

Reviews

Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes. By Lillian S. Robinson. New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. ix-148, preface, afterward, works cited, index.

In *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, Lillian S. Robinson focuses on the development of female characters in comic books, a genre of literary text that has been slow to gain recognition as a medium of cultural expression and slower still to be examined through a critical lens (2). Adopting a feminist position, she argues that the stories of female superheroes in the genre “transgress [the] use of mythological sources, borrowing from various traditions and creating new ones in order to tell different stories about gender, stories that come closer to the universe of belief than do masculine (and masculinity) adventure comics” (6). The book sets the creation and evolution of various female superheroes against a background of other factors, varying from political to personal. However, Robinson orients the book’s format around a discussion of specific eras in the development of the original female comic superhero: Wonder Woman. Utilizing a critical feminist perspective to interrogate the comic book genre allows the author to tease out the effects of social movements on the development of the comic heroine while simultaneously lending itself to appropriate interjections of the author’s own experience as a lifelong reader of comic books. Chapter titles even “Chronicle” comic conventions. Combining these elements creates an illuminating analysis of the impact of female heroes on the genre.

Describing her lifelong love affair with comics, Robinson reveals that she began reading comics shortly after the introduction of the Wonder Woman character. Her combined personal and professional interest in comics lends itself to the use of a variety of sources in the construction of the book, ranging from Judith Butler to pop culture artifacts. Much of her evidence also comes directly from the comics themselves, giving readers a plethora of primary sources to add to the discussion. Accordingly, the book is presented in a format that makes it accessible to a variety of readerships: Robinson’s critiques are sound and relevant, appealing to a scholarly audience; however, her easy writing style and anecdotal evidence make this book an enjoyable read for a non-scholarly audience as well.

Just as important as critical analysis and empirical evidence to Robinson’s book, is the author’s ability to situate herself as a consumer of comics during different periods of their production. Robinson believes that her subjective imprint on the analysis cannot be erased and should be laid bare—especially since she is a participant in the history she discusses. Instead of treating this as an obstacle, she proclaims her interpretive stance as participant by opening the book with an article, written previously, entitled “Looking for Wonder Woman.” This passage, and the threads of subjectivity that are continued on for the duration of the book, allows readers to extrapolate the author’s intentions and cultural position for themselves and gives them more opportunity to glimpse how Robinson reads comics as literary texts. Robinson recounts her own experience with comic

books as a young reader during Wonder Woman's primordial development, a position returned to and reflected upon throughout the book. This is the position that colors Robinson's analytical moves, and deserves special attention if the book is to be properly understood.

In addition to examining Robinson's own developing perspective, the overall genre is examined from a feminist perspective. The tension between domesticity and empowerment in a modern capitalist society, a tension Robinson reflects on in her own life, is a tension which must be confronted by all comic heroines, and which is crystallized by Wonder Woman. In the post World War II era, Wonder Woman's alter ego, Diana Prince, did not appeal to Robinson, a result of the writer's vivified rejection of the notion that womanhood meant a life of domesticity and a loss of the heroic aspects of the feminine wartime identity. Instead, as a child Robinson focused on the physical prowess of the heroine, and her identity as an Amazon with Olympic roots (1). While the creator of the series took great liberties with the Greek mythology, reconceptualizing its rhetorical force in a manner better adapted for the comic audience, the evocation of the Amazon credo created a more compelling character than the bespectacled Diana Prince. While the author felt the empowerment of Wonder Woman, her fear that cultural norms would eclipse of the female hero and force her into the assigned gender roles, gives the book a personally as well as culturally reflective nature.

Moving beyond the characters, Robinson also conducts an overview of the industry itself, though it is secondary

to analysis of the female heroines. The comic book industry has been shaped by the conventions of capitalism; as such, the primarily motive for producing comics is profit. There are instances to be found throughout the text in which the industry's quirks and conventions are considered, along with an analysis of the individuals who played key roles in shaping comic genre. According to Robinson, capitalism's influence resulted in ideological shifts of American comic culture, represented by the feminine heroes in three different eras. Robinson takes the reader through the ebb and flow of social influences that dictated the progression of lead female characters between these periods. For instance, in the 1970s, comic storylines are set in a contemporary American society with modern sensibilities, but the storylines do not explain how the world evolved to that state. This artistic choice makes the stories appeal to a broader audience, generating profit, but it does not give adequate attention to the many decades of struggle for equality that had taken place beforehand in American society. Wonder Woman's ideology is one of female empowerment, a shift exemplified by a 1973 *Ms.* magazine cover (82). Wonder Women starred on the cover with a banner advocating: "Wonder Woman for President." Robinson attributes this event to the rise of feminism as a social movement, which, in a sense, made the movement a profitable one, and which made comic books marketable to a new audience, females.

