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RETHREADING RELATIONS: THE KOKUM SCARF AS A CALL TO ACTION FOR BUILDING GOOD RELATIONS

AVERY SHTYKALO [1] and GABRIELLE LEGAULT [2*]

Abstract. When Ukrainian settlers arrived in what is currently called Canada in the late 19th century, they brought with them cultural traditions, including a brightly coloured, floral-patterned scarf. As they settled on Indigenous lands, cross-cultural relationships developed through trade, reciprocity, and shared survival, leading to the gifting and exchange of these scarves with Indigenous communities. Over time, this item became known in Indigenous communities as the kokum scarf, which took on new meanings within Indigenous culture and identity. Most recently, the scarf emerged in February 2022 as a symbol of Indigenous solidarity with Ukrainians during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Using Indigenous research methodologies based in relationality, this paper draws on interviews with three women—Ukrainian, Indigenous, and both—to explore the histories, meanings, and transformations of the kokum scarf. By centring lived experiences and oral histories, we contextualize the scarf's role in past and present Indigenous-Ukrainian relations and examine its potential as a lens for decolonization, allyship, solidarity, and reconciliation. Through these stories, we consider how the kokum scarf can inform new possibilities for rebuilding meaningful and reciprocal Indigenous-settler relationships.

Keywords. Indigenous-Ukrainian relations, Kokum Scarves, Call to Action

1. Positionality Statement

Avery Mary Katherine Shtykalo: I am a third-generation Ukrainian settler who grew up in Treaty 1 territory. Currently pursuing my MA in Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria on lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories, I am involved in Indigenous-engaged research because of its potential to foster anti-oppressive futures. From a young age, I questioned the status quo, and why in a world of abundance, the disparities across socially constructed identities are so vast. During my BA in Indigenous Studies, I became aware of how colonialism is intertwined with other axes of oppression, including white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. For me, learning from a place of Indigenous

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* Corresponding author Avery Shtykalo

knowledges is a way to understand the world from an alternate and transformative viewpoint, while critically acknowledging the fact that my presence and occupation on these lands reifies settler colonialism. It is how I contend with this contradiction and strive towards building coalitions to nurture futures that refuse colonialism. I'm grateful to engage with these ontologies and epistemologies that honor my own accountabilities and responsibilities a white Ukrainian queer woman.

Gabrielle Legault: I am Métis from Lac Pelletier, Saskatchewan (Treaty 4 Territory), with French Canadian and Danish ancestry, and a citizen of Métis Nation British Columbia. I live and work on unceded Syilx Territory in Kelowna, where I am an Assistant Professor in Indigenous Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. My research is rooted in community-led approaches and centres Indigenous identity and wellbeing, urban Indigenous experiences, and land-based wellness programs. I work in partnership with Métis and Friendship Centres to support youth-led and Elder-guided programs that strengthen identity, belonging, and intergenerational connection through land and culture. I am a proud member of the Kelowna Métis Association and remain actively involved in local Métis community life alongside my two children.

2. Introduction

Kokum scarves are a thin piece of fabric adorned with floral designs and set against bright-coloured backgrounds. Ukrainians may know them by other names, such hustyna, hutska, khutska, babushka scarf, or baba scarf. The meaning of each scarf varies depending on the wearer—whether Ukrainian, Indigenous, both, or neither. In Ukraine, these scarves have evolved over time, incorporating modern materials like silk and sequins. Traditionally, they symbolize femininity and are often worn by Ukrainian grandmothers (babas), tied under the chin and covering the hair. However, in Canada, stories passed intergenerationally within Ukrainian-Canadian communities, and some prairie Indigenous communities describe instances of Ukrainian women trading and gifting the scarves to Indigenous women. Today, kokum scarfs are widely embraced by Indigenous peoples, incorporated as regalia, worn as shawls, wrapped around wrists as bracelets, and sold at Indigenous markets. In Ukrainian-Canadian communities, they remain a vibrant symbol featured in Ukrainian dance choreography and costumes, popular as cultural attire, and suitable for attending Ukrainian and Roman Catholic churches, continuing to reflect Ukrainian-Canadian identity.

