

# Ukrainian Canadian B/Orders: Culinary Remembrances and Queer Bordercrossings in Marusya Bociurkiw's *Food Was Her Country*

by Astrid Fellner

*This paper discusses narratives by Ukrainian Canadian queer writer Marusya Bociurkiw, showing that culinary remembrances in her texts figure as powerful symbols of ethnicity, crossing various borders of nationality, ethnic belonging, and sexuality. Zooming in on her most recent work *Food Was Her Country: The Memoir of a Queer Daughter* (2018), I argue that Bociurkiw's ethnic culinary narratives can be read as queer border narratives, which engage the complex narratives of home, belonging, and crossing boundaries. Intervening in debates about displacement, diasporic identity, and national affiliation, Bociurkiw's culinary texts expose the logic of "culinary citizenship" (Mannur 2010: 20), allowing the narrator to position herself vis-à-vis her home countries via her affective encounters with food.*

**Keywords:** Food narratives, Ukrainian Canadian literature, transcultural identities, border crossings, bordertextures

*My parents were born in a country whose name means "border." The nationality of their passports and even the names of their birthplaces changed several times in one century, the border shrinking and expanding.*

Marusya Bociurkiw<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: Marusya Bociurkiw and Borders

While Canadian literature has always been multicultural and literary critics have embraced ethnic minority writers for some years, Ukrainian Canadian writing is still under-represented in Canadian literary studies. Canadian writers of Ukrainian descent have, however, produced a substantial body of literature written in English that makes a rich contribution to the diversity of Canadian literature. As Lindy Ledohowski has argued, Ukrainian Canadian writings in English experienced a shift in the representation of ethnicity over the years:

*While early Ukrainian-Canadian literature in English shaped and presented Ukrainianness within a broad, undifferentiated ethnic milieu, by the end of the 1970s, an idea of Ukrainianness in Canada as a distinct ethnic category with specific features and reference points began to become the norm.<sup>2</sup>*

In my paper, I will zoom in on recent writings, which, to a large extent, have begun to question previous traditional assumptions about the inevitability of ethnic assimilation by drawing attention to various kinds of hybrid, diasporic, and transnational identities. Especially in recent years, writers such as Marusya

Bociurkiw have critically examined political allegiances and patriarchal social structures, offering a critique of the heterosexism of their Ukrainian Canadian communities. As Lisa Grekul points out, “Ukrainian-Canadian writers [...] have made substantial and relevant contributions to discussions about assimilation, multiculturalism, and transculturalism; about the intersecting issues of ethnicity, ‘class,’ gender, and sexuality; about nationalism, transnationalism, and diaspora.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper discusses narratives by Ukrainian Canadian queer writer Marusya Bociurkiw, analyzing the multivalent meanings of food in her literary texts.<sup>4</sup> Food, in her texts, figures prominently, and as I want to show, Bociurkiw’s food memoirs analyze “the importance of viewing food as a discursive space able to critically interrogate the nostalgic and affective rendering of food in relationship to racial and ethnic identity.”<sup>5</sup> Culinary remembrances in her texts figure as powerful symbols of ethnicity, crossing various borders of nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality. Bociurkiw is an author, filmmaker and professor who has written six books, including the novel *The Children of Mary* (2006), and the award-winning *Comfort Food for Breakups: The Memoir of a Hungry Girl* (2007), which was also shortlisted for the prestigious Lambda and Kobzar awards. *Food Was Her Country: The Memoir of a Queer Daughter* is her latest book and was published in 2018. As a filmmaker, she has produced ten films, including her famous 2015 documentary *This is Gay Propaganda: LGBT Rights & the War in Ukraine*, a feature documentary about the Euromaidan revolution seen through the eyes of feminist and LGBT+ activists in Ukraine. Dr. Bociurkiw is associate professor of media theory at Ryerson University and Director of The Studio for Media Activism and Critical Thought.<sup>6</sup>

As an artist and critic, Bociurkiw situates herself “at the intersection of queer, feminist and race theory,” her artistic practice, as she states, always being “premised on the condition of being a diasporic subject, with all the possibilities and contradictions of living in a psychic borderland.”<sup>7</sup> In one of her earliest essays, “Bordercrossings: Skin/Voice/Identity,” Bociurkiw has stated: “my positioning of my various subject positions, and therefore of my identity in various artistic or feminist or ‘queer’ contexts is constantly renegotiated.”<sup>8</sup> Bociurkiw’s negotiations of her multiple subject positions involve many crossings of borders and queering of orders of Ukrainian Canadian diasporic norms. As Weronika Suchacka has stated, as her career develops, we see more and more categories that become defining for her oeuvre. Thus, apart from the already mentioned subject positions of a writer, film director, academic, and an activist, the role of a daughter, family member, diaspora member, queer community member, feminist, lover, food connoisseur, and traveller (to name but a few categories) become the subject matter of her literary and/or artistic creations.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the various intersectional forms of diasporic identities in her works, this article looks at Bociurkiw’s food narratives, zooming in on her most recent work *Food Was Her Country: The Memoir of a Queer Daughter* (2018).

