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“If no one grieves, no one will remember”: Cultural palimpsests and the creation of social ties through rituals

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Abstract

Classic sociological theories hold that rituals offer opportunities for community integration and cohesion. Rituals allow people to come together across many differences and experience similar thoughts and feelings. Death rituals raise existential questions about the purpose of society and generally foster preexisting social ties. This paper examines the efforts of a US community of volunteers who gather to bury unclaimed, or “abandoned,” babies. Drawing on ethnographic research over a two-year period, we advance the concept of cultural palimpsest to capture the process by which a gathering of strangers turns a potentially divisive political issue into a community forming event. We find that in their efforts to mourn babies to whom they have no connection, these volunteers temporarily foster new social bonds that allow them to work through unresolved grief. Similar processes of ritualistically inverting social meanings occur whenever people gather to turn potentially negative into group forming events.

KEYWORDS

death/dying, funeral, infant mortality, religion, ritual

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Sociologists have long recognized that rituals constitute a key opportunity for community integration and cohesion (Collins, 2005; Douglas, 1966; Durkheim, 1912; Hertz, 1960; Turner, 1969). Durkheim (1912), for instance, argued that we gain reason, a sense of self, and our most basic ability to relate to one another through ritualized moments of shared purpose and collective effervescence. Rituals around death are particularly important because they address existential questions about who we are as a society, what ties us together, and what our collective purpose is. In most funerals, this fostering of community ties rests on a personal relationship with the deceased or their relatives (Bailey & Walter, 2016; Woodthorpe, 2017b). Burying a stranger, therefore, poses profound challenges for the funeral to integrate a community of mourners. In this article, we use the case of a community of volunteers who buries unclaimed babies to theorize the power of rituals to unite when division seems more imminent. More generally, our analysis speaks to how community members marshal rituals to turn a situation that threatens to tear apart the social fabric into an event that strengthens community ties.

Dominant social-psychological perspectives suggest the purpose of the modern funeral is for loved ones to process their loss and to grieve in such a way that life can go on (Davies, 2017; Walter, 2005; White et al., 2017). Funeral attendants enact a rite of passage that remembers and memorializes the deceased while at the same time acknowledging that the deceased is now in a different realm, with religion often filling in the spiritual dimensions of the transition. This double movement of the rite of passage—*holding on* through remembrance of what has been lost and *letting go* by disposing of the bodily remains—is facilitated by the prior connections the attendants have to the deceased, usually as family or friends. Close family ties not only allow for specifying the loss and anticipating a future for both the community and the deceased, but also exert an obligation to organize a funeral (Woodthorpe & Rumble, 2016). Alternatively, deaths of heads of state or celebrities allow a personal, if indirect, connection to the deceased because the public life of these figures generates familiarity. While relatively few people may have known Princess Diana, millions felt they knew her life as a member of the British royal family and personified her loss.

By contrast, deaths that do not attract the involvement of close relatives or high-profile people often take place without public ritual. Unclaimed deceased tend to be whisked away to private, isolated funerals, or hidden in unmarked graves (Klinenberg, 2002). They constitute a growing phenomenon in the US (Quinet et al., 2016; Sohn et al., 2020), the UK (Woodthorpe, 2017a), France (Keller, 2013), India (Steinberg, 2015), and Japan (Allison, 2015). Special categories of unclaimed deaths, however, have gathered interest from volunteers organizing funerals. Among those are the deaths of abandoned infants. Infant deaths are one of the “most painful and least tolerable deaths” in Western societies (Zelizer, 1994). Pregnancy losses, stillbirths, and infant deaths due to disease and abuse often remain unspeakable and stigmatized, their taboos isolating the silenced mourners and causing prolonged and complicated bereavement (Layne, 2006). Amid this silence, mourners may face difficult existential and religious questions, wondering, for example, why a good God would take away an infant at such a young age and what evil might have caused such loss (Anderson et al., 2005).

In light of contemporary moves to restrict mourning to the close circle of relatives and the heavy burden of burying infants, we examine how funerals in the US work as communal rites when strangers without prior ties to the deceased come together to bury babies declared abandoned. Rather than fostering existing social bonds, we observe how burying a stranger offers new ways of theorizing the power of rituals to *create* social bonds. Drawing on interaction ritual chains theory, we argue that in order for funerals of unclaimed babies to provide community cohesion, extra work needs to be performed to integrate the baby in the community of strangers, give religious meaning to the unexpected loss, and let go of the deceased baby. The risk of burying abandoned infants, especially in the US political context, is that the event will be hijacked for an anti-abortion protest, or be deployed to vilify “bad parenting,” which is a coded way of hierarchically marking class and race differences (Heimer & Staffen, 1998). The ritual then needs to erase the past of how the baby died and was abandoned in a hospital or

public space for mourners to project their own individual and collective needs (often unresolved grief) that bring them to the funeral and integrate them as a community.

We argue that the integrative potential of stranger funerals depends on how the mourners are able to turn these events into *cultural palimpsests*, blank slates on which they can project their own collective and individual needs. A palimpsest is a piece of writing material on which the original writing is effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces of the original remain and impress the new writing. A *cultural palimpsest* refers to the removal of past interpretive framings and the emergence of new cultural interpretations by which the original meanings shape the emergence of new collective schemes. We show that in the case of abandoned babies cultural palimpsests rest on avoiding contested politicization of the circumstances of death, on a personalization of the deceased as a potential community member, and by reliance on familiar religious rituals during the funeral to create a space for new meanings to emerge. As in the partially rubbed out initial palimpsest's writing, the original tragedy of the babies' premature deaths circumscribes the range of cultural and community integration work that is achievable. Removing traces of a tragic past seeps into the process of novel meaning making.