This research emerges from Indigenous-settler relations, sparked by a collaboration between Gabrielle Legault, a Métis scholar and Indigenous Studies professor at the University of British Columbia (Okanagan Campus), and Avery Shtykalo, a Ukrainian-Canadian settler undergraduate majoring in Indigenous Studies. Through Gabrielle's course on Indigenous identities, which required students to reflect on their own backgrounds, Avery was drawn to examining her Ukrainian-Canadian family's relationship with Indigenous peoples. Born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Treaty 1 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis

Nation), she was familiar with the kokum scarf's presence in both Indigenous and Ukrainian communities. However, following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, she witnessed Indigenous peoples wearing the kokum scarf as a symbol of solidarity with Ukrainians experiencing war. This prompted a shared inquiry into the scarf's history and its significance in Indigenous-settler relations, both historically and in contemporary discussions of reconciliation. Through historical research and interviews with three women—Ukrainian-Canadian, Indigenous and both—the paper explores how the kokum scarf serves as a lens for understanding relationships of solidarity, allyship, and decolonization.

3. Research Journey

Our initial review of the literature on Ukrainian-Indigenous relations and the kokum scarf revealed a lack of academic scholarship on both topics. While media articles have discussed the scarf's significance and featured interviews with scholars, authors, and community members on their experiences with the kokum scarf and/or settler-Indigenous relations (Benallie, 2022; Brock, 2022; Herrera, 2022; King, 2022; Paley & Brake, 2022; Sandbox, 2022; Sanders, 2022; Yawnghwe, 2021), there is a distinct lack of formal research in this area. Leah Hrycun, a Ukrainian settler scholar and one of the few PhD students studying Ukrainian-Indigenous relations, became a key resource. She generously shared her experiences, knowledge, and relevant literature, guiding us towards potential research participants.

Some people we contacted declined to participate, citing concerns about their level of expertise or lack of specific stories related to the kokum scarf. However, many indicated interest in exploring the history of the scarf and the broader conversation on reconciling Indigenous-settler relations. During summer 2023, we conducted interviews with three key individuals whose public contributions align with knowledge of Ukrainian-Indigenous relations and/or the kokum scarf: Marion Mutala, who was identified through her appearance in news articles and her book, *Kohkum's Babushka* (2017); Patty Krawec, who was identified through her article exploring the romanticization of Ukrainian-Indigenous relationships (2022); and Sandra Semchuk, who participated in the Indigenous Ukrainian Relationship Initiative (2024).

Our approach to conducting and analyzing the interviews was guided by Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008), which enabled us to co-create knowledge through relationships with each other, our ancestors, the land (Treaty 1 and Syilx territories), prior scholarship, and the experiences shared by the participants. The decision to centre Indigenous research methodologies was deliberate, aligning with our commitments to decolonial and anti-oppressive practices. We prioritized methodologies that challenge the harmful legacy of research on or about Indigenous peoples, instead emphasizing research done with and for Indigenous communities (Andersen & O'Brien, 2017; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

Our research is grounded in values, ethics, and protocols of relationality that reject Western research paradigms promoting objectivity and detachment.

These conventional frameworks have historically contributed to the objectification and subjugation of Indigenous peoples through hierarchal and supremacist logics (Haraway, 1988; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous relationality, by contrast, attends to the accountabilities and interconnected responsibilities researchers have to humans and non-human beings, lands, skies, waters, and ancestors (Wildcat & Voth, 2023). By employing relational research methodologies, we recognize our own "complex accountabilities" to past, present, and future relations while navigating the geopolitical and gendered realities of settler colonialism (Starblanket, 2018).

Thematic insights from our interviews included 1) The origins of the kokum scarf, 2) cross-cultural relationship building between Indigenous and Ukrainian women, 3) early economies of trade and sharing between Indigenous peoples and Ukrainian settlers, and 4) land-based connections between Indigenous peoples and settlers. In exploring these themes, we integrate our participants' teachings with the existing literature on decolonization, allyship, and solidarity, offering a deeper understanding of the kokum scarf's evolving role in Indigenous-settler relations.

4. The Written History of Indigenous-Ukrainian Relations

Between 1892 and 1914, approximately 120,000 Ukrainian settlers arrived in Canada, primarily settling in the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Lehr, 1991). While Ukrainian-Canadian historical literature extensively documents the experiences of these settlers, it often omits the presence and contributions of Indigenous Peoples. Ukrainian-Canadian author Myrna Kostash (2017) emphasizes the physical intersections between Ukrainian settlers and Indigenous peoples throughout the prairies, such as Métis road allowances located at the edges of Ukrainian homesteads. However, Kostash also notes the absence of written histories that acknowledge the hospitality and assistance Indigenous communities provided to Ukrainian settlers, as when they "gave shelter in a storm, helped deliver babies, concocted medicinal brews, exchanged pelts for blankets" (2018, p. 6). Other Ukrainian-Canadian scholars (Melnyk, 1977; Swyripa, 1992) have noted stories of cross-cultural connections, highlighting shared experiences of persecution and hardships in early 20th-century Anglo-Protestant Canada. Anishinaabe scholar Niigaan Sinclair (2024), from Treaty 1 Territory, similarly describes Ukrainian-Indigenous relations in Winnipeg's North End: "Ukrainians relied on the knowledge of Indigenous communities to survive. [...] Ukrainians were our neighbours, running farms and business all along the Red River to Winnipeg. Contact between our two cultures resulted in amazing collaborations" (p. 321).

