

COMMUNAL ETHOS ON A RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ WEB SITE

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Abstract. This paper will analyze how participants on the Russian émigré web site “Little Russia in San Antonio, Texas” rhetorically construct a Russian communal ethos in cyberspace. This ethos emerges primarily through two activities: the creation of cultural and technical resources, and the connecting with other people and other web pages through the site. Together, these activities form a rhetorical community on the web, a community that is itself a new form of transnational activity. This new communal form is enabled by the robust nature of web communicative forms as well as the web’s transgression of national and cultural boundaries, permitting the incorporation of diverse people and diverse rhetorics in the forming, contestation, and negotiation of Russian cultural identity online. The outcome is a Russian cultural identification that results not from a unified official voice but rather, through the mix and clash of a multiplicity of contrasting and often contending perspectives.

1. Introduction

Many Russian-American émigré communities have a physical place where people gather to talk and share stories, as well as to obtain food, news, and other culturally specific items. These “rhetorical gathering places” typically take the form of émigré-owned stores, cafes, and churches (cf. Tarasoff 1989). With the proliferation of the World Wide Web, more and more communities are forging such places in cyberspace.

This paper will analyze how one such place, the web site “Little Russia in San Antonio, Texas” (located at <http://mars.uthsca.edu/Russia/>) rhetorically constructs a communal identification in cyberspace. This cultural identification is expressed through two primary activities on the “Little Russia” web site. The first one is the creation of resources and sharing of knowledge about Russian culture. The second activity is what one might call “connectivity,” the creating of hypertext linkages and dialoguing with other participants on various bulletin boards provided by the web site. Together, these activities form a virtual community on the web, a community that is a form of transnational activity between the Russian diaspora and Russians in Russia itself.

The community of participants engaged in these activities is diverse. "Little Russia" is comprised of ethnic Russians living within Russia, Russian émigrés living in the United States and elsewhere, as well as non-Russian peoples in both Russia proper and outside of Russia. These participants employ distinct rhetorics in the formation of cultural resources, sharing of cultural knowledge, and forming of connections with others linked to the site. What makes these articulations novel is that on the World Wide Web, the form of communication is more rapid, transnational, and participatory than in more traditional media forms, such as newspapers, books, television, or radio. To put it simply, the World Wide Web affords a unique combination of interactivity, content, and media richness that permits more people from more locations to receive and communicate sound, pictures, text, and even animation at extremely fast speeds.

These aspects affect the shape of online communities. As Steven Jones writes, computer mediated communication "is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space" (1995:16). One example has been cited by Nancy Baym (1993), who argues that the infrastructure of Usenet shapes communal identifications in the newsgroup rec.arts.tv.soaps (see also Paul Kelly 1995).

The interactivity and richness of the web offers a more involved form of interaction with the medium, and this interaction plays a significant role in defining the contours of the "Little Russia" gathering place. The web permits a more participatory reading, in which content is largely shaped by direct reader contribution. Thus, one relies less on the voice of one representative "author" to serve as a conduit or mouthpiece for the collective tradition (cf. Bauman 1986). Rather, there are many voices of many authors, each with their own diverse ethnicities and histories that contribute to the character of the site.

Because of this diversity, the notion of what authentically represents Russian culture on "Little Russia" is hybridic and ambivalent. In cyberspace, cultural identifications are less the result of monologic discourses that emerge from within a specific bounded territory and more the product of a mix and clash of often contradictory and contesting points of view that emerge from varied places. Authenticity finds a rhetorical counterpart in the concept of "ethos," which refers to the character of a speaker. But while many theorists see ethos as focused on the solitary speaker (the private individual), ethos at its heart is rooted in notions of community and place. Thus, what produces a Russian ethos on "Little Russia" is collaboratively established. Within the context of the World Wide Web medium, this notion of ethos as "communal place" acquires new dimensions and figures prominently in the construction of identity on "Little Russia."

2. “Little Russia” as a Rhetorical Gathering Place

The best metaphor for a site like “Little Russia” is that of a “rhetorical gathering place.” According to Kevin Hunt, web sites function as “rhetorical ‘gathering places’ in that they are virtual locations in which users “enter and share in [a specific set of communal] values” (1996, online). The concept of “rhetorical gathering place” itself originates with the classical Greek notion of “ethos.” One of three “proofs” of Aristotle’s rhetoric, ethos refers to the character or credibility of a speaker as defined through the choices made in his or her speech (Aristotle 1991:37). But while many theorists see ethos as focused on the solitary speaker (the private individual), Aristotle probably had in mind a more public view of ethos. While Aristotle defined rhetoric proper as “the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1991:36) nowhere does Aristotle say rhetoric itself is to persuade a passive audience. Rather, it is a collaborative activity designed to practice a form of “krisis” (evaluation, judgement) by locating possibilities and exigencies for persuasion (Farrell 1993:94). Aristotle envisions that this rhetoric could not come into existence without a certain type of audience, one that acts as both judge and chooser. Aristotle’s audience is not simply a “market,” but rather, a group with social responsibility that has a capacity for rational choice. Rhetoric forms a climate of civic friendship wherein a “language of engaged community” can bring people together to reflect, refine, and judge (Farrell 1993:97).

