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

If you are troubled by illness that has eluded all medical and magical treatment, or if your loved ones are unwell, you can find Nerka any day except Tuesday and Saturday. You would join some hundred patients who have travelled from around Bosnia, and from further afield, to the village of Turija in the northeast. They gather in her palatial yellow house by a skinny stream, waiting to be seen and to see whatever will happen, because Nerka is known for her moods, tactlessness, insolence, and hilarious banter as much as for her therapeutic touch and uncanny insight. Nerka, whom patients have lovingly titled their “Queen of Health” (queen also being an idiomatic expression for very “cool”) heals by means unknown—waving hands, without touching—all disorders but old age and death. What is known about Nerka defies expectations about locally salient differences and, more generally, about biomedical commonsense or religious beliefs. While she will treat much more than your regular clinicians—from sorcery attacks to heartaches, from arthritis to bankruptcy—among her pilgrims are not infrequently medical nurses and doctors, as well as other professionals, students, industrial workers, and peasants whom years of historical materialism, life experience, or good commonsense have schooled in skepticism about non-biomedical promises. And while her method references freely, at times outrageously, the three dominant regional faiths: Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Catholicism, her patients include people of all backgrounds and dispositions—to believe, to practice, and to disbelieve, to doubt. Nerka treats patients from both the Serbian and Croat-Muslim entity of the divided Bosnian state<sup>1</sup>, as well as those seeking her from the new states of the former Yugoslavia, or from further afield: an American commander on mission in Bosnia, for instance, or a Hindu expatriate executive of a British-Indian-owned, formerly public plant. In her words: “I’m not looking at nations, what matters to me is that people need my help and that I can help them. Do you know how many real Chetniks [Serb nationalist militants], who were slashing throats in the war, came through my office? Once there came 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.”

Nerka often tells of the three lights on her face: on the forehead and each of her cheeks, only visible to my eyes on her large portrait, where they looked like the photographer’s fault. Nerka corrected me. The lights, she says, emerged on her face one day and each is for one of the three faiths. But, as I will show, Nerka is no simple icon of love and togetherness.

#### *Mixing, Muddle, Mêlée*

This text is about healing encounters at Nerka’s. Nerka runs a singularly powerful and popular practice in contemporary Bosnia, which has seen an explosion of the medical and magical market since the 1990s war and peace. I explore Nerka’s therapeutic space for the inventive and inconsistent rituals that simultaneously put into play and displace the ethno-national and religious differences and passions that are conventionally wedded to the three dominant Bosnian peoples: Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Eastern Orthodox Serbs, and Bosnian Catholic Croats.

My writing on “mixing” at Nerka’s is first of all a work of reluctance, which perhaps is not exercised enough in the writings on religion, ethno-nationalism, and identity in Bosnia since the war of the 1990s and the multi-ethnic nation-building projects ever since. A handful of scholars of the region never tire of repeating that the concepts of ethno-nationalism and identity are over-determining the academic and media discourse about the region as much as they dominate the formal political practice (Bougarel, Helms, and Duijzings 2007; Gilbert 2010). As a corrective, some have issued a call to move beyond ethnicity in order to more adequately grasp lived and otherwise salient dynamics, logics, and priorities in a multitude of domains, from economy to popular culture. But this call usually entails a certain redundancy of the ethnic that reinstates the very thing it tries to exorcise, not least through recycling of references (which I will try to resist here) to the good examples of scholarly ethno-national fetishism.

Underlying the interests in ethno-religious identity in Bosnia is the ideological history of the socialist Yugoslav project of “brotherhood and unity” (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) and the tireless (but, arguably, exhausted and exhausting) debates about its effectiveness in the vernacular practice, given that Bosnia was the most ethnically mixed Yugoslav space and, after Yugoslav breakup, from 1992 to 1995, the site of genocidal ethnic violence. Scholars of post-socialist, post-conflict Bosnia tend to side variously with the competing assessments of ethno-national or ethno-religious plurality: as a thing that Bosnia once had, but has since lost; that has not been lost as much as never properly had; that took place only in urban, secular enclaves, although its importance was inflated in the official and lay imagination, carried away with the humanist images of tolerance and co-existence; or, finally, as a thing that lives on, squatting on some grounds no bigger than the shadow cast by the tattered banner of secular cosmopolitanism, in the midst of radicalization of ethno-national politics and institutional Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Catholicism.

The stock of Bosnian iconography of mixing includes “mosaic,” “kaleidoscope,” “carpet,” and the most peddled images of cityscapes interrupted all at once by Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bell towers and mosque minarets. But by far the most privileged item of mixing under consideration has been the issue of “mixed marriages,” whose incidence and relevance, and whose war and post-war fates, have been subjected to statistical scrutiny and put to rhetorical uses to no end—that is, endlessly and inconclusively. Calling for reluctance, I want to take issue with the discourses of mixing in general and, more specifically, with the privilege granted to crudely-conceived bodily evidence of a history that reduces encounters and entanglements to marital or coital affairs and that sites the effectiveness of the ideology and imagination of plurality in the genealogical, genetic, essentialist frame of the sexual mixing, reproductive of difference that can be somewhat neatly traced to the pure, parental origins in quantifiable fractions: half-this, a quarter-that, etcetera. A similar logic informs the governmental policy of the so-called “ethnic key” that translates citizens into ethnic percentages according to which formal political representation is ensured and assigned in cantonal, city, and federal governments in the Muslim-Croat Federation, and in the administratively tripartite Bosnian state and its capital, Sarajevo.