Although oral histories and intergenerational stories highlight relationships of mutual aid, trade, and shared struggles, many Ukrainian settlers remained unaware of the extent of their participation in the broader colonization of Indigenous lands (Kober, 2013). Sinclair (2024) acknowledges this complexity, noting that while many Ukrainians collaborated with Indigenous communities, others actively

participated in colonial structures: "Some Ukrainians also participated in racist acts, too, advocating for theft of our land in 1907" (p. 321). Historical literature (Klymasz, 2015; Ledohowski, 2011, 2015) suggests that Ukrainian settlers, despite initial marginalization, eventually integrated into the Anglo-Protestant white settler identity, an identity that sought to erase any Indigenous presence. This assimilation was reinforced by colonial ideologies rooted in imperialism and racial hierarchy (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; TallBear, 2019). Such eliminatory logics contributed to policies of forced assimilation, including the Indian residential school system, the banning of Indigenous ceremonies and cultural practices under the Indian Act, and the imposition of restrictive legal definitions of Indian status (Simpson, 2014; Wildcat, 2015). Therefore, while Ukrainian settlers shared moments of solidarity with Indigenous communities, they also played a role in settler colonialism. The erasure of indigeneity from historical narratives, alongside the pressures of assimilation, contributed to the reification of colonial structures that continue to shape Indigenous-Ukrainian relations today.

5. Stories of the Kokum Scarf

The three women interviewed for this project—Marion Mutala, Patty Krawec, and Sandra Semchuk—come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Their stories, though distinct, weave together through shared themes of connection, cultural exchange, and solidarity. To promote interviews based in mutual respect, reciprocity, and relational knowledge sharing, we provided the questions in advance and allowed time and space for the conversations to go beyond the scope of those questions. This flexible and adaptable approach allowed for a conversational atmosphere, making space for the researchers to share relevant personal connections, reflections, and stories beyond pre-set research questions to acknowledge diverse forms of knowledge transmission (Wilson, 2008; Yunkaporta, 2019).

5.1. **Introducing the Participants.**

Marion Mutala is a Ukrainian-Canadian author from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Treaty 6 and Homelands of the Métis Nation). She shared personal stories, poems, and pieces of her written work, expressing hope for reconciliation and unity between settlers and Indigenous peoples. She encourages and promotes multiculturalism and solidarity amongst diverse groups through conversation and open dialogue.

Patty Krawec is an Anishinaabe-Ukrainian woman who belongs to Lac Seul First Nation in Treaty 3 territory, residing in the Niagara region of Ontario (traditional lands shared by the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples). She brings deep insights into decolonization in terms of Indigenous-settler relationships, reconciliation, and solidarity. Patty's lived experiences in a predominately Ukrainian household, alongside her reconnection with Anishinaabe culture, shapes her perspective on how to critically navigate issues of reconciliation.

Sandra Semchuk is a Ukrainian-Canadian settler from Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan (Treaty 6 and Homelands of the Métis Nation). A prominent photographer and media arts scholar, her work—featured in the National Gallery of Canada—explores themes of relationality and historical memory. Sandra's upbringing in Saskatchewan and her relationship with her late Cree husband have significantly shaped her understanding of Indigenous-Ukrainian connections.

A key theme emerging from the interviews was the personal significance of the kokum scarf to each participant. Marion associated the scarf with her Ukrainian heritage, recalling memories of her ancestors wearing what she called the babushka scarf. Patty, despite growing up in Ukrainian culture distanced from her Indigenous identity, viewed the scarf as distinctly Indigenous, as an assertion of indigeneity and a symbol of resistance.

Rather than seeking a single origin story for the kokum scarf in Indigenous communities, we recognize multiple histories, each shaped by perspectives and relationships. The notion of a single, authoritative history is itself a colonial construct, privileging written records over oral traditions and relational knowledge (Battiste & Hendersen, 2000; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). Indigenous knowledge frameworks emphasize that history is relational, evolving through lived experiences and intergenerational storytelling rather than fixed monolithic narratives (Wilson, 2008; Yunkaporta, 2019).