In addition to its communal aspect, ethos also has the metaphor of public “place” at its heart. According to Michael Halloran, “the most concrete meaning given for the term in the Greek lexicon is ‘a habitual gathering place,’ and I suspect that it is upon this image of people gathering together in a public place, sharing experiences and ideas, that its meaning as character rests. To have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks...” (1984: 60). This spatial notion of ethos is fitting to apply to the Web because it is often conceived in terms of geographic and spatial metaphors (Gurak 1991). For example, one “surfs” the web, one “navigates” through a web page, and one “goes” to a web site. Web sites themselves are often constructed in terms of spatial metaphors. For example, “Little Russia” features the “Little Russia Newsstand” and “The Little Russia Lounge.”

For Kevin Hunt, communal ethos on the web is expressed in three primary activities: individual creativity (for example, creating a personal home page), connectivity and interactivity (establishing links to others), and reciprocity (the sharing of resources and information) (1996). But while these activities work to consolidate a shared ethos in cyberspace, the web, by virtue of its fluid and protean nature, also loosens specific identifications. A web community like “Little Russia” is comprised of a shifting set of participants asynchronously logging on from different parts of the world. It brings together both ethnic

Russians and non-Russians from within Russia and without. As Baym notes, all interaction on computer mediated communication is “simultaneously situated in multiple external contexts. The preexisting speech communities . . . provide social understandings and practices through and against which interaction in the new computer-mediated-context develops. CMC use is always nested in the national and international cultures of which its participants are members” (1995:141). Thus, communal ethos on the web emerges less from the cultural understandings of a specific geographic locality and more from those of a virtual global “ethnoscape.”

The term “ethnoscape” is derived from the work of Arjun Appadurai, who defines it as “a landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons...” (Appadurai 1990:297). Ethnoscapes form as groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct histories, and reconfigure their ethnic ‘projects’ (1991:191). Appadurai argues that ethnoscapes have emerged from changes in global politics, marked by an organizational shift from “binary positionalities” dominated by space to one of disjunctive global “flows” (1990:296). The result is that an ethnoscape is a *deterritorialized* domain, a domain which is severed from the links to “space, stability, and cultural reproduction” (1991:191). Deterritorialization loosens the “bonds between people, wealth, and territories [which] fundamentally alter the basis of cultural reproduction” (1991:192). Deterritorialization brings groups into contact with one another (such as “lower-class” and “wealthy” sectors) that normally do not come together.

The “ethnoscape” of “Little Russia” tests the boundaries of the more homogenous, closed notion of “ethos” inherited from ancient Greek rhetoric. Ancient Greek “ethos,” while communal in nature, envisioned its community as a relatively homogenous, geographic, and aristocratic version of the “polis”(Miller 1993:234). The web provides a much more diverse ethos that has a deterritorialized notion of place at its heart. As a space organized in terms of flows rather than binary positions, it might be instructive to view web communities as “cultures as sites traversed,” perpetually in-between locations of permanent dwelling, temporarily inhabited by newcomers and repeat visitors (Clifford 1992:103).

As the web permeates geographic and temporal boundaries, participants form rhetorics that are deterritorialized from Russian culture altogether. On “Little Russia”, ethnic Russians, Russian émigrés, and non-Russians come together temporarily to share knowledge and collectively articulate, contest, debate, and negotiate Russian culture and identity. Émigré communities used to maintaining cultural values in geographic seclusion must incorporate a wide range of cultural ideas into the discourse of communal identity on the web. But while the ethnoscape of “Little Russia” is partially the product of the mix and

clash of diverse rhetorics deterritorialized from specific geographic identifications, it is also produced by rhetorics that consciously create a sense of stability and fixedness. Pictures, stories, music, and other elements give the site a distinctly Russian identity. Thus, the ethnoscape of Russian émigré webs is the product of a dialectical flow between rhetorics of fixing and loosening. To see how this dialectical flow creates this ethnoscape, we need to turn to a content analysis of the “Little Russia” web site itself.