When in 1993 Jean-Luc Nancy was asked to write a eulogy for *mélange* and wrote a eulogy for *mêlée*,<sup>2</sup> with an eye on Sarajevo under siege, he did so with professed embarrassment and reserve: “...the most just and beautiful eulogy of the *mélange* would be *to not have to give it*, exactly because the notion [of the *mélange*] itself could not even be discerned or identified” (2000:147). The talk and work of ethnic cleansing, which assumes the possibility of pure identity, calls for a response, Nancy wrote, suggesting however that we respond asymmetrically. In other words, to praise the *mêlée* is to possibly betray it by both singling out the work that went into mixing and by identifying the supposedly originally separate strands, lending them a proper substance apart from the mess. To eulogize in that sense is to commemorate, having dealt the final blow, whereas mixing is ongoing “crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing...” (2000:150). A symmetrical response runs a related risk, according to Nancy, of being confused with various political and cultural projects from multiculturalism to hybridization, whose good intentions are

beyond doubt but which tend to, inadvertently, ontologize the identities to be threaded, molded, melted, transcended, and achieved.

While I am deeply sympathetic to Nancy's tactful handling of *mêlée* and indebted to his critique of identity (to which I will return) I nevertheless depart from Nancy to explore quite a different and ethnographic response to the pervasiveness of ethnicity and issues of mixing. Nerka's therapeutic interventions bring together religious traditions and ethnic and national identities excessively, irreverently, and promiscuously, while her explicitly political commentary defines belonging heavy-handedly and inconsistently. Nevertheless, because her practice attends to surfaces without positing a substantial depth—ethnic, religious, or national—and because she constantly troubles all the categories that she enacts, her healing engenders a suspicion of identity while playfully and powerfully gathering a transient community without essence. I proceed to the tune of hesitance, touring historical and vernacular sites and matters that resonate with Nancy's idea of *mêlée*, as a spontaneous, matter-of-fact existence of differences as well as of mimetic sympathies, aware and weary of the fact that my attention potentially solidifies: renders the phenomena into fixed exemplars of a mixture, or what Nerka, mocking the official rhetoric, sometimes calls a '*multi-kulti*.' But describing Nerka requires a different voice, which I borrow to show that neither discourses that valorize mixing nor Nancy's hesitation that proposes a *mêlée* can approximate a practice that is scandalous, politically subtle, and therapeutically efficacious. However, rather than suggesting that one must abandon all attempt at description of plurality or that "the native" issues an authentic, inimitable model for a politically-minded scholarship, I throw into the mix another, and quite different, local instance of irreverent pluralism, which I will visit around the persona of a regional TV-diviner and the analytical figure of a muddle. The difference between the two local asymmetrical responses to the normative discourses on mixing is insightful.

Nerka, the people's phenomenal "Queen," emerges within the broader political-economic circumstances of contemporary Bosnia, which I have been exploring ethnographically since 2000 but offer here only in a shorthand, as a marketization of health matters (for more detailed account, see Jasarevic 2012a, 20012b). In particular, the popularity of medicine and sorcery associated with religious traditions, and Bosnian Islam in particular, employs Nerka. Listen to what she says: "I was forced to do this work, I didn't want it. I was forced because of what is happening in the world. There are sheitan-imams, there is a disorder (*zbrka*), there are so many who heal, who "pour fears" [a form of folk anti-anxiety therapy], who write inscriptions (*zapise*), and people keep going to them."

### ***Messy Medical Market***

Nerka is not the only one troubled by the new health market in Bosnia where until the 1990s, the socialist health system provided medical services and pharmaceuticals fairly effectively and free of charge. Since the end of socialism and the peace, private clinics and pharmacies mushroomed, while the medical and administrative staff of the public health system informally monetized medical care. Today, people suspect the competence and motivations of medical doctors, seek second opinions in the private sector, if they can afford it, and rely on each other to evaluate prescriptions, claims, and recommendations issued by the professionals. Poor health is not a private matter but a collective emergency that mobilizes the expertise of one's family, friends, neighbors, and chance interlocutors. More often than not it leads to traveling across the plural medical terrain in pursuit of help (see Jasarevic 2011).

The market for traditional and alternative medicine has similarly exploded. Folk therapies that were marginal during socialism are now the stock of health care, as are alternative therapies, some of which resonate with regional and more global trends, from homeopathy to bioenergy (see Lüse and Lázár 2007; Lindquist 2006, 2007; Portata 2007). Medical therapies are widely

advertised as well as informally recommended, turned into a monetized family business or performed with gifting expectations (see Jasarevic 2012b).

At times, methods and idioms of the alternative and traditional practitioners in Bosnia messily intersect. In a 2009 interview for *Aura*, a by-weekly periodical devoted to “Healthier life, culture of living, alternative medicine, and fates,” a Tuzla-based Koranic healer, a young woman regularly featured in this odd genre—which brings patients’ testimonies, regional celebrity gossip, and advertisements for magic and biomedicine together with promotional journalism<sup>3</sup>—spoke of treating the case of disordered “karmic laws” with recitation of the Koran.<sup>4</sup>

### *Sihir Business*

The medical plurality in Bosnia is not entirely new nor is it exceptional considering the medical anthropologists’ proposition that all health systems are plural, even if biomedicine or a particular indigenous tradition is particularly authoritative (Lock and Nguyen 2010; Petryna, Lakoff, and Kleinman 2006). What is new, however, is the visibility and popularity of the alternative forms of medical knowledge that effectively compete with the biomedical definitions of body and health. Similarly, patients and health practitioners share the sense that the new historical times have altered local bodies, psychics, sensibilities, and dispositions and have produced new or reinvented old sorts of disorders. Take the tremendous rise in illnesses related to sorcery (*sihir*, *crna magija*) and spirit-intrusion (*nagaz* or *ogrez*)<sup>5</sup>, all of which were shyly contracted and treated throughout Yugoslav scientific socialism.

