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Refusals of Tolerance: Hunger, Mercy, and the Ethics of Immediacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on tolerance has become axiomatic for political and cultural life in the era of (post-)liberal modernity. In the event of any form of violence, the discourse is invoked as a ‘solution’ to ‘intolerance’. But what if we considered the tolerance discourse itself as an axiom of violence? Its discursive labour creates configurations of power relations that transform the existing human affairs and relations into fixed conditions and categories of difference. Instead of taking tolerance as an analytical proxy, this paper ethnographically elucidates how the tolerance discourse is refused and resisted with the social grammars, practices and ethical vernaculars of care, mercy and solidarity. By focusing on the spaces of public kitchens in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina and the ethics of immediacy they engender, I explore the actually existing forms of living with difference beyond the threshold of tolerance discourses.



KEYWORDS

Bosnia and Herzegovina;
ethics of immediacy; mercy;
refusal; tolerance

On his arrival to Sarajevo in 1925, an American painter wrote into his diary: ‘Tolerance marks the respect with which these peoples of varying faiths mingle their common lot’. He went on with his observations and noted,

Here one sees the Bosnian peasant of orthodox faith drop his contribution into the cup of a blind Mussulman who squats, playing his goussle, at the entrance of a mosque. Glancing at the peaceful little stalls where Christians, Mussulmans, and Jews mingle in business, while each goes his own way to cathedral, mosque or synagogue, *I wondered if tolerance is not one of the greatest of virtues.* (Hornby 1927, 153; italics added)

The painter’s travel memoir was brought to wider attention at the turn of the twentieth century by the historian Noel Malcolm in his acclaimed *Bosnia: A Short History*. The book was first published in 1994, at the height of the Bosnian War (1992–1995). Malcolm builds on the painter’s observation to develop his own argument about tolerance in Bosnian history. He takes the idea of tolerance as given, and contends that ‘the main threat to tolerance came, as so often in Bosnia’s history, from outside Bosnia’s borders’ (Malcolm 1994, 163; italics added). Here Malcolm refers to the fact

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that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bosnia's territory became a geopolitically contested frontier where competing imperial and nation-building projects intersected and unfolded, often violently (Toal and Dahlman 2011; Hajdarpasic 2015). These projects tore apart what both the painter and Noel Malcolm characterised as local configurations and practices of tolerance.

These unproblematic references to tolerance are symptomatic for an argument that runs through the literature on religiously and ethnically plural societies, past and present, whereby violence and hatred stand in opposition to the liberal value of tolerance (Forst 2013). Is such a logic of dichotomisation between violence and tolerance tenable? Are the virtues and practices of tolerance the only way to understand how individuals and communities carve their lifeworlds in a non-violent way in the spaces of multi-layered heterogeneity, be they cultural, ethnic or religious? This paper unsettles this axiomatic logic, in which the liberal value of tolerance is taken unproblematically as the peaceful state and the model of social relations, and violence as its ultimate nemesis.

In the twentieth century, the discourse around tolerance proliferated globally and became intrinsic to ideas of multicultural justice, civility, peace, and pedagogy (Hage 1998, 78–80; Brown 2006, 1; Dzenovska 2018). In our contemporary moment, increasingly characterised as illiberal or post-liberal (Pipyrrou and Sorge 2021), tolerance is frequently invoked as a remedy to the rise of hate speech, racism, violent rhetoric, nationalism and intolerance in the public sphere (Brudholm and Johansen 2018). Such a dichotomisation between intolerance as vice and tolerance as virtue is deceptive. It depoliticises and erases various forms of violence encoded in the discourses on tolerance. Indeed, as Ghassan Hage writes, although these discourses are 'perceived as morally "good" practices, they are structurally similar to the "evil" nationalist practices of exclusion that they are supposedly negating' (1998, 79). This becomes clearer when the idea of tolerance and the discursive labour it performs is juxtaposed with historically sedimented experiences, vernaculars and practices of 'recognizing and adapting to the inevitability of difference' (Baer, Makdisi, and Shryock 2009, 929).

