

Olson, Laura and Svetlana Adonyeva. *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 368. \$39.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-299-29034-4.

In their well-researched and thoroughly insightful monograph, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*, Laura Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva investigate how three generations of Russian rural women relate to tradition. Olson and Adonyeva draw from many years of personal fieldwork as well as from a vast archive of interviews conducted by faculty and students of Saint Petersburg University. The subjects of their study are three Soviet generations of women born between 1899 and 1950; Olson and Adonyeva classify them as follows: those born before the October Revolution (1899-1916), those born from the Revolution through total collectivization of the village (1917-29) and those who came into their youth during the postwar years, but were born between 1930-50 (77).

Olson and Adonyeva's critical approach is informed in part by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault's studies on power relations. Focusing on the ways people exercise agency in negotiating their relationship to culture, Olson and Adonyeva's work illustrates that life-cycle rituals do not simply represent one-sided situations of subjugation, but in fact, when "faced with structures of social control, people react in complex ways, including obedience, transgression, and compromise." (5) The fundamental questions motivating the study are many. The central question, "how do Russian rural women relate to tradition?" is deceptively simple; the answers to that question remain extremely complex. In their interpretations of how women "perform folklore" during life-cycle and calendar rituals for example, Olson and Adonyeva reflect on the "nature of subjectivity and history, agency and tradition" as they seek to further illuminate the continually shifting relationships Russian rural women have with tradition (23). Indeed much of the focus of this monograph is on the theoretical connections between "performing folklore" and the construction of social identity. In performing folklore, Olson and Adonyeva assert, one is able to use "preexisting, shared, symbolic structures (verbal, visual, intonational, gestural, etc.) to construct his or her relationship to a group—that is, to create and re-create his or her own identity" (11).

The book consists of an introduction, nine chapters including: (1) Traditions of Patriarchy and the Missing Female Voice in Russian Folklore Scholarship; (2) Age and Gender Status and Identity: Structure and History; (3) Subjectivity and the Relational Self in Russian Village Women's Stories of Courtship and Marriage; (4) The Pleasure, Power, and Nostalgia of Melodrama: Twentieth Century Singing Traditions and Women's Identity Construction; (5) Transgression as Communicative Act: Rural Women's *Chastushki*; (6) Magical Forces and the Symbolic Resources of Motherhood; (7) Magic, Control, and Social Roles; (8) Constructing Identity in Stories of the Other World; (9) Death, the Dead, and Memory-Keepers, and a conclusion.

The introduction provides the reader with brief personal and professional biographies of the authors, outlining their theoretical backgrounds and motivations for focusing on *women's* (hi)stories; it also sheds light on their use of the three terms in the subtitle of the manuscript: tradition, transgression, and compromise. In their study, Olson and Adonyeva defined tradition as "any cultural product that is handed down from past to present" (8) and "a habit of saying, doing, and thinking in a certain way" (307). Drawing examples from their own interviews, Olson and Adonyeva discuss how "the transmission, interpretation, and changing of tradition involve choice." (8) Olson and Adonyeva apply the terms "plot and script to describe,

respectively, the culturally instilled ways of thinking that help people construct and describe the past, and those that interpret the present and postulate future behavior... Plots are standard formulations of past action... Scripts, on the other hand, are conventional projections of actions to come” (13).

In Chapter One, the authors highlight the story of women’s contributions to folk tradition through a survey of the four genres of folklore (the folktale, epic, lament, and folk song) that late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century collectors deemed central to the Russian canon. Olson’s and Adonyeva’s alternate interpretations of women’s contribution to these genres challenge contemporary scholarship; in the section on *bylina*, for example, the authors assert that “although there are known taboos about when epics could be sung, there are no known taboos about *who* could sing them” (32). Demonstrating how “ethnography has misread women’s contributions to the corpus of Russian folklore,” their own fieldwork shows that “the masculine tradition of singing epics in public was paralleled by a feminine tradition of singing epics within the home” (32, 306).

Chapter Two begins with a delineation of age and gender status in the twentieth century Russian village and moves to a discussion of the socialization of girls and women, and boys and men through an examination of rituals performed during rites of passage. The section on “The Cow as Symbol of *Bol’shukha* Status” offers a fascinating example of how age and gender “organize the social hierarchy..., define the distribution of economic and social functions and power... and offer life scripts to men and women” (77).

