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“Soothing My Child’s Soul and My Own”: Dealing with Pregnancy Loss in Postcommunist Romania

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Abstract In Romania—where induced abortions were legally prohibited during communism and are now morally condemned by many—those who lose a pregnancy against their will have long been regarded with suspicion, confronted with a sense of culpability, and surrounded by silence. This ambiguity is reflected in the local terminology and the perceived etiology of loss. In this article, which is based on 15 months of fieldwork between 2012 and 2015, I illustrate the various meanings and manifestations of a silenced sense of culpability around involuntary pregnancy loss in the lives of women from Bucharest and a small town in Central Romania. I also show how many of these women attempt to break the silence around their lost fetuses and carve out a personal space of commemoration and consolation. Their informal use of forbidden religious rituals paradoxically allows them to confirm the existence of their lost little ones and to position themselves as caring, rather than culpable, mothers. [pregnancy loss, commemoration, culpability, postcommunist Romania]
or interrupt the pregnancies they did not want. It is estimated that, by the time they reached the age of forty, women had experienced an average of five illegal abortions (Băban 2000). These abortions were often unsafe and caused a dramatic increase in maternal mortality rates—the highest ever recorded in European history.\(^3\)

Apart from the destructive consequences for women’s bodies, Ceaușescu’s politics of reproduction also severely affected social life and intimate relationships in communist Romania. Hunting for any subversive ideas and practices, the state’s secret police apparatus had infiltrated all domains of social life. Present, incognito, on the work floor and in the community, the members of the Securitate—as the secret police was popularly called—were actively involved in repressing dissent. As a result, everyday interactions were fraught with fear, suspicion, and silence. The profound schism that people experienced between their intimate lifeworld and their public appearance informed a range of “politics of duplicity” (Kligman 1998) and acts of dissimulation in the public sphere. But the intrusive political interventions also affected the most intimate interactions—especially sexual relationships that were feared to result in unwanted pregnancies (Anton 2009; David and Băban 1996).

Over the nearly three decades that followed the 1989 Revolution, reproductive politics and practices in Romania have drastically changed. The infamous abortion ban was the first one to be abolished after Ceaușescu and his wife had been executed. Though pregnancy terminations have remained an important means of fertility control ever since and Romania’s abortion rates currently rank highest in Europe, both the safety and the physical consequences of the interventions are now comparable to those in other Western countries—and much unlike those during communism.\(^4\) The use of contraceptives, heavily propagated by the international NGOs that flooded the country in the postcommunist era, developed slowly at first but is now widespread. Once again, Romania has reached one of the lowest fertility levels in Europe and the world. In response, new pronatalist discourses have entered the public arena. While policymakers and demographers stress the urgency of redressing the “demographic catastrophe” in the light of an ageing population, out-migration, and ethnic mixing, the Orthodox Church uses its increasingly powerful voice to morally condemn the contraceptive and abortive practices that it claims to lie at its basis.

Due to the historical focus on the willful termination of pregnancies, the situation of those who lose their pregnancies against their will in Romania has long been ignored. And yet, their experiences have been heavily influenced by the past and current societal approaches to induced abortion. During communism, the situation of Romanian women who happened to experience a miscarriage or stillbirth was dire. Regarded with suspicion, subjected to interrogations and facing the possibility of a criminal sentence, these women had difficulties disproving their culpability (Kligman 1998). Nowadays, as abortions gain renewed public attention and have become imbued with negative moral connotations, miscarriages are still uncomfortably associated with the intentional interruption of a pregnancy—especially since the exact cause of a pregnancy loss often remains vague for outsiders. Suspicions easily arise. In addition, both in the past and in the present, the relatively high incidence of reproductive mishaps and infertility in the country has often been presented as a direct result of an
alleged Romanian “abortion culture” (Stloukal 1999). Thus suspected to have been in fact provoked by the (earlier abortions of the) pregnant woman herself, unexpected reproductive misfortunes are implicitly imbued with culpability and explicitly surrounded by silence. In this article, I illustrate the various meanings and manifestations of culpability and silence around pregnancy loss in the current Romanian context. I also show how Romanian women attempt to break the silence around their lost fetuses and carve out a space of commemoration and consolation in the context of historical suspicion.

Methodology

The findings I present in this article are based on the anthropological fieldwork I conducted, over 15 months between 2012 and 2015, in a small town in Central Romania and in the capital city of Bucharest. My research project focused on various experiences of reproductive vulnerability (related to infertility, pregnancy, birth, and motherhood). The topic of pregnancy loss, which was central to this project, turned out to be an extremely sensitive one in Romania; however, as I will show in this article, it is an “open secret” (Ledeneva 2011) that is rarely talked about in explicit terms. As a result, especially in the beginning, I had a hard time finding people willing to acknowledge, and open up about, their personal reproductive losses. Instead, it appeared to be much more productive to adopt a flexible research approach that left ample space for indirect talk about the topic—centering, for instance, on (successful) pregnancies, delivery-related fears, hypothetical cases of loss, others who had experienced a loss, past and present demographic policies, and other related issues.  

