COMMUNAL ETHOS ON A RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ WEB SITE

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Abstract

This paper analyses how participants on a Russian émigré Web site rhetorically construct a Russian communal ethos in cyberspace. This ethos emerges primarily through three activities: the creation of cultural and technical resources; the linking of other pages to the site; and the debate and dialogue on bulletin boards. Together these activities form a transnational rhetorical community on the Web that evokes deterritorialised notions of identity. Russian culture on the Web acquires a very global aspect, diversified by motifs and attitudes from a multiplicity of mobile participants. This new communal form is enabled by the robust nature of Web communication 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.

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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. What follows is a study of communal identity formation on the site "Little Russia in San Antonio, Texas" (located at http://mars.uthsca.edu/Russia/). This cultural identification is expressed through three primary activities on the Little Russia Web site: (1) the creation of resources and sharing of knowledge about Russian culture; (2) the creating of hypertext linkages to other sites; and (3) dialogue with other participants on various bulletin boards provided by the Web site.

The community of participants engaged in these activities is diverse. Little Russia is participated in and maintained by ethnic Russians living within Russia, Russian émigrés living in the United States and elsewhere, as well as non-Russian people both within 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 Web, the form of communication is more rapid, transnational, and participatory than in more traditional media forms, such as newspapers, books, television, or radio. The Web offers unique possibilities for interactivity, content, and media richness that permit more people from more locations to receive and communicate sound, pictures, and text, at extremely fast speeds. The shape of community online is a product of both participation and technology. Computer-mediated communication, as Steven Jones (1995, 16) writes, "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."

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. Furthermore, the translocal nature of Web-based interaction imbues the setting with an overriding aspect of motility and fluidity. For the first time, culture and rhetoric come to be predominantly shaped in deterritorialised frameworks.

Little Russia as a Rhetorical Gathering Place

In a classical sense, one's rhetorical authenticity is established through the device called *ethos*, which refers to the character of a speaker as defined through the choices made in his or her speech. Until now, most have seen ethos as focused on the solitary speaker (the private individual), but ethos at its heart is rooted in notions of community and place. According to Michael Halloran (1984, 60):

> *The most concrete meaning given for the term [ethos] in the Greek lexicon is "an habitual gathering place," and I suspect that it is upon this image of people gath-*

ering 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.

The ancient subjects (actors) of a rhetorical gathering place would have situated themselves within three fields: (1) his/her location within a secular and divine order; (2) his/her situatedness in place; and (3) his/her "singularity" (Alcorn 1997, 8-11). In the deterritorialised and disembodied realm of cyberspace, this conceptualisation is refigured. In its singular aspects, what replaces the notion of a credible speaker with consistency of thought and speech is replaced by something called "net presence" (Hunt 1996). Net presence is best achieved not through stability but via creativity, flexibility of identity, mobility and playfulness. Furthermore, people "move" around a lot more in cyberspace, clicking with ease from one site to the next. Cyberspatial participants find it easier to juggle multiple roles in diverse translocal settings, leading them to new forms of affiliation and affection.

In its communal aspect, the ethos of virtual communities might best be reworked into what Arjun Appadurai (1990) calls an *ethnoscape*. An ethnoscape is a loose agglomeration of diverse people unmoored from one specific place yet simultaneously connected to many places, "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. An ethnoscape is a deterritorialised domain severed from the links to "space, stability, and cultural reproduction … [Ethnoscapes are loosened from the] bonds between people, wealth, and territories [which] fundamentally alter the basis of cultural reproduction" (Appadurai 1991, 191-2). Being part of an ethnoscape means that identity is criss-crossed by currents emanating from the diverse places in which one simultaneously gains a foothold. As groups previously ghettoised from one another are brought together, ethnoscapes nurture a collective consciousness independent of place. Instead of rhetorical earnestness, one finds rhetorics that show greater ephemerality, fluidity, and a propensity toward creatively play and experimentation.

