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Growing Up as a Migrant Identity and Belonging in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Honey and Ashes*

With the global conflicts that contribute to the movement of people of all ages, scholarly interest in migration and identity formation among children, as well as in cultural production that focuses on their representations, continues to grow. For instance, writing about the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, Daria Semenova notes that after 2022 migration has become a major topic in the Ukrainian publishing market (Semenova 2024: 110). Such publishing efforts – in Ukraine and other countries – aim to reflect “[migration’s] complexity and contribute to questioning and renegotiating [its] traditional notions” (Jendrzey et al. 2024: 13). For young people, migration changes almost every aspect of their lives, from a new home and school to new relationships, language, and culture. Moreover, it occurs during the most formative years, shaping their developing sense of identity. In the Canadian literary landscape, this is evident in various children’s and young adult books, for instance, Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch’s *Stolen Child* (2010) and Gabriele Goldstone’s *Waltraut* (2024), in which the protagonists try to lead a “normal” school life while at the same time struggling to ‘fit in’ in the new environment as immigrant girls in Canada. In relation to Ukrainian children’s literature, similar stories: “help those displaced make sense of their experiences and provide models for empathetic communication to their compatriots from the host regions” (Semenova 2024: 110). Therefore, such works carry significant educational value, as they offer representation and might help migrant children ‘recognise themselves’ in literary narratives, while introducing non-migrants to their experiences.

Using the example of Janice Kulyk Keefer’s *Honey and Ashes. Story of a Family* (1998), a memoir that reconstructs the childhood and youth of first-generation migrants from a second-generation perspective, this article will demonstrate that valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of migrant children can also be

drawn from life writing. Although not always focused primarily on childhood, such texts provide a retrospective vantage point on formative experiences and reveal how identity develops over time and across various life stages. Life writing also enables the identification of common patterns of behaviour and recurring experiences characteristic of so-called 'hyphenated' individuals – the term which Lindy Ledohowski uses in reference to Ukrainian Canadian writers as well as “non-English speaking immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe” in Canada, who had to learn how to “[live] ‘in the hyphen’ of contemporary Ukrainian-Canadianness” at the turn of the twentieth century (Ledohowski 2007: 108). In this sense, life writing allows identity formation to be examined at the microscale, through retrospective reconstruction of formative experiences.

This paper examines identity formation in migrant childhood and youth – with particular focus on the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada – through a narrative case study of Kulyk Keefer's memoir. I argue that migrant childhood in *Honey and Ashes* reveals identity as a negotiated process, shaped not only by cultural hybridity but also by institutional exclusion and intergenerational tension. The memoir brings together multiple generational viewpoints, tracing the migration of a Ukrainian family to Canada in the 1930s through the experiences of Kulyk Keefer's grandparents, her mother and aunt, who experienced migration as children, and Kulyk Keefer herself, who reconstructs their stories from a second-generation perspective. This position allows Kulyk Keefer to identify patterns of behaviour, cultural practices, and fears passed down across generations, while incorporating the expectations and values of older generations into the narrative and creating a space for intergenerational dialogue. Central to this paper, however, are the experiences of Kulyk Keefer's mother and aunt, as their stories illustrate the process of identity formation in childhood and adolescence, while also shedding light on often-overlooked forms of systemic and individual discrimination faced by white, yet 'ethnic,' migrants in early twentieth-century Canada.

This paper consists of several sections devoted to various aspects of migration and identity formation among children in *Honey and Ashes*. By focusing on experiences at the intersection of education, social relations, and cultural belonging, it demonstrates how identity is shaped by migration-related experiences and negotiated across generations. It foregrounds the conditions under which identity is formed, challenged, and reconfigured. Moreover, it shows that, for youth, belonging is continuously negotiated in everyday contexts such as school, family, and peer relations. Migration should not be understood solely as a geographical relocation, but rather as a psychological, cultural, and social change, especially for children and youth who are still in their developmental stage. Therefore, to explore how and to what extent events inevitably tied to migration affect future self-sense, an interdisciplinary approach is needed. The discussion draws on acculturation studies, developmental psychology, research on cultural identity and hybridity, and research on the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada.

Migration, Identity and Childhood

Culture, as Kulyk Keefer demonstrates in her memoir, plays a defining role in individual growth and identity development. Drawing on the childhood experiences of her mother, Natalia, and aunt Vira, who migrated from Ukraine to Canada as young girls in the 1930s, she repeatedly returns to how family traditions, language, and everyday cultural practices shaped their sense of belonging, while reflecting on how the stories and memories she inherited continue to shape her own identity. At the same time, to identify with more than one cultural framework can feel more like a burden than a privilege, especially when, as a child, one cannot straightforwardly answer the seemingly simple question: “Where are you from?” This is the very issue Kulyk Keefer returns to at the end of *Honey and Ashes*, admitting that she “could never answer [this question] the way [her] ‘English’ friends might do, with one name, one place” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 327–328).

