

Performing Peace: Vernacular Reconciliation and the Diplomacy of Return in Cyprus

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The Cyprus conflict is usually described as one between a majority Greek Cypriot and minority Turkish Cypriot population, with their opposing visions of the island's future. In that conflict, more than 200,000 Cypriots from both these communities were displaced between 1958 and 1974. Lost in this standard narrative, however, are the conflict's other 'Others': the smaller Maronite, Armenian, Latin, and Roma populations, who also experienced displacement in the course of the conflict. This paper concerns the Maronite community's struggle to remain in or return to their historic lands in the island's northwest. We examine the acts of everyday diplomacy that, over the past decade, have resulted in a revival of the largest Maronite village, a removal of restrictions on their rights, and most recently the partial withdrawal of the Turkish military from another Maronite village so that it may be reopened to settlement. We use these as instances of what we term 'vernacular reconciliation', ways of rebuilding coexistence that suspend questions of sovereignty that remain at the heart of the Cyprus impasse. We argue that this pragmatic approach calls on cultural knowledge of past patterns of coexistence through performances that in turn produce deeply felt senses of responsibility and patterns of reciprocity. Such patterns of reciprocity, we show, are reappropriated in the context of ongoing conflict.

Keywords: peace, Cyprus, conflict

Introduction

'The day after we put up that sign, somebody called the police,' Michalis tells us, explaining how he had led a community initiative to erect a sign at the entrance to his natal village that welcomes visitors in Greek, Turkish, and English. The village, Kormakiti, today boasts the only such trilingual sign in divided Cyprus, where language has been both a party to and a victim of the island's conflict. In the wake of the island's 1974 partition, around 160,000 Greek Cypriots were displaced from north to south and 45,000 Turkish Cypriots from south to north

(see Bryant 2012). This displacement was accompanied by a process of ethnic homogenization on either side of the ceasefire line that became only more entrenched as decades passed.

Ironically, the one village that today greets its visitors in all the island's official languages is the ancestral home to people who identify themselves neither as Greek nor Turkish but as members of Cyprus's small Maronite community. Although many Maronites like Michalis have Greek names, they identify themselves with an historically Arabic-speaking community that began arriving in the island in the seventh century and that today is comprised of only around 6000 persons. Along with the Armenian, Latin, and Roma communities, they were not part of the Greek–Turkish conflict that partitioned the island. Instead, these small minorities were the conflict's other Others, groups that attempted to negotiate an ultimately untenable neutral position. Armenians and Maronites, because of the concentrations of their population in what is today the island's north, became victims of the legal association of their communities with the Greek Cypriot majority, explained below. While Armenians were displaced from quarters of north Nicosia starting in 1963, many Maronites migrated in 1974 from the villages in the island's northwest where they had lived for centuries. Although one of those villages retained a small Maronite population, three became Turkish military camps, their residents displaced to the island's south.

In this article, we examine the small acts of everyday diplomacy (Constantinou 2016; Marsden *et al.* 2016) that, over the past decade, have resulted in a revival of the main Maronite village, a removal of restrictions on Maronites' rights, and most recently the partial withdrawal of the Turkish military from a second Maronite village so that it may be reopened to settlement. The paper emerges ethnographically from Hatay's activist engagement with the Maronite struggle over almost twenty years, and it builds theoretically on Bryant's previous work on patterns of coexistence in post-Ottoman spaces (esp. Bryant 2016). It also draws on our joint long-term ethnographic research on the island (summarized in Bryant and Hatay 2020).

This paper interrogates a problem that remains insufficiently investigated in the literature on refugee return: what conditions are necessary for the successful return of displaced persons after intercommunal conflict, in which return requires remixing (e.g. Harrell-Bond 1989; Black and Koser 1999; Ó Tuathail and Dahlman 2004). The case of the Cypriot Maronites is in some ways unusual, in that the community was not a party to the conflict and so might be seen as having suffered 'collateral damage'. Nevertheless, as a group they have experienced displacement and discrimination, as well as considerable moral and political pressure to anchor their cause to Greek Cypriot demands for return.

As long as the checkpoints dividing the island were closed, engagement with their places of origin was difficult both because of movement restrictions placed by the Turkish Cypriot administration and because of pressure from Greek Cypriot refugee organizations. After the 2003 lifting of movement restrictions, however, many Greek Cypriot and Maronite displaced persons crossed to the north and began to interact socially, politically, and economically with Turkish Cypriots in a

challenge to refugee associations' insistence on non-engagement until their rights in the north are restored. As [Adelman and Barkan \(2011\)](#) make clear, however, such insistence on rights often takes place in the absence of real possibilities of return and may even impede those through turning the demand for rights into a rite. The case we describe here shows what is possible when one brackets the rhetoric of rights in favour of pragmatism, and the interdependencies that may result.

