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Sarah A. Tarlow

Representing Utopia: The Case of Cyrus Teed's Koreshan Unity Settlement

ABSTRACT

In the late-19th century, impelled by a dissatisfaction with American "competist" values and inspired by a vision of cosmic truth, Dr. Cyrus Teed, known as Koresh, left Chicago with a small group of followers to build their New Jerusalem in the swamplands of Estero Bay, Florida. The central tenet of Koreshanity was that the earth is a hollow sphere, and we live on the inside. This conception of the universe encouraged a theology, political science, and philosophical understanding that stressed the finite, knowable, and internally complete nature of the world. The history and material remains of the Koreshan community are discussed, and the article ends with some reflections on how their utopian project has been, and should be, represented in a modern context. There are political implications in what is chosen to be said or left unsaid about dissenting groups like the Koreshans.

Cyrus Teed and Koreshanity

> "The earth is a concave sphere, the ratio of curvation being eight inches to the mile, thus giving a diameter of eight thousand, and a corresponding circumference of about twenty-five thousand miles."
>
> —(Koresh 1905:12)

The founder of the Koreshan Unity was Cyrus Reed Teed, later known as Koresh (although he was not related, either genetically or ideologically, to David Koresh, the late-20th-century millennial utopian of Waco, Texas). Teed was born in 1839 in New York state and eventually became a physician, with his own practice in Utica, New York. One night in 1869, working late in his laboratory, Teed had a mystical "illumination" that set the course for the rest of his life. A beautiful woman appeared to him and filled him with a profound spiritual understanding, through which he came to realize that he was the new messiah. Teed renamed himself Koresh, the Hebrew translation of his name, and began to gather around him a group of converts to his way of thinking (Carmer 1949; Mackle 1971; Michel [1975]; Landing 1997). After failing to win large numbers of converts in New York state, he moved to Chicago in 1886 and there continued his ministry, eventually establishing the Koreshan Unity, a community of Koreshans devoted to putting Teed's social and religious philosophy into practice.

Koreshan religious beliefs were broadly millennial and exalted celibacy and community. His social philosophy was inseparable from his spirituality and involved a strong notion of communal living, eschewing private property or capitalistic exchange. The aim of spiritual improvement for Koresh was to reach *involution*, a state of perfection and harmony with the cosmos. At the center of Koreshanity, however, was Koresh's peculiar cosmology (Figure 1). The earth could be understood as being like a giant tennis ball, with the inhabited surface on the inside. The sun, moon, and astral bodies hung suspended in the center (Koresh 1905). For him, it was more than a differently shaped world; it was the foundation for a whole new and better society, which was inseparable from a new theology and a new social order. If humans live on the inside, that meant to Koresh that the human universe is knowable, finite, and ordered. Gone were the uncertainties of infinite space (Koresh 1905:97–101; Hume 1928:170; Gardner 1992:19). Moreover, the universe was now focused on a center, rather than expanding outward. Around his new cosmology, Koresh (1905) devised a whole social system: political, economic, social, cultural, and religious aspects of an ideal society in which each person would be able to attain perfection—an ineffable state of immortal fulfillment—in his New Jerusalem. Koreshans' theological and social beliefs proceeded directly from their cosmology. Koresh avowed (1927:48) that the discovery of the cellular cosmogony "settles the great questions of origin and destiny, and all the great problems that are agitating the mental world at this period of scientific and social revolution."

In 1894, Teed and a small group of followers from Chicago arrived at the site on the Estero River in southwestern Florida (Figure 2) that had been donated to the Koreshans by Gustav

Historical Archaeology, 2006, 40(1):89–99.

