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## Book review of 'Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas' by Robert R. Desjarlais

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Todd Lewis now serves as editor of the book review section of the *Bulletin*. Our eventual goal will be to use these pages to review concisely every major academic work published on the Himalayan region. This should be defined broadly to include all the academic disciplines represented in the Nepal Studies Association. We are also interested in including reviews of select popular, non-academic publications, including photography books. As in other areas of the journal, we are depending upon members to participate in the process: contact the editor if you wish to suggest a title or to sign on to review a specific publication. And please remember to have your press forward a copy of your book to the *HRB*.

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**Robert R. Desjarlais, *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.**

This analysis of soul loss and shamanic healing among the Yolmo Sherpas, an ethnically Tibetan-Buddhist people of the Helambu region of north central Nepal, is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 1988. Desjarlais, who attended approximately 24 healing ceremonies as a shamanic apprentice, attempts to convey an innovative interpretation of the aesthetic dimensions of Yolmo experiences of illness and healing. The author succumbed to three trances himself early in his fieldwork and the book is clearly an attempt to make sense of this unfamiliar and culturally foreign experience in a way that also elucidates Yolmo reality for a non Yolmo reader.

The key assertion Desjarlais wishes to demonstrate is that Yolmo aesthetic values are embodied. He leads the reader through a logical, step-by step analysis of social history, Buddhist influences, cultural values, post marital residence patterns, and other topics to demonstrate how each of these factors both shape and are shaped by the aesthetic values and bodily experiences of the Yolmo. Both sensory experiences of the body and aesthetic perceptions, he argues, can be comprehended by an examination of social relationships, songs of sorrow, and other phenomena. Desjarlais reviews current theories and debates on aesthetics, experience, somatization, and other pertinent issues in an interdisciplinary fashion in order to provide the theoretical framework for his own ethnographic material.

Some of this discussion is provocative and illuminating. But throughout much of the book the author reiterates his intentions for the analysis so frequently that the reader becomes impatient for the demonstration of these theoretical claims a bit more implicitly. When he provides case examples of illness episodes, healing ceremonies, funerals, and songs of pain such contextualization is provided and his arguments about the necessity of initiating medical anthropological interpretation with an emphasis on the bodily experiences of individuals is persuasive. Desjarlais provides convincing evidence that sorrow, loss, and fear of separation from others pervade the sensory lives of the Yolmo. Further, such emotional distress embodies interpersonal conflicts and causes illness; the way that illness feels to a Yolmo is experienced in culturally specific ways. The shamanic diagnosis through pulsing, rice divination, and oracular trancing illuminates the interpersonal or cosmological problems. Once

completed, healing, often through sacrificial offerings, is undertaken. The healing ceremony helps alter bodily sensations of illness as people are brought to know themselves more fully by the shamanic manipulation of tacit cultural knowledge. Through the images that emerge in the trance state the shaman is able to articulate the underlying paradoxes of Yolmo reality that cause distress and unease. Such illumination is transformative in terms of social dynamics and individual ailments.

*Body and Emotion* is an innovative contribution to attempts within medical anthropology to locate cross-cultural analyses of illness and healing in the sensory, bodily experiences individuals have of pain, illness, and healing. Desjarlais makes explicit from the outset that he plans to demonstrate an aesthetic approach to interpreting pain, emotions, and soul loss in the Himalayan context. He informs the reader that he wishes "to advance a way of writing ethnography that includes the reader's body as much as the author's in the conversation at hand" (p.19). This was a worthy goal, and one that will doubtless inspire others to experiment in this manner in other cultural contexts. But this reader agrees with Desjarlais' self critique in the Afterward that such engagements of the reader's body through the medium of a written narrative-- much less across the cultural boundaries involved in his analysis--are difficult and the results unpredictable. I did not, for example, feel how a Yolmo would experience pain as Desjarlais would want the reader to do. I do understand significantly more about Yolmo experiences and ways of thinking and being after reading the book, but I agree with one of Desjarlais' informants, who in response to the ethnographer's persistent questions replied, "How can we know what is in another's heartmind?" (p.22) I admire Desjarlais for taking on such a difficult endeavor, however, and was kept engaged throughout the book waiting to see if I would, as he promised, "feel" my new awareness of Yolmo constructions of bodily sensations. And certainly, Desjarlais is correct in identifying this dilemma in the representation of other realities as a central problem in text-bound ethnography.