Judging by the number of articles devoted to the issue of *sihir* in the *Aura*, as well as the frequency of *sihir* complaints I heard at healers’, sorcery seems to generate considerable local anxiety. *Sihiri* are spells made in the Bosnian Muslim tradition but the term encompasses all forms of local black-magic making, which similarly comprise inversions of Koranic or Biblical texts, bundles and concoctions of bodily extensions and waste, cemetery soil, food leftovers, etcetera. Black magic paraphernalia is remarkably similar across cultural and historical contexts (for comparison see Frazer [1819]2009; Tylor [1871]1920; Mauss [1902]2001; Favret-Saada 1980; Taussig 1993; Geschier 1997). *Sihir* accusations form the underbelly of the intimate relations that are relied upon and recruited to effectively navigate the market and state. Sorcery is particularly suspected between neighbors, business partners and rivals, and extended kin, and within the structurally oppositional mother-in-law (*svekrva*) and daughter-in-law (*snaha*) relationship.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to magic and healing it’s a free market, and people seem to seek the most efficient means to their practical ends rather than a practitioner of the same ethnic background. Contrary to Tone Bringa’s (1995) observation that Orthodox Serbs were suspected of *sihir* by the Bosnian Muslims in a 1980s central Bosnian village, sorcery in contemporary northeastern Bosnia is not attributed to any particular ethnic group. Spell-makers and spell-breakers come from all backgrounds, and the spells aim not at the ethno-national other but at far more intimate and pertinent grievances: unfortunate love and business affairs or familial power relations. In other words, ethnicity is not an priori concern of black magic, but if existential matters happen to map over ethno-national distinctions, ethnicity becomes implicated by default.

Imams (*hodže*, singular, *hodža*), however, enjoy unrivaled reputation in the business of spells<sup>7</sup>, which reputation—anecdotal evidence and the composition of imams’ clients suggest—seems to travel beyond Bosnian borders. Whereas it seems to me that within Bosnia alterity does not seem to imbue magic of the ethnic other with special mana, Bosnia may be exciting the wider, post-Yugoslav regional imagination with magical potential, quite in keeping with other historical examples of how violence and marginality endow people and places with magical attributes that are feared and solicited by more privileged groups (see Taussig 1987). So for instance, Bosnian professional diaspora working with the international relief NGOs or with the American defense contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, help their colleagues, former Yugoslavs, find relief from sorcery or anxiety or make use of divinatory technologies with the Bosnian healers and diviners,

who also readily work at distance<sup>8</sup> (see Jasarevic 2012c). Similarly, a local pharmaceutical wholesaler in Tuzla told me that their Slovenian business partner asked to be put in touch with a certain imam famous for his medicinal inscriptions (*zapisi*) and talismans (*hamajlije*).

### *Talismans, Texts, CDs and DVDs*

Islamic spiritual healing manuals have become popular and available in the bookstores, next to a stock self-help literature on herbal medicine, dietary regimes, bioenergy, meditation, and dream interpretation. Competing advertisements for spiritual self-help and protection handbooks are also legible in the *Aura*: there is the *Struggle for Life in Spiritual World and Healing*, promoted by the author, the young healer mentioned above; there is a two-volume “original, simple, and practical” guide to protection against jinni and sheitan, published by a group of students of Islamic studies;<sup>9</sup> and there is the impressive CD and DVD of a Sufi sheikh’s (*šejh*) *Protection and Healing of Sibir, Black Magic, Jinn and Sheitan’s Evil*. Imams can be recruited to heal or harm, though the practitioners tend to divide the labour carefully. Imams, who can be either affiliated with the Islamic Community or with a Sufi order, or both, heal by reciting Koran (for treatment of “red” or “black wind,” for instance), issuing medicinal inscriptions that are to be ingested or inhaled, and making talismans that are worn on a person or placed in home or business. Imams tend to heal only sibir and spirit-caused disorders, although healing manuals recommend Koran as a cure for all illnesses.

Inscriptions and talismans are not at all new in the region. They were mentioned by late 19th century Bosnian literati who contributed to the *Herald* of the National Museum in Sarajevo, busily recording immanently disappearing folk ways, beliefs, and magic, and in the process—the Austrian-Hungarian administrators hoped—writing a common, multiethnic Bosnian culture that would counteract rising Serb and Croat nationalisms (see Lipa 2004). A medical doctor, Lepold Glück, who found talismans on his patients’ bodies (1890:48), published a comparative survey of these curiosities made by clerics of all confessional groups, suggesting that “Mohammedan” talismans were most complex and custom-made, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic ones were ready-made,<sup>10</sup> and the Sephardic Jewish ones, *kameje*, came from Jerusalem at a significant price. A recent analysis of the National Museum’s collection of inscriptions and talismans dates their earliest mention to the 14th century (it dates their disappearance to 20<sup>th</sup>), suggesting that the use and circulation of these remedies was invigorated with the arrival of the Ottomans (Fabijanić 2004). Health and wealth, sibir and urok, were perennial concerns. Fabijanić draws on several regional histories (see Garčević 1942; Sielski 1941; Handžić 1938; and Hangi 1907) to propose that talismans were the “common good” (*opšte dobro*): Catholic priests used them to treat Muslims, Catholics sought imams or Eastern Orthodox priests, and at least one imam treated an Eastern Orthodox man (see Fabijanić 2004:42-43; 73). The ordinariness of folk irreverence for the religious traditions is legible in clergy’s matter-of-fact reports (see Kovačević 1888:16-7) as well as in their unease about religious pluralism. In official correspondence, Bishop Bsile in Eastern Bosnia complained in 1860s that Catholics seek priests for spiritual medicine and if the latter’s inscriptions failed, they “ran over” to imams and Orthodox priests (quoted in Fabijanić 2004:43). On the other hand, an 1866 court record of a Shariat judge granting a license to a Catholic priest to treat an Eastern Orthodox patient (Fabijanić 2004:42) suggests that the traffic in religious medicine was somewhat regulated.

