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FORM A CALMING CIRCLE: BEADWORK, HUMOR, AND/AS MEDICINE IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

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Abstract. This article documents the creation of a Métis fire bag ("octopus" bag) as a site of kinship, healing, and resurgence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Métis beadwork practices, traditional plant knowledge, and humour the article traces how beadwork can hold space simultaneously as material culture, medicine, and relational pedagogy. Through an autoethnographic account of designing and beading a vibrant purple fire bag, the author explores how intentional making, and teachings embedded in plants and stitches, can support individual and collective well-being. The article contributes to Indigenous scholarship on material arts by foregrounding beadwork as a living practice that carries memory, care, and medicine across generations.

Keywords. Beadwork Humour, Kinship, Medicines, Motherhood, Parenting, Plants, Textiles, Traditional Garments

1. Positionality Statement

I share my heartwork from a corner I have carved out within the academy; one where I struggle as one of very few Indigenous people in my institution and where I use beadwork as an embodied pedagogy in my teaching and an act of resistance and knowledge mobilization in my research. In these spaces of learning, my children and I largely exist in pan-Indigenous communities as long-term visitors on other Nations' territories.

I live as a member of the diaspora, and have done so since I left Manitoba in order to pursue my legal education at the University of Ottawa. My mum is Colette Lussier and my nana is Pauline Lussier (née Dumont). My great-grandfather, who became an ancestor when I was in my late teens, was Joe Dumont of Otterburn and later Ste. Anne's; his mum, who passed when I was wee, was Élzire Carrière—daughter of Augustin Carrière and Adélaide Desjardins. My three children, who carry the surname Lussier-Meek, and I hold our citizenship under the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF), and I am doing my very best to

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raise them to understand exactly who they are and what responsibilities they carry as Métis people.

2. Introduction

This is not my first pandemic beading project by any stretch of the imagination. Nor is it my first pandemic fire bag; in the summer of 2021, as the initial public health crisis appeared to be resolving after more than a year of desperate isolation, I beaded my first attempt at this eight-legged bag that once formed an essential part of a Métis man's wardrobe (Fitzhenry, 2016). Inspired by dropping case counts and rising vaccination rates, I beaded my first humble attempt, convinced the worst was behind us. It was very hopefully titled "Ob-la-di, Oc-to-pus (Life Goes On): A Modern Métis Fire Bag" (see Figure 1), and my journey in learning and reclaiming the production of this traditional garment is documented in an article of the same name (Lussier, 2024).

As it turns out, we simply didn't know what we didn't know, and third, fourth, and fifth waves of the variants Delta, Omicron, and others followed. The wave of hope that many of us had ridden in the preceding months ebbed away, and many of my nearest and dearest began to struggle deeply with what may have been new but was nowhere close to normal. After nearly two years of simply putting one foot in front of another, home-schooling children, pursuing graduate studies, working remotely full-time, and never hugging my mother or grandparents, I stumbled.

My learners and kin will be the first to tell you that when things get tough, I reach for the beads. Like many beadworkers, I recognize that my beadwork practice carries therapeutic power, both for individual beaders and for whole communities (Grey, 2017, pp. 5, 25; Kermoal, 2016, p. 129; Racette, 2004, p. 204). One of my former learners, Natane Allison of Bkejwanong (Walpole Island) First Nation, once described beadwork as a practice that brings "inner peace" (2020), and other beadworkers frequently remind us that beadwork is a meditative practice (Edge, 2011, p. 108; Kelsey, 2014, p. 25; Prete, 2019, p. 52; Parks Canada, 2016). It is a slow and contemplative art, one that simply cannot be rushed. Lisa Shepherd, a Métis artisan, explains that "there's no instant gratification in beading. There's life and there's a breath in the work that you are doing. And you have to slow down, and your heart rate slows down, and your breathing deepens and there is just this connection that happens" (Parks Canada, 2016).

In those first few days of what was later (unsurprisingly) diagnosed as burnout, I was unable to so much as look at a bead, never mind sit with my own thoughts and deepen my breath. It wasn't pretty. In a heroic attempt to support me through all the grief that was manifesting for all the people, things, and moments we had lost to the pandemic so far, a close friend upped their texting game. What else could they do, from six hours away, in times like these? While the stream of memes, TikTok videos, and GIFs was nearly constant during those darkest days, there was one that came to serve as a stand-in for a broader sentiment of

FIGURE 1. "Ob-La-Di, Oc-To-Pus (Life Goes On)": A Modern Métis Fire bag

unconditional love across distance and through pandemic isolation. The GIF in question features actress Kathy Najimy as Mary Sanderson in the 1993 Disney film *Hocus Pocus*. The scene captured in the four-second GIF involves Mary suggesting to her sisters, played by Bette Midler and Sarah Jessica Parker, that they should "form a calming circle." Her sister replies, in a highly agitated state, "I AM CALM" (Andyj219, 2007).

