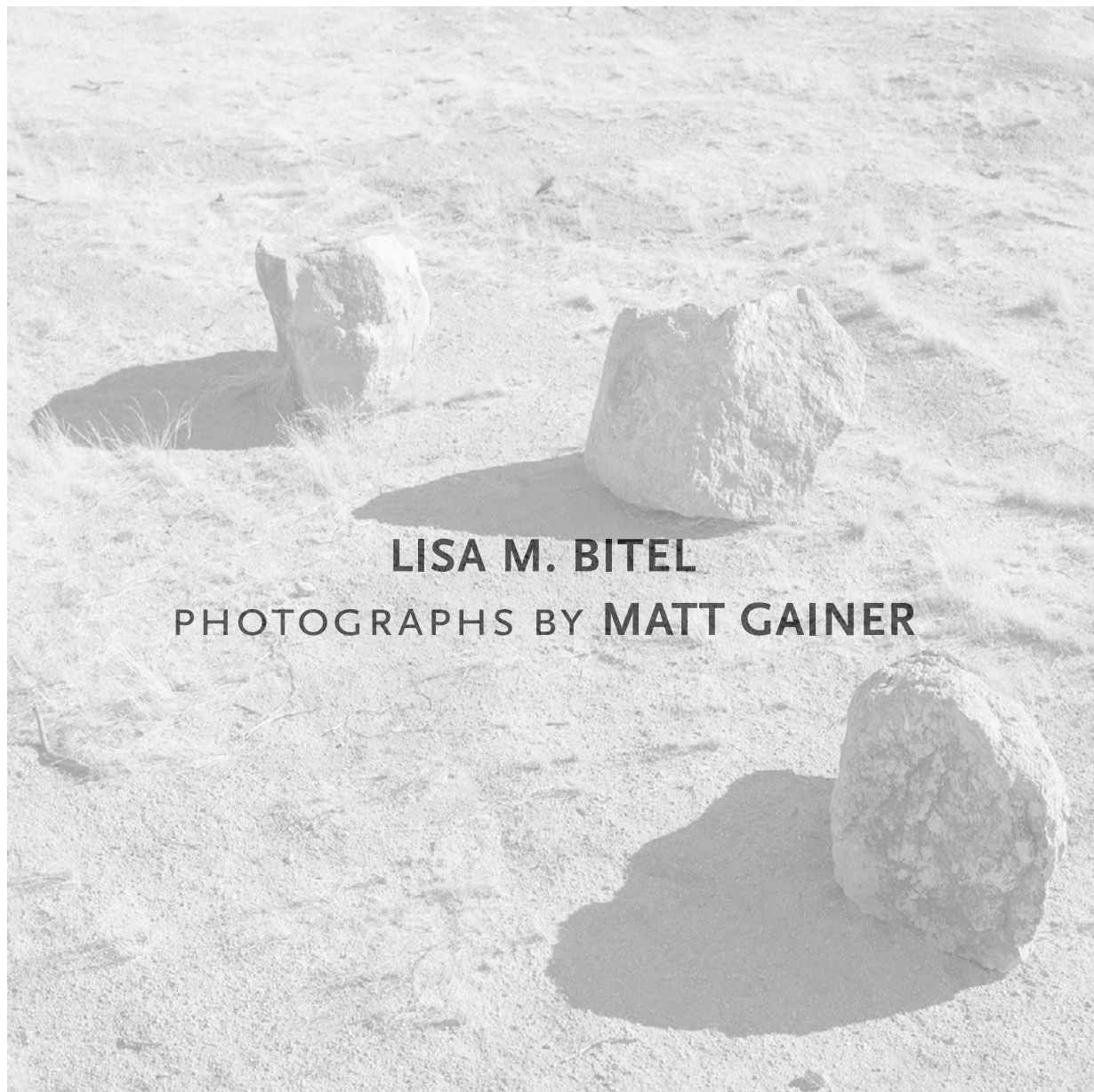
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MATT GAINER**



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IN THE MOJAVE DESERT



LISA M. BITEL

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Cover photograph: October 13, 2006 (pilgrims at the Rocks).
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For Peter, who saw God in a fjord.