Throughout the memoir, she also shows that Canadian influences inevitably became part of Vira’s and Natalia’s identities despite their obvious ties to the Ukrainian community. One seemingly trivial yet quite telling example is their gradual adoption of expressions such as “we’ve had a ball” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 153), a phrase they would probably never have used had their second language not come to occupy more and more space in their everyday lives. At the same time, the cultural framework passed down by their family remained present throughout their teenage years, long after they had left their home village of Staromischna in western Ukraine. As Kulyk Keefer writes, her family “brought the Old Place with them when they crossed the ocean, hiding the past in embroidered shirts, the folds of woven rugs” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 14). Their identities were shaped, to a greater or lesser extent, through the simultaneous negotiation of inherited cultural traditions and new influences encountered in Canada.

The formative role culture plays in *Honey and Ashes* resonates with Birman and Addae’s understanding of culture as a fundamental dimension of child development, acquired through socialisation and enculturation (Birman and Addae 2015: 122–123). People learn the components of a given culture through exposure, especially through these two complementary processes. Whereas socialisation refers to the deliberate transmission of values and norms by parents or institutions, enculturation is a more implicit process through which children absorb cultural practices from older family and community members, as well as from cultural production (Birman and Addae 2015: 123). Vira and Natalia gradually absorbed new cultural practices in Canada, sometimes under pressure to fit into a new society and sometimes naturally through everyday experience. Yet the values and traditions brought from Staromischna remained an equally important part of their sense of belonging, as they continued to be cultivated within the family and consciously passed down from one generation to the next – especially given the fact that Kulyk

Keefer stresses that she “was born out of [her relatives’] lives as well, out of all they were and all they came from” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 14).

As already established, the transmission of culture across generations does not mean that migrant children simply preserve one cultural framework. As Kulyk Keefer repeatedly suggests, growing up after migration often means learning to negotiate between inherited traditions and the expectations of a new society. At the beginning of *Honey and Ashes*, Kulyk Keefer notes that individuals with hyphenated identities often feel as though they “live in two countries of the heart and mind at once” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 7). She develops this reflection further in her autobiographical essay “Language Lessons”, where she recalls feeling foreign in both parts of her identity, with her given name, “Janice,” which marked her as not fully “nashi” (belonging to Ukrainian culture). Taking her married name, “Keefer,” did not help her feel more at home in her Canadian part, either (Kulyk Keefer 2016: 25). This duality complicates identity formation and contributes to its inherent ambiguity; at the same time, she notes that her “betwixt and between” (Kulyk Keefer 2016: 25) position provided her with the vantage point “to critique, to defend or to redress wrongs not just in the adopted but in the home culture as well” (qtd. in Suchacka 2019: 12).

For a migrant child, however, living as a “hyphen” can be far more confusing than liberating. At home, children are immersed in the culture of their country of origin, while at school and among peers, they encounter a new cultural context – one they are expected to learn almost immediately. Developmental psychologists describe this process as acculturation, whereby migrants gradually learn the culture of the resettlement country while maintaining ties to their culture of origin (Birman and Addae 2015: 124). This blend of influences is seen in *Honey and Ashes*, where Vira and Natalia, Kulyk Keefer’s mother and aunt, navigate a new reality: “From a thatched and clay-floored cottage to a downtown rooming house; from the quietness of carts and horses to the screech and slam of city traffic” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 122). After moving from rural Ukraine to Canada, they soon realise that the outside world’s expectations often clash with the cultural norms upheld in their parents’ family home.

The author suggests in her memoir that it may be less a question of how one adapts to a new culture than of how one balances the two parts of identity that emerge from it. In one of the chapters, the author recalls how she made herself at home in her Canadian identity, especially “under the shelter of [her] husband’s safely English name” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 199). However, at some point in her research about Ukrainian, Polish and Jewish relations, she admits that the part of herself connected to her family village in Ukraine – long suppressed – began to resurface: “It is part of who I am and where I come from; one of the landmarks on a journey I can’t help but undertake” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 201). This echoes her earlier reflections on her cultural heritage and the inherent tension within it, demonstrating that one part of identity cannot be abandoned at the expense of the other.