Yes, we can pause for a moment to acknowledge that it is an absolutely silly thing, but one that builds on a critical Métis cultural practice. As Sherry Farrell Racette (2004) once wrote, "consistently identified as an aspect of Metís cultural practice; laughter, play and celebration created places of safety and solidarity" (p. 204). And, silly as it may appear at first glance, I make no apologies for my non-linear creative process. Sometimes inspiration comes from the most unexpected of places, whether a GIF or a sandwich board. For example, consider the time my beadee and I went to my local fabric store on March 12, 2020, and saw the sign in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. Fabrications Ottawa Sandwich Board

In the months that followed, I tried to support this local small business with sandwich board musings so on point that we could never have known that at the time I snapped the photo. During one online shopping trip in fall 2021, I stumbled

on *Hocus Pocus*-themed quilting cotton (see Figure 3), which I purchased on impulse with no particular project in mind.

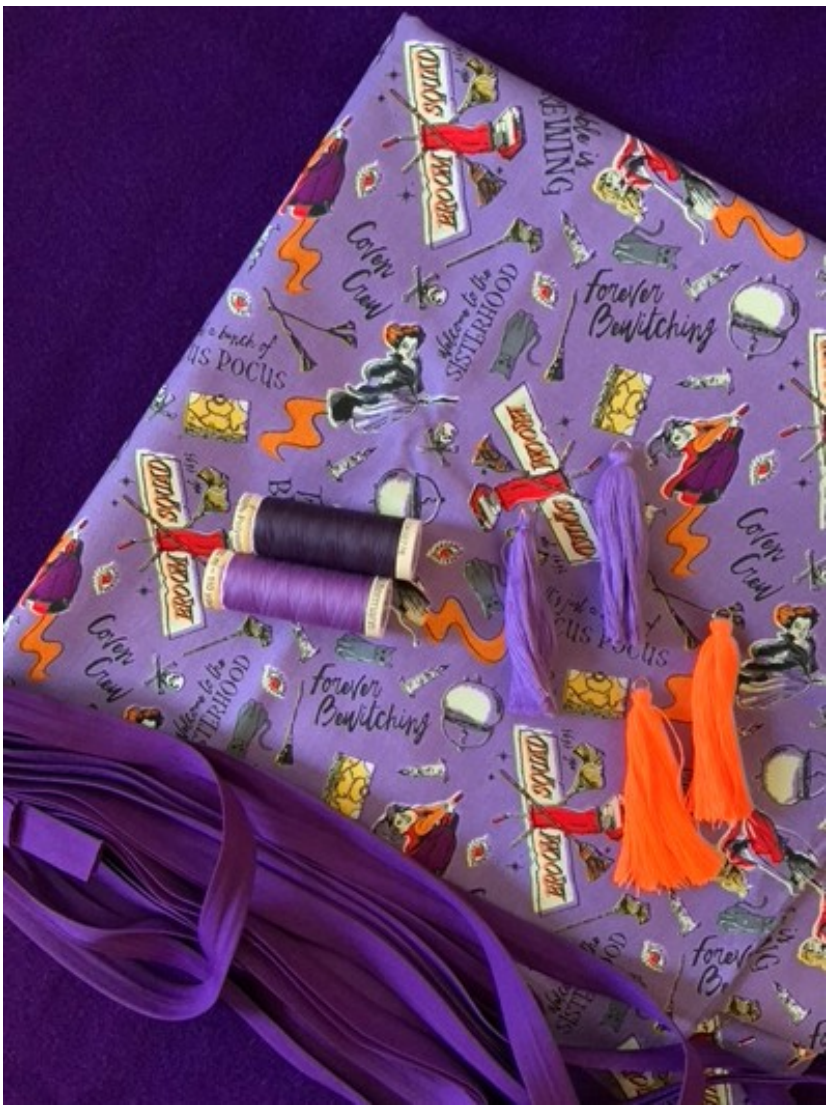

FIGURE 3. Hocus Pocus Quilting Cotton and Various Fire Bag Notions

I knew that I couldn't go wrong with *Hocus Pocus* for my beadee (who grew up with the nickname "Binx" after the cat in the film and who remains a passionate follower of this cult classic well into adulthood), and I was sure the right project would present itself one day. Months later, on the darkest December day and my sixth receipt of the calming circle GIF, inspiration hit. It felt as if the world were on fire and that it was time for another fire bag—this time with a healthy dose of humour—and a calming circle.