Marion and Sandra each shared histories of the scarf as a symbol of reciprocity—exchanged among Ukrainian and Indigenous women through trade and gifting. Sandra recalled Cree and Ukrainian women in her community trading scarves for moccasins or gifting the scarf as a token of appreciation for sharing knowledge. Patty spoke of the histories of Indigenous and Ukrainian women exchanging the scarf, suggesting that the accessibility and familiarity of the floral designs contributed to the scarf's widespread adoption: "The short answer is they're beautiful and they're accessible." Patty also noted the deep resonance of the scarf's floral patterns with Indigenous aesthetics: it is "something that looks like our own geography. The florals are familiar; they look like our flowers. The colors are familiar; they look like our woodlands."

Beyond aesthetics, the kokum scarf represents historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and Ukrainian settlers. While Indigenous-settler relations remain fractured even today, the stories tied to the scarf offer a glimpse into past moments of cooperation and mutual support. Marion believed that both groups' histories of persecution contributed to these connections: "I really think Ukrainians and Indigenous peoples had a strong connection because both of them were persecuted, mistreated." Indeed, assimilation was a key tool used by colonial governments in the persecution of Ukrainian settlers in ways similar to Indigenous peoples. As Marion explained, Ukrainian settlers faced assimilation pressures and were encouraged to Anglicize their names, abandon their language and culture, and integrate into English-speaking society. During this same period, Indigenous peoples endured attempts of forced assimilation through residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the dispossession of land (Royal Commission Aboriginal

Peoples [RCAP], 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). This parallel struggle fostered moments of solidarity, although Ukrainian settlers became assimilated over time into the dominant settler-colonial body politic (Klymasz, 2015; McPherson, 2000).

Stories of the exchange of teachings between Indigenous and Ukrainian women emerged throughout the interviews. Marion shared a family story to illustrate how Indigenous peoples guided and supported Ukrainians settlers:

> If it wasn't for the Indigenous peoples helping my grandparents, they probably would have starved or froze to death or whatever because of winter. My mom said when she grew up Indigenous peoples would come to her home and my baba would always have tea on and bread for them and they would trade fish. And so, there was a relationship established between them.

More recently, Marion saw Indigenous peoples' use of the kokum scarf during the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a powerful demonstration of peace, solidarity and unity:

> And why Indigenous peoples continue to wear it, I don't know for sure, but I know they do support us Ukrainians. I feel it's wonderful and it's a huge blessing and an honour, and it just shows you that something, a simple scarf, can connect people.

However, Patty cautioned that contemporary calls for Indigenous solidarity with Ukraine often overlook the history of Ukrainian settlement in Canada and its role in settler colonialism. Patty first learned about the cross-cultural connection and history of the kokum scarf through Indigenous peoples' public display of support for and solidarity with Ukrainians in February 2022. She noticed that much of the media negated the harms of settler colonialism caused by Ukrainian settlement in Canada:

> Because [the Russian-Ukrainian war had] been going on for a long time and I started seeing all of these calls to solidarity with Ukrainians from other Indigenous peoples. All of these calls to solidarity started coming up, and they're very uncritical.

While recognizing the importance of solidarity, Patty emphasized that it needs to extend beyond Ukrainian settlers to all oppressed groups, including Indigenous peoples. The kokum scarf, then, carries, a layered history of cultural exchange, mutual aid, and the complexities of Indigenous-settler relations.

6. Discussion

6.1. **An Invitation for Settlers to Restore Relations.** In her research assistantship with Opaskwayak Cree Nation Elder and scholar Stan Wilson, Avery was encouraged to recognize the knowledge embedded in everyday experiences and her own family teachings (personal communication, March 2023). This research acknowledges the importance of such perspectives, including visits with

family, friends, and community, and Avery's experiences with Ukrainian culture, identity, and the Prairie lands on which she grew up. These non-Western forms of knowledge generation provide deeper insights into the themes explored in this discussion. Tuck et al. (2023) describe this decolonial Indigenous research practice as one in which knowledge is gathered where we "constantly create and construct ourselves and our worlds through visiting" (p. 146).

Building on this, the themes shared by Patty, Marion, and Sandra in their interviews were grounded in visits between Avery and Gabrielle to contextualize their insights with literature centring Indigenous self-determination, sovereignty, and futures. The temporal space of this research— written in 2023–2024 as the war in Ukraine continued and Indigenous-settler relations remain strained under ongoing settler colonialism—is also significant. During informal visits and conversations under the prairie sun, Avery's white settler Ukrainian-Canadian relatives expressed their eagerness to restore Ukrainian-Indigenous relations through renewed acts of gifting the scarf as gestures of reconciliation.

