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Review Of "Separatism And Women's Community" By D. R. Shugar

Wendy E. Chmielewski

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Review

Author(s): Wendy E. Chmielewski

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the anti-utopian views of Dostoevsky or Zamiatin. Here was a true believer who doubted but never fully abandoned his utopian beliefs. This new dominant in twentieth-century utopian thinking has been called "meta-utopian." What is meant is a perspective that neither accepts nor rejects utopianism, while it may fully undo one or more specific utopian visions. From a position in among a number of utopian possibilities the meta-utopian thinker meditates on the "rules of the utopian game," on its presuppositions, its deep structures. As Seifrid shows with care and precision Platonov's first great novel, *Chevengur*, is neither a utopia nor an anti-utopia (or dystopia) but instead a "curious combination" "ambivalently posed between pathetic lament and parodic derision."

This book is a very welcome addition to Platonov studies, utopian studies, and the study of early twentieth-century Russian intellectual history. Building on a number of previous works, Seifrid does a convincing job synthesizing the literary and philosophical currents within which this writer, so unique and difficult to place, should be interpreted. Discussion includes the utopian millenarianism of Nikolai Fedorov, the concept of proletarian culture of Aleksandr Bogdanov, the satire of Mikhail Zoshchenko, the socialist realist writing *avant la lettre* of Fedor Gladkov, among others.

Platonov deserves more serious attention from English-language readers. One detail that could have made this discussion more accessible would have been to give translations of all titles of Platonov's works and to refer to them in the text by their English titles. Still, this is a very valuable addition that, it is hoped, will encourage inclusion of Platonov in syllabi of courses and seminars on utopia.

Edith W. Clowes
Purdue University

Dana R. Shugar. *Separatism and Women's Community*.

Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995. xvii + 216 pp. \$30.00.

THIS BOOK BY DANA SHUGAR (Assistant Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island) is a valuable addition to the growing literature on the history of the women's movement, lesbianism, and lesbian-feminist theory during the 1970s and early 1980s. In the first part of the book Shugar explores the ways in which women attempted to create community based on shared political conceptions of feminism, radical feminism, and separatism, which they believed would be the basis for revolutionary social change. In a second section Shugar explores how women actually built community by examining the experiences of the women in Lavender Woman, a Chicago newspaper collective, and women's experiences in various land community experiments. She looks at these communities through the lens of two books, Michal Brody's *Are We There Yet?* (1985) and Joyce Cheney's *Lesbian Land* (1985). In the third section Shugar reviews a body fiction from this period that depicted "utopian" women's communities. She theorizes that this literature was central to the evolution of separatism and the development of women's community. This fiction served several functions. These books were entertainment, blueprints, and receptacles for political theories and ideas about community. Shugar believes that authors of this body of literature were in turn influenced by the ideas and experiences of women who built living communities. She concentrates on Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, first published in 1978, and Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*, which appeared the same year, as two books illustrative of separatist theory and issues of community building.

Shugar does an admirable job of sorting out for her readers the various forms of feminism and separatism as debated by practitioners and theorists. She traces the development of separatism through interviews and writings, in now often hard to find publications, and describes the connections with feminist theory. Separatism, as postulated by radical feminists and lesbian feminists of the 1970s and early 1980s, challenged not only patriarchal notions of women and gender, but all social, political, and economic relationships. Shugar leads her readers to understand that separatism meant not only did women want to turn away from patriarchal institutions, but turn towards other women. For many feminists this meant that forming women's communities was the first step in implementing the revolution. The author is particularly adept in distinguishing between theories of heterosexual and homosexual separatism, theorists, and practitioners.

Shugar faces the difficult task of explaining the nature of women's community. She is not always successful. Women's community was a multi-faceted term, frequently used, not often clarified, and with no agreed upon definition. The term was used by "members" to identify the many forms of women coming together from business collectives to intentional residential communities in rural settings. It was also used as a general term to describe diverse and amorphous feminist and/or lesbian activities of residential, commercial, and political groups in metropolitan areas (as in the women's community in Chicago). As Shugar explores in great detail the theoretical underpinnings and varieties of women's community, it would have been a service to readers with little knowledge of this area to have a clearer definition of what "community" meant to the women studied.

Shugar gives a good overview of what political issues were pivotal in the creation of these communities. She describes the work by some women's communities to incorporate recognition of the diversity of women as to maternal status, class, race, physical ability, ethnicity and translate that recognition into community paradigms and practices. She also notes the attempts by some communities to incorporate other non-traditional practices, such as women's spirituality, environmentalism, and collective economic arrangements into the new communities.