Lisa Bitel

*For Mom and Trang for helping me see clearly,
and for Mela and Chloe, that you may too.*

Matt Gainer

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Impressions: Our Lady of the Rock, 2006–2011, *a photo essay by Matt Gainer*



October 13, 2006

Preface

Looking the Wrong Way

In 2006 I was browsing the Internet for the latest news of apparitions and miracles when I stumbled across the story of Maria Paula Acuña. A 1997 article printed in the *Los Angeles Times* reported that she claimed to see the Virgin Mary at a place called Our Lady of the Rock, just outside California City in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles.¹ On the thirteenth of every month, hundreds of men, women, and children followed Acuña into the desert to watch. Only Maria Paula could see and speak with the Virgin, the article explained, but onlookers searched the skies for signs from heaven, gazing directly into the sun and snapping photographs of the sky.

Apparitions come as no surprise to a medievalist. In the pages of ancient manuscripts and in the carvings of crumbling churches, I have encountered far more bizarre apparitions than the Blessed Virgin. Premodern Christians (and followers of other faith traditions) regularly spotted saints, angels, demons by the dozen, flying ships, rains of blood, fireballs, ghosts, and shape-shifters, among other marvelous sights. Maria Paula Acuña and her followers seemed to offer me a rare chance to witness religious visions in process rather than in the pages of a document, and to pose questions that I might take back to the past. What might this moving picture of ancient practices, I wondered, reveal to me? It tempted me like time travel. I decided to go see for myself.

I had mixed feelings when I first witnessed Maria Paula Acuña fall to her knees and address thin air. After all, as an anthropologist friend had told me recently, “We’re researchers—we test the credibility of stuff.” Apparitions of the Virgin Mary seem less plausible these days than other kinds of invisible phenomena, such as black holes in space or devices of nanotechnology. I tried to look through Maria Paula’s eyes, but of course that is impossible—only Maria Paula knows what she sees. I considered causes for her behavior and wondered about her background and motives. I pondered her relation to the witnesses who accompany her to Our Lady of the Rock in the Mojave Desert. Still, while I might be able to rule out some causes for her sightings, I lack evidence—aside

from my unwillingness to believe in the intervention of the Blessed Virgin—to prove that Maria Paula does *not* see what she says she sees. Like other witnesses to religious visions, I must make a decision about the seer's integrity based on my own observations and interpretations.

"Do you really think she sees the Virgin?" people ask me. It is often hard to tell whether they are asking, "What does Maria Paula see?" or "Does she see anything?"² Academics want to know whether Maria Paula believes she sees supernatural phenomena or whether she only pretends. Sociologists and anthropologists study prophets and shamans in terms of ethnic identity and power; scholars of religion focus on visions and revelations in the context of charismatic movements, doctrinal debates, and grassroots reforms. Psychologists, physicians, and brain scientists wonder about physiological and neurological causes of her trances and ecstasies. But in fact none of us can know what Maria Paula sees. We have not learned how to look through Maria Paula's eyes. As Courtney Bender has explained in her study of modern mystics, it is precisely this invisibility or "untranslatability" of Maria Paula's visionary experience that renders it meaningful and even authoritative—not just to her followers but also to scientists, academics, and Doctors of the Church who might notice and try to assess it.³

As it turned out, the discerners of Maria Paula's visions have more interesting stories to tell than the self-identified visionary. Pilgrims to Our Lady of the Rock are not the glassy-eyed cultists and hysterics of documentary films about latter-day prophets. They are ordinary men and women who live in a practical world of jobs, families, rents, and car trouble. Not all of them are convinced of Maria Paula's intercessory capability. At each vision event, they watch for proof of God's concern and the Virgin Mary's attention to Maria Paula, to themselves, and to the larger world of Christian believers. They learn how to spot clues that most people cannot detect, like the cloud in the shape of an angel or the unexpected scent of roses, which help them evaluate Maria Paula's efficacy.