As time passed and I perfected this “rear-mirror methodology” (Ledeneva 2011; Wamsiedel 2017), consolidated my position within various social networks, got better versed in the Romanian language and local codes of behavior, and even carried myself a pregnancy that was labeled “high-risk,” I saw people’s openness gradually increase. Eventually, a considerable part of my time in the field was spent talking, directly, to parents who had lost a fetus or a child—or “parents of angels” (părinți de ingeri), as they often like to call themselves. I heard personal stories about losses that had happened as early as a few weeks into pregnancy, as well as accounts of deaths of children that had survived well beyond the moment of birth. I found the majority of my interlocutors through Organizația EVA, the only NGO in Romania focusing on parents who lose a child, either before or after birth. Most of the people that I met through this organization happened to be in their thirties and belonged to the Romanian middle class. The women who eventually opened up to me in the Carpathian Mountains were often slightly younger and had a lower socioeconomic status.

The informal conversations I had happened in people’s homes, in public spaces such as parks and cafes, during several annual events organized by Organizația EVA to publicly commemorate lost babies, as well as during the intimate support groups the NGO organized (and allowed me to assist) in Bucharest on a monthly basis. With about twenty-five of my interlocutors I also conducted one or more in-depth interviews, often lasting more than two hours. These interviews were all recorded and have been transcribed and systematically coded by a team of Romanian research assistants. I complemented these direct interactions
with observations of the discussions these parents of angels had on the online forum of Organizația EVA. Additional interviews were held with medical professionals and Orthodox priests who regularly engaged with such parents, both in Bucharest and in Central Romania. I tried to contextualize the knowledge I thus gathered by studying historical, anthropological, legal, and policy documents, and I retrieved national reproductive health statistics as well as hospital statistics from the maternity ward in my fieldwork town in Central Romania.

Although there were some clear differences between my urban and rural informants with regard to their socioeconomic position, openness, and articulateness—with those in Bucharest appearing to be more accustomed to the interview as a research method and to the self-reflection that constitutes an important element of it—there were also clear patterns in their ideas, experiences, and practices. It is these common grounds that will be described in this article. Due to the sensitive nature of the information that those who opened up to me were willing to share, all names mentioned in this article—including the one of the organization—are pseudonyms.

**Culpabilities Contextualized**

The loss of a pregnancy can provoke many different interpretations and reactions, in different times and places. These are likely to be influenced by wider sociocultural understandings of pregnancy, embryology, parenthood, gender, and death, but also by various notions that relate to the loss itself: its terminology, its etiology, and the perceived appropriate remedy. First of all, words have the power to shape both common interpretations and intimate experiences of reproductive events. Terms such as “miscarriage,” “loss,” “disruption,” or “mishap” (or local equivalents thereof) carry negative connotations of failure, abnormality, and disturbance. They may thus generate sentiments of shame or culpability that directly inform the meanings and management of the event. At the same time, such labels may profoundly misrepresent women’s subjective experiences. As some anthropologists have pointed out, people’s own sense of disruption is highly contingent—depending on their changing understandings of what is natural, normal, or expected at some point in time (Bledsoe and Scherrer 2007; Jenkins and Inhorn 2003). Local terms for pregnancy loss may further distort underlying reproductive intentions when they refer to both spontaneous and induced abortions, or at least leave the distinction between the two ambiguous. The agentic (and often moral) associations of such ambiguous labels may generate complex discursive navigations from miscarrying women trying to disprove their culpability (Erviti, Castro, and Collado 2004; Van der Sijpt 2017b).

Second, the meanings of pregnancy loss are closely intertwined with beliefs about its causation. Notions of etiology are often diverse: identified causes of the loss may range from physical movements and medical problems to the intergenerational transmission of sin, spiritual forces such as witchcraft, and God’s will (Cecil 1996; Chapman 2003; Rice 2000; Van der Sijpt and Notermans 2010). Such etiological appointments may be complemented with feelings of personal guilt and failure. Especially in settings that are characterized by neoliberal logics of care and that offer reproductive technologies allowing for detailed
fetal imaginaries, pregnancy experiences are imbued with a sense of individual responsibility and accountability (Lupton 2012; McCabe 2016; Rapp 2000; Thompson 2005) that may engender feelings of personal guilt and self-blame when reproduction goes awry.

Third, pregnancy losses acquire meaning in relation to the existing possibilities for remediying its consequences. Western settings especially have recently witnessed an upsurge in public spaces for coping with and commemorating reproductive loss. Layne (2003) has described how the rapid growth of a pregnancy loss support movement has actively reshaped the meanings of early reproductive loss in the United States. Others have described the increasing popularity of rituals of commemoration of the dead fetus (Gammeltoft 2003, 2010; Hardacre 1997; Harrison 1999; Peelen 2007) offering women in various contexts the possibility to give sense to their pregnancy losses. Some of these rituals also address implicit feelings of guilt, as they aim to soothe or appease the spirit of the fetus (Gammeltoft 2003; Hardacre 1997; Moskowitz 2001). In other contexts, the absence of such social spaces and possibilities may reflect the generally perceived insignificance of pregnancy loss; yet, it can also produce frustration and emotional pain in those who do experience their reproductive mishap as an important life event.