Throughout the memoir, Kulyk Keefer not only attempts to come to terms with this duality but also grapples with how to maintain a balance between her Ukrainian and Canadian identities in everyday life. At times, she admits that she was tempted to conceal visible markers of her ethnicity, much like her mother, Natalia, once did when, for the sake of convenience, she used the surname “Sloane” instead of “Solowska” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 139). In this respect, Kulyk Keefer’s experience reflects her mother’s – while Natalia adopted an English-sounding surname occasionally, Kulyk Keefer likewise found herself relying on her husband’s surname in certain contexts. Despite belonging to different generations, both women occasionally downplayed visible markers of their Ukrainian identity in order to navigate Canadian society more easily.

Kulyk Keefer’s struggle to reconcile her Ukrainian and Canadian identities does not merely represent an individual experience but also reflects broader psychological processes associated with migration. Once again, we can return to the concept of acculturation, which provides a useful framework for understanding how tensions between different parts of identity emerge and persist over time. Berry proposes that there are two key aspects of this process: the first is maintaining ties to one’s “culture of origin,” and the second is “involvement” with the other culture. Similarly, Phinney argues that these two separate spaces can coexist and that “individuals may have independent identities with respect to their cultures of origin and to their societies of settlement” (qtd. in Berry et al. 2010: 18). This raises the question of how separate these ‘parts’ of identity can be, and whether one can feel more authentic than the other.

Kulyk Keefer recalls that, as a second-generation migrant, her identity was often unbalanced and marked by a longing for belonging as she could not position herself, “with a name like Kulyk,” “in a world of Smiths and Browns” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 4). It is intriguing to consider what might account for this imbalance and what Vira and Natalia felt about their identity – did they feel more ‘at home’ in the Ukrainian or Canadian part after spending most of their lives there? Or maybe such a division cannot be resolved in universal terms? After all, as Natalia’s daughter concludes at the end of the memoir: “Perhaps home is only this: inhabiting uncertainty (...) Not belonging, but longing—that we may live in the present, without craving the past or forcing the future” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 328). Considering this, one might wonder whether daily life in Canada might have left Vira and Natalia little opportunity for such reflections – maybe they were so focused on living in the present, with their efforts aimed at adaptation, that this thought never had a chance to develop? Or perhaps their lives were inherently intertwined with their Ukrainian culture, so it never became the past that Kulyk Keefer longed for.

Observations on living between two cultural spheres, tackled in *Honey and Ashes*, can be further extended through Suchacka’s discussion of belonging and the notion of home in the Ukrainian Canadian context. On the very first pages of her landmark “*Za Hranetsiu*” – “*Beyond the Border*”: *Constructions of Identities*

in *Ukrainian-Canadian Literature* (2019), she reflects on the notion of home, drawing upon Madan Sarup's claim that neither identity nor home can ever be "fixed," as the latter is not merely a physical space but "a place to which [an individual] feels an attachment, a belongingness" (qtd. in Suchacka 2019: 10). The observation that "identity is to do not with being but with becoming" resonates with Ukrainian Canadian authors such as Kulyk Keefer (Suchacka 2019: 11). It illustrates how they frame identity as a process of continual reconstruction rather than fixed affiliation. Suchacka also addresses why Kulyk Keefer's stance on her hybrid identity in the memoir is political. In her analysis of Canadian literature's exclusionary tendencies, Suchacka argues that it often establishes firm boundaries of "who [and what] does not count as Canadian" (qtd. in Suchacka and Lutz 2023: 20). This 'our versus not ours' approach frequently leaves ethnic and hyphenated writers on the margins, which does not mean however, that they do not "express their opposition to discriminatory practices in CanLit" (Suchacka and Lutz 2023: 21). Kulyk Keefer's work precisely situates itself within this contested ground of "being a hyphen," caught between two cultures.

Kulyk Keefer also contributes to representing the experiences of three different generations in a single migration narrative, making each perspective valuable and highlighting that ethnic discrimination remained embedded within the Canadian community even after the post-war immigration policy, which was less rigid and allowed the migration of "refugees and displaced persons" (Burtseva 2017: 75). Suchacka notes that the points of reference around which identity was moulded varied for each wave of Ukrainian migration to Canada (Suchacka 2019: 122–123). However, what she does not focus on in detail is the microscale that Kulyk Keefer captured: even within a single family that migrated together, identities can differ significantly across generations, depending on whether they migrated as adults, as children, or were born in Canada. Individual psychological development and childhood identity formation differ among Olena, Kulyk Keefer's grandmother, who grew up in Staromischyna; for Natalia and Vira, who spent time in Ukraine and Toronto; and for Kulyk Keefer herself, who only knows Staromischyna from family stories – which, nevertheless, shaped her outsider status among Anglo-Canadians.

