Folklore scholarship when addressing the question of cultural continuity and change among ethnic minorities, often translates this issue into one of representations. The study of folk dance, music, and crafts commonly seeks to make these cultural practices representative forms of the culture under consideration. This article continues to focus on the "beautiful small," to use Hannerz's metaphor, in reference to localized expressions of Ukrainian culture on the Canadian Prairies. Yet, instead of addressing the question of how Ukrainianness is being promoted through representations in the locality – with the help of symbols, symbolic performances, staged events – I ask the question what makes local practices of Ukrainianness vital and how this vitality is reaffirmed.

More specifically, the article considers the phenomenon of communal cooking and how this social institution affects the ongoing self-organization of local Ukrainianness in the Canadian context and its continuing coming into being, the processes which constitute the dynamic nature of local Ukrainianness, or its vitality. First, I discuss why it is important to approach communal cooking when addressing the question of culture's vitality from the position of practice and agency. The vitality of any social phenomenon relies on the continuity of prescriptive structures, and their being actively utilized and changed by the agents. Agents, while acting within the framework of these prescriptive structures have the potential to affect and with time even alter
these structures. Thus both, the continuity of those social structures that are responsible for Ukrainian identity of locality, and their being risked and challenged every time they are acted out, constitute two indispensable sides of the vitality of local Ukrainianness. Then I look at the community’s lifecycle and its dependence on local food practices. Various cycles of events constitute the temporal parameters of the local life world and invest it with different meanings. Cooking for these events insures that these cycles of community life continue to unfold within the locality. Following Mary Douglas, I look into the question of how each [cooking] event carries something of the meaning of other [cooking] events, and how each communal cooking, being already a structured social event, structures other events in its own image. During every session, preparing a meal is done according to local cooking conventions and rules. While these rules and conventions are re-established through the repetition of routine practices, ethnographic analysis of one such event, presented in the second half of the paper, establishes that over the very course of this repetition they are often tacitly challenged and hence, subject to restructuring due to the individual agency of the performers. Finally, I return to the question of how the vitality of local Ukrainianness is affected by the social institution of communal cooking and discuss how within the cooking practices, performed routinely and in a ritual-like fashion, local Ukrainianness as a living practice is tacitly revived and re-lived by the cooks themselves while Ukrainianness as product, in this context in the form of Ukrainian food, has been explicitly served to the community-at-large.

Ukrainianness: From representations to practice

In 1998-2001, I spent much of my time in the town of Mundare, Central Eastern Alberta, and its vicinity, conducting field research on local Ukrainianness in the transnational context. Mundare is one of many “Ukrainian” settlements in Western Canada, but better known perhaps because of the long term presence of two Ukrainian Catholic monastic orders: the Basilian Fathers and the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate. The community began its history as a “western” frontier railway town at the turn of the twentieth century (in 1903). Settled by predominantly rural immigrants from Halychyna as early as the 1890s, the area of the so-called Ukrainian bloc became the first compact settlement of Ukrainians in Canada. A small settlement of about 600 people today, Mundare continues to be embedded in the distinctively “western” Canadian physical and cultural landscape. Mundare area is also known for its Ukrainian landmarks: the Ukrainian church, the Ukrainian museum, park “Ukraina,” and now for its monument to the Ukrainian sau-