In the remainder of this article, I will take these three themes—terminology, etiology, and potential remedy—as a starting point for exploring the meanings and management of pregnancy loss in postcommunist Romania. Such an exploration is particularly relevant in Romania not only because the specific dynamics around involuntary reproductive loss have historically been neglected in the country, but also because, more generally, the lives of many of its inhabitants are pervaded by a sense of involuntary loss. A growing body of scholarly work has shown that, as a result of the neoliberal transformations of the postcommunist era, Romanians have witnessed the disintegration of the welfare state, the disappearance of previous economic certainties, the crumbling of old moral frameworks, and drastic reinterpretations of social identities. All these processes have had a profound impact on people’s daily life navigations and social relations (Carlson et al. 2000; Friedman 2009; Gal and Kligman 2000; Kideckel 2008; Stan 2012; Stan and Toma 2009; Stillo 2015; Verdery 1996; Weber 2009). In this rather volatile context, the unexpected interruption of a pregnancy represents just one of many instances of loss that people may experience throughout their lives. Yet, tied as it is to one’s body and social identity, it is also one of the most intimate forms of loss—and thus a moment par excellence for studying the discourses and dynamics that may evolve in times of uncertainty, ambiguity, and social suspicion (cf. Layne 2003). By offering a minute analysis of the terminology, etiology, and remedies that come into play when reproduction goes awry, I therefore aim to contribute to our scholarly understanding of people’s various engagements with the processes of loss that characterize much of postcommunist life more generally.

Terms for Pregnancy Termination

In Romanian, there are only a few terms to denote a pregnancy loss. In colloquial language, people most often simply talk about “pregnancy loss” (pierdere de sarcină), irrespective of the
gestational stage at which the loss happened. Alternatively, people use the medical terms “abortion” (avort), or, less frequently, “stillbirth” (făt născut mort). The colloquial use of those terms is, however, much less rigid than official definitions propose: in medical jargon, the term “avort” specifically denotes “the expulsion of a product of conception without any signs of life [called avorton] before the gestational age of twenty-eight weeks”; when expulsion happens after twenty-eight weeks, the lifeless “product of conception” should be declared a făt născut mort (order 359/2012). In everyday language, the notion of avort has become so widespread, however, that it is also invoked for describing cases that would medically be defined as “stillbirths.” Even in hospital settings, it is not uncommon to hear a stillborn baby being called an avorton—that is, the result of an abortion—by medical personnel and patients alike. Practically, the notion of avort is almost as generic a term as pierdere de sarcină.

Both notions—avort and pierdere de sarcină—leave the question of intentionality undressed. The most prominent Romanian dictionary defines “avort” as “the accidental or induced interruption of a pregnancy before a fetus reaches viability” (Academia Română 2016, emphasis added). The term thus connotes both chance and culpability. Although one could add adjectives to specify whether an abortion happened spontaneously (avort spontan) or was consciously induced (avort provocat), the term is usually mentioned in its uncompounded, and thus polysemous, form. Due to its particular usage in both past and present public discourse, however, agentic interpretations often prevail. Avort is the word used in the public discourse about the subversive reproductive practices during the communist regime; avort is the word used in critical analyses of the current “demographic catastrophe”; and avort is the word used in negative religious propaganda about immoral, willful pregnancy terminations. Not surprisingly, those who unexpectedly lose their pregnancy are reluctant to use the word avort at all when describing their experiences. Especially women like Corina, whose fetus died in utero and had to be removed through a curettage, face incomprehension and moral apprehension from those around them:

Many associate this pregnancy loss with an [induced] abortion. When the thing with my child had happened and I called to say that “look, it’s gone” and I said that the doctor had scheduled me for a surgery . . . abortion—because it’s called an abortion in medical terms, whether you accept it or not—[people said] not to do it, because it is an [induced] abortion. [But I said:] “No, the child is dead in me; there’s a risk of septicemia. There’s a risk that I will die and I have another child at home. So it is not an abortion.” . . . I did not say willfully: “I don’t want this child, take it out of me.” That is why I am telling you: people . . . mmmm . . . many are understanding, but few understand. . . . So I try to avoid these words. I always say “surgery,” because I find it hard to say “abortion,” I find it hard to say “curettage.” Because it was neither an abortion, nor a curettage. For me it was a medically necessary surgery.

Religious texts and clergy invoke yet another verb—a lepăda—that is similarly indistinctive, as it means both “to abort” and “to give birth to a dead fetus before term” (Academia Română 2016). Yet, the alternative meanings of the verb reveal its rather agentic connotations: a lepăda may also mean “to drop or to throw a useless or worthless object,” “to leave behind (forever and willingly),” “to push aside,” or “to shed.” Women who seek consolation from a
priest after unexpectedly losing their pregnancies often feel shocked to be confronted with this term, which they associate with induced abortion. Anca, the founder of the NGO that unites and represents “parents of angels,” told me that she once explicitly denounced the use of this verb when she gave a talk at a monastery:

I admit that am not very pious, I don’t speak like in the Bible, I don’t know the Bible by heart. But I do know how much one word can count. It is quite something to tell a mother who wanted her child that “you have killed your child; you have lepădat.” It’s a word; it is simply a matter of changing a word. It matters very, very much.

Denoting various manifestations of pregnancy loss—early or late term, spontaneous or induced—the generic notions that exist in the Romanian lexicon allow for multiple uses and ambiguous interpretations. This does not only have consequences for social communication about unwanted reproductive losses, but it also affects the intimate ways in which “parents of angels” experience and commemorate such events.

Interpreting Loss: Etiology and Blame

When talking about pregnancy loss, Romanians generally indicate that, while the number of induced abortions and related maternal deaths has clearly decreased after the Revolution in 1989, they perceive the incidence of unwanted reproductive misfortunes to be much higher than before. Many blame environmental factors and a precarious postcommunist lifestyle for this upsurge. In their view, losses of pregnancies and malformations of babies would mainly be attributable to increasing levels of air and water pollution, technological and even nuclear radiation, the consumption of highly processed food, as well as the poverty and stress experienced by many Romanians struggling to make ends meet. Religious explanations invoking God’s will and fate are also predominant in this country where 81% of the population considers itself observant Orthodox Christian (INS 2011).