Recognising these intra-family differences in identity formation shifts the focus to how children and youth experience and respond to migration, and it will also provide a useful framework for understanding how Vira and Natalia felt in new environments, such as school in Toronto. As studies in developmental psychology indicate, migration often constitutes a significant stressor during childhood. According to Andrade, Sala Roca, and Pérez, conditions that often accompany migration, such as "lack of stability, safety, acceptance, warmth, and connection to community," may significantly affect children's development. These factors are "considered as potential experiences for emotional wounds," and if not addressed properly, they can contribute to various "mental health issues" (Andrade et al. 2023:

2). Research also emphasises that children develop various coping strategies to overcome discrimination that they often face because of relocation. They tend to rely on support “from teachers, peers, parents, or religious beliefs” (Andrade et al. 2023: 5). This underscores the crucial role that educational institutions and caregivers play in recognising instances of intolerance and prejudice, in order to minimise the negative effects of migration-related stress. These observations provide a useful point of departure for understanding why Kulyk Keefer devotes so much attention to school, teachers, and peer relationships in *Honey and Ashes*, all of which will be analysed in greater detail in the following sections.

Judgmental Gazes

One of the first shocks a migrant child faces during adaptation is the initial social confrontation with the new country and its society. Rather than being seen as one of their own, the child is often perceived as an ‘other’ – a label that, at the time in Canada, corresponded to what Vivienne Hall calls a “badge of inferiority” (qtd. in Ledohowski 2007: 115). However, before Vira and Natalia experienced that, they were, for the first time, exposed to the notion of travelling beyond Ukraine and Poland, which seemed an exciting and unusual prospect. Kulyk Keefer focuses on how, for the first time, the girls experienced the joy of adventure with no other worries on their mind, despite their mother being seasick. She described the cruise from the perspective of two sisters who joyfully “ran the length of the ship and danced to the sailor’s accordions.” They were happy and carefree; finally, they had time to simply play as “their day hadn’t been burdened by household or farmyard labour, school or churchgoing” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 117–118). As Suchacka notes, it was not rare in rural Ukraine at the turn of the twentieth century to view women, also young girls who were prepared from a young age for marriage, as having their significance reduced to merely “another pair of hands and a new piece of farming equipment” apart from their reproductive role (qtd in Suchacka 2019: 211). With men working elsewhere, “the burden of initial work on the homesteads was placed on women and children.” This was not only the case in Ukraine but also occurred during the early settlements of Ukrainians in Canada, where they brought their patriarchal values across the ocean (qtd in Suchacka 2019: 214).

However, this innocent adventure, a departure from Vira and Natalia’s usual life, ended abruptly when they set foot on the ground at the port in Halifax after a long voyage from Gdynia. They were almost immediately stripped of their clothes and subjected to medical inspection by doctors and officials, and the impression of safety quickly vanished. Women in one line, men in another, a challenging experience for young girls in a completely new country. As Kulyk Keefer states, her mother remembered how it was her turn “shivering at the table, being pushed and prodded, until she’s finally permitted to put her clothes back on” (Kulyk Keefer

1998: 118). Vira and Natalia are here for the first time, exposed to external institutional control. Their bodies, stripped of clothes, become vulnerable under the gazes of strangers. At the same time, this passage, in a way, foreshadows future events in which the sisters will be stripped of their sense of agency not once. From this point onward, they are positioned as newcomers and will be defined and classified by others, all of which anticipates the disorientation that will await them during their early experiences in Canada.

Following this initial experience of vulnerability and loss of control shortly after their arrival, Vira and Natalia are quickly confronted with the equally disorienting reality of everyday life in Canada, when they discover that, as immigrants, they are the subject of others' stares and are perceived and pigeonholed by Anglo-Canadians. To name this phenomenon, we can turn to the concept of othering, which can be defined as "the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group," which also "entails the invention of categories and ideas about what marks people as belonging to these categories" (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 422). Kulyk Keefer herself wonders how her mother and aunt had adjusted to the new place, which reminded them at every turn that they were different, and writes about what they likely felt, namely, an overwhelming sense of not belonging. She notes, "To those who own this place, they are incurably foreign" (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 122). Speaking their native language became a visible marker of difference. Vira and Natalia recall offensive slurs, such as "bohunk being tossed their way" (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 122). Though they were white and their skin colour did not immediately position them as others, they still faced exclusion based on seemingly minor physical features, such as the "width and slant of their cheekbones" (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 122). As Ledohowski notes, drawing on Vivienne Hall, "social inferiority," which was often associated with "ethnic characteristics," constituted one of the main "obstacles to full assimilation into Canadian culture" (qtd. in Ledohowski 2007: 115).