Two recent, popular Koranic healing manuals, first published in the 1990s, perpetuate the impression that healing is a sanctioned Islamic practice, while also offering quite different reflections on their place in the broader historical context: one references the islamization of Bosnia and affiliates itself with the lessons of the more authentic Islam (Štulanović 2007), while another acknowledges a long local history of healing among imams whose practice was outlawed but informally continued throughout the communism (Pekarić 1998).

## *Money and Muddle*

While monetary exchange has always been a concern of local magic and healing practices, the scale of the present enchantment business is new (see Jasarevic 2012c). If global historical dynamics of capital relate Bosnian postsocialist circumstances to the occult economies that Jean and John Comaroff (1999) described in the post-colonial, post-socialist, and post-Fordist spaces, the public discourses that the fantastic rise in sorcery and alternative medicine inspires are locally particular (for another divergence from “occult economies” see Klima 2006). There are quite predictable concerns about the welfare<sup>11</sup> of the folk, seen as cheated out of scarce money and resources—the fees for sorcery making and breaking are notoriously high—and distracted from more entrepreneurial pursuits: a manager of one Micro-Credit Organization complained that their best client spends thousands in loans and profits on sorcerers in attempts to fend against black magic. But the stakes of magical thinking are raised further in the voiced worries about the irrationality and passions of the masses. Remember the not too distant travesty of Radovan Karadžić, wanted for war-crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), who avoided capture and persecution under the guise of a “New Age” healer, Dr. Dabić in Belgrade, Serbia. The alarmist assumption in the international media and local rationalist discourses is that masses that cannot tell a war criminal from a bioenergy sage, medicine from quackery, make-believe from real, would of course continue voting the state into backwardness, nationalism, or religious orthodoxy. And while it is the citizens of Serbia who misrecognized the charisma of Dr. Dabić, it is the Bosnian Serbs who followed him when his appeal was dressed in the military fatigue.

The naïveté of the masses and the mass appeal of magical means, is the commerce of the bizarre regional celebrity, Milan Tarot, a “tarotologist,” who ran live shows on Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian TV houses where callers, at the going rate per minute, received the most absurd fortune forecasts and advice (‘Your son will get a visa [for the United States]...when he becomes an astronaut of a space-mission to Mars’ or ‘You will get pregnant in seven days, if you read Pinocchio daily’). Tarot is not at all striving for the credible. His outrageous advice is matched by the outfits he sports from orange Buddhist robes, to golden pharaoh headdress, to a rubber mask that looked much like Karadžić’s Dr. Dabić-face. And then there are the props he uses: from a clergyman’s large Orthodox cross to Scooby Doo puppets. And yet the main stars of his show are the callers whose voices ring of mundane emergencies and carry, across phoned, televised, and youtubized distance, their incredibly earnest pleas. Or, at times, frustration at Tarot’s performance, which is cruel, vulgar, and outrageous and all along funny in a way and to the extent that perversion can be amusing. Whether the callers fake or believe, Tarot profits for the calls placed from across ex-Yugoslavia and Europe, as we are reminded by the prices that stream across the screen.

## *The Queen’s Domain*

It is the work of popular imams that keeps Nerka, the people’s Queen, particularly busy. She refers to them indiscriminately as sheitan imams and claims that their sorcery, their incompetent meddling with illnesses, and their entrepreneurial prescription practices, which inflate the number of remedies and return visits, contribute to the public health emergency brought about by the present disorder. She carefully screens her patients’ bodies for traces of used Koranic inscriptions, as well as for the pharmaceuticals from which they are supposed to abstain prior to her treatment. With her distended vision that often sees beyond the present and phenomenal she grasps the undeclared remnants of pills and traces of past inscriptions on the patients and then her angry shouting at the accused, who might be dismissed or treated but (reprimanded),<sup>12</sup> fills the office and the waiting room with discomfort. The beloved Queen’s patients are known to defect

to imams, against all her warnings, and she rehearses a litany of these betrayals to the audience of some five to seven people in treatment, proving the point that hers is an ungrateful task. The explosion of Koranic healing and magic adds urgency to Nerka's healing, which, in one of the stories that she tells of her initiation, is itself sanctioned by Muslim mysticism: a Sufi sheikh in Western Bosnia allegedly summoned her for an interview that ended with a plea: 'Work, work for as long as you exist, help people. Allah assigned you for it.'

Nerka's practice occupies a space between religion, magic, medicine, and healing that she only defines negatively. She angrily refuses comparison with imams, diviners, or sorcerers<sup>13</sup> and challenges the claims made by much of alternative medicine, bioenergy in particular. One day, when her loyal patients suspected my disbelief and doubted my ability to justly describe Nerka to the western academia, one of them, suggested that I "write simply," 'While others are reading fortune and future she has the power to cure. She doesn't use inscriptions but has power in herself, in her hands, she cures with those... I don't know how, I don't know with what she cures [others join in: we don't know, we don't], but only dear Allah could have given her this gift, Jesus too had a gift like that, to heal, it's a gift. Those others are sorcerers and fortune tellers, but there's not anyone like her in this world.'

Her diagnostic categories are often biomedical and often, at her insistence, crossed-checked with medical technology, but biomedicine would not readily recognize the links that she makes, inconsistently, between symptoms and causes or the anatomies that she doodles in the patients' records. And yet, because her idiom is not obviously secular nor is her appearance straightforwardly religious—her outfits are sexy and her language can be quite rude—and because she disowns both alternative medicine and magic, Nerka effectively eludes a categorial grasp. Instead, she inspires inconclusive lists. Categories guide conduct; they help prescribe idiom and suggest positions in social, moral, and discursive space. Without such aids, relating to Nerka is not easy.

