

Of Medicine and *Différance* in Post-War Bosnia
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At first read, Nerka, the singularly quirky therapist around which Larisa Jasarevic's insightful account of healing in post-war Bosnia revolves, appears to be the antithesis of Muchona the Hornet, the native exegete who garnered fame with his polished expositions of Ndembu religion in Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols*. Muchona, Turner noted of the man he affectionately referred to as his colleague, "delighted in making explicit what he had known subliminally about his own religion" (1967:19). His intuitive grasp of "local knowledge" (Geertz 1983) and his interpretive skills turned him into the model informant against whom all other anthropologists' informants would thereafter be measured. In his candid account of fieldwork in Borneo, Peter Metcalf (2002) thus compares Kasi, the formidable old woman who has been his teacher for two decades, to Muchona. The comparison, he suggests, has provided a useful cross-check for evaluating the benefits as well as the limitations of his educative relationship with Kasi.

Now, Muchona and Nerka are both healers. Yet, whereas Muchona the "Interpreter of Religion" is widely recognized as the paradigmatic culture broker, Nerka could be called the queen of mystification. In her gritty yet endearing portrayal of Nerka, Jasarevic paints the healer as an obfuscator whose every move communicates ambiguity. Whereas Muchona is driven to clarify any cultural material requiring elucidation, Nerka relishes in the confusion of categories. Neither noticeably secular nor openly religious in her demeanor and dress, she

befuddles clients with her outrageous antics, her willfully mysterious diagnoses, her irreverence for religious specialists of all stripes, and her reluctance to explain who she is and how she heals—even to Jasarevic. By embracing yet also rejecting categorical boundaries, she compels the anthropologist (as well as her own patients) to consider simultaneously how a thing is and isn't. Far from driving away potential clients, however, Nerka's cultivation of ambiguity and her defiant rejection of received ontologies are precisely what contribute to her popularity as a healer. How Nerka's cultivated disruption of ontological certainties provides the possibility of her own success (and perhaps that of the anthropologist) is what interests me here.

Except for notable exceptions (Last 1981), the literature on affliction management has tended to emphasize the coherence and boundedness of medical systems everywhere. Even when terms such "traditional medicine" (meant to evoke discreet and stable sets of practices associated with identifiable social groups) and "ethnomedicine" (suggesting "tribally bounded medical customs" [Janzen and Feierman 1992:xvii]) have been recognized as problematic, scholars have rarely questioned the existence of distinctive systems. In her pioneering study of Andean medicine Crandon-Malamud (1991) thus identified five distinct domains of medical resources, ranging from shamanistic care to hospital care, available to people on the Bolivian altiplano. Given how power relations are embedded in medical resources, seeking relief for one's affliction there is rarely a simple matter of finding a competent medical practitioner. When illness strikes, members of the three ethnoreligious groups (Aymara peasants, Methodist Aymara, and Catholic *mestizos*)

that make up the local population pragmatically select from the available repertoire of curative strategies to forge new identities and secure access to additional resources. Set against the backdrop of economic hardship and political instability that is Bolivia's current fate, Crandon-Malamud's study points to the complex ways in which meeting one's health needs is part of a constantly evolving set of coping strategies. Medical resources on the altiplano are thus accessed as a mode of ethnic identification and a mechanism of empowerment. Although patients routinely manipulate ethnoreligious boundaries in search of health, the treatments they procure, rooted as they are in local ontologies, only reinscribe the distinctions—between Indian and *mestizo* (or White), shamanism and Catholicism (or Methodism), and tradition and modernity—around which social identification operates. There is no place in such a model of medical economy for the kind of “irreverent pluralism” (that simultaneously establishes and displaces categorical boundaries) that Jasarevic (p.3) claims is the hallmark of Nerka's practice.

Rather than take the distinctiveness of medical systems (or so-called traditions) as their point of departure, other scholars have explored ways in which healing involves the breaching of boundaries and the questioning of categories. West and Luedke (2006) thus draw attention to the ingenuity and innovativeness deployed by healers who practice their craft in times of austerity and curtailed social services in southeast Africa. Healers, they note, routinely cross boundaries—literal as well as metaphorical—in search of new healing substances, new knowledge, new therapeutic “styles” and strategies, as well as new sources of legitimacy. Whether they broker access to therapeutic resources, borrow the

trappings of biomedical and other secular institutions, apprentice themselves to spirits, or look to the past in search of authenticity and authority, they cross the border between the familiar and the unfamiliar, weaving together disparate strands of knowledge and experience. “So fundamental to the profile of the healer are transgressions of boundaries,” West and Luedke (2006:2) note, “that one might conclude that the power of healing is in some profound way bound up with the act of crossing borders.”