3. Cultural and Technical Resources

“Little Russia” is maintained by Vladimir Pekkel, an instructor and researcher at the University of Texas Health Science Center. The graphics were designed by Julia Ilyutovich, who works for the NASA Lewis Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio. Both are émigrés from Russia. The site has received many awards for its design and content, including the Magellan 4-Star Site Award, the Russian-American Award for the Best Presentation of Russian Culture in America, the University of Maryland Russia Club’s Award of Excellence, The 5-Star Award by Luckman Interactive, and others.

“Little Russia” contains a wealth of cultural information in pictorial, audio, and interactive format. The site features a photo gallery depicting major attractions in Russia, including photos of famous buildings in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Karelia, and other locations. Each picture is annotated in English to provide a brief historical context. English usage here is largely pragmatic. Since English is the most widely used tongue on the Internet (cf. Paolillo 1996), its usage here is intended to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The site also contains a collection of links to Russian literature resources, though surprisingly it is very modest (surprising because Russian culture at large greatly values its literary tradition).

The Russian Music Collection, on the other hand, is quite substantial and impressive. It contains audio clips, biographies, and lyrics (some animated and coordinated with sound clips) from musical artists. While some of the artists are well-known (such as F.I. Chaliapin or Vladimir Vysotsky), the site also exposes visitors to lesser known artists such as Mark Reizen, Boris Gmyria, and Nadezhda Oboukhova. The caption under “Opera Singers” reads in part, “It should be no surprise that the rich Russian culture is producing so much talent - it always has, but few outside Russia got a chance to experience it.” The site also contains a collection of jokes (translated into English) with brief explanations of the historical context of each. This page includes political jokes about Russian military heroes, family jokes of the mother-in-law variety, and jokes about America. The Religion page gives an historical description of the country’s major religious faiths and their religious practices.

“Little Russia” also contains extensive technical resources. These include the “Little Russia” Newsstand, which provides a “free service to Russian-speaking community [sic]” by offering reprints from current Russian periodicals such as *Argumenty I fakty* (*Arguments and Facts*), *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (*Literary Gazette*), *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (*The Independent Gazette*), and others. Reprints are distributed in transliterated format or in a Cyrillic font to subscribers via electronic mail and the Web. The site also contains a collection of utilities for Russifying computers (fonts in KOI8 and Windows CP1251 format, keyboard templates, transliteration programs, games, utilities, and help files). There is also a list of Internet servers in Russia (in the form of links and a sensitive clickable map) and a page containing demographic and geographic information on Russia from the CIA world fact book.

The graphic design of the site itself is also a cultural resource (see Figure 1). The lettering in the left column is ornately drawn, resembling the large lettering found in a codex, and the picture at the top of the main page is that of a small Russian wooden church set against a vast landscape of rolling hills and sunlit sky. The landscape portrait evokes a 19th century painting by Issac Levitan called “Above Eternal Peace,” which also sets a small wooden church against an abundance of water, land, and sky. Levitan specialized in a style of painting called *pejzazh* (“scenery” or “landscape”), a style that conveyed a perception of Russia as a “silent, timeless, landscape undisturbed by human presence” (Kirichenko and Anikst 1991:95).



Figure 1.

Pejzazh painting was a form of a Russian artistic style called “style russe.” Style russe was part of an emergent Russian nationalist movement during the

second half of the 19th century. It was marked by a revival of indigenous Russian culture through folk art (91-93). This style came after a period in which Russian artists experimented with modern European and Byzantine motifs. The incorporation of this style into the design of “Little Russia” also has cultural and nationalistic sentiments. It visually creates a space that has a distinct Russian identification. These visual elements are comparable to architectural “memory places” or “topoi” used in ancient rhetoric, in which rhetors committed to memory the interiors of entire buildings and used them as organizing principles for speeches (Ong 1971:106-108). The visual elements on “Little Russia” are virtual “landmarks” (Linenthal 1991:3) that remind visitors of a “home” called Russia.

4. Purposes of Cultural and Technical Resources

These resources serve two primary functions. First, they rhetorically mediate encounters between other cultures and Russians by encouraging understanding about the Russian people. Annotations, for example, are in English to appeal to the widest possible audience. Russian culture is described as a treasure that was hidden away (“few outside Russia got a chance to experience it”). This mediation is still important in a post-cold-war era. Many Americans, following the lead of former President George Bush, still say that America won the cold war. From time to time, these messages appear on the “Little Russia” web “board” (see below). These impressions are due to ignorance, if not outright hostility, toward Russia. Unfortunately, impressions, ignorant or not, lead to action in the real world in terms of diminished financial and socioeconomic opportunities for Russians at home and abroad. “Little Russia” is therefore a place where both Russians and Russian émigrés can form a collective front to construct a rhetoric, in the form of links, sounds, and text, to encounter these opinions, contest them, and mediate them.