As I want to show, this author's culinary narratives can be read as queer border narratives, which engage the complex narratives of family, home, belonging, and sexuality. Focusing on instances of queer culinary remembrances in Bociurkiw's *Food Was Her Country*, I want to show how this text intervenes in debates about displacement and diasporic identities. I argue that her most recent food narrative exposes the logic of culinary citizenship, allowing the narrator to seize identitarian positions via her affective encounters with food.<sup>10</sup> Before I look more closely at the different forms of culinary remembrances in Bociurkiw's text, I want to place this Ukrainian Canadian writer within the tradition of ethnic Canadian writings, on the one hand, and transcultural queer writings, on the other.

### Ukrainian Canadian Literature and Transcultural Identities

In *Becoming the Hyphen: The Evolution of English-Language Ukrainian-Canadian Literature*, Ledohowski has argued that

*Canadian writers of Ukrainian descent, writing in English, have transformed themselves and been transformed by critics from being ethnic "strangers" and "foreigners", similar to all other non-English speaking immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries*

to what Wah has referred to as "living in the hyphen"<sup>11</sup> of contemporary Ukrainian-Canadianness.<sup>12</sup> In her *Re-Placing Ethnicity: New Approaches to Ukrainian Canadian Literature*, Grekul, in turn, argues that "[h]yphenated identity [...] was-and is-not the only issue addressed by Ukrainian-Canadian writers."<sup>13</sup> In fact, Ukrainian Canadian writers, just like many other ethnic writers, have to negotiate multiple identities, and especially for female Ukrainian-Canadian writers the various intersections between ethnicity, class, sex/gender, and sexuality have become important issues in their writings. Consequently, Weronika Suchacka has studied the construction of identities in recent Ukrainian-Canadian literature from an intersectional perspective. Ethnicity, she argues, only constitutes one aspect of the multiplicity of identities in Ukrainian-Canadian literatures.<sup>14</sup> Writings by Ukrainian-Canadians contribute to a postmodern notion of identity, which is often conceived of in terms of a journey. The construction of identity, she argues

*appertains to ancestral experiences, for example, ancestors' migration journey, but also the immigrants' lives prior to and after their exodus. These ancestral experiences clearly remain a formative influence for the immigrants' offspring generation later, but at the same time, these are confronted with the offspring's personal experiences in Canada where, due this pluralization of reference, the multiplication and diversification of their identities occur.*<sup>15</sup>

Concomitantly, as part of Canadian literature, Ukrainian Canadian writings also have to be seen within the framework of the official discourse of multiculturalism

in Canada. Many critics have argued that the official policy of multiculturalism, which was introduced in Canada in 1971, has influenced the writing and publishing of Canadian literature.<sup>16</sup> According to Grekul, before 1971 few English-language Ukrainian Canadian authors wrote about their experiences as ethnic writers because they felt they had to assimilate to Anglo-Canadian society. As she explains the change:

*But as ideologies and practices of assimilation gave way to general public awareness and increasing acceptance of a “mosaic” model of Canadian nationhood-as Anglo-Canadian society began to recognize the value of ethnic minority groups within the new multicultural model of nationhood-second- and third-generation Ukrainian Canadians began to take pride in Ukrainian folk music, dance, and art. [...] Ukrainian Canadian writers benefited both directly and indirectly from Anglo-Canadian society’s openness to cultural diversity.<sup>17</sup>*

In her 1991 essay entitled *From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope*, the Ukrainian Canadian author and critic Janice Kulyk Keefer famously propagated the paradigm of transculturalism. As Grekul describes Kulyk Keefer’s ideas:

*Adopting a transcultural vision of Canadian society would, she felt, better describe the unique predicament faced by members of ethnic minority groups in Canada-especially those individuals caught between ethnic and national identity, belonging to both and neither-and would ultimately help them come to terms with their divided sense of self.<sup>18</sup>*