Developmental studies of migration identify discrimination based on language, accent, or cultural background as a common experience for migrant children (Andrade et al. 2023: 5). The physical features and the language Vira and Natalia spoke became a "stigmatizing difference," which was consequently used as a "motive for potential discrimination" (Staszak 2020: 25). From the outset, they entered a reality that "marked them out as different and dangerous," in which even moving through public space often meant being avoided by others. The neighbours' reassurance that they would eventually "get used to it" implies that they were expected to adapt to exclusion, just as everyone else in a similar position was expected to (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 122). However, it should not be surprising in terms of how the process of othering works – it is always based on the asymmetrical contact between groups, in which "only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness)" (Staszak 2020: 25). If one cannot change anything, one is expected

to accept it and adapt. Here, the sense of belonging and inclusion in the community depends on external recognition, which is often withheld from those positioned as ‘ethnic’ or ‘other,’ just as it was for Vira and Natalia.

Search for Understanding

An externally imposed sense of difference does not remain confined to hearing slurs on the street but, as the girls soon find out, becomes even more pronounced at school, where Vira and Natalia are required to actively participate in a system that both exposes and evaluates them. School becomes the space where the tension between how they see themselves and how others see them is most visible. At the same time, school also becomes a key site of adaptation, laying the foundations for the later assimilation of Vira and Natalia in Canada – after all, as Kulyk Keefer notes: “School helped them forget the enormity of what they’d left behind, of what they’d come to; it also helped them to understand that their lives were full of entrancing possibilities, not just worries and dangers” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 133). As Dagmara Drewniak writes in *Forgetful Recollections: Images of Central and Eastern Europe in Canadian Literature* (2014), Canada after all “offer[ed] a better life” for Vira and Natalia, although their mother Olena seemed not to recognise it at first (Drewniak 2014: 92). Indeed, Kulyk Keefer repeatedly mentions “how lucky” her family was to migrate at the pivotal time – it certainly gave her mother and aunt an opportunity to even experience somehow safe childhood and youth without rushing into adulthood; it also helped them escape the crossfire of historical events in Galicia, which could have been a more severe form of trauma. However, this does not mean that Natalia and Vira did not face discrimination, a sense of exclusion, and hardships along the way in building a new home and a sense of identity.

Interactions with Canada’s dominant culture also initiate and enable the mixing of their cultural repertoires, which eventually resulted in the development of cultural hybrid identities in Moslund’s understanding. It gradually unfolds in the case of Vira and Natalia as they, for instance, move from having no knowledge of English or familiarity with Canadian culture to adopting expressions such as “we had a ball” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 153). As Kulyk Keefer observes, the changes in the girls’ vocabulary demonstrate “how much [they] come to feel at home in her third language: the distance [they] travelled between necessity and pleasure” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 153). It is significant because it illustrates that, at some point in their lives, the foreign language became a medium of self-expression. They did not erase their original cultural framework but instead expanded it with new elements from the country where they built their new home. Notably, this aligns with Moslund’s analysis that the gradual acquisition of language, norms, and social practices adds another layer to one’s sense of self and contributes to the formation of an in-between, negotiated identity (Moslund 2025: 28–29). However, as Moslund also acknowledges,

hybridity cannot be considered as an inherently positive term as “hybridizations are not in themselves liberating or harmonious cultural fusions” (Moslund 2025: 25). Viewing hybridity as “a form of transgressive liberation” (Moslund 2025: 25) is a superficial stance that overlooks the systemic inequalities and forms of social discrimination that hyphenated individuals face. Although people with hybrid identities can take pride in living on the brink of two cultures, it cannot be ignored that living in a liminal space requires many sacrifices, including a departure from the sense of security that comes from feeling just like everyone else.

From her early school memories in Canada, Natalia recalled feeling different – not in the way she wanted. Although she was already fourteen, she was placed “in a kindergarten class.” It was a decision that implicitly marked her as deficient and reinforced her sense of exclusion (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 132–133). This experience must have been not only socially disorienting but also humiliating, as it positions her as an outsider among much younger children. As Kulyk Keefer puts it, her mother felt “like a goose among goslings” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 132). What made Natalia even more uncomfortable and ashamed was the teacher’s behaviour. On one occasion, he demanded that she name the rooster drawn on the blackboard. Natalia knew the answer in three languages but could not produce a standard English word. She grew visibly stressed and fell silent, and when she finally tried to respond with “chicken’s father,” her classmates laughed (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 133).