Nor have they abandoned institutional religion. Most go to churches of one kind or another and consider themselves Catholics, members of another Christian denomination, or both. They are not refugees from earlier centuries laboring to revive outdated folk devotions, defy the Vatican, or smuggle native goddesses into California parishes. La Señora de la Roca is no rallying point for demonstrations of ethnic identities or immigration status either. On the contrary, pilgrims travel purposefully into the desert in order to experience firsthand one of the oldest and most fundamental promises of Christianity: the revelations of God, made possible by the resurrection of Jesus and facilitated by heavenly messengers, particularly Mary, the Virgin Mother of Christ the Savior.

Some of what they do in the Mojave resembles the venerable practices of other Jesus followers. More recent regional customs, politics, shifts in visual culture, and technological advances also influence pilgrims' practices in the Mojave. To label their collective activities "folk" or "popular," as some Catholic leaders and many scholars still do, is unhelpful in explaining their motivations. Such simplistic categorization, as one scholar

points out, ignores the “often practical, crassly material, and decidedly modern aspects of so much popular religion” and the fact that plenty of people who share the daily struggles of pilgrims do not seek relief in worship.⁴

In the pages that follow, I offer a less reductive explanation for why so many people choose to watch Maria Paula and how they have made religion at Our Lady of the Rock. Although I cannot discern the spiritual authenticity of Maria Paula’s visions or describe exactly what each individual pilgrim witnesses, I can tell you how they look (in both senses of the verb). I also suggest why they go to the desert to see what they can—and cannot—see.

I worked with my friend and colleague, the photographer Matt Gainer, to make this book about modern ways of religious looking. For six years we trailed pilgrims to Our Lady of the Rock, jointly and on individual missions. While I took notes, Matt took pictures. His photographs capture both the narrative structure of the monthly vision event and the simultaneous activities of the crowd on any given thirteenth day of the month—one woman’s moment of intense interiority in the midst of noisy chaos, the diffident posture of a critical pilgrim, the visual irony of witnesses displaying photos of the invisible Virgin to the visionary who presents them to the camera. The images reveal patterns in the recurring liturgy of visions yet also chronicle changes at the site over the years. The photos offer a prosopography of witnesses too. A chapter of twenty-nine color photographs tells Matt’s version of a typical thirteenth of the month at Our Lady of the Rock. Forty black-and-white photographs also appear throughout the book as clarifications and comments on the textual narrative. The rest of his thousands of shots and recorded interviews have provided evidence for my analysis of the vision event. Unpublished pictures skulk like ghosts behind my pages of words. The names of all informants except Maria Paula Acuña and Sister Thelma, who are public figures, and Juan Rubio, who gave explicit permission, have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

The Virgin Mary’s previous apparitions and miracles have been well documented at Lourdes, Fátima, Marpingen, Knock, Garabandal, Medjugorje, Betania, Zeitoun, the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and a multitude of less famous places. I cite many admirable studies of these religious phenomena in the notes of this book, along with the works of historians and theologians who have explicated diverse traditions of prophecy, vision, and dreaming among Christians. Many authors have probed the long history of extraordinary sights of, and human contacts with, the supernatural. Modern devotees of Mary—priests and other pious Catholics but also novelists and journalists—have written movingly and also critically about personal relationships with their Blessed Mother.⁵ A whole library of possible explanations already exists as to why apparitions of the Virgin Mary proliferated suddenly in the nineteenth century and have continued multiplying ever since. One entire aisle in that imaginary library is devoted to the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the famous gathering of Catholic leaders that loosened the clergy’s strict control of devotional practices but that, at the same time, raised standards for the discernment of spirits. Another aisle of that imaginary library concentrates on visual

religion after the Big Bang of electronic technologies and communication networks and the resultant spread of globalized religious and visual cultures.