However, it would have been appropriate if Robinson had done more work to specifically analyze the culture of the creators themselves, as well as the

comic industry's motivations for its artistic and practical decisions.. Also not given enough consideration in the book are the stylistic and visual aspects of the comic universe. The author takes little time to examine these aspects critically, and does not give an adequate weight to the visual aspects of constructing comic book narratives. The book does not discuss technique, point of view, or change in style, although some work is done on the evolving figure of the female superhero, including some analysis of costume.

While the book is lacking in certain kinds of analysis, it still adds to the conversation of pop culture in general, offering a strong feminist perspective on the comic book universe and its capitalist influences. So, in spite of this issue, *Wonder Women* offers a concise introduction to the world of the female hero, and the variety of foes she encounters, be they supernatural or sexist.

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No Space Hidden: The Spirit of African American Yard Work. By Grey Gundaker and Judith McWillie. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005. Pp. xviii + 237, acknowledgments, photographs, notes, bibliography, index.

Names like Lonnie Holley, Bessie Harvey, and J.B. Murray will ring familiar to anyone who follows the market for outsider, self-taught, twentieth-century folk art, which has risen in popularity since the 1960s. This growing interest has been largely fueled by a contemporary art world that has tended to discuss this work beneath a museum spotlight and on top of a pedestal; a context which has typically painted them as images of rurality, isolation, and exceptional anomaly. *No Space Hidden* departs from this trend by weaving these artists and their work back into their local contexts. The authors, Grey Gundaker and Judith McWillie, consider these artists alongside thirty other men and women living mostly in the southern United States, who manipulate found objects and materials within the space of their yards. Through a combination of collected stories, interviews, photographs, and scholarship from over twenty years of research and personal relationships, the authors present a group of artists who challenge notions as to where, how, and when art is made. The effect is one of critical redress, to “draw attention to precisely what much contemporary art discourse is unable to do, that is, to address concerns that have motivated much of the art African Americans in and out of the South have made for their homes and communities” (25).

Judith McWillie is professor of art at the University of Georgia, and she collaborates once again with Grey Gundaker,

anthropology professor at the College of William and Mary. *No Space Hidden* takes an approach to material culture as a lens into African American spirituality, folklore, and conceptions of art that is similar to the 1998 edited volume *Keep Your Head in the Sky: Interpreting African American Home-ground* (University of Virginia Press, 1998), to which Gundaker and McWillie both contributed chapters. Immensely readable and substantive, the book argues for persistent ways of seeing and knowing that are akin to African and Christian traditions, but which are now made legible in a twentieth-century vernacular through assemblages of cast-off objects like light bulbs, hula hoops, painted tree roots, lawn chairs, and cement blocks.

Gundaker and McWillie focus on a particular kind of bricolage practice with space and material: yard work. As they explain in the opening chapter, the authors deliberately choose the term “yard work” over other categories, such as “folk art environments” or “vernacular landscape design,” for its polyvalency. It is used to denote aspects of performance and activity within the yard that not only transcend mere expression or adornment, but which function to communicate spiritual truths about life and the human condition. To establish a continuity of yard work practice, Gundaker and McWillie integrate first-hand interviews with scholarship on both folklore and African history, particularly the work of Robert Farris Thompson, and with slave narratives from various sources, including the Federal Writers’ Project. Despite the inclusion of African sources, it is not the authors’ goal to construct a transatlantic history of yard work practice, but rather to understand the ways yards function symbolically to map relations among matter, spirit, and human

emotion. This goal is reflected in the book’s division, which alternates between portfolios that present a bulk of the yards and the stories of their creation, and corresponding chapters that sketch out the larger historical and cultural continuities between these projects. Gundaker and McWillie diligently balance their attention between the materials and the process, the individual and the communal, current yards and “longstanding cultural integrities” (xv).