Yet, when actually confronted with some form of reproductive loss, few women explain their personal experiences in terms of such structural factors or distant forces alone. Instead, their stories reveal much more immediate etiologies as well as concrete feelings of culpability. Almost all postloss stories that I heard included elements of self-blame. Women felt guilty for having failed to take better care of themselves while pregnant, to seek the best possible prenatal health care services, to avoid emotional stress even though they had deemed it a risk factor, to be attentive to potential physical signs of problems, to change their care provider when trouble was detected or to act differently when the loss was imminent. The sense of individual responsibility and accountability that has been described to pervade pregnancies in other Western neoliberal contexts (Lupton 2012; McCabe 2016; Rapp 2000; Thompson 2005) clearly affects Romanian women’s postloss interpretations as well.

In the Romanian context, this perceived self-blame is aggravated by ascribed guilt from others. Not only the ambiguous Romanian terminology, but also the silence that generally (and historically) surrounds the event and its aftermath may lead outsiders to wrongly suspect the loss to have been intentionally provoked. Although such suspicions may not always be
explicitly verbalized, it is widely known that they exist. Misunderstandings may even affect intimate relationships within families that generally do not explicitly discuss reproductive affairs; quite a few of my informants felt disappointed by the distant, dismissive, or even hostile reactions of their own mothers or partners after the loss. Generally, women expressed frustration about not being able to properly define the loss, acknowledge the existence of their fetus, and express their intense regret about losing it against their will. Instead, a variety of ambiguous and conflicting interpretations—including their own—continued to exist as few people would speak openly about the reproductive happening and the deceased fetus.

While this societal silence—and the etiological ambiguity it sustains—may be traced to the communist past, it is also fed by current practices and discourses in the Romanian medical and religious establishments. First, in Romanian hospitals, reproductive losses are dealt with quickly and uniformly. Despite the medical distinction between spontaneous abortions and stillborn fetuses, “products of conception” are often treated similarly in Romanian hospitals, irrespective of their gestational age. According to the Romanian Civil Code, “a child that is born dead does not exist” (art. 654) and “the rights of a child are recognized from the moment of conception, but only if he is born alive” (art. 36). As a consequence, most fetuses that are born without any signs of life are sent for laboratory investigations and incinerated afterwards, rather than shown or given back to the parents. Not even the paperwork received upon discharge acknowledges their previous existence: for an avorton lost before twenty-eight weeks of gestation, documentation is mostly lacking; a death certificate for a fetus stillborn after twenty-eight weeks of gestation does not include the first name of the baby or any other identifier (Van der Sijpt 2017a). Being informally referred to as “aborted ones” (avortoni), they are not only dehumanized, but also shrouded in silence and ambiguity from the very moment of their expulsion.

Second, the Romanian Orthodox tradition silences spontaneous reproductive mishaps. All Orthodox priests to whom I spoke acknowledged that, according to the Orthodox belief, there is no significant distinction between aborted fetuses, miscarried fetuses, stillborn babies, and even babies that were born alive but died before baptism. The dividing line is not between early and late pregnancy losses or between fetuses that died as a result of a willful act and those that left spontaneously. Rather, what matters is the distinction between unbaptized and baptized babies. Baptism occurs from the fortieth day after birth and officially initiates a baby into the Orthodox community. During the ceremony, the baby is cleared from ancestral sins and receives its official Orthodox name and identity, which will ensure spiritual protection throughout life (Gorovei 2002). Upon their death, baptized members of the religious community are entitled to a funeral service and a proper burial place in the Orthodox cemetery, while those who were lepâdați before being baptized are, at best, buried without a full service, at the margins of the graveyard, next to those who committed suicide (Toma 2010). Lacking an official Orthodox name and identity, unbaptized babies cannot be commemorated in the usual way either. For them, as well as for all other “irregular” or “anonymous” cadavers that are excluded from regular rituals, a general service is organized twice a year—called moșii de vară in summer and moșii de iarnă in winter (Benga 2011).
My informants felt that, by indistinctively excluding all dead babies from the customary services, the Orthodox Church ignores both the variety and the importance of reproductive losses in people’s daily lives. Cecilia, who lost her twins after seventeen weeks of pregnancy, talked about the misrecognition of her two boys, as well as of herself as a woman and mother:

I don’t know. It is as if such women [who lose their pregnancies] don’t exist for them [i.e. Orthodox priests]. It’s a category that does not enter in their plans. For them, there are only women who managed to baptize their children. Because they say that only baptized children go to God. . . . This is one of the problems when you lose a pregnancy that is neither very small, nor very big. You don’t have any certificate for the children, they are not registered anywhere. . . . And then you remain somehow between two worlds, you know? I mean, [such children are] not baptized, the church doesn’t accept them, but they have existed, they have reached a certain point.

This misrecognition in the Orthodox Church also keeps the implicit associations of spontaneous losses with induced abortions intact—especially because lost fetuses are generally called “lepădați” in religious parlance. Associations with immorality may figure even more explicitly in the interactions between priests and bereaved parents, when the former hypothesize about the causation of the reproductive mishap and propose ways to remedy the situation to the latter. Notions of sin and redemption are often central to their discourse. The following excerpt from an interview I held with a priest in my fieldwork setting in Central Romania is illustrative. Asked what he would advise women who spontaneously lose their pregnancies, he said:

They take some time to calm down and to settle, after which they get back to religious life. That is, they will confess and take communion. Any person, irrespective of the sin he committed, has a chance of redress through confession. [ . . . ] She herself [i.e., a woman who lost her pregnancy] wishes to come and confess . . . because maybe through that experience she will remember sins that may have never been confessed. Because she understands that there is a problem that, until that moment in her life, could have caused [the pregnancy loss]. We don’t say that “that is the cause.” But everything is possible.