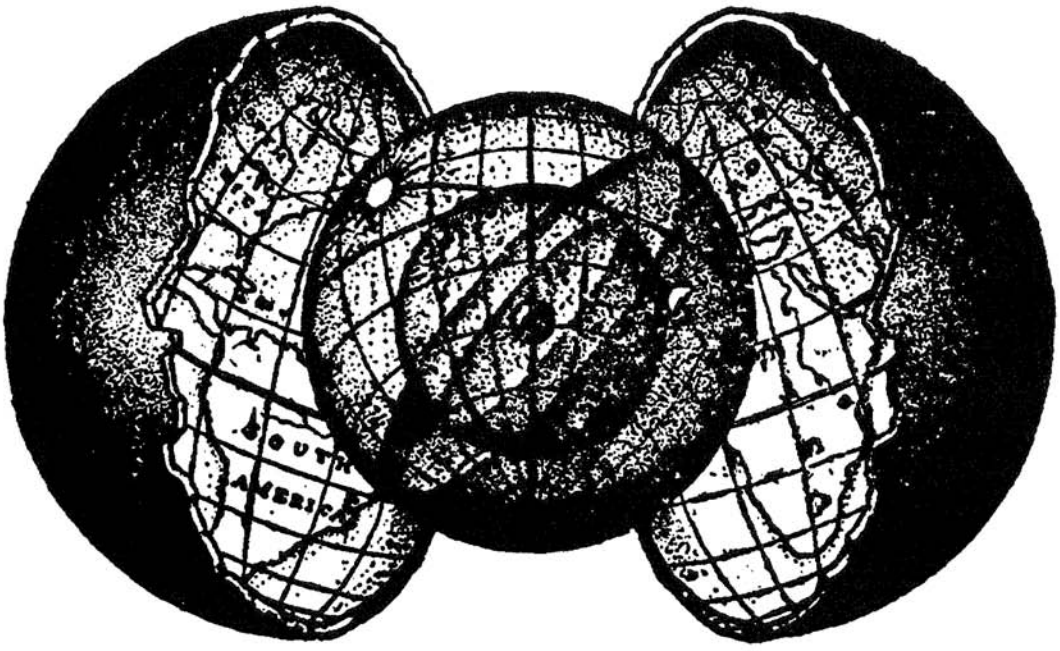

FIGURE 1. Koreshan cosmology (from Koresh 1905).

Damkohler, a German immigrant who had settled there and been inspired by some Koreshan literature (Damkohler 1967; Landing 1997). From Estero, Teed began his two projects of founding his "new order" and proving by experiment that the earth was, indeed, a hollow sphere. On the long strand of nearby Naples Bay, he conclusively proved, to his own satisfaction, his new "universology" (Koresh 1905:11) through a series of experiments devised by himself and one of his followers, Ulysses Morrow, using an instrument invented by Morrow called a *rectilineator*. At the same time, the Koreshans continued to spread the word, through vast quantities of literature produced and printed by the group's own Guiding Star Press, including a newspaper, a monthly journal, and scores of single-issue pamphlets.

Meanwhile, the utopian project continued. The new settlement was to be a beacon and example and, in due course, to be celebrated as the origin and navel of the New Jerusalem. Teed's ultimate plan for the physical layout of the city was that it should be a great star-shaped city of broad streets and beautiful parks. Great underground tunnels would carry all that was necessary to supply the city with electricity and clean water and would also contain the pipes and sewers through which liquid and solid waste would be carried out of the city for composting. In this great city, black and white people would live in harmony and equality (Berrey 1928). In the meantime, a tract of swamp was cleared, temporary buildings erected, and the cultivation

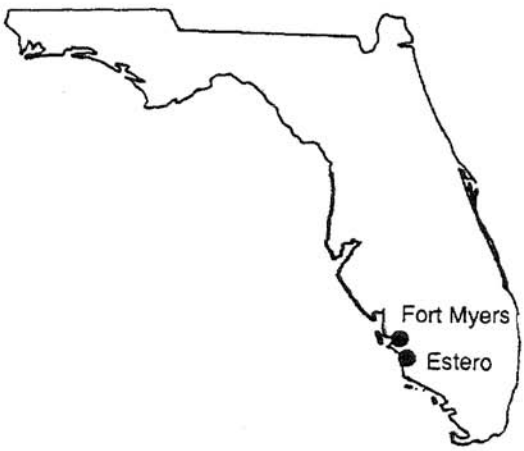

FIGURE 2. Location of Koreshan Unity site at Estero, Florida. (Drawing by author, [2002].)

of fruit and vegetables for the community's own consumption began.