What, then, can a medievalist, in cahoots with a photographer of social protest movements, relying on a virtual library of visionary religion, add to our collective understanding of modern visions and apparitions—besides a naive eagerness to spot the Virgin Mary in the clouds? Three credentials qualify me to write this book. First, I watched and listened carefully to Maria Paula and her witnesses for more than six years as they built their religion in the desert. Second, my coconspirator, Matt, can see things with his camera that I cannot. As his witness and interpreter, I report and explicate here what we both saw at Our Lady of the Rock because only words and images together can account for visionary religion.

Third and most important, I am an expert on what some historians call the *longue durée*—the long haul—of Christian visionary and visual traditions. Religion is an ever-mutating but inherently backward-looking phenomenon; in order to comprehend the meaning of contemporary mariophanies, one must grasp the enduring drama of Christian revelation and the history of the Savior's mother over the long haul of twenty centuries, as set down in sacred scriptures, rehearsed in rituals through the ages, argued in doctrines and theologies, probed endlessly in literature, represented in art and architecture, and repeatedly reenacted by believers around the world. If you know how to look at the unseen past, it becomes much easier to spot the invisible in our own post-Enlightenment present. Maria Paula and her associates are not the only modern believers scanning for signs of the divine. Other vision seekers are doing similar things in the plazas of small villages and parks of major cities, on street corners, and under freeways. They find the Virgin in shrines, fields, parking lots, factories, living rooms, and kitchens. In garages and backyards. On windows. In food products and tree trunks.

Thus chapter 1 of this book explains what happens at Our Lady of the Rock each month and how two thousand years of Christian revelatory tradition prepared the way for Maria Paula to meet Mary in the desert. Chapter 2 investigates the ancient tradition of desert pilgrimage that led Maria Paula and her pilgrims to transform a corner of the Mojave into a holy place of pilgrimage, as earlier deserts in other parts of the world once summoned other prophets and seers. Chapter 3 examines historical models for religious visionaries, especially those who see the Virgin. Chapter 4 focuses on the pilgrims: who they are, where they come from, why they go to the vision event, and how they practice the Christian discernment of spirits and visions. This chapter also analyzes changes in the rituals, iconographies, and environment of Our Lady of the Rock over several years. Chapter 5 follows three pilgrim informants out of the desert as they return home with relics and proofs of visions, where, out of Maria Paula's sight, they too confessed to be practicing visionaries. Chapter 6 examines the discernment of contemporary visionary religion carried out by reporters, photographers, videographers, and creators of Internet media. In conclusion, I reconsider Christian ways of looking.

Throughout the book, I try to locate Maria Paula and modern pilgrims in appropriate local historical and cultural contexts: demographic changes on the borderlands of Mexico and the United States, recent religious trends and Catholic politics, reports of apparitions and miracles from around the world, the latest developments in American communications and visual technologies, and the seemingly endless debate among academics, faith leaders, scientists, and citizen observers about sight, perception, reason, and belief. Nowhere in the book do I render an opinion on the reality of apparitions, nor do I intend my analysis to debunk the vision event, demean the visionary, or dismiss the witnesses to her desert visions. To paraphrase a fellow vision hunter, I pray that nothing in these pages will challenge anyone's devotion to la Virgen de la Roca.⁶

Many invisible helpers deserve my gratitude. A grant from the American Council of Learned Societies funded one year of research on this project. The Center for Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Southern California sponsored a collaborative research project with Norberto Grzywacz on the neurological basis of religious vision. Andrew Fogleman, Margaret Wertheim, Colum Hourihane, David Morgan, Jon Miller, and Deirdre de la Cruz all posed challenging questions for my research. Sandra Ruiz transcribed and translated some video and audio recordings. Sherry Velasco corrected my Spanish; all unattributed translations are my own. Students at USC and the University of California at Santa Barbara contributed field notes and bibliography for this book. Oren Margolis deserves special thanks for a preliminary site visit and also for cataloging references to contemporary visionaries. Jake Bloch's field notes and splendid video interviews provided crucial evidence. The Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, funded by the Pew Foundation, generously supported research for the book, including the sponsorship of three international conferences on religious visions and visionaries and a photography show. I thank the many distinguished scholars who took part in those conferences and whose work has improved this book.