Second, these resources construct a virtual organizational and cultural infrastructure to maintain transnational ties to the Russian homeland. Transnational networks are formed by émigrés who maintain multi-stranded connections with both their places of origin and settlement. In geographic settings, émigrés do this by founding organizations to maintain networks of cultural and political support that “flow” transnationally, across national boundaries. Russian and Soviet émigrés have always been actively engaged in forming transnational connections. Two examples include the money and clothes given to Lithuania by the American-Lithuanian community in Chicago during World War II (Rubchak 1992b:120), and the founding by Vancouver émigrés of the Society for Technical Aid to Russia in 1922 to send money and clothing for Russian peasants enduring famine (Tarasoff 1989:39).

“Little Russia” engages in transnational activity by providing a virtual archive of cultural resources to preserve and promote Russian cultural traditions. The provision of technical resources, particularly those pertaining to Russifying computers for Internet usage, is to assist Russians and Russian émigrés in adapting to this new technology. This adaptation is also a way of helping Russians “catch up with the West,” aiding Russia in the patriation of foreign technologies to realize its own post-Communist cultural identity. Even the providing of links to Russian web servers is a transnational effort to put the Russian Internet on the world map, a way of hypertextually “arguing” for increased usage of these sites through exposure to potential advertisers, Internet users, and others whose participation can be of material benefit.

The “struggle for representation” is, as George Marcus writes, a form of contemporary political activism (1996:10). For the Russian transnational community, exposure is especially important due to the increased demand for democratic media in its post-Communist transition. Unfortunately, recent economic hardships have stifled Russian participation in cyberspace. At the end of 1996, the Russian Public Center for Internet Technology estimated that only 25,000 to 50,000 (out of a population of 150 million) Russians had full access to Internet services (Fick 1996:16. This figure does not include the number of Russian émigrés living in diaspora who have access to Internet services, a figure that is unknown). The political outcome is that Russian concerns are underrepresented on this increasingly pervasive and powerful communications medium. Russians may no longer be censored by the Soviet bureaucracy, but they are censored by forces of free market capitalism that presently render most of them unable to afford the technology needed to participate in cyberspace. As Russian émigrés witness the tremendous economic and political hardships facing their families and friends at home while they see Western governments, including the United States, push forward economic and military policies threatening the interests of Russian people, many undoubtedly feel an urge to help from abroad. Their response is reflected in the construction and maintenance of these web pages, which create a “rhetorical gathering place” for all of Russian heritage around the world to convene, find a common ground, and partake in political activism.

In an age when powerful communications technologies increasingly come under the control of large multinational corporations (cf. Schuler 1997; cf. Doheny-Farina 1996), the web promises a technology that can even the media playing field by offering under represented Russian émigrés a powerful communications medium to voice their concerns. The archiving of Russian cultural resources and provision of technical assistance benefits both the transnational Russian diaspora as well as Russians in Russia itself. Most importantly, the effectiveness of transnational flows on “Little Russia” is part and parcel of community formation itself. Insofar as these resources solidify

communal identifications, they strengthen transnational activity. But communities need more than large electronic libraries of information. Communal ties are strengthened through people getting together to tell stories, joke, debate, and connect with other people. That the web also permits this form of community building makes it a uniquely rich medium. By putting an extraordinary amount of communicative power in the hands of anyone with access to web technology, “connectivity” further cements connections among Russians worldwide thus enhancing its potential for social and political effectiveness.

5. Connectivity

The tradition in which people establish links to colleagues, friends, and others is perhaps the most primal activity of community forming on the web (Hunt 1996). The basic idea is to strengthen connections and identifications among people who share common values, concerns, and interests. If a “Little Russia” communal ethnoscape can be identified from connectivity, it would probably be that of a group concerned with connecting to and maintaining Russian culture. But the rhetorics employed to engage in this activity are diverse and diasporic, due to the mobile and transnational nature of “Little Russia” participants. “Little Russia” is an ethnoscape of shifting persons: émigrés, Russians in Russia proper, and various others. For this reason, “Little Russia” is a juncture where rhetorics of displacement and rhetorics of settlement converge. These rhetorics manifest themselves in the diverse ways that participants imagine Russian culture, Russian identity, and the culture and identities of other groups.