Subsequent chapters break down thematically as Olson and Adonyeva examine specific traditional practices that were generally opposed by Soviet authorities, but nevertheless remained integral to village life. Chapter Three, for example, examines women’s stories of courtship and marriage through the lens of changing subjectivities and conceptions of selfhood. Olson and Adonyeva’s discussion of the contradiction in the construction of Soviet selfhood is an excellent illustration of this; they explain that the Soviet rituals, created to replace traditional rituals, had the end goal of fostering a spirit of the collective, but that the actual “means to *achieve* collectivism implied cultivating agency and self-fashioning, which are at the foundations of individualism” (129). Chapter Four examines how romance songs provide a basis upon which to construct community (155). Borrowing from Ann Kaplan’s work on the mother figure in melodrama, the authors categorize the songs into complicit texts and resisting texts; complicit texts, they explain, depict women as victims of men while resisting texts depict women’s resistance to socially constructed power relations (156). They argue that the “melodramatic discourses serve to articulate the changing cultural paradigms of late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries” (21). Olson and Adonyeva also take on, less successfully, an analysis of the melodramatic genres of soap opera and gossip in village life. Chapter Five examines three types of *chastushki*: those focused on politics, on everyday life and on erotic topics. Ripe with ritual laughter, *chastushki* provided women with a means to dispute the established hierarchy and express publically that which was otherwise forbidden. Olson and Adonyeva’s engaging examples illustrate how the “*chastushka* provides a temporary fissure in the village social hierarchy: younger people can address their elders critically, girls can make romantic approaches to young men, a young woman can speak ill of her in-laws, a rank and file *kolkhoz* [collective farm] worker can speak up against the president” (172). Chapter Six focuses on the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge of magical skills during motherhood. According to Olson and Adonyeva’s informants, knowledge of magic was necessary to assist the mother (so that she could understand what was happening to her during birthing) and to help the newborn get

through sudden illnesses and avert the evil eye. Based on information gleaned from field reports from the Vologda and Arkhangel'sk regions and the authors' own fieldwork in a village in the Riazan' *oblast'*, Chapter Seven examines the means by which *porcha* [witchcraft/sorcery] is able to shift the balance of power in a community and perform "an action of social leveling" (238). Chapter Eight discusses the relationship between *bylichki* [memorates/fabulates] and tradition. Communicative by nature, *bylichki* are most often also didactic, but more importantly, as Olson and Adonyeva assert, they are also used to construct, negotiate, and shape the social networks of the living and the dead (276). Chapter Nine examines women's roles as guides and mentors in practices relating to death and the caring for and honoring of the dead. Specifically, Olson and Adonyeva discuss death as practice, the practice of honoring the dead, and the role of the lamenter as mediator. As their informants' stories illustrate, memorialization is motivated by social duty as well as the individual's need to express loss. The authors find that while children and men can certainly be "bearers of tradition" in the Russian village, "only elder women are in charge of *memory*, which is central to the spiritual life of the Russian village community" (305).

Russian village women created their own life scripts against the backdrop of tradition; as Olson and Adonyeva conclude, those scripts did not exactly follow the script defined by the cultural imperative but tradition was "capacious enough, generous enough, and flexible enough to accommodate variations, creativity, individual agency, compromise, and even transgressions" (314).

This book contains an extensive bibliography and notes section and a short glossary. While the notes for the most part point the reader to further reading, or engage her with interesting commentary from the authors that are beyond the scope of their book, some of the notes deserve a place in the body of the work. That the authors created pseudonyms for the participants and the village names in order to protect the privacy of their informants, for instance, is certainly understandable and even commendable, but burying this in note seven of Chapter One (found at the end of the book on page 322) creates some confusion. If one misses the note, the following revelations in Chapter Seven seem out of place: "The first part of this chapter is largely based upon the lore of one village, which we will call Krasnoe, in Riazan' *oblast'*" (223) and "When she talked about these sorcerers with me, she became very fearful that I would somehow leak to them what she told me. For this reason, the names of the participants in these stories and the name of the village have been changed" (240). The discussion on the evil eye and social leveling in Chapters Six and Seven and on folk religion in the subsection on sorcery and religion in Chapter Seven is fascinating, but feels incomplete. The authors' skillful analysis throughout the rest of the manuscript leaves the reader wanting more here. Although the authors concede in the conclusion that the "greatest gap in their text is about men" (307), Olson and Adonyeva's readers would have benefited greatly from their insight into why, for instance, in songs like "Oh, Sailor, Sailor, Sailor" and "The Soldiers Rode Home" it was the *sons*, and not the daughters, who were left behind (148-55).

Interdisciplinary in nature, Olson and Adonyeva's study draws on scholarship from a wide variety of disciplines including cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, folklore studies, gender studies, genre studies, Russian history, Russian literature, Soviet studies and women's studies. *The Worlds of Russian Village Women* is a valuable addition to scholarship on oral histories of Russian rural women and will prove informative to scholars and students alike. By closely examining the choices Russian village women make to follow or break a rule or tradition, Olson and Adonyeva depict the clash between the public and the private, transgression and compromise, and between the traditional moral code of patriarchy and strong female will in

order to illustrate and unpack just *how* and *why* Russian village women exercise agency within their community (194).

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