Many of Avery's relations spoke, like Marion and Patty, of the deep emotional significance of Indigenous peoples wearing the kokum scarf in solidarity to demonstrate reciprocal relationships. This identification prompted us to contemplate the ways gifting or sharing culture can support solidarity that transforms Ukrainian-Canadian settlers' relationships with Indigenous peoples, which aligns with the teachings of Syilx Okanagan knowledge keeper Jeannette Armstrong (2007), who describes gifting as a powerful act: "This is something that is needed in terms of how we are doing things in the world today. And this is something that needs to be understood deeply at the personal level. It comes down to each person embodying this concept and practicing it without letting up. It comes down to each person being human in this way" (p. 49). Armstrong's perspective may help explain why the kokum scarf became such a powerful symbol of Indigenous solidarity with Ukrainians during the Russian invasion in 2022. However, she also highlights that reciprocity and gifting are not one-time gestures, but practices that require ongoing commitment: "each person embodying this concept and practicing it without letting up" (2007, p. 49). As Marion and Patty both noted, the historic practice of gifting the scarf and more generally engaging in reciprocal economic relationships between Ukrainian-Canadians and Indigenous Peoples is no longer common.

To genuinely restore these relationships, it is essential to understand why such reciprocal practices faded and to explore how they can be revitalized in ways that support Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and futures. This discussion argues that embodying the values embedded in the kokum scarf require Ukrainian-Canadian settlers to critically examine and unlearn colonial perspectives, moving beyond dominant approaches to reconciliation towards an anti-oppressive, solidarity-oriented coexistence with Indigenous peoples.

6.2. **Grounding Ukrainian-Canadian Identity in Settler Colonialism.** The stories shared in this research reinforce that reciprocal and respectful relationships between settlers and Indigenous peoples are indeed possible. Such

relationships align with the visions outlined in Indigenous treaty agreements, including the Two-Row Wampum Belt, and the Numbered Treaties (Asch, 2014; Borrows & Coyle, 2017; Johnson, 2007; Starblanket, 2019). However, these relationships have been systematically undermined by settler colonialism, which is not only the dominant structure shaping Canada but also continuously generating new forms of racism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism designed to eliminate and assimilate Indigenous peoples (Barker, 2024).

Ukrainian-Canadian settlers, as predominantly white individuals, became entangled in and complicit with the settler colonial mechanism which comprise Canadian systems, structures, values and identity (Czumer, 1970; Ledohowski, 2015; McPherson, 2000). While Ukrainians faced their own discrimination upon arrival, as Marion noted in her interview, they were pressured to assimilate into Anglo-Canadian culture to secure economic and social opportunities in Canada. Prairie historians such as Sarah Carter (2008) and Kathryn McPherson (2000) explain that Ukrainians, like Indigenous peoples, were subjected to a similar reshaping of relationships and cultural practices in order to maintain Canada's settler colonial social and economic order.

However, in succumbing to the wider Canadian settler body politic, Ukrainians also entered a new position of privilege in a society structured by white supremacy. With their adoption of the English language and Anglo-Canadian norms, they became part of the settler-colonial system that imposed racial hierarchies and dominant narratives about Indigenous peoples. This often invisible yet omnipresent discourse, frequently framed as benevolence, positions Indigenous peoples as needing to be "saved" from their traditional ways of life, reinforcing harmful stereotypes of primitiveness and inferiority (Byrd, 2011; Moreton-Robinson, 2021; Simpson, 2014; Weir, 2024).

Even today, these biases impede Ukrainian-Canadian settlers' ability to build meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships with Indigenous Peoples. Even when Ukrainian-Canadian settlers are cognisant of the problematic nature of these colonial worldviews, they remain embedded in a system that grants them power and privilege in Canada (Snelgrove et al., 2014). Settler colonialism functions by occupying Indigenous lands and resources while erasing Indigenous identity (Mackey, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This system perpetuates racialization and white supremacy, making it impossible to restore past Indigenous-settler relations without fundamentally dismantling colonial beliefs. While returning to a romanticized past of harmonious relations may be unrealistic, settlers can work towards decolonization by actively interrogating and rejecting colonial ideologies.