There are two places where a “Little Russia” communal ethnoscape emerges in the form of connectivity. One was described earlier: the plethora of links to other resources about Russian culture. Resources (from the CIA, for example) are contributed by both Russian and non-Russian scholars, as well as various others, and the site includes numerous links to other resources on the web at large, resources created and housed both in Russia and abroad. As a whole, these connections form a global transnational network that houses, if you will, a virtual repository of Russian culture.

The second place where connectivity emerges is on something called the “Little Russia World Wide Web Board.” This free board allows any participant visiting the site to post a message for public display, reception, and response by other visitors. The board functions similarly to a Usenet newsreader in that posts can become “threads” (topics) to which subsequent posters can reply. But the board allows a more robust form of communication than text-based Usenet posts by permitting the inclusion of sounds, pictures, animations, and other rich forms. The official policies for posting are that one must obey “God’s Laws”

(the Ten Commandments). Posts that deviate from this norm are usually deleted.

The “Little Russia” board is divided up into several “generic” pages. This separation does not follow along any discernable differentiation in topical categories, but rather, is more pragmatic. (The only exception is the recipe board). The more posts that exist on any one board, the longer it takes to retrieve from the server. Hence, it is more efficient to use the site by having multiple boards.

In my sampling of one of these generic boards, I found that over half of the posts concerned two major categories (see chart): requests for technical information (for example, purchasing airline tickets in Russia, finding a job in the US or Russia, sending finances to Russia, immigration, etc.) and requests to meet others (for example, émigrés searching for schoolmates, Americans searching for relatives in Russia, requests to meet Russian penpals online, etc.)

TABLE 1. *Types of Posts on one “Little Russia” World Wide Web Board*

Requests for technical or practical assistance	278
Requests to meet schoolmates, relatives, friends	264
Requests to meet Russian women	180
Sharing information about Russian culture (proverbs, interests, hobbies, antiques, etc)	175
Non-Russian issues	78
Miscellaneous	28
Politics	20
Total	1023

A typical example of a location request is as follows:

In Reply to: Re: Mission to Russia '97 posted by Sasha on March 19, 1997 at 18:34:37:

Sashka... Gde ti zhivesh v Amerike?
 [Sasha... Where do you live in America?]
 *** **

Posted by Sasha on March 21, 1997 at 18:47:20:

In Reply to: Re: Mission to Russia '97 posted by Alyona on March 21, 1997 at 12:45:55:

...Jivu v Los Angelese
 chego I tebe jelayu.
 [I live in Los Angeles, which I wish for you.]
 Sasha
 *** **

Posted by Alyona on March 24, 1997 at 11:14:49:

In Reply to: [Re: Mission to Russia '97](#) posted by Sasha on March 21, 1997 at 18:47:20:

Eto priglashenie?

[Is that an invitation?]

*** **

Posted by Sasha on March 26, 1997 at 16:11:32:

In Reply to: [Re: Mission to Russia '97](#) posted by Sasha on March 24, 1997 at 11:14:49:

Dah! [Yes!]

From here, they exchange addresses and telephone numbers. Sasha asks Alyona to telephone him, to which Alyona replies:

Posted by Alyona on April 02, 1997 at 11:23:01:

In Reply to: [Re: Mission to Russia '97](#) posted by SASHA on March 27, 1997 at 13:50:11:

Ochenb dorogo zvonitb. Mozhno I zdesb poboltatb. U menya \$700 ostalosb, nado kak-to 2 mesyca ezhe na nix prozhitb. Gde ti zhil priezda suda (v kakom meste v rossii?)

[It is very expensive to telephone. We can chat here. I have \$700 dollars left, and somehow I must survive two more months on it. Where did you live before coming here (where in Russia?)]

*** **

Posted by Sasha on April 02, 1997 at 22:47:15:

In Reply to: [Re: Mission to Russia '97](#) posted by SASHA on April 02, 1997 at 11:23:01:

V Rossii ya jil v Moskve I nemnogo v drugih gorodah.

A voobsche-to ya s Ukrainy.

Privet, Sasha.

[In Russia I lived in Moscow and for a little while in other cities.

But in general I am from Ukraine.

Greetings, Sasha.]

Here, Alyona openly shares with Sasha his financial difficulties living in America, an experience that can be common to people living in diaspora. Alyona prefers the Web as a communicative protocol to the telephone because, as a university student, it is cheaper to use than telephone charges.