In this paper, I am concerned with situations in which the discourse of tolerance is proselytised in the name of peace and reconciliation as a strategy aimed at reconfiguring the existing human affairs and relations, and thereby becomes a form of everyday symbolic violence (Hage 1998, 87). My aim is to ethnographically elucidate how the tolerance discourse is refused, resisted, or ignored. I trace the moments during which such impositions are juxtaposed with the social grammar and ethical vernaculars of care, mercy, and solidarity. In doing so, I focus on the spaces of public kitchens and what ethics and practices of care, mercy and solidarity they engender in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Threats of Tolerance

Sitting in the living room of Nisama along with her neighbour Maša, in a provincial town in central Bosnia, I was reminded of Noel Malcolm's words about 'a threat *to* tolerance' coming from outside Bosnia's borders. Nisama and Maša, both in their early fifties, were acutely aware of what such a threat could entail. Both women, like so many other fellow Bosnians, lost loved ones during the Bosnian war (1992–1995) when the social textures in their neighbourhoods, villages, towns and in the country at large broke apart. But they

were also aware of other threats in the ebbs and flows of everyday life. Nisama is a teacher at an elementary school. Her neighbour Maša does not work due to prolonged cancer treatment. Maša describes herself as Catholic. She is married to Safet, who describes himself as Muslim. Their son lives abroad and proudly reminds everyone that he is married to a Serbian wife.¹

These patterns of mixed marriages among older generations and ongoing neighbourly exchanges are not entirely uncommon in the town. For more than a century, it was an important regional metallurgical hub, where people of various walks of life lived with each other. In particular, after the Second World War, such social textures were knitted together even more tightly under the Yugoslav socialist ethos and ideas of 'brotherhood and unity', as well as due to the growing urbanisation during that era (Gilbert 2018). The disastrous economic privatisation that began in the 1990s led to the total disintegration of the industry in the town, and the local population shrunk by more than 60%. While the practices of mixed marriages waned with the end of Yugoslav socialism, as well as the hardening of ethno-national divisions in the public sphere caused by the war, the ongoing neighbourly exchanges and forms of civility continue to punctuate day-to-day sociality in the town. This is also why Nisama and Maša find the discourses of tolerance, looming time and again in their lives, problematic (see also Jansen 2010; Stefansson 2010).

As a teacher, Nisama is regularly required to attend various educational workshops. These workshops have mushroomed in the postwar years (Helms 2010; Hromadžić 2015; Johnson 2015). Their aim is to 'train' and 'educate' Nisama and her colleagues on how to be a tolerant person, and how to teach the virtues of tolerance. The workshops have been sponsored by numerous international bodies in the name of peace and reconciliation in the postwar country.² Indeed, as Peter Lippman observed, not long after the end of the war 'tolerance', coupled with 'reconciliation' were included among the 'correct terms' used by numerous local and international NGOs to attract funding, and gave rise to the tolerance discourse. Azra Hromadžić also documented how during her fieldwork, 'the OSCE used the integrationist discourse when applying for money from the reconciliation-motivated and integration-driven donor community' (2015, 60; see also Hayden 2007). As Lippman goes on to explain, the use of these terms often amounted to an empty declaration, phrases 'uttered with complete insincerity' (2019, 69, 266). On numerous occasions over the course of my fieldwork, Nisama, her colleagues, and other teachers I interviewed have told me how uncomfortable they feel about such initiatives. Their rejection of the pedagogies of tolerance is rooted in the conviction that these 'educational' workshops are a clear expression of symbolic violence, imperial attitudes, and othering on the part of the organisers and funders of these programs. My interlocutors were clearly aware that the subtext of the training workshops was a civilising mission to educate them on how to become tolerant liberal subjects.³ As they often suggested, the underlying message of the workshops is that all participants, their pupils and their parents, are by definition anything but tolerant. On several occasions I found myself enjoying a conversation with Nisama's family when Nisama herself would turn up exhausted on the doorstep of the house, returning from yet another training workshop. Every time she felt belittled and humiliated by her experiences.

The feelings of Nisama and her colleagues strongly resonate with Wendy Brown's lucid observation:

[t]he notion that tolerance must be taught articulates intolerance as the 'native' or 'primitive' response to difference (...). The rhetoric of 'teaching tolerance' relegates enmity or intolerance to the constructed narrow-mindedness of those who are more childlike, less formally educated, and, above all, less individuated than enlightened moderns. Hence the equation of the 'bigot with "ignorance," and also the popular journalistic use of tropes such as "primitive blood feuds" or "archaic enmity" to frame contemporary ethnic conflict in eastern Europe, Rwanda, or Ethiopia. (2006, 183)