What Canada needs, she says, is a “change in Canadian iconography” from the mosaic, or multicultural, model of nationhood to a kaleidoscope, or transcultural, model.<sup>19</sup> Transculturalism, as Kulyk Keefer has it, allows for communication between various cultures, privileging “interconnection, mobility, and transformation.”<sup>20</sup> As a theoretical perspective, it attempts to move beyond binary oppositions, drawing the attention to the inherent hybridization of cultures. Quebec critic Afef Benessaïeh also prefers the term transculturality over multiculturalism or interculturality as “it is a separate concept that designates specific processes inadequately captured by these other terms.”<sup>21</sup> As she puts it, transculturality captures more adequately the sense of movement and the complex mixedness of cultures in close contact, and better describes the *embodied situation of cultural plurality* lived by many individuals and communities of mixed heritage and/or experience, whose multifaceted situation is more visible under globalization.<sup>22</sup>

As I want to suggest, in focusing on various bordercrossings, Bociurkiw’s works can be fruitfully studied as within a transcultural paradigm.<sup>23</sup> Bociurkiw’s texts open up transcultural spaces, which, in turn, can be described as borderlands. The metaphor of borderlands is actually quite useful in describing Ukrainian American literature, and, as we shall see, particularly so when it comes to Bociurkiw’s works. As Bociurkiw describes her in-between status in her most recent memoir *Food Was Her Country*:

*We were born in Canada, which was solid and bright, but there was this other place, the Ukraine, five thousand miles away, where old babas lined up for bread, and it was sad, and we were supposed to love it. [...] Whether through food or writing or dreams, I have been traversing those five thousand miles, not quite here and never really there, ever since. The journey is illusory, a play with hyphens and hybridity, with desire and disavowal; Rushdie's imaginary homelands: part fiction, part documentary, all story.*<sup>24</sup>

Living in the borderlands, or as Kulyk Keefer puts it, being “permanently lodged in the limbo between home lost and a home, or a substitute for home, found,”<sup>25</sup> Ukrainian diasporic literature can be treated as border literature. Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzananas have defined border literature as “a transgressive discourse whose aim is to render possible, within the fixed cultural, literary or linguistic bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted.”<sup>26</sup> Like many other Ukrainian-Canadian writings, Bociurkiw’s writings are situated at the crossroads, at the meeting points between different cultures and traditions and where different identities intersect, ethnic but also gender and queer identities. As Suchacka states: “Through the exploration of one’s personal and ancestral experiences of displacement, and dilemmas it has brought about, the constant exploration of identity/identities is enabled.”<sup>27</sup> It is this constant re-negotiation of the multiplicities of identities that is characteristic of Ukrainian Canadian writers in general, who, as Suchacka concludes, find themselves on the border, or, to follow Bociurkiw’s phrase, “beyond the border.”<sup>28</sup>

### Queer Bordercrossings

“I have been travelling through Ukraine for two weeks” writes Bociurkiw in her memoir *Comfort Food for Breakups* and she adds:

*People stop me and ask me: Why are you here? [...] We only spend two hours with Olena, and it's odd how the time slows down, becomes almost still. It is warm in Olena's tiny house, but I am chilled by the uncanny sense of returning to the past, the dead and the living all present in this moment. We eat eggs, I pass around photographs. We talk about my grandmother, Olena's sister, who died two years earlier. Olena asks timid, halting questions about her sibling, who left for a better life, za hranetsiu, beyond the border, so very long ago. Was she ill? Was she happy?*<sup>29</sup>

Bociurkiw’s phrase “*za hranetsiu, beyond the border*”-a translation that reflects her double consciousness-hinges on what Montréal critic and translator Sherry Simon has referred to as “the comma of translation”<sup>30</sup> or what Anglophone Montréal writer Gail Scott has termed “comma of difference.”<sup>31</sup>

It is a stylistic device that carries deep cultural meaning. Marking the point of juncture, “drawing differences together and separating them at the same time,”<sup>32</sup> this comma signals that Bociurkiw situates herself at the crossroads of cultures,

in the space of difference “where traffic goes two ways.”<sup>33</sup> The comma in this quote appears at the precise moment of translation-linguistic translation-but also translation between the old and the new, the Grandmother and herself, the past and the present, drawing self-reflexively the attention to the process of cultural translation. “*Za hranetsiu*,” as Suchacka explains, “placed along with the English translation, ‘beyond the border’” refers to the “continuous process of Ukrainian-Canadian border crossing.”<sup>34</sup> The combination of these two phrases calls attention to the continuities as well as the discontinuities between her “home” culture and that of the “other”.

