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*The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition,  
Transgression, Compromise*, by Laura J. Olson and  
Svetlana Adonyeva (Review)

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*The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*, by **Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva**  
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enjoys strong Soviet-era legacies, and is occasionally touched by today's international multiculturalism. After reading the monograph, one is curious about the theoretical implications of an enmeshed relationship between a young state and self-declared experts on identity; of an ethnically diverse, village-focused identity versus a nationally unified one; and of the influence of intriguingly arbitrary professional trajectories on the discipline.

Surprising to US folklorists will be the lack of references to US folklorists' scholarship, such as well-established work of the construction of the folk, authenticity, expert knowledge, and folklore on display. *Villages on Stage* opens with a call for a "critical ethnography of folklore," and the study aims to achieve this through examining amateur troupe performances, Moldovan ethnographers' fieldwork practices, and their construction of expertise. The inside front cover notes that *Villages on Stage* represents a re-working of Cash's dissertation in Anthropology at Indiana University, and the monograph shares some strong similarities with her doctoral thesis, both in material presented and overall tone. Relating US folklorists' work to the Moldovan case would provide insights that could broaden out our understanding of both folklore and the Moldovan case. The clearest explanation for this omission lies in *Villages on Display* being grounded in another discipline, anthropology, although this conclusion will likely be disappointing for folklorists. This anchoring is reflected in the publication details; Cash's monograph was published in the Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia series by the Germany-based LIT Verlag publishing house.

**The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise.** By Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. Pp. vii + 368, glossary, notes, bibliography, index, photographs.)

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*The Worlds of Russian Village Women* represents the first study of rural women's lives as they are

lived, rather than through the heavy coloring of ideological agendas. As the authors note in their introduction, Russian rural women have typically "been depicted as victims of oppressive patriarchy, or celebrated either as symbols of inherent female strength or as one of the original sources of one of the world's great cultures" (p. 5). Olson and Adonyeva focus on how women construct their identities in light of village tradition, simultaneously valuing it and compromising with its tenets as well as transgressing it. The authors study three generations of rural women: those born between 1899 and 1916, those born between 1917 and 1929, and those born between 1930 and 1950. Each generation experienced a different reality, namely the last years of the Russian empire, the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Stalinist era, respectively. The book illustrates how the shifting social structures of each period are reflected in the folklore, ritual traditions, and, ultimately, in the identities of women in these three groups.

The book is composed of nine chapters, seven of which are dedicated to various aspects of folk tradition, including courtship and marriage, songs and singing, motherhood, magic, legends, and death and memory. The first two chapters provide background information for the study and the interdisciplinary theoretical approaches that Olson and Adonyeva apply. The authors rely on analytical tools from anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, literary theory, history, and folkloristics. Chapter 1 focuses on the patriarchal nature of Russian folklore scholarship and how it has systematically silenced women's voices. The authors convincingly demonstrate that because women usually told tales or sang epics at home, collectors erroneously assumed that these genres were exclusively in the male purview. When folklorists did manage to collect examples from women, they attributed the practice to decaying tradition and judged women to be less effective performers. In addition, the female genres of laments and lyric songs, often sung in groups, were viewed as less prestigious than men's solo genres. Chapter 2 outlines the nature of age and gender status for men and women in the twentieth-century Russian village, with particular emphasis on the role of *bol'shukha* (mistress of

the household). They discuss how women forged relationships, were socialized and initiated, and how Soviet-era values altered and interacted with traditional norms.

In the bulk of the work, the authors focus mainly on two types of texts: poetic genres (lyric songs, romances, and *chastushki*, two-to-four-line humorous songs) and narratives about rites of marriage, birth, and death as well as about magic and the supernatural. They stress that these narratives provide “a subjective view of history” (p. 47). Olson and Adonyeva conclude that these songs and stories form the basis for “plots” and “scripts” of the teller’s/singer’s life. Plots are defined as “standard formulations of past action” contained in folklore, literature, and pop culture, from which people select “to transform their lived experience into knowledge, into narrative, or into autobiography” (p. 13). While plots relate to past actions, scripts describe “actions to come” (p. 13). In some cases, the authors could apply these two terms more consistently; these concepts are useful explanatory tools for understanding how women construct and narrate their own lives.

In their consideration of courtship, weddings, and songs and singing in chapters 3–5, Olson and Adonyeva take a broad view of what constitutes a folk genre. For example, they include the “cruel romance” (melodramatic song of literary origin) and soap opera in the mix because these genres serve as the basis for identity construction and for plots. This approach might be the single most important contribution of the work because it aligns the variety of women’s experiences, from Soviet ideology to village marriage traditions, from urban influences to Western pop culture, into a coherent whole, unrestricted by the “purity” of the tradition that is often the watchword of Russian folklore research. The focus of these chapters is the tension, over the course of three generations of women, between the traditional values represented by the songs and rites and the social situation in which the women found themselves. The authors provide nuanced analyses of favorite songs and women’s narratives about their weddings to demonstrate how the women negotiated their identity within an often-shifting social system. What results is a clearer portrait of the role of folk tradition, popular

culture, and socialist ideology in their lives than can be found in any study heretofore on rural Russian women.

Chapters 6–9 focus on narratives about motherhood, the supernatural, magic, the afterlife, and death (including a brief consideration of laments, a genre largely limited to the oldest generation). Olson and Adonyeva trace how, as a woman was initiated into the various life stages, she began to perform different genres reflecting new responsibilities as a mother, as a *bol’shukha*, and as a mourner who has experienced the loss of a family member. The authors demonstrate how these genres negotiate familial and social responsibilities, allow for individual expression of fear and grief, and foster communal cohesion while negotiating systems of social control. Of particular note is their consideration of how motherhood initiates women into the world of protective magic. Their analysis of women’s subsequent use of magic, for good or ill, as a tool to consolidate social power is particularly compelling.

*The Worlds of Russian Village Women* presents a breadth of information on rural women’s practices in the twentieth century. The authors masterfully elucidate the interrelationships among a variety of genres, from rituals to prose narratives, from charms to songs, which typically has been lacking in prior scholarship. While the book is too dense to be recommended as a text for undergraduates, excerpts could prove useful in courses on folklore and anthropology. This study will be an invaluable source for researchers in various disciplines on the lives of Russian rural women since the Bolshevik Revolution.

**Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind.** By John Miles Foley. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 292, preface, further reading, notes, index.)

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John Miles Foley’s *Oral Tradition and the Internet* is an incredibly ambitious work by an incredibly ambitious scholar. Published shortly after his untimely passing in 2012, this book