The site has been surveyed a number of times, mostly for the purposes of securing its listing in the National Register of Historic Places and for its restoration and interpretation as a state historic park. To date, archaeological research at the site has been limited. Some excavation was carried out in 1991 at the founder's house at the time of its restoration (Piper Archaeological Research 1991). Two years later, the site was mapped, noting the position of trash scatters and earthworks as well as structural features. At the same time, an archaeological management plan was formulated by Janus Research and Piper Archaeology (1993), but the plan has not yet been fully implemented. The extensive documentary archive (the Koreshans themselves produced large volumes of philosophical and promotional literature) permits the creation of a very rich picture of the lives and values of the members of the community. This paper suggests that archaeological and architectural information about the site, although limited, can already illuminate the story of the Koreshans when considered in conjunction with textual sources, and that further archaeological and architectural work at the site will enhance its research potential.

Teed's social philosophy was anticapitalist and anti-individualist (Koresh [1900]a, [1900]c, 1927; Hinds 1908; Berrey 1928). He distrusted the popular media and was a regular critic of the Christian church, although not of Christianity, and of the oppression of women (Koresh 1892, [1900]d). Members of the Koreshan Unity did not own personal property (Koresh [1900]a). The highest orders of membership were reserved for those who led celibate lives devoted to the community and to Koreshanity, although those who wished to live as married couples or families were allowed to do so. Meals were taken communally, and all members of the community worked at the Unity's activities. Basic maintenance activities included the construction of buildings and gardens, food growing and preparation, laundry and schooling (Koresh [1900]a). Additionally, the Koreshans produced large amounts of literature on their own press and ran a store and gas station to cater to the travelers who passed through their settlement on the Tamiami Trail (now Highway 41). They sold some of their own surplus produce and manufactured goods, including a range of concrete garden ornaments made in their own works (Berrey 1928).

Community members lived well. Utopian settlements of the 19th century almost always ran into financial difficulties or problems in maintaining food supplies. This was often due to a membership that was high in aspiration and commitment but, being mainly urban and middle class, generally lacked the practical skills in agriculture and horticulture that were necessary to live off the land. The Koreshans were also mainly middle class and, being for the most part from Chicago, would not appear to be well prepared to cultivate the Florida swamp. However, despite these apparent disadvantages, they managed to build a successful community that not only sustained itself economically but also provided a surplus for the market. It is likely that good business sense, diverse economic activities, fertile land, and a commitment to hard work enabled them to make a success of their Florida venture.

The Koreshans built more than 20 structures at Estero, including communal utility buildings, dormitories, and family dwellings, most of which are still standing, spread over an area of about 50 acres. The lines of shell paths and roads are mostly visible. The extensive landscaping they undertook has largely been overtaken by the swamp environment, but the earthworks of sunken features and mounds are still visible. Many of the concrete ornaments produced on-site by the communards are still evident, although the gardens that once surrounded them have given way to lush forest, in which many of the exotic species cultivated by the Koreshans are evident.

For reasons of principle, the Koreshans eschewed alcohol, tobacco, profanity, and, except for a small number of families, sex (Berrey 1928:64; Kitch 1989). The abstemious lifestyle they promoted appears to have been largely followed by the community members. For example, the only beer bottle glass recovered from the site appears to postdate its main period of occupation (Piper Archaeological Research 1991:22). Nevertheless, the life of the communards was not dull. One of the first buildings constructed on the site was the Arts Hall. This was heavily used by the

Koreshans for concerts, plays, operettas, and revues, all of which they performed themselves (Michel [1975]:5). They went on pleasure trips and picnics to the beach and braved alligators and water moccasins to go boating on the river. They made tennis courts, still evident as areas with a shell "pavement" (Figure 3), and played numerous indoor and outdoor games.

The buildings of their settlement were only ever intended to provide temporary shelter until the communards were rich enough in numbers and resources to create the New Jerusalem, according to Teed's plan (Berrey 1928:46).