Bociurkiw’s acts of bordercrossing can be said to operate in conversation with transcultural feminist writers. In particular, her works, as I want to suggest, build on a queer transcultural feminist politics, which defies national borders and shows that living “beyond the border” calls for a constant process of cultural translation of various identities. Evoking June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, and Gloria Anzaldúa in her article “Bordercrossings: Skin/Voice/Identity,” Bociurkiw builds on a queer sexual politics that pays attention to the multiple ways in which the diverse experiences of living on the different borders of identity-national, cultural, ethnic/racial and sexual-intersect. Crucially, Bociurkiw’s queer translational poetics and politics involve debates about home, displacement, and diasporic identity, which are rendered in the forms of culinary remembrances. Her texts open up spaces of cultural exchange that perform acts of culinary citizenship, producing the image of a far-away culinary rich Ukraine in order to reflect back to Canada a fractured and critical image of the many diversities of Canada.

Clearly, the look back eastwards (and often the journey eastwards) serves as an important theme in Ukrainian-Canadian literature. As Suchacka states, “If not the physical return to Ukraine, then it is the emotional, spiritual and/or literary journey back ‘home,’ back to one’s origins, that is still yearned for by the generation of Ukrainian-Canadian writers.”<sup>35</sup> The gaze itself is “Janus-faced;”<sup>36</sup> it is “directed two-ways, towards both ‘homes’: Canada and Ukraine.”<sup>37</sup> Suchacka quotes Marusya Bociurkiw, who, she believes has adopted this view when she writes:

So much of where I come from is located in the unspoken history of my parents’ immigration, the why and how of taking that journey across the ocean and then across the country to the Prairies, so traumatic in its import that my Baba, still, 60 years later, tells and retells her ocean crossing story in incredible detail, to anyone who’ll listen. All of this has never felt more important to me or to my work than it does right now.<sup>38</sup>

For Bociurkiw bordering processes, the re- and de-bordering of states, play an important role in her works, serving as the framework within which other acts of bordercrossings can take place. As she explains in “Bordercrossings”:

*Both my parents were born in Ukraine, a country with some ten other countries*

*or territories touching its own perimeters, and whose name, literally, translates into English as "border." I have never been to Ukraine, but I learnt the most intimate details of its geography-the names of its rivers, their tributaries, the different regions and their particular characteristics, at the dreaded weekly Ukrainian School. Though I remember none of these names now, I do remember having to memorize and then draw, for an exam, some seven or eight different versions of the border of Ukraine, which changed as quickly as some other country could invade and say "gotcha."<sup>39</sup>*

These borders are also important in symbolic ways. Bociurkiw's memoirs perform various forms of bordercrossings, where the crossings of borders also refers to "the negotiation and pushing of limits and the consequent exploration of a risky territory defined at least as much by history as by memory."<sup>40</sup> As the writer herself admits, "[t]he crossing of borders from the realm of sexual identity to the realm of cultural identity, and of finding a language that works for both, is, I have to say, the biggest challenge I have faced in my work thus far."<sup>41</sup>

### **The Language of Food: Queer Culinary Remembrances**

The language that seems to work for Bociurkiw in order to give voice to these multiple selves is the language of food. This language of culinary remembrances acts as a form of cultural translation that allows her to cross the borders of personal and cultural identities, establishing new orders that break with heteronormative conventions, allowing her to forge new kinship relations. "Home," she states in *Food Was Her Country*, "was all the spoken and unspoken messages of trauma. All through those TV-lit suburban nights, I dreamed of escape."<sup>42</sup> *Food Was Her Country* is a memoir, rendering the story of Marusya and her mother and their tumultuous culinary relationship. Marusya's Ukraine-born mother, who is a great cook, faces the challenge of having to learn how to speak and eat again after she has been diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. The book explores the daughter's journey of grieving after her mother's death and her gradual process of reconciliation with her. In terms of genre, the book also situates itself beyond borders, mixing the genre of the memoir with the female tradition of writing cookbooks. The protagonist's memories are structured by her ambivalent relationship to her family, which is discursively rendered through nostalgic meditations on food. At one moment, for instance, she recalls her difficult times as an adolescent growing up in Ottawa and living through a year of eating desserts. The depiction of this episode of eating fudge ribbon pies is accompanied by the inclusion of the recipe of this dish at the end of the book. This recipe is only one of the many recipes included in the book, but this dessert is especially important as it also serves as a metaphor for the narrator's coming out process: "I had not yet resolved the uncertainties of my libido [...] Were the assertive flavours and temperatures of Fudge Ribbon Pie metaphor for my unacknowledged desires?"<sup>43</sup> In her recollection, her food preference is therefore



directly linked to her sexuality, which also introduces comic relief into her story when she, for examples, states: “After my year of extreme desserts ended, I entered into a decade-long dalliance with heterosexuality.