At a general level, the concept of cultural palimpsest draws attention to a social process through which potentially deeply divisive social issues are ritualistically converted into community forming events. This process can be found across social situations where the aim is to put a positive spin on negative events and where rituals are the means to redefine the social situation. Rather than searching for a silver lining in a bad event, however, the creation of a cultural palimpsest erases collective trauma to allow for re-inscription of new cultural schemes. As such, we can find this process of cultural redefinition not only within religious volunteer groups but also within social movements and professions aimed at addressing past wrongs. However, cultural palimpsests have their limits for social change: if the ritualistic transformation rests on individualistic appropriation, the result will be a missed opportunity to address structural factors that produce the socially divisive issues.

2 | RITUALS AND COMMUNITY

Classic sociological and anthropological approaches posit that rituals are the means by which society come to exist, bringing people together and allowing them to experience similar thoughts and feelings. Durkheim argued that assembly is how we achieve the very idea of a social. Through the intensity of emotion that people experience, which unites members of a society across their many social differences, society in turn can make and remake itself (Durkheim, 1912). Turner (1969) similarly argues that rituals are where a society (re)affirms its values, norms, and knowledge of itself.

To capture how rituals may generate a sense of group membership from a micro-sociological perspective, Randall Collins (2005) advanced *interaction ritual chain theory*. He distinguished four conditions for the power of rituals to generate group cohesion: an assembly of two or more people, with boundaries for outsiders so that participants know who participates and who does not, a shared focus, and a common emotional response to the event (or collective effervescence according to Durkheim). Rituals vary in intensity depending on how they are put together and enacted with the strongest cohesion coming from being fully and bodily absorbed in synchronized social interaction. Rituals may result in creating a sense of group solidarity, enhancing emotional energy, rallying around symbols that represent the group, and producing a sense of moral rightness in adhering to the group and willingness to defend it against transgressors. In Collins' conception, individuals gain collective sensibilities and identities through participating in ritualistic interactional sequences and seeking emotive "highs" of belonging and identification. Collins offers a flexible, elementary framework for the study of rituals that can be developed to understand how a negative (in our case an unknown baby's death) can be turned into an integrative occasion for the ritual's participants.

While Collins' theory uses an extensive definition of ritual (including everyday interactions), some rituals have greater social salience than others. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960) took stock of how societies

prepared for important changes of status such as birth, death, adulthood, and marriage. He proposed that transition rituals constitute processes with three distinct components: a passage out of a previous social status; an ambiguous time betwixt and between statuses where the community articulates its values; and the incorporation into a new position. Funeral rites tend to focus on the transition from life to death and the eventual incorporation of the deceased in a spiritual-religious world.

Rituals affect members of a society not just through the emotive power they exert on individuals but, by participating together, members step out of the realm of the everyday to pay special attention to their roles in forming the collective (Olaveson, 2001). "If we are all angry, or sad together, we nevertheless feel better and *stronger*" (Collins, 2014). Death rituals become socially salient when they provide "comfort and ontological security" (Long & Buehring, 2014). A funeral allows those left behind to make sense of its lost part, thereby offering a means to reaffirm commitment to the group as a whole (Durkheim, 1912). Life can go on because death has been ritualistically, if temporarily, conquered (Bailey & Walter, 2016). Or, as Holloway et al. (2013) put it: "a *physical procedure*—disposal of the body—is encapsulated in a ritual *social process*—the funeral—which demands a *philosophical response* on the part of the individual concerning the relationship between life and death."

More often than not, the funeral is seen as a "family affair" (Bailey & Walter, 2016), actively and reflexively (re) affirming and rejecting familial relationships (Woodthorpe, 2017b). In Van Gennep's (1960) conception of funeral rites, mourning rituals were based entirely on kinship, with the degree of kinship between decedent and survivor determinant of the length and expected intensity of mourning. This idea that mourning requires intimacy with the deceased persists today. Walter (1996) argues contemporary grief involves constructing a "durable biography" that integrates the memory of the dead into survivors' lives, a process achieved by telling personal stories and reminiscing with others who knew the deceased (Bailey & Walter, 2016). A funeral is deemed successful in contemporary individualistic societies like the US and UK when it provides an honest and authentic expression of the dead's biography in public form (Walter, 1996).

People who die young complicate dominant models of grief, especially infants not alive long enough to have earned individual names. They are among what Van Gennep (1960) called the "most dangerous dead," existing indefinitely in a liminal state, not yet incorporated into the world of the dead and not yet established as worthy of mourning by the living. Perinatal death, or fetal death beyond 20 weeks gestation, and infant death, are among the most difficult kinds of loss to grieve (but see Scheper-Hughes, 1992). According to Bennett et al. (2005), "When an adult dies, a piece of the past is lost; however, when an infant dies, a piece of the future is lost." Children are perceived as emotionally "priceless" (Zelizer, 1994) and "possessors of innocence" (Pomfret, 2015). Yet, there exists a strong cultural unease in talking about infant death, especially miscarriage and stillbirth (Bennett et al., 2005). The lack of cultural scripts available to bereaved parents can cause them to feel alone and may lead to traumatic, unresolved, or disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002). Compounding the sense of forced silence around infant death is the way modern society has sequestered death to private life (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). The political divisiveness of abortion politics in the U.S. adds yet another layer of complication to people's efforts to mourn infant loss in public, especially when the death involves a fetus. In addition, the abandonment of infants, alive or dead, signifies bad parenting that is racially coded (Heimer & Staffen, 1998). Altogether, the death of a baby places a mourner in an emotionally laden, culturally fraught domain.