### ***Gifts, Indebting***

Patients arrive to Nerka's after rounds of tried, failed, and abandoned medical or magical treatments, having exhausted their budget, patience, and faith in doctors, healers, luck, or God. At Nerka's they find not a simple reassurance but the discomfiting experience of being exposed, confused, abused, and terribly indebted.

Indebted because Nerka's treatment has no price. In the face of rampant marketization of folk- and bio-medicine, popular commonsense insists that real (*pravi*) healers and doctors do not charge for treatment but take whatever they are given and forgive when they are given nothing (see Jasarevic 2012b). By extension, many people feel that real healers are not advertised but are to be found by the word of mouth, in places obscured by their plainness: in an apartment like any other in a socialist high-rise or in a village far away. At the same time, the sheer number of commercial advertisements and traffic at the infamous and expensive sorcerers indicate that a healer or sorcerer need not be so very real to be powerful and effective.

Nerka, however, acts as an absolute giver, but not by virtue of giving absolutely, as in George Bataille's economy of exuberant expenditure. On the contrary, she is an utter giver inasmuch as she cannot be given anything that she needs, craves, or cares to have. Her giving always exceeds yours and she takes with displayed indifference for your gratitude or your money. Furthermore, you risk her displeasure whether you give or withhold, whether you calculate how much is reasonable to give ("I hear them thinking, should I give 20 or 30 or 10?" Nerka tells me) or when you give unreasonably much: she refuses the money given by patients who are broke or who, she guesses, borrowed money.<sup>14</sup> Not only does she give what cannot be given back ("Dear Allah, did I get tired! I give myself for you, it is my self that I'm giving" she complains to her assembled patients one day), cannot be reciprocated or repaid. But your leaving money (crumpled 10KM [Convertible Marks] or crisp 100 Euros) escapes her attention as does your gratitude: your

offer of love and devotion could be snubbed and suspected.<sup>15</sup> She is the only giver of gifts that indebt, and this negative reciprocity profoundly marks the domain of her power. The abuses,<sup>16</sup> threats, and nerve-wrecking playfulness that accompany Nerka's gift of healing are a bitter medicine to take, although they do not diminish her generosity. And whereas elsewhere in Bosnia an exchange is a delicate affair surrounded with various considerations that check a giver from reimbursing herself symbolically with congratulations, Nerka reiterates patients' debts to her, exposing them further, as they lie stretched out on the couch, beneath her healing hands and knowing gaze.

Nerka's insistence on violent gifting is another challenge to the legitimacy of enterprising and promising healers, black magic dealers, imams, and priests.

### *Nebojša*

One day in September of 2007, stuffing her wallet with the bills that patients have stacked at the end of the table since morning, Nerka calls in the family of Nebojša, a five-year old with Down syndrome from the city of Bijeljina in Serb Republic. To the audience of the patients in the office she declares that "illness and life boil down to this [tapping the wallet]: if only we had money" and then addresses Nebojša: "Are you afraid, you little one, my beauty?" The child, it turns out, is not afraid but kept quiet because his parents told him so. Nerka orders the parents to let the child speak whenever he feels like. "And to the face of the [Eastern Orthodox] priest too!" Nebojša enthusiastically adds, cracking up, which prompts his mother to explain how Nebojša got into trouble the other day and lost the license to speak his mind, when he kicked a *pop* out of their house. The child joins in her telling of the event with his whole body: his finger theatrically waiving, shoulders raised, his little face frowning, striking a caricature of an authority figure. Nerka, amused, asks the boy: "What did the priest want from you?" When Nebojša declares: "Money!" she is delighted, laughs wholeheartedly; we all do. Nerka turns this into a lesson for the anthropologist: "There, do you see now? Don't you know that imams rejoice when they learn of someone's death? They rub their hands thinking 'there'll be chicken [a feast], there'll be a pretty widow.'" Nerka is working on Nebojša, stretched out on the couch, while simultaneously treating others in the room; her attention is always disseminated, her contact not only spatially remote but also itinerant. She says to no one in particular, "Screw the money, all we need is health!" Nebojša, exercising his new freedom of speech, repeats: "Screw the money!" pauses, then adds, "But mom is always short of it, for the medicines." The mother burrows her face in Nebojša's neck, smothering sobs that shake her back turned to us. Nerka breaks the silence around the room, moved: "Let him always speak, let him take everything out! You are done for now, come back." Nebojša speaks, "Dad, pay to my aunty." Nerka, startled: "I don't want anything! I just want you to come back again so that the auntie helps you." To the parents, she declares, "I said what I had, come back again."

Nerka will not let her work be framed by formal expectations of generosity or merit. When I asked her whether her work is *sevap* [Turkism for good deed and merit], she was indignant: "There is no such thing as *sevap*. *Sevap* was made up by a gentleman who hasn't yet made any [merit]. Imams are talking about *sevap*, but have you ever seen them give anything to anyone? Priests as well, they only take, people just bring [gifts] to them they never give back. Have you ever heard that they buried someone without money? No! [...] If I give you 1KM I forget about it. *Sevap* is *halal* [Turkism that translates in the vernacular as forgiving and forgetting],<sup>17</sup> there is only *halal*..."

But then again, Nerka's forgiving is not complete—consider her accounting of patients' betrayals and of her sacrifices—nor is it reconciliatory, as in the post-war civil society building plans and projects. One day she says, "Let whoever wants to forgive the Serbs, I can't. I will not forgive. The other day a mother from Podrinje [site of grave atrocities in Eastern Bosnia] was here. Her seven sons [are missing], she was reciting their names. I know they are all dead, but

how can I tell her?" Another time, however, Nerka says: "I would do away with all you Muslim women." An elderly woman in a headscarf laughs nervously: "Don't say it, Nerka, there aren't many of us left." Nerka fires back, "What with it? The other day I told to imam's face 'screw all imams.'"