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 deterritorialised notion of place at its heart. 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. As an ethnoscapic space organised in terms of flows rather than binary positions, it might be instructive to view Little Russia as a "culture as site traversed," perpetually in-between locations of permanent dwelling, temporarily inhabited by newcomers and repeat visitors (Clifford 1992, 103). Let us now turn our attention to see how this traversed culture is defined on Little Russia.

Cultural and Technical Resources

Little Russia is maintained by two Russian-speaking people (an instructor and a researcher at the University of Texas Health Science Center) and a person who works for the NASA Lewis Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio. 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, and the 5-Star Award by Luckman Interactive. 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 co-ordinated 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 1251 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. We might see this latter aspect as an index of how Russian identity is globalised online. The Webmaster's choosing to rely on an American and not a Russian resource to communicate demographic facts about Russia's ethnic and religious makeup suggests a willingness to allow Russia to be seen through Western eyes.

The graphic design of the site itself is also a cultural resource that seems to balance ambivalently a kind of localised or historical Russian cultural ethos while presenting it on a global stage. The lettering in the left column is ornately drawn, resembling the large lettering found in an old book, 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 nineteenth century painting by Isaac Levitan called *Above Eternal Peace*, which also sets a small wooden church against an abundance of water, land, and sky. Levitan specialised 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).

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 nineteenth century. It was marked by a revival of indigenous Russian culture through folk art (Kirichenko and Anikst 1991, 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, visually creating a "space" with 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 organising 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.

The *topoi* of geography is an important touchstone of Russian identity, one that historically inspires both pride and apprehension. After the sixteenth century, Russia progressed primarily through geographic expansion. Nikolai Berdiaev referred to the power of space over the Russian soul (Starovoitova 1995, 132). At the same time, to the Russian peasant looking out from the village and seeing nothing, the boundless steppe often evoked feelings of insignificance and despair before an immense unfeeling nature (Tuan 1977, 56). In the present era, Russians are experiencing a crisis of ethnic identity resulting in part from alterations in political geography and the loss of an empire (Starovoitova 1995, 140). The visual imagery on Little Russia may be an attempt to recapture this, for it not only evokes a connection to a homeland, but politicises it in a global way by hanging a Russian flag from its virtual front porch.

Purposes of Cultural and Technical Resources

The cultural and technical resources of Little Russia serve three 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). Little Russia is a place where Russians can form a rhetoric of resistance, in the form of links, sounds, and text, to counter these opinions.

Second, they provide access to cultural sources that are distant and otherwise out of reach for Russians living abroad. The Russian diaspora on the Web is essentially doing in hypertext what immigrants do when they establish community institutions — stores, bakeries, transnational organisations — to recreate the "homeland" in their local settings (Clifford 1994, 318). For groups in diaspora, the rift from homeland and transportation into a new spatial and temporal setting is an unending psychic crisis. James Clifford characterises the rift from home and new place as "a renewed, painful yearning". To ensure their continued collective existence, diasporas hold onto artefacts from their home, often turning to the past for inspiration which, as Marian

Rubchak (1993, 339) writes, "needs to be recovered or reconstructed if the exile is to cope with the existential needs of the present and secure a future, without sacrificing cultural integrity."

Third, they help form a transnational network online 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 organisations to maintain networks of cultural and political support that "flow" transnationally, across national boundaries. This effort is not new to the Web, for Russian and Soviet émigrés have always been actively engaged in forming transnational connections (cf. Rubchak 1992b; Tarasoff 1989; Raeff 1993). 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 aid it in constructing its own post-Communist identity. If, as George Marcus (1996, 10) writes, the "struggle for representation" is a form of contemporary political activism, then the providing of links to Russian Web servers is a transnational effort to put the Russian Internet on the world map, a hypertext argument for increased visibility of these sites.