I went on a handful of dates with theatrical boys; boys who read Nietzsche; boys who sang in the church choir. One hundred percent of them turned out to be gay.”<sup>44</sup>

Her craving for desserts as a teenager is, however, also linked to her ethnicity, as her preference for sweet things and the “triumphant inventions of the western world”<sup>45</sup> was also a reaction to the alienated relationship she had with her “Mama’s homemade dill pickles at every meal, the cold breakfasts, the whitish meals of pirogies and sour cream.”<sup>46</sup> Still, the narrator feels a connection with her mother when she states: “Perhaps only my mother understood who I really was: a girl waiting and waiting, with regret and excitement-for subways and rented rooms, for cities and cabarets-for her life to begin.”<sup>47</sup> Symbolizing an imaginary journey home to her family, particularly the process of reconciliation with her mother, the narrator’s culinary memories help her piece together the different fragments of her life so that she can reconfigure the notion of family to encompass alternative forms of belonging.

By recreating food memories, her story entangles the languages of food, nostalgia and queer desire. It complicates traditional notions of imagining food as authentic manifestation of cultural essence, offering a form of critical nostalgia that flouts conventional narratives of authenticity, queering heteronormative expectations of Ukrainian-Canadian families. The subtitle of *Food Was Her Country*, which reads *The Memoirs of a Queer Daughter* draws attention to the fact that the book disrupts the b/orders of Ukrainian Canadian families, drawing the attention to other forms of family and kinship. In fact, her story focuses on queer desire, refusing to subsume sexuality within the overarching narratives of national identity and racial belonging. In highlighting forms of what David Eng has called “queer diasporas,” Bociurkiw’s account of the multiple intersections of desire, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and kinship tells a different story, which “highlights the breaks, discontinuities, and differences.”<sup>48</sup> As the narrator in *Food Was Her Country*, for instance, explains, “I kept a lot of things from my blood relatives, as most queers do. It wasn’t secretiveness, exactly. It was a problem of translation.”<sup>49</sup> Citing one of her articles, she writes: For many lesbians [...] there is no possibility of return; the rhetoric of community as family displaces blood ties. The bar, the community centre, the political movement, the circle of friends become a copy of a copy of “home.”<sup>50</sup>

Queer diaspora, as Eng has it, “emerges as a concept providing new methods of [...] reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments.”<sup>51</sup> Organizing her kinship feelings around the new structures that she has built for herself, notably her



founding of a feminist video collective,<sup>52</sup> Bociurkiw can finally make sense, living a queer life. The way I see it, affective encounters with food help the narrator in her process of reconnecting with her family.

In both of her food memoirs, *Comfort Food for Breakups* and *Food Was Her Country*, culinary remembrances figure as powerful symbols of ethnicity, cultural identity, and sexuality, becoming significant sites where identity construction, community building and social critique can take place. In the different stories that make up *Comfort Food for Breakups*, Bociurkiw writes:

*My recipe journals are full of histories long and short: a grilled vegetable couscous with harissa sauce made the night my lover Kryz first entered my kitchen; a marinara sauce that healed the wounds of a friend's breakup; my mother's perogy recipe, scrawled on the back of a brown paper Starbucks bag, [...].*<sup>53</sup>

Descriptions of culinary practices set in motion thoughts on belonging and national identity, opening debates on what Anita Mannur has termed “culinary citizenship,” a form of affective national identity “which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food.”<sup>54</sup>

In the following section, I will look at the concept of culinary citizenship more closely, situating Bociurkiw's food narrative within the tradition of ethnic culinary diasporic writings and showing how her memoirs offer a model of queer culinary citizenship. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a large number of culinary-themed ethnic fictional writings in North America, in particular Asian American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino/a texts.<sup>55</sup> With the growing popularity of multiculturalism in the North American literary marketplace ethnic culinary narratives have burst onto the literary scene in order to “spice up” the market. Clearly, the interest in culinary narratives is also linked to the popularity of ethnic food in restaurants.<sup>56</sup> As bell hooks has argued, “within commodity culture ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”<sup>57</sup> Döring et. al. summarize the popularity of ethnic food narratives in the following way: “The discourse of multicultural meals and consumerist variety becomes a means of erasing difference: the other is consumed.”<sup>58</sup>

“With a readership hungry to consume delectable representations of otherness, ethnic culinary narratives also contain pre-packaged marketable cultural otherness.”<sup>59</sup>