### *People's Queen*

The border drawn by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement between the Croat-Muslim Federation and the Serb Republic is administratively easy enough to cross but looms large in the imagination of residents on both sides. Memories and landmarks of ethnic cleansing, refugee settlement by the ethnically same, the fear of armed radicals, not least in the police forces, are all disincentives to travel, especially given that your name or your accent might speak of your ethnicity, although rarely unambiguously. Nerka regularly draws visitors from the Serb Republic. She often declares herself "the only protector of Serbs" and protests to the multiethnic audience of her patients, always kept on their toes by the uncertainty that Nerka playfully generates, that "it is easy to blame it all on Serbs." She boasts of having treated Serbian pop celebrities,<sup>18</sup> Bosnian Serb politicians, warlords, and the common lot. She makes insistent, though inconsistent, distinctions between Chetniks (Serbian militant nationalists), Serbs, and the Eastern Orthodox Christians. In her spectacular therapeutic performances, Nerka displaces herself from any one of the regional faiths, and locates her belonging in all. "I love Islam with my heart but I never thought about separating it from Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy," she says. She observes Islamic and Christian holidays, reads the Bible and the Koran to "calm down," and boasts of a disregard for formal religious prescriptions, "I eat ham and still love Allah." Nerka's life history is spun of the tales that she fitfully begins and abandons, which her patients and her enemies pick up, touch up and circulate. She declares herself "a real Bosnian," which seems to imply an entangled genealogy. She says she was born a Muslim, with a Serbian great-grandmother whose name, "Nevena", she wore until the age of eight, and regularly mentions that her two sons in their late teens, bear Orthodox and Catholic names.

And yet, another time in the course of the treatment she says that "people should be realistic. Everything comes down to nationality." Having finished her cigarette, she shows the tall, blond, elegant woman to the couch, asking her: "And Dragica, what nationality are you?" "I don't know," Dragica says. Nerka: "How can you not know?" Dragica: "I don't. A Bosnian?" Nerka: "That's your citizenship." Dragica: "Well, I'm half-half. My father is Catholic, my mother a Muslim." Nerka: "Your name is Dragica, so it means you are a Catholic." Dragica: "But my mother named me. And a name can be changed." Nerka: "Where will you be buried?" Dragica: "By Gradina [regional] hospital in Tuzla" [a cluster of cemeteries lies there, literally spilling into one another: Muslim, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and a "city" or "atheist" cemetery]. Nerka: "Where those atheists are." Swinging her arms gently above the patient's body, Nerka presses, prods her for answers, attempting to fix the woman outside of the mixture that she is, seeking the originary or final point, the moment of birth or death that would cancel the possibility of multiple being or of an existence blissfully oblivious to the normative, categorial clarity.

### *Mêlée*

Mixing, Nancy thinks, is best to leave be. Being itself is already mixed up because there is no single being but only being with and among others, in a contiguous and contagious exposition that is the plurality of existence. *Mêlée* is the originary and necessary condition of life. Being comes about through comingling—bodily, historical, life-historical, circumstantial, or solicited. *Mêlée*, forever yet unfinished action, is ideally unidentified, unnoticed, and lived. But also potentially tense and conflicted. And always partial. Consider that imams, priests, spell-makers,

and Koranic healers treat people of all ethnic backgrounds and that patients seem to procure medicine and magic from all religious and irreligious traditions. Here I can point to a history of vernacular and practical mixing, risking to turn it, with my pointing, prying finger, into a substance: a mixture, a done deal of fusion or disorder, that lends itself to projects of identifying, quantifying, celebrating, achieving, or undoing. To identify too closely, if we are guided by Nancy's sensibilities, is possibly to reduce a phenomenon to an exemplary point of radical self-sameness, to isolate, to focus on, to target. For Nancy, Sarajevo in the 1990s "has become *the* expression of a complete system for the reduction to identity," (2000:145) besieged and aimed at. Pure identity, however, Nancy writes, presumes a paradoxical relation of self that is like nothing but self, and as such without extension, collapsed into nothing, outside of any relation. There can only be identity in relation to and in distinction from others. Community or culture is unique and recognizable by the virtue of how distinct it is, but distinction, Nancy cautions, is not to be confused with foundation, with an essence. And having a culture or community in common itself differentiates each singular member. In other words, community does not subsume people into a mass, does not engender a specular recognition of the essentially self-same, but rather brings out and brings together differences. The challenge as Nancy puts it is "to do right by identities, but without ceding anything to their frenzy, to their presuming to be substantial identities" (2000:147).

On the contrary, Nerka who works by interlacing inconsistently, imprecisely, roughly what ethno-national ideologies would keep apart and what multi-ethnic peace-building projects would wed together, gives in to "the frenzy." She points out religions, identities, and differences. She embarrasses by asking people who they are, calling them names or implying their ethno-political faults, forcing them to identify and defend themselves, if only by rejecting nationalism and appealing to humanism. All the while her fickle definitions potentially displace identities only to bring them up again. "Let us be realistic," she says, "everything boils down to nationality."

Then there is Milan Tarot, who turns "the frenzy" into show business.<sup>19</sup> The muddle that is his trademark has recently been turned into an explicitly political provocation: in 2012 Tarot's website announces his running for an independent delegate in the Serbian National Assembly. He appeals to those who would otherwise not vote. Tarot offers to end, as he puts it, "the joke" that is the current state of Serbian politics, with a half-serious alternative that mimics the political genres, images, and affects (Tarot's campaign video stages sincerity, discomfort in front of camera, and a quiver in the voice) but amplifies them with cues that are farfetched (a lemon yellow blazer, meditative musical background, and a series of untenable and unrelated electoral promises of plenty: 6000-Euro salaries for all and three meals a day, listed in detail as if he were reading a menu). He foresees being "the only wizard in the Assembly."