This passage clearly illustrates how language also serves as a marker of belonging and how a lack of language knowledge can expose migrant children to ridicule, which further reinforces the gap between their inner selves and the ‘labels’ assigned to them. In this sense, Natalia’s experience reflects what Erikson describes as identity formation emerging through the interplay of “reflection and observation,” that is, through a continuous negotiation between self-perception and the perceived judgment of others (Erikson 1968: 22–23). She constructs the image of herself against the expectations that others – children and the teacher – seem to have of her. Another thing is that she is once again othered by the dominant group of students as she is “unable to prescribe [her] own norms and project [her] own voice” (Staszak 2020: 26) against their statement: you do not belong here. Moreover, this situation shows that schools and pedagogical bodies should anticipate such reactions and prevent harm to migrant students, especially when they are fully capable of doing so, as in this case. Kulyk Keefer’s mother remembers this event clearly, although it may seem trivial compared to the violence which can be inflicted on purpose because of racial or ethnic discrimination. It only proves that instances of exclusion can persist in memory long after the experience, leaving lasting damage that should never be overlooked.

The school environment need not function solely as a site of exclusion; it can also be a space where migrant students receive recognition and support, if they are fortunate enough to have dedicated teachers who care for their needs. Despite

the initial humiliation at school, it happened to Vira and Natalia, who recall two of their teachers with deep gratitude and respect even in adulthood. Kulyk Keefer finds herself wondering: “What must they have been or done to earn the devotion of those silent or stammering immigrant girls, terrified by the enormous school with its harshly lit halls?” (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 132). The answer lies in their supportive attitudes: they played a crucial role in their adaptation process, not only by teaching them English but, foremost, by approaching Vira and Natalia with patience and understanding. Their behaviour stands in quite stark contrast to earlier moments of humiliation; these women recognised the girls’ potential and gave them an opportunity to grow. Even the fact that these teachers visited their modest home and interacted with the family without judgement, “sipping tea from enamel mugs and not once betraying surprise or disgust that (...) small beads of fat were floating at the top,” demonstrates the teachers’ understanding of the precarious conditions faced by migrant children (Kulyk Keefer 1998:132).

Support from teachers and authority figures constitutes a key protective factor in mitigating the negative effects of discrimination, while acculturation “provides access to resources such as social support from its members” – in this case educators in Toronto (Andrade et al. 2023: 5; Birman and Addae 2015: 126). In this sense, school has a real impact on the identity formation of migrant children who can gradually gain confidence in a new environment and a sense of agency. Through encouragement and recognition, Vira and Natalia moved from being perceived primarily through their ethnic background to becoming active participants in their own educational and social development. After all, Vira became a successful doctor, and Natalia worked as a designer – and it was due to their efforts, but also because someone noticed them and gave them a push in the right direction.

Social and Systemic Discrimination

The process of identity formation cannot be shaped exclusively by external institutions, such as schools, or by society; the family’s expectations are equally influential. As many scholars recognise, parents and family members do not always understand children’s and youth’s needs, especially during adolescence. For instance, Birman and Addae note that “socially and emotionally, during this period, peers become increasingly important, romantic interests develop, and adolescents face important choices about how to negotiate various social circles and construct their own network of relationships” (Birman and Addae 2015: 123). One of the most desirable feelings while growing up is belonging and inclusion within a peer group. To achieve this, children sometimes go to great lengths. This strong need to be included becomes particularly evident in the passage about Natalia’s haircut.

Kulyk Keefer describes the moment her mother decided to cut it, without caring about the traditional implications it carried: “All it signifies on Queen Street

is that she's a bohunk straight off the boat. More than anything, Natalia wants to look like the girls at school" (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 39). In the "Old Place," 'kosa,' a long braid, signified femininity, beauty, and moral virtue. In Canada, however, it marked them as foreign, which Natalia and Vira clearly sought to avoid for fear of social exclusion. Naturally, this act shocked her father, who failed to recognise what his daughters were fighting for: social acceptance. He only perceives the loss of the 'kosa' as a break with tradition, and disapproval is clear as he storms into the hairdresser's salon with the aim of confrontation. Natalia's experience here reflects cultural hybridity, the blending of cultural influences arising from contact between different groups and practices (Moslund 2025: 23). Her choice to cut her braid shows an effort to incorporate elements of the new culture into her own repertoire. In this case, however, the intention is not to challenge dominant cultural norms but rather to align with them. Without a doubt, this is a deliberate statement for her peers: although I am ethnic, I am like you, and I seek your approval. It does not matter that her parents see it as a departure from her origins; for her, it is a strategic act through which she attempts to negotiate her position within the new social environment.

