

## A Review of Larisa Jasarevic's *Three Lights on the Queen's Face: On Mixing, Muddle, and Mêlée*

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In her beautifully written “ethnography of surfaces,” Larisa Jasarevic descends into the (extra)ordinary lives of “ordinary” Bosnians. Troubled and provoked by the existing scholarship on “mixing” and “identity” in the context of postwar, post-socialist, post-Yugoslav, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author carefully, respectfully and reluctantly carves a “new space,” both theoretical and ethnographic, for capturing and examining the complexities of everyday life that she encounters. Jasarevic refuses to “fix” her informants and their actions, especially the workings of the therapist Nerka (the People’s Queen), into ready-made ethno-national, supra-national or anti-national categories. Instead, Jasarevic offers rich ethnographic descriptions of contradictions, collisions, doubts, passions, devotion and disappointment that Nerka and her followers experience as they gather and act around the issues of “health and wealth” and “the impossibility of belonging.”

Intentionally avoiding “the stock of Bosnian iconography,” which includes, among others, the notions of “mosaic,” “kaleidoscope,” and “carpet,” the author, building on Jean-Luc Nancy’s work, approaches mixing as “ongoing ‘crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing’” (Jasarevic 2). Jasarevic invites readers to follow her as she maneuvers and unpacks two ethnographic moments that offer asymmetrical responses to the normative discourses of mixing. This strategic move, to use ethnographic depth and knowledge to confront the dominant, suffocating discourses about Bosnian social and political life, is refreshing and the work’s greatest strength. Many other ethnographers and anthropologists of the region recognize the muddled ruptures, tensions and continuities that escape easy categorization; these authors, however, almost exclusively end up wrapping up their messy and contradicting findings into too “clean,” analytical, and summary sentences, statements, or, in Jasarevic’s terms, iconographies. Here is where Jasarevic departs from the majority of works on contemporary Bosnia—she refuses the temptation to “summarize” and “fix” —; instead, readers are left to absorb, understand and respond to dramatic and contradictory overlaps between geographies, temporalities, peoples, actions, histories and selves that escape simple classification and, by extension, easy relation.

Jasarevic’s main challenge is to avoid coagulating, in language and in analysis, that which refuses to be secured—“irreverent pluralism” and “yet unfinished actions” (Jasarevic pp. 3, 9). This is why Jasarevic “borrows a voice,” in order to capture her informants expressions and respect for multiple being while simultaneously recognizing their actions that, at times, attempt to fix individuals “out of mixture.” In order to do so, Jasarevic needs to carve a space that neither valorizes mixing nor hesitantly proposes a *mêlée* (Jasarevic p.2). She does this by exposing her ethnographic moments that reveal the gathering of “various lines, trails and skins while at the same time describing their various trajectories and their webs, both those that are tangled and those that are distinct” (Nancy 2000: 147) and by introducing the notion of *muddle* as the analytic figure (Jasarevic p. 3). While her ethnography is rich and convincing, the

author's analytical attempt to embrace, complicate and move beyond Nancy by using the notion of *muddle* is the closest that Jasarevic comes to fixing and congealing that which she tries to grasp and explain. Jasarevic is possibly aware of this—she offers *muddle* as an analytic figure, but her offering is sporadic and reluctant. The *muddle* is never explained (How is it different from, situated in-between, *mélange* and *mêlée*? What does it allow for?), but it floats through the text, its titles and subtitles. This might be intentional, but still, one is left wondering, why does the author, rightly critical of mosaics, carpets, and kaleidoscopes, need to develop yet another “iconography,” even if it is a fluid one, “situated” between *mélange* and *mêlée*, a *muddle*?

Furthermore, the notion of an alternate/floating/impossible/circumstantial “community of waiting” that gathers around the therapist and the healer Nerka is an interesting and powerful one, with much analytic and ethnographic possibility. This momentary overlap of projects, doubts, loves and fears, worries and skins, provides a compelling opportunity to think beyond the over-ethnicized, dominant and rigid discourses of “the political” and “mixing” that dominate Bosnian anthropological and other scholarly circles. While Jasarevic provides a wonderful lens for us to grasp the complexity of Nerka, we do not get an equally complicated, ethnographically intricate portrayal of Nerka's followers. I thus invite Jasarevic to delve deeper into Nerka's waiting room, composed of “an ex-war prisoner on whose forehead his guards chiseled crosses with an ax, and a man with tattooed *kokarda* [a Serbian emblem] who was a real Chetnik. They came at the same time, waited together, no one said anything” (Jasarevic p. 1). There is (an intentional?) silence hanging above and after this sentence. I would like to see the author unpack these silences, and bring the complexities of *čekanje* (waiting, anticipating) in the waiting room closer to the readers' minds and hearts, as she does with Nerka.

Finally, in her concluding pages, Jasarevic introduces the materiality of bodily surfaces—namely, skin—which is “the meeting and the parting point” (Jasarevic p. 11), the juncture that Nerka heals, uses, and abuses, by simultaneously refuting and attempting to fix that which cannot be fixed, identity. This ending is interesting and incomplete—it reads more like another opening than a conclusion. This possibly signals where the author's work will move next, joining the exciting and emerging theorizations of “skins, surfaces and distance,” including the works of Claudia Benthien, Nina Jablonski, Monica Casper, Lisa Jean Moore, and John Protevi and others. I hope that the author seizes this opportunity and invites us on yet another journey, creating novel ways of doing the ethnography and anthropology of Bosnia.

In conclusion, the idea to deploy stories of and gatherings around “health and wealth” in Bosnia towards a critical analysis of “identity” and “the political” (ethno-national, mixed) is an excellent one and Jasarevic made the best of it. An ethnographic study of “surfaces” and asymmetrical responses to normative mixing is a dazzling way to identify and respond to problematic assumptions underlying much scholarship on Bosnia's social and political life. The author has correctly identified the potential of such an endeavor and the text provides evidence of powerful ethnographic work and theoretical intervention.

## Work Cited

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2000. "Eulogy for M  lee." In *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.