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# SUBVERSIVE SONGS IN LIMINAL SPACE: WOMEN'S POLITICAL *ČASTUŠKI* IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract**
Women are not known for their political satire, but they do traditionally engage in carnival laughter. During the Soviet period women engaged in political *chastushki*, which combine both types of humor. These could be either subversive and underground (and could lead to arrest) or official and used for reeducation. In the post-Soviet period, elder rural women demonstrated their attunement to both of these Soviet contexts. The community quality of the *chastushka* form and its context, the public village forum, held out the promise of safety. Political *chastushki* helped women construct a social identity with a distinct public voice.
Keywords: *Laughter; Chastushki*

Evaluating women's participation in totalitarian laughter is a challenge for cultural critics, due to the scarcity of public venues in which women participated in the production of humor. For example in literature, only a handful of female authors chose satirical humor as the focus of their art.[1] In the arena of amateur satirical theatrical performances, women had no place (or a purely ornamental place): the "laughter of the mind" was associated with men.[2]

The reasons for women's peripheral participation in public satirical discourse are related to what Nancy Walker calls "a complex web of cultural assumptions about woman's intelligence, competence, and 'proper role'". Walker writes: "As long as woman is viewed as helpmate, sex object, and

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domestic servant, she cannot at the same time be allowed the capacity for humor, with its implication of superiority and its fundamental critique of social reality" (1988: 98). The same is true in folk and popular cultures. Anthropologist Mahadev Apte surveys numerous studies showing that in patriarchy, women are largely excluded from the production of laughter (Apte 1985: 69).

But the assertions about women's peripheral participation in laughter all have to do with a certain kind of humor: what Michail Bachtin terms unidirectional satirical laughter, and what Apte calls "verbal aggressive humor" or "tricky and clever" humor. Such humor laughs at the flaws and foibles of others, positing the speaker's, and by extension the listener's, superiority. Women do commonly participate in another kind of humor, which roughly corresponds to Bachtin's concept of double-voiced or carnival laughter. This laughter is ambivalent and body-centered: it conjures up ironies and mediates between incongruities, is bawdy and playful in its mocking (Bachtin 1984: 11-12). Cultural critics may call this kind of laughter subversive, when it defies social rules rather than transmitting or upholding them (Green 1990 [1977]: 33). These women's traditions are often practiced separately from mainstream culture, and in women-only groups. Apte observes that the collective nature of such folk practices helps to overcome prohibitions that would be applied if these women acted individually. In non-industrial societies, often only post-menopausal women can participate in aggressive, tricky or clever humor (1985: 71, 78).

I wish to focus here specifically upon women's involvement in a type of folk discourse that combines elements of both of these types of humor: political *častuški*.[3] *Častuški* (sg. *častuška*) are short ditties (two, four, or six lines of trochaic trimeter or tetrameter) that are sung to instrumental accompaniment (accordion and/or balalaika) or recited. These songs are generally performed in spontaneous group situations: an individual singer or pair sing a *častuška*, and other singers join in with their own. In the twentieth century, scholars often identified *častuški* as a women's genre, although men also sang or declaimed them; but politics is generally seen as a man's topic. When women intentionally enter the arena of political discourse through the medium of sung folk satirical poetry, then we are seeing an interesting application of women's folk discourse as a means of communication with a "public" audience – an audience linked with the nation, rather than women's immediate social group (their cohort, their village). The two cases I wish to examine in this paper, which took place in the post-Soviet period, each involve elder rural Russian women performing politically satirical *častuški* for audiences beyond their own village. In order to understand this phenomenon, we need to take a closer look at the *častuška* genre itself and its changing functions as folklore in the Soviet period.