As Mannur has put it,

*within the framework of popular multiculturalism, ethnic-themed novels became the flavor du jour, satiating America's appetite to consume difference often in what we might conceive of as 'sugar-coated' realism wherein a culinary idiom deliberately and strategically produces narratives of otherness.*<sup>60</sup>

Ethnic culinary narratives may contribute to the commodification of ethnicity

and “the packaging of ethnicity within a palpably ‘exotic’ framework,” but they nevertheless fulfill important cultural work in North American literature. Food tropes in ethnic writings serve as metaphors that construct and reflect relationships to cultural identity, addressing issues of belonging, authenticity, and nostalgia. Food is a visible sign of ethnicity which figures prominently in all immigrant and diasporic literatures, serving as an important instrument in the construction of a “home away from home.”<sup>61</sup> Bociurkiw’s narratives expose the logic of culinary citizenship, which already becomes clear in the title of the book *Food Was Her Country*, which establishes a discursive link between the categories of food and nation. Crucially, her culinary narratives engage the complex narratives of home and belonging, offering “meta-critiques of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one’s relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which unflinchingly yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices.”<sup>62</sup>

As we can see in Bociurkiw’s texts, culinary citizenship is intimately tied to sexual identity, and culinary tropes also function as powerful signifiers of sexuality. Depictions of affective encounters with food which are intertwined with remembrances of national origin, family, and sexuality function not only as important markers of the construction of identity but also serve as a powerful form of criticism to both heteronormative investments of diaspora (for instance genealogical filiation), and nationalist stakes of queer liberal formations, such as marriage and citizenship. To be sure, discourses on family, intimacy, and the nation have long been intertwined, and many scholars have pointed to the patriarchal and nationalistic baggage the concept of “family” carries.<sup>63</sup>

By recreating food memories Bociurkiw’s *Food Was Her Country*, just like her previous *Comfort Food for Breakups*, however, entangles the languages of food with nation, nostalgia and desire, offering a series of border crossings that queer not only national borders but also social orders and normative understandings of Ukrainian Canadianness. “For a while,” the narrator says, “I lived as though I did not have a family. There was no middle ground in those days: a single diasporic narrative on the one hand, a queer undoing of that story on the other.”<sup>64</sup> Recollecting moves from Halifax to Vancouver and reflecting on the many locations she and her family lived in, “Bociurkiw also enchants with a host of life experiences that range from dates (many, often bad) to making art (her life’s eureka).”<sup>65</sup>

For a long time, Bociurkiw thought that she “could see no possibility of growth within the sheltering yet confining forest of family”<sup>66</sup> but, as her memoirs show, she has gradually managed to re-evaluate her life and re-connect with her family through the language of food. After her mother has passed away, she struggles to find a way to deal with loss. Piecing the fragmented stories of her life together in her narratives allows her to reconnect imaginatively with her family.

As she says,

*I have found that the only way to survive loss is to integrate it into every part of your life. To, in a sense, refuse loss. To maintain a place for the dead among the living, as Ukrainians with their graveyard visits, their place settings for the dead, and their gossip of death, do. To breathe it in, as the Buddhists would say. And thus, to avoid melancholia. Perhaps, even, to find gratitude.<sup>67</sup>*

It is through culinary remembrance that Bociurkiw's tries to come to terms with the loss of her mother. The very last sentences of the book read: "The food is voluble, expressive in every way. It says: love-steady, serviceable, healthy love-is ordinary and quite splendid. It says: your mother is with you and always will be."<sup>68</sup> Conspicuously, Bociurkiw offers a critical and queer version of a nostalgic project of recovering the past. Her food memoir clearly complicates traditional heteronormative notions of imagining food as manifestation of cultural essence, offering a form of critical nostalgia that flouts conventional narratives of authenticity. By engaging and queering the concept of culinary citizenship, Bociurkiw's memoirs constitute a rich repository of texts that include intersectional voices that trouble Ukrainian Canadian b/orders, giving voice to marginalized diasporic identities. *Food Was Her Country* draws the attention to the notion of cultural citizenship which problematizes narratives of belonging, unyoking it from essentialisms. "Like my mother and my grandmother," the narrator says at the end of the book, "they understand food to be the only country that is truly theirs."<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

Enoch Padolsky has argued that

*Food has long been regarded as a useful and important ethnic marker, particularly in terms of identity issues. From an ethnic perspective, the assumption has been that your identity can somehow be connected to, or even induced from, the foods that have significance for you and your group, foods that reflect your ethnic language, culture, history, traditions, religion, and so on. If you are Ukrainian, you eat cabbage rolls; if you are Jewish, you eat matzo ball soup; if you are Chinese, you eat har gow, and so on. In other words, you are what you eat.<sup>70</sup>*

Bociurkiw's food memoirs complicate this traditional view. They engage in critical discussions about the imbricated layers of food, nostalgia, and national identity, and the various forms of bordercrossings performed in the diaspora, establishing food as a language for negotiating cultural belonging. The affective value attached to food is, however, not simply a nostalgic gesture to remember the past. "As a reflexive form of nostalgia, culinary nostalgia has the function of engaging the politics of identity."<sup>71</sup> Bociurkiw's memoirs affectively position her as an ethnic subject critical of nostalgic longing for home.