Identity formation among migrants remains heavily dependent not only on personal effort and family influence, but also on structural constraints and external forces that determine who is accepted and who is not. *Honey and Ashes* shows that even seemingly successful cultural adaptation does not guarantee full acceptance by society. Some things remain out of our control, as was the case when Vira applied to the University of Toronto for the first time. She had overcome language barriers and school challenges and hoped to follow in Lilian Karmulska's footsteps, "a girl with a Slavic name like her own, going on to medical school" (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 146). Vira believed she could do the same. But her application was quickly rejected after someone read her last name: "Solowska? I hardly think so" (Kulyk Keefer 1998: 146). This is an example of institutional discrimination, which is not based on justified premises but on perceived ethnic difference. It needs to be said that such exclusion was not incidental but reflected the broader geopolitical climate and the attitudes Anglo-Canadian citizens held toward Eastern European immigrants in Canada at the time. Ukrainian newcomers often faced stereotypes and discrimination, seen as culturally inferior and very different from the white majority (Suchacka 2019: 103–105; Świetlicki 2023: 105–132). These views were spread through the media and politics, which often painted immigrants as a threat to national identity (Suchacka 2019: 103–105).

Maintaining one's identity as a source of pride under such conditions was difficult when individuals were "surrounded by barely veiled hostility and blatant prejudice," which undoubtedly influenced their quality of life (Suchacka 2019: 103). Vira's rejection shows that the denial of opportunities, regardless of individual achievement, constitutes, without a doubt, a violation of rights; however, what is more concerning is the reality in which such politics and society consider such

behaviours as part of the norm. After this situation, thanks to her determination and effort, Vira was finally accepted to university and pursued her medical career, proving these unjust limitations wrong.

Conclusion

Kulyk Keefer's memoir tackles the experience of growing up on the brink of two cultures, under the constant scrutiny of others who try to undermine one's efforts to find a sense of belonging. Vira and Natalia, as first-generation migrants, faced pressure at home, which served as the anchor of their family's origins, to preserve their Ukrainian identity. At the same time, they were obliged to hide any signs of it whenever they stepped into Toronto's outside world. The dominant group, as understood through the theory of othering, made their Ukrainian heritage a marker of difference that signalled non-belonging to the Anglo-Canadian canon.

How did the girls find their voices and define themselves amid these competing influences? After all, as Moslund notes, hybridity among "migrants or postcolonial masses" has little in common with the liberating nature of cultural blending; instead, it is foremost about experiencing "the precarity and loss and pain of displacement and unbelonging" (Moslund 2025: 25). Vira and Natalia had to navigate two separate and often conflicting cultural frameworks, which made them easy targets for ethnic discrimination – whether exercised by their peers, people in their immediate surroundings, or consolidated by institutions and authorities. Yet when they tried to adjust their language, appearance, behaviour, or education to be as close as possible to the 'White, Anglo-Saxon' girl ideal, they were scolded by their own parents for departing from tradition and conduct learnt at home.

Their identity-formation process was never stable during childhood and adolescence; it could never have been, as it was rooted in too many points of reference. It was bound to revolve around home and the external Canadian world, which, as Kulyk Keefer emphasises, became more familiar and thus more natural over time. After all, if they married a Ukrainian boy, as their mother wished, would they be happy? Eradicating their Canadianness could not have solved their identity issues; it would not have been equal to staying authentic to themselves. All passages discussed in this paper demonstrate how migratory experiences profoundly shape identity formation during the most formative years by depicting the hardships and obstacles encountered along the path towards self-discovery. These scenes also highlight the roles of the domestic sphere, peer relations, school, and figures of authority, such as teachers, in this process.

Moreover, *Honey and Ashes* carries value in terms of narrating a story of belonging that spans three generations – we can observe the process of identity negotiation from multiple perspectives, which enables us to notice how, for instance, first-generation migrant assimilation may differ for individuals at different life stages, as in the case

of Vira and Natalia in juxtaposition to their mother, who already carried values, cultural practices, and ideals from the place in which she grew up. Furthermore, everything is once again filtered through Kulyk Keefer's self-reflexivity, as she serves as a palimpsest, offering another layer of reflection on the identity-formation process of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada. Her identity can also emerge through this narrative reconstruction of her family history.

