

## Introduction, Part I: Before Canada

Robert Bohdan Klymasz

In Canada, Ukrainians who immigrated to North America after the Second World War are often called “third wavers.” In contrast to earlier “waves,” these émigrés were distinguished by a high degree of professionalism and a respect for learning. These qualities accompanied Natalie Kononenko when, still a youngster, she experienced her own version of the classic voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to “the New World” in 1951.<sup>1</sup>

The making of a prominent scholar like Natalie Kononenko constitutes a narrative that’s both circuitous and progressive. The paragraphs that follow are meant to outline the principal dynamics of this story.

Armed with a Harvard doctorate in Slavic and Near Eastern languages, a maturing Kononenko made her debut as a formidable folklorist in 1979 with the publication of a substantial introduction to the Ukrainian epic tradition, the *dumy*. This piece, *Ukrainian Dumy*, still constitutes the most authoritative survey of its kind. But this was only the beginning: less than a decade later Kononenko stunned the world of Ukrainian and East European folkloristics with the publication of her major study, *Ukrainian Minstrels: And the Blind Shall Sing* (1998), a work that dared to offer a refreshing update on the Ukrainian *epos* by using her findings as a field researcher in modern Ukraine at the close of the 20th century. The book deservedly earned two prestigious prizes.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this, Kononenko had already entered the world of international folkloristics with the publication in 1985 of a smart and meaty article on traditional foodways as reflected in Ukrainian proverbs, “Izha ta kul’tura kharchuvannia.” Written in Ukrainian, this piece underlined two of Kononenko’s scholarly strengths. Firstly, it demonstrated her ability to handle foreign languages with considerable ease, and second, the article showed a high level of sensitivity to the operative interconnections that characterize all folkloric phenomena. Subsequently, while based as an academic at the University

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<sup>1</sup> For more biographical details, see her piece on “The Kule Chair of Ukrainian Ethnography” in *Champions of Philanthropy: Peter and Doris Kule and Their Endowments*, ed. Serge Cipko and Natalie Kononenko (Edmonton/Ottawa: Kule Endowment Group, 2009), esp. 91–103.

<sup>2</sup> The Kovaliv Prize (an international award), 1997 and American Association for Ukrainian Studies book prize, 2000 (*Editors’ note*).

of Virginia in the United States for almost a quarter of a century (1975–2004), Kononenko not only honed her skills as a teacher, mentor, and administrator but also developed a reputation as a vigorous folklorist whose probings encompassed not only issues of verbal production but also folk art (see “The Goddess, Prehistoric and Modern,” “Goddess Figures in Ukrainian Folk Art,” “Rushnyky: Ukrainian Ritual Clothes and the Hnatiuk Collection,” and “Ukrainian Folk Costume”), religion (“Folk Orthodoxy: Popular Religion in Contemporary Ukraine,” “The Influence of the Orthodox Church on Ukrainian *Dumy*,” and “How God Paired Men and Women: Stories and Religious Revival in Post-Soviet Ukraine”), and women’s studies (“Mermaids [*Rusalki*] and Russian Beliefs About Women,” “Women as Performers of Oral Literature: A Re-examination of Epic and Lament,” “Matriarchy,” “Region—East Europe,” and “How God Paired Men and Women: Stories and Religious Revival in Post-Soviet Ukraine”).

The new technologies offered by the “digital age” were tools she eagerly embraced to enhance the outcomes of her investigations, while the collapse of Soviet travel restrictions in 1991 opened up a whole new world of research possibilities (see “Folk Orthodoxy: Popular Religion in Contemporary Ukraine,” “When Traditional Improvisation Is Prohibited: Ukrainian Funeral Laments and Burial Practices,” “Ukrainian Weddings since the Soviet Period,” “Field Disasters: Close Call in Ukraine,” “Fieldwork in Ukraine: Reports on the Death of the Ukrainian Village Have Been Greatly Exaggerated,” “Living in the Virtual Material World,” “Karaoke Ivan Kupalo: Ritual in Post-Soviet Ukraine,” “Using Digital Technology in the Field: Report on Folklore Research in Ukraine,” and “Collecting Ukrainian Heritage: Peter Orshinsky and Leonard Krawchuk”). Kononenko has never hesitated to share her findings at public presentations, scholarly or other. Her writings have always been distinguished by a feature that typifies the best of folklore studies everywhere: a balanced blend of “armchair,” library research on the one hand, and face-to-face field investigations on the other. These positives, developed from the onset of her career, continued to shape her scholarly activities after moving to Canada in 2004.

Although Kononenko is widely recognized as a leading Ukrainianist, her contributions to Turkish folkloristics should not be underestimated since these mark an equally important aspect of her scholarly profile (see items *The Turkish Minstrel Tale Tradition*, “The Techniques of Turkish Minstrelsy: Oral Composition versus Memorization,” “Folklore Scholarship in the Post-Soviet Period,” and “Reviving *Dumy* at the Birth of a Nation”). Her obvious familiarity with the contrasts and similarities that characterize different traditions undoubtedly prepared Kononenko for the next major step in her career: the decision to move to another country.