The literature on death has little to say on how people participate in death rituals for decedents they never met or for whom no biography exists. While research on public mourning for celebrity deaths offers some clues as to how strangers mourn, such as when millions around the world paused to collectively grieve the passing of Princess Diana or Michael Jackson (Brown et al., 2003; Schwartz, 2015), with the famous there is still some sense of prior connection, however imagined, and a biography, however fabricated, to draw upon. When scholars give attention to people gathering to mourn total strangers, it typically involves extreme or dramatic events, such as when unidentified migrants wash ashore a foreign land (Mirto et al., 2019). But "if a funeral is to work as a social rite against death, it must work for all, not just for the closely bereaved" (Bailey & Walter, 2016). Attention to how

people come together to mourn the loss of someone they never met and have no prior knowledge offers new ways of theorizing the power of rituals to *create* social bonds, as compared to strengthening existing ones.

The number of Americans dying with no next-of-kin able or willing to bury them has risen since the 1970s (Sohn et al., 2020). When this happens, it falls to local counties to handle disposition. While no national figures exist, based on original data for the County of Los Angeles, we calculate that 230 bodies under the age of one went unclaimed over a two-year period (2012–2014). In California, by law any fetus that reaches 20 weeks of gestation must be cremated or buried, with a fetal death certificate and fetal burial permit required. While the County of Los Angeles cremates all of its unclaimed infants, surrounding counties, including Orange County, Ventura, and San Diego, outsource burials of unclaimed babies to a volunteer organization, one of a limited number of non-profit organizations with the sole mission to bury babies declared “abandoned.”¹ Most commonly, these babies have died in hospitals during stillbirths, miscarriages, or soon after birth as a result of complications. Less frequently are babies who have died as the result of neglect or homicide.

We examine how members of volunteer organizations participate in a ceremonial ritual to mourn babies that are not their own. Burying unclaimed babies faces three community-forming challenges for volunteers: (1) Because these babies are strangers to the attendants, there are no connections, no shared memories to draw upon and establish the continuity between a life lost and the community left behind. (2) The short lifespan of the infants provokes profound religious questions about the meaning of life and God’s plans for these infants. (3) Due to the stigma of pregnancy losses and stillbirths and, at the same time, the politicization of abortion, funerals of fetal remains and infants can easily lead to divisiveness rather than integration.

Yet, we show that by consciously appropriating the ritualistic aspects of funerals by creating a mutual focus of attention and a shared mood, the community of volunteers report that the funeral of unclaimed babies brings them closer together as a collective. We find that the volunteers do so by constructing meaningful but intentionally depoliticized rituals to transition babies to heaven. This restores the group’s sense of shared moral purpose and connects them to God. Organizers avoid any discussion of biography, instead constructing a new identity for the baby. In seeking to answer the question of why volunteers take on the burden of mourning strangers, we find that many participants suffer from unresolved or disenfranchised grief from their own perinatal losses. Their efforts to mourn unknown babies allows them an outlet to safely process personal loss in public, experiencing an intensive collective effervescence that extends classic understandings of death rituals. We elaborate on Collins’ interaction ritual chains theory to specify a social mechanism of ritualistically turning a potentially divisive event into a cohesive event and examine the potential of this appropriation for addressing structural factors that produce culturally divisive issues.

3 | METHODS & SETTING

This study is part of a larger project on the unclaimed dead, defined as people who die without next-of-kin willing or able to handle disposition. Since October 2015, we have conducted fieldwork in a number of government agencies who arrange cremation and burials for unclaimed decedents. Through the course of this fieldwork we also uncovered communities of volunteers who come together to bury certain subpopulations of the unclaimed, including a 501(c)3 organization based in Southern California that buries abandoned babies. Founded in 1998, the Garden of Innocence (GOI) holds funerals on an ad hoc basis in ten counties in California and Oregon. Like other 501(c)3 religious or charitable organizations, GOI is exempt from paying federal taxes and constitutes a tax-deductible contribution for donors. The organization’s mission is to provide dignified burials for abandoned children, with the motto: “If no one grieves, no one will remember.” This research received Institutional Review Board approval.

We attended ceremonies in three California locations, including San Diego, Fresno, and Ventura, always spending time before and after the ceremonies talking with members. We recorded by audio or video each ceremony, and we took detailed fieldnotes. In total we attended 12 funerals during 2017–2021, gathering dozens of in situ

interviews. We also conducted in-depth recorded interviews with participants and organizers between August 2016 and September 2021. Questions focused on understanding participants' motivations to attend the funerals of babies they did not know, as well as the meanings they derived from participation. Consistent with an abductive analytical approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), we started with open coding to identify obvious patterns (e.g., ritual steps, participant roles, demographics). We moved between our data and existing literatures as we refined our axial codes (e.g., perinatal loss, disenfranchised grief, God's purpose). Through this iterative process we sought out both the most common patterns and the most surprising.