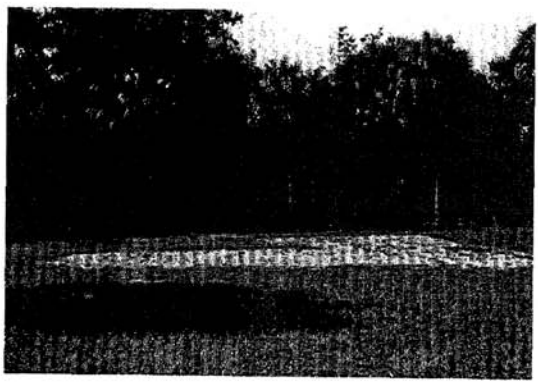

FIGURE 3. Tennis courts, Koreshan Unity site, Estero, Florida. (Photo by author.)

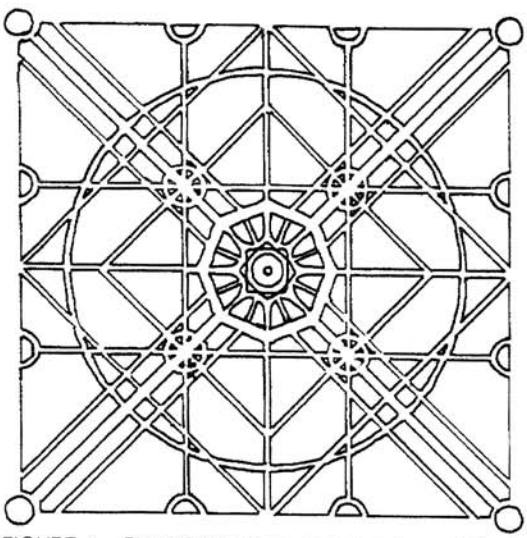

FIGURE 4. Plan of the "New Jerusalem," as originally imagined. (Drawing by author.)

Although some architectural features like the circular porches at the founder's house, for example, refer to the circularity of Teed's New Jerusalem (Figures 4, 5), most of the surviving buildings of the site are built according to the local vernacular styles prevalent in the "outer world" at that time (Herbert and Reeves 1977). Nevertheless, the buildings the Koreshans made were solid and well constructed, especially in comparison to the cabin of the German settlers who had occupied the site before the Koreshans did (Figure 6). Their community was one of the first in western Florida to have electric lighting, supplied on-site by their own generator, for the Koreshans, unlike some other members of utopian communities, embraced recent technological developments (Koresh [1900]b; Herbert and Reeves 1977:73). Where Teed, however, had specified that the New Jerusalem would have underground tunnels (wide enough to carry all the wires, cables, and pipes necessary to an efficient, hygienic, and modern world, as well as carrying a garbage disposal system that would remove all waste from the city), the Koreshan Unity settlement erected poles to carry the electricity cables (Figure 7) and apparently dumped their trash in the nearby forest, as numerous trash scatters in the immediate environs of the settlement suggest (Janus Research and Piper Archaeology 1993).

These were not the only gaps between the imagined utopia and the practical experience of the communards. Despite Teed's anti-competism [competition], the Koreshans were happy to sell provisions to passing tourists and residents of nearby towns (Carmer 1949). Clearly a distinction was made between those inside the community, with whom goods and provisions should be freely shared, and those outside, who might be economically exploited. Despite the formal eschewal of personal property, excavations at the site have revealed artifacts that were probably privately owned, including a pin made from a modified dollar with initials impressed in it, almost certainly a personal keepsake, and an iron key, which suggest that even within the community, access to some things or areas was restricted (Piper Archaeological Research 1991: 22,24). Still, the possession of a few minor personal items hardly constitutes the failure of the project or of communal living. Overall, the Koreshan settlement was economically successful,

FIGURE 5. Map of the Koreshan Unity settlement as eventually laid out: (*1*) Gustav Damkohler's house, (*2*) Arts Hall, (*3*) ornamental mounds, (*4*) sunken gardens, (*5*) founder's house, (*6*) Planetary Court (senior women's house), (*7*) tennis courts, (*8*) machine and generator sheds, (*9*) stores, (*10*) workshops. (Drawing by author.)