In this view, the loss of a pregnancy is seen not as a sin per se, but as the potential result of some previously committed sin(s). By claiming that “many reasons for the loss of a pregnancy can be attributed to the parents” (Brodner 2010), the Orthodox church shrouds spontaneous mishaps in a cloud of culpability that may long haunt bereaved parents. Indeed, a number of my informants expressed the fear that their involuntary pregnancy losses are caused by earlier immoral behavior—especially the voluntary interruption of previous pregnancies. Paula, who struggled with temporary infertility and lost several pregnancies years after she had aborted a pregnancy at the age of 21, said:

I think that everything happens for a reason, and that everything you do has consequences. . . . I don’t know, it has affected me very much . . . After I started losing those pregnancies, I have been thinking very often about, and I have really tried to imagine, how my life would have looked like with that child that I let go of [i.e. aborted]. And many times I wondered: “was it somehow a punishment?” . . . Nothing happens by chance!
Even if women themselves do not perceive a causal relationship between induced abortions and subsequent involuntary losses, they may be confronted with the accusations of relatives or friends who do believe there is a link. Victoria, whose mother was a gynecologist and had provoked many illegal abortions during the communist period, told me, for instance, that many people around her interpreted her pregnancy losses as the direct consequence of her mother’s actions.

In such cases, the proposed remedy is always religious in nature. Only women’s confessions of the committed sin(s), their pious behavior, as well as a priest’s prayers for divine mercy can lead to redemption and redress. Abundant are the stories, told by priests and lay people alike, about reproductive successes happening only after continued efforts to lead a devout life, or—for those who happened to lose a fetus that was conceived outside of an official conjugal framework—after the conclusion of marriage. Together, the official Orthodox dogma and such officious narratives contribute to an environment of suspicion and blame that does not encourage people to talk openly about their reproductive mishaps.

Although a powerful force in shaping Romanian public discourse and Romanian’s personal identities, the Orthodox Church and its widespread influence do not go uncontested. In my study, a considerable number of people were skeptical of the Orthodox dogma and practices—sometimes as a direct result of some negative experiences after pregnancy loss. Especially “parents of angels” who adopted a critical stance in relation to the general societal silence and suspicion around loss explicitly distanced themselves from the Church (Van der Sijpt 2017a). Yet, both adherents and nonadherents did seem to find relief in an important Orthodox postmortem ritual that allowed them to commemorate their lost fetuses—even if the ritual was originally not meant for unbaptized babies at all.

Soothing Souls: The Remedy of Pomană

In the Orthodox tradition, the death of a person is followed by a recurring ritual called pomană (pl. pomeni), performed after three days (i.e., right after the funeral), nine days, forty days, six months, one year, and then yearly until seven years after death. Although there are many local varieties to this nation-wide practice, essential to it is the gift and consumption of food in commemoration of the deceased person. The quantity of shared food items depends on the ritual moment as well as the financial capabilities of the bereaved; the pomeni right after the funeral, after six weeks, and after a year are often major events, with an elaborate meal being organized either at home or—in the case of more affluent families—in a restaurant. Indispensable at any pomană, however, is colivă: a delicious cake-like dish containing boiled wheat kernels, walnut, and sugar, that is often decorated with candies and icing sugar.12 Pierced by burning candles, the food is blessed by a priest during a memorial service called parastas before it is consumed or given away, in small packages, to the attendees and community members. The distributed food may also be accompanied by objects, such as candles, Orthodox incense, tableware, towels, clothes, or even furniture (in some regions). Upon distributing any of these items, the givers specifically mention that it is
done “for the soul of X [name of the deceased],” after which the receivers utter a ritualized acknowledgment of reception (“bogdaproste”).

Next to offering food to relatives, friends, and community members, one can also choose to give alms (a da de pomană) to the poor and disadvantaged people in society, both at the ritualized moments of commemoration and on other significant days reminding of the deceased person (such as his or her birthday or name day). Anything goes; one can choose to “feed” the elderly people in a retirement home, “dress” the children of a poor family, “entertain” (with toys) some sick children in a hospital, “treat” (with colivă or other food items) one’s hard-working colleagues, or just give away one’s own sandwich to a beggar on the street. Again, the giver is supposed to mention “for whose soul” the act is performed, and receivers (even small children who spontaneously receive something from a stranger on the street) know to reciprocate the gift with the ritual utterance “bogdaproste.”

Irrespective of their particular manifestation, pomeni serve two purposes. In the first place, they are meant to help the dead and ensure their comfort in the afterworld. Though enacted in this earthly life, the alms are believed to directly benefit the deceased person whose name is mentioned in the process: he or she would “eat” the food that is served or given away, use the candlelight that accompanies the served food to navigate the dark terrains of the afterlife, and stay warm with the clothes that are being distributed. Indeed, before distribution the giver may even say explicitly that “in this world the food/candles/clothes/etc. are for X [name(s) of the receiver(s)] and in the other world they are for Y [name of the deceased person].” These charitable deeds would furthermore enhance the process of postmortem redemption. Unable to obtain God’s mercy by doing good themselves—as they can’t pray, confess, or fast anymore as living people can—the dead depend on others to ask God for forgiveness for them. As pomeni are explicitly performed in the name of the dead, they contribute to the absolution of the sins the latter committed during life. A priest explains:

We are like ambassadors, who knock on the door of God’s mercy, for Maria, Gheorghe, Vasile, Ion, who moved away from this life. They themselves can’t ensure their comfort after death anymore through their deeds. There was a time when they could, until the moment of physical death. And so we see that pomeni have this aim of helping those who moved away from this life. How? By ameliorating their state. Their state, which can be one of suffering. Because the reality of heaven and hell exists. Even if they are in heaven, there are different levels in heaven. Not all saints are at the same level. Neither is there only one level of suffering in hell.