4 | ANALYSIS

4.1 | Ritualizing an unknown baby's death

4.1.1 | Separation: The circle of love

In a grassy cemetery corner, thirty women and men of mixed ages and ethnicities gather under a canopy of trees as they watch a row of sixteen men dressed in regalia march through the grass. The Knights of Columbus, a global Catholic fraternal service order, wear plumed chapeaux and capes in red, white, or purple; black tuxedos with white shirt and black bow tie; baldrics; and white gloves. They carry swords at their sides as they escort a small wooden casket from the cemetery's administrative building to the tucked away corner. Marina,² a retired naval officer and today's officiant, leans into a portable microphone and thanks the audience for helping to "send home baby Tessa." She adds, "As with each child that comes to the Garden of Innocence, we form a *chain of love* and pass that child from one person to another so that we can say that we have touched this child and this child has touched our hearts."

People stand and move toward the centre of the garden, circling the narrow graves. The Knights of Columbus form an honorary dual row with swords at their sides as the Assembly Commander carries the casket through to the northernmost edge of the circle. The casket is made of pine wood and has a small maple-stained carving of a baby on the top and each side. The commander hands it to the person next to him, and slowly the casket moves through the circle from person to person. People seem to brace for the weight of the casket as they ready for their turn, but the casket is surprisingly light, a reminder of the short life in remembrance today. A woman makes the sign of the cross prior to receiving the casket. Another wipes her eyes after releasing the casket. Some take time to whisper what could be a small prayer. When the casket has circled through everyone's arms, the Knights raise their swords while the commander places the casket by the side of an open small grave.

From a sociology of rituals perspective, the active participation of the attendants, strangers to each other, is highly significant. Standing up from their seats to form a circle and then passing the casket from person to person not only increases the participation level from passive audience members watching a ceremony to people pulled into the event (Collins, 2005), and thus increasing collective solidarity and identity, but it also helps synchronize a shared focus and solemn emotional mood. This collective dimension is further accentuated by the public nature of the sign of the cross, recognizable as religiously meaningful, when passing the coffin. The chain of love then demonstrates buy-into a common mission and communicates a common religious identity to those assembled.

In a review of 57 ethnographies of non-Western societies, White et al. (2017) found that most kin engaged in mortuary rituals that included "close and often prolonged contact with the contaminating corpse."³ Questioning why such practices would be so prevalent around the world when there does not appear to be "obvious payoff," the study's authors conclude that moderately intimate exposure to a deceased loved one aids the grieving process by facilitating "reclassification of the loved one" (ibid, p. 163). The circle of love constitutes a ritual involving a degree of contact that is not prolonged but neither the low level of intimacy accorded by "paying respects," such as briefly touching a corpse at a wake. Lily, a long-time volunteer, explains: "The circle of love or the chain of love

is really the most moving part to me where we all can give a blessing to our babies.” Notice her exact words—*our* babies. But the babies are unknown to participants in the Garden—the mourners do not actually know the person they are burying. So, they construct an intimate and moving ceremony in which they informally adopt the deceased children as their family. Participants hear from organizers that for some of the babies the circle of love is the one and only time they will have been held.

Van Gennep (1960) said death rituals, like all rites of passage, have a three-part structure of *separation*, *liminality*, and *reincorporation*. In the first, the spirits of the dead must be separated from their social roles as members of the living. Burying babies of which very little is known except that they are young and unclaimed requires that the attendants at the funeral first acquaint themselves with the baby. The chain of love in the Garden helps babies become “complete” members of this community (ibid, p. 101). Richard, at the time a volunteer and later the San Diego chapter’s director, says, “When that child gets passed from one person to another, I know for me and I know for many others, that child becomes part of our life.” Yet, passing the baby is a simultaneous ritualistic move of relating and separating: by touching and holding the casket the baby comes into a community and at the same time is separated from its birth parents, about whom *nothing* is said in the ceremonies.

Rebirth into this community of strangers is further marked with a *new first name*. A name is a crucial rite that individualizes and incorporates (Heimer & Staffen, 1998). It marks one’s entry into human, not biological, life, as well as one’s end (Laqueur, 2015). It individualizes a person and prolongs membership from one situation to the next (Collins, 2005). If there is no name, the death of the individual is socially incomplete. Garden founder Adele Patters argues that a name “is a dignity every human being deserves ... instead of Doe, or a morgue tag.” For babies left at hospitals, such as after a stillbirth, there may be a family name, but Patters does not use it.⁴ She explains, “We wouldn’t want someone to be embarrassed by someone in the future saying, ‘Well, you abandoned your baby.’ We kind of incognito put them here in the garden.” By renaming the child, the Garden community works to erase the dehumanization associated with abandonment and marks a rehumanization of the baby in their own community. The names are chosen by long-time volunteers, often memorializing a personal loss, further personalizing the ties between the living who attend the ceremony and the deceased. This again distances the babies from the circumstances of their short life.

The ritualistic passing of the casket from person to person during the chain of love and renaming allow the attendants to appoint themselves the baby’s *surrogate family*, a collective identity shared only by those who took the time to attend the ceremony. They mark this explicitly by referring to the baby being buried throughout the ceremony as *theirs*. The first moments of the ceremony then render the deceased baby a community member and at the same time separates the infant from the painful circumstances of death that led to abandonment. The deceased baby is presented in a historically decontextualized way without any mention of what caused its passing. The past has been deliberately wiped in order to rewrite the event with the attendants’ own interpretations. At the same time, audience participation quickly and effectively turns a group of strangers into a collective with a shared focus and emotional timbre.