The result is a somewhat sprawling book that relies heavily on the attentive reader to interpret and connect practice with meaning. The first three sections lay a foundation for understanding the metonymies, symbolism, and signs operating within African American yards by introducing a lexicon of objects and their meaning along with a discussion of “kinds of land and what happens there.” (79) Many of these terms and principles, such as border use, safety zones, reflective surfaces, wheels and watching figures, reappear later in the book. But what initially appears to be repetitive (and potentially excessive) becomes a vehicle for introducing and reaffirming the material metalanguage operating within these featured yards. By equipping the reader with a vocabulary for interpretation and then allowing the oral histories to stand on their own—which, in themselves, often resist the organizing principles of the book—Gundaker and McWillie try to *frame* a living culture rather than reify a group of objects.

No Space Hidden is thus a comprehensive volume that also leaves many ends open for readers to form “their own critical evaluations of the author’s voice along with the information the source contains” (xiv). Implicit in this method is not merely a call for reader response, but a plea for deeper consideration of each subject’s voice and the moral

imperative expressed in their worldviews. As the many examples attest, the “spirit of African American yard work” is one of justice, respect, positive transformation, safety, creative possibility, talent, and hope. The featured stories of Eddie Williamson and Bennie and Elizabeth Lusane, as well as the final chapter on heavenly glory, express this theme in ways that are particularly compelling.

Readers looking for a visual resource or collectors accustomed to the glossy pages of conventional art books may be disappointed by the black and white snapshot photographs, some of which have poor resolution, that make it difficult to visualize the actual nature of these spaces (nineteen color plates are thus a helpful inclusion). Nonetheless, one ought to consider this a boon for McWille and Gundaker’s overall project, which eschews objectification and instead looks at *how* practices of yard work sustain the lives of their makers. Thus, *No Space Hidden* is like a visitors’ guide that will serve as a useful point of departure for casual readers as well as students of anthropology, folklore, geography, and art history. But, the book’s greatest strength is the resiliency of its subjects. After being introduced to these practitioners, readers just might be moved to embark on their own driving trip through these towns and neighborhoods. With eyes now conditioned to see, they might spot an unusually populated yard, step out of their cars inquire after their makers, and to become more like neighbors than tourists..

No Space Hidden was the 2007 winner of the James Mooney Prize for anthropological scholarship, awarded by the Southern Anthropological Society.

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Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture. By Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 193 pages.

It was not her experience studying abroad in France, but rather her move to the Midwest for graduate school that made Jocelyn Donlon keenly aware of the bits and pieces of her life in southern Louisiana that she had previously taken for granted. Her experience – the startling recognition of difference in a mirror, but a close difference that seems more like oneself than an exotic other – provides her rationale and sets the tone for *Swinging in Place*, an investigation of the porch in Southern American culture that is both the rigorous academic project of a capable scholar and the documented self-discovery of a Southerner.

While Donlon cannot offer a narrative of the architectural evolution of the porch, as there is, unfortunately, not enough surviving evidence upon which such a narrative could be built, she does offer a survey of the predominant theories regarding its origins. Noting that such structures as the balcony, veranda, and portico existed in Europe before the colonization of the Americas, she points out that they certainly did not serve the same social function as the American porch. Rather, it was the breezy stoops built by the peoples in West Africa, whom the Europeans brought in chains to the Americas, which are most likely the closest spiritual ancestors of the porch. Thus, while little can be said for certain about the evolution of the porch, Donlon comes to the very reasonable conclusion that it is most certainly a “creolized” (15) design.

Swinging in Place is not an architectural history, however. Rather, it examines the porch as a liminal space, as “a transitional space between public and private spheres” (13) that Donlon makes the focus of her project. She uses de Certeau’s distinction between “space” and “place” to make her case, arguing that the porch is at once a “‘configuration of positions’ that has been dictated by the dominant culture” (the “place”) and yet it is also “composed of intersections of mobile elements” which make it possible for individuals to “resist societal regulations” (the “space”) (25).

Though she does not use theatrical terms per se, for Donlon the porch is very much a stage. As a location where an individual can perform his or her own identity to the community or the community can direct the performance of an individual’s identity, the porch then becomes a venue in which hegemony and resistance are both built and quashed, where action is both scripted and improvised. In fact, it is this “modulating between spheres yet resting in neither” (25) which led Donlon to choose “Swinging in Place” as her title and to state her thesis thus: “Porches, front and back and side and other, are powerfully constructed ‘places,’ liminally situated between indoors and out, where people must work to reconcile the demands of a family, the norms of a community, and the desires of individuals – all of which are coherent by a social and political context – to create an individualized ‘space’ for themselves” (160). It is no surprise then, that Donlon spends the majority of her book investigating the many selves that are “in negotiation with the community” (159) on

the porch, by looking at how the space-place of the porch provides a setting for the construction of gender, race, class, sexuality and generation in her South.