The usage of Russian is a way that each person linguistically authenticates the other, as an attempt to test for the possibility of forming a common Russian ground for a relationship. This choice is an important one in the context of the

“Little Russia” community. Many participants on “Little Russia” do not speak Russian. Most of these participants are American men who request encounters with Russian women. Many participants of Russian heritage express grave concern that these men care neither for Russian women nor Russian culture. They fear that these men are using economic superiority to exploit Russian society. Given the level of disdain among many ethnic Russians toward these posts, the most *benevolent* status for English speakers is that of “outsider.” Thus, the Russian language offers a way of testing and authenticating a unique comradeship between Alyona and Sasha: those who cannot speak it cannot be trusted too much.

Alyona also “places” Sasha ethnically by asking where Sasha was born. “Placing” is a way of rhetorically locating a person’s identity within communal contexts (Kingsolver 1992), accomplished by asking a person questions tracing kinship, origin, work history, residence patterns, and so forth. If “ethnicity” is, according to Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomelf, the “reach for groundings in which individuals can find some sense of place and position in the world (cited in Grossberg, 14),” then the attempt to place that ethnicity is part of the activity of testing and authenticating the possibility of shared experience and therefore, one’s “ethos” or credibility. But Sasha’s reply indexes a credibility that rests on the shared “ethnoscape” of “Little Russia.” Sasha is probably not Russian, but Ukrainian instead, a native of a country that chafed for independence under nineteenth and twentieth century Russian and Soviet imperialism. One might thus expect Sasha’s reply to contain a level of irritability toward Alyona. But Sasha’s post (and Alyona’s reply that follows) indicate no tension. Abroad, in a foreign country, they probably share a Russian identification, enhanced by the cooperative “Little Russia” ethnoscape.

The blurring of such identifications is not unique to web communities, as it has been noted elsewhere among Russian and Soviet émigrés. Fran Markowitz (1995) notes that Soviet Jewish émigrés, upon emigrating to America, irritated the worldwide Jewish community because of their “greater concern for restoring their own everyday lives than for the broader mission of reunification with the Jewish people” (204). These émigrés turned to fellow non-Jewish Russian émigrés for companionship and the ability to speak the Russian language (206), which was ironic, since they were effectively denied Russian citizenship status in the Soviet Union. As a result, they came to imagine themselves as Russians more so than Jews. But while this imagining came about in a non-web context, what is interesting is that they required geographic proximity among a variety of Russian speaking Soviet Jews. The deterritorialized space of the web breaks down these geographic barriers, yet it maintains the ability to draw diverse groups into proximity to one another. Thus, the web seems to raise a limiting case for the importance of geographic communities in the formation of similar identifications.

Alyona and Sasha's nascent friendship is finally solidified by exchanging brief narratives of travel and pilgrimage to America. As Victor Turner has written, travel narratives about journeys between times, statuses, and places are experiences full of meaning (1967). A common theme of such journeys is the young person who heroically goes out in search of their identity and/or a mother or father. These journeys are often rites of passage into a new stage of life (Rappaport 1979).

The following excerpt depicts Sasha's passage to America. The humorous nature of the exchange illustrates that such journeys require interpretation that are shaped by and in turn shape cultural understandings:

Posted by Sasha on April 08, 1997 at 22:13:05:

In Reply to: [Re: Mission to Russia '97](#) posted by Alyona on April 04, 1997 at 12:34:28:

Vzyl I priehal. Po obmenu. Menya russkie pomenyali na meshtok koloradskoy pshenizy. Slushay, esli ty po obmenu zdes, znachit kakoy-to bednyj amerikanskiy rebenok seychas v Sibiry?!!
Sasha.

[The opportunity came and I took it. Exchange. The Russians took me for a bag of Colorado wheat. Listen: if you're here on an exchange, that means there's some poor american [sic] kid now in Siberia?!!]

A third participant, another Russian, observed this exchange and contributed the following reply:

Posted by BEHbKA on April 12, 1997 at 02:40:00:

In Reply to: [Re: Mission to Russia '97](#) posted by Sasha on April 08, 1997 at 22:13:05:

Vo-pervyh, v Sibiry ne bednyi amerikanskii rebenok, a bogaty: eto ne deshevo stoit. A vo-vtoryh. V Sibir' to oni ne ezdyat. Ezdyat v Piter I Moskvu. I horosho. Glyadesh', kul'tury podnaberutsya.

[In the first place, american [sic] kids in Siberia aren't poor, but rich. It isn't expensive to live there. And second, they generally don't go to Siberia. They go to St. Petersburg or Moscow. And that is good. There, you see, is a collection of culture.]