4.1.2 | Liminality: The homily

At the moment of passing through the circle of love, Tessa and the other renamed babies are no longer abandoned but neither are they at peace in the eyes of Garden participants. The babies are at a threshold, captured in a liminal moment, betwixt and between, neither here on earth nor there in heaven. This is a vulnerable time for the babies’ ceremony because the attendants need to justify why they are spending their Saturday morning to bury a baby they did not know. By putting themselves in the role of surrogate family for an abandoned infant, they take on a taxing role as people expected to mourn a lost child. In American culture, losing a child is “an intolerable social loss” (Zelizer, 1994) and one of the most difficult experiences a person can undergo. Participants need to understand how a fundamentally disturbed order can be restored.

For the articulation of a new order in which the death of babies makes sense, the Garden family turns to religion, marshaling God's love for personal and collective healing. Why should people in the Garden burden themselves to mourn a child they did not know if not for a higher purpose? Despite this being a funeral, there is no eulogy that narrates the deceased's life (Bailey & Walter, 2016). There cannot be, since nothing is known (or at least shared) about the babies. Rather, the Garden ceremony offers attendees a homily that addresses a common theological concern: the purpose of suffering. Father Bien-Aimé, a children's hospital chaplain, officiating at a ceremony of five babies in Fresno contrasts the chaos of a prematurely ended life with joy that a new birth should entail, saying in his homily:

When we think of a child coming into this world we always think of joy, of a joyful occasion, preparations of all kind of happy things that occur when a child is about to come into this world. But I'm not naive. I'm not suggesting that there is no evil in this world.

Then he sets up a critical intervention in the cultural script, arguing "this is the job of the divine":

The fact that God knows all about these children may baffle somebody. But for me it means that in the grand scheme of things God can and will bring something beautiful out of His gates. These innocent souls who through no fault of their own have met the unfortunate existence of this world will be luminaries in God's kingdom.

Rather than pitied souls, the babies become "luminaries," playing a special role in heaven. Their deaths are sacralised in this moment and they themselves are now ready to be saved.

But what *exactly* is God's mission for the babies? Many of the pastors see a specific task that the babies perform in the here and now for the attendants. "When we lose a child," Pastor Anna, another volunteer clergyperson, says, "it's widespread, it's not only touching the parents but it can involve people as far as grandparents, siblings, co-workers, neighbours. It touches the heart of everybody when we're dealing with a child." Her words echo the sentiments of classic theories on death, that the loss of an individual affects the society as a whole (Hertz, 1960). In a service for Baby "Stewart," Reverend Marcus says: "It comforts me to know that Stewart, as well as all the babies here in the Garden were children that were set on a course of destiny ... they were sent here for a reason." The reason: *to help people heal*. Rev. Marcus continues:

Some of you are struggling with things and in this uncertain world you feel a little unrested but ... Stewart is on assignment and we need to give glory to God because He knew that when He brought the family together, Stewart would let us know it's OK. You see, what God asks us to take in our understanding is that there's a legion of angels sitting for each and every one of you, and all they are doing is sitting and waiting for your beck and call.

The ceremony at this point makes a transition from *them*, the babies, to *us*, their new kin in the Garden. As Reverend Marcus's words suggest, the purpose of the babies, from the perspective of people in the Garden—is to help attendees heal by witnessing God's love. The question is no longer, *why did this baby die*, but, as Reverend Marcus articulated next in the homily, in a critical gestalt switch, "*Why did God bring this baby in my life today?*"

The homily takes the people in the Garden from the darkness of the death of a baby to the light of God's love, redefining the deaths of the babies as a religious event and showing that the children are safely in heaven. In a dual move, the ceremony turns to the audience of mourners, nudging them to grieve the baby as a way to heal from personal loss and sending them on a mission to spread God's message. Marcus closes with this call to action: "Some of you may be the only Bible that people ever read, so if you take love away from here, share love throughout the rest of this day and

the rest of your life.” He says that this kind of sharing “will show what Tessa meant to all of us,” adding that “we are now her family, and she is love.”

Note how officials channel familiar religious rites to prime the audience for a particular interpretation of the event as a deeply personal quest: dealing with one's own traumas. The collective dimension is the assumption that all attendants are hurting and could benefit from reflection and that they are united through a common religious experience—in this case, a religious framing of loss through shared participation in a funeral. Yet, while the healing process is shared, the reasons people need to heal remain deeply individual. At this point in the ceremony what also is striking is what the ritual *lacks*: political mobilization. In the homilies, there is no problematization of the structural factors that may lead babies to become abandoned at death. Instead, the focus is on what the death of these babies could personally mean for those attending the funeral.

Next, the Knights pull out their swords and raise them into salute. Marcus hands the casket to a cemetery worker, who is inside the narrow but deep grave. The worker places the casket inside a large Styrofoam box, which will be covered with rose petals scattered by attendees—a blanket of red, white, and pink. This is another of several collaborative acts that bring the community together by directing a shared focus and generating a shared mood (Collins, 2005). Some bodily actions can bridge cultural backgrounds: throwing the petals into the grave erases difference for a moment and brings mourners in the garden in rhythmic motion together (Warner, 1997). While lowering the casket into a grave is often felt as a moment of irrevocable sorrow, in the Garden of Innocence the long line of people waiting to toss rose petals breaks up the emotional intensity of the ceremony and prepares the mourners for letting go of the baby.