To look at these numerous selves being constructed on the porch, Donlon makes use of not only a multitude of texts, but also many kinds of texts. Drawing from William Faulkner and Gloria Johnson, her grandmother’s longtime neighbor, just as readily as from Victor Turner or Michel de Certeau, she puts voices into conversation that might not usually be seen as talking to one another. In fact, it is Donlon’s extensive catalogue of personal narratives, collected from friends, family, students, strangers, and even herself, that serves as the textual bedrock of her investigation. Given the porch’s nature as a stage where stories are both told and made, it seems wholly appropriate.

Her choice to put literary texts and personal narratives on par with more theoretical works is likely to rub some the wrong way. Admittedly, I found myself doubting what credibility a lengthy literary analysis of a scene from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* could offer a study that is, more or less, an anthropological analysis. However, after seeing how Donlon ties art and anthropology together, not only did she generally convince me of the wisdom of such an approach, she made me reconsider why I might have thought art and anthropology to be mutually exclusive to begin with.

That said, I do not buy her argument that she can effectively counterbalance her face-to-face fieldwork (which was predominantly conducted with people living in southern Louisiana) by “providing examples from novels set in

other parts of the South" in order to "[increase] the representation of different cultures"(26). While I certainly agree that "a fictional narrative can offer stories that real people may be hesitant to tell a folklorist face-to-face or to document in a letter" (27), I do not think literary analysis can be rendered commensurate to face-to-face interviews. Rather, I think analysis of literary texts engenders a more organic understanding of the porch in southern culture by refusing to stay only within the disciplinary lines academia has drawn in the sand. What is so exciting about Donlon's approach is that she does not try to depict the porch as some kind of object that stands alone, or even an object that could be fully captured in one portrayal; rather, she tries to see how the porch lives in, and is shaped by, different contexts.

Claiming that the heyday of the porch ran from roughly the turn of the twentieth century into 1960s/70s, Donlon says that the "death of the porch" is due in large part to the widespread incorporation of air conditioners into the southern household, although changing gender roles, television, and rising crime rates are important factors as well. Nevertheless, Donlon's narrative is not overshadowed by the melancholic sense of loss that pervades many folkloristic projects. Maintaining that the porch "remains integral to a southern identity" (19), she closes the book with a chapter looking at how people, particularly young people, are finding the old place of the porch to be a space for something new.

Donlon spends the better part of her introduction recounting memories of her grandmother and describing the

porch at her grandmother's house. Her grandmother's porch became so central to Donlon's evolving sense of self that she says "[I] cannot separate my grandmother's porch from my family"(11). Honest about the emotional attachment she feels for the porch, Donlon describes how she has worked to keep nostalgia in check as she writes. Such a clear admission of how much the author, and the author's writing process, are knit up in the subject being written about is not only refreshing, but actually far more truthful than those fictions which suppose authors can somehow stand apart from the subject that they are examining. Certainly, she looks with a scrutinizing eye, one that takes care to not be blinded by sentiment, but Donlon's work is ultimately a labor of love; her rigor brings her to a more complex appreciation of something she has always loved. May we all be so fortunate in our work.

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The Idea of North. By Peter Davidson. Topographics. London: Reaktion, 2005. Pp. 271, introduction, notes, illustrations, image credits.

One can see and feel a place in a physical sense, but each place also carries an “overload of possible meanings” and presents an “assault on all ways of knowing” (Hayden, Dolores. 1995. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 18). In *The Idea of North*, Peter Davidson provides just such a perspective on place, as both tangible and deeply meaningful. However, rather than focusing his analysis on any particular locale, this book examines the concept of north itself from a variety of perspectives. North is impossible to locate precisely, in part because its location and meaning vary by culture and by individual. Instead it is presented as “always a shifting idea, always relative, always going away from us” (8). To the painter Eric Ravilious, north was Iceland and the arctic regions of the world; to Ovid, north was Bulgaria; and to the contemporary poet, Simon Armitage? Why, north is right ‘here,’ in his home in West Yorkshire, England. North is seen as a direction, a feeling, a place that is usually other than “here,” that is both real and imagined. For some, north may call to mind remoteness, loneliness, desolation, exile, and melancholy. Yet, just as readily, north may invoke adventure, savage and austere beauty, purity, freedom, and the possibility of the unknown, all expanding outward to the distant horizon. All of these ideas of north, and more, are culled from Davidson’s intensive, cross-cultural survey of art, literature, film, myth, and personal experience. The end result is a

fine work that communicates the depth and range of meanings that have come to be associated with this concept.

