

*Volatile Conviviality: Joking relations in Moscow's marginal marketplace**

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Abstract

This article explores the joking relations that constitute conviviality in one of the largest marginal bazaars in Moscow. The marketplace is known as a hub for migrant workers and traders, and is often stigmatized in the media. It remains one of the largest commercial nodes in the bazaar network that stretches across and beyond much of ex-Soviet Eurasia. Scholars of conviviality have often claimed that convivial living represents more than hilarity and laughter; exactly how laughter actually happens and what sets of relations and interactions make it possible have been largely left out of the discussion. I will explore how a certain joking repertoire both connects Russian customers with migrant sellers and traders from Central Asia, Vietnam, Ukraine, and elsewhere, and animates relations between sellers themselves. I argue that these relations are characterized by *volatility*, which incorporates play and improvisation within different registers of uncertainty, conflict, enjoyment, proximity, and—ultimately—virtuality.

Introduction

'Hey you, Michael Jackson!', a vendor grabs me by my wrist and tries to pull me into his shop in the Sadovod bazaar located somewhere on the margins of Moscow.

The marketplace is spread over an area of about 100 hectares. It gathers together a large circus of cheap commodities, animals,

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people, and things: leather bags and soft toys, spare car parts, Vietnamese hair salons, fishing itineraries, disused sewing machines, rare tropical fish and owls, ceramic bowls and carpets, wedding dresses, restaurants and kebab shops, as well as occasional beggars and sellers of fake consignment notes. This diverse medley is somehow compartmentalized and organized into rows and sections, gendered and ethnicized in all kinds of ways. This might give an impression of some kind of ordered systematicity. Yet, as one dives deeper into the crowds and the relations of the market, one soon realizes that these boundaries are not all there are: people cross them repeatedly and make many other things happen at the same time. Sadovod remains one of the most popular destinations for wholesale traders and retailers throughout the European part of Russia, but its trade connections extend to the North and South Caucasus, China, Central Asia, and as far as Cuba and Nigeria. It is also an area with one of the largest concentrations of undocumented Central Asian migrant workers in the Russian capital. There are no public figures available for the exact numbers of workers employed in the marketplace, but I would estimate the number to be around 5,000 or more. This hub brings together all sorts of people and is also rife with overly represented low-intensity violence, which can include knife fights and shootings, mass confrontations between hundreds of workers and traders against one another or the security guards, as well as mugging and the torture of debtors. However, while the daily routines involve regular outbursts of violence and cruelty, they also include forms of solidarity, expressions of sincerity, hilarity, and banter, as I will demonstrate in the course of this article. By focusing on the joking relations that make up the texture of everyday life in Sadovod, I aim to foreground aspects of the place that have often become occluded in mainstream media narratives focused on violence, but also certain scholarship on, migrant precarity that seems to be fixated on issues of migrant victimhood in Russia.

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‘Michael Jackson yourself,’ I snap back and continue to move along the crowded corridor, trying to free myself from the vendor’s grip. Laughter erupts from every direction. The vendor is a sturdy man, possibly Tajik, in his thirties. ‘Come back here Michael Jackson, you hear me?! Check out the jeans!’ he yells at my back as several of his

younger mates grin. Someone adds in a thin, mocking voice, ‘*Shurikam bezplatno!* (bottoms [i.e. passive homosexuals] get it for free!).’

Such subversions of customer-seller hierarchies and inter-masculine jokes—Michael Jackson is rated low in terms of the masculine qualities esteemed by the bazaar’s workers—are often masterfully directed at Russian male customers in order to momentarily overturn the racial hierarchy that emasculates men who are routinely racialized as ‘black’ in the mass media and through document checks in public spaces and elsewhere.¹

Sellers shift from provocation to flattery and politeness, hostility and threat, care and instrumental calculation, and back again to joking and play. How do we understand this rich game of appearances and tactics as part of migrant marginality in this place that combines ‘warm’ conviviality with its opposites of violence, aggression, and ‘cold’ calculation? What specific types of joking relations emerge in the bazaars and how do they constitute convivial events and encounters? In this article I will explore several case studies from fieldwork that I undertook in 2014–2015 in Sadovod and other marketplaces to address these and other questions.

While it is often the case that conviviality is said to be more than mere hilarity, just what exactly constitutes joking and fun in convivial relations, especially in post-Soviet contexts, has not been extensively explored. In anthropology, literature on joking has been defined largely by the works of Radcliffe-Brown on ‘permitted disrespect’ in ‘joking relations’, as well as various discussions of joking ‘frames’.²

¹ The experience of racism by non-white men is, of course, not homogeneous and depends largely on class, citizenship, and ethnicity. While this has been changing as a result of the terrorist subway bombing in 2017 in St Petersburg, which was linked by the police and media to a migrant worker from Kyrgyzstan, it is the North Caucasian newcomers in Moscow who are usually stereotyped as violent and hyper-masculine. The lower class migrant workers from Central Asia, on the other hand, are especially vulnerable to forms of humiliation classically described by Fanon. See F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York, 2008.

² See Amanda A. Wise, ‘Convivial Labour and the “Joking Relationship”: Humour and Everyday Multiculturalism at Work’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2016, pp. 485–487. See also E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1974, p. ix; D. Handelman, ‘Postlude: Framing Hierarchically, Framing Moebiusly’, *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 65–77; D. Handelman and B. Kapferer, ‘Forms of Joking Activity: A Comparative Approach’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1972, pp. 484–517; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, ‘On Joking Relationships’, *Africa*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1940, pp. 195–210.

In contexts of ethno-cultural multiplicity, recent works have focused on the role of ‘rude jokes’ and the way in which mock aggression, teasing, exchanges of insults, and obscenities can forge trust and bonding, or even embody a subaltern means of critiquing the violent forms of inter-ethnic relations that Sanchez terms the ‘retaliatory logic of communalism’.³ Equally, as Steinmüller has argued, humour is able to carve out a space at a distance from the state’s discourse by establishing communities of mutual intelligibility, constituted of those who ‘get’ the ‘deep play’ of irony and the content behind the literal meaning.⁴ This form of mutual intelligibility and attunement certainly requires constant maintenance work. ‘Convivial labour’, Wise notes, establishes a provisional ‘consensus’ about where the boundaries lie with regard to what is permissible.⁵ Joking can be said to be an important ‘convivial tool’, as Back and Sinha argue, drawing on Tillich’s philosophical work which largely defines living together normatively.⁶ To my mind, basing conviviality on a shared ‘consensus’ or a negotiated common ‘joking frame’ may underemphasize the workings of risk, contingency, and aggression in many convivial contexts, as is the case in marginal markets. Taking inspiration from Singh’s exploration of ‘agonistic intimacy’, a concept which attempts to complicate the dichotomy between friend and enemy, I am interested in exploring the range of relations that involves enjoyment, consensus, and conflict.⁷ An important challenge here seems to be to think of conflict, othering, and violence as not occurring in parallel to or alongside conviviality, but rather as constituting part of

³ See A. Sanchez, ‘Profane Relations: The Irony of Offensive Jokes in India’, *History and Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2016, pp. 296–312 (p. 300); Wise, ‘Convivial Labour’, pp. 481–500; S. W. Reid, ‘Making Fun out of Difference: Ethnicity—Race and Humour in a London School’, *Ethnos*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2015, pp. 23–44.

⁴ H. Steinmüller, ‘The State of Irony in China’, *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2011, pp. 21–42; H. Steinmüller, *Communities of Complicity: Everyday Ethics in Rural China*, Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, 2013; Sanchez, ‘Profane Relations’, pp. 304–306.

⁵ Wise, ‘Convivial Labour’, pp. 488, 491, 495–496. See also T. Heil, ‘Conviviality: (Re)negotiating Minimal Consensus’, in *International Handbook of Diversity Studies*, S. Vertovec (ed.), Routledge, Abingdon, 2015, pp. 217–324.

⁶ L. Back and S. Sinha, ‘Multicultural Conviviality in the Midst of Racism’s Ruins’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2016, pp. 518–524 (p. 518).

