

Response to the Provocation for the 2006 Indiana University Roundtable on Post-Communism
on “Public Spaces,”
by Alaina Lemon, Anthropology, University of Michigan. March 7, 2006.

I address several questions from the provocation by summarizing ways I have approached them with particular ethnographic observations and theoretical lenses in my work (I don't summarize the works, only those parts that address the questions). In our discussion, I am prepared to speak in more detail to methodology.

-How is space used discursively to index and initiate social change (or stasis)? See “Talking Transit and Spectating Transition: The Moscow Metro,” in *Altering States: Anthropology in Transition*, eds. Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, Martha Lampland. U. of Michigan Press, 2000.

The Moscow Metro frequently serves in media and in less mediated conversations as background to voracious arguments about what constitutes social order or social chaos. Public transit too is itself, we might say, a form of media: it is a space, or rather a network of places, where Moscow sees itself. On the Metro each day each traveller encounters thousands of other faces, and witnesses interactions among generations, across genders, between officials and civilians, and among “citizens” and “aliens” (De Certeau, cf. Benjamin).

People have long set claims about social order or disorder in the Metro in strategic ways. Claims became increasingly strategic—and increasingly contested—after the late 1980s, when Metro stations became public places where the so-called “transition,” in its market forms, were most visible to inhabitants of the city. Some continued to use public transit infrastructures to stand for good old (or bad old) order, while others painted it in as a backdrop for social chaos. Emigre scholar Paperny treats this discursive opposition as an ontological one: he has claimed that Russo-Soviet culture oscillates between movement/fluidity (Culture One) and

stasis/repression (Culture Two), locating the beginning of a long phase of Culture Two with the first Soviet law to settle Gypsies and state schemes for urban planning.

Paperny's metaphor seems overly binary to describe multiply overlapping social relations and layered communications (Bakhtin, Voloshinov). So too do many arguments linking “movement” to “social order” in the “transition”. Economic liberals in Russia and some Western sociologists have argued that market reforms require unrestrained population movement. Voices on the other side (even while the Soviet *propiska* system that required registration of residence with municipal authorities is still in effect, and registration in large cities like Moscow remain restricted) called for the return of harsher movement restrictions rescinded in 1993, prosecuting begging and “leading a parasitic life,” hoping for a return to a lost economic and social order.

Throughout the 1990s, print and visual media frequently depicted the Metro as a setting for the worst of the chaos of transition, where order had degraded, a place where unrestrained migrations of homeless and movements of beggars circulated with the litter and leavings of commerce. If, as Mary Douglas argued in the 1960s, Dirt is matter out of place, then here we have depictions of people and matter together out of place, metaphors connecting “waste” to the actual movements of people. I argue in the paper that, through other means as well, talk about and in the spaces of public transit is really “about” who should be included in the city, in the nation.

What is seen and said underground can reverberate above ground, in other spaces and in Media constructions, which people may in turn recycle in their next face-to-face encounters underground (see Urban on meta-discourse and culture). This entails that the spatial structures of the Metro alone determine neither the social encounters within it nor accounts of those

encounters (see Foucault and cf. some aspects of phenomenology). In other words, so-called *immediate* spatial and bodily encounters *underdetermine* experiences of and meta-discourses about social interactions. Rather, communicative and social practices within public transit, and discourse about those practices, achieve force not only because they *seem* to be grounded in concrete, familiar spaces (cf. Bourdieu), but also because they intersect and index other discursive practices of belonging and exclusion (see Ochs, Silverstein, Irvine on indexical functions and social distinctions).

-How do late and post socialist public spaces reflect intersections of the national and the supranational? See “Your Eyes are Green Like Dollars: Counterfeit Cash, National Substance, and Currency Apartheid in 1990s’ Russia,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 13/1: 22-55, 1998.

The American press long oversimplified spatial separations between the first and second worlds. The borders of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc countries were more variably permeable than even many US scholars allowed. The absence of certain Western goods was made to stand for the Iron curtain. So, after 1991, observers from the US read the appeal of dollar bills and American cigarettes in Russia as if Soviets had never purchased *any* imports or experienced *any* travel, as if the fall of socialism had unblocked the valves channelling pent-up desires for foreign commodities. News photos titillated by juxtaposing supposed opposites of familiar goods in foreign spaces: fur-hatted soldiers drank Coca-Cola on Red Square. Like the first-contact ethnographies of the 19th century that portrayed startled natives reacting to a gramophone (see Stocking, Segal, Trouillot, Yanagisako), the American papers liked to amuse and astound with images of Russians shaking the invisible hand.