The main portion of the book is organized into three sections: Histories, Imaginations of the North, and Topographies. Each of these sections examines ideas of north as embodied in a particular set of media or forms (although these overlap somewhat from chapter to chapter) We are told that the materials selected for inclusion were considered to be “particularly indicative or representative” (19) of each category rather than comprehensive or randomly selected—an understandable method given the scope of the work. Despite this selectivity, the reader is indeed given a wide range of materials to consider. The first section of the book provides “a history of ideas of the north, from... archaic Greece, through the medieval and renaissance periods of speculation and cartography, to... the nineteenth century” (19). The following section on “Imaginations of the North” focuses more closely on the ways that ideas of north have been captured and portrayed by artists, writers, and film-makers, while the final section examines more specific topographies of the north ranging from Canada, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, China, and Japan. Along the way, the reader is treated to analyses of materials of striking diversity. We are presented, for instance, with Icelandic sagas where dead spirits sing gustily in their open barrows, Sámi tales about wizards who sail across the seas on a bit of enchanted bone, works of art that purposely exploit and confound the similarities between ice and snow, the (post)industrial landscapes of Britain,

and accounts of a dry Japanese river bed which divides this world from the next, and where one can here the sobbing of ghostly children. Despite this great diversity, all of these materials express some concept of the north, and contain many similar, if often competing, themes (e.g. north as the place of death, north as a source of truth, etc.).

No work is without its faults of course. Two shortcomings in particular detract from the overall contribution of the text: one conceptual and one practical. First, Davidson offers no concise thesis. The main theme seems to be that the idea of north moves people to extremes. However, Davidson does not provide any more specific arguments that could contribute to the scholarly effort to understand the relationship between people and place. For instance, *why* is north a powerful concept? Is it something intrinsic to the properties of a round planet, shortages of daylight, and cold weather? Or does it have to do with something inherent in the human condition, where areas and others far removed are considered otherworldly or inhuman? The book seems to imply both explanations without ever directly stating them. The second shortcoming of the book is more practical: it lacks a bibliography and, worse, an index. This makes it exceedingly difficult to consult the book once one has finished reading it, a particularly vexing issue considering the scope of sources detailed within it.

Despite these issues, *The Idea of North* is a powerful and impressive piece of scholarship. The northern places included here range from the "real" (e.g. Scandinavia), to the fictitious (e.g. Nabokov's Zembla), to the mythological

(e.g. the Hyperborea of the Greeks). But since the north is both real and imagined, perhaps the importance of distinguishing between real and unreal places is not so great after all. As Yi-Fu Tuan (2001. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.) reminds us in his classic study of place, Europeans once firmly believed in the reality of both a paradise on Earth and (of particular relevance to Davidson's book) a Northwest Passage, despite repeatedly failed and often disastrous efforts to find them. None of these failures dissuaded the belief in these places, however, since "[s]uch places had to exist because they were key elements in a complex system of belief" (Tuan 2001, 85 - 86). Thus, the *idea* of north is itself influential, is itself a motivating principle of social and cultural significance, regardless of whether that idea is coupled with an actual, physical location, and regardless of whether any two people agree on any particular location as northern in character. Davidson's work helps the reader appreciate this reality for what it is.

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Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village. By Margaret Paxson. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press (Editorial). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. (Order From). 2005. Pp. 390, introduction, afterword, acknowledgements, terms and phrases, bibliography, index.

In a small village in the woods of northern Russia, memory – stretching across a broad collective landscape – functions as the glue binding a culture together over time. Karl Marx wrote, “The tradition of all of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” (Quoted in Paxson 2005, 8). Margaret Paxson’s *Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village*, spanning “seventy years of totalitarianism, and the hundreds of years of brutish exploitation,” brings that weighty past into the present and shows how memory frames life in a small northern Russian village (346). Diving deeply into her research (17-1/2 pages of bibliography and 10 years of fieldwork) and into the lives and stories of her informants, she produces a text that will appeal to academics and non-academics alike. Paxson mines the memories of the small cluster of farmers that make up Solovyovo, revealing herself as an empathetic researcher. Using in-depth participant observation and interviews, and following an overarching metaphor of “the landscape of memory,” she expresses how memory becomes translated and reinscribed across time.