4.1.3 | Reincorporation: The doves

The final stage of the transition ritual—reincorporation into a new status—is about to begin. Tessa has received her new name and ties to her old life have been severed. She's become part of the Garden family, and the participants have learned to find personal meaning in their relationship to Tessa, their grieving an act of lived religion (Edgell, 2012). In the final part of the ceremony, it is time to let go of the baby the group of strangers just incorporated as a new family member. Lily announces, “As we are gathered here today for Tessa, we encircle her with our love. We give dignity to her birth, yet we know we must say goodbye.” Saying goodbye is done symbolically, through the release of a dove by yet another volunteer. The dove flying away reflects Tessa's spirit being set free. Three more volunteers each then release a dove, explained during the ceremony “as symbols of the Heavenly Father, the son or messenger, as your religion believes, and the Holy Spirit that dwells within all of us to escort the spirit of Tessa to her Heavenly home.”

The doves are followed by yet one more ritualistic layer to help the babies join the world of the dead: volunteers recite the names of all the babies that have come before Tessa, 300 and counting. Because participants take turns selecting names for the babies, every time they attend and hear their baby's name recited, they feel personally connected again to the Garden. John White, one of Knights of Columbus for the Fresno garden, says the name “becomes a part of you” and it brings people back to visit the cemetery even when there are no ceremonies. White explains, “There's people that come here all the time, even if they're not involved. They just come here because they want to go visit their son or daughter.”

The ceremony closes with a prayer that acknowledges God's love: “Now, Tessa is in your care, God, and will forever be. May you watch over her, and bless her forever more.” With that, Tessa's mission is finished. The Garden family has guided her to heaven and turned her care over to a higher power. At the same time, Tessa showed God's presence among the attendants, offering an opportunity to find collectivity amidst pain and sorrow. The carefully calibrated rituals are designed to purify the babies, to make them innocent after the cultural stain of abandonment by their biological parents.

Altogether, the ceremony for unclaimed babies in the Garden of Innocence demonstrates a ritualistic way to appropriate an extreme version of a “bad death” for the cultural benefit of the living and bringing those living together in a community of personal healing. For people in the Garden, a chance exists to right this wrong, drawing on familiar religious rituals to bring a permanent sense of meaning to the babies’ lives. Because they have to work together to turn the baby’s death into an opportunity for individual growth, the ritual binds members (Collins, 2014), both during and after the hourlong ceremony.

5 | CONSTRUCTING RELIGIOUS MEANING AROUND PERSONAL LOSS

The ceremony includes scripted and unscripted references to healing, but it is in the moments after the ceremony, as people join in informal conversation, that the needs to heal become clearer. A theme of unresolved grief emerges through the stories and reflections that attendees tell. This is why the ceremony in the Garden is intended to be religiously generic (e.g., “the son or messenger, *as your religion believes*”), in order for participants to fill in symbolic gaps for the diverse collective of attendees, who include a range of ages, ethnicities, and class backgrounds, and who may be suffering from different kinds of losses. Across this variation though, the stories that people reveal convey themes of unresolved grief and shame, often originating in the lack of cultural scripts around mourning of miscarried and stillborn children.⁵

After a ceremony in Fresno for five babies, in which Garden founder Adele Patters announced our presence as researchers, a man came up to us and said, “I named one of the infants this year, and I’ve been coming here since the start of this.” Asking us to keep his name out of anything we wrote, the man then explained: “In 2010, my wife and I lost ... [pause] She had a miscarriage, and we didn’t know anything about any of this. In 2012, this [the Garden] came up, and I’ve been doing it ever since.” For the man, attending and participating in funerals for unclaimed babies gave him a way to honor his lost child—a loss for which he felt shame—as well as to mourn other infants gone too soon. He was not alone. After a ceremony for baby “Conrad” in San Diego, Reverend Marcus introduced a young man who said, “I lost my daughter when I was on deployment. My wife had to deal with that by herself.” It had been five years but the husband remained in pain, adding, “This is helping with everything.”

While research on pregnancy loss has tended to focus on women’s experiences, research also finds that men can experience “lasting grief” after miscarriage (McCreight, 2004). Men tend to find their experiences marginalized and their emotional needs unrecognized (ibid). But in the Garden of Innocence, the veteran was able to tell his story of loss in a matter-of-fact way to a group of strangers. The Garden has a way of priming people’s stories that in other settings would pause conversation because of the demands such stories put on listeners. How do you respond when someone whom you have never met tells you they lost a baby? After the Garden funeral, there’s no need to respond. People nod, maybe offer a hug, and generally accept that whatever an attendee needs to heal from and however they need to process is perfectly acceptable because the ritual opened the emotional door to expressing such deeply personal hurts.

We also heard from women who attended the ceremonies as a way to heal, and their stories reveal similar themes of unresolved grief, including Tracy’s account of her stillborn baby:

I had a little girl who was a stillborn, 20 ... next year will be 30 years. It’s really hard to handle that. So I had heard about the Garden of Innocence, and I was like, “Oh, maybe that will help me feel” ... I didn’t hold my baby, because I said, “Why should I hold her if you’re gonna bury her?” I couldn’t handle that, and I was only 20 at the time. But this God showed me, “It’s okay. You should’ve held her, but it’s okay. Now you can hold these babies and love them.”