Despite the resistance of many settlers to engaging in decolonization, recent events highlight the persistence of settler colonial violence against Indigenous peoples (Bilefsky, 2023; Eisenberg, 2022; Gaglione, 2023; Hobson, 2023; Kives, 2023; Withers, 2020). Settler opposition to searching Winnipeg's Prairie Green landfill for missing Indigenous women, confrontations over Wet'suwet'en land defense, and violent disputes over Mi'kmaq lobster fishing rights all illustrate how colonial logics continue to control Indigenous lands and bodies (Bourgeois,

2024; Maynard & Simpson, 2023; Razack, 2002; Stark, 2016). This violence aligns with Patrick Wolfe's (2006) assertion that "settler colonialism is a structure rather than an event" (p. 390): its goal is to continuously eliminate Indigenous peoples to secure land and resources for settlers.

6.3. **Moves to Innocence and the Limits of Symbolic Reconciliation.** As Indigenous peoples continue to resist colonial erasure and have their voices heard in Canada, the restoration of Indigenous-settler relations requires settlers to critically examine the ways current approaches to allyship and solidarity can instead unknowingly reproduce or reinforce settler colonialism. Furthermore, it suggests the importance of considering decolonization in relational practices. Many settlers engage in "moves to innocence" (Mawhinney, 1998, cited in Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 3), by which they seek to absolve themselves of colonial guilt without making meaningful changes. This deflection prevents genuine engagement with reconciliation and decolonization, instead prioritizing settler feelings over Indigenous realities.

During her interview, Patty provided an example of such a move to innocence, illustrating how settlers often rationalize their presence on Indigenous lands to evade accountability (Tuck & Yang, 2012). She recounted a conversation with a relation who defended Ukrainian settlers' land occupation in Canada:

> As [this person] says, Ukrainians weren't always white; your [settler ancestors] didn't steal that land. And they weren't given to it for free. They had to work hard for it. And I [Patty] was like, I know . . . but how long do you get to be in possession of a stolen TV before it stops being stolen? Like do you just give it to your neighbor, and then your neighbor gives it, and by the time it gets to the fourth person, it's not stolen anymore. They didn't come in with the intention of displacing Indigenous people. But they benefited from it.

This exchange highlights a common settler-colonial deflection—the idea that because Ukrainian-Canadians worked hard for what they had, their role in colonization is either diminished or absolved. This reasoning dismisses the fact that much of the land was never legally surrendered by Indigenous peoples and that treaty obligations have repeatedly been broken (Dudha, 2025; Taylor, 2024). While acknowledging the hardships Ukrainian settlers faced is important, it does not excuse or erase their participation in the broader settler colonial project. The displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples were foundational to the Canadian state, and settlers—regardless of intent—benefited from these injustices. Tuck and Yang (2012) explain that differing experiences of marginalization cannot be made equivalent to one another. Ukrainian-Canadians, like many non-Anglo settlers, did experience discrimination, but this does not exempt them from their complicity in the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands. Distinct experiences of oppression are best understood within their own contexts, rather than being conflated to justify settler presence.

Another way that settlers distance themselves from responsibility is through performative allyship: that is, gestures of support that lack substantive action (Kluttz et al., 2020). Jewell and Mosby (2019) refer to this as "symbolic reconciliation"—a process in which settlers engage in superficial displays of solidarity that do little to disrupt colonial structures. Symbolic reconciliation allows settlers to feel as though they are contributing to reconciliation while avoiding meaningful engagement with Indigenous demands for justice (Blackstock, 2011; George, 2021; Jewell & Mosby, 2022; Younging et al., 2009). Actions associated with symbolic reconciliation align with what Robin DiAngelo (2018) describes as performative allyship from white people. In drawing this comparison, it is evident that the actions associated with symbolic reconciliation often stem from the avoidance of white guilt. Rather than addressing the root causes of colonialism, settlers may focus on their own emotional discomfort, shifting attention away from Indigenous calls for accountability. These moves to innocence and other practices of performative activism protect, uphold, and bolster settler colonialism, white guilt, privilege, and entitlement (Breen, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Kluttz et al., 2020). They reinforce white supremacy and prevent settlers from being able to build meaningful reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities.