As we were sitting in her living room, Nisama was preparing for one such workshop. Her conversation switched back and forth between telling Maša about the workshop and explaining how Nisama's children would be available should Maša need anything, as her cancer treatment made Nisama's daily help indispensable. Then the women looked at each other. Nisama sighed, and said 'to tolerate means to endure. Does it mean that I am enduring you?' Nisama looked at Maša. Then, they hugged each other. 'But that's what the politicians would like us to do. So we're just tolerating each other', Nisama said, while firmly holding Maša's hands. The gesture of the friendly embrace was a subtle refusal of the hegemonic discourse of tolerance that would frame Nisama's and Maša's relationship as an acknowledgement of each other as the categorical Other that can only be tolerated and endured. Contrary to such framing, however, *in* and *through* the humble gestures of friendship and care, the women recognised each other first and foremost as human beings (see also Brković 2016). Peter Lippman documented a similar attitude in Prijedor, a municipality in the Krajina region of northwest Bosnia that experienced one of the greatest brutalities during the war. Lippman tells the story of Vedran, a young man of mixed ethnic background, who resolutely refused the logic of the tolerance discourse. Vedran told Lippman, 'It is an agreement among the divided: tolerance is installed between ethnically separated people rather than a recognition of each other as human beings. These constructs promote a prison mentality: separation, the motionlessness of fixed identities' (2019, 282). Indeed, for Vedran, as well as for Nisama, Maša and other local residents in the town, it was not the threat *to* tolerance but rather the threat *of* tolerance imposed from outside, entering their lives through political vicissitudes, public rhetoric, and international interventions, which they found problematic, and which had the potential to drive yet another wedge between people, incite violence, cause injury, or cement the existing divisions. And it is their critique of and refusal to accept the tolerance discourse as a way of configuring human affairs that invites us to ask: how does the tolerance discourse effectively become a form of (symbolic) violence?

Refusals of Tolerance

If the tolerance discourse poses a threat of violence, we need to ask what kind of labour such a discourse performs. The discourse originated in the specific context of European liberalism; it emerged as a response to Europe's religious wars which were ended by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This was epitomised by John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), which consecrated 'religious liberty as a foundational element of liberal political rationality and *raison d'état*' (Mahmood 2016, 33). Since the late nineteenth

century onwards, the tolerance discourse has been increasingly employed across the globe as a universalising framework for the debates on the forms, possibilities and mechanism of regulating aversion or differences in plural societies, be they ethnic, religious or identitarian (Brown 2006; Forst 2013; Walton 2015; Makdisi 2019). Whenever conflicts, outbreaks of inter-communal tensions, hate speech or violence occur, discourses of tolerance – whether amicable or antagonistic – have frequently been invoked as a kind of ‘moral Manichaeism’, as Wendy Brown suggests, that reverberate as a ‘remedy’ and ‘solution’ to ‘intolerance’ manifested in the form of persecution, exclusion, discrimination, or mass killings (Brown and Forst 2015, 42; Brudholm and Johansen 2018). Put differently, the tolerance discourse creates an *a priori* landscape of arranging human affairs and relations. Yet by imposing a generic and universalising rubric of ‘tolerance’ on a vast array of human affairs, such discourses erase, silence, subordinate a broader historical ecology of social arrangements that individuals and communities have forged and cultivated to live with multiple forms of difference over time (Stefansson 2010; Bryant 2016).

Whenever the discourse tolerance is invoked, Wendy Brown reminds us (2015, 64), we need to ask what its opposites are, what it omits and hides, and what configurations of power relations it creates. For Ghassan Hage, similarly, tolerance discourse is ‘a form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism’ (1998, 87). Taking concepts such as tolerance as a self-explanatory proxy for attending to ways of regulating difference inevitably amounts to ‘locking our analyses into fixed positions revolving around binaries (violence–nonviolence, present–past [or tolerance–intolerance for that matter]) that reinforce each other and repose already established claims rather than produce new directions for research’ (Hajdarpasic 2015, 200–201). To paraphrase Clifford Geertz (1973), tolerance has become not a model *of* but a model *for* human affairs and relations, silencing and purporting the historically sedimented textures of human relations into fixed conditions of categorical and unbridgeable difference. What are the possible grammars, vocabularies and imaginings *for* living and sharing a common place, and *for* relating to each other in social spaces endowed with difference, ethnic and religious in this case, without falling into the tolerance discourse? One way to address this question, I suggest, is to explore ethnographically the moments and situations in which people refuse to accept the logic and consequences of tolerance discourse.