Building on the critical work and beadwork patterns in Christi Belcourt's *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use* (2007), the top of the piece features a variety of plants and flowers that are traditionally used as medicines by Métis people.

In an exploration of links between women's environmental knowledge and Métis rights, Natalie Kermoal (2016) notes that when artists bead representations of sacred medicines, the resulting material objects, imbued with intention, can carry medicinal properties:

> Women also stress the healing and therapeutic power of beadwork.... Through their own healing, and by choosing in some instances to bead plants and flowers that have curing powers, they are transferring the medicine on to the clothing. (p. 129)

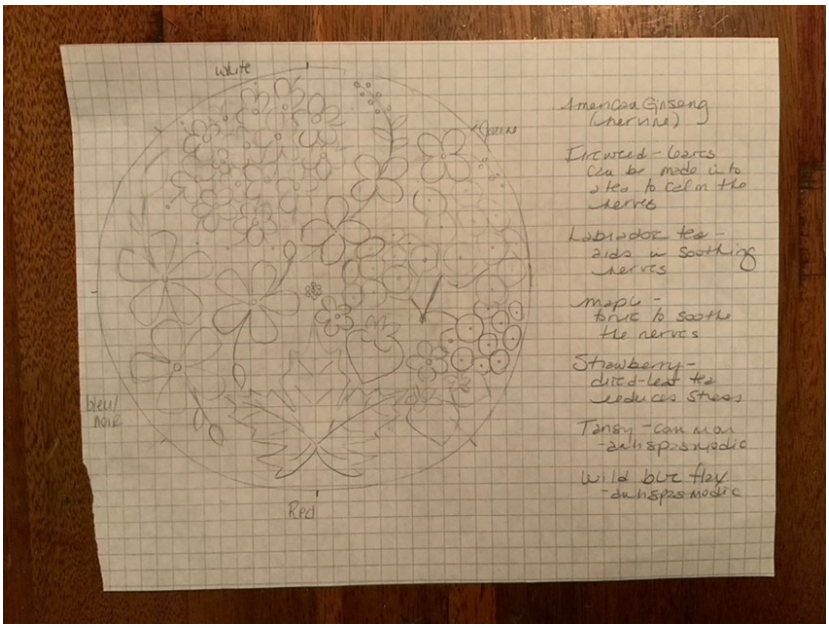

FIGURE 4. Pattern in Evolution

With this teaching in mind, while researching for the pattern, I focused on beading medicines with calming properties. The plants ultimately depicted range from nervine agents to antispasmodics and plants that can be steeped into teas to calm the nerves.

Though I could never have known it at the outset, as I moved through my work of determining which medicines could or should be represented on the bag, I came to realize that all the plants I had selected could be beaded in white, yellow, red, or blue. Once that dawned on me, the obvious choice was to design the pattern in a (calming) circle divided into quadrants that roughly follow the quarters of the medicine wheel (see Figure 4).

While not an exclusively Métis symbol, the medicine wheel, as Métis artist Leah Dorion reminds us, carries "an entire holistic knowledge system" (2014). In pre-COVID times, my children and I had the opportunity to learn from Leah during a workshop offered to young families at the Wabano Centre for Indigenous Centre for Excellence in Healthcare in Ottawa. The children were in awe of Leah

(and the seed mosaics she helped them create), and the many books she has written and illustrated through the Gabriel Dumont Institute took on a special importance in our home after our visit. The medicine wheel frequently pops up in the storybook images that help visually translate traditional Métis stories for young readers.

Of the medicine wheel, Kelly Beaulieu (2018) of Sandy Bay First Nation explains:

> The circle, or wheel, is a common symbol in many cultures and represents several elements to the First Nations. The circle acknowledges the connectedness of everything in life, such as the four seasons, the four stages of life and the four winds, and it represents the continuous cycle and relationship of the seen and unseen, the physical and spiritual, birth and death, and the daily sunrise and sunset. The circle is divided into four coloured quadrants. The colours can vary, but the symbolism remains similar amongst the first peoples. The wheel moves in a clockwise direction, with the teachings always beginning at the yellow, or eastern, quadrant. These colours relate to teachings of the directions, seasons, elements, animals, plants, heavenly bodies and the stages of life.