We build on literature in peacebuilding and conflict resolution that argues for attention to 'hybrid', 'local', or 'everyday' mechanisms for constructing peace ([MacGinty 2010](#); [Richmond and Mitchell 2011](#); [Chandler 2015](#)). Cyprus has also experienced the 'top-down, standardized, technocratic and institutionalized approaches to peace favoured by many international institutions' ([MacGinty 2014](#): 549; also [MacGinty and Richmond 2013](#)) that have become a subject of critique in international relations. Instead, an international relations literature has emerged, on which we draw, that calls for a focus on the local: on the ways that individuals leading their everyday lives may engage in peacebuilding, either inadvertently or to achieve particular ends (see also [Kappler 2014](#); [Leonardsson and Rudd 2015](#); [Paffenholz 2015](#); [Öjendal et al. 2017](#)).

In particular, this literature observes that diplomacy is not relegated to diplomats but consists of acts in which all of us engage in daily life (esp. [Constantinou 2006, 2016](#); [Marsden et al. 2016](#)). Much of this literature explores the 'labour of peace' that is critical for managing quotidian tensions in plural societies ([Bryant 2016](#)) and hence maintaining 'everyday peace' ([MacGinty 2014](#)), i.e. finding ways to prevent violent conflict before it begins. This paper gives ethnographic substance to the distinction that MacGinty draws between 'everyday peace' as a form of 'conflict-calming and avoidance' and 'everyday diplomacy' as a set of activities that 'can move a society towards conflict transformation' (2014: 549). We are particularly interested in everyday emissaries, whom Roger Zetter mentions in this special section as important for displaced persons testing the waters of return to areas where they would be required to mix with members of former enemy groups. We show how, in this context, an appeal to 'ordinary ethics' ([Lambek 2010](#)) can be used for pragmatic peacebuilding purposes. We term such pragmatic acts of peacebuilding 'vernacular reconciliation', a way of rebuilding coexistence that also suspends the questions of sovereignty that remain at the heart of the Cyprus impasse.

We argue that vernacular reconciliation calls on past patterns of coexistence, particularly the performative aspects of managing everyday tensions. We term this form of social interaction 'fictive neighbourliness' for the ways in which it appropriates the reciprocity and implicit social norms at the heart of local, neighbourly interactions while applying these at an attenuated scale. We argue that the performative nature of these interactions does not make them any less effective, indeed serves to interpellate persons in ethical modes of interaction that have practical results. At the same time, we raise questions about the gendered nature of these performances, where reciprocity is produced in the enactment of what are implicitly understood as male and female social roles. Indeed, while this pragmatic

approach reappropriates such performances of coexistence in the context of ongoing conflict, we show that this relies on gendered solidarity and ask about the sustainability of such practices in the future.

Returning to Return

The sign at the entrance to Kormakiti village appeared after April 2003, when the crossing points dividing Cyprus suddenly opened after 29 years, allowing Cypriots access to the other 'side'. That opening created new political, economic, and social realities. For the first time in almost three decades, Greek and Turkish Cypriots were able to cross to see the homes and villages that they had lost during the conflict, even if they were not able to return to those places. Much academic writing has addressed the ambiguities and new realities that emerged from the easing of movement restrictions, focusing particularly on encounters between Turkish and Greek Cypriots during the opening (Bryant 2010a; Dikomitis 2012); the politics of those crossings (Bryant 2010b, Dikomitis 2005); and the ways in which new opportunities for interaction facilitated, or failed to facilitate, movements for reconciliation (Lordos *et al.* 2009; Psaltis 2011, 2016; Vural 2012). While the opening itself was politicized in both of the major communities, many of the other Others in the island envisaged different opportunities from that opening that were not tied up with the sovereignty struggles of which they had never been a part.

The island's smaller minorities were squeezed between the two larger communities at least since the 1950s, when a Greek Cypriot anticolonial rebellion aimed at uniting the island with Greece met with Turkish Cypriot armed resistance. The bloody struggle that erupted in that period resulted in 1960 in the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), a bicomunal state with power shared proportionately between the two main ethnic populations—Greek Cypriot (82 per cent) and Turkish Cypriot communities (18 per cent). Minorities such as the Christian Maronites and Armenians were legally incorporated into the Greek Cypriot community (on this process, see, Constantinou and Skordis 2011), while the Muslim Roma community became officially Turkish Cypriot. By 1963, growing civil unrest between Greek and Turkish Cypriots led to the breakdown of the Republic's government.

For the Maronites, whose ancestral villages are on the northwest coast, the main displacement occurred when in 1974 a Greek-sponsored coup intended to unite the island with Greece overthrew President Makarios and provoked a Turkish military intervention. The ceasefire line at which the Turkish army stopped its advance through the north of the island became the island's line of division, and both Greek and Turkish Cypriots quickly fled to either side of it. The Maronites' status as a legal part of the Greek Cypriot community made them vulnerable in times of violence. That status meant that after 1974 most of their villages were occupied by the Turkish military and turned into camps, the Maronite inhabitants displaced to the south. While the largest village, Kormakiti, remained open, post-1974 restrictions on Maronites' rights of

movement and political participation, as well as lack of access to services such as schools, soon began to push younger Maronites from that remaining village to the south. By the mid-1980s, only around three hundred older Maronites remained full-time in the island's north; the population depleted further to around 150 at the time of the opening of the checkpoints in 2003.