West and Luedke’s musings on therapeutic border-crossing are based on ethnographic observations on the African continent, but they could just as well refer to parts of the former Yugoslavia, notably Bosnia, where, according to Jasarevic, an intensified traffic of materia medica, therapeutic knowledge, and healing techniques across ethnoreligious boundaries calls into question conventional models of identity and alterity. Take Nerka, for instance. At a time when disruption in the availability of health services in post-war Bosnia has profoundly impacted people’s ability to obtain medical treatment, the healer who her patients fondly call “*their* queen of health” successfully “‘resources’ and repurposes” (Wendland 2012:114) a seemingly inexhaustible supply of ideas and technologies to cure everything “from sorcery attacks to heartaches, from arthritis to bankruptcy” (p.1). She is known for her uncanny ability to identify complex afflictions without so much as touching her patients’ bodies. Aware that her reputation—and ultimately her profits—hinges on producing a memorable impression, yet also mindful that her powers should be shrouded in an aura of mystery if they are to remain effective, she dazzles audiences with demonstrations of her potency without ever divulging much about herself or

the sources of her formidable insights. Part-Sphinx, part-entertainer, she elicits a mixture of awe, attraction, and perplexity from the patients and would-be patients who stream through her opulent home five days a week.

Like other healers bent on taking advantage of what Jasarevic describes as an exploding market for alternative/traditional medicines, Nerka operates on the “edge of Islam” (McIntosh 2009) and other ethnoreligious boundaries. Like them she often positions herself both “betwixt and between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ healing styles” (Simmons 2006:78) to capitalize on existing (as well as emerging) domains of knowledge, experience, and practice regardless—yet also precisely because—of the values and identities these various domains index. However, Jasarevic justifiably argues, the space in which the healer operates cannot be characterized as a locatable niche with fluid but nonetheless definable boundaries. Put differently, seeing Nerka as just another savvy healer does not do justice to her quixotic personality, her special brand of “therapeutic entrepreneurialism” (Luedke 2006:44), and her puzzling mix of faith and skepticism towards the therapeutic resources she taps into.

Nerka is a study in contradiction. She draws from Islam as a source of legitimacy (and presumably a repository of potency) by claiming that a Sufi Sheikh told her healing was her God-given mission, yet she lashes out at imams, accusing them of harming people with dangerous Qur’anic medicine—the effect of which she must counteract with her own cures. She baffles clients with her unpredictability; one minute she promotes tolerance and humanism, and the next she makes a statement about religion or ethnicity that reveals the depth of her prejudices. Yet

because everything she says automatically acquires semiotic weight, one can never be sure how to interpret her most outrageous comments or what she *truly* means when she contradicts herself. Ultimately, her speech acquires an esoteric quality that further contributes to her reputation as an enlightened, if enigmatic, healer. In short, the unintelligibility of Nerka's words and deeds is further proof that she possesses special powers.

Jasarevic deftly captures the "careful political dance" (Luedke 2006:63) Nerka performs in her effort to build a constituency, while also disclaiming any alliance with a particular therapeutic tradition (such as Qur'anic healing, magic-making, or bioenergy). Yet I could not help but wonder to what extent Nerka actually charts her own trajectory and whether her inconsistencies are entirely calculated. Is the mixture of playfulness and poise, irreverence and gravity with which the healer welcomes long-term patients and new visitors alike part of a carefully scripted performance meant to confuse, repulse, and attract all at once? Does Nerka speak disparagingly of Qur'anic healers because she considers them serious competitors against whom she must constantly position and reposition herself? Or is she, like Quesalid, the Kwakiutl shaman immortalized in Lévi-Strauss's "The Sorcerer and his Magic" (1963), a skeptic who is truly not sure what to make of the powers she harnesses while healing but who understands that her success is contingent on patients' expectations of what she can do for them? In other words, and to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss's classic formula (1963:180), could we say of Nerka that she did not become a great healer because she cured her patients, but rather she cured her patients because she had become a great healer?

Any claim Nerka makes about her craft as a healer belongs to the modality of denial. We're told that the healer rejects the codification (or translation into intelligible language) of her healing tools and techniques and "angrily refuses comparisons with imams, diviners, and sorcerers" (p.7). It is tempting to interpret Nerka's stubborn refusal to define who she is, except through references to what she isn't, as an instance of Derridaesque posturing—the healer's own twist on *différance*. *Différance*, Derrida's (1978) deliberate misspelling of *différence* (difference) to account for the fact that the French term *différer* means both to differ and to defer, implies that words can never conjure up their full meaning but must be defined through appeal to other words, from which they differ. Meaning is thus always "deferred," that is, postponed. In Nerka's case, she alludes to other healers only so that she can distinguish herself from them; their identities thus arise only through the effacement (or displacement) of her own identity, which is deferred for possible emergence in other contexts. Ultimately Nerka's difference as *différance* can only be understood through the play of identity and non-identity.

As frustrating as it may be to face interlocutors who "elude categorical grasp" (p.7) by deferring meaning and nurturing ambiguity, anthropologists, Jasarevic seems to suggest, would do well to remember that the lessons they receive in the field take many forms. Whether or not it is true that "most ethnographers are at some level constantly on the look-out for at least partial reincarnations of Muchona" (Metcalf 2002:20), what is clear is that informants do not always reveal what they know (or for that matter, what they do not know) in straightforward fashion. Quirky, disconcerting, and mischievous as she may be, Nerka offers an important

perspective on the question of belonging in Bosnian society—one that invites a radical rethinking of identity and difference. In this regard, she may well turn out to be an iconic figure of post-war Bosnia.

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