They complicate a simple logic of culinary identifications within diasporic

memories, using culinary remembrances to structure the narrators' ambivalent relationship to ethnicity.

Food, as I have argued, also “transmits affect, constituting a powerful discursive space in which the affective relationship of the protagonists to food can be critically interrogated.”<sup>72</sup> As an affective relation, food, as is shown in Bociurkiw's works, connects to cultural belonging; at the same time it also allows her to reconfigure kinship to encompass alternative, queer forms of belonging. Instead of writing stories in which she attempts to recuperate her past and in which she valorizes dominant notions of cultural belonging, she focuses on queer diasporic identities. Unyoking family and kinship from oppressing models of patriarchy, heteronormativity and capitalism, Bociurkiw crafts a model of kinship and cultural belonging that allows her to accept her many bordercrossings and to re-connect with her family. In her narratives she performs queer culinary citizenship, which allows her to reconnect imaginatively with Ukraine.

### About the author

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## Endnotes

- 1 Social Justice Media. n. d. "Marusya Bociurkiw." Biography, Accessed September 7, 2019. <https://marusyab.wixsite.com/marusya-bociurkiw/bio>.
- 2 Lisa Grekul, *Leaving Shadows Literature in English by Canada's Ukrainians* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2005) 109.
- 3 Ibid., 202.
- 4 I would like to thank Weronika Suchacka, who during the annual conference of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries (GKS) in Grainau in February 2019 drew my attention to the works of Marusya Bociurkiw.
- 5 Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010) 12.
- 6 For further details on her biography and on her works, consult her website at: <https://marusyab.wixsite.com/marusya-bociurkiw>.
- 7 (Social Justice Media. n. d.)
- 8 Marusya Bociurkiw, "Bordercrossings: Skin/Voice/Identity." *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 14, no. 1 (1993): 8.
- 9 Weronika Suchacka, "'The [C]rossing of [B]orders' and Intersections: Presenting and Practicing Intersectionality in Marusya Bociurkiw's Works." *TransCanadiana* 10, (2018): 71
- 10 Cf Mannur, (2010), 29.
- 11 Fred Wah, *Diamond Grill* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1996), 53.
- 12 Lindy Ledohowski, "Becoming the Hyphen: The Evolution of English-Language Ukrainian-Canadian Literature." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 39, no. 1–2 (2007): 108.
- 13 Lisa Grekul, "Re-Placing Ethnicity: New Approaches to Ukrainian Canadian Literature," in *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2004), 372.
- 14 Cf Weronika Suchacka, "Za Hranetsiu" – "Beyond the Border": *From Constructions of Identities in Ukrainian-Canadian Literature* (Augsburg: Wißner-Verlag, 2019) 14.
- 15 Ibid., 398–99.
- 16 Cf Mary K. Kirtz, "Old World Traditions, New World Inventions: Bilingualism, Multiculturalism, and the Transformation of Ethnicity," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 28, no. 1 (1996): 8.
- 17 Grekul, "Re-Placing Ethnicity," 50.
- 18 Grekul, *Leaving Shadows*, 112.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Janice Kulyk Keefer, "From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope: Out of the Multicultural Past to Comes a Vision of a Transcultural Future," *Books in Canada* 20, no. 6 (1991): 16.
- 21 Afef Benessaïeh, "Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality," in *Transcultural Americas/Amériques Transculturelles*, ed. Afef Benessaïeh (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2010)12. German critic Wolfgang Welsch also favors the term transculturality because the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality are often bound to traditional notions of homogenous cultures. Cf Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today," in *The Contemporary Study of Culture*. Vienna: Turia + Kant, 1999. 220–221.
- 22 Afef Benessaïeh, "Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality." 16. Emphasis in the original.
- 23 According to Sissy Helff, border crossings are an important characteristic of transcultural texts. As she explains:

“I will speak of a ‘transcultural novel’ if one of the following aspects applies: first, if the narrator and/or the narrative challenge(s) the collective identity of a particular community; second, if experiences of border crossings and transnational identities characterize the narrators’ lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*); and third, if traditional notions of ‘home’ are disputed” (83).