I am particularly grateful for the input of Roberto Lint Sagarena, who tutored me in modern Latino/a Catholicisms and accompanied me to the desert. Luis Corteguera, who also went to the desert with me, has been my debating partner on religious and historical topics for fifteen years; his insights are hidden in this book. In addition to our editor, Michael McGandy, and the anonymous and enormously helpful reviewers for Cornell University Press, Lester Little also read the manuscript with his usual care and astuteness. Bill Christian, too, critiqued the manuscript; he has been my mentor and guide on vision-hunting expeditions and my patron in the academic community of visioneers. I hope this book reveals how much I have learned from him.

It goes without saying that this book could not exist without the collaboration of writer and photographer. Matt Gainer and I debated every detail of the vision event as we drove back and forth to the desert, awaited the Virgin's arrival under the sizzling sun, and lunched on bad burritos in California City diners. Our arguments about the visionary

and her witnesses have provoked the best ideas printed on these pages. The cost of publishing Matt's images in this book were generously subvented by the deans of USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences and the dean of the USC Libraries, the School of Religion at USC, and the USC-Huntington Institute for California and the West.

Even my children helped me interpret Christian visions taking place in the California desert. Nick clambered around Lopez Canyon in search of Maria Paula's original vision site. Sophie confronted me with a crucial question: How does one recognize an apparition of the Virgin? Or, as she put it more colloquially, "How do they know it's not just some random—ass dead guy?" That question led to my hypothesis about choosing to look the right way. Finally, as always, I thank Peter. He may believe none of it, but he knows how important it is to me, and he read every word.



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OUR LADY OF THE ROCK

Pilgrims have been driving to Our Lady of the Rock since 1995. Every month, on the morning of the thirteenth, Angelenos and other southerners load up cars, trucks, and vans and head north, cutting through the San Gabriel Mountains on Highway 14 to descend into the desert. At the town of Mojave, travelers turn eastward through miles of scrub toward California City, where they pick up the Randsburg Mojave Road, which turns into the old Twenty Mule Team Road. They pass the state reserve for desert tortoises, the parking lot of Borax Bill Park, and miles of unpeopled terrain until eventually they spot—if they look sharp—a hand-lettered sign tacked to a telephone pole. The sign points left to Our Lady of the Rock. Watchful drivers head deeper into the desert on the ambitiously named Lincoln Boulevard (really just a dirt track), where they join a line of vehicles from near and far. They have come down from Fresno and Oakland; in from Vegas; up from San Diego, Texas, Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru; from as far west and east as the Philippines or India; and occasionally even from Europe. They all arrive at this junction by motor vehicle. Short of walking for days or riding a horse, there is no other way to reach the place where Maria Paula Acuña sees the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Between 1995, when Maria Paula Acuña moved to California City, and 2009, when the Marian Movement of Southern California completed a long-planned “grotto” at Our Lady of the Rock, the schedule for vision days was largely the same. Señora Acuña and pilgrims conducted a liturgy that they had developed together, in response to the Virgin’s appearances, over the years. The rituals were similar to those played out in shrines and churches around Catholic Christendom: group prayer with rosaries, the processional, the main service—at Our Lady of the Rock, this included Maria Paula’s vision—the sermon, and the benediction before departure. Pilgrims knew what to do when commanded to recite the Sorrowful Mysteries or sing an Ave Maria. They borrowed iconography from other holy places. Newcomers could easily join in. Everywhere a pilgrim’s gaze rested,

there was something familiar to see and hear. Even the desert was a homely vista for anyone who lived in northern Mexico or the American Southwest.