Desjarlais is interested in explaining why the Yolmo seem to suffer from soul loss and its resulting symptom of vitality loss more than neighboring peoples. He explains that a shift in the social order from an emphasis on kin-based households to a temple and village-focused hierarchical structure has resulted in resource allocation and loyalty conflicts. Tensions and threats related to fission and fragmentation emerge as a result of the need to both keep and share resources within and outside of family groups. The body, for Desjarlais, is the locus for demonstrating the conflicting demands that result from economic, political, and ethnic changes. This compelling argument would have been augmented by identifying whether changes in Yolmo symptomology, illness etiology, frequency of disorders, etc. had occurred as the societal changes did. Desjarlais describes the Yolmo as a rather dispersed group; they are practicing more neolocal and less patrilocal residence, wealth is less distributed throughout the lineage, new relations with the tourist industry and other ethnic groups have emerged, and links to the temple have weakened. Could soul loss and its shamanic cure be interpreted as a way of constructing a specific Yolmo cultural identity *vis a vis* other ethnic groups? Do such healing practices strengthen a Yolmo way of being or do they facilitate changes in cultural constructions of self, body, identity? Will the Yolmo relational sense of self weaken and are increasing episodes of soul loss a way of demonstrating fundamental transformations in cultural constructions of self that are more autonomous and less reliant on one's social structural position in relation to others?

In spite of Desjarlais' attempt to demonstrate the Yolmo embodiment of cultural values, the book has an oddly disembodied and decontextualized feel to it. This was surprising given the emphasis on conveying Yolmo perceptions of reality as reflected in everyday life. Although he discusses the ways that house building, storytelling, and ritual conduct influenced the ways Yolmo experienced their bodies, I found myself wondering about the daily and annual activities and routines. A sense of the quotidian rhythm in the Nepalese communities he visits is missing. In a few cases it was also disturbing that he describes how people are feeling and thinking after confessing he had never had direct conversations with them. The stylistic choice to include fragmentary snippets of images (the offering of a cup of tea, the slumping of a body on a step) may achieve the author's objective of having the reader grasp the Yolmo's fragmentary construction of their bodies and social world. But it may instead indicate the ethnographic neophyte's original, impressionistic view of another culture. As Desjarlais returns and engages in further study, observation, conversation, and trancing will his fleeting images of Yolmo reality become more complex and whole? The phrases of action, conversation, and image that he inserts in the text are

effective in conveying his argument and method--but perhaps less effective in creating a sense of Yolmo worlds in the mind and body of the non expert reader.

I read this book as a medical anthropologist with a specialty in the Andes, not as an expert in Nepalese culture. As such, I was excited by similarities and differences in the cultural constructions of body, self, society, illness and healing between Quechua and Nepalese villagers. I found Desjarlais' detailed definitions of ailments and their symptoms extremely useful for comparative purposes. The book exposed me to Nepalese ethnographic material that facilitates the forging of comparative links for explaining the connections between social tensions that result from particular historical transformations in society and the individual's experience and manifestation of distress. Desjarlais significantly points out that divination and healing may provide ways for Yolmo individuals to express distress over the conflict between cultural values and the demands of group interdependence versus individual desires and autonomy. In his view the shaman makes this explicit to others in the community who have created the difficulties experienced by the patient. I would add that such a conclusion has important implications for understanding depression, soul loss, and healing in other cultural settings and resonates with recent work done on fright, soul loss, and symbolic healing by other scholars, particularly in Latin American contexts.

I will have to leave it to those more expert in the ethnography of Nepal to evaluate the book's contribution from a regional standpoint. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in experimentation in ethnographic representation, medical and psychological anthropology, and cross-cultural studies of body, self, emotion, healing, and religion. Although it would not be particularly useful as an introduction to Nepalese culture, the book would certainly complement other texts that give a fuller picture of everyday life and a broader social and historical background.

#### **Christine Greenway**

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**David and Janice Jackson. *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* 1988 Illustrated by Robert Beer. Ithaca, New York, USA: Snow Lion Publications, 1984 (second revised edition 1988). 202p. \$29.95**

This book represents an extensive effort to offer step by step, practical descriptions and guidelines for the production of thangka paintings as carried out by Tibetan artists. It is a good introduction for beginning artists who have never seen thangka painting being done in person before to learn how thangka painting can be done in one's own studio. Based on five journeys to India, Nepal and Tibet carried out over an eleven year period and involving careful study with many Tibetan thangka painting masters, the authors developed a detailed insight into how a Tibetan thangka is painted. Their book covers this process from the preparation of the canvas, to making sketches of the images, to pigment selection and preparation, to the application of colors, to the tools used, and finally to the finishing of a thangka painting. Their description of this process is particularly detailed concerning the sketches of the images (proportion theory in particular), the explanation of the traditional pigments being used, and the methods used to apply the colors. This record of the techniques developed by many generations of Tibetan thangka painters is the most valuable contribution of this study. The thorough illustration of shading techniques and the rich collection of motifs are a major accomplishment. Robert Beer's drawings are exquisite and clear and successfully help present the topics under discussion. In order to maintain authenticity and to offer a clear reference for artists or scholars who wish to pursue this topic further, the authors patiently recorded the Tibetan pronunciation for most of the technical terms used by Tibetan artists.