I had been thinking a lot about circle-based pedagogies, having recently completed my second semester of teaching law school online from a computer in a corner of my unfinished basement. I had been sitting with the work of Métis scholar Lynn Lavallée, who has written about circle-based learning practices as conceptualized in relation to the medicine wheel and who explains the wheel as a powerful visual tool:

> The medicine wheel is both a symbol and a tool to understand phenomena. It is a circle divided into four quadrants, or segments, which are separate but interconnected. This state of separateness but interconnectedness is sometimes depicted visually with feathers placed between each quadrant and the four quadrants joining in the centre. The colors of the quadrants vary between nations.
>
> (Lavallée, 2009, p. 23)

She goes on to explain the visual language of the medicine wheel as it relates specifically to health, noting that "health is the balance between the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual: the four quadrants of the medicine wheel. Health also involves balance with others (family, community), with the environment, and with Mother Earth" (2009, p. 24). In these unprecedented times during which so many of us have struggled to achieve balance in isolation, the medicine wheel felt like an obvious frame within which to bead medicines that calm us.

FIGURE 5. Common Tansy

Beginning in the East with the yellow quadrant, as one does: the quadrant of the very young (Beaulieu, 2018; see Figure 5) contains common tansy, a species introduced to North America by settlers (Marles et al., 2012, p. 137) that was quickly adopted into Indigenous medicinal usage (Belcourt, 2007, p. 55). Tansy is used to treat a wide range of ailments, from earaches to fevers, and is included in the calming circle for its use as an antispasmodic (Belcourt, 2007, pp. 55–56). It is clear from a single glance that this quadrant of the wheel represents less than a quarter of the circle. This visual cue remarks upon the pandemic experience that has required the very young to shoulder enormous burdens to facilitate the lives of adults keen and even desperate to "return to normal." With children under five ineligible for vaccination, the burden of adults' decisions often landed on the shoulders of the very young, who were forced to grow up in unprecedented and accelerated ways during the pandemic. Incorporated into the tansy are beads plated in 24 karat gold, a nod to the brilliance of the young ones, even in difficult times.

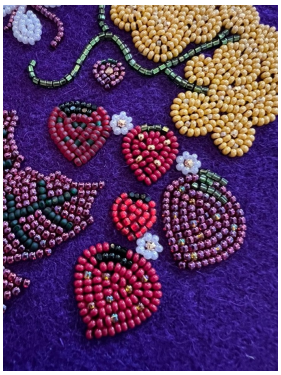

FIGURE 6. Strawberries

The red of youth and adolescence (Beaulieu, 2018) encroaches on the tansy in the form of strawberries—a visual attempt to make curtailed childhoods and the resulting challenging transitions a little sweeter (see Figure 6). In some communities, young women engage in strawberry ceremonies when they come of age, a practice that encourages learning about "life, love, and community" (Armstrong, 2020, p. 97). Heartberries have long held a special place in my life and beadwork practice, making appearances in heartworks ranging from countless pairs of Métis Christmas mittens (Dorion, 2017) I have sewn for loved ones, through to the honour shawl I completed as part of my doctoral dissertation (Lussier, 2022). [.2.1]Cree knowledge sharer Carrie Armstrong (2020) also offers that "strawberries are often referred to as 'women's fruit' and are said to be a symbol of rebirth and hope" (p. 97). I am unconvinced that a calming circle would be complete without hope—for the future, for love, for community. The seeds of the berries are plated with gold; here, these brilliant beads can be read as glimmers of hope.

FIGURE 7. Maple

The red quadrant is anchored by a maple leaf in cranberry-coloured beads with a lustre finish (See Figure 7), evoking autumn and the changes in seasons and in life itself. The veins of the leaf are beaded in matte evergreen-coloured charlotte-cut beads, representing the first time my beadwork practice has incorporated these delicate facets that sparkle when the garment moves and catches the light. Beyond the most common way to consume maple—syrup—it is used for a range of medicinal purposes by Métis people. While it is included in the calming circle for its consumption as tea to soothe the nerves, it can also be used to treat diarrhea, increase urine flow, strengthen the liver, or serve as a poultice for boils or swelling, among other common uses (Belcourt, 2017, pp. 33–34).