The script and rhythm of each vision day may have seemed the same, but the players always improvised. Maria Paula's behavior and moods shifted from month to month depending on her health and the Virgin's messages. Pilgrims constantly chose what to do from minute to minute of the daylong event, as Maria Paula prayed or exhorted her audience. They might listen as she whispered to the Virgin or mumble their own pleas to the Blessed Mother or carry on with some other business. Their principal occupation was scrutiny of the sky. They constantly raised their eyes, as well as cameras and cell phones, in the direction of (what they supposed to be) the Virgin's presence. The crowd's composition varied as new pilgrims arrived or previous witnesses stayed away. If the vision event fell on the weekend, the audience swelled with younger adults and entire families. Weather affected the crowd's size, too, and forced alterations in the monthly routine. News about regional events or the Catholic Church inspired variations upon the day's activities. Sometimes Maria Paula arrived late or waited hours before actually having her vision, and the entire ritual schedule accelerated. As the grotto neared completion in late 2009, however, the crowd's focus split between the Virgin's shrine, which sheltered her statue, and the skies overhead. The vision event began to change in more radical and permanent ways.

Maria Paula is the only person who claims to see the Lady of the Rock in the Mojave on the thirteenth of every month, although most witnesses have learned to detect signs of the Virgin's invisible presence. She alone converses with the apparition. I refer to this experience variously as a vision, revelation, epiphany, theophany, or mariophany. Both "epiphany" and "theophany" refer to the visual manifestation of God or a deity to humans, although epiphany can also mean "revelation" more generally; "mariophany" refers to a similar visual manifestation of the Virgin. In Catholic terms, an apparition may be either corporeal—that is, visibly present to the human eyes—or present only in a symbolic or spiritual way, with or without participation of the human senses (called imaginative or intellectual vision in Catholic doctrinal terms.) Still, whatever Maria Paula Acuña experiences as visual and aural manifestations of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ, other Catholics have perceived before.¹ Her description of the Lady evokes Marian apparitions from ten, thirty, or hundreds of years ago. Her vocabulary for the apparitions, her gestures, her responses to the invisible, and even her choice of venues reflect ancient traditions of epiphany and prophecy. Señora Acuña would never have entered the desert to meet the Virgin if, two thousand years ago, the Jesus of scriptures had not taught his followers to see the signs of their own forthcoming salvation. Christian visions, prophecies, and revelations have always been at once singular and familiar, private and shared, never-before-witnessed and old news.

Maria Paula says that her first encounter with the Mother of God came as a surprise. Nonetheless, she was prepared for the Virgin long before they met on a hilltop in Lopez

Canyon. Like every attentive believer, the visionary—I grant her that provisional title throughout this book without arguing her right to it—collected exemplary role models and pertinent legends over the course of her lifetime.² She absorbed the visionary catechism from the material environments that daily surrounded her at home, at work, at social gatherings, in church, or in public media. She learned about the extraordinary visual experiences of others by watching television or films, readings newspapers and gossiping. Perhaps her mother or grandmother spoke to her of saints and seers. Maria Paula represents herself as ignorant and naive, but she knows how to dress and behave as a holy woman and she skillfully exploits symbolic images. Without much formal education, she has harvested her lessons from the visible world around her.

As many scholars have noted, today's global citizens have learned how to select meaningful information from among the many competing sources of visual culture and memory that confront them daily.³ As a small girl and young woman, Maria Paula must have seen images of the local version of the Virgin in her church in Sonora, and various other madonnas in home shrines, both in the United States and in Mexico. She has participated in Marian devotions and fiestas. She clearly grasps the patriotic importance of the ubiquitous Virgin of Guadalupe. In 1989, when she caught the scent of roses and blinked at the radiant mist that preceded the Mother of God's appearance before her eyes, Maria Paula suspected who was coming. She reacted, as she has confessed, exactly as historic visionaries did, long ago, to hints of the Virgin's presence. After all, those venerable seers confronted the very same Mary, mother of Jesus, who also spoke to Maria Paula. No one witnessed Maria Paula's initial vision of Mary, but none of the pilgrims has publicly challenged her account of that first encounter either. Her imitation of other visionaries, although it may seem like mere mimicry to critics of Marian apparitions, is both homage to historical visionaries and proof that Maria Paula's experience was legitimately Catholic.