As participants in Little Russia contribute to the site, they form new social configurations that change their logics of national identity and ethnic self-perception. Little Russia transnationals differ from their forebears in that they do not sever connections between cultures but rather, maintain a foothold in both their places of origin and settlement. This allows them to operate simultaneously in the different settings they inhabit and carry cultural and political currents in two or more directions (Rouse 1995, 368; Schiller et al., 1995, 48) where they settle and become part of local ways of life. As Roger Rouse (1995, 354) writes:

> *[transnationals] linked the various locales [of settlement and origin] so tightly that they have come to form new kinds of social space — multi-local settings that span the boundaries of the nation-states involved … thus, it is necessary to go beyond the assumption that identities are invariably "localized" and recognize that many (im)migrants have in fact developed multi-local and transnational affiliations.*

One manifestation of a translocal affiliation is the Little Russia photo gallery or *duma*. Each entry includes a brief biography of the person, online contact information, favourite foods, artists, books, and colours, and a response to the questions, "What would you do if you had three wishes?" and "Name a person you would like to be stranded on a desert island with". Individually, the group was comprised of people from Russia, Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands, Canada, the former Yugoslavia, and the United States. Collectively the group gave itself a kind of transcultural (Epstein 1995) name: Little Russians.

The growth of such affiliations as that found on Little Russia reflects a shift wherein the idea of an organic relationship among population, territory, political organisation, and cultures (an idea which has served as a guiding principle for a long time), is now being transformed into a world moving inexorably toward some kind of global culture in which difference is not the *originary premiss*, but rather, some kind of hybridity

and exchange among people who may never have heard of one another before (Hannerz 1996, 20). Globalisation fragments the "organic unity" of cultures, creating a cornucopia of different attitudes and styles — language, dress, cuisine, art — that virtual transnationals adopt out of and creatively engage from their original context (Smith 1990, 176). As ethnoscapic people become more itinerant and/or connect fantasies of faraway places to their own local dreams, culture becomes less localised and more globally oriented, acquiring a hybrid consciousness of itself as a "single field of persistent interaction and exchange" (Hannerz 1996, 19).

Nation-states are increasingly threatened by transnational flows (Appadurai, cited in McLagan 1996, 188), yet it is important to remember that transnationalism derives its particular character not against but through nationalism, through national consciousness of culture and the strategies for negotiation and/or resistance of political and territorial boundaries. As transnational groups become ever aware of their displacement from geography, nations become increasingly sensitive about cultural integrity. Efforts to emphasise cultural solidarity are met by the fluidic interpenetration of currents into imaginations and places previously marked off. But just when it seems like culture will split apart, people show that they clearly want culture because they go to great lengths to hold onto it. Thus, transnational connectivity does not construct a world where culture is extinguished, as members of groups go across long distances to revitalise, reconstruct, and reinvent not only their traditions but their political claims to territory and histories from which they are displaced (Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995, 52; Hannerz 1996, 52). Rather, it is a scenario in which people integrate the tension between solidarity and fluidity into the formation of new kinds of cosmopolitan and transcultural consciousnesses (Epstein 1995; Hannerz 1996).

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. But the rhetorics employed to engage in this activity are diverse and diasporic, due to the 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.

Apart from the links embedded in the site resources that were highlighted earlier, another way that a Little Russia communal ethnoscape is built is through dialogue on 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. 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, and animation. The official policies for posting are that one must obey God's Laws (the Ten Commandments). Posts that deviate from the Webmaster's interpretation of this norm are usually deleted. The Little Russia board is divided into several generic pages. This separation does not follow any semantic chain but rather occurs

whenever one board accrues too many posts such that the page takes too long to download over a computer modem. Reading the board one encounters violent interruptions in topics, and ruptured threads that are suddenly cut off and then appear somewhere else.

In my sampling of topics from one board, I found that over half of the posts concerned two major categories (see Table 1): requests for technical information (for example, purchasing airline tickets in Russia, finding a job in the US or Russia, sending finances to Russia, immigration) and requests to meet others (for example, émigrés searching for schoolmates, Americans searching for relatives in Russia, requests to meet Russian penpals online).