Imams and magic makers occupy a recognizable ritual niche, even if the distinction between institutional religion and magic is not straightforward. And Milan Tarot and his audience are embraced in the shocking exchange of money and misery in another, incredible, highly mediated reality of always first, or almost always only first, encounters: before the reality check (a son sadly out of a mission to Mars, Pinocchio not impregnating, a second opinion). Nerka's pilgrims include a growing body of returning patients, whose personal experience tests her efficacy, and the new arrivals informally referred to her, by those who swear that Nerka helped them. Her gifting and healing relates people to her forcefully and indefinitely. And yet the familiarity with Nerka does not help sort her out with some fixed, categorial grasp. She can only be described with the fluidity of a list, which shuffles religious, national, secular, and humanist diacritics. Nancy says that identity hangs on the contact, which is to say on exchange, sharing, and mixing, because "touch alone exposes the limits at which identities or ipseities can *distinguish themselves* [...] from one another, with one another..." (156). Because Nancy conceives embodied being as essentially extended, superficial, inherently engaged in relations, and because surface defies grasp beyond the skin-deep encounter, contact also proves the limit to

appropriation. Skin is the meeting and the parting point. This is not a crudely materialist denial of metaphysical shades of being, but rather a denial of withdrawn substance of identity: ethnic, national, religious, or human.

While confusion at Nerka's is uncomfortable, unlike imams, priests, magic-makers, and traditional and alternative healers she habitually gathers followers around these ontological uncertainties. Nerka's touch is painfully intimate and compelling, precisely because she so bluntly displaces the possibility of belonging, together with the crowds that gather to disperse.

Not without traces; on Facebook, some days ago, she informed me, in the Serbian dialect in which she always writes, that a heart-shaped mark has emerged on her right cheek. The Queen's face is the iconic surface of intimate contact that preserves distance and gives rise to the harsh play of difference, which just could be love.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bosnian central state that emerged with the Dayton Peace Agreement, which concluded the war in 1995, is composed of the Serb Republic (RS), with a predominantly ethnic Serb, traditionally Orthodox Christian population, and the Muslim-Croat Federation, composed of the majority of Bosnian Muslims and Croats, traditionally Catholic. The territory of the Federation is ethnically plural inasmuch as all three dominant ethnicities share the spaces either indiscriminately or along the demarcated lines. The third administrative unit in Bosnia is the so-called District of Brčko, which has been given a special status of legal exception. This city in northeastern Bosnia is home to all three groups and is an often cited experiment in ethnic integration. My research takes place in northeastern Bosnia, which is, arguably, exceptionally mixed. The plural composition of the regional capital, the city of Tuzla, flight of refugees in and out notwithstanding, has weathered the 1990s war and has, not surprisingly, been made an example of ethnonational multiculturalism.

<sup>2</sup> Translators of Nancy's text remind English readers that *mêlée* in French rings with connotations of fight and sexual liaisons, as well as mixing, motley and variegation, which did not travel with the English form "melee" (in Nancy 2000:205 n.2).

<sup>3</sup> A similar periodical is *New Arka*. Both are published in Sarajevo and distributed in both entities of Bosnian state: Serb Republic and Muslim-Croat Federation.

<sup>4</sup> Amina Minela seems to be in her twenties. She is a *bula*, which in the vernacular registers a woman who wears a headscarf ('*pokrivena*,' literally "covered") and is presumably religiously educated. At least two other equally young women *bule* (plural) are advertised in *Aura* since 2008. Their age is unusual considering that in the traditional forms of healing that lean on Koran, such as *strava*, "fears," anxiety therapy, *struna*, a stomach massage, and *crveni vjetar*, which heals "red wind," a spirit-caused skin condition, those who receive the gift of healing begin practicing only after menopause.

<sup>5</sup> *Nagaz* and *ogrez* register an accidental contact, as when one steps on, insults, hurts, or seduces a spiritual entity that in turn invades him or her or otherwise causes injury. The local terms often get lost in the healing manuals recently translated from Arabic. For instance, in Muhamed Semaha's *Healing with Koran (Liječenje Kuranom)*, the translator uses the term "possession" (*opsjednutost*) for the Arabic term *mess*, which directly translates to *dodir* or "touch." In vernacular uses, however, Semaha's descriptions of *mess* would correspond to *nagaz*, *ogrez*, or *ograisanje*. "Possession" is rarely mentioned in the market or in therapeutic settings, and then mostly with reference to entities exorcised by Orthodox and Catholic clergy. Otherwise there are references to treatments of jinni intrusions by practitioners within the small community of Wahhabis, more or less radical conservatives who are new to Bosnia, and the popular practice of the young and hip Dr. Ahmet Srabović.

<sup>6</sup> What is so powerful about the *sihir* discourses is that even those who "don't believe much" are "caught" – to use Jeanne Favret-Saada's (1981) terms from another context where "spell-making" makes up a reality incredible to all but those initiated into an experiential and discursive community that does not require belief. In other words, inferences that those in one's immediate vicinity harbour envy and ill-will or contract one of many spell-makers to act on their behalf are themselves spellbinding. I witnessed many occasions when a woman or a man engaged in a series of expensive and nerve-wrecking defenses against alleged spells "made" by *snaha*, *svekrva*, or a neighbor, only to be informed by a healer "for real" that there were actually no traces of spells on their homes or bodies, or at least that it was impossible to name so precisely the source of the spell. That is, diagnosis and divination may find a spell, may relate it to a man or a woman or to a particular place where it was contracted, sometimes even a letter of the suspected name, but calling out a specific "snaha, svekrva, or a neighbor" could not be based on evidence. As in so many other contexts, it is women who tend to be accused of (seeking or making) magic, although I know of plenty of Bosnian men who have sought professional intervention into their love or business affairs.