Her witnesses, too, have spent their lives absorbing the cues to authentic religious experience. Professed Catholics know the look and feel of a holy place, whether inside a church or out in the wilderness. They can distinguish between sacred and profane moments. Devotees of the Virgin Mary cherish her icons and the legends of those who have been blessed to see her apparitions, and they rely on both icons and historical models when evaluating new claims to visionary experience. They have gathered this wisdom from literally all over the place: from half-remembered sermons at Mass, holiday celebrations, classroom lectures, church decor, home shrines, and holy cards. They have harvested religious concepts and visual memories from television programs and movies, books, Bibles, billboards, news reports, casual conversation, the Internet, and innumerable other oral, documentary, and visual sources.⁴

Each witness's mental archives of Christian concepts, vision history, and religious images shape his or her expectations of visions, visionaries, and the Virgin. Pilgrims seek out Our Lady of the Rock for many different reasons. They share their understanding of the Virgin, their assessment of Maria Paula, and the meaning of the vision event when

they gather in the desert. Pilgrims may not agree about the details of famous apparitions or Maria Paula's abilities, but they know some reliable signs of a bona fide visionary in direct contact with a genuine apparition of the one and only Mother of God—a mariophany—and they anticipate spiritual rewards for witnessing such a phenomenon.

The vision event in the Mojave repeats a predictable pattern every month. What follows below is a synthetic description of a typical thirteenth of any month between 1995, when Maria Paula moved to California City and began to meet the Virgin in the desert, and the winter of 2009–2010, when Our Lady of the Rock gained a permanent monument in the Mojave. The event is predictable—it happens at the same place, with the same ritual elements and same kind of crowd, and it looks much the same every month—but it is not uniform. Subsequent chapters will complicate this postcard picture of a single day at Our Lady of the Rock, teasing out the historical background of this and other apparitions, unique details of particular vision events in the Mojave, the personality of Maria Paula and her pilgrim witnesses, and multiple interpretations that participants and external observers have offered for whatever happens at Our Lady of the Rock. The ritual routine on each thirteenth connects one month's event to the next.

The visionary and her supporters understand that Marian iconography and devotions at Our Lady of the Rock strategically rehearse previous appearances of the Virgin elsewhere. Maria Paula's personal history and behavior recall visionaries from earlier times. The desert setting lends biblical authenticity to the vision event, and at the same time its seeming emptiness frees pilgrims from both the burdens of daily life and the scrutiny of church authorities and nonbelievers, as subsequent chapters of this book explain.

On the Thirteenth of the Month, 1995–2009

Pilgrims always arrived at Our Lady of the Rock early in the day to await the advent of Maria Paula Acuña and the Virgin Mary. Some came on the evening of the twelfth to camp and keep vigils in the desert, especially on summer weekends or Catholic feast days. By ten o'clock on the morning of the thirteenth, anywhere from several dozen to several hundred vehicles had parked in orderly rows and spilled their riders into the landscape. In earlier years, thousands of onlookers would attend, often in busloads, but after 2000, audiences apparently grew smaller. No one could explain why, although some witnesses suggested growing disenchantment with Maria Paula, especially when she had some money trouble around 2006. Nonetheless, several hundred witnesses continued to gather each month, and the crowd swelled on important feast days in May and December.

Savvy pilgrims always planted their lawn chairs, tents, and umbrellas near the inner sanctuary to stake out spots with good views. They spread blankets for the family and positioned portable barbecues and coolers filled with drinks and snacks. Later in the day, fatigued onlookers would ask permission to stand in someone else's shade or borrow an empty chair. Tamale vendors and purveyors of religious items erected long tables of

goods for sale. Freelance merchants remained outside the sanctuary, where they hawked plastic umbrellas to protect against the sun, as well as tacos, tiny icons of Mary or Jesus, and pamphlets—meditations on suffering, brief hagiographies of Padre Pio and martyrs of the Mexican civil war, basic catechisms, and self-help guides based on the life of Jesus. Rosaries in various plastics and charm bracelets featuring a variety of Virgins and saints were always popular. Near the low picket fence, which surrounded the inner sanctuary of about sixty feet across, a table manned by the Marian Movement of Southern California dispersed Xeroxed brochures and collected donations. They also displayed and sold photographs from previous vision events and historic apparitions. Flowers were everywhere—in wrapped bouquets, in buckets of water, and clutched in pilgrims' hands—although none were native to the desert.