Leeyq'sun scholar Rachel Flowers (2015) further explains that settler-led forms of solidarity, allyship, and reconciliation frequently reproduce colonial power dynamics. Without centring Indigenous perspectives, reconciliation efforts risk reinforcing rather than dismantling colonial hierarchies (Craft & Regan, 2020). One prominent example of symbolic reconciliation is the commodification of Orange Shirt Day. Intended to be a day of remembrance for Indigenous residential school survivors, the day has increasingly become a settler-driven initiative (Jewell, 2024). Anishinaabe scholar Eva Jewell (2024) explains that while many settlers wear orange shirts to show support, these shirts are often produced and sold by non-Indigenous businesses, failing to directly benefit Indigenous communities. She further states "that in a neoliberal context, these avenues of 'solidarity' are commodifications that reify settler colonial capitalist practices and a Canadian culture of Canadian benevolence" (2024, p. 184). Indeed, the act of wearing an orange shirt, much like the kokum scarf, can be a powerful symbol of solidarity and support for Indigenous peoples. However, without intentional action, such gestures remain hollow. Jewell (2024) critiques this pattern, stating that "reconciliation is critiqued for its malleable qualities that allow it to be twisted and co-opted by the Canadian state as a feel-good, moderate, harm-reduction approach that fails to transform the structures that violate Indigenous Peoples and our lands, waters and non-human kin" (Franks, 2020, as cited in Jewell, 2024, p. 185).

To avoid falling into these patterns, it is crucial for settlers to understand that reconciliation begins inside themselves (Breen, 2019; Boudreau Morris, 2020; Jewell, 2024; Johnson, 2007; Kizuk, 2020). Self-reconciliation is an internal process of critically reflecting on one's complicity in settler colonialism and committing to transformative action. It requires settlers to confront the uncomfortable realities that their ancestors, government, and personal worldviews have contributed to

ongoing colonial violence. It is, as Jewell (2024) describes, "a reckoning with and commitment to changing behaviours, practices, beliefs, and structures that normalize settler colonial violence and white supremacy. It is a radical re-membering of the responsibilities that come with the right to be on this land" (p. 186). For Ukrainian-Canadians, self-reconciliation includes recognizing that, despite its differing manifestations, colonialism is occurring both in Ukraine and what is currently known as Canada. This process includes critically reflecting on how their communities engage with colonialism in both contexts to achieve solidarity in the refusal of colonial ideology and oppression.

Rather than centring settler discomfort or approaching decolonization as an act of charity, true solidarity requires a commitment to rejecting settler colonialism altogether. This means listening to Indigenous leadership, supporting Indigenous sovereignty, and actively working against structures that sustain Indigenous dispossession (Flowers, 2015; Simpson, 2014). A transformative approach to reconciliation involves unsettling deeply ingrained colonial ideologies and embracing Indigenous-led frameworks for renewal (Craft & Regan, 2020; Jewell, 2024; Maynard & Simpson, 2023; Starblanket, 2023; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The kokum scarf provides an opportunity for Ukrainian-Canadians to reimagine their relationship with Indigenous peoples not as rooted in symbolic allyship, but as an ongoing, reciprocal, and relational practice of solidarity.

6.4. **Being in Good Relation.** Interrogating reconciliation and contemporary solidarity efforts through a decolonial lens can help Ukrainian-Canadian settlers reflect on and embrace the values of reciprocity and mutual support that once characterized relationships between Indigenous and Ukrainian people. As Patty noted, the kokum scarf's symbolic solidarity risks falling short without critical examination. Moving forward calls for more than symbolic gestures, it invites a shift towards meaningful, Indigenous-centred relationships. The scarf serves as a material reminder of the ongoing relationship between Indigenous and Ukrainian peoples.

Beyond rejecting colonial beliefs, it is important to recognize how the kokum scarf itself has become a powerful site of Indigenous resilience, countering the erasure of Indigenous peoples that settler colonialism attempts to impose. The scarf, an item of Ukrainian origin, now carries powerful meanings of resistance and strength in Indigenous communities. It serves as both a historical marker of Ukrainian-Indigenous relations and a reminder of the continued inseparability of these communities. Even for Ukrainian settlers living in Canada who are unaware of their entanglements with Indigenous histories, their presence on Indigenous lands—made possible through treaty agreements—binds them to these relationships (Starblanket, 2019). Recognizing this interconnectedness is not optional; it is foundational to understanding what it means to be *in good relation.*

Rebuilding this relationship requires addressing the barriers explored earlier in this discussion. Breen (2019) and Whitlow and Oliver (2019) describe how settlers often struggle with discomfort and fear when attempting to build relationships with Indigenous peoples, worried about doing or saying the wrong thing.

While these emotions are valid, allowing them to stall or prevent engagement risks perpetuating disconnection. Working through discomfort (rather than being immobilized by it) can open the way to more authentic and respectful relationships. In contrast, remaining passive in the face of uncertainty may allow misinformation, guilt, and avoidance to continue driving a wedge between Indigenous and settler communities.