The moment of this refusal when Nisama and Maša hugged each other and Nisama said ‘to tolerate means to endure. Does it mean that I am enduring you?’ is evocative and yet powerful, for it calls into question the entire tolerance discourse in one gesture of a friendly embrace. Writing about refusal, Carole McGranaham suggested that we need to turn our attention to the generative power of refusal. As McGranaham notes, individuals and collectives often refuse particular affiliations, identities, or relationships as a way to stake ‘claims to the sociality that underlies all relationships, including political ones’ (2016, 320). By disputing the need for a discourse of tolerance, the two women advocated for another way of relating to one another.⁴ As I shall argue, this is grounded in the historically sedimented social grammars and vocabularies of humanness, mercifulness and kindness through which Nisama, Maša and other local residents recognise each other first and foremost as moral persons and human beings in the flow of everyday life. However, rather than focusing on the intimate neighbourhood settings in which Nisama and Maša interact, I would like to shift my gaze to the public urban spaces where tolerance discourses usually dwell. I have chosen to focus

on the spaces of public kitchens as a way of juxtaposing these discourses with the actually existing idioms and practices of care, mercy and solidarity.

Public kitchens have historically been spaces of coexistence in two ways in particular. First, these spaces accommodate and mediate relations and interactions between various categorical Others, between Christians and Muslims, for example. Second, by belonging to a broader landscape of beneficence, public kitchens constitute a nexus of ethical traditions where the idioms of care, solidarity and mercy with those in need have been practiced and negotiated over a long period of time.

It has been widely documented that Ottoman public kitchens fed Muslims and Christians alike (Singer 2012), and Jewish and Christian imperial subjects were encouraged to participate in charitable donations to the vulnerable (Singer 2009, 135). It would, therefore, be easy to treat public kitchens and other public acts of beneficence as governed by the codes of religious tolerance, as the American painter did more than a century ago. However, such a view is problematic – if not mistaken – because public kitchens have always had multiple functions and constituted a nexus of many impulses (Singer 2012).

Instead of taking tolerance as an analytical proxy, I focus on the immediacy of such encounters and impulses, and their underlying ethics. I ask what the acts of caring and mercifulness can tell us about the ethics of human affairs and relations in postwar Bosnian and Herzegovina. Tolerance discourses strip the practices of giving and caring for others of their multilayered forms and silence particular histories of ethical sensibilities and practices that are at work at the moments of such encounters. Where once we might have used the discursive lenses of tolerance to perceive certain encounters as moments in which the boundaries of difference are reaffirmed, now we can see other modes of relationally at work whereby the textures of care and mercy have been woven, sustained, or broken apart over time.

In her work on the ethics of giving, Amira Mittermaier (2014, 2019) explored how in everyday acts of giving and redistribution her interlocutors imagined and enacted ‘alternative forms of relationality’ and how in these acts ‘an implicit form of justice is lived and embodied’ (Mittermaier 2014, 55, 64). Mittermaier describes performing such acts as the ethics of immediacy. Building on Mittermaier’s argument, I focus on ethics of immediacy in the spaces of public kitchens. The ethics of immediacy were expressed by my interlocutors in the language and acts of shared good-heartedness and humanness. These articulations embodied ‘the profound dependency and interdependency of humans’ (Mittermaier 2014, 64) regardless of their categorical Otherness. The alternative forms of relationality were articulated in the vernacular notion of *merhamet* (from Persian/Arabic/Turkish *rahma* – mercy) that Bosnians of different walks of life and religious traditions associated with human qualities and affective registers for acting in a kind-hearted and merciful way in the world here and now. Examining the acts of beneficence and redistribution and the practices of kind-heartedness and mercy as ‘the long-term sediments of experience’⁵ of care and solidarity in the context of public kitchens can help us to locate the actually existing forms of living with difference beyond the threshold of tolerance discourses.

Historical Sediments

The history of public kitchens in Bosnia and Herzegovina dates back to the Ottoman era. Public kitchens (known as *imaret*) were the backbone of beneficence and charitable

practice that spanned across the Ottoman empire more broadly (Singer 2002; 2009). There were 149 public kitchens in the Balkans during the first 200 years of Ottoman rule, of which 29 were on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslavia (Lowry 2008).

Imarets operated as endowments (*waqfs*, *vakuf* in Bosnian). The best-known endowment in the Bosnian region, bequeathed by Gazi-Husrev Beg, was established in 1531. It provided for one public kitchen (*imaret*) in the heart of Sarajevo's old town. The endowment document (*vakufnama*) stipulated that the public kitchen was required to provide a portion of soup twice a day and four loaves of bread to every poor person.⁶ This public kitchen closed in 1943 during WWII due to a lack of provisions. The early Yugoslav socialist era officially brought the existence of imarets to an end. This was not simply due to the emergence of the state's socialist welfare provisions. After the Second World War, the socialist Yugoslav state nationalised the existing religious endowments between 1946 and 1958 (Zajimović 2010).⁷ The confiscated endowments were not returned in the postsocialist, postwar period.