Shugar correctly identifies these disagreements were often a factor in tearing communities apart. In short sections, labeled as interstices, Shugar describes her own experiences with women's communities as she conducted the research for this book. These sections illustrate how deeply held political beliefs continue to pull women and communities apart. However, Shugar fails to consider that some of the communities she describes had roots in the historic and contemporary intentional communities movement. Other factors, such as economic problems, small membership, poor land choice, or difficulties in living outside of mainstream society, may have also played a part in the reason some of these women's communities failed to thrive. Experimental communities of all kinds frequently fail to last beyond the initial stages. Shugar does not adequately explain that quite a few of these women's communities continue to exist today in one form or another.

Almost entirely missing from the descriptions of the various kinds of communities are the deeply emotional and sexual ties between women that held many of these groups together. While Shugar's primary goal is an exploration of theories of heterosexual and homosexual separatism, the reality of a large portion of same sex relationships in women's communities should have necessitated an exploration of this issue. For the women Shugar studied sexual identity was a crucial part of a revolutionary political and personal statement. Lesbians themselves, and scholars who study lesbians, have also noted the strong ties between women often outlast sexual relationships and live on in "kinship" networks for years, even decades. Without an

acknowledgement of these connections between community members, readers are left with a less than complete understanding of the ways in which these groups functioned. However, just by writing this book Shugar does contribute to a different framework from that of the recent and more well known gay/queer (mostly male) historical paradigm. She suggests that, at least for these lesbians, sexual identity was tied to political choices rather than the result of individual "nature" or genetic destiny.

Shugar's work has three important purposes for those interested in utopian studies and theories of social change. She has begun the scholarly investigation of women's intentional communities, little known outside the movement itself. The exploration of the political and theoretical connections between literary utopias and practical experience in community experiments is invaluable. This work provides a new and in-depth analysis of an important social movement of the last quarter of the twentieth century, adding to our general knowledge of women's history, in particular, lesbian and feminist history of the 1970s and 1980s.

Wendy E. Chmielewski
Swarthmore Peace Collection

Hendrik Smeeks. *The Mighty Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes* (1708).

Edited by David Fausett. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. i + 129 pp.

FEW WILL HAVE HEARD of this obscure Dutch utopia, here reprinted with manuscript notes from the author's own copy. Yet it would have been surprising if one of the greatest mercantile and exploring peoples of the seventeenth century, whose East India Company ships did much to explore *terra australis inconnu* on their way to Batavia, had not recast some of their observations in imaginative form. Their journeys, as is well known, inspired utopian writers in other lands (and notably the principal 'austral utopias' of the period, Denis Vairasse's *The History of the Sevarites*, 1675, and Gabriel Le Foigny's *La Terre Australe Connue*, 1676).

For Fausett, author of a study of the genre (*Writing the New World. Imaginary Voyages and Utopias of the Great Southern Land*, Syracuse UP, 1993), *Kesmes* is of interest in part as a cruder but major forerunner to *Robinson Crusoe* (and possibly known by Defoe himself), with Henry Neville's highly popular *The Isle of Pines* (1688) standing in as the other major British precursor to the true story of Alexander Selkirk. *Kesmes*'s hero, De Posos, like Defoe's *Crusoe*, though nominally a church-going and virtuous man, undergoes ordeals which symbolise a passage through social alienation and purgatory to redemption (the return of the wealthy traveller to Europe). The parallels begin to ebb at this point. The imaginary kingdom De Posos discovers is not uninhabited, and contains dystopian and satirical elements (for example concerning religious dogmatism) which affiliate the work to Swift more than Defoe. Indeed, Smeeks's delineation of seemingly Spinozan heresies in *Kesmes* earned him excommunication from the Dutch Church.

The central theme here is not redemption through labour, via the conquest of nature (for at a primitive level there are echoes of Bacon's *New Atlantis* even on *Crusoe*'s island). Though there is a survival narrative of sorts, and detailed observations on topics like the causes of scurvy, the central part of De Posos's journey discovers a civilised people acquainted with European languages and customs, their religion and knowledge derived from European and Asiatic customs, but yet prohibiting any travel abroad. The reason for this is simply that like Europeans, religious controversy and hatred came to occupy much of their energies, until finally