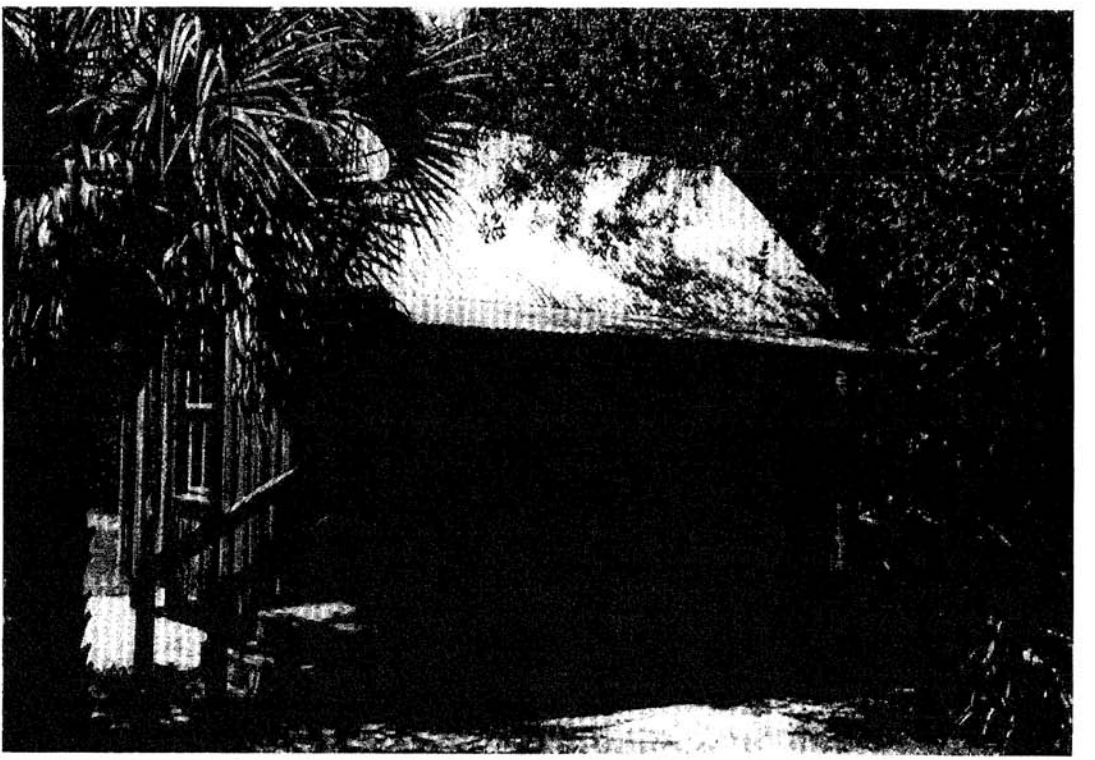

FIGURE 6. The house of Gustav Damkohler, the previous owner of the Koreshan lands in Estero, Florida. (Photo by author.)

FIGURE 7. Pole for carrying electric cable, Koreshan Unity site, Estero, Florida. (Photo by author.)

tolerant of its neighbors, and essentially true to its principles (Fine 1972:87).

Decline and Fall

Experimental utopian communities differ from their purely textual counterparts in that their experience was not static. The life of a community is dynamic and constantly developing; thus the Koreshan Unity changed through the course of its history. The community moved to Estero in 1894, and the site was owned and run by Koreshans until the decision in 1961 to convey the Unity's lands to the State of Florida for a state park. Although Teed had believed himself to be immortal, he died in 1908. The last Koreshan, Hedwig Michel, lived until 1982. After Teed's death, the community suffered a series of schisms, desertions, and changes but managed to make a living through its store, gas station, and trailer court for more than 50 years. There were only about a dozen members left by the late 1940s. In comparison with most utopian communities, Estero's 67-year lifespan is an impressive achievement. According to the members own hopes of endurance and recruitment, however, the community was not a success. They did not accomplish the transformation of the human world that Koresh had hoped to make. Perhaps the designation of "success" or "failure," as Donald Pitzer (1989, 1997) has argued, is not as interesting an avenue to follow as the study of "developmental communalism": the changes in community organization, philosophy, and aspiration through its existence. There are other grounds on which the Koreshan Unity could be counted a successful venture: they negotiated many of the tensions of communal living; they made a beautiful and happy community where a number of people found spiritual and social fulfillment; and, if nothing else, they made many more people aware that there are alternatives to individualistic industrial capitalism. The reasons why the Koreshan Unity succeeded for so long, why so few defected, and how "community spirit" endured for over 60 years raise interesting questions for research.