Tracy emphasized that the rituals of holding the casket during the chain of love and attending a funeral allowed her to do for other babies what she could not do for her own.

Tracy's story reinforces the lack of cultural scripts available to people who have suffered a perinatal loss. A stillborn baby feels to many parents an "invisible death" (Cacciatore et al., 2008), a loss that is both ambiguous and haunting. In a society where bereavement has been individualized and death processing seen as a primarily psychological event, the Garden gives attendees a framework to make sense of their personal loss in a safe public setting. Of the many pains bereaved parents face after a stillbirth, not being able to hold, or choosing not to hold, the infant can become their biggest regret (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012). The circle of love helps right this sense of wrong and leads to the second reason Tracy's story is so important. It reveals how Garden organizers are adept at finding ways to include people in the ceremony as part of their healing and generate not only a shared emotional mood but also a religious rationale. The first time that Tracy attended, she helped read the names of the babies already buried in the Garden, explaining, "I was like, 'How'd that happen?'; but in a good way ... It makes you feel better." For Tracy, this unplanned inclusion in the ceremony was a sign that God wanted her to participate.

Organizers assume that people in the Garden are suffering, and they construct the ceremony to collectively process private grief. Adele explains: "When they do have a problem and they haven't gotten over it, we ask them 'Would you like to name a baby after your loved one that you lost?' and then that brings them closer to the Garden and then they get closure." The babies, exactly because their personhood is reduced to the innocence of infancy brought to a premature end, are turned into cultural palimpsests, ready to receive whatever personal burdens and messages the mourner brings to the garden.

For this interpretative flexibility to work, Garden organizers strive to keep contentious politics out of the ceremony, even though the act of burying a "baby" may mean burying a fetus. Attendees may push back, or stop attending, when the event becomes infused with something political. We can see the importance of depoliticization when the ceremonial mood is breached by rare, unscripted insertions of politics, such as references to "bad mothering" or abortion. At a ceremony for five babies in Fresno, CA, Adele Patters broke with the standard program and in so doing broke the spell for some attendees. During an impromptu speech coming right after the homily, Patters said:

Today, marks our 386th child buried in the Garden of Innocence ... We were hoping we would build this special place and it would never be filled. But it continues to grow, sadly, and babies are found all the time. We have a baby coming soon to Bakersfield that was found in a river. I've already buried a baby that was found in a river. I didn't need to do it twice but it's important.

The speech, which lasted several minutes, created a cultural rupture, because it revealed truths about the ways that some babies die. After the ceremony, a woman named Mariette came up to us to express her displeasure. "That bothered me today to hear that. It made me feel like that was emotional blackmail and wants to get people more involved to make it feel like almost like there's this horrific thing happening in the world." Mariette, who said she has been attending GOI ceremonies for some time, continued:

I don't want people to think that there are that many people that are just abandoning their babies like trash in places. That's not the case. It's not. There's more the cases that in our own communities we're not making sure that we're opening our eyes to people that are in trouble before they're at that place.

She did not want to engage with the political implications of Adele's framing of abandoned babies, which suggests that mothers could do horrible things to their babies. Instead, Mariette wanted to see the Garden as a salve on a social wound, whereby we collectively fail to care for young mothers in trouble. She added, "I think I keep hoping I'm going to find somebody in this community that's going to feel the way I do that we need to pay attention to these young moms before they have their babies. Maybe before they even get pregnant." Mariette's desire to shift blame from the individual to the society echoes the struggles of child advocates in the 19th century who saw a child's death as a sign of collective failure toward living children (Zelizer, 1994). While it is true that the majority of babies buried in the Garden come from hospitals, where they were classified as miscarriages or stillbirths, there have been a number of cases where a baby has died a brutal death. As organizer, Adele knows

the backstory of each baby, but she generally avoids sharing details, because stories about bad parenting or unwanted pregnancies jolt the careful erasure needed for the attendants to inscribe their own needs on the event and achieve a depoliticized collective effervescence.

6 | CONCLUSION

The death of unclaimed babies presents a threefold existential challenge for communities because by definition they die prematurely, without connection to the deceased, and their deaths can easily be politicized in the contemporary US. In most communities, such babies are disposed quietly in pauper graves. By deliberately appropriating the three stages of rites of passage in ways that privilege their own individual and collective needs and by fostering a sense of collective effervescence with a shared focus and synchronized emotional ambiance, a group of volunteers manage to turn the potentially divisive death of unclaimed babies and fetuses into an integrative event, highlighting the transformative power of ritual to unite (Collins, 2005; Douglas, 1966; Durkheim, 1912; Hertz, 1960; Turner, 1969). The Garden of Innocence volunteers adopt the deceased infant as one of their own by renaming the child and physically embracing its casket. They then explore why God brought the infant in their lives at this moment, focusing not on a premature death but on their own existential suffering and grieving. They signify the letting go of the infant not only by collectively covering the casket with rose petals but also by releasing a dove (a recognizable icon of purity and peace in Christianity). Throughout, the community members use the death of a stranger to work through their own issues and rely on religion to turn an otherwise secular occurrence into a sacred event. Rather than depraved humanity, an abandoned baby symbolizes the long lingering pain of unresolved grief.