Sasha and Alyona's exchanges contain cultural themes that index perceptions of both Russia and America ("rich" versus "poor," uncultured "Siberian" versus cultured "St. Petersburg"). The humor reflects an ambivalent posture toward Russia (it is both cultured yet poor), especially evident in Sasha's stab at the Russian bureaucracy's mistaking him for a bag of wheat. Sasha's post evokes a type of ironic narrative genre that flourished during the Soviet period, when Russians often told stories about the absurd contrast between their government's

ability to accomplish gigantic scientific and technical projects while failing to meet the most basic needs of the Soviet people, such as putting bread and cheese in stores. Svetlana Boym has identified this duality as a defining characteristic of “everyday life” in Russia (Boym 1996). Thus, a *babuska*’s (grandmother’s) shopping trip to get a bag of sugar becomes sacralized as a “podvig” (a Russian word meaning “heroic feat”) when she narratively recounts the endless variety of empty shelves, transportation problems, and shopping lines that she overcame to accomplish her goal (Ries 1997:53). Such feats are rhetorical tropes in Russian culture, embodied in the popular figure of “Ivan the Fool,” a person who can master gigantic feats, but cannot survive everyday life.

That such discourse enters into “Little Russia” indicates that it is a rhetorical gathering place in which language can become a linguistic playground wherein this trope figures centrally in rhetorics concerning notions of Russian identity. As Roger Abrahams writes, the playful dimensions of such stories are not mere embellishments to more serious themes but rather, demand “a recognition of an intimate sympathetic relation between a proposed solution of a recurrent societal problem and the movement involved in the artistic projection of that problem. [This linkage is made] not at the expense of the play element of culture, but rather by insisting on the essential utility of the ‘playing-out’” (1968:168).

But playful language, while a rhetorically potent form of discussion on “Little Russia,” is often overshadowed by more serious and heated banter. A recent example occurred under the topic, “Russia is the Best-America Sucks.” This thread began when a Russian exchange student who said he had been living here for two years now realized that America “sucked.” From this post emerged rhetorics legitimating, contesting and negotiating authentic “Russianness” and “Americanness,” rhetorics that in general, did not fall strictly along national identifications. Some Russian participants imagined America as a “McDonalds” bent cultural imperialism. This prompted mixed replies from both American and Russian participants. There were American participants (one was even a veteran) who agreed that America “sucked,” while other Americans argued that America was better since it won the cold war and that the original poster should return to Russia. Russia was constructed as anti-Semitic by both Russian and American posters. This prompted mixed replies from Russian émigrés, some of whom said they regret having ever lived in Russia, while others lamented various hardships living in the United States.

The following exchange exemplifies the ambivalent nature of this discourse:

Posted by Alexei V. D-- on February 08, 1997 at 23:23:30:

In Reply to: Re: russia is the best, posted by Art on February 01, 1997 at 13:37:02:

Hey, Russia as a people and as a country is unique and certainly a great place.
Now we’ve been screwed over by the government, but it doesn’t make the

place we were born bad. Now all those fake ass so called russians [sic] who escaped to america [sic] and now find it amusing to put down our Motherland need to get a life. It's not the country's fault, it is the people's fault.

Posted by Zhanna on February 11, 1997 at 11:57:34:

In Reply to: Re: russia is the best, posted by Alexei V. D-- on February 08, 1997 at 23:23:30:

... What do you mean by "those fake ass so called russians"? Nationality? Religion? If you ment what I think you ment [sic], then people like you are exactly the reason why a lot of emigrants [sic] from Russia don't have very warm memories of their former motherland.

I have scars on my legs which will remind me for the rest of my life, that I was a jewish [sic] child growing up in the communist Russia [sic]. The government was not the one responsible for those scars, but a couple 10-year old kids were. They did not act on orders from KGB [sic], nor were they told by the communist party to cut my legs with a razor blade; it was their own choise [sic]. So, what did you say about it not being "people's fault"? And by the way, remember the famous frase [sic]: "People have the government they deserve"...

Now, having said that, overall I agree with you. One can't love or respect oneself if he does not love and respect his roots (for the sake of this discussion, the country one came from). I have a 8-month old son [sic], and I fully intend to have him speak fluent russian [sic] language as well teach him about russian [sic] traditions, culture and so on. On the other hand, I will also tell him what it was like to grow up there, and believe me a lot of stories I have to tell are not very pleasant...