What Has Posterity Made of the Community?

Highway 41, a major road, now divides the Koreshan site. To the west of the highway, the site is managed by the State of Florida as a state historic site. To the east, a private, nonprofit organization, the College of Life Foundation (formerly the Koreshan Unity Foundation), maintains a number of buildings and runs a small museum and theater. The state-run part of the site, which includes most of the buildings and gardens, offers a fairly straightforward historical interpretation through leaflets and information panels. The foundation, which until recently refused to work with the state park or with other state historians or archivists, takes a more committed position, seeing itself as the heir to Teed's original community with a responsibility for promoting Koreshan values. Charles Dauray, the president of the foundation, is quoted in the local press as claiming that the foundation's activities are "the fulfillment of what the Koreshans

ultimately wanted to do" (Gillis 2001b). Yet their interpretation of Teed's moral purpose is contested. In particular, the recent decision of the nonprofit foundation to construct a 62-acre development including housing, commercial premises, a marina, hotel, meeting rooms, and restaurants on Koreshan land has been seen by many local people as financially motivated. This follows the sale of 176 acres of Koreshan land to a development company in 1993 for the construction of a gated community and golf course, a sale that generated millions of dollars for the foundation, from which the salaries of its three-member, unelected board are paid.

Dauray claims that such developments are in line with Koreshan values: "They were not just idealists . . . They realized that to get along you had to have an ability to make a living" (Gillis 2001a). Noting that the Estero community was originally envisaged as the New Jerusalem, a mighty city with millions of inhabitants, he suggests that the proposed housing development is in line with Teed's intentions. Yet Teed was emphatically not a property developer; the community was founded as an alternative to and a critique of capitalist values. His New Jerusalem was founded on principles of equality and inclusiveness; it was not a gated community. The nature of the new president's selective understanding of Teed's socialism might be unsurprising, given his political position (he is founding chair of the Collier County Young Republicans club), but it is cynical to claim Koreshan precedent for exactly the kind of profit-motivated participation in socially divisive capitalist markets that Teed despised. Similarly, the other activities on the foundation site are in accord more with the moral values of modern conservative Americans than the radical position of the original Koreshans. While Teed did not approve of drinking or smoking, both activities that are outlawed at the foundation site, he also disapproved of marriage, which he considered a form of legal slavery, and promoted a celibate life as an important part of spiritual fulfillment. The College of Life Foundation, however, permits weddings at the site. This is fair enough, insofar as some reinterpretation to articulate with the values of those who manage the site seems quite reasonable. In the claim to be perpetuating Teed's morality, most of what is fascinating about Koreshanity is lost.

Teed was in no way conservative. The Koreshans were passionately anticapitalist, antipatriarchal, even antifamily. They were avowedly antimaterialist, but their furniture is now preserved and presented in a museum. Battle reenactments take place on the land once farmed by this largely pacifist group (Erhart 1997).

Does it matter? After all, histories are made by telling, not retrieved wholesale, right or wrong. Yet, just because an unambiguous truth cannot be represented, the past cannot be told in just any way. Numerous factors affect what can be said about the past. These include fit with the facts, internal coherence, and ethical and political implications. On those last grounds, the comfortable middle-American presentation of utopian societies should be challenged for two reasons. First, researchers have an ethical duty to people of the past, and that duty is not well discharged by appropriating their lives and all that was most important and profound to them in order to promote a system of values quite alien or even opposed to those they espoused. Ethical responsibility to past people is a huge and complex philosophical issue, and it will only be mentioned here. This subject has been more extensively developed elsewhere by the author (2001a, 2001b).