The retrospective character of *Honey and Ashes* is an additional element that helps the reader more clearly identify the formative childhood experiences that became relevant to the characters' search for belonging. Life writing prevents real-life stories from being forgotten or buried in the past; it also inspires other minority writers in Canada to give representation to migrant characters, especially children and youth. It is not only an act of retelling but also of documenting and preserving these experiences, ensuring that Vira's, Natalia's, and other children's and adolescents' stories of struggling in a new reality after migration are neither forgotten nor dismissed as being of minor importance. Thus, rather than asking whether migrants can successfully integrate, a more productive question may be what measures are undertaken to ensure that migrant children are in a safe environment during their developmental stage, so that they do not have to give up one culture at the expense of the other, and whether current literature and media reflect this.

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Summary

In recent years, there has been growing scholarly interest in migration and identity formation among children, as well as in cultural production that focuses on their representations. For young people, migration changes almost every aspect of their lives and occurs during the most formative years. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on acculturation theory, identity, and cultural hybridity to explore how migration influences identity and a sense of belonging in childhood and youth, particularly in the Ukrainian Canadian context. Using Janice Kulyk Keefer’s *Honey and Ashes* as an example, the analysis demonstrates the pressures that first-generation migrants often face to preserve their culture from their country of origin while adapting to the expectations of a new country. By focusing on Janice Kulyk Keefer’s memoir, this paper illustrates how life writing enables the observation of identity-formation processes at the microscale, capturing how a sense of belonging is shaped in everyday experience. The analysis also explores how the dominant group constructs the ethnic characteristics of minorities as markers of difference that signal non-belonging in society. The paper aims to demonstrate that, for migrants, hybridity is foremost about experiencing various hardships on the way to building a new home and a sense of self. Ultimately, this analysis reveals identity formation in migration as a process shaped not only by individual internal struggles but also (if not foremost) by family influences and the social and systemic context of the country of resettlement.

Keywords

ethnic identity, cultural hybridity, othering, acculturation, Ukrainian Canadian diaspora, migration, childhood and youth

Streszczenie

Dorastanie w doświadczeniu migracji. Tożsamość i poczucie przynależności w prozie Janice Kulyk Keefer na przykładzie Honey and Ashes

W ostatnich latach obserwuje się rosnące zainteresowanie środowiska akademickiego problematyką migracji, szczególnie w kontekście kształtowania się tożsamości dzieci i młodzieży, co znajduje odzwierciedlenie w licznych tekstach kultury skierowanych zarówno do najmłodszych odbiorców, jak i dorosłych. Doświadczenie migracji przypadające na okres intensywnego rozwoju i dojrzewania zmienia niemalże każdy aspekt dotychczasowego życia młodych osób. Niniejszy artykuł opiera się na interdyscyplinarnym ujęciu odwołującym się do teorii akulturacji, tożsamości oraz hybrydyczności kulturowej, w celu zbadania wpływu migracji na proces kształtowania się tożsamości i poczucia przynależności w dzieciństwie i okresie dorastania, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem doświadczeń osób pochodzenia ukraińsko-kanadyjskiego. Na przykładzie biograficznej narracji Janice Kulyk Keefer pt. *Honey and Ashes* analiza unaocznia presję, z jaką borykają się migranci pierwszego pokolenia starający się zachować dziedzictwo kulturowe kraju pochodzenia, jednocześnie próbujący dostosowywać się do norm i oczekiwań, jakie stawia przed nimi społeczeństwo państwa przyjmującego. Koncentrując się na interpretacji utworu, autorka artykułu wykazuje, że pisarstwo biograficzne umożliwia uchwycenie procesów formowania się tożsamości w mikroskali, podkreśla tym samym znaczenie codziennych doświadczeń dla kształtowania poczucia przynależności. Analiza omawia również kwestię mechanizmów, poprzez które grupa dominująca przeistacza cechy etniczne mniejszości w wyznaczniki odrębności, co bezpośrednio przekłada się na doświadczenie wyobcowania społecznego. Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że hybrydyczność tożsamości migrantów wiąże się przede wszystkim z koniecznością mierzenia się z licznymi trudnościami w procesie budowania nowego domu, jak również poczucia własnej wartości. Artykuł ukazuje, że kształtowanie się tożsamości u jednostek z doświadczeniem migracji jest procesem złożonym, który determinowany jest nie tylko przez indywidualne doświadczenia, lecz także (o ile nie w szczególności) przez relacje rodzinne, kontekst społeczny oraz systemowe formy wykluczenia obecne w kraju osiedlenia.

Słowa kluczowe

tożsamość etniczna, hybrydyczność kulturowa, różnicowanie (othering), akulturacja, diaspora ukraińsko-kanadyjska, migracja, dzieciństwo i młodość