Inside the enclosure stood a modest temporary stage, about twenty feet across and six feet deep; in earlier years, before the stage, witnesses surrounded a simple low platform instead. Fiesta streamers crossed from the roof of the stage to tall poles set around the perimeter fence. Barn-style doors hung open on either side of the stage, suggesting how it could be closed up when day was done. A small tree and some creosote bush grew nearby. Behind the stage, outside the fence, stood a giant steel cross. On the other side of the



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sanctuary was a tumble of white boulders, quartz or marble, surrounded by chain link fencing, which gradually grew into a building site.

As the crowd gathered in the morning, a few men would bustle around the stage and sanctuary. Like the ladies at the Marian Movement's table, they wore specially printed T-shirts. The front featured an image of the Lady of the Rock—or, rather, the statue of the Lady of the Rock carried in the monthly procession, which Maria Paula said resembled the apparition exactly. On the back was the text of the Ave Maria (in Spanish). Movement members distributed buckets of flowers around the sanctuary and tested audio equipment, shifted icons and candles, and positioned a large crucifix, a statue, or an image of La Virgen de Guadalupe on the back wall of the stage. One tall old Anglo named Ron always led the crowd in recitation of the rosary, droning into a microphone, sometimes echoed by a Spanish speaker. Occasionally Ron interrupted himself to issue instructions to the crowd or to convey bulletins about Maria Paula Acuña's impending arrival. In summer, the audience hid under vividly colored umbrellas to avoid the already brutal sun, which often heats the desert to 115 degrees Fahrenheit in August. In winter, they wrapped themselves in blankets against blasts of wind. By ten thirty or eleven, the able-bodied would drift along Lincoln Boulevard back toward the Randsburg highway, lining the road in anticipation of the visionary's appearance. She was always among the last to arrive at Our Lady of the Rock. These days she rides in a white SUV, but for years she came in some other modest vehicle, always accompanied by a small flock of white-garbed attendants. Maria Paula calls them *monjas*, *monjitas*, or *hermanas*—nuns or sisters—although none of them belong to an official order. If the visionary's diabetes or another ailment weakened her, she was driven all the way to the picket fence. On good days, though, her ride parked at the highway junction so that she could lead a procession of witnesses back to the sanctuary. Maria Paula would hop out of whatever car had brought her, dressed in spotless white from veil to sneakers, sporting huge round sunglasses and always smiling. From the moment the car door opened, she would direct the *monjas* and the rest of her retinue, including the man who managed a portable microphone and speakers, and the litter bearers of the Blessed Virgin's statue, all of whom hurried to perform her bidding.

When everyone gained his or her proper place, all of them would begin pacing slowly through the scrub toward the sanctuary. Pilgrims trailed along. If someone surged excitedly ahead, one of Maria Paula's handlers would halt him so that the visionary and the Virgin's statue, lifted high on her bearers' shoulders, led the way again. Together, visionary and witnesses prayed and sang Aves as they advanced. Often a guitarist or a horn player accompanied them. On some feast days, traditional *matachine* dancers shuffled back and forth in rhythm, tiny bells jingling from leather shin cuffs tied over their white pants. Children always ran along beside the line, and mamas pushed sleepy babies in their strollers over the bumpy ground. Some witnesses paused for individual devotions along the way. Women bowed their heads and murmured over their decades of rosary beads. It was not unusual to see a sturdy man squat on his heels, cover his eyes with one hand, and weep.