Second, the archaeology of utopias can potentially enrich our social and cultural understandings of the 19th century. Often, the 19th century is viewed as a period of huge economic growth, of the triumph of capitalism, of rich industrialists and, obversely, of the downtrodden poor, oppression of those who were not white, male, rich, and of European descent. All those things are certainly important in understanding this period, and to be sure it is not desirable to return to the promotion of an elitist view of 19th-century history as the triumph of progress. At the same time, alternative views need to be incorporated into histories as well as into the critiques of some widespread societal values and the "other" 19th century of radicalism, reform, experiment, and active improvement.

The issue of accurately portraying utopian communities has been more extensively discussed with reference to the well-studied American Shaker communities. Reflecting on a visit to the Shaker town at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, Mark Leone (1981) notes that the public presentation of Shaker culture promotes a view of

Shaker life that shores up traditional American values, such as ingenuity and hardiness, rather than offering a radical critique of the values of modern American society, such as capitalism and the family. Thus, instead of representing Shakers as rejecting individualist and capitalist ethics, their modes of production, material culture, and way of life are presented as efficient, simple, and inventive. This construct reinforces other aspects of culturally dominant American identity, such as economic rationality and productivity (Leone 1981). The really radical and strange aspects of Shaker lifestyle—their celibacy, their ambisexual godhead, and their devotional practices—were presented unfairly as exotic quirks, which ultimately led to the collapse of their society.

The outlook of the Koreshans was very similar in a number of respects to that of the Shakers, so much so, in fact, that the two groups considered merging (Stein 1992:324). Their fate in some subsequent interpretations has been similar to that of the Shakers. Mildred Fryman (1975:8), in the unpublished "Statement of Significance" written for the Koreshan Unity site National Register Nomination, asserts, "The model for this communal activity was the early Christian Church, not Marxist theory. . . . The result was a concept of a cooperative community which was not a politically motivated rejection of the capitalistic system." Teed was by no means a Marxist, yet he described his creed as both communist and socialist and claimed that the Koreshan mission was to "demonstrate the fallacy of competism (competition); advocate the destruction of the money power; the control of the products of industry by the government, and the equitable distribution of the goods of life. Koreshanity will abolish wage slavery, and make it impossible for men to accumulate wealth and impoverish the people" (Koresh 1901; Berrey 1928:3–4). This statement certainly sounds very much like a politically motivated rejection of the capitalistic system. It is possible that, during the Cold War, when Fryman was carrying out her assessment, there was an ideological imperative to prefer an interpretation of the site that foregrounded the "American" virtues of the settlers and denied the potentially subversive, radical socialist views espoused by Teed. Moreover, because the statement was prepared for a nomination to the National Register, the potentially "un-American" aspects of the community's political history may have been deliberately played down.

Leone's point that the modern "heritage" presentation of utopian sites is not ideologically neutral is an important insight and, as he himself points out, not necessarily a bad thing. The way archaeologies of utopia are written and presented can be informed by political, moral, and ideological purpose. Nevertheless, archaeologists have a duty to the people of the past to represent their views, values, and experiences as completely and subtly as we can. One Shaker sister quite reasonably complained that she did not want to be "remembered as a chair" (Starbuck 1998:3). David Starbuck (1998:3) reflects, "it is far too easy to identify the Shakers with their products and manufactures rather than to think of them as knowledgeable informants and purveyors of a distinctive culture." Starbuck's (1984, 1990, 1998) own work at Canterbury village goes some way toward rectifying this perception by thoroughly recording numerous details of Shaker life and presenting a picture of Shaker belief and practice that goes well beyond furniture and herbs.