Pomeni thus constitute explicit acts of care for the dead, aiming to ensure a good afterlife by alleviating the burdens of physical discomfort and spiritual sin. Yet, caring for the dead this way also soothes the ones who are organizing and performing the pomeni. Some informants indicated they feel peaceful and calm after having done good to the beloved ones who passed away. Nina, a talkative friend from Bucharest in her mid-thirties, said:

You get calmer. . . . When my mother did it—now there are her parents, her brother, my father’s parents, my father’s sister—she said that the night afterwards she sleeps very calmly. She gave them light. You give them light, because you light a candle and you
give them light and you invite them also at the table. ... At least from my mother I know that after she gives alms and she has worked and has made food etcetera, she is calm. She knows that she has given food to her mother, her father, her brother. ... She is very nervous when she does so!

Others highlighted the feeling of satisfaction they derive from caring for the needy in this world when performing pomeni. While not everybody may believe in the possibility of actually feeding, dressing, or otherwise soothing the souls of the deceased, nobody would deny the existence and clear needs of people belonging to the most disadvantaged strata in the current Romanian society. Many people argued that the “real” pomeni are those acts of commemoration that truly benefit the poor—and not the fancy dinners among relatives or the numerous packages for affluent worshippers in the church. The satisfaction one derives from contributing to a needy person’s well-being would be an intrinsic motivation for giving pomeni—even at random moments. It transforms the act of giving from a ritualized obligation, imposed by a powerful but disputed Church, into a “gesture from the soul” (gest de suflet), purely based on the inner desire to do good. Many people told me that they simply feel the need to give alms from time to time. Asked how that feeling manifests itself, one informant said:

You’re like ... when you eat, it seems like you are overwhelmed by bad thoughts: “am I the only one eating?.” Or when you are standing in line and you buy a warm pretzel or a warm donut, maybe your eye falls on a person, a child. ... You feel that need; it is the impulse of that moment when you want to do that. [But] when there are people around you who ask you for it and then maybe throw it, you are not happy with yourself that you didn’t happen to meet the person who needed it.

It is this dual purpose—of soothing the soul of the dead as well as one’s own soul—that makes pomeni a widespread practice that many Romanians cling to, even when they may be ambivalent about the power of the Orthodox Church, do not necessarily consider themselves an observant Christian, or belong to a different religious denomination altogether.

It is not surprising, then, that many women who lost a fetus or an unbaptized baby expressed a desire to organize pomeni to commemorate their little ones and to give themselves some inner peace. All of them believed that what was lost had contained a “soul” (suflet) already from the moment of conception. Indeed, it was even in terms of a lost “soul” that bereaved mothers often talked about their dead embryo or fetus (”sufletul meu”). Those who were connected to Organizația EVA often claimed that this soul would turn into a little “angel” once in Heaven. As angels, the deceased children-to-be would remain connected to the earthly realm; stories about continued postmortem relationships with, and unambiguous signs from, these departed embryos and fetuses were omnipresent and widely accepted, both in the self-help groups and on the online forum of the organization (Van der Sijpt 2017a). In the light of such representations—portraying the lost little ones as “souls” or even “angels” who live on in the afterworld—the desire to organize pomeni felt completely natural to these mothers.
According to Orthodox dogma, however, they are not allowed to materialize this desire. Pomeni can be organized only for baptized members of the Orthodox community, who received an official Orthodox name that can be invoked in the context of the postmortem alms. Unbaptized dead babies—whether they died before or after birth—are unrecognized and “nameless” within the church and thus excluded from such personalized rituals. Priests may even explicitly dismiss the existence of a soul that would be in need of care or commemoration, as the recollections of a mother who lost her unborn twins show:

I asked [the priest]: “what can I do for these two souls?” I don’t know, [I meant to ask] how to organize pomeni, or prayers, or ... something. And he told me: “For whom?” [I answered:] “For the souls that ...” And he told me: “Well, what can you do? You confess and that’s it!” And I said: “But ...” “Yes, but they don’t exist anymore; that’s it.”

Quite a few “mothers of angels” expressed indignation about this dogmatic stance. Being excluded from performing the ritual, they rejected the practice of pomană altogether—seeing it as something “invented by people” that has nothing to do with the dead, but rather enables the Orthodox Church to exert its power and “dominate the masses.” Others did not criticize the ritual per se, but denounced the fact that it could not be performed for unborn and unbaptized children. Like Cecilia (quoted above), these women felt that, by excluding them from the rituals, the Orthodox Church painfully disregarded the existence of both their babies and themselves as caring and loving mothers. They experienced this exclusion as yet another implicit punishment by the Church for something that had happened against their will.