Public kitchens re-emerged in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian war (1992–1995). Many of the kitchens that began operating as humanitarian organisations during the war have not been closed. On the contrary, the number of people relying on their care and provision is still significant in the postwar years, and keeps rising. Unlike during the war and immediate postwar years, present-day public kitchens, as far as I was able to document, scarcely rely on international humanitarian aid, if at all. This signals a shift towards grassroots solidarity in the running of public kitchens. Operating a public kitchen thus requires the mobilisation of grassroots support and resources, both local and transnational, to overcome the predicaments generated by the dysfunctional state and exacerbated by the effects of neoliberal restructuring of welfare provisioning in the country (Kurtović 2015; Brković 2017). The public kitchens in which I have conducted fieldwork are nowadays by and large maintained through local means – occasionally financed by the Cantonal governments, and mainly supported by donations from individuals and local or religious communities that are inspired by different impulses and motivations for giving and different moralities, and largely helped by volunteers. These include Catholic and Islamic organisations along with the Red Cross, and local non-governmental organisations. Many kitchen workers remarked bitterly, echoing Lippman's observation, that it would be financially more viable for them to promote 'tolerance' or 'reconciliation' between ethno-national groups, which reinforces differences between people, rather than trying to feed the hungry.

Since 2014 I have been carrying out ethnographic fieldwork focused on the rising numbers of public kitchens in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the postwar years. Over the course of my research, I repeatedly visited nine public kitchens operating in four different cantons. I interviewed the workers, representatives and volunteers at the public kitchens as well as those who rely on the kitchens. Whenever possible, I also spent long periods of time around the collection points, observing or volunteering to distribute food. Although it was not possible to acquire a complete picture of all public kitchens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the figures I was able to collect from the kitchens themselves indicate the scale of deprivation and hunger in the country. Moreover, it was often the case that the number of distributed meals did not reflect the actual numbers of people who relied on it, and often the meals were shared with at least one

other person. To give the reader a glimpse of the scale on which the public kitchens operated during my fieldwork, let me refer to a passage in my fieldnotes: according to the official registers, in June of 2014 5011 meals were distributed daily in the Sarajevo canton, but the actual numbers were higher as each kitchen gave away dozens of extra meals, as well as ad hoc food packages made up of occasional donations. In the Tuzla canton, over 3500 meals were distributed daily. In the medium-size and relatively prosperous town of Visoko, a new soup kitchen was opened during my fieldwork in 2015; after a year, it had distributed over 30,000 meals (*ie* about 100 every day). In the small town where Nisama and Maša live, the local Franciscan public kitchen, to which both women regularly donate food (as do numerous other local residents), was distributing around 150 meals every day.

‘Only Hungry People Come Here’

It is a hot July evening in 2014, and I am sitting in one of the side streets adjacent to Baščaršija, the Old Ottoman quarter of Sarajevo. The street is filled with cafés and restaurants. My seat a small bench positioned right next to the wide-open door to the kitchen where everyone is busily preparing dishes and small food parcels. It is the month of Ramadan and the streets are buzzing, as are the staff in the kitchen. The time to break the fast (*iftar*) is slowly approaching. Every few minutes one of the passers-by stops and pops their head through the door, asking ‘do you need anything today?’, or ‘hey, come here ... here are 30 pastries’. Others are less vocal and just hand over an envelope with cash, rushing away when they are asked to wait for a receipt for their donation. ‘God bless you’, shouts the voice from inside the kitchen. The donors are a diverse group. Some are civil servants, affluent owners of restaurants, or of prospering businesses. Others are less wealthy and live precarious lives themselves. Yet, they still donate a loaf of bread, a small bag of pastries, or whatever they can afford. This is the Peoples’ Kitchen (*Narodna Kuhinja*) – a local public kitchen, whose main media face is a woman known as Auntie Zilha. She is often portrayed by the media as Sarajevo’s Mother Theresa, despite her being Muslim. Nowadays, the kitchen serves more than 1100 men and women in Sarajevo, young and old, pious and atheist, all living in destitution and hunger and relying on the *merhamet* (mercy) of others.