- 24 *Food Was Her Country: The Memoir of a Queer Daughter* (Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin P, 2018). 17–18.
- 25 Janice Kulyk Keefer, “Home Comings/Border Crossings: Travels Through Imagined and Actual Worlds,” in *Dangerous Crossing: Papers on Transgression in Literature and Culture*, eds. Monica Loeb and Gerald Porter (Uppsala: Swedish Science P, 1999), 15–30.
- 26 Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzanás, *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 13.
- 27 Suchacka, “*Za Hranetsiu*,” 136.
- 28 *Comfort Food*, 47.
- 29 *Comfort Food*, 46–47.
- 30 Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal. Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2006) 131.
- 31 Gail Scott, *My Paris* (Urbana/Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 91.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Suchacka, “*Za Hranetsiu*,” 15.
- 35 Suchacka, “*Za Hranetsiu*,” 127.
- 36 Janice Kulyk Keefer, “Writing, Reading, Teaching Transcultural in Canada,” in *Multiculturalism in North America and Europe: Social Practices, Literary Visions*, ed. Hans Braun et al. (Trier: WVT, 1995), 182.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Bociurkiw, “Bordercrossings,” 6.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 40 Kulyk Keefer, “Home Comings,” 19.
- 41 Bociurkiw, “Bordercrossings,” 6–7.
- 42 *Food Was Her Country*, 35.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 21.ä
- 47 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 48 David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke, 2010), 14.
- 49 *Food Was Her Country*, 49.
- 50 *Food Was Her Country*, 49–50.
- 51 Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 303.
- 52 Cf *Food Was Her Country*, 49.
- 53 *Comfort Food*, 16–17.

- 54 Ibid., 13.
- 55 See, for instance the South Asian novels *Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003) by Shoba Narayan or *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) by Amulya Malladi. There is also Monique Truong's *Book of Salt* (2004) in Vietnamese American literature or Arab American Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003). African American writers Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Audre Lorde have also employed food tropes and images of food consumption as ethnic signifiers. Jamaica Kincaid and Dionne Brand are two important writers from the Caribbean whose works are full of culinary scenes. And in U.S. Latino/a literature Laura Esquivel's *Como Agua Para Chocolate/Like Water for Chocolate* (1989/1992) is probably the best-known culinary narrative. See my article "The Flavors of Multi-Ethnic North American Literatures: Language, Ethnicity and Culinary Nostalgia" for more details.
- 56 Cf. Astrid M. Fellner, "The Flavors of Multi-Ethnic North American Literatures: Language, Ethnicity and Culinary Nostalgia," in *Culinary Linguistics: The Chef's Special*, ed. Maximiliane Frobenius, Cornelia Gerhardt and Susanne Ley (Festschrift für Neal Norrick. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013), 244.
- 57 bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Eating Culture*, ed. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany: State U of New York P. 1998), 181.
- 58 Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen, "Introduction: Writing/Eating Culture," in *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*, eds. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide and Susanne Mühleisen (Heidelberg: Winter. 2003), 7.
- 59 Fellner, "Flavors," 245.
- 60 Mannur, *Culinary Fictions*, 83.
- 61 Susanne Reichl, "'Like a Beacon Against the Cold': Food and the Construction of Ethnic Identities in Black British Novels," in *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*, ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003), 178.
- 62 Anita Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora," *MELUS* 32, no. 4 (2007): 29.
- 63 In "It's All In the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation," Patricia Hill Collins explains how nationalism, race, and gender, linked through the concept of the family, mutually construct one another.
- 64 *Food Was Her Country*, 49.
- 65 Brett Josef Grubisic, "Marusya Bociurkiw Produces a Comic Treat with Memoir Food Was Her Country," *Thestar.com*, accessed September 13, 2019, [www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/reviews/2018/09/28/guilt-discontentment-and-fudge-ribbon-pie.html](http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/reviews/2018/09/28/guilt-discontentment-and-fudge-ribbon-pie.html).
- 66 *Food Was Her Country*, 50.
- 67 Ibid., 138.
- 68 Ibid., 139.
- 69 Ibid., 138.
- 70 Enoch Padolsky, "You Are Where You Eat: Ethnicity, Food and Cross-Cultural Spaces," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 37, no.2 (2005): n.p, accessed September 13, 2019, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.bnl.lu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=19471233&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- 71 Fellner, "Flavors," 257.
- 72 Ibid.