Yet, this did not mean they abandoned the practice of pomană altogether. On the contrary: they often found their own, informal ways of giving pomeni. Both in my interviews and on the online forum for “parents of angels” I found numerous, more or less explicit, indications of semiritualized practices of sharing for the sake of lost fetuses. In reaction to an online complaint of a mother whose colivă for her daughter—who died twenty-one days after birth—had been refused by a priest, Raluca (who was also my informant) wrote:

The soul of your gentle little angel is pure. Being an angel, she does not need any colivă and alms. In fact, we give alms for our own inner calm, for our own reconciliation, knowing that we can do something to commemorate our angels. Maybe in some other church you will find a priest who will want to [help you]. But maybe it is better to find another way to give alms to commemorate your little angel. Don’t be disappointed anymore. Listen to your soul and you will feel what you need to do to commemorate her, for her soul and for your own, for inner calm.

The noninstitutionalized, charitable actions that women informally undertake to commemorate their “angels” are diverse in nature, but they almost always target small children. Women prepare food for them or buy them candies, new clothes, or toys, just like they would have done for their own child had it been alive. Though they clearly consider this an act of pomană, they do not always reveal the “soul” for whom the object was given: many don’t mention anything at all; others simply say the pomană is for their “little angel”; and
some feel the need to invoke a generic name—the stereotypical “Maria” for girls and “Ioan” for boys—to indicate the sex of the lost baby. This silence is not necessarily inspired by Orthodox beliefs about baptism and name giving. Rather, mentioning the name of one’s lost fetus out loud could be experienced as painful or shameful. Also, it could lead to adverse reactions from the receivers, who, upon hearing of the reproductive loss, would either uncomfortably silence it or curiously inquire about the details.

Many of my informants therefore deemed it wiser to use this widely accepted “gesture from the soul” to commemorate their fetuses and comfort themselves in silence. Sonia, for instance, told me that she struggled with feelings of guilt since she had lost her fetus after she sprained her ankle and fell while pregnant. She mentioned that she had not done any “proper” pomeni ever since, but that she had thought of the soul of her baby whenever she had offered a piece of clothing to a poor person or food to invitees. Asked whether she had mentioned her baby to the receivers of her gifts, she answered:

I say it only at the moment when we put the candles and incense at home. Then I call [the baby], at home, without a priest, without a church. . . . At a pomană in the church you cannot mention their names because the church does not accept that. . . . Instead of that, we can also share things with some incense, with a candle. We can also share at home without arriving at the church. The people [who are invited] do not know what it is about. They simply say a certain word (bogdaprote), take the package and eat it. People do not necessarily ask you for whom it is.

The Orthodox priests with whom I spoke were aware of these informal practices. Some condemned them fiercely; they called the act of invoking somebody who cannot be invoked a “ridiculous” one that reveals people’s lack of real faith. Others showed more leniency; they acknowledged that such practices can provide comfort to bereaved parents and show, at the very least, people’s intrinsic desire to do good and be generous. None of the priests, however, would label such practices as “pomeni” or mention them in their interactions with bereaved parents. They clearly distanced themselves from what Romanian “parents of angels” consider to be a soothing remedy in a context of misrecognition and suspicion.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have analyzed the interpretations and implications of spontaneous pregnancy loss in contemporary Romania. I have highlighted the critical importance of local terminology for shaping experiences of loss: the Romanian lexicon offers a number of terms that denote both spontaneous reproductive mishaps and induced abortions at the same time and that are therefore always ambiguous in nature. This ambiguity is exacerbated by a pervasive societal silence, resulting from both the country’s traumatic reproductive history (in which any pregnancy loss was suspected to have been illegally induced) and the current discourses and practices in important institutions such as hospitals and Orthodox churches. In this environment of silence and ambiguity, pregnancy losses are often imbued with an implicit sense of guilt—either self-imposed or ascribed by others who uncomfortably associate these events with agency and immorality. For those who lose a fetus, then, there is very little social
space for giving meaning to their lost little ones, as well as to their own feelings of grief and regret.

In this context, the ritual of pomană—officially inaccessible to “parents of angels”—is reconfigured as a meaningful act of commemoration and consolation. As an act of commemoration, pomană serves to confirm the existence of a fetus that has not been seen or held (in most cases) and that is generally misrecognized in Romanian society. It builds on the idea that fetuses live on as little angels in heaven and require continued care from their bereaved parents. By fulfilling these duties of care for their fetuses, just like for any other dead person, “parents of angels” contest the societal misrecognition of their little ones. Invoking their unbaptized babies—either explicitly or only in thought—as the very reason for which the ritualized acts of social exchange are being performed, they ascribe to these fetuses the social subjectivity that society denies them.

As an act of consolation, pomană has the potential of alleviating the emotional pain and regret that many bereaved parents experience after pregnancy loss. By taking care of their dead babies, they do not only confirm the existence of their little ones, but they also show themselves to be responsible parents as well. Being able to express their parental love and dedication through pomeni gives them a sense of calm, connection, and moral virtue that stands in contrast to the emotional distance and the suspicions they often experience from those around them. It also helps them confirm—again, explicitly or only for themselves—that their intentions towards this fetus have always been good. Any personal feelings of guilt may be reduced in the process. As such, the ritual of pomană is not only a gesture from one’s soul, directed at others, but also a gesture towards one’s soul, potentially bringing the emotional comfort that society is unable to offer.

Although the dynamics described in this article are specific to a particular type of loss and to a particular group of Romanian women, they are also revealing of a number of daily life experiences that can be observed more generally in postcommunist Romania. The societal silence around specific cases of pregnancy loss is reflective of a more general lack of open discussion about reproductive matters, as well as about the painful aspects of the communist history, in present-day Romania (Anton 2009; Băban 2000). The social suspicions arising from the use of ambiguous, generic terms of pregnancy loss are another consequence of this lack of public discussion, but they also point at the social tensions that currently pervade many Romanian intimate networks and relationships (Friedman 2009; Gal and Kligman 2000; Stillo 2015; Weber 2009). The notions of self-blame that I encountered in women’s personal narratives of loss relate to a wider public discourse highlighting individual accountability that developed in conjunction with postcommunist neoliberal reforms in the country (Kideckel 2008; Raț 2013; Stan and Toma 2009; Vincze 2015). And the skepticism about the Orthodox dogma that some of my bereaved informants expressed connects to a growing sense of distrust towards major Romanian public institutions (IRES 2015).

Within this context of silence, suspicion, and skepticism, people have, however, developed multiple strategies for giving meaning and direction to their daily life uncertainties. This
article has shown that, even when faced with extremely intimate forms of loss, Romanian women still find ways to tactically navigate the discursive ambiguities, social struggles, and institutional hurdles that they encounter. By informally employing the religious rituals from which they as mourning mothers are officially banned, they paradoxically stabilize the social status of both themselves and their lost little ones.

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Notes

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1. Between 1957 and 1966, the fertility rate dropped from 2.9 to 1.9 children per woman, which placed Romania among the countries with the lowest fertility rates in the world at the time. Although Ceauşescu, as well as many analysts, attributed this fertility decline to the liberalization of abortions during the early communist period (from 1947 onwards), demographers like Rotariu (2010) claim that, in reality, the decline had already begun in the 1930s.

2. The law prohibited abortions except if a pregnancy endangered a woman’s life, was the result of rape, involved a hereditary disease, or was carried by a woman of forty-five years or older, or who had already delivered and reared at least four children (Kligman 1998).

3. In 1989, the last year of the communist regime in Romania, the maternal mortality rate had increased to 170 deaths per 100,000 live births, out of which 87% were estimated to have been caused by illegal abortions. Yet, as statistics were manipulated and falsified under the regime, these figures should be read with caution; real death rates were arguably even higher (Băban 2000; Creangă et al. 2007).

4. The abortion ratio decreased by 85% between 1990 and 2002 and has dropped below the birth rate ever since 2004, when women had on average 0.8 abortions during their lifetime (Ministry of Health et al. 2004; Mureşan 2008). In 2011, the Romanian Ministry of Health reported an official number of 526 abortions per 1,000 live births, the highest abortion rate in Europe (CNSISP 2013). These statistics do not account for the many abortions that are performed in the private sector.

5. At this stage, it was a challenge to find the right balance between hiding and revealing my actual research interests and position when I presented myself to potential research participants (cf. Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Wamsiedel 2017).
6. The organization was founded in 2008, at a time when there was very little public information or support for those losing a pregnancy. The increasing popularity and availability of the Internet over the last decade has certainly contributed to its success. In August 2017, the online forum had 1,749 subscribed members.

7. Many of these soothing rituals are, contrary to the commemorative practices I describe in this article, meant for cases of intended abortions.

8. I exclude from my discussion here all euphemistic verbs that are used to denominate induced abortions in particular. Rather than mention intentional pregnancy interruptions by name, people prefer to talk about “a da afara” (to expel), “a scapa” (to drop off), “a renunta” (to renounce), “a rezolva” (to resolve), and so on. Anton (2009) has linked such euphemisms to the ban and taboos that surrounded induced abortions during communism. The specificity of these terms makes them inapplicable to the cases of involuntary pregnancy loss that are central to this article.

9. Although a legal provision stipulates that stillborn babies can be taken home (order 359/2012), the procedure for doing so is often unknown or experienced as cumbersome by bereaved parents. Consequently, those who have been able to see and bury their dead fetuses are few and far between (Van der Sijpt 2017a).

10. An official Orthodox directive, issued by the Holy Synod in 1908, allowed for the possibility to organize some religious rituals—such as the blessing of the grave and the utterance of a particular religious chant during the descent of the coffin—at the funeral of unbaptized dead babies of Christian parents (Braniste 1980, 485). The Holy Synod revised and complemented this directive in 2010, adding a “prayer of comfort” and “some instructive words about the purpose of the sacrament of the Holy Baptism” to the rituals a priest can perform (Temeulitul MMB no. 10096/02.12.2010). In practice, however, it seems that these directives are rather freely interpreted and enacted by priests; and even if the proposed rituals are performed, many bereaved parents still lament the absence of a full-blown funeral service for their baby.

11. Benga (2011) describes how, in a particular rural area in Romania, there is also a specific commemoration ritual for all children “who did not make it to a proper human existence”—from miscarried and aborted fetuses to unbaptized newborns—on the eve of the feast of Saint Demetrius on October 26. This localized popular practice seems unrelated to the Orthodox Church, however, and exceptional in the Romanian context.

12. A priest once explained to me that the colivă symbolizes the dead body. Just like the wheat kernels grow only after having been sown in the earth, the dead body will resurrect only after having been buried.

13. Although the notion of “pomană” covers a complex web of meanings, in this article I use the English term of “alm” as a—somewhat simplified—synonym.

14. Some of my interviewees—both members and nonmembers of Organizatia EVA—have attributed the increasing use of the notion of “angel” for deceased embryos and fetuses to the work done by the members of the NGO—even if, in Romanian, it was probably not uncommon to refer to dead children as angels before 2008 as well (Van der Sijpt 2017a).

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