The image of Soviet Russia as having been entirely cut off from the rest of the world, behind the Iron Curtain, is too extreme. Although *Western* imports increased manifold after

1991, *other* foreign goods had been available long before. Soviet Russia and its satellites traded with an entire network of countries that the U.S. continues to boycott, shipping in Cuban oranges and cigars, for instance, along with sugar. The Soviet state traded also with non-aligned or dually-aligned states: certain Indian wares, such as tea in pretty, metal boxes and leather shopping bags stamped with garden scenes, circulated to Russia and to Eastern Europe—but not to the United States. Trade with the *kapstrany* was not completely blocked: Scented French lipstick and delicate Italian shoes were available from time to time in Moscow shops (though surely not in the countryside). In the early 1990s, embroidered denim skirts sold by Vietnamese students were as popular as Adidas and Levis (the latter both produced in still socialist Hungary by the 1980s). Mass commodity trade and monetary relations among the socialist states and certain capitalist states went on throughout the cold war. To dismiss such connections, across sometimes vast global spaces, because they were “behind the iron curtain” would be to neglect alternative trajectories of global connection (cf. Eric Wolfe, see Strathern).

-How are spaces coded? (public/private: real/staged; us/them...) See *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Post-Socialism*, Duke University Press.

The word “Between” in the title is intended ironically. It quotes the name of the first play staged at the Moscow Romani Theater. I use it here to gesture towards the illusion that so-called hybrid identities are located in some space between prior and stable identities, and also to social science and popular metaphors that place so-called marginal people (such as “Gypsies” and “nomads”) outside the spaces of society. In the book, I argue that social worlds are always connected, and that sometimes it is the most “diasporic” of peoples who have troubles moving through borders.

For several centuries Roma have been portrayed both as rebellious outlaws and as free-spirited songbirds—in either case, as if isolated from society. Post-Soviets, too, exalted the songs of Gypsies on stage while they scorned the words and actions of Roma on the streets or in their houses. The book first traces historical processes through which Russians, Soviets, and some Roma themselves, framed the paces of Romani performance in contrast to the spaces of “real life.” In this way they interpellated Gypsies as simultaneously “natural performers” and “natural liars.” The rest of the book shows how repeated instantiations of this interpellation have been deployed to justify excluding Roma from economic and political spaces and physical places, and have regimented relations not only between Roma and non-Roma, but among various groups of Roma in Russia.

What impacts have major political and social changes had on people’s experiences of space and spatial conventions of behavior? See ‘Dealing Emotional Blows’: Realism and Verbal ‘Terror’ at the Russian State Theatrical Academy. *Language and Communication*. Vol. 24/4: 313-337, 2004.

I am drafting a book that traces the means by which diverse collectives of people attempt to naturalize judgments about motives and morality. The book is tentatively titled, *Technologies of Intuition in Moscow after the Millennium*. Specifically, it will examine ways that people struggle to anchor actions, motives, and affects to places and temporal orders. I am especially concerned with ways subjects who occupy dominant positions frame their anchorings as common sense—via what I am calling “technologies of intuition”—and ways that other subjects contest them (or don’t). I conducted fieldwork for this project in the department of directing at the Russian State Theatrical Academy in Moscow in 2002-2003 (funded by the International Research and Exchanges Board), and in the fall of 2005.

At the academy, students and instructors faced each other across a two-decade generation gap—the instructors represented the last Soviet generation, while the students represented the first generation having little memory of Soviet times. One might expect, then, that they would disagree over ways to depict social life, over ways to depict motivations and characteristics, over ways to depict persons in particular places and situations. After all, they brought both varying experiences and varying canons into their encounters. I hope to explain situate their real-time disagreements as ones that were contingent within both immediately institutional as well and broader historical, social, and cultural contexts. By focusing on struggles over performance aesthetics and communicative techniques (“technologies of intuition”), and by relating these struggles over ideologies of communication to ongoing political events and arguments in Russia, I hope to illuminate the means by which people and collectives rationalize some ways of moral being over others.