In these posts, Zhanna indexes her credibility as both a Russian and a Jew, a somewhat problematic combination given the anti-Semitism in Russia and the former Soviet Union (Markowitz 1995). She narratively constructs a history of enduring physical torture at the hands of malicious 10 year-olds. Her most compelling witness is not textual, but physical in nature: the mute "scars" on her legs, which also serve to physically mark her ethnicity as a Russian Jew. Buried in her rhetoric is a narrative of why she came to America (ostensibly in part to escape anti-Semitism). Yet she also indicates a desire to forge and maintain a connection with her Russian homeland, saying that she intends to have her 8-month old son speak "fluent russian" and learn Russian traditions. In short, Zhanna's narrative is very much "diasporic," centered on the memory of a past homeland to which she believes she cannot return (Clifford 1994). It is a rhetoric that clashes with other émigré rhetorics, rhetorics of regret and bitterness. But Zhanna's rhetoric creates a more credible, if not sobering ethos: as a scarred Russian Jew she rightfully feels bitter, yet despite that pain, she still feels that true Russians should not ignore their ethnic roots.

These posts show that “Little Russia” can become a focal point where rhetorics formed by diverse individuals affect a specific cultural identification. As David Edwards argues, these debates are forms of transnational political activism by acting as “simulated politics” (1994). The permeability and fluidity of web technology permits a mix of discourses into the rhetoric of Russian cultural identity on “Little Russia,” overcoming distance and time barriers to bring émigrés to the doorstep of political and cultural activity in their homeland while they are simultaneously situated in places of settlement. The outcome is a cultural identification that is neither unified nor officially sanctioned but rather, the product of diverse and often contestatory rhetorics.

6. Conclusion

The prospect of a transnational “Russian” ethos on the Web raises unprecedented questions pertaining to the relationship between literacy and national/ethnic identifications in computer mediated communication. If the rhetorical concept of “ethos” relies on a person’s interrelatedness with a larger community, then ethos at its core is fundamentally about “belonging.” (Note that “ethnic” comes from the Greek “ethnos,” meaning “nation, people”). The communal ethos of “Little Russia” proceeds through a variety of rhetorics that test and authenticate one’s belonging to the Russian community at large. But this belonging is not tied to geographic constraints, as the diversity of “Little Russia” shows. Virtual rhetorical gathering places are more like ethnoscaapes, the product of changes in global organization from one of binary positionalities to disjunctive flows. Such a situation challenges traditional perspectives toward how people rhetorically construct cultural and national identities.

Historically significant changes in literacy have always altered conceptions of selfhood, national identity, and even metaphysics. David Porush, for example, has written about how the invention of the “Aleph-Tav” (the Hebrew Alphabet) permitted the expression and conception of a new Hebrew metaphysics and new sense of shared, collective consciousness (1997). In the Americas of the eighteenth century, the proliferation of the newspaper aided the formation of national consciousnesses, consciousnesses that Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.” For Anderson, national consciousnesses are not distinguished by their authenticity, but by style in which they are “imagined” (1991:6). The creation of the newspaper, for example, created linkages among independent actors. It “brought together, on the same page, this marriage with that ship, this prince with that bishop...” creating “an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom these ships, brides, bishops and princes belonged” (62). Reading the newspaper, while performed privately, allowed one to imagine oneself as connected simultaneously to

millions of others whose existence one was confident of, yet whose personal identities one did not know (35).

Today, the World Wide Web plays an increasing role in forming these assemblages. Indeed, the Internet has already contributed to Russia's post-Communist identity, for it functioned as an underground press relaying speeches during the Soviet coup of 1991 (see archive). The Web transcends geographic and temporal limitations to link a diverse ethnoscape of people coming asynchronously from virtually anywhere on the globe. Geographic boundaries are displaced by "links" whose arrangement and content alone shape cultural sensibilities by relating items together in one semiotic space. Usually, participants are accessing a web site "anonymously," perhaps engaging in this activity at the very same instant as "anonymous" others across the globe. Yet anonymity is counter-balanced with an equal pull toward describing and placing oneself and others as credible representatives of an online communal ethos. What emerges from all this is a dialectic between rhetorics of anonymity and revelation, placement and displacement. These rhetorics are greatly aided by a medium that allows anonymity and mobility yet permits extremely rich and interactive means for personal expression. This unique combination of communicative forms and practices challenge traditional notions of community, identity, and ethnicity.

As web technology proliferates across national boundaries, cultural identifications will come to depend less on closed local groups and more on global "scapes" that transgress national and cultural boundaries. The growth of émigré web communities is not a separate phenomenon from offline social movements, but rather, coincides with an enormous increase in international and transnational movements resulting from the end of the cold war (McLagan 161). These "postnational social formations" include organizations, movements, ideologies, and networks which are not contained or defined solely in relation to a nation-state, but rather are "more diverse, more fluid, more ad-hoc, more provisional, less coherent, less organized, and simply less implicated in the comparative advantages of the nation-state" (Appadurai, cited in McLagan 188). As Internet-based transnational activity by émigrés becomes more prevalent, the web will play an increasing role in the forging of new cultural sensibilities.

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