⁷ B. Singh, ‘Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration in Popular Hinduism: A Study in the Political Theology of the Neighbor’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2011, pp. 430–450.

the same (dis-)continuum, undialectically, but rhizomatically without presuppositions of a common ground.⁸

Since there seems to be no single, emic term that sums up these experiences, I will have to improvise and introduce an analytic metaphor myself—volatility. In chemistry and physics, volatility refers to the point at which a substance evaporates, which also renders some materials more explosive than others. In finance, it refers to the oscillation of a trading price. The term therefore combines two perspectives on contingency as variation, shifting of registers and chance, and as explosion, both relating to the body of literature in terms of the way in which unknowability and unpredictability can be resources, rather than mere risks to be tamed and hedged against. I relate volatility to the conceptual figure of *fire* developed by Mol, Law, and Singleton, which can be helpful in thinking through the entanglements of conflict and care. Fire is one of several spatio-temporal arrangements between people and things, others being stable ‘regions’ and slowly self-transforming ‘fluids’. In the words of the authors, it involves: (1) continuity of shape as an effect of discontinuity, (2) a flickering relation between presence and absence, and (3) a link between a single, present centre and multiple absent Others.⁹ Arguably, considering joking relations as volatile spatialities provides an analytical lens, in addition to those of flows or networks, to empirically engage with aspects of precarious ‘urban assemblages’, Massey’s ‘thrown togetherness’, or Simone’s ‘cityness’.¹⁰ Volatility exceeds, I argue, the organizational coherence of fire as a type of

⁸ I say this in relation to the argument that begins the analysis from difference that is supposedly ‘bridged’ by convivial practices, rather than from the egalitarian ‘domains of commonalities’. It reaffirms the vision of bounded and rigid social categories, while ‘cohesion emerges not as the outcome of bridging difference but as a constant part of the dialectic between order and disorder, as well as creativity and conflict, across the spaces and places that people inhabit’: see N. Glick Schiller and G. Schmidt, ‘Envisioning Place: Urban Sociabilities within Time, Space and Multiscalar Power’, *Identities*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–16 (p. 3).

⁹ A. Mol and J. Law. ‘Situating Technoscience: An Inquiry into Spatialities’, *Environment and Planning D, Society and Space*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2001, pp. 615–618, 609–621. See also J. Law and V. Singleton, ‘Object Lessons’, *Organisation*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2005, pp. 331–355.

¹⁰ For an expanded discussion of spatialities, see I. Farias and A. Blok, ‘Introducing Urban Cosmopolitics: Multiplicity and the Search for a Common World’, in *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, Atmospheres*, A. Blok and I. Farias (eds), Routledge, London and New York, 2016, pp. 1–23; D. Massey, *For Space*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2005; A. Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010.

spatialized relation: it might explode into a conflict with a customer or a fellow worker or simply become irrelevant and disappear. In other words, volatility is a quality that is transversal of topological spatialities, while still giving rise to collectives of traders, sellers, and customers. The resulting social connectivities and circulation of goods expands beyond Eurasian and inter-Asian assemblages to include other regions. Jokes oil, and sometimes generate, such volatile mechanisms of connectivity, but in their limited ways, they also allow social relations to be more than what they already are—to operate not only actually but also on the as-if virtual plane.

We will come back to this last statement about virtuality at the end of the article. For now, we need to take a detour to better familiarize ourselves with the place, and to consider the jokes thrown around during the working day and during nights off.

Stigma

Sadovod is a rather unspectacular area consisting of a number of windowless buildings with towering advertisement billboards. It is surrounded by walls and fences, rows of surveillance cameras, and armed private security guards. The market is located on the isolated edges of southeast Moscow, right next to the MKAD ring road (Moscow's Ring Highway), the circular thoroughfare that divides the city from its suburbs. Like some other similar, but less well-known marketplaces, Sadovod is located in a relatively polluted neighbourhood of Kapotnya, next to a large oil refinery, the MNPZ (Moscow's Oil and Petrol Factory), on one side, and a large forest, Zhara, on the other, which is said to be the burial site of toxic waste and chemical weapons dating back to the First and Second World Wars. Its location contributes to its marginal status just as much as the presence of large numbers of non-Russian migrants, and its association with another former stigmatized marketplace—the Cherkizovsky market or Cherkizon, as it is often called. One frequently hears casual visitors remark or write online: 'What a terrible, dirty place! Full of blacks, non-Russians—it is a new Cherkizon!'¹¹ Often

¹¹ Beginning in the early 2000s, many popular and state-owned media outlets systematically demonized the Cherkizovsky market as a centre for 'ethnic criminal gangs', drug trade, trafficking, disease, and especially as a space representing the state's weakness in assuming control over these enormous monetary flows.

considered to exist at a distance from state regulation and control, yet intertwined with it in more indirect ways, the bazaars and the mobility of their traders have been described by scholars as forms of globalization or regionalism from below.¹² These trade forms have experienced a decline since the 2000s, while currently, both the Chinese-led Silk Road Economic Belt and the nascent Eurasian Economic Union seek ways to further reformat and control these inter-Asian or rather inter-Eurasian flows and networks, and to integrate them into larger trans-regional supply chains. In the case of Sadovod, at the time of writing, the penetration of the state has intensified significantly as security guards have begun writing down the names of those working in its vicinity and checking for licences (patents) among them. Circulating rumours include talk of the Tajik and Russian security services arresting and deporting ‘bearded’ traders (*borodachi*) for allegedly offending the Tajik president Emomali Rahmon over WhatsApp, or for being ‘Salafis’ on the way to Syria. The *borodachi* also became targets of ritualized police raids and sometimes racist riots, as happened in 2013 in the deindustrialized parts of Moscow’s Biryulyovo. At that time the area was a local fruit and vegetable market, which was ransacked by Russian football fans after one of their members was killed by a local trader. Still, despite this marginalization by stigma, many Russian Muscovites, and especially wholesale traders from the peripheral regions, continue to visit the marketplace. Often they favour this older and more familiar trade format to the malls and supermarkets that have been displacing the bazaars since the 1990s. From 2010, the city’s mode of spatial design, planning, and development under the new mayor Sergei Sobyenin has shifted into the more familiar European pattern of neoliberal urbanism. Aimed largely at appeasing the nascent Russian middle classes, the emerging spatial order has intensified class segregation, gentrification of the city centre, and construction of exclusive ‘public’ spaces such as the renovated

Cherkizovsky was eventually closed, and most of its workers and traders moved to Sadovod and Moskva markets, causing these places to be identified as Cherkizon’s successors.

¹² On relations between the state and bazaar economy in Central Asia, see, for example, H. Karrar, ‘Kyrgyzstan’s Dordoi and Kara-Suu Bazaars: Mobility, Globalization and Survival in Two Central Asian Markets’, *Globalizations*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1–15; and H. Karrar, ‘Merchants, Markets, and the State’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2013, pp. 459–480. For a more valorized view of traders, see G. Mathews, G. Lins Ribeiro and C. Alba Vega, *Globalization from Below: The World’s Other Economy*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012.

Zaryadye and Gorky parks.¹³ All these are significant transformations from the self-organized commercial formats that became iconic in the post-Soviet 1990s and were classically discussed in the literature of the time.¹⁴ From being vital places of mass and cheap consumption and employment, the markets in Russia were transformed into marginal and tamed entities due to the city's programmes aimed at making the city 'comfortable for living' and cleansing the capital of 'uncivilized trade'.¹⁵ While in Cherkizon the area was divided among many traders, landowners, various subtenants (as well as subtenants of subtenants), now the wholesale trade in the city has become largely monopolized by a few powerful 'big men'.

Sitting with me in a KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) after work one evening, an interlocutor who worked as a seller mapped the social schema of the marketplace using the remains of our dinner (see Figure 1). The large napkin came to stand for the 'Administration', which managed order in the bazaar, while the large Coca Cola bottle that towered over the rest of the litter came to represent the owners of the marketplace, as well as their protection (*krysha*): Vladimir Putin himself. For the common workers and traders in the bazaar, the workings of the Administration are shrouded in mystery, so that when asked who is in charge of everything, market workers mostly say that 'no one knows' or point to the 'Jews'. The 'Jews' refers to a group of influential businessmen, developers, and property owners, who come from a diaspora of Azerbaijani Jews otherwise called Juhuros or Mountain Jews. While Juhuros also work as common traders in the market and as management staff in the bazaar's Administration, which is highly diverse and international, the top positions of power are largely thought to be linked to them. A paper trail, representing the security guards, shows the separation of the Administration and the owners of the bazaar from both the traders, that is, the tenants

¹³ M. Büdenbender and D. Zupan, 'The Evolution of Neoliberal Urbanism in Moscow, 1992–2015', *Antipode*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2017, pp. 294–313; A. Kalyukin, T. Borén and A. Byerley, 'The Second Generation of Post-Socialist Change: Gorky Park and Public Space in Moscow', *Urban Geography*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2015, pp. 674–695.

¹⁴ R. Mandel and C. Humphrey (eds), *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*, Berg Publishing, Oxford and New York, 2002; and C. Humphrey and V. Skvirskaja (eds), *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities*, Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, 2012.

¹⁵ Moscow's mayor S. Sobaynin quoted in RIA News, <https://ria.ru/moscow/20101101/291453977.html>, [accessed 18 December 2018].

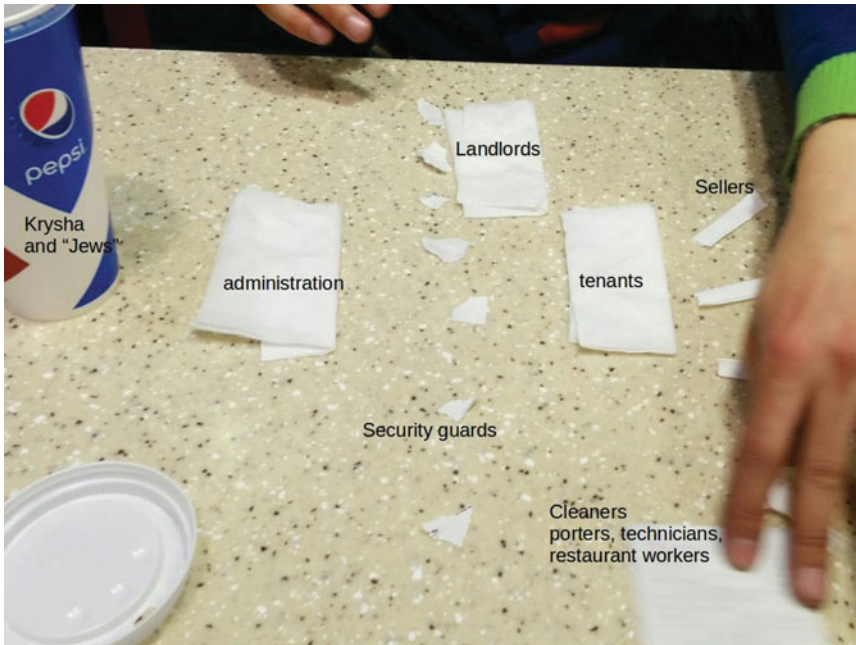


Figure 1. (Colour online) Informant mapping Sadovod's social relations.

(*arendateli*) and the rentiers (*arendodateli*), as well as from the general workforce of cleaners, porters, and sellers.

The workforce was divided by my research assistant into two groups that seem to represent both socio-economic standing and the relation to the type of employer: on the one side there are those who were directly employed or subcontracted by the market's Administration (cleaners, technicians, porters, and the kitchen staff of restaurants) and, on the other, sellers and helpers who are employed by the traders or tenants. The sweepers and porters (*bachas*) seem to be predominantly younger but sometimes very senior men from the rural areas of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who were not placed lower in the hierarchy, but still represent a separate, highly ethnicized, professionalized group. Conviviality in the hub therefore exists within an internal social structure that is far from being a romantic form of inter-ethnic mixing. Added to this segmentation by class and ethnicity is the high intensity of work that conditions the forms that joking relations take in the field.

Sellers often keep themselves awake thanks to powerful doses of coffee and energy drinks, and sometimes end up working as many as 19 hours a day in freezing temperatures of up to -30 C (which can cause facial skin to break). Some call themselves ‘robots’ or describe themselves as living a ‘dog’s life’, largely due to an impoverished rhythm revolving around sleep and work. A seller’s stable pay—called *vyhod*—starts at RUB 500 or 1,000 a day (around EUR 7 to 14 at the time of my research in August 2015). The rest of their income can be up to 5 per cent of the profits made on the day, although this figure varies and usually only applies on weekends. Considering the general costs of living, this is often just enough to get by on and pay back (or not) some of the debts one routinely incurs. Importantly, the workplace generally becomes a kind of family with all the ties, bonds, and implicit, unspoken rules and expectations that come with it. Sellers often take rather large loans to buy cars, presents, or air tickets as well as doing favours like taking care of the boss’s children or working extra hours. As the skill and the experience of the sellers grows, they are able to turn the tables on their bosses and ask for better pay or leave to work for another trader. However, as a result of the intensifying crisis, declining demand, and the devaluation of the Russian currency in 2014, traders were hesitant to open new *tochkas* (shops) or to employ new sellers, which narrowed opportunities for alternative employment.

Newcomers, and especially women, can often end up in exploitative relationships with male traders who sooner or later may expect the female seller to share a flat with them, perform housework, or provide sex. But relations here are never straightforward: for many newcomer women, these types of relations present an opportunity and a workable arrangement, for some time at least, before they move on or build businesses of their own.¹⁶ Here, mostly ‘*blondinka*’ (blondes, that is, women from Ukraine, Russia, Belorussia, or Moldova) are sought after and considered attractive and prestigious sellers, both because of their Russian language skills and their fair skins. Young men look for opportunities to commence relationships with Moscovite or Russian women, but their chances are limited because of their low status. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to paint these married

¹⁶ For a discussion on the complex and multi-ethnic ‘repertoires of family life’ between Afghan traders and local women in Odessa, see M. Marsden and D. Ibañez-Tirado, ‘Repertoires of Family Life and the Anchoring of Afghan Trading Networks in Ukraine’, *History and Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145–164.

and unmarried men's sexuality as centring around a quest to obtain Russian women as some kind of passport to prestige and 'freedom'. Marrying a Chechen, Ingush, or Dagestani woman is often considered a much more honourable and morally prestigious move. This has to do with the respect commanded by North Caucasians, who are seen by many migrant workers as more masculine and non-subservient vis-à-vis Russians due to histories of anti-colonial rebellions, recent independence wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2009), as well as the current political influence exercised by the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Chechen women are said to possess strong *iman* (faith) and family values, but also signify an alliance with a more dominant masculinity. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani businessmen are often avoided, as they are seen as a riskier group of employers, because, like the Afghans and Tajik male traders, they largely live alone in Moscow, while having families 'back home'. Many of my female interlocutors said they preferred to have Vietnamese bosses who often work in the bazaars as married couples. The everyday realities of relations exceed this ethnic clustering as people mix and cross lines on a daily basis, all the while reinforcing them on other occasions.

In contrast to their memories of business and work in the bazaars in the 1990s, traders now complain about and bemoan a lack of solidarity among themselves and a growing individualism: 'Everyone has his own dream, and he just tries to make it come true, that's it,' one of my co-workers would say. This requires many workers to build relations with each other using the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in a way similar to that described by Gandhi in his discussion of the Meena bazaar.¹⁷ I believe this has much to do with the place itself. Most migrant sellers rarely engage in any significant interaction with their 'real' neighbours in the places in which they live in Moscow or regions around the city. Work in a bazaar like Sadovod, therefore, recreates the more amicable face-to-face, village-like sociality of *soseeds* (neighbours). Yet these 'neighbourhoods' are not stable and durable entities like villages, but rather mobile and very volatile ecosystems, depending on economic and seasonal cycles as well as other factors. People come and go, often depending on the market as a safety net, a backup option, or a springboard for travel elsewhere. The businesses themselves may expand and open up many additional *tochkas* in several places in the market and hire more staff in order to sell more goods

¹⁷ A. Gandhi, 'The Hermeneutics of the Bazaar: Sincerity's Elusiveness in Delhi', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, pp. 126–131.

during high seasons, but when the demand ebbs—during the freezing cold months of January and February or the holiday months of June and July, for example—the staff is cut to a minimum and all the pricey *tochkas* are shut down or relocated.¹⁸

Along with this ephemerality, frustration is often intensified by the rhythms of the job, which is punctuated by units of goods sold. Every failed sale and small petty clash with a customer ‘plays on the nerves’ (Russian: ‘*delaet nervy*’) or ‘screws the brains’ (the literal translation of ‘*delaet mozgi*’). This may build up to anger, which spills over into an argument or a fight. A customer’s appeal (made with the objective of getting a better deal) to a sense of solidarity with a seller who is a fellow Muslim or fellow migrant countrymen often simply leads to an altercation or fight. Despite many everyday acts of generosity and networking between sellers and customers, the marketplace is not a hub of idealized solidarity and mutual aid: it is also a generator of tension and conflict. This was something Aziza, a middle-aged seller from Osh, dramatized through her performative narratives during one of our after-work gatherings, which I will describe later. For now, let us turn to the varieties of joking relations that are performed during the working day.

Work-day jokes

Sellers often contrast their *shashlyk* (gatherings) after work to being in the bazaar. While the gatherings are referred to as spaces of sincerity, solidarity, and honesty, during the day these same friends may behave hypocritically, suddenly stop talking to one another, or disappear. The bazaar is coded very differently and its routines are signified by specific kinds of joking relations that utilize and play with ambiguity as well as with the affordances of the body and space aimed at grabbing the attention of a visitor (see [Figure 2](#)). I argue that, with regard to interactions with strangers, these represent calculative devices and a form of vocalized touch that allow migrant subjects to become audible. With regard to the insiders (*svoi*), they often revolve around different forms of concealment and pranking. Of course, this is not an

¹⁸ Spots in the best places are not cheap; a *tochka* of around five square metres in a good place with high traffic can cost RUB 500,000–100,000 a month or more (which was around RUB 6,877/EUR 1,375 at the time of my research in August 2015, with an exchange rate of around RUB 73 per EUR).

exhaustive list of jokes and there is no general interpretation that I try to advance here. Rather, I will point out some aspects of the joking repertoire during the working day.

The space of the market allows for migrant subjects to be loud and noisy as opposed to quiet and invisible. Silence and invisibility seem to have become the customary behaviour adopted by external migrant workers in public spaces, and especially at home. This is largely due to the risk of being reported to the police by neighbours who might suspect that a flat is accommodating large numbers of workers who lack relevant registration documents. This might lead to police raids, detention, and pricey extortion. In contrast to the space of home, therefore, the marginal hub of the market allows for the sonorous becomings of migrant subjects and for multiple rhythmicities. The cacophony of different languages and the clang and continuous chatter have been cited by some of my interlocutors as particularly enjoyable aspects of their day. The humorous calls of male hawkers and the repetitive entreaties of female hawkers urging customers to enter a shop blend with multilingual chatter, slick advertisements broadcast from the market's central speakers, and criminally or romantically



Figure 2. (Colour online) A seller shows shoes to a potential customer.

themed *chanson* songs from smaller music shops. Initiating contact by shouting as loudly and as frequently as possible, and making the right kinds of jokes to customers, are often considered vital skills among male sellers. At times, mostly Central Asian men shift their attention from potential customers to other male sellers to partake in playful contests in which they vie to be the loudest, cockiest, or funniest, and to extend their masculinity through the intensity of their voices and tone across space. Women are usually expected to envelop visitors in chatter, but they mainly attract customers with ‘looks’; they therefore rarely engage in such masculine contests and tend to attract attention through eye contact, polite conversation, and a friendly tone. Chinese, Vietnamese, or Bangladeshi sellers and traders usually also abstain and merely sit quietly in corners, preferring to hire someone who can do the talking in Russian. Even if the senses are differently activated, gendered, and ethnicized, the intention remains the same, as one of my interlocutors who worked as a seller told me: ‘Here it is not you [the customer] who chooses the stuff, it is you who is being picked up and chosen!’ The ‘choosing’, usually performed by male sellers, often draws on carnivalesque Rabelaisian aesthetics of profanity, that is, the imageries of the ‘crude’, ‘vulgar’, and ‘lowly’ body parts as well as witty rhyming combinations of words and incongruities:

Kozha na ljuboj rozha!
 Leather for every mug face!
 Smotri, firma Hai-Hui, odivai i kayfuj!
 Check out the Hi-Dick brand, put it on and enjoy!
 Mnogo beresh, dolgo zhivesh!
 You take many, you gonna live long!
 Pokupaj shapku i poluchaj Ferrari bezplatno.
 Take the hat and get a Ferrari for free.
 Blondinkam skidka 50 per cent!
 Blondies get a 50 per cent discount!
 Molodoj s borodoj, podhodi skidku beri!
 Young man with a beard, come and take the discount!
 Tataram darom, Khohlam—bezplatno!
 Tatars get it as a gift, Ukrainians—for free!

Other jokes can also be mixed up and applied ‘inappropriately’, producing various forms of double meaning such as addressing obese men and women as ‘lady-sportswoman’ or ‘sportsman’.

While the reader might smile at some of these double entendres, they may be confused by others. This points to the shared framework of intelligibility that sellers attempt to foster between themselves and their visitors, which, at times, does fail to work. It is also often unclear when the joke is supposed to be entertaining and pleasing for a visitor and when it is meant as veiled ridicule. This ambiguity might remind one of Yurchak's discussion of late Soviet *stiob*, given that the calls of Sadvod's hawkers indeed evade the binary opposition of being either for or against the hegemonic discourse of Slavic supremacy.¹⁹ Can we argue that precisely this indeterminacy of *stiob* is sold together with the commodity to the Russian customers by Central Asian sellers or, rather, that *stiob* frames things as commodities and visitors as customers? To be more precise, in order for a thing to become a commodity, it needs to be 'sorted' or framed by specific 'calculative devices', an essential feature preceding or running alongside the act of an exchange mediated by money, as Tsing and Callon et al. have argued.²⁰ The Michael Jackson joke at the beginning of the article therefore effectively interpellated me as both a guest customer and an object of ridicule. I am certainly not advancing a functionalist understanding of jokes or one overarching interpretation; instead, I seek to point out how convivial hospitality is not antithetical to, but encompasses, various forms of calculation.²¹ In the spaces of the bazaar there is a similar process linked directly to exchange value which is both a source of capacity—the playfulness of being vocal—and a source of irritation for the brain and nerves. At the same time as jokes become both forms of contest as well as interpellative lassoes with which to capture customers, during pauses and breaks, different ways of concealing things become a prominent form of play among workers.

¹⁹ *Stiob* for Yurchak was linked to the ethics of living alongside the Soviet ideological master discourse, not in opposition or support thereof. Being a form of joking practice, *stiob* 'required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two': A. Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2006.

²⁰ M. Callon, Y. Millo and F. Muniesa (eds), *Market Devices*, Wiley, Oxford, 2007; A. Tsing, 'Sorting out Commodities: How Capitalist Value is Made through Gifts', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 21–43.

²¹ See M. Marsden, 'Fatal Embrace: Trading in Hospitality on the Frontiers of South and Central Asia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 18, 2012, pp. 117–130.

Sometimes male sellers and traders instigate pranks and hide each other's goods, causing the owner distress when they are tricked into believing that their merchandise has been stolen. In the case of the market sellers, though, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether a trick is an attack or a joke. Take, for example, the two friends Bek and Walid, both in their early twenties from Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, respectively.²² They had been living for around three to four years in Moscow and working as sellers in the same vicinity. At the time of my stay they were also competing to date Vera, a Ukrainian newcomer hired to sell fur coats. Bek created a fake profile on the Russian Odnoklassniki social network for another female seller called Aigerim and messaged Vera warning her that Walid 'was not to be trusted', withholding any detail of what 'she' meant by that. The ensuing exchanges between Vera and fake-Aigerim effectively sabotaged Walid's chance of dating Vera, causing him much bewilderment and distress. Real-Aigerim too could not understand why Walid was blaming her for his spoilt romance. Soon neighbouring sellers and traders in the same passageway were confused and gossiping, asking questions about what had happened in the triangle between real-Aigerim, Walid, and Vera, while Bek was enjoying the confusion. When the situation was eventually exposed as a 'joke', Walid, the offended party, did not know what to make of it. Was it a joke or a jealous act of betrayal by a friend he thought was reliable? Perhaps it was both or neither, yet Vera refused to believe that the story was a fabrication. Even though Bek actually lost interest in her during the process of the prank, he continued to instigate melodrama between the different parties. What seemed to be important in the end was a sense of play, of doing things for the fun of it (*dlya prikola*). The pleasure generated here seems to be related to the global phenomena of a pranking youth subculture. Pranks, scholars have argued, can act as subversions of power or become malicious forms of pleasure at other's misfortune, otherwise known as *Schadenfreude*.²³ In the context of the market, I would speculate that Bek transformed his individual envy into *Schadenfreude* and made this feeling circulate among the collective of sellers and traders at Walid's expense.

²² Throughout this article, I have changed most of the names of my interlocutors to preserve their anonymity.

²³ R. H. Smith, U. Merlone and M. K. Duffy (eds), *Envy at Work and in Organisations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.

To the extent that such pranks and sonorous competitions contribute to constructing masculinities of various ranks and grades, young men have to learn to navigate its ‘polyphonic grammar’ as a kind of rite of passage.²⁴ It seems that if there is sense in this kind of humour, it is connected to the broader process of development of skills vital to forms of ‘everyday diplomacy’, hustling, and tactics of precarious experimental life.²⁵ One such quality of character, which we will discuss next, is the quality of being quick-minded—*shustryj*.

Shustryj

A successful seller who is *shustryj* not only needs to know Russian, but must also to be able to speak well and often with humour and to understand materials and models. They must also sometimes negotiate or broker with the market’s management or the security guards. The combination of these different social roles and skills involves the ability to ‘shuffle’ different selves²⁶—improvising, imitating, and passing for what one is not. Reeves also notes the popular practice by Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow of ‘performing’ their documents or sharing one passport between them, which plays to Russian stereotypes of Asians ‘having all the same face’.²⁷ In the context of the bazaar, again, many male Afghan traders attempt to pass for Indians or even Latin Americans when flirting and attempting to begin relationships with Russian female customers. While Afghans are often stereotyped as violent, religiously fanatic, and ‘uncultured’, singing Bollywood songs, for instance, can break the ice and help initiate first contact and sometimes even relationships with Moscovite women. For their part, Central Asian men and women embrace specific haircuts and dress so as to pass for Vietnamese, Chechen, or Dagestani: ethnicities that are ranked higher by the Russian populations than their own. Besides speaking about racialized sexual economies circulating in the place as well as forms of tricking the

²⁴ Gandhi, ‘The Hermeneutics of the Bazaar’, p. 148.

²⁵ M. Marsden, D. Ibañez-Tirado and D. Henig, ‘Everyday Diplomacy’, *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2016, pp. 2–22; M. Reeves, ‘Diplomat, Landlord, Con-Artist, Thief: Housing Brokers and the Mediation of Risk in Migrant Moscow’, *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2016, pp. 93–109; A. M. Simone, *Always Something Else: Urban Asia and Africa as Experiment*, Basler Afrika, Basel, 2016.

²⁶ Mandel and Humphrey (eds), *Markets and Moralities*.

²⁷ M. Reeves, ‘Clean Fake: Authenticating Documents and Persons in Migrant Moscow’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2013, p. 509.

state apparatus of migration control, I want to draw attention to these different cases of becoming what one is not. Such becoming and play are not unrestrained and they are always dangerously close to going too far and becoming ‘double-faced’ and hypocritical.²⁸ Likewise, being *shustryj* is open-ended and controversial, and can slide into potentially immoral behaviour which can be scrutinized and condemned by peers during a *shashlyk*.

However, in the context of exchange with a common Russian customer, such moral restraints are usually relaxed: ‘I feel that I am like a shepherd shearing the fur from the flock of sheep, and I have to use various tricks to lure them closer,’ Bek told me during my time as an apprentice seller. While becoming-animal is a border-crossing life skill, in the commercial marginal hub the easy prey are considered to be Muscovite Russian men, who are seen as generous, yet too straightforward, gullible, and simple-minded—in other words, *lohi* (Russian for people who are not streetwise and easily cheated). After becoming a seller in the marketplace myself, I learned how this banter was an ongoing source of hilarity among my Vietnamese and Central Asian interlocutors, both men and women. They often described Russian, specifically Muscovite, men as good-for-nothings who are subservient to their women. In my interlocutors’ view, these women have the last word in deciding what the man is going to wear, where he will go, what he buys, and exactly how much he will spend. *Shustryj* here emerges as a skilful quality of becoming-human: human because of the capacity to navigate the turbulent ‘real’ life—a ‘dog’s life’—where one is constantly in danger of being scammed, taken for a ride, ripped off, dumped, or fired ‘like a sheep’. ‘You have to be *shustryj*, not open your mouth all the time! Right from when you were little you were like this—with a big mouth and ignorant,’ an angry aunt would scold one of my younger Uzbek friends who had been unfairly denied pay for a job in a distribution centre. He was himself to blame, the aunt maintained, because he refused to learn how to navigate precarity. Being quick-minded is obviously not a specific quality of a marginal, commercial hub like Sadovod, but it is in this place that it is professionalized and institutionalized in very particular ways. Sometimes it clashes with other moral economies and ethical regimes. Abdul, a Tajik shoe seller in his mid-forties who had worked for ten years in Kraskoyarsk and Novosibirsk before moving to

²⁸ M. Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*, Hurst, London, 2016, p. 176.

Moscow, for example, complained bitterly about the bazaar. He could not, he claimed, tolerate the systematic lying that was part of his daily job. Selling through deception was making him ‘dirty money’, it did not bring *barrakat* (blessings) nor *rizq* (provisions, sustenance), but only trouble, debt, and a guilty conscience. Several months after our meeting, Abdul left to work in a port city in South Korea. *Shustryj* can therefore be experienced as a forced and torturous habitus that one dreams of escaping. On the other hand, it can also become a source for emotional performance in front of a public of friends and random acquaintances to produce momentary bonds and feelings of sincerity. During working hours at the marketplace, it is usually men who initiate joking conversations and flirting, but this often changes after work. During *shashlyk*, women often took the initiative in the joking banter.

Shashlyk

Significantly, *shashlyk* have a nocturnal dimension at their core which is well reflected in the ‘mental map’ drawn by one of my interlocutors. It depicts a company of tiny, smiling, stick-figures gathered around a steaming grill in what looks like an isolated natural location marked by a gigantic baobab-like tree and a vast starry moonlit sky (see [Figure 3](#)).



Figure 3. A ‘mental map’ of a *shashlyk* gathering by Bek, one of my interlocutors.

Gestures and activities like preparing meat, starting a fire, cutting vegetables, and taking selfies were performed in a scripted and almost abbreviated fashion, since one always had to keep in mind the work shift starting again the next morning at five o'clock. The gatherings usually took place in the parks of the *mikrorayons*, where those present at a particular party lived, which were usually the newly built high-rises in the Kotelniki area. Although Moscow has so far not developed large, segregated ethnic neighbourhoods, as one finds in the USA or the countries of Western Europe, socio-economic polarization has dramatically increased and resulted in spatial fragmentation and exclusive areas for rich and poor; clusters of labour migrants have emerged, particularly in the East of Moscow, in places with cheaper, less prestigious housing; overloaded infrastructure; and deteriorating ecology.²⁹ Small towns just outside the city are also generally known to be areas where the police are laxer and where everyday racism is less prevalent than in the city centre. Here many migrant workers are able to live relatively undisturbed in private houses, *dachas*, or flats in high-rises.³⁰

On that evening, there were around ten of us at the table in the forest. On other occasions there were often more, especially during birthday parties. Sometimes there were fewer people. Badih, a lively-eyed, sinewy young Afghan man, lit a cigarette and passed the pack to Gulya, who flirtingly wrapped her arms around Chung, a young Vietnamese seller, and spoke in an exaggerated, sugary voice: 'Chung, *em-yeu ahn!*' (Vietnamese: 'Chung, I love you'). At the time, Gulya was a close friend of Aziza's, both sellers in their early thirties from Kyrgyzstan with children back home and a lot of selling experience in the Russian bazaars. Reflected in the headlights of a car, Gulya's brightly dyed blonde hair glowed like a golden bulb in the darkness of the forest night. Walid and several of his newly arrived younger cousins were playing football nearby, their shadows falling on the trees and on our table. Most had been working in some capacity in Sadovod's intricate service economy for an extended period of time or as teenagers had even worked in other large markets in the 1990s. Some had been 'neighbours' on the same 'line' at some point in time,

²⁹ O. Vendina, 'Social Polarisation and Ethnic Segregation in Moscow', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2002, pp. 216–243.

³⁰ See M. Light, 'Policing Migration in Soviet and Post-Soviet Moscow', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2010, pp. 275–313. A recent map by the Civic Committee and Sovo NGOs confirms this: it depicts racist attacks and shows that, paradoxically, central streets and squares are the most dangerous places for migrants. See <http://hatecrimes.ru/>, [accessed 18 December 2018].

others might have been relatives who had just arrived in the city. Badih attempted to trade in sheets and blankets at first, until he went bankrupt due to the devaluation of the rouble and falling demand in 2015. He quickly switched to delivering meat from several food markets to the restaurants in the market and also undertook other small jobs on the side. Also present were Ksyusha from Lugansk, Ukraine, and Vera from Belorussia. Both were around fifty, with degrees in economics and psychology, but were now working as sellers and considering establishing their own business. They joyfully spoke of an ‘international’ gathering and a ‘UN congress’ when counting all the ethnicities present around the table, evoking the spectre of state-sponsored Soviet internationalism.

The internationalism of the group—who gets invited or not—depends on the organizer, a ‘host’, or the ‘transversal enabler’, as Wise calls them.³¹ The ‘host’ mobilizes their networks and coordinates the logistics of the gathering, once more confirming that spatial proximity by itself does not generate conviviality, but often requires facilitators. These ‘hosts’ or facilitators, such as young sellers like Bek or Aziza, accumulate a certain social prestige—symbolic and social capital—which can extend their opportunities or reconfirm trust, a fragile and vital currency in the small kin-based businesses and lower class migrant worlds of Russia generally. The composition of the insiders—what in Russian one would call the *svoi* of the *shashlyk*—was strongly shaped by the ethnic segmentation of the market: the Chinese and Vietnamese, a few Cubans, and Bangladeshis seemed to group together separately from Central Asians, as well as from the North and South Caucasians, Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Afghans. The Afghans usually aligned themselves with the ex-Soviet group, possibly because of their relatively good knowledge of Russian and their specialization in the leather bag trade, which placed them in proximity to traders and sellers from Ukraine, Dagestan, and Central Asia.

The composition of the group was also reflective of more typical gendered trends in migration in Russia: most women present were either divorced or living separately from their husbands. Their children were usually staying with their grandparents ‘at home’, as was the case with Aziza, Gulya, Ksyusha, and others. Exceptions were a few younger women whose parents had been living in Moscow for

³¹ A. Wise, ‘Everyday Multiculturalism: Transversal Crossings and Working Class Cosmopolitans’, in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, A. Wise and S. Velayutham (eds), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009, pp. 21–45.

some time. Men, on the other hand, were more mixed, and consisted of unmarried ‘sons’ or married ‘fathers’ with parents and families in Russia or abroad.³² *Shashlyk* was an occasion that generated suspense, possibly because a lot of participants themselves were in a rather transient and indeterminate state. One would refer to this sense of collective, suspenseful enjoyment during *shashlyk* as *kayf*, which in Russian also connotes drug-induced pleasure and intoxication. During the party, Gulya might hurriedly silence a mullah’s *khudba* (Islamic sermon) which popped up on a playlist because she was in the mood to dance to a new, glamorous hit song with Walid. Meanwhile, Abdul might become indignant that men and women who were strangers were sitting so close together around a table covered with alcoholic drinks. Meat would be strictly *halal*, while the alcoholic toasts and speeches by Vera or Ksyusha commemorating friendship would be punctuated by *inshaallahs* (God willing) uttered by other Muslim participants. *Kayf* during *shashlyk* does not produce a smooth, hybrid ‘third space’: rather, fluidity is partial and situational, and is mixed with essentialisms, yet geared towards the cultivation of an ethos of co-presence. ‘Only those who respect you are your true friends,’ Aziza would say here—even if those ‘true friends’ barely knew each other and many of them might soon drift off to other social circles or even leave the country and delete their Odnoklassniki profiles and cut all ties.

Kayf during *shashlyk* attempts to foster a temporary sense of secure togetherness where ‘everyone is *belyj* (white)’ and ‘*chisty* (clean)’, as Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Afghan participants often say. This conception of convivial community certainly inverts the stigmatizing discourse of ‘dirty’ and ‘dark’ migrants, but it does not ‘make nonsense out of fixed identities’, as Gilroy might claim.³³ During such gatherings, some Afghans were jokingly called ‘*chernyj Moskvitch*’ (black Muscovites) in a way that implied a funny incongruity: ‘Look, this is a white Muscovite,’ Bek would say, pointing a finger at me, ‘and this is a black one,’ he’d say, looking again at Walid, perhaps finding this funny in the face of the hegemonic image of Moscow as a city composed of a ‘white’ Slavic population. This might remind one of the ‘intimate apartheid’

³² N. Khusenova, ‘The Feminization of Tajik Labor Migration to Russia’, in *Migration and Social Upheaval as the Face of Globalization in Central Asia*, M. Laruelle (ed.), Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2013, pp. 355–375. Also M. Reeves, ‘Staying Put? Towards a Relational Politics of Mobility at a Time of Migration’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 30, no. 3–4, 2011, pp. 555–576.

³³ P. Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2004, p. xii.

described by Bourgois and Schonberg in their classic study of multi-ethnic, homeless drug users in San Francisco. The ‘colour line’, the authors stress, is central to structuring relations in this entangled community, where crossing the line between whites and blacks is seen as exceptional and is even stigmatized.³⁴ However, during the *shashlyk*, differences become ridiculous, not exceptional, while being ‘white’ and ‘clean’ signify intimacy for different kinds of bodies, not only those supposedly belonging to the ‘Moscovites’.

In relation to such appropriations it is important to note the context of state violence and everyday racism that have become general features of post-Soviet cities. Several scholars note how such spaces have experienced a rapid decline in the ethnic diversity of their populations, or expansion of their ethnoscapas due to labour migration. In Russia’s case, the state has been notoriously anti-liberal and critical of the multicultural policies and ideologies of the ‘West’, and it regards the issue of the ‘integration of migrants’ as part of a broader programme aimed at ‘national consolidating’.³⁵ Although, to date, it does not officially support a mono-ethnic nationhood, it has introduced tougher migration controls, fines, and punishments, even as extra-legal detentions and extortion of bribes have continued to be the norm. The current clampdown on different forms of ‘shadow economy’ employment of Central Asian migrants has resulted in record numbers of deportations and entry bans.³⁶ Furthermore, in the context of everyday relations, there was a widespread emergence, beginning in the 1990s, of the racializing derogatory category of *cherny* (black). We have seen how things are reversed and made complex in the bazaar, a space which allows one to claim noise for oneself and to engage in a degree of con-artistry. How then does this work during time spent away from the workplace and in relation to the ‘absent others’ about whom one might now gossip? We will turn now to Aziza’s storytelling at the table.

³⁴ P. Bourgois and J. Schonberg, *Righteous Dopefiend*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2009.

³⁵ *Стратегия Национальной Политики Города Москвы На Период До 2025 Года* [National Political Strategy of Moscow City until 2025], <http://lublino.mos.ru/presscenter/news/detail/4306860.html>, [accessed 18 December 2018].

³⁶ In 2014 they peaked at 58,196, up from 13,508 in 2011, in Moscow alone. This figure subsided slightly the following year. К. Е. Троицкий, *Административные Выдворения Из России: Судебное Разбирательство Или Массовое Изгнание?* [Administrative Expulsions from Russia: Legal Investigation or Mass Deportation?], Civic Assistance Committee, Moscow, 2016, p. 11.



'She comes up to me and says, "You dark-ass bitch", you know,' Aziza began her story. She grimaced, writhed, and made herself sound as snobbish as possible, to the delight of Bek, but she seemed to frighten and alienate Walid. 'And I say to her: "Young lady, is this a correct way to express yourself?" And she tells me: "I say and do whatever I want!" So I tell her: "So aren't you dark-ass yourself? You're also a newcomer. You listen to me carefully, I have the right to choose my customers here. Go fuck off with your rules, ok?" She says, "I'm from Chechnya" and this and that. Damn, I really don't give a fuck where you come from and I don't give a damn about your Russian passport! I don't need that sort of attitude. If a simple man comes up to me, just a common, simple man, a *karapaim* as we call them in Kyrgyz, then I'll really give him such a treatment, ooo, he will never forget!' 'She will kiss him and take him to the second floor!' Bek adds, smirking, alluding to the sexual intercourse that often takes place in the storage section of the *tochka* module shop between traders and sellers. 'But if someone comes up to me,' Aziza says, continuing to parody the arrogant Muscovite accent and waving her hands and fingers in an exaggerated imitation of upper-class pretentiousness: "You know what, I only buy my clothes in MEGA, I only buy a pair of jeans for no less than RUB 2,500 (around EUR 34),³⁷ what is your lowest price, bitch? Huh? What is it? RUB 1,500 (EUR 21), huh? Why? Why is it that expensive, bitch?! Why, so expensive?" So, I tell her straight: "Go fuck yourself, bitch!!!" That is the way I talk to them nowadays.' "Bro," she tells me. "I'm not your bro, you dark-ass!!" I tell her. I can't stand this kind of shit. Another day an Azeri guy comes up to me and is like meee meee, "You stupid whore," he tells me. I tell him, "I am not your woman who works for you and who bends every which way you want. What are you gonna do to me, huh? Come on, do something, do something, fucker! You can't do a thing, let's go outside the gates of the market then!" Then I pick up a stick! ... Aaaaa ... And he is like ... "Fuuuck", and runs away!

³⁷ MEGA is a large shopping mall on the opposite side of the road from the Sadovod market. It is not considered to be an outlet for the rich at all, although it is seen as a 'civilized' trading establishment by the locals and does contain several premium shops. However, Katya's (mis)identification of these spaces as especially privileged seems to signify the gap that exists between her marginalized social position and that of the locals.

Everyone at the table laughed or grinned quietly over the story of a workplace conflict that usually occurs several times a week, if not several times a day.

Aziza went on to tell more stories. They included one about a conflict where she threw a fire extinguisher at a 'Tadjik' porter boy, yet forced him to read out an apology letter to her in Russian (which he could not even write properly) because she had skilfully manipulated the market's management by pretending she was hurt in the stomach and was ready to complain to the police. "What if I was pregnant?" I asked them. So, they had to do what I said 'cos, you know, they don't want the police to come here and for stuff to get outside the gates of this place.' She continued telling stories, clowning and gesticulating ever more energetically. Her demonstrations of force ended with a narrative about her confrontation with her Vietnamese boss, whom she 'taught' to pay her well after a series of episodes that included her dropping all the carefully arranged goods in his stalls, in retaliation for his unwillingness to increase her pay.

'He was arranging it all so lovingly, dickhead!' she added now in a mild and sugary voice. 'But did he pay you after this?' I was unclear. 'Yes, he did pay me, because that thing ... it's nothing,' she went on. 'But then I was kicked out.' 'How?!' 'These security guards found a way, so I don't work there anymore on that line. Once my blood pressure rose really high and I fainted. So, they all started saying that I was a nutcase. That I'm psycho, you know.' Again, the gathering cracked up. 'They told you that you were mentally ill, so you were not allowed to keep working there, right?' 'Yeah, but now all the guards in all the lines know me. They say, "Hey, Aziza you're actually normal." I say, "Who says that I'm not normal?!" But they say, "We won't tell you who said so, but someone said that you were a psycho."' After this final story, Aziza grew quiet. She drew out her phone and showed me photos of her kick-boxing a rubber tyre in a forest and her small son. He was smiling into the camera and was also wearing large boxing gloves that almost dwarfed his head. She seemed to have assumed (again) the ethical figure of care and filial attachment, rather than of an individual, cunning master.

How can we understand Aziza's enactments of rage and care, impersonation and parody in front of a friendly audience? Some of it was certainly positive facework, that is, impression management to enhance her powerful status and identity. By using humour, she arguably reaffirmed her desired self with the help of the selected and laughing audience; she demonstrated to us her mastery of the

complexities of Sadovod's life and her disregard for its hierarchical social pyramid as well as that of Russian citizenship. The 'Tadjik' porter-boy, the boss (*khozain*) and traders, the bazaar's management ('Administration'), and the North Caucasian customer with the Russian passport were all targets of her ire. The joking established intimacy, but not predominantly through a shared insider code or an exchange of blows and playful bites, but rather through ironic self-mockery. By building up a fearsome, hyperbolic image of herself, and then subverting this very construction with her last story about losing a job because of being labelled a 'psycho', she was being ironic and undid her implicit claims to superiority.

This performance and the narrative seem to contrast with earlier ethnographies that analysed 'Russian talk' of the 1990s and early 2000s. While in Ries's account, 'laments' and self-victimizing litanies become the defining features of the 'everyday' discourse, Shevchenko's interlocutors aim to 'demonstrate independence' and 'autonomy' in their conversations as a form of 'coping', she argues.³⁸ In the first case such narratives contribute to the formation of 'authoritarian social relations', while in the second, trust and solidarity are achieved 'through affirmation of universalized distrust' and the assertion that "nowadays" solidarity is impossible'.³⁹ Aziza is far from complaining here, of course. In fact, her self-presentation goes against the grain of much literature on Central Asian working class women in Russia, which tends to emphasize their victimhood.⁴⁰ Instead Aziza displays mastery of the masculine habitus, of being cunning, and *shustryj*. There are several other dimensions to her monologue that need to be explicated. One is that Aziza's self-mockery has a family resemblance to forms of non-individualist agency that expresses itself through displays of complicity and self-ridicule, something recently discussed by Anderson and Ibanez-Tirado in relation to the Syrian and Tajik contexts.⁴¹ The other is that we might see Aziza enacting a cosmopolitical figure that seems to be largely overlooked in the

³⁸ N. Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1997; O. Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2008.

³⁹ Ries, *Russian Talk*, p. 120; Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ E. Tyurukanova (ed.), *Migrant Women from the Commonwealth of Independent States in Russia*, Maks Press (in Russian), Moscow, 2011. Also Khusenova, 'The Feminization of Tajik Labor Migration'.

⁴¹ P. Anderson, 'The Politics of Scorn in Syria and the Agency of Narrated Involvement', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2013, pp. 463–481; D. Ibañez-Tirado, 'Everyday Disasters, Stagnation and the Normalcy of

literature on migrant sociality—the figure of the ‘idiot’. Drawing on Dostoevsky’s character Prince Myshkin, Stengers conceptualizes an ‘idiot’ as an ethical figure of cosmopolitical ethics as well as an (everyday) diplomat. The ‘idiot’ is ‘outside of the idiom of the polis’, which was the Ancient Greek definition of idiocy.⁴² Likewise, the polis of the bazaar, Aziza argues, does not understand her; in fact, it uses this to disqualify and fire her for being uncontrollable and unpredictable, her body itself prone to breakdowns. While cunning and quick-mindedness is the craft of the diplomat, the psycho-idiot is split between different positions. The *shustryj* trickster or con-artist is a skilful negotiating figure of everyday diplomacy, while the ‘psycho’ breaks down these transactions to give rise to ephemeral after-work collectives during *shashlyk* or birthday parties based on the hilarity of self-ridicule.

In response to the vicissitudes of employment as well as the rigid social stratification of workers in the marketplace, Aziza portrays herself as an even more unpredictable, furious, and chaotic force than those threatening her. From the affirmation of her superior status to being ridiculous, she shifts to affirm her co-presence with her ‘neighbours’. To my mind, these shifts of ‘involvement’, as Anderson would call them, are integral to volatile sociality in the sense that the subject understands itself as moving between the positions of entanglement and individual autonomy, between everyday diplomacy and idiocy.⁴³

Concluding remarks: Sadovod’s virtual hub

The *shashlyk* group that I was part of in 2015 disintegrated soon after our meetings. Walid left for Norway along with a group of Syrian refugees, while his close friend Badih ended up in Paris. Within a couple of years Walid had his application for asylum rejected and headed to France to join Badih in the hopes of somehow staying in Europe. Bek’s other mate—Chung—left for Vietnam. Others with

Non-Development: Roghun Dam, a Flood, and Campaigns of Forced Taxation in Southern Tajikistan’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2015, pp. 549–563.

⁴² I. Stengers, ‘A Cosmopolitical Proposal’, in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, B. Latour and P. Weibel (eds), MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 994–1003; Blok and Farias (eds), *Urban Cosmopolitics*, p. 15.

⁴³ Anderson, ‘The Politics of Scorn’.

Russian passports moved to Turkey or South Korea to do odd jobs. Some returned, some did not. Chung came back, but he went to work in Moskva market and moved on to other social circles. Bek tried to set up his own business trading socks alongside his main job as a seller; over time he largely distanced himself from his cousins, relatives, and older acquaintances, broke up with his long-term girlfriend Aigerim, and rejected several opportunities for an arranged marriage in Uzbekistan. His WhatsApp avatar turned into a lonely dark figure looking down a rainy highway, and he often began to complain of a lack of 'true friends' and people 'to talk to'. Others like Aziza and Gulya disappeared off the radar completely, as they apparently left to work on other lines. Just as I thought I would never hear of the group coming together again, Gulya spontaneously organized another birthday party in late 2017. Several older members were reunited once more only to disperse afterwards and maintain little contact with one another. With volatility, my aim has been to emphasize the sporadic, uncertain, and transient character of these relationships at the time of the decline of the bazaar form in Russia and elsewhere.

The markets in Moscow have assumed a lingering and semi-spectral existence. As a result of the economic 'crises' in 2008 and 2014, many former traders went bankrupt and became 'wage labourers'. They often ended up working as sellers with more established traders who by then monopolized the market of cheap Chinese imports. In contrast to the crisis of 1998, this time it seems that the age of large marginal commercial hubs in Moscow, and possibly in the European part of Russia generally, will continue to exist in a much more restricted fashion under greater state control. This does not imply that life is on course to become more ordered and structured. On the contrary, while the 1990s are usually depicted in the popular Russian imagination as 'chaos' and have been critically discussed in such terms in the literature on 'post-socialism',⁴⁴ traders and sellers, as well as other market workers I met, define the current crystallization of various monopolies and the greater role of the state as *bezpredel* (lawlessness). For them, the 'wild Nineties' represent a nostalgic Golden Age of lost futures. The general atmosphere of distrust, and the ever-pervasive risk of betrayal and *kidalovo* (scam), has not decreased for many, but rather has intensified. However, as we have seen in Aziza's case, this does not necessarily lead to a discourse of victimhood, but rather to performances of

⁴⁴ Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday*.

assertiveness and righteousness that slip into comic posturing as a means to signal sincerity and an 'idiotic' subject position. Just like other grassroots practices of conviviality elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, Sadovod's conviviality remains a symbolically invisible form of coexistence, from the perspective of 'larger' ideologies of national stability as well as ethnic or religious community. People will continue to eat, *shashlyk*, trade, and joke with one another, but it may become more difficult to recognize such practices as forms of actually existing living-together as state and non-state driven discourses of ethnic and religious essentialism as well as class segregation continue to be consolidated and gain in everyday currency. For now, however, joking in the bazaar allows for alternative publics to emerge, away from the newly gentrified spaces in the city centres, national military parades, as well as the imaginaries of the very few existing, municipally driven, pilot projects that aim to deconstruct mutual stereotypes of diverse neighbours by organizing convivial interactions through workshops and community events.

In this article I focused on the joking repertoire in order to demonstrate how laughing interactions create conviviality that is marginal yet vibrant, and which involves forms of calculation, performance, and symbolic attacks. As a final remark, I want to advance the idea that focusing on joking relations allows us to capture the virtual dimension of a particular assemblage—what could be, rather than what is, in the marginal hub. This is, after all, the power of incongruous humour—to imagine other worlds. What if Walid really was a player? What if a Moscovite visitor is like an effeminate Michael Jackson? What if Aziza was indeed able to intimidate her boss and control the predicament of precarious employment? By posing these possible scenarios, the workers and dwellers of the commercial, marginal hub create another layer of speculative potential—a virtuality. It is this that opens up the everyday discourse to the play of possibilities which are volatile and potentially risky.

A popular meme circulating in the social networks of some of my interlocutors reflects this well: it depicts a lion as a metaphor that simultaneously represents beauty and danger as well as respect and dignity (see [Figure 4](#)). The varied repertoire of joking allows for the navigation of this terrain, where trust is understood as an unruly, wild animal and a potential weapon. To conclude with the text from the meme, which might retrospectively throw a different light on the case studies of joking relations discussed above: 'Every man you gift with your trust, you give a knife to. He can hurt or defend you with it.'

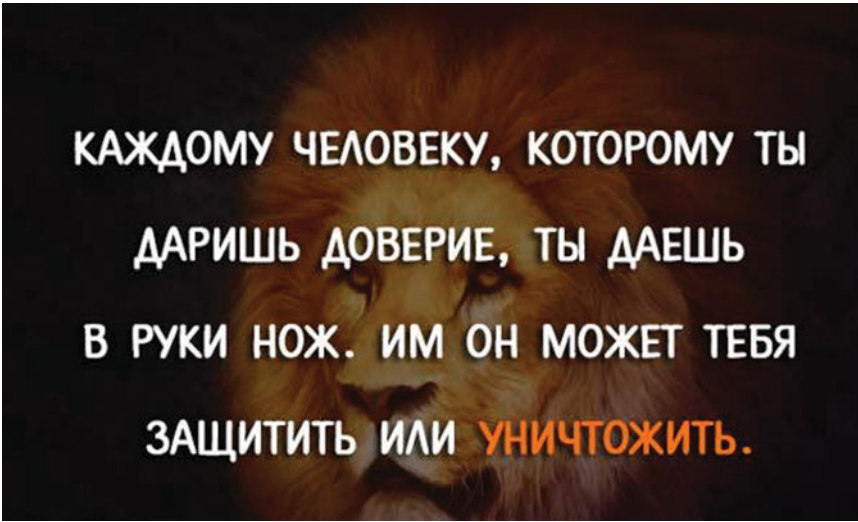


Figure 4. (Colour online) A WhatsApp and Odnoklassniki meme posted by my interlocutors.