Western cultures, particularly those shaped by colonialism, have often devalued relationality, emphasizing individuality over community. Yet, relationality and community remain central to Ukrainian-Canadian culture. This can be seen in Ukrainian dance, where music, costumes, and steps are deeply connected to the land and regional identities, and where dance formation, such as circles, holding hands, and dancing in pairs, reflects the importance of togetherness. The kokum scarf has the same potential. In contemporary times, it demonstrates that Western cultural communities can enter into relation with Indigenous cultures and create something that is transformational and refuses colonialism. Through relationships grounded in reciprocity, mutuality, respect, and renewal, just as in the original exchange of the kokum scarves, there is an opportunity to build something beautiful and deeply meaningful.

Marion and Patty both remind Ukrainian-Canadian settlers that the responsibility to renew these relationships rests with them. While Indigenous peoples continue to express solidarity toward Ukrainians, particularly in the face of the ongoing war, there is an opportunity for Ukrainian-Canadian settlers to reciprocate that support in tangible ways. One avenue they suggest is addressing the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit Peoples. Just as Ukrainian women face extreme violence in war, Indigenous women continue to be disproportionately targeted by gendered colonial violence in Canada (Havryshko, 2023; Horne, 2023; Kulick, 2022). Recognizing this shared experience provides an opportunity for Ukrainian-Canadian settlers to engage in meaningful solidarity—not as a symbolic act, but as a commitment to dismantling colonial structures that perpetuate harm.

For Avery, the kokum scarf provides a sense of kinship and belonging through the shared resistance against oppression and assimilation. Similarly, Marion describes seeing Indigenous peoples wearing the scarf as "wonderful, and it's a huge blessing and an honour, and it just shows you that something, a simple scarf, can connect people." Patty also notes that while the kokum scarf was historically non-Indigenous, it has become a symbol of Indigenous self-determination and empowerment. It is no longer simply a piece of fabric but represents Indigenous resistance, survivance, and assertion of identity in the face of the eliminatory logics and policies of settler colonialism. For Ukrainian-Canadians, the scarf can similarly serve as a reminder of their own responsibilities to answer the calls from Indigenous peoples, to engage in anti-colonial and anti-racist work, and to forge new futures based on genuine, rather than merely performative solidarity.

7. Conclusion

The kokum scarf, then, is not just a historical artifact or a sentimental token; it is a call to action. It serves as a reminder of our shared responsibility to restore and sustain relationships, to reflect on where our solidarities are most needed, and to protect these relationships from erasure, just as our own cultural identities deserve to be preserved. Ukrainian-Canadian settlers are invited to look to their ancestors who valued interconnectivity and interdependence and embody those values in relations with Indigenous peoples today. In doing so, they can move beyond symbolic reconciliation and into the kind of solidarity that actively works against colonialism, oppression, and erasure.

The themes that emerged throughout the interviews highlight the kokum scarf as a symbol of connection, reciprocity, sharing, mutual respect, and empathy within historical settler-Indigenous relationships. These values, rooted in relational accountability, are the very qualities that Indigenous peoples have long sought from settlers in the pursuit of reconciliation. They reflect the principles of mutual benefit and co-existence that were central to the treaty agreements that continue to provide settlers with the opportunity to live and thrive on these lands (Craft, 2013; Johnson, 2007; Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 1998; RCAP, 1996; Starblanket, 2023; Stark, 2017). However, these stories do not erase or absolve the role of Ukrainian settlers in the broader settler colonial project. Instead, they offer a way forward for renewed relations, a path that acknowledges both historical entanglements and the responsibility of settlers to renew relationships through meaningful action. This is not intended to romanticize Ukrainian settlers in comparison to other settler groups but rather to recognize that all settlers, regardless of background, have a responsibility to engage in decolonization. By understanding their own histories and cultures in relation to Indigenous peoples, settlers can begin the work of building good relations.

While the kokum scarf has varied meanings, its enduring significance lies in its capacity to represent meaningful settler-Indigenous relationship building. Only by committing to decolonial solidarity that involves actively rejecting settler colonialism and embodying relational values can settlers begin to restore relationships rooted in reciprocity, knowledge sharing, and mutual respect. Fostering anti-colonial futures requires more than acknowledgement; it demands action. By embracing the values embedded in the kokum scarf and centring Indigenous-led pathways forward, settlers can work toward relationships that are not simply repaired but genuinely transformed by being grounded in reciprocity, hope, and a shared future.

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[1] School of Indigenous Governance, University of Victoria, Canada

Email address: averyshtykalo@uvic.ca

[2] Department of Community, Culture and Global Studies, University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus, Canada

Email address: gabrielle.legault@ubc.ca