Although in the postwar years, the population of Sarajevo became predominantly Bosniak (*ie* Muslim) I would hesitate to label the men and women who come to the kitchen as Bosniaks. Not only does this categorical identity have a dual ethno-religious meaning, it also strips the people who came to the kitchen of their more complex positionings, self-understanding, and life histories (Golubović 2020). Whereas for some people I encountered, such a categorisation did not pose any problems, others rejected it immediately without prompting for a host of reasons, including mixed marriages, commitment to socialism and Yugoslavia, or disgust with ethno-national politics, which they saw as the main reason they were forced to come to the kitchen in the first place. Others were finding it so hard to get by that they refused to even think about it. The workers in the kitchen were also unconcerned by the identities of individuals queuing on the street. ‘Whoever has been sent by the municipality or is destitute is welcome here. Just come’, they often commented. I encountered similar attitudes in other public kitchens, which also served the hungry from all backgrounds and walks of life. As they all commented,

‘Forget about this tolerance nonsense. Only hungry people come here’. Often I was told, ‘When someone is hungry, she comes here because she is hungry, it doesn’t matter what nationality that person is’.

Hunger and mercy intersect in public kitchens.⁸ They create the spaces of common ground where the solidarity of ‘empty bellies’ (Hromadžić 2015), and mercy of/with fellow humans unfold, and in which the tolerance discourse is refused. Indeed, it is not the language of tolerance that brings all these people together. Rather, as I observed time and again, often a single word characterised the everyday labour and ethics of care in the spaces of public kitchens: *merhamet*.

Locating Mercy

In the town where Maša and Nisama live, the Franciscan public kitchen is located near the main Catholic church, another Catholic and Orthodox churches are about a two-minute walk, and the local mosque is about five minutes. It is hardly recognisable from other houses in its vicinity. Only when one gets closer does a small sign, ‘Public kitchen’, become visible. The house is divided between the kitchen on the ground floor and the charity organisation ‘Mother Theresa’ and the local radio station on the first floor.

Anyone who enters the space of the kitchen and its dining area is warmly welcomed by the staff. The space is clean, nicely decorated, and with tables and chairs for up to 20 people. Each table is covered with a tablecloth, has a salt/pepper cellar, and a vase with a plastic flower in it to create a homely atmosphere. Anyone who comes can sit and eat peacefully in a friendly environment, although many people prefer to eat at home. The fact that there is a picture of Jesus and the last supper on the wall does not seem to bother anyone. There is also a black and white photo on the wall of the man who donated the house for charitable purposes.

The kitchen was opened only after the end of the Bosnian war in 1998. It began life in the cellar of a different house in the neighbourhood, in a space donated by another ‘good person’, as I was told. The kitchen is officially run by a Franciscan organisation based in Sarajevo, where it also runs another public kitchen along with other charitable activities. In the town, the kitchen has two permanent female workers/cooks. One of them has been working in the kitchen since 1998. It also has one part-time driver who is employed by the Catholic church. Furthermore, the kitchen collaborates with the Catholic humanitarian organisation Mother Theresa and relies on that organisation’s network of volunteers to distribute meals. During my fieldwork, the kitchen collaborated with 25 volunteers, who were mainly retired people in their 60s.

Back in 1998, when the kitchen started, it was feeding 50 people, all of whom still attend regularly (with the exception of those who have died). Nowadays, the kitchen officially provides for about 110 people. The backgrounds of these people reflect those of the local population, as well as of the kitchen staff: Serbs, Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats, as well as ‘mixed families’, and those who do not want to indicate any categorical (ethno-national) identity, or do not even know ‘who they are’, as one of the workers said. According to the official figures available in the Sarajevo headquarters, the town’s kitchen is listed as feeding 150 people. Running the kitchen as if it provided for 150 people has enabled the kitchen to create a small daily surplus of meals that is then given to anyone who needs it.

Apart from the shared space in the kitchen, the food is also distributed at a collection point on the outskirts of the town about two miles away from the kitchen. The space is provided by the local Catholic priest and adjacent to the church. Here again, people of various backgrounds from the nearby neighbourhoods can come and collect provisions, or volunteers from the Mother Theresa organisation distribute the food to the homes of elderly people in the area, whether Bosniak, Croat or Serb. At the moment about 40 people rely on the food delivery in the neighbourhood.

This brings me to the question of who can come and use the kitchen, and how the use of its service and space is regulated. The workers in the kitchen do not ask for any proof of a person's situation from the municipality's Center for Social Work, nor do they stop anyone from using it. Everyone is welcome, and the Center regularly sends people who are in need to the kitchen as it only has limited means to provide social assistance. This is also reflected in the municipality's rather irregular financial contributions to the running of the kitchen. Again, the workers, Nisama, Maša and other local residents commented that if the kitchen used 'the correct terms' such as tolerance or reconciliation to describe their activities, this would have increased their chances of getting more funding.