Table 1: Survey of Topics on Little Russia (September 1997)

Topic	*Number of posts*	*Percentage*
Contact	444	43.4
Assistance	278	27.2
Culture	195	19.0
Miscellaneous	106	10.4
Total posts analysed	1023	100.0

Posts of contact or "person-to-person" accounted for 43.4% of postings. These posts comprise approximately 264 of the total contact posts and generally fall into two categories: posts by American men trying to meet Russian women (approximately 180 or 17.6%) and posts made by Russian speakers living abroad, family locating Russian relatives, and requests for Russian penpals (approximately 264 or 27.2%). Posts requesting or providing assistance (immigration aid, help with Russian language, computer help) accounted for the next most frequent number of posts. The straightforward question-answer nature of these posts requires little analysis. There are two kinds of posts, however, that are worth a closer look because they are fairly solid examples of the ways that identity is negotiated in a deterritorialised arena.

The first is contact posts between Russians abroad. Victor Turner (1967) has written that journeys between time, status, and places can be a meaning creating experience leading to social solidarities and a collective awareness of being "travelling companions." These journeys are often rites of passage into a new stage of life (Rappaport 1979). Contacts between Russians abroad evoke Web-based variations of Turner's and Rappaport's themes. These posts share a kind of formulaic genre that structurally conforms to the following pattern:

1. Identification;
2. Statement of where the writer is from and where he/she lives now (that is, some explicit tracking of place-names, such as Petersburg, Ontario, New Hampshire, etc);
3. Some indication of how they came, where they travel, and/or what they do here;
4. Indication of desire to form connection;
5. Language usually changes to or is entirely in Russian.

It is perhaps the sharing of this genre that makes up for the loss of physical space: formulaically, the genre conforms to a certain shape, creation and fulfilment of expectation. Rhetoric stands in for place. Sharing stories of pilgrimage indexes comradeship

as companions on a journey. The following exchange between A and S is fairly exemplary in this regard (my translation in [square brackets]):

S-ka... Gde ti zhivesh v Amerike?
[S... Where do you live in America?] (1657)[1]

...Jivu v Los Angelese chego I tebe jelayu.
[I live in Los Angeles, which I wish for you.]
S (1704)

Eto priglashenie?
[Is that an invitation?] (1715)

Dah!
[Yes!] (1738)

[They exchange addresses and telephone numbers.]

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 rosii?)

[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?)]
(1810)

V Rossii ya jil v Moskve I nemnogo v drugih gorodah. A voobsche-to ya s Ukrainy. Privet, *S*.
[In Russia I lived in Moscow and for a little while in other cities. But in general I am from Ukraine. Greetings, *S*.] (1888)

Vzyal 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 Sibiriy?!!
S.

[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?!!] (1965)

S's and *A*'s exchanges contain cultural themes that index perceptions of both Russia and America ("rich" versus "poor," uncultured "Siberian" versus "St Petersburg"). *S*'s stab at the Russian bureaucracy's mistaking him for a bag of wheat evokes an important device of Russian folklore: the *podvig*, or heroic feat (Ries 1997, 53). The *podvig* is embodied in the popular figure of Ivan the Fool, a person who can master gigantic feats, but cannot survive everyday life. Soviet bureaucrats attempted to repatriate the *podvig* toward the propagation of utopian ideals, and today for many Soviet-era Russians the concept has a double-edged sense, serving as an ironic rhetorical trope mocking governmental inefficiency. Thus, people relate *podvigs* about long shopping trips, efforts to get toilet paper, and so forth.

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. At the time of this study, many posts came from American men requesting encounters with Russian women. (All of these posts were later deleted.) Others expressed concern about this activity and about the general prevalence of men taking Russian women away from their homeland. 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 *A* and *S*: those who cannot speak it cannot be trusted too much.

A also places *S* ethnically by asking where *S* was born. Ann Kingsolver (1992, 129) argues that rhetorical "placing" is a way that people discursively position themselves as insiders or outsiders of particular networks and situations. For Kingsolver, placing is not merely a form of "ontological housekeeping" but rather, an important practice of negotiating identity and authority by establishing a known place in networks of interrelationships. Placed in "a common network or work setting, individuals can share an identity, a status, or an argument", as when two African-American grandmothers place themselves as healer, worker, mother and grandmother, and as members of the "black" community (p. 130). Alternatively, placing can distance people, as when arguing neighbours assert their being "worlds apart" by invoking their affiliation to different networks of kinship (p. 131). Placing vectors accepted relations among people because it tests, negotiates, and establishes the ground rules for interaction.

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 1993, 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. Here we see that *S*'s status as a member of a former Soviet nation seems to be important to the interchange. At the same time, his being a Ukrainian, a native of a country that chafed for independence under nineteenth and twentieth century Russian and Soviet imperialism, does not seem to invoke emergent nationalistic hostility that one might expect. In an ethnoscape, territory loses relevance in rhetorical placing, subsiding to a more mediated sense of place as the groundedness for relating.

The second type of post in which identity comes into play is the category of culture. During the time of this research, a debate raged under the theme "Russia is the Best-America Sucks." Russians typically accused America of wanting to imperialise everyone with McDonalds, boorish culture, and militarism. Americans accused Russia of being economically and culturally impoverished. In particular, there were a number of posts by Americans like the following:

> And if Russia is the best, then why are they all trying to get on the next plane to the USA. And let's not forget who won the cold war!! (3793)

A number of Russians and American posters straddled the lines. Russians were accused of being anti-Semitic by both Russian and American posters. An American veteran said that he had been "screwed over" by the government during the Vietnam War. Positioning and placing took a prominent role in this banter, as the following post indicates:

> 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. (1266)

> What do you mean by "those fake ass so called russians"? Nationality? Religion? If you meant what I think you met [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-yearold 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 choice [sic]. So, what did you say about it not being "people's fault"? And by the way, remember the famous phrase [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... (1277)

The response to the "fake ass" comment is interesting in the way that the person uses her physical body as a rhetorical site to contest claims. The most compelling witness to these events is not rhetorical but physically mute via the "scars" on her legs. 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. Her narrative is very much "diasporic" in its ambivalence, centred on the memory of a past homeland to which she believes she cannot return and in spite of its hardships still holds a draw on her imagination (Clifford 1994).

These posts show that in spite of its translocal nature, Little Russia can also become a focal point where people sharpen their ideas about identity. On the one hand, there may be a group of people who see themselves beyond their cultures as "Little Russians," yet there are others for whom a specific national identification remains important. More likely, for everyone, there are some aspects of cultural self-conception that people want to play with and others that they prefer to conserve. What makes electronic environments unique is in their advanced flexibility allowing greater choice to be able to negotiate these different roles and choices (Turkle 1996). As David Edwards (1994) suggests, "simulated politics" can also be a form of transnational political activism, but it is a politics that carefully straddles lines. Contemporary culture is caught between the "growth of globalizing processes and the pre-eminence of exclusive, bounded, essentializing nationalisms" (Appadurai 1990, 307; Rouse 1995, 359). Little Russia seems to be a forum where at least rhetorically this dialectic plays out.

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 environments. 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

ethnoscapes, the product of changes in global organisation 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 (1997) has written about how the invention of the *Aleph-Tav* (Hebrew Alphabet) permitted the expression and conception of a new Hebrew metaphysics and new sense of shared, collective consciousness. In the eighteenth century, the proliferation of the newspaper aided the formation of national consciousnesses into what Benedict Anderson (1991, 6) calls "imagined communities." The newspaper created linkages among independent actors. It "brought together, on the same page, this marriage with that ship, this price with that bishop..." creating "an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom these ships, brides, bishops and prices belonged" (Anderson 1991, 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 (Anderson 1991, 35).

Today, the World Wide Web plays an increasing role in forming these assemblages. The Internet has already contributed to Russia's post-Communist nationality. During the coup, it made it impossible "for the geriatric plotters in the Kremlin to suppress the delivery of truth" (Barlow). Faxes, e-mails, and Usenet posts all bypassed the conspirators and kept the outside world more up to date on events than those in Russia itself. Cultural self-definition was cast into a wide-open unregulated arena. 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, culture and transculture (Epstein 1995). These rhetorics are greatly aided by a medium that allows anonymity and mobility yet permits extremely rich and interactive means for personal expression.

Note:

1. All Little Russia board posts accessed <http://russia.uthscsa.edu/Messages/*[number]*.html>

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