<sup>7</sup> Their close competitors are Gypsies, whose black magic is considered proverbially powerful. However, because I know only of one, though extremely popular, Gypsy black-magic dealer in Tuzla region, it seems to me that Gypsies, the paradigmatic other, who are generally considered the most accomplished sorceresses as well as the best cheats, have a reputation greater than their share in the magic market. Marcel Mauss and Bronislaw Malinowski both noted that the socially marginal group is regularly accused of magic, and ethnographies have since described a complex play of awe, attraction, and repulsion towards the magical body of the social and political other (Taussig 1987, Siegel 2006).

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<sup>8</sup> While in the United States, I was approached by Kosovars and Bosnians for referrals to a good fortune teller or healer.

<sup>9</sup> *Zaštita od džina i šejtana u svjetlu Kur'ana i Sunneta, Hamajlije, talismani i ruk'je u svjetlu Kur'ana i Sunneta* published by Kutubhana Innehulhaqq, Tuzla.

<sup>10</sup> Glück also mentions an inscription for headache relief that is written on the crust of warm bread and eaten, or on willow leaf, which is steeped in water and drunk (52).

<sup>11</sup> After Serbia outlawed the broadcast of fortune telling, Milan “Seer” Tarot, moved his programs to Bosnia and Croatia. A journalist for Croatian *Jutarnji List* anticipates that Croatia too will introduce a similar ban to save the “unfortunate masses” (*nesretni puk*) from themselves (*Večernji List* 24/10/2009).

<sup>12</sup> Once, Nerka started jokingly yelling at a returning patient: “Look at him, I cured his lung cancer in twenty one days, and then off he went to an imam. All of my patients, they abandon me and go onwards. And I returned all my debts, if I borrow from someone a Dinar, I return it, and they, they go to imams and give 50 KM just like that. From now on *imams* will be “making” it for all of you [*praviti* usually refers to *sihir*].”

<sup>13</sup> Most traditional healers try to dispel the unwanted conflation of their practice with sorcery. Unwanted because spell-making and divining are regularly associated with frauds that cost the gullible precious money, and furthermore unflattering because associated with the Gypsies.

<sup>14</sup> This is perhaps another way that Nerka escapes getting indebted to her patients. For if someone runs into debt to pay Nerka, their gift of money which is owed and must be repaid remains a debt even if given onwards (to Nerka) as a payment or gift. Giving a gift of debt is one way in which patients are also giving themselves, because to contract a debt is to give a promise which must be fulfilled if one were to lead a good life or die a good death.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida critiques the possibility of a gift on the grounds that gratitude acknowledged by the giver is a way of symbolic payment, restitution, and symbol that does not escape the circularity and temporality of exchange that constitutes a Subject and annihilates the gift. The assumption is that subjects constitute themselves through domination not generosity.

<sup>16</sup> “I have no measure,” she says at the times when she threatens to kill her enemies, who attack her with sorcery, or her patients who have slighted her. Other times she says that she would never hurt anyone (although she never puts it so emphatically, so clearly before a larger audience as she does in private, when she explains that if she hurt just once, there would be no end to her evil-doing). Some take her threats seriously others don’t – “She is incapable of doing evil,” says one of two brothers among her patients whom Nerka has treated for years, a cancer survivor. While Nerka wants to be taken seriously at all times, her impulsiveness makes her patients doubt what Nerka really means. It is the history of experience and her practice that decides the case for many whether or not Nerka really means it when she threatens to hurt or kill. When I ask one of the two brothers about Nerka’s threats, he says: “Let’s not speak hypothetically, let’s look at the past record.” Nerka’s threatening ways can be endearing without it necessarily appealing to our weakness (libidinal, as in the weakness in one’s knees and butterflies in the stomach) towards power that Deleuze and Guattari call our, everyone’s, “everyday fascism.”

<sup>17</sup> In Bosnian, this Turkism, from Arabic *halal*, permissible, is used mostly to gesture towards forgiving and forgetting, *halalit*, say a debt or an insult. It is also used across the ethnic vocabularies. Balorda 1976[1930], who observes Eastern Orthodox mortuary rites in 1930s central Bosnia, notes that relatives, neighbors, friends, acquaintances visit a dying person to “alale,” which he translates as “to say farewell,” *oprostiti se*. Now the infinitive *oprostiti* also means to forgive. When parting in Bosnia, at least from the elderly, they will insist that you forgive them, *halali*, if they have somehow slighted you in their (usually excessive) hospitality. In this sense parting is always possibly thought of as parting for good.

<sup>18</sup> Including Ceca, the iconic pop star in the region who was married to infamous Arkan, Chetnik commander, sought for war crimes.

<sup>19</sup> Tarot’s muddle resonates with Michael Taussig’s (2003) notion of magic that is energized by a public performance of the trick and thrives on an interplay of faith and skepticism (on trickery, revelation and concealment, see also Rosalind Morris 2000). In one episode of his live-streaming TV show, Tarot brings “evidence” of black magic: gloved, he handles some mundane objects – nails, wire, a plastic soap dish, etcetera – explaining how they are used to convey spells. In the process, he also “gives out” recipes for do-it-yourself sorcery, from love magic to financial misfortunes. Much of his exposition indeed plays on the local sorcery techniques, reliant on principles of sympathetic magic. His performance simultaneously

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addresses the skeptics, those who don't believe there is such a thing as black magic, and advertises his spell-removing skills to the afflicted.

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