As the kitchen workers explained, and as I observed, the kitchen relies not on tolerance but on *merhamet*, that is, on the kind-heartedness, solidarity and mercy of all good people. The list of the various local individuals such as Nisama and Maša, and the communities that enact *merhamet* in their actions, and who actually volunteer and help out the kitchen is quite long. So, for example, according to the kitchen workers, there is one 'merciful granny who always buys a packet of carrots and brings it over on her way into town. She knows that we'll need it'. Also, 'merciful local village communities' (all villages listed in the interview were Muslim-only villages) that 'collect whatever people grow in their gardens and fields and bring it in their cars; things like potatoes, onions, plums, or home-made jam'. Another enactment of *merhamet* was attributed to the local (Croat) entrepreneur who runs the town's bakery and a supermarket. The owner donates 65 loaves of bread every day. But there are also many other *merhametli* (kind-hearted) individuals such as 'One Croat who works in Austria, and who donates €200 every month; or another woman who regularly donates €75'. Another Bosniak entrepreneur regularly donates eggs and meat. There is also one pious Muslim family who donate meat whenever they perform the meat sacrifice (*kurban*).⁹

The annual Islamic feast of sacrifice (*kurban bajram*) and the sacrificed meat that is donated to the Franciscan public kitchen opens up an important discussion about care and *merhamet* as the instances of everyday ethics of immediacy. The kitchen receives sacrificed meat from local Muslims. Some people bring half a ram, others an entire ram. The kitchen also regularly receives a large amount of sacrificed meat from the Sarajevo headquarters that is donated by the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The meat is redistributed immediately by the kitchen to everyone, irrespective of their background. Often the sacrificed meat is also donated by larger entrepreneurs or the embassies of Muslim-majority countries to the town; it is the public kitchen that redistributes this donation to anyone in need. In this context, Marija, the kitchen worker who herself identified as a pious Catholic, said that the workers in the kitchen remind people to whom they redistribute the meat that this is sacrificed meat. This means that it should not be consumed with alcohol or sold. Then, she told me 'I know that if you have bones in the sacrificed meat, you have to put them into the fire so they burn. You mustn't throw them away'.

A few days later, I mentioned this conversation about sacrificed meat to my friend, who is a pious Muslim. He responded by introducing me to his colleague at work, whom he described as being *merhametli* (kind-hearted). As it turned out, the colleague is actively involved in the local Catholic church, and he also volunteers for the kitchen. His tasks include cutting up donated sacrificed meat and distributing it in the town. Like Marija from the kitchen, he performs his task diligently and with tremendous care. During our conversations, he was always very modest, and said only 'if I can help, I'm glad to do so', while explaining his actions of being and acting *merhametli*.

The moments of being and acting *merhametli* defy the discourse of tolerance. In the ebbs and flows of everyday life, the actually existing forms of care enacted through the ethics of immediacy emerge in situations and acts such as being careful about the sacrificed meat in the Franciscan public kitchen. It shows how various forms of acknowledged difference are pragmatically accommodated and cared for, rather than simply endured, and what kind of ethical decisions and actions these entails (Lambek 2010). Indeed, when, for example, I asked about the potential 'halal' issues in the public kitchen, Marija herself started speaking about the need to 'take care of others', and to be and act *merhametli*. 'These days', she continued, 'it is rare to actually use pork meat in the kitchen, but when we did it in the past, or occasionally now, we always knew who needs to be told or warned. We always have an alternative for those who can't eat pork'. To avoid any potential problems, the cooks only use sunflower oil and nothing else for cooking. Then she continued, 'You need to understand people; doing this work, you have to be human you have to care about others. If I put something like that into the food deliberately, I would be guilty, not the person who ate it.' She grounded her conviction about care and respect of others by referring to her personal ethics and Christian morality as well, while touching her heart affectively. After a moment of silence, she added 'and this is *merhamet*'.

I was very moved by my encounters with Marija. Nevertheless, when I later described them to Maša and Nisama, and also to a Muslim friend with whom I was staying during my fieldwork, they were neither moved nor surprised by what I told them. For them, there was nothing extraordinary in Marija's conduct – on the contrary. They told me about Marija's life story, how she used to work in the same company as my friend before the Bosnian war, and how 'she has always cared about such things'. Then they added that she had a love affair with a married Muslim man, with whom she had a child; however, they never lived together because the man refused to get divorced. So she raised her son as a single mother, struggling to get enough for him but always somehow managing. They continued, 'she has always cared and has been a kind-hearted woman, always acting *merhametli*'. For Maša, Nisama, Marija and my friend, once again, it was the idiom of kind-heartedness and mercy (*merhamet*) that was important, whereby the ethics of immediacy and vocabularies of care for other human beings regardless of their difference were enacted in their lives, and the threats of the tolerance discourse were refused.