There is some risk in pursuing Leone's neo-Marxist agenda, however, in that the power of religious belief can be underrated or underemphasized. It may be preferable, as Leone does, to offer an explanation in terms of a radical political critique of capitalism, rather than a reaction against godlessness and immorality. The aspects of society the utopians critiqued did not only include social policy and political and economic iniquities. Many utopians also promoted a strong religious and moral critique of society. It is quite easy for many modern academics to emphasize political critique, but they often feel less comfortable in representing strong religious faith or moral conviction. Leone is clearly sympathetic toward the Shakers' anticapitalism, yet Shakers were not secular socialists. Factually accurate as well as self-critical representations of the people of the past (as in Wylie 1985) should incorporate the beliefs and practices of past peoples that researchers find difficult or strange and those with which they have sympathy. While Leone is therefore correct in pointing out the narrowness of the "establishment" interpretation of the Shakers, it is not appropriate to paint them as heroes of

socialism either. For example, Leone correctly observes (1981:308) that Shaker dancing is more than "sublimated sexuality"; but his alternative interpretation that it functions "to keep emotions out of destructive competition between workers" is equally partial and inappropriately modern, in failing to consider religious ecstasy as a significant factor. Leone shares in a late-20th-century discomfort with evidence of religious devotion and spiritual passion. Their (to us) strange religious beliefs, enforced celibacy, strict bodily disciplines (Hayden 1976), and obedience to rule were as much a part of the Shaker experience as their craft skill *or* their anticapitalism.

The presentation of a monolithic "authentic" experience is not a realistic aim. Representing utopians (or anybody in the past) will inevitably involve recognition that the experiences and views of any group were themselves variable and the histories that are written will be selective and partial. In representing utopias, one engages in projects of political significance in the modern world, but modern representations must also be balanced with presenting their vision in a way that makes sense of what they, the people of the past, were trying to do.

There is certainly a political potential in pursuing an archaeology of 19th-century utopias. Even if ultimately unsuccessful, utopian communities, like utopian art or writing, are potent places of social critique. They demonstrate clearly that society in the recent past was never homogenous; they undermine the nostalgic myths that represent "the old days" as times of contentment; and they illustrate the contingency of history—things could have been otherwise than they are. At the same time, they also demonstrate some very specific modernist values: a belief in improvability, a faith in innovation and experiment, a huge sense of self combined with an emotional and analytical consideration of one's society.

Finally, then, utopia can be a way to think about how principles and processes of the modern world played out other than through industrial capitalism. Despite the rejection of mainstream Euroamerican capitalist society, the members of utopian communities continued to value improvement (through education, innovation, social engineering, and the arts, for example) and personal fulfillment. They also responded to the rationalist tendency toward ordering, structuring, and regimenting that characterized secular thought in the post-Enlightenment period. It is not coincidental that America, where more than anywhere else in the 19th century, individualism and self-determination were permitted to thrive, also nurtured the greatest number of communitarian utopias.

Conclusion

To date, archaeological research at the Koreshan Unity site has been very limited, but the potential for further research is great. It is hoped that in the future such work might include the following types of studies:

> A detailed study of the trash scatters in the site environs, through which the degree and nature of the interaction between Koreshans and the local community can be studied;
>
> An examination of consumer practices of the Koreshans as compared to local, noncommunitarian sites of the same period (i.e., to what extent were the Koreshans self-sufficient; do the methods of food preparation evident suggest that the Koreshans were eating more frugally, communally, or exotically than their neighbors); and
>
> Conducting spatial studies of the landscape and the internal architecture of the buildings may shed light on the promotion and enforcement of Koreshan rules of behavior through self-regulation and surveillance.

In 1875, when Charles Nordhoff was compiling material on the mid-19th-century socialist settlement of Icaria, Iowa, for his great survey of American utopias, a man wrote to him to say, "The man who sees only the chaotic village and wooden shoes, and only chronicles those, will commit a serious error. In that village are buried fortunes, noble hopes, and the aspirations of great and good men" (Nordhoff 1993:339).

This message has particular resonance for archaeologists because primary evidence usually

comprises the scattered material remains of people's lives. Archaeologists need to keep trying, in all the attempts to write social archaeologies, to go beyond chronicling "the chaotic village and wooden shoes" and to do justice to the fortunes, hopes, and aspirations of those who lived there. Historical archaeologists, by virtue of having access to the wooden shoes as well as the great and good aspirations, can produce richly textured accounts of "daring experiments" like the Koreshan Unity settlement.

Acknowledgments

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