To outsiders, the actions of Garden attendees may seem odd, ethically dubious, and even offensive. Who are these strangers to appropriate someone else's tragedy for their own purposes? How can they pass a casket around, anoint themselves surrogate relatives, and impose God's will on this tragedy? Yet, such is the transformative power of the ritual for attendees that it feels morally right to give abandoned babies an individualized funeral rather than dumping them in a mass grave or at sea.

The appropriation of an infant's death for the personal grief of strangers contrasts sharply with the private family affair that makes up most contemporary funerals in the US. However, put in deep time (Laqueur, 2015), funerals in the Garden evoke an early 20th century way of thinking about child death as a collective event (Pomfret, 2015). The volunteer mourners' actions un-sequester death from the private realm (Mellor & Shilling, 1993), recapturing the effervescent ideals of Durkheim (1912) and Turner (1969). Mourners connect to each other in these moments as well as to the sense that every life—even the shortest—deserves social recognition.

This meaning transformation does not occur in an interpretative vacuum but dovetails on the longstanding historical place of religion in people's rite of passage from life to death (Garces-Foley, 2014; Walter, 2012). Even in postmodern funerals that eschew religious tradition (Walter, 1996), clergy often lead burial services. Hospitals regularly employ chaplains to attend to the dying, the performance of rituals just prior to and after death considered a source of solace for patients and their loved ones (Cadge, 2012). In this and many other ways, religion and death are intimately linked, so much so that Malinowski (2018 [1925]) posited that death—and specifically our fear of it—is *the* reason religion exists. In the case of unclaimed infants, religious practices and beliefs channel the strong emotions these deaths generate out of the profane world of the everyday and into a sacred space where life can be reaffirmed. Religious funeral practices offer a familiar set of membership symbols that guide and prolong the meaning-making process beyond the ceremony (Collins, 2005).

The potential for social action of cultural palimpsests, however, is limited if the collective redefinition turns participants inward to address their personal needs rather than exploring the structural causes of the original trauma. By explicitly avoiding the circumstances and causes of death and renaming the deceased infant, the community members not only depoliticize the death but also forego an opportunity to question and witness the

structural reasons of why infants die and go unclaimed. Instead, this particular rite of passage focuses the attendants on their personal faith and individual struggles. The depoliticization of the deaths is striking in light of abortion politics and “safe surrender” legislation (laws which allow mothers legal immunity to give up newborns in designated Safe Havens). The deaths of Garden babies could have been a call to action—as, for instance, immigrant deaths in Europe and the US have become a rallying point for political movements (De León, 2015). Instead, at a time of increased secularization (Voas & Chaves, 2016), the rite of passage becomes a different collective manifestation of the enduring relevance of religion in times of grief and loss.

More generally, the notion of a cultural palimpsest captures the transformation of a potentially divisive and horribly tragic event into a cohesive and integrative occasion by ritualistic means. Latour (1999) argued that science is a process of inscribing empirical phenomena through technological devices and in the process transforming the natural world for calculation and claims-making. Cultural sociologists have similarly highlighted that cultural schema become inscribed on bodies with normative consequences separating deviance from conformity (Beisel & Kay, 2004). As a collective practice, a cultural palimpsest uses the familiarity of rituals to bring people together in a sequence of separation, liminality, and reintegration. The result is that a situation threatening the collective is reinterpreted to strengthen social ties and to allow individuals to project their individual and collective needs on the situation. While the *cultural* dimension of cultural palimpsest refers to the collective meaning making, the *palimpsest* part highlights that the past is never fully erased and constrains the range of possible interpretations. The new interpretations become meaningful, exactly in contrast to the traumatic situations they aim to convert.

We can find attempts at creating cultural palimpsests whenever groups collectively aim to redefine a traumatic situation, such as when people create collective memories and commemorate dark historical events (Halbwachs, 2005; Skillington, 2013), process cultural traumas into collective identities (Alexander, 2004), and even produce collective discourses of hope and renewal (Bauman, 2017). We can find it among mental health professionals, including psychologists and therapists, who rely on rituals and transitional objects to re-signify traumatic events such as divorce or abandonment at birth (Rose, 1999; Sas et al., 2016). A ritualistic response and cultural appropriation to such potentially disintegrative events not only offers a safe hideout to deflect group ruptures (Giddens, 1994), but also allows the generation of novel social ties and bonds between strangers. However, as our research shows, it is important to recognize both the constructive potential of this social coping mechanism and its conservative status-quo preserving effects. Cultural palimpsests bring people together but do not necessarily foment social change.

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No conflicts of interest.

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Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code Section 7104.1, after thirty (30) days have lapsed from the time of attempt to notify the person(s) responsible for the interment or inurnment of remains (i.e., next-of-kin), a body (including fetal remains past 20-weeks gestation) are deemed abandoned and placed under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner.

- ² All names of individuals have been changed.
- ³ White et al. (2017, p. 150) identify three levels of intimate contact in handling of corpses: low, which includes “paying respect” by briefly touching the body during a wake or funeral service; moderate, which includes more prolonged or extensive actions such as kissing, embracing, washing, and dressing the body; and high, which includes “inner body contact (i.e., penetration of natural orifices, cutting through the flesh, dismantling the corpse, etc.) and/or consumption of the remains.”
- ⁴ Patters maintains a database with legal names of each child the Garden has buried, but she keeps the information private to protect birth parents.
- ⁵ Stillbirth refers to the death of a fetus at or after the 20th week of pregnancy. The key distinguishing factor between stillbirth and miscarriage is gestational period and as such the losses exist on a similar continuum.

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