FIGURE 8. A toast

The maple also reminds me of maple syrup teachings my children received from Jeff Hewitt during the Zoom defense of my doctoral dissertation in spring 2021. A celebratory toast, to life, in pandemic isolation was certainly a novel use of maple, but it also served as medicine to calm the nerves (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 9. Wild Blue Flax, Before

The quadrant of the wheel for adulthood and parenthood (Beaulieu, 2018) is filled with wild blue flax, a plant harvested for consumption, medicinal, and a variety of industrial purposes (Belcourt, 2017, pp. 57–58; see Figure 9). A source of fibre and an assortment of vitamins and minerals including Omega 6 and 9 and potassium, wild blue flax can be used as a mild laxative, to "help lower cholesterol," and to treat heartburn; it is included in the calming circle for its use as an antispasmodic and tonic (Belcourt, 2017, pp. 57–58). The flowers, seeds, and buds are beaded in curves that attempt to reach around and cradle the generations before and after. This visual cue speaks to the experience of adults who do their very best to hold their families together across generations. As a parent to three young children ranging from three to seven years old at the onset of the pandemic in North America, my ongoing pandemic experiences can only

be described as attempts to stitch us all together; just keep beading and ignore all the beads you have spilled on the floor.

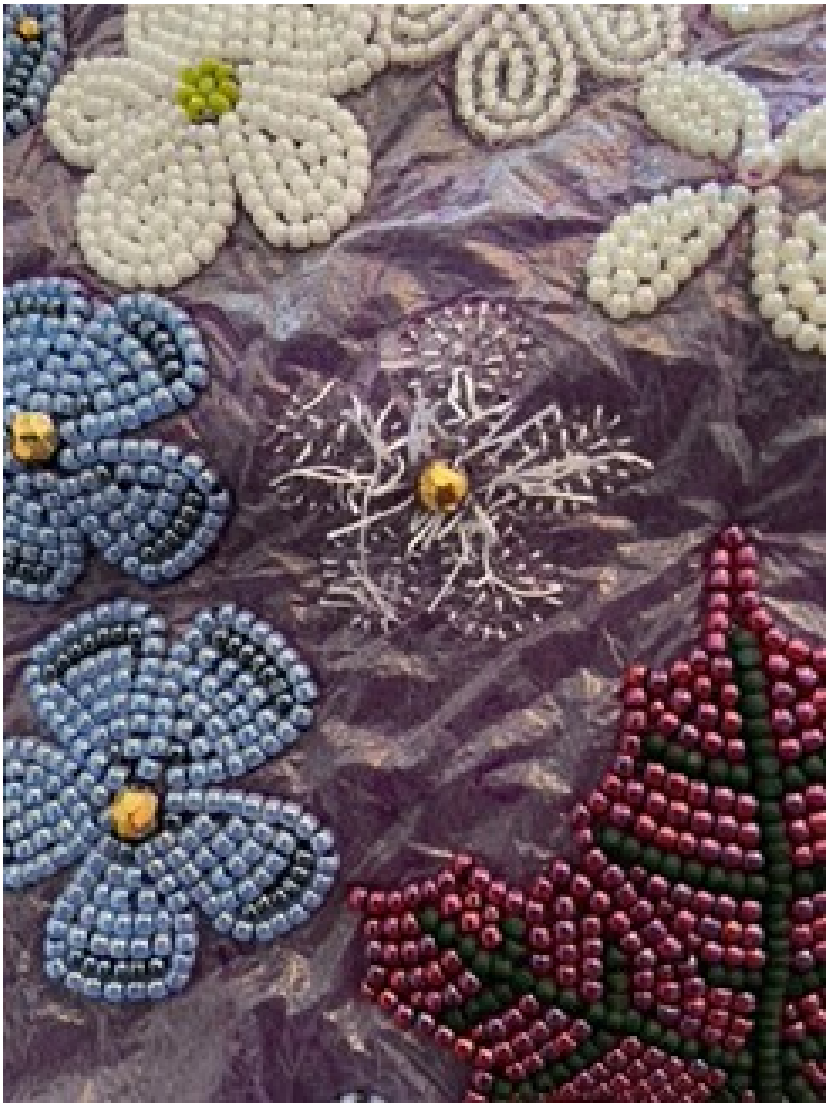

FIGURE 10. