

Marina Lewycka, Women's Work, and the Figure of the Ukrainian Woman as Economic Migrant

by Heather Fielding

Marina Lewycka's Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian is the most prominent portrayal of Ukrainians in contemporary British fiction, but it relies heavily on stereotypes about the Ukrainian woman as hypersexual and hypermaterialist. This article uses Anca Parvulescu's ideas about east-west economic migration as a "traffic in women's work" to analyze this stereotype in Lewycka's fiction. Valentina, who immigrates to the UK to marry an elderly man, is threatening because she refuses the fiction that she is part of the family, instead insisting that she is a working for pay, in labor ranging from cooking to sex. She is also dangerous because she is motivated entirely by consumer desire, and leaves her husband to buy things in the west. The novel imagines her as bringing these shallow economic motives, which leach care and affection out of social bonds, into the British family. A later novel, Various Pets Alive and Dead, reimagines Valentina as Maroushka, an alluring but dangerous financial analyst. Lewycka takes the logic of Valentina to its extreme: Maroushka shows this same flattening of social and affective bonds into a compulsion for money, but this time at a macroeconomic level, as she develops a new hedge fund designed to profit from the collapse of the housing market. Here, Lewycka imagines the Ukrainian woman as a figure for a "gangster" capitalism that threatens to ravage the British economy. These novels connect the stereotype of the Ukrainian woman to anxieties about contemporary global capitalism after the financial collapse of 2008.

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In 2005, for the first time, a British-Ukrainian writer, writing about Ukrainian characters, broke into the mainstream literary fiction market in the UK. The novelist was Marina Lewycka, a university lecturer from Sheffield who was already in her fifties by the time she started writing. The daughter of Ukrainian displaced persons who immigrated to the UK after World War Two, Lewycka made her name with *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, a quasi-autobiographical novel about a character modeled on Lewycka's elderly father. The novel is a family chronicle, as Nikolai struggles to tell the story of his family's tragic experiences during the Holodomor and World War Two to his daughter, who was born after their exile. But *Short History* is also what some reviewers described as a "classic Viagra comedy," a farce about Nikolai's marriage to Valentina, a much younger Ukrainian woman who is transparently using him for his money and a visa.¹

Short History became a bestseller and a candidate for the big literary prizes of 2005—the novel was long-listed for the Booker Prize, the most important honor in the British literary world, and short-listed for the Orange Prize for the best book

by a UK-based female writer. Lewycka became, and continues to be, a mainstream writer, whose work has not been pigeon-holed as “ethnic fiction.” In these terms, her first novel is particularly significant: it constitutes the most widely received literary discussion of Ukraine and Ukrainians in contemporary British fiction, for better or for worse.²

Lewycka’s first novel likely rose to popularity in the UK in part due to its timing. *Short History* came out just after the Orange Revolution, when Ukraine’s troubled path toward western democracy was in the news. The novel’s appearance also coincided with the eastern expansion of the European Union in 2004. While her Ukrainian characters would not become EU citizens as part of that expansion, nonetheless her work tapped into larger ideological concerns about economic migration from east to west within Europe, about people from poorer postsocialist countries moving en masse to the more developed economies of western Europe, not to flee oppression but to seek better economic conditions.

In her first novel, these issues converge around the figure of the Ukrainian woman who migrates to the UK for economic opportunity through marriage. Her portrayal of Valentina, a crass, hypersexualized, hypermaterialistic gold-digger who marries an infirm elderly man, earned her negative attention in Ukraine, and Ukrainian writer Andrey Kurkov—an important voice on Ukrainian issues in the British press—accused her of trading in damaging stereotypes.³ Indeed, Valentina is a deeply problematic character, especially because she is one of so few Ukrainian characters to have a major role in a mainstream work of British literary fiction. But Lewycka is a British writer, writing for British audiences; we should not turn to her work for realistic, culturally sensitive portrayals of Ukraine or Ukrainians.

Rather than simply condemning Lewycka for her portrayal of Valentina, though, this article is interested in analyzing how the stereotype of the Ukrainian woman migrant functions in the novel, and in using the novel to explore the cultural and political logic of these stereotypes. Anca Parvulescu’s work provides a useful frame for beginning to understand Valentina’s role in Lewycka’s novel.⁴ In her far-reaching study of gender and east-west immigration in contemporary European cinema, Parvulescu argues that the figure of the woman from Eastern Europe plays a particularly charged role in the discourse around economic migration. She is often imagined as a sex worker, as a nanny or cleaner, or as a wife, someone using marriage to improve her economic situation across national lines. Parvulescu argues that these roles form part of a continuum: the woman from Eastern Europe is a worker, who performs “tasks historically performed by a wife.”⁵

In moving to western Europe to pursue this work, she “participates in a symbolic exchange program”: her movement across borders functions to integrate a Europe that is often imagined as a family.⁶ This is a contemporary, transnational version of the structure Levi-Strauss called “the traffic in women,” the process through which cultural bonds are maintained by the circulation of women between kinship groups.

This “trade” of women helps to create and maintain Europe, facilitating exchange and continuity between its western and eastern halves. As Parvulescu puts it, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Eastern European nations were not rich in cultural or consumer goods that could be exported to the west, but “what the countries of East Europe did have in the wake of 1989 were women.”⁷

Western European countries, in turn, need Eastern European women’s labor, which fulfills an economic need that has emerged with women’s increased participation in the labor force: the unpaid labor women traditionally performed in the home is increasingly rationalized into components and outsourced beyond the family. As they participate in this exchange, women migrants from Eastern Europe come to be described, though stereotypes, as particularly well-suited for these roles: they might be hypersexualized, described as looking like models, or imagined as old-fashioned. With all of these characteristics, as Parvulescu puts it, these women are imagined as “embodiments of a nostalgic past untainted by feminism in which women presumably knew and enjoyed staying in their place.”⁸

Parvulescu sees the traffic in women as “a critical lens through which to conceptualize the legal and illegal circulation of women as women internationally.”⁹ This lens seems particularly useful as a way to understand Valentina, who circulates between Ukraine and the UK as part of this traffic in women. She exemplifies the tricky position of women in this exchange: their position is socially charged because it turns on payment for the household labor of women, which has historically been unpaid. This labor takes place at the intersection between paid employment and just being part of the family. What is most interesting about Lewycka’s portrayal of Valentina is that the character is conscious about the role she is playing in this transnational economy. She self-consciously uses her sexuality to extract profit, and demands to be seen as a worker who deserves to be paid. She refuses to participate in the polite fiction that she is a member of the family who loves the man she married. Stylistically, Lewycka emphasizes this dynamic by narrating her from a distance, keeping her emotionally opaque to the novel and its narrator: she cannot be redeemed as an object of sympathy. Valentina is dangerous, in the novel, precisely because she knows her role and acts in her own economic interests. She can be contained and recuperated only when she is removed from the traffic in women, from this economic exchange: her Ukrainian husband reappears at the end of the novel, returning her to a relationship that is primarily affective, rather than economic.

Valentina is threatening because she reveals the raw capitalist function of what might otherwise seem like a familial relationship. But Lewycka also goes one step further. For most of the novel, Valentina is driven by an economic desire that is insatiable, compulsive, and all-consuming. It makes her willing to give up affective and familial bonds—the marriage in Ukraine to which she returns at the end. In these terms, the novel presents Valentina as an allegory for Ukraine at the moment

of its independence “when what the novel calls an unrestrained “gangster stage” of capitalism emerged to take advantage of the change in socio-economic systems.”¹⁰

In her 2012 novel, *Various Pets Alive and Dead*, Lewycka further develops this allegory. That novel’s Ukrainian female character is a financial analyst who colludes with investors who were making massive profits off of the financial collapse of 2008. The novel describes her in terms that recall Valentina, and locates her in the sphere of the traffic in women: her empty financial speculation that aims to do nothing but produce more money is compared to prostitution. Like Valentina, Maroushka is not a victim, and does not need to be saved. In fact, the British economy needs to be saved from her.

When her novels push this dynamic to its logical conclusion, women migrants from contemporary Ukraine ultimately come to embody global finance capitalism, conceived of as an uprooting force of shallowness and promiscuous growth that crosses borders to strip away depth, history, and care. These novels imagine them as pure materialism and self-interest, excluded from familial relationships. The lens of the traffic in women helps us to see the ideological work this figure does in Lewycka’s novels: the idea of the Ukrainian woman migrant comes to stand in for anxieties about what late-stage, transnational finance capitalism does to the family.

Women’s Work and the Intersection of Family and Wage Labor

Short History is particularly interested in the fuzzy line between familial care and economic labor, a line that Valentina crosses. In Parvulescu’s analysis, “the traffic in women produces a new extended family (nannies, domestics, and care workers are figured as ‘one of the family’) within which the old tasks of reproduction are performed.”¹¹ This woman is figuratively situated within the family, although she is also a worker, someone who is economically compensated for her labor. This idea of the European family crosses discursive contexts: as Parvulescu shows, the image was often used by EU officials and by the media to describe European integration following the fall of the Soviet Union.¹² Before considering this allegorical level, this article will examine how that discourse plays out within the novel’s fictional family.

In Lewycka’s novel, Valentina emerges as a threatening figure in part because she is so easily imaginable as part of the narrator’s British family when she comes from Ukraine to marry Nikolai. The novel emphasizes her compatibility with the family by presenting an almost all-Ukrainian cast of characters; nearly everyone in this novel’s version of the UK has Ukrainian roots. Valentina is not, then, actually an exotic foreigner but someone who is already familiar, a Ukrainian woman entering a Ukrainian-British family in a diaspora neighborhood, where everyone speaks both Ukrainian and English. Against this background, her purely economic motive becomes dangerous: she looks like a member of the family, but she actually

is not. There is a simulacrum of care backed up by nothing but a desire for money: Valentina could not possibly actually love this elderly man, who she mocks and abuses as soon as she realizes he has no money. We see her exploit this appearance of family when, for example, Nikolai calls the police to report her abuse. In front of them, she calls to him in terms of endearment: “come, holubchik, my little pigeon.”¹³ The simulacrum is convincing enough to the policemen: they think, “not all old people are so lucky as to have a loving wife to care for them.”¹⁴

Valentina’s role in the family is all the more significant because Nikolai and his family need her and her labor. Parvulescu argues that jobs in affective care become available for foreigners because labor in the European family has been broken down, rationalized, and “Americanized”: the various roles once performed by female relatives, who are now working themselves, must be repackaged and allotted to hired workers.¹⁵ That is indeed what seems to happen in the novel—the family is no longer capable of keeping itself going on its own. Nikolai is an elderly widower; there is no one to perform his wife’s work, and his daughters are both married mothers with careers. The novel’s opening conflict is that Nadia’s sister realizes that Nikolai can no longer take care of himself: “The house is filthy. He eats off newspaper. He eats nothing but apples.”¹⁶ Valentina’s labor is actually quite necessary—it helps Nikolai to stay on his own rather than going into sheltered housing, which he must do at the novel’s end when Valentina leaves. Nadia comes to visit her father, finding him naked, with his pants in a pile on the floor, having defecated on himself. Valentina’s response is to tell Nadia, “you clean up pappa shit,” as she begins to reject the role of caregiver, to turn that role back over to Nadia.¹⁷ When Valentina stops performing her duties, it manifests as neglect. Without her, Nikolai’s daughters have to confront the fact that they are not able to take care of him on their own, in the context of western middle-class life.

Part of the scandal surrounding Valentina’s role is that all of the wife’s activities are expected of her. Those tasks include everything considered “women’s work”: from sex to cleaning and cooking and eldercare. These are all activities that we see Nikolai requesting or being unable to do for himself in the novel. Nikolai’s daughters are angered when Valentina stops cleaning. And Nikolai is angered when Valentina withholds sex: “You no good woman shut husband out of bedroom.”¹⁸ The state, in turn, sides with Nikolai: she is refused a visa, despite her marriage, because the inspector “found no evidence of a genuine marriage”—because she keeps him out of her bedroom.¹⁹ Parvulescu asks us to see these roles in affective labor on a continuum from sex work to marriage—that is a continuity that the frame of “women’s work” helps to make visible.

One of the reasons that Valentina becomes such a negative figure in the novel is that all of this work—from sex with elderly Nikolai to cooking his meals—is work to her, and she expects to be paid for it. She demands money for these roles that Nikolai’s wife, according to the fiction of the family, did for free. She gets a

job and stops cleaning the house when she is no longer being paid: "I too much working. No time house working [...] Your father-he no give me money."²⁰ Nadia, the narrator and Nikolai's youngest daughter, tries to reason with Valentina as a contributing, real member of the family: "Why should my father pay for your cars? For your telephone bills? You have work. You earn money. You should contribute something to the household."²¹ But Valentina refuses this logic, insisting that Nikolai must pay her 20,000 pounds when she becomes pregnant—a plan that fails only because elderly, impotent Nikolai, who she repeatedly refers to as "squishy squashy floppy floppy," is clearly not capable of having impregnated her.²² Valentina understands this economy and does not buy into the lie that her relationship to this family is anything but an economic transaction. This is one key reason why she is dangerous: not only because she is a subject in this economy but because she refuses to participate in the fiction that her work is really about being part of the familywomen's work is *work* to her. She reveals this exploitative economy in which Lewycka's good liberal British protagonists, who need her work, are complicit.

Valentina's sexuality is her greatest tool for making money, and she sexualizes herself at every turn. She wears fluffy pink stiletto slippers around the house, puts on too much makeup, gets Nikolai to pay for her breast enhancement surgery, and flirts not just with Nikolai but with every man in their community. A neighbor describes her as "all fur coat and no knickers," after revealing her suspicions that Valentina is sleeping with other men.²³ This sexuality is not a segue to love—there's little sign that she cares about anyone—but an instrument for obtaining money and a visa. She threatens Nadia that she will tell Nikolai's doctor about his sexual proclivities, embarrassing the entire family, if she does not convince Nikolai to support her visa application: "I will tell her eighty-four-year husband want make oralsex. Squishy squashy husband want make oralsex."²⁴ After giving birth to her baby, she refuses to breastfeed: "Valentina's superior breasts are evidently for display purposes only."²⁵ Here, her breasts— "bursting like twin warheads out of an underwired, ribbon-strapped Lycra-panelled lace-trimmed green satin rocket launcher of a bra"—explicitly become sexual tools to secure economic mobility, to the exclusion of any duty of care.²⁶

Valentina would be a very different character if the novel portrayed her as a victim—a desperate woman from a poor country, doing her best under unfortunate circumstances. But Valentina refuses to be a victim, choosing instead to exert power and reject helplessness. She takes Nikolai to a psychiatrist, and to court, twice; she gets a Dictaphone and a copy machine so she can collect incriminating evidence against him; she puts a baby monitor in his bedroom so she can hear what he says on the phone; she manipulates the police through flirtation; she recruits allies among the Ukrainian community, in part through sex. She wants a British passport and an income and she uses all the tools at her disposal to get them. She is described with epithets that suggest ruthless determination and belligerent

aggression-her formidable “twin warheads.” She is even physically aggressive with frail, elderly Nikolai. When Nikolai gets mad, tells her to go back to Ukraine, and pushes her, “she pushes him back. She is bigger than he is.”²⁷ “You dog-eaten-brain old bent stick, you go in room and shut up,” she screams at him, shoving him again.²⁸ At another point, we see Nikolai, naked and cowering in a corner as she chases him with a wet towel; she is angry that he does not have as much money as she expected. Her aggressiveness and independence are threats: although she’s been made part of the family, she’s a lone wolf, a predator acting only for herself.

Perhaps the novel’s most offensive move is that it doesn’t give us a deep reason why Valentina wants to be in the UK, beyond the fact that she wants money. It refuses almost every opportunity to give us Valentina’s point of view, or to provide a realist, sympathetic account of her motivations—a narrative decision that makes the character seem like a stereotype. There is little sense of interiority behind Valentina’s desire for money; she remains a flat object of comedy who we view from the outside. The novel simply does not fill in Valentina’s back story—why she divorced her Ukrainian husband and came to the UK. Was she fleeing some dangerous situation? Did she want a career she couldn’t have in her home town of Ternopil? The other characters in the novel become fully fleshed out as their family stories come to light, but Valentina is notably excluded from these dynamics. There is a sense of emptiness around her, “a gaping void in which questions wheeled around like startled birds.”²⁹

This narrative decision is all the more noticeable because in her second novel, *Two Caravans*, Lewycka would draw another female Ukrainian character, but with a very different method. That character, Irina has also immigrated to the UK to work—but Lewycka portrays the character much more fully, narrating from her first-person point of view so that we learn her complex reasons for immigrating. Those reasons are not primarily economic: she wants to improve her language, and to experience a nostalgic, romantic England she knows from novels. Irina insists in particular that “I’m not one of those awful Ukrainian girls who come to England only to ensnare a husband.”³⁰ Irina comes to England as a strawberry picker, not a domestic laborer, and throughout the novel defines her against the stereotype of the female economic migrant. When her Ukrainian boyfriend is searching for her, he asks a store clerk if he has seen a Ukrainian girl: “Ah, Ukrainian girls also we have plenty. Every night you see them on street and on beach making sex for money.”³¹ “Not this girl,” responds Andriy.³²

Both in characterization and in the literary techniques she uses to depict the character, Lewycka defines complex Irina against flat Valentina. Perhaps surprisingly, Valentina is ultimately recuperated at the end of the novel—something that is possible because she exits the economy of the transnational traffic in women. In the novel’s last section, she leaves the UK and returns to Ukraine with her Ukrainian husband, leaving Nikolai and his daughters alone. The presence

of her husband is crucial to redeeming Valentina. He functions to contain her sexuality, certainly, but to return to Parvulescu's framework, it becomes clear that he plays another role as well. Her husband and Nikolai "get on like a house on fire" and Nikolai invites him to move into his house, indeed into the room recently vacated by Valentina when she moves out.³³ They are both engineers and have a lot in common. He becomes a sort of surrogate son for Nikolai, the only person who is actually interested in the history of the tractor that he spends his time writing.

His entrance onto the scene transforms Valentina into an object whose role is to facilitate homosocial, quasi-kinship bonds between men. Her relationship with Nikolai's family is suddenly not about sex or money. Instead it is routed through her husband, and now that relationship is about kinship between different generations of Ukrainian families, and between Ukraine and Europe. The traffic in women has turned out to be so threatening that the project of European integration it promotes, in Parvulescu's analysis, can only be completed homosocially, between men. Valentina's presence no longer reveals the family's complicity in an economy that recruits Eastern European women to perform domestic and affective labor in Europe. Valentina, in turn, is resocialized, tied down to the Ukrainian family, no longer this roving, too-independent, transnational agent of economic desire.

Something similar happens in *Two Caravans*. Irina, the serious girl who refuses to fall into the stereotypes about Ukrainian women in the UK, longs for romance—but rather than have her fall for a British man, something that would invite the stereotype, instead the novel has her fall in love with another Ukrainian migrant, Andriy. Late in the novel, she finds herself in trouble when a human trafficker pursues her, aiming to sell her into a life of sexual slavery. She is rescued by Andriy, in an ending that resonates with Dubov's return at the end of *Short History*: in both cases, a Ukrainian woman is rescued from some version of the traffic in women by a good Ukrainian man who will be, or is, her husband. The only way out of this economy of exploitation is for them to be tied back into a heterosexual relationship that is outside of this transnational circuit of women's work.

Women's Work and Gangster Capitalism

Valentina is dangerous because she will not abide by the fiction that she is a member of the family, and insists on defining herself as a worker who must be paid. This section explores another layer of the threat: the novel links Valentina's role, in which she reveals the transnational money-generating reality of what seem like affective social relationships, to a broader macroeconomic concern. Valentina comes to embody an aggressive American capitalism that uproots people and threatens affective and social bonds. Valentina is both the not-very-successful agent of this economy and its subject. This form of capitalism spreads, through the traffic in women, even into an average family, far outside the financial capital

of London. In *Various Pets Alive and Dead*, the threat will become broader: in that novel, the Ukrainian woman as an economic migrant embodies this unproductive, flattening, destructive economy-now specifically imagined in financial terms-that threatens to take down the British economy.

Valentina is motivated by an obsessive economic desire that bulldozes through social relationships: she leaves her apparently loving husband in Ukraine to come to the UK so she can make money to buy things. She is not really trying to create a career, or to help her son take advantage of educational opportunities that will improve his future in the long term-he is flunking out. Her economic desire is thus not productive: she is not trying to build anything, to use that money for long-term improvements. Instead, her desire is consumerist and immediate: she wants to buy things now. Her consumer desires are farcical, substanceless, impractical, and insatiable: she wants a Rolls Royce, even if the only one she can afford does not run. She wants only store-bought modern convenience food-disgusting boil-in-bag concoctions, TV dinners of stringy meat. She insists on a new, higher tech vacuum cleaner, and a stove that must be brown in color-even though they already have a vacuum and a stove that work. When Nikolai will not buy her what she wants-“No car! No jewel! No clothes!...No cosmetic! No undercloth-es!”-she gets another job to enable more consumption.³⁴ Nadia inspects Valentina’s bedroom, and finds a hoard of stuff she has bought from mail order catalogues: “there is a chaos of [...] hairbrushes, beauty appliances, toothbrushes, stockings, packets of biscuits, jewellery, photographs, sweet wrappers, knickknacks...”³⁵

With an identity driven by consumerism, Valentina resembles no one so much as the heroine of an American naturalist novel from the era known as the Gilded Age, at the turn of the twentieth century. Novels like Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* showed the working woman of the 1890s as a “deluded consumer, chasing after manufactured dreams of ideal happiness that she will never attain.”³⁶ Rita Felski argues that in the naturalist novel, women’s consumer desire is structured as a compulsion, which means that it is insatiable and endless: “there is no objective need that is being addressed; rather the commodity comes to stand in for an imaginary fulfillment that remains necessarily unattainable.”³⁷ All she wants is stuff, more stuff, and there is no end to her desire-thus her sense of disappointment. “I always working hard. Too much hard,” Valentina complains-and still she does not have the things she wants, and is embarrassed when her family comes to visit.³⁸ This is Valentina’s vision of life in the west, what the aphorism of “more opportunity” becomes in this sort of dystopian vision: the opportunity to do ever more shopping, without the possibility that it will ever be enough. The cycle can only be completed by her exit from the UK and the possibility of consumer paradise in the west, by her return to Ukraine with a husband who fixes her car rather than buying a new one.

It is her husband, Dubov, who most explicitly turns Valentina into an allegory

for Ukraine at the moment of independence, because of her economic desire. He argues that at that moment, in the early days of the 2000s, Ukraine was subject to a “Wild West” form of capitalism that does indeed seem to come from the age of the naturalist novel: “the rapacious type of early American capitalism,” the “gangster stage” of a market economy that we might associate with the Gilded Age.³⁹ This, Dubov tells us, is an economic system with no restraining social safeguards, no developed civil society to temper the rapacious desire to leach the profit out of everything in society: no longer are “predatory instincts...held in check by the fabric of civil society, [and] once that fabric is torn asunder, why, they flourish like weeds in a newly ploughed field.”⁴⁰ This, Dubov tells us, is a specifically American form of capitalism that lets the profit motive run wild, and he opposes it to a Scandinavian version of capitalism that preserves social safeguards through the welfare state.

Valentina’s path from Ukraine to the UK through marriage for economic reasons exemplifies what this stage of capitalism has done to Ukraine, according to Dubov’s theory

Once we were a nation of farmers and engineers. We were not rich, but we had enough...Now racketeers prey on our industries, while our educated youth fly westwards in search of wealth. Our national export is the sale of our beautiful young women into prostitution to feed the monstrous appetites of the western male.⁴¹

Valentina is the exemplary subject of this form of capitalism, which uproots families and disrupts social bonds. On one hand, she is trying hard to be a gangster capitalist herself, having rejected a loving family in Ukraine to bilk an elderly man out of his pension: “Yes, she is greedy, predatory, outrageous,” Nadia observes, comparing her to the robber barons Dubov describes.⁴² On the other hand, she is, as Nadia points out, “a victim too. A source of cheap labor” on the global market, someone who will both work in a nursing home and perform elder care for Nikolai, while being naïve enough not to realize that he does not have enough money to make it worth her while.⁴³

This “gangster capitalism” also flattens society in another way as well: it evacuates historical complexity, reducing the nation to its economy. That is what has happened to Valentina’s Ukraine, in the novel’s vision. It is a presentist nation, without historical grounding, something the novel calls “new Russia” and invokes whenever it needs to reference Valentina’s materialism: a place where the slate of history has been wiped clean, as with Valentina, who has no backstory.⁴⁴ Nikolai’s Ukraine is a different nation. It is shaped by its twentieth-century history—the Holodomor, the Holocaust, World War Two, and Soviet oppression—and continually reshaped as its history is told and retold and understood by new generations. As a native of this Ukraine, Nikolai has complex motives that the novel spends much time unpacking—how did he behave during the war? How did he cope afterwards?

We do not learn any parallel information about Valentina, who does not need to have a historical reckoning with her family's past, so far does she live in a flat present of consumer desire.

The Ukrainian woman economic migrant becomes a figure for gangster capitalism most explicitly in one of Lewycka's later novels, *Various Pets Alive and Dead*, which pushes the logic of *Short History's* portrayal of Valentina to its end. Set just at the moment of the 2008 financial collapse, the novel tells the story of a young man, Serge, who grew up on a commune with his radical leftist family. He is supposed to be doing a mathematics PhD at Cambridge, but has abandoned his dissertation to pursue a career as a quantitative analyst at an investment bank in London. Serge has not yet revealed his new path to his family, still living as they do in what the novel describes as a "preconsumerist" lifestyle. *Various Pets* is an explicitly political novel that stages a contest between the aggressive financial capitalism of London and the hippie socialism of Serge's past.

For the purposes of this article's argument, the most interesting part of the novel is a secondary character: Maroushka is a young, beautiful Ukrainian woman who also works as a quantitative analyst at Serge's bank, where she is more competent and less ethical than he is. Serge, of course, falls for her. He is not entirely comfortable in his role in risk analysis, in which he makes profit off of the collapse of sectors of the economy, but Maroushka excels. His attraction to her mirrors his attraction to the world of finance: he wants it, but feels kind of horrified about wanting it. With Maroushka, the novel expresses his sense of guilt by repeatedly describing her as both attractive and disgusting: her perfume "borders on the repellent but is in fact incredibly arousing"; a loose bra strap "looks grubby, but strangely sexy."⁴⁵ In the most provocative moment of the novel, Serge thinks to himself that he wants to save her from an "empty life of statistical prostitution."⁴⁶ Figuratively, the novel here positions Maroushka on the continuum of the kind of women's work that Eastern European immigrants are asked to do.

Maroushka becomes a revealing new version of Valentina from *Short History*, despite the massive difference between their level of education and choice of profession. Valentina is independent and aggressive and laser-focused on the goal of making money. All of that repeats in the figure of Maroushka, who manipulates Serge to better position herself and who equates wealth with intelligence: "In my country, Sergei, rich is everything. Now we have rich elite. These persons are more intelligent. I am also am intelligent. So why not me?"⁴⁷ And in both cases, these women are driven by a compulsive desire for money that has no end: Valentina will never be happy with what she has, and the novel compares finance capital's vision of growth to the uncontrollable reproduction of rabbits. Neither will ever be satisfied, but will always need more.

Like Valentina, Maroushka is willing to sacrifice personal relationships for money, as she pursues her "empty life." Serge had been making illegal private

trades, and Maroushka finds out. When she rejects him, at the end of the novel, she sells him out to their boss, who is willing to sponsor her permanent visa, if she uses her math skills to help him at his new hedge fund. More broadly as well, Maroushka makes money from uprooting social bonds. Their new hedge fund bets against the failure of the housing and mortgage markets: they plan to make money from uprooting people.⁴⁸ Serge is complicit as well, but he leaves this profession at novel's end, while Maroushka only moves ever higher up the ladder.

Maroushka, like Valentina, is also a native of "new Russia," that ahistorical, flattened version of Ukraine. She is a member of "this beautiful young high-flying free-floating no-baggage global elite, whose title is wealth, whose passport is brains, whose only nation is money."⁴⁹ She is not tied down to any nation, shaped by historical traumas or ethnic loyalties. Having no baggage also means, here, having no roots. She is empty, shallow, nothing but desire for money itself.

Short History had already linked the Ukrainian woman migrant to a kind of gangster capitalism, but *Various Pets* goes so far as to put this associative argument into fully allegorical terms: these Ukrainian female characters represent a gangster-stage of finance capitalism coming home to attack the UK. This becomes most explicit when Serge Googles Maroushka's home town, Zhytomyr. He feels a rush of familiarity when, using Google Earth, he sees the town's Lenin statute and recognizes it from the textbooks of his own leftist schooling. The novel draws a tenuous figurative link between the British welfare state capitalism of the period known as "postwar consensus" and the Soviet Union. It is this version of capitalism, the welfare state, that is under threat in the novel's diagnosis of the moment of the financial collapse of 2008. Serge's father, an economist and this novel's version of Dubov, theorizes the moment: "We have moved away from the post-war vision of a society based on shared prosperity, to a society based on grotesque accumulation of personal wealth on one hand, and increasing insecurity on the other."⁵⁰

Even more explicitly, Serge's unrepentant boss describes the 2008 collapse in these terms: "Think Russia. End of Communism. Unlimited opportunity."⁵¹ As he and his allies "firm up the Government's commitment to the role of the financial sector in the national economy," he foresees the full-scale routing of the public institutions that are the hallmark of the welfare state, as the government sells off its assets: "Schools. Universities. Prisons. Hospitals. Sheltered housing. Residential homes. Think of the business opportunities."⁵² This collapse is opportunity, if you are able to be one of the gangster capitalists. Maroushka is: her new hedge fund is designed to profit exactly from this kind of market collapse. In this sense, Maroushka is simply historically advanced, already evolved to be able to deal with this new reality. It turns out that she does not need to be saved by Serge. She becomes a kind of new oligarch, come to feast on the remains of the British economy.

Like Valentina, Maroushka is early-independence gangster capitalism,

capitalism without care or ethics, money that can only function to create more money. But while Valentina will only bring her economic compulsion into one family, Maroushka will use hers to help destroy the British welfare state for her own personal profit.⁵³

Valentina, in *Short History*, is threatening when she refuses to buy into the fiction of women's work. Maroushka does away with that fiction entirely, and through her Lewycka argues that this traffic in women's work increasingly defines the entire economy and all of social life: that care and family are simulacra, and there's nothing underneath any of it but self-interested actors seeking profit without producing anything. And this is, ultimately, where the figure of the Ukrainian female economic migrant goes in Lewycka's fiction: she embodies contemporary finance capitalism. She is anything but a victim; she is powerful, and smart, and advanced, and kind of evil—a sort of economic femme fatale. Lewycka's novels work through the ideological implications of the stereotype of the Ukrainian woman economic migrant as hypersexual and hypermaterialist. These novels show that this stereotype is tightly connected to anxieties not just about immigration, but about contemporary global capitalism in the wake of the financial collapse of 2008.

About the author

Heather Fielding is associate professor of English and director of the Honors Program at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, USA. The author of *Novel Theory and Technology in Modernist Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), she has published articles on topics ranging from digital pedagogy to modern and contemporary fiction in journals including *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in the Novel*, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, and *Computers and Composition*. In 2018-19, she was a Fulbright Scholar in Ukraine. She holds MA and PhD degrees from Brown University and a BA from Tulane University.

Endnotes

- 1 Bill Hamilton, review of *Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka, *Publisher's Weekly*, March 7, 2005.
- 2 Yana Leontiyeva makes an even bigger claim: "apart from the successful Ukrainian-origin British novelist Marina Lewycka, it is hard to name a single Ukrainian author who has articulated migration experience to international acclaim" ("Ukrainian Migration to Europe: Policies, Practices and Perspectives," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 3, no. 1 [June 2014], n.p.).
- 3 Andrey Kurkov, "Human Traffic," review of *Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka, *The Guardian*, March 19, 2005. Critics who are less interested in her portrayal of Ukrainians have tended, by contrast, to praise Lewycka as a "warm and humane writer" (Sarfaz Manzoor, review of *Various Pets Dead and Alive* by Marina Lewycka, *The Guardian*, March 1, 2012) whose works are defined by "kindness and inclusivity" (Lucy Atkins, review of *The Lubetkin Legacy* by Marina Lewycka, *The Guardian*, May 1, 2016).
- 4 Anca Parvulescu, *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 10 Marina Lewycka, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 254.
- 11 Parvulescu, *Traffic*, 12.
- 12 See Parvulescu, *Traffic*, 2. This rhetoric of Europe as family continues in the era of Brexit, as the title of a recent opinion piece in the *Guardian* shows: "Europe is a dysfunctional family, but divorce is not the answer" (Michael Morpurgo, April 4, 2019).
- 13 Lewycka, *Short History*, 144.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 See Parvulescu, *Traffic*, 7.
- 16 Lewycka, *Short History*, 48.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 140.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 275.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 202. For a fuller exploration of the narrative dynamics of sympathy in this novel,

- see Heather Fielding, "Assimilation After Empire: Marina Lewycka, Paul Gilroy, and the Ethnic Bildungsroman in Contemporary Britain," *Studies in the Novel* 43, no. 2 (July 2011), 200-17.
- 30 Marina Lewycka, *Strawberry Fields* (US edition of *Two Caravans*), (New York: Penguin, 2007), 20.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 142.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Lewycka, *Short History*, 233.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 121. A. Nejat Töngür and Yidiray Çevik similarly interpret Valentina's consumer desire as so insatiable that her disappointed, unfulfilled return to Ukraine is inevitable ("Migration to a Consumer Society: *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka," *Journal of International Social Research* 6, no. 28 [Fall 2013], 439-50).
- 36 Jennifer L. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Literary Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 191.
- 37 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 78.
- 38 Lewycka, *Short History*, 123.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 45 Marina Lewycka, *Various Pets Dead and Alive* (London: Penguin, 2012), 4, 344.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 260.
- 48 Lewycka's novel *We Are All Made of Glue* is particularly interested in real estate speculation as a site where the British welfare state is vulnerable. The novel chronicles the downfall of the welfare state through the story of a council estate that is bought by real estate developers, who want to tear it down to build high-priced apartments. The novel imagines the council estate, where different kinds of people lived together, as the site of a welfare-state utopia of "love, friendship and mutuality" (*We Are All Made of Glue* [London: Penguin, 2009], 223). The developers, by contrast, care only about money, and aim to profit on the destruction of these social bonds.
- 49 Lewycka, *Various Pets*, 61.
- 50 Lewycka, *Various Pets*, 83.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 336.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 Oliver Linden has argued that Lewycka's *Two Caravans* uses the figure of the Ukrainian woman to "pinpoint glaring emotional and social defects in twenty-first century capitalist society" in the UK ("'East is East and West is Best?': The Eastern European Migrant and the British Contact Zone in Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* and Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans*," *Anglia* 3 [2009], 472). Her other novels go much further: yes, these characters show up problems in the UK, but they also threaten Lewycka's nostalgic vision of what remains of the British welfare state.