Conclusion

This paper problematised the tolerance discourse and its axiomatic logic, which renders violence as tolerance's ultimate nemesis. Based on these grassroots experiences of the

top-down impositions of the tolerance discourse and its refusal, I have argued that this logic needs to be broken down. The labour of the tolerance discourse reduces the complex web of human affairs and relations to *a priori* binaries that silence, obfuscate, or erase the long-lasting practices of care, mercy and solidarity. This paper focused instead on alternative forms of relationality enacted in the spaces endowed with difference, such as spaces of public beneficence in ethno-religiously mixed urban settings situated in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina. Following Wendy Brown's call to focus on 'alternative political speech and practices' (Brown 2006, 205), I ethnographically elucidated the language of mercy and kind-heartedness (*merhamet*), and the ethics of immediacy enacted through acting mercifully (*merhametli*) in the space of the public kitchen. Through these vocabularies and practices of care, mercy and solidarity, the local residents can relate to each other and care for each other as human beings while acknowledging their difference, rather than enduring and tolerating each other as the Other. What this paper documented is how, *in* and *through* places like public kitchens, everyday forms of care and mercy are being configured. These configurations are often formed by historically sedimented textures of organising human relations, impulses and experiences that the tolerance discourse tends to ignore, if not sanitise. Public kitchens, I argue, are the sites that bear the potential to generate and foster what Amira Mittermaier describes as the ethics of immediacy, where 'in everyday acts of distribution an implicit form of justice is lived and embodied' (Mittermaier 2014, 64). It is this ethics of immediacy articulated in the idioms of mercy and care as an actually existing form and practice of 'imagining and enacting alternative forms of relationally' (2014, 55) that offers a historically and ethnographically sensitive ground from which we can engage with the ethics and textures of care for others beyond the axiomatic logic of 'tolerance-*contra*-violence' that has proliferated in the era of (post-) liberal modernity. Ultimately then, while problematising the emergent axioms of violence in the (post-)liberal era (Pipyrrou and Sorge 2021), we also need to remain focused on the 'remedies' offered that challenge these axioms of violence, and work out how they become entwined. This is a vital exercise that allows us to trace the forms of (symbolic) violence and wounds that such remedies, far from resolving, may actually be in the process of inflicting.

Notes

1. Here, I use the categories of self-identification of my interlocutors. Although these categories are often deployed by scholars solely as ethno-national categorical identities (*i.e.* Bosniaks/Muslims, Croats/Catholics or Serbs/Orthodox), their everyday use and meaning are much more complex and contextual. As I argued elsewhere (Henig 2020, 11), following Douglas Rogers, rather than taking these abstract categorical identities as *the* starting point for understanding, it is more productive to explore how 'people come to understand themselves and one another as human subjects and aspire to participate in moral communities' (Rogers 2009, 51), be they families, neighborhoods, villages, political parties, religious congregations or communities of care and mercy.
2. The Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) has been one the main sponsors, for example, <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/tolerance-and-non-discrimination> (Accessed July 25, 2021).
3. For a similar argument in postsocialist Latvia, see Dzenovska 2018

4. My use of refusal here is akin to Brković's (2016) concept of 'depoliticization from below' as a way to explore various non-hegemonic possibilities of the political in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina.
5. I borrow this phrase from Jane Guyer (2004, 179).
6. This practice was not restricted to the Gazi-Husrev Beg endowment as it is documented in other endowment documents (*vakufname*) see: *Vakufname iz Bosne i Hercegovine* (1985).
7. This process had already started during the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918–1939), during which endowed land was targeted.
8. As Carolin Leutloff-Grandits documented in postwar Croatia, this is not always the case. In the town of Knin, 'the fight against hunger' charity campaign did not overcome the inter-ethnic tensions but rather it set 'mechanisms of nation-building in motion, continuing the war policy of ethnic engineering, albeit with other means.' (2009, 44)
9. As I argued elsewhere (Henig 2019), the act of 'giving' to those who struggle to access even basic provisions is not simply a religious duty/obligation but also an expression of a critical social commentary on the current economic deprivation in postwar Bosnia.

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