By setting the village of Solovyovo in space and time through the memories of its inhabitants, Paxson shows how social memory is enacted in stories, religious practice, social organization, commemoration, and the symbolism of space.

“Death laced the corners of their stories,” she writes (29); this landscape of memory is a view of past events (the return of a soldier, the death of Stalin, the destruction of a church) through present eyes. But also, as Paxson says, memory casts the present into the future to be rendered anew by individual choices and societal changes. Paxson’s idea of memory is an act of persistence defining cultural identity.

Through Paxson’s extended metaphor of “the landscape of memory,” Solovyovo becomes a place of power and social memory spanning the centuries from the tsars and feudal landlords; to Bolsheviks and civil wars; to collectivization and socialism; and to perestroika and open markets. Held in memory and reified in ways of acting socially, we learn that memories are never free from their historical context, even if that context is rooted not in truth, but in a reconstruction of it. Moreover, Paxson points out, memories have agency; they are acts. Memories are ways of *knowing* and producing meaning. While streets can be renamed; faces and facts can fade away; photographs can be altered; and stories can die with people, memory cannot be “idealized away.” Nor can it be erased by the gulag or by the “market’s invisible hand.”

Narratives of the past govern the behavior and belief of today, their patterns affecting social organization in vivid and accessible detail. From the “radiant past” – when revolutions were fought, wars and famine came and went, death crept in, ghosts and phantoms dwelt in the beliefs of the religious, and when marriage and birth renewed and reified a collective narrative – memory creates a bridge to the equally far off “radiant future.”

Like a person in America reminiscing about those ubiquitous “way things were,” when times were easier and people were nicer, the people of Solovyovo idealize their “radiant past” – when people were equal, close-knit, and cooperative, and when relationships were better (97). From this “radiant past” comes the idea of *svoi*. Opposed on the one hand to greed, a desire for personal wealth, *svoi* (“being one’s own” or “belonging to”) also stands in opposition to foreignness, the quality of being a social outsider. As such, the villagers, who both exist outside of and are affected by the new market economy, are mistrustful both of money and external forces. One villager, for instance, remembers the happiest time of his life as being during the great famine of 1947, because “it was as if there was some kind of inspiration in life then” (95). “Regardless of the hard life,” he recalls, everyone’s “mood” was better (95). Paxson’s view across the landscape of memory benefits the reader at the root of village life by taking us into the village, into the villager’s homes and into their lives.

A portrait of social memory in this region of the world is particularly relevant after the collapse of communism, because of widespread assumptions about the speed of change in the transition from Soviet Union to Russia. The unpredictable –but more known and more studied – world of Moscow is very far from that of rural Russia, yet the social fabric of Russia cannot be understood without including *all* of its social stratum.

By exploring the narrative landscape of Solovyovo, Paxson weaves an intricate ethnography of the memory of these descendants of Eastern Slavic farmers.

This memory is primarily a memory of survival: survival of a people, of a way of life, of beliefs, and, above all, of memory itself. This memory of survival in the non-stop toil of a “harsh and unsuited land” for agriculture can sometimes yield some surprising results. For instance, this memory lends force to a critique of freedom. For the residents of Solovyovo, freedom is the opposite of what we think of in the West. There is no freedom (*svoboda*) without discipline, says one woman, indicating that “frameless” freedom is dangerous because it threatens to undermine the social order. Now, after Gorbachev, this woman states, “Anyone does whatever he wants. Anyone can steal from whomever. Anyone can kill anyone anywhere.” (113). For the people of Solovyovo, this new unrestrained freedom is the companion of social disorder, a critique which draws its force from the memory of the “radiant past” before the fall of the Soviet Union, when the social order was intact and the community’s freedom was not limited by the freedom of individuals.

As any scholar knows, proper and meaningful translations of words are imperative to an accurate and deep understanding of thought and action. Words and phrases, especially in Russian, almost never translate verbatim. Their meaning is hidden somewhere else; one must have a deeper knowledge of a culture to grasp its concepts and context. Paxson did her work and knows her area of research. She offers deep and accurate descriptions of the village and its people, and knows that a deep understanding of the meanings of words, phrases, and their uses – their *local* uses – is necessary to grasp the concepts that she’s presenting.

This is a brilliant ethnography. Drawing on an immense body of theoretical literature, Paxson writes like a novelist, yet forgoes nothing to the discerning academic. The book is visually stimulating, rich in ethnographic detail, and yet is well-written and engaging.

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