Even before 2003, Kormakiti Maronites living in the south had been able to visit their village, but surveillance by security forces and movement restrictions had made any thought of doing so regularly, or moving back, untenable. Those restrictions had begun to ease in the late 1990s, for reasons we elaborate below. The 2003 opening, then, provided an opportunity for Maronites to establish more consistent ties with their ancestral home, with many restoring their houses in Kormakiti. Some have moved back, especially if they are retired, while others stay in their homes on weekends. The revival of the village has also brought the increased interest of the Turkish Cypriot government, bringing the village some services that it needs, such as road repair, but also amplified interference and control that have required negotiation.

The trilingual sign appeared during the post-2003 period, and several years after its erection we finally heard from one Maronite community leader the story of how the villagers gained permission for it. Now a businessman in the island's south, Michalis maintains ties with Kormakiti, and he told us how sometime in late 2007 an official from the office of the *kaymakam*, or district governor, arrived in the village one day and suddenly began renaming the streets. The streets already bore names reflecting Maronite history and religion, so the villagers were not pleased when this government official took it upon himself to give their streets Turkish names.

Michalis related how he went directly to the *kaymakam* and invited him to the village, saying he wanted to show him why the new names were inappropriate. He arranged a feast with much food and *zivania*, a local drink akin to vodka. Throughout the evening, Michalis said, he explained to the *kaymakam* that Maronite Cypriots were on the verge of extinction, that they needed to maintain their cultural distinctiveness, and that having their own place names was one symbol of that. In addition, he also explained that they had never been a party to the conflict and did not want to take sides. Given this, and the large numbers of Greek Cypriots and foreigners who visited the village, it was better not to be linguistically exclusive. After the third or fourth *zivania*, Michalis pulled out a piece of paper giving them permission to have trilingual signs, which he persuaded the *kaymakam* to sign.

'The next day, I immediately ordered trilingual signs to be made', Michalis related. 'Within a few days, there was a sign outside the village saying, "Welcome to Kormakiti" in Turkish, Greek, and English. Of course, the next day somebody called the police, but my man in the village produced that paper from the *kaymakam*, and nobody could do anything'.

Michalis told us this story as an example of what food and alcohol can accomplish. In fact, as we will show below, food and alcohol have accomplished much

more. In particular, they are part of what Roger Zetter describes in this special section and elsewhere (Harild *et al.* 2015), as the messy, iterative, and open-ended process of voluntary return—if refugees return at all.

Moreover, the already complex and fraught process of moving from one life to another is made even more so when returning entails also living amongst and having at least minimal interactions with persons who, either as individuals or as members of a group, have caused one's displacement. There is much documentation, especially from the former Yugoslavia, regarding the failures of 'real' remixing, with Bosniak returnees either preferring ethnic enclaves where they mix little with Serbs and Croats, or 'return' actually being a process of legally reclaiming and then selling property. Moreover, within the limited literature on return and remixing, a distinction is often drawn between simple coexistence, or living together without conflict, and reconciliation based on forgiveness and empathy (e.g. Lederach 1997; Chayes and Minow 2003; Amstutz 2005; for problems in this approach, see Brudholm 2006), where the latter is viewed as a priority to impede future conflict.

We argue, along with others (Ring 2006; Stefansson 2010; Doumanis 2012; Henig 2012), that there is much to be said both for and about everyday coexistence and the quotidian forms of diplomacy that it entails. Silence around sensitive issues may imply not seething resentment but rather the use of 'constructive ambiguity', a term from diplomacy that refers to the ways that interlocutors may bracket sensitive issues in order to make progress on other subjects where they can reach agreement (Bryant 2016; also MacGinty 2014). This is part of what Bryant (2016) calls the 'labour of peace' that is present in all everyday interactions of proximity and requires negotiating tensions. It may also be an inherent strategy of what MacGinty calls 'everyday peace', the 'routinized practices used by individuals and collectives as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society' (2014: 550). As MacGinty outlines, such everyday interactions include practices like avoidance of controversial topics, maintaining ambiguity about one's identity, ritualized politeness, and blame deferral (*op. cit.*, 556).

While the labour of peace refers to the everyday management of tensions inherent in any relations of proximity, MacGinty's understanding of 'everyday peace' appears to refer specifically to moments where such tension management is mobilized to prevent violent conflict in divided societies. In this understanding 'diplomacy' is employed primarily as a way of negotiating peace from potential conflict. In its broadest terms, 'everyday diplomacy' may be 'broadly understood to emerge whenever someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of people or a cause, or successfully claims to mediate between others engaging in such representations and negotiations' (Constantinou 2016: 23; see also Marsden *et al.* 2016).

This is most often achieved through avoidance and deflection—through ways of avoiding persons and categories that would divide and going on with life. Such practices tend to involve constructive ambiguity, allowing identity markers and boundaries to remain ambiguous. Constructive ambiguity 'does not deny difference; in fact, it recognizes difference in its refusal to confront it. It does not efface

difference but rather denies that difference must be an insurmountable obstacle to sociality and peace' (Bryant 2016: 23).

In this literature on everyday coexistence, however, there tends to be an elision between the everyday maintenance of peace in divided or troubled societies and what might be broadly characterized as post-conflict reconciliation or 'peace formation' (Richmond 2013). This elision of processes that occur before violence and separation with those that occur after is understandable, given that many of the norms, values, tactics, and practices appear closely related. People tend to reconstruct social lives on the basis of the norms and values that they knew before. Nevertheless, we suggest that the difference between everyday peace and what we have called vernacular reconciliation is that the latter self-consciously mobilizes and calls upon local norms and values to create particular types of relationships and obligations that will facilitate return and remixing.

As we describe below, certain members of the Maronite community in Cyprus have engaged for almost twenty years in forms of everyday diplomacy that include acting as emissaries, gastronomic negotiations, and a complex understanding of gift relationships. This involves not only those acts of damping tensions that characterize the labour of peace but also 'performative diplomacy' (Talbot 2017), a ritualized and polysemic form of exchange that creates obligations while allowing actors the freedom to interpret the rite in various ways. We show below that while everyday diplomacy is highly performative, in the way that diplomacy always is, this does not make it any less 'real'. Indeed, this diplomacy has had very concrete consequences.

In the Maronite case, we claim, such everyday diplomacy entails a performative enactment of the rituals of neighbourhood, with their associated norms and obligations. In the post-Ottoman space in which Cyprus is historically and geographically located, relations of proximity are conceptualized as a set of values and practices called *komsuluk* (Sorabji 2008; Baskar 2012). These are relations that were formalized in Ottoman law and in the everyday rituals of drinking coffee together, reciprocal aid, and awareness of plurality. Such practices required an acceptance that difference is an inevitable part of living with others and that it must be managed rather than eliminated. In this sense, the neighbourhood constitutes 'an ethnically indifferent regime of morality and sociality, binding people of close proximity, and expressing a rather non-ethnic form of belonging and relatedness' (Henig 2012: 16).

Moreover, as other work has demonstrated (esp. Duru 2016; Starr 2016), one may self-consciously construct identity through the performance of pluralism, or through self-conscious adherence to shared social norms and expectation that others also adhere to them. Indeed, studies of the practices of conviviality (e.g. Overing and Passes 2000; Freitag 2014) show that coexistence often entails ritualized and even exaggerated expressions of community solidarity—what Deniz Duru calls 'a particular valuing of sociable sociality in the making of place' (Duru 2016: 167). These often exaggerated performances and rituals of community construction are also part and parcel of diplomatic practices—everyday or

otherwise. Even in Mauss's *The Gift*, we see how sociality itself relies on forms of symbolic and material exchange that in turn are often ritually performed.

As we show below, these are performances in which both parties participate, and in which the success of the performance depends upon recognition of these shared values and reciprocal duties entailed by it. This includes the implicit agreement of all participating to enact those shared values. It is in such a way, we argue, that the everyday performance of peace may facilitate not only the pragmatic fulfilment of needs but also what we term vernacular reconciliation.

Vernacular Reconciliation and the Diplomacy of Return

One Sunday afternoon, we sit on folding chairs outside a small caravan while large chunks of meat turn slowly on a spit. The caravan is parked amidst a group of four others that have claimed a space only a hundred meters from a rocky beach, though separated from it by a two-lane highway. The beach itself is the last one in the island's northwest before one enters the Kormakiti Peninsula, known jokingly amongst Turkish Cypriots as Maronitistan. Although the number of historically Maronite villages had dwindled over time, most of the land in the peninsula belongs to Maronites. Unlike Greek Cypriots, Maronites did not have their properties directly confiscated by the Turkish Cypriot government after 1974, although three of their main villages became military camps, hence de facto ousting their legal owners. As noted above, the government began in the late 1990s to ease restrictions on Maronites' rights of movement and inheritance. At the time of writing, however, Maronites living in the north remain unable to elect or be elected, and they cannot acquire hunting or fishing licenses, for example.

Despite these continuing restrictions, our host, Sharpel, had recognized that 2003 was a potential turning point, presenting new possibilities. Like most Maronites, Sharpel had left for the south after 1974, in his case because his natal village, Ayia Marina, was turned into a Turkish military camp. Because of health problems, Sharpel had taken early retirement, and so after 2003 he had time to cross often to the island's north. When he became friendly with a man who was about to return to Turkey, he purchased the caravan from him and immediately set in motion a series of diplomatic manoeuvres with one aim: to secure his mother's return to her ancestral home.

The day of our particular visit was almost a decade later, by which time Sharpel—known in Greek as Antonis—had established extensive networks in the island's north. Those networks were based on his simple, earthy and very Cypriot hospitality: along with the large chunks of roasted meat called souvla that were a staple of his gatherings, he served mushrooms and wild asparagus and field greens that he had gathered and prepared. Although he lived on the outskirts of Nicosia in a two-room refugee house, he had built a large cellar where he stored his home-made pickles, preserves, and dried meats. This feast of his own products, lovingly gathered over many months and prepared in traditionally Cypriot ways, was always accompanied by large quantities of alcohol, particularly zivania.

As we can see from the story with which this paper opened, this hospitality is explicitly strategic, something of which those who receive that hospitality are also aware. As we sat eating our souvla, for instance, a police officer pulled up in his police car and greeted Sharpel warmly. Sharpel invited him to sit with us, but the policeman said he couldn't stay. 'Wait, wait', Sharpel insisted, and dug into his freezer for a packet of pork meat that he had already prepared. The officer accepted it shyly, patting Sharpel on the shoulder. Sharpel would explain to us later that the officer had a foreign, Christian wife who couldn't find the kind of pork she wanted in the primarily Muslim north.

The explicit recognition of the importance of food and drink in oiling social mechanisms is a variety of what Costas Constantinou (1996) has called 'gastro-nomic diplomacy', an important method and ritual for keeping the peace that has been employed throughout the world and throughout human history. In the extensive study of gift-giving and exchange relationships in anthropology, the type of bond this creates is usually referred to as 'generalized reciprocity', the sort of reciprocity in which close friends and family members engage, where the goal of gift-giving is not to receive something in return but rather to foster the social bond. David Graeber (2001: 219–20) uses the term 'open reciprocity' to refer to reciprocity 'that does not keep accounts'.

In the case of Sharpel and the village leader, these were explicitly performative instances of hospitality and feasting, where the persons attending understood beforehand that the goal was to foster a relationship and create social ties. So, when politicians, union leaders, and journalists drank zivania and ate Sharpel's pickled quail eggs, they did so already having arrived at the caravan with the knowledge that the social bond created there could at some point lead them to act on Sharpel's—and thereby the Maronite community's—behalf.

Commensality is a theme often invoked by Cypriots who lived in mixed villages prior to the conflict when they wish to describe intercommunal social bonds. In both authors' research, we often heard people say, regarding the past, 'We would eat and drink together' or 'We attended each other's weddings' (see Bryant 2004, 2010a, 2010b; also Argyrou 1996). Since commensality is not mentioned in reference to intra-group contact, its invocation already marks this as inter-group contact, implying the unexpected or exceptional. In such circumstances, the invocation of commensality implies a difference overcome through the ritual practice of breaking bread. Moreover, the most common spaces where that commensality occurs have tended to be homosocial, with sharing coffee at home, and men drinking together in the coffee shop or other public male spaces (Herzfeld 1985, 1991; Cowan 1991).

In Sharpel's tireless undertaking, preparing the ground for a gradual return to their villages, the *de facto* focus was on homosocial bonds, although this was hardly exclusive. Rather, it was partly a way of overcoming the lack of a common language. Because Sharpel does not speak Turkish and has a limited command of English, discussions were easier when they concerned topics about which they could share ties of masculinity, such as hunting and women—and, of course, the problems of negotiating Turkish Cypriot politics. While the latter might

seem a more sophisticated problem than could be tackled with language limitations, in such interactions it tends to be highly personalized, revolving around access to those persons who can get things done.

Apart from its gendering, which will be discussed more below, there are two other aspects of this performative commensality that are noteworthy. The first is that Sharpel's willingness to purchase a caravan in the north and rent the land from a Turkish Cypriot in order to be able to host and perform the rituals of hospitality already indicates a bracketing of the problems of sovereignty—and with them, justice—that have turned the pursuit of rights in Cyprus into rites. If he had conceded to attempts to anchor the Maronite cause to Greek Cypriot demands for return, he would have refused to remain in the north or to rent land there until a resolution of the Cyprus Problem that would have enabled all displaced persons to return. He would have conceded that individuals breaking ranks with demands for a just solution could potentially damage their cause, for instance by showing that return was possible even in the absence of justice.

The second is that the everyday diplomacy enacted through ritualized acts of commensality and gift exchange is performative, but it nevertheless creates lasting, if not deep, relationships. We say that these relationships are not deep, in the sense that none of the men who frequent Sharpel's caravan have him in their immediate social circles, nor does he have them in his. Nevertheless, the relationships that they develop create deeply felt senses of responsibility and a desire to aid Sharpel in his cause. We suggest here that in these acts of exchange they become 'fictive neighbours', that indeed what they call upon and respond to are culturally specific codes of living together.

In the early twentieth century, anthropologists often used the term 'fictive kinship' to refer to those persons who were 'chosen kin', such as godparents, as opposed to those who were kin 'by blood'. Whilst that concept later fell by the wayside, we find the idea of 'fictive neighbours' appropriate to describe the scaling of neighbourliness involved in Sharpel's performance. Neighbourliness, after all, depends upon close proximity, while Sharpel's home for the moment remains in the island's south. What defines the neighbourhood, however, is not only distance. As David Henig describes the concept of the neighbourhood for Bosnia–Herzegovina, 'It is the space where people live with one another, rather than next to each other' (Henig 2012: 15). What Sharpel and those who frequent his caravan both create and express are a desire and intention of living together that have been cultivated over a significant period of time and that result in acts aimed at realizing coexistence.

Although one might argue that traditional values and rituals of neighbourliness in Cyprus have been compromised by urbanization and immigration, Sharpel and other emissaries call upon those values and rituals in their diplomatic performances. As we will see, this is not only limited to the informal diplomacy of hospitality but is also embedded in economic transactions, including those associated with the 'hospitality industry'. In particular, one restaurant and the family that runs it have been instrumental in negotiating the sort of fictive neighbourliness

that results in the deeply felt sense of responsibility that has, in turn, produced tangible results.

On Peace and Kebab

In early 2015, the Maronite community lost one of its pillars. Yiorgos Skoullou was a butcher (in Turkish, *kasap*) by trade, and along with his wife, Christina, and later his daughter, Maria, they ran Yorgo Kasap Restaurant, an establishment that at the time of his death had acquired fame not only in the island, but also in Turkey and Greece. What began in the 1990s as a stopping-point for Turkish Cypriot hunters who traversed the region on weekends became, by the time of his death, one of the best-loved places for village food on the island. As the restaurant grew, both it and its owner came more and more to symbolize and publicize the Maronite struggle to survive as a community and to cling to their land.

One of the reasons for this was that although the 2000s saw a revival of Maronite Arabic in Cyprus, with language classes for children, in the 1990s Yiorgos was one of the last native speakers of this dialect. This form of Arabic dates to the first arrivals of the community starting in the seventh century and has preserved much of the vocabulary and other features of its Lebanese origins (Constantinou 2009; Constantinou and Skordis 2011). In later years, while his wife began to take over the butchery side of the trade, his daughter Maria gradually became the restaurant's face—a symbol of efficiency, hospitality, grit, and pragmatism. Both mother and daughter switch easily from Greek to Turkish or English, depending on their interlocutor, though with limitations in the latter two tongues. Through their everyday pragmatism, they have slowly begun to demonstrate to Turkish Cypriots, particularly, what multiculturalism might look like.

Today, the restaurant is open every day of the week, serving not only Maronite, Greek Cypriot, and Turkish Cypriot customers, but also the tourists who have read about it in any number of guides. At the time the restaurant opened in the early 1990s, Kormakiti resembled other Greek Cypriot and Maronite villages in the north, with damaged churches and houses that had been looted and partially destroyed (for more on the destruction of property that had belonged to 'Others', see Bryant and Hatay 2020). Initially, a few elderly Turkish Cypriot hunters made a habit of stopping at the local Kormakiti coffee shop to drink coffee and practice the Greek that they had begun to forget. As their number increased, Yiorgos's wife, Christina, began to cook a local dish known as thieves' kebab for them on Sundays. With time, both the menu and the restaurant grew, as hunters who enjoyed Christina's food began to bring their families and friends. In a short time, some of those friends began to include high-level bureaucrats, and eventually also some regional politicians. Perhaps most importantly, they also included young Turkish Cypriots who had never met a Greek Cypriot or Maronite, who began to understand for the first time who this group was, and the restrictions that it had lived under.

Over time, the positive impression left on those high-level bureaucrats and politicians who visited began to affect other state officials who had, until then,

chosen to ignore the Maronites' problems. Some politicians and officials who visited the village, experienced the family's hospitality, and listened to the villagers' problems became voluntary ambassadors for them in state offices. Because of these voluntary emissaries, eventually roads and buildings began to be repaired and movement restrictions were lifted, creating a chain effect that began to draw members of the two communities together in deepening relations of interdependency.

Now not only did Maronites in Kormakiti have persons that they could call to solve their problems, but additionally those persons began to have a deeply felt sense of responsibility towards a community that otherwise had no recourse within the political system of the island's north. In turn, with the opening of the checkpoints, many Kormakiti Maronites who continued to live in the south began repairing their old homes or building new ones in the village, spending time in them on the weekends. The permanent population of the village has grown, as retirees move back. The village has begun to sponsor fairs in which many Turkish Cypriot producers participate and that attract considerable interest from Turkish Cypriots looking for activities on the weekend.

It was no surprise, then, that for Yiorgos's funeral (see Figure 1) the large Maronite Catholic church was packed not only with Maronite mourners, but also with hundreds of Turkish Cypriots who came to pay their respects to the family. The family, in turn, thanked individually all the non-Maronites who came, expressing gratitude for this confirmation of the social bond. One journalist who had known Yiorgos for twenty-five years by the time of his death acknowledged in his newspaper column the importance of the restaurant in transforming Turkish Cypriot attitudes towards the community. He wrote,

That restaurant that after 1974, because of Kormakiti's isolated makeup, only hunters had discovered has created an intercultural friendship that today thousands of Turkish Cypriots view with sympathy. . . . Because of it, the Turkish Cypriots, themselves a marginalized minority, discovered in this tiny territory that they have their own minorities.

The journalist went on to describe how despite their small numbers, the Maronites engaged in a struggle, waiting patiently 'until the realization of the return to them of what belongs to them.' He then concluded,

Diplomacy is not always the monopoly of the educated elites (*monşerler*). Most of the time, in direct contradiction to all the efforts that diplomats expend over years to negotiate and solve a problem, it is what citizens do that is more beneficial and lasting. Because if the goal of that diplomacy is to ensure trust and cooperation between citizens, citizens can bypass diplomats and reach that goal more directly themselves. . . . Goodbye, dear Yiorgos. You did what the diplomats could not do for this land (Düzgün 2015; see also Hatay 2013).

In the interactions between this family and the politicians who visit their restaurant, or Sharpel and the trade unionists who come to his caravan, relationships that are carried out and developed in a pragmatic and performative way, through



Figure 1.
The funeral of Yiorgos Skoullou, January 2015 (photo courtesy of Havadis newspaper).

acts of hospitality and reciprocity, nevertheless result in lasting and deeply felt senses of connection and responsibility. The influential nationalist politicians who were instrumental in easing movement restrictions in the late 1990s continue their relationships with the community today. It is noteworthy that such interactions bracket the past, including past responsibilities for displacement and discrimination, and instead focus on solving present problems. This represents a form of empathy to the extent that one is willing to forego discussion of issues one knows to be sensitive in the interest of forging a relationship (see [Stefansson 2010](#)).

However, precisely because of this implicit empathy, it is difficult to say that this form of constructive ambiguity only suspends the past and does not also include forms of reconciliation with it. Rather than saying, ‘This is a wrong that has been done to us and continues to be done to us, and you are to blame’, these interactions say, ‘This is a wrong that has been done to us and continues to be done to us, and you can help us overcome it’. These interactions call on the interdependence of a fictive neighbourliness. They call on cultural knowledge of past patterns of coexistence, and the management of tensions between and within communities that was particularly concerned with preserving peace. Rather than truth-telling or ‘rights talk’ (e.g. [Curtis 2014](#): 202 ff.), then, this form of vernacular reconciliation simply accepts that there are always good and bad neighbours, and that the process of going on with living often entails focusing one’s efforts on cultivating the good ones.

The deepening interdependence created through these interactions can be seen in the interior of the restaurant (see [Figure 2](#)), where a portrait of Atatürk has equal prominence with Charbel Makhoul, a Lebanese Maronite saint. One might at first assume that Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, hung there as a gesture to Turkish Cypriots. To hang it there, though, is also a defiance against attempts ideologically to conscript Maronites into the Greek Cypriot community. Even more surprising, however, are Maria’s expressions of appreciation for Atatürk, including filling her Facebook page with his photo on national holidays.

We suggest that this represents not only a strategy, but also an openness to the everydayness, rather than the ideology, of politics. The walls are also filled with photographs of the Skoullou family, including many in which they pose with Turkish Cypriot politicians. Although Maria cannot vote, she is, for instance, quite vocal in her support of particular politicians who will help them, in the knowledge that her voice has influence. Indeed, she at one point openly and vocally supported one young politician whom she counted as a friend despite risking losing customers from other parties. Given her own lack of voting rights, this vocal support makes clear that performances are also ‘real’, where the authenticity of the sense of reciprocity and responsibility produced is also subject to judgment. Indeed, Maria does not refrain from remarking on those other, late-comer politicians who have come to seek her support once they recognized her significance in the region.

The increasing interdependence that has emerged from these interactions resulted, in late 2016, in the Businesswomen’s Association giving Maria their award as Female Entrepreneur Who Has Contributed the Most to Her Region



Figure 2.

The interior of Yorgo Kasap Restaurant (photo by Rebecca Bryant).

(*Kıbrıs Gazetesi* 2016). This was significant, because it was the first time that a non-Turkish Cypriot had received such an award. When we saw her after the ceremony, Maria showed us the newspaper clipping, very pleased with the recognition the award implied. Such gestures culminated in summer 2017 in a dinner prior to the beginning of a week of marriage festivities for her brother. For this dinner, which we attended, they closed off the village square, setting up an overflowing buffet and a group of entertainers who continued until the wee hours. Maria invited all the villagers, as well as close friends, including several dozen Turkish Cypriots who had consistently supported and helped them. By that time, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı had already announced that the Turkish army would withdraw from three other Maronite villages, opening them for resettlement. When Maria saw us at the wedding party, she was tearful at the attendance of so many Turkish Cypriots who had helped them achieve this goal that, as a community, they had worked towards for almost twenty years.

Performing Neighbourliness

We have used the term ‘fictive neighbourliness’ to describe the relationship created through these interactions, and we have referred to the overall effect as ‘vernacular reconciliation’. Fictive neighbourliness implies that even in the absence of proximity, one may construct relationships that resemble neighbourliness. We suggest, then, that Maronite emissaries have explicitly focused on building such bonds of neighbourliness, ones that rely on the continuing cultural significance of cultivating ties with persons who are neither family nor friends. Such cultivation relies, in turn, on the acceptance of forms of hospitality and ritualized gestures intended to foster the social bond. In the example with which we began this paper, Michalis

invited the *kaymakam* once to the village and for a specific purpose, and the official accepted the invitation in the knowledge that Michalis was likely to request something from him. Such an evening of food and drink does not in itself create the sort of bond we are describing, though it gives us a successful instance of performative diplomacy. While it does not create a bond, it opens a space where one could be created, if the persons involved eventually go beyond that evening's utility. As we see from the other examples of everyday emissaries, the bonds of generalized or open reciprocity on which neighbourliness depends are cultivated through various forms and degrees of sharing over time.

This performative diplomacy also, we should note, relies upon the polysemic nature of performance, which allows participants to suspend the sovereignty dispute that is at the heart of the Cyprus conflict. By developing ties with specific individuals who are able to wield influence, it may be possible, for example, to get movement restrictions lifted without having to appeal directly to institutions that Greek Cypriot refugee associations refuse to recognize. Or by inviting the district governor to one's village and plying him with food and drink, one may appeal to him as a person who only happens to occupy an office that others in one's community will not recognize. On the other side, Turkish Cypriots may understand this as an appeal for aid by an emissary of a small and weaker community. It is this polysemic nature of performative diplomacy, we have argued, that makes it particularly appropriate for establishing new bonds in the context of a sovereignty conflict (see also Talbot 2017).

We remarked in the introduction that such bonds are also gendered and often rely on homosocial interactions. We see this in Sharpel's homosocial gatherings at his caravan, where politicians, trade unionists, and journalists would gather for *souvla*, *zivania*, and primarily male talk on weekend afternoons. Again, although the gatherings were not exclusive, the ease of male interaction helped overcome language limitations. Christina's similar language limitations are eased by an ability to bond with customers over those things that they share in common and that are usually coded as women's concerns: one's children's futures, the care of grandchildren, upcoming namedays and weddings. Despite an otherwise tough demeanour developed from the demands of running a booming restaurant business, Maria similarly strikes those who first meet her as singularly devoted to family, including the memory of her father.

Gender has a complex relationship with ethnicization in conflict cases such as in Cyprus, on the one hand appearing to transcend ethnic divisions and on the other hand reinforcing them (see Cockburn 1998; Alison 2004; Handrahan 2004). We have yet to see if the sorts social relations that Bryant finds transcend ethnic divisions between Greek and Turkish Cypriot women (2010), or civic associations that Varshney (2003) finds important for maintaining peace in India, or the kinds of professional associations that have begun to foster ties of interest in Cyprus, will come to substitute for these culturally specific and gendered forms of generalized reciprocity that we have described as fictive neighbourliness. It is an open question whether younger Cypriots, many educated abroad, who today challenge gender norms will continue to find such culturally specific understandings of

sociality effective. But for the moment, the ethics of neighbourliness continue to be a cultural resource for cultivating bonds that may lay the groundwork for return.

Conclusion: Return beyond Reconciliation

We have argued here that the ground for return may be developed through performances of everyday diplomacy that call on culturally specific ethical practices and socialities and the bonds that develop through them. What we have described as fictive neighbourliness calls on the important social role of the neighbour as someone who is neither friend nor family but with whom one has relations of mutual aid and responsibility. We have tried to show that cultivating such bonds in a situation of ongoing conflict requires acts that are implicitly political, even as performative diplomacy allows those engaged in the ritual to interpret the political effects in differing ways. In such a way, political positions and narratives of the past may remain constructively ambiguous. This allows a focus on current concerns whose resolution may depend on bonds of fictive neighbourliness that in turn depend on desire for a future together.

The slow and iterative process of building those ties, or weaving through networks and discovering those persons who were attuned to the appeal to those culturally coded forms of reciprocity, finally yielded fruit in 2017. At the beginning of the year, the Turkish army partially withdrew from Ayia Marina village, and in the spring Turkish Cypriot leader Akıncı announced that two other villages would be opened to resettlement. Under the supervision of the Turkish army, the U.N.-supervised Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage began to restore Ayia Marina's church, while the Maronite villagers of Ayia Marina contributed to building a mosque in order to encourage their former Turkish Cypriot neighbours also to return. The Turkish Cypriot government appointed a committee to review Maronites' political and civil rights in order to facilitate their return, and this committee was placed under the Minister of Finance's undersecretary, himself someone who over many years had frequently visited Sharpel's caravan and who had been instrumental in backstage diplomacy on Maronites' behalf. In the meantime, numerous articles began to appear in local media explaining who the Maronites are, their double minority status, and the threat to their culture if they continue to live dispersed.

In conclusion, it is worth remarking that the everyday diplomacy that we have described here does not appear to fall in the usual categories of reconciliation or coexistence. While the latter is often described as simply 'being oblivious to the Other' (Sampson 2003: 182) and living without conflict, the former tends to be understood as a process of truth-telling, witnessing, and producing empathy (e.g. Adam and Adam 2001; Borneman 2002, 2003). While empathy is important in our case (see also Halpern and Weinstein 2004), it is an empathy that is produced out of, or simultaneous with, a deeply felt sense of responsibility that we describe as fictive neighbourliness and that in turn is a result of everyday diplomacy. That diplomacy, moreover, is explicitly performative, calling on culturally specific

norms of hospitality, reciprocity, and mutual aid, while both the giver and receiver of that hospitality understand that it aims at creating a social bond of interdependence. It is also hierarchical to the extent that the emissaries in this case use cultural codes of reciprocity while also emphasizing that they are socially, politically, and legally marginalized and so dependent on others.

We suggest, then, that discussions of the conditions necessary for return need a more complex language for thinking about forms of living together that involve neither embracing nor ignoring one another. We believe that such performances of plurality are one potentially fruitful place to begin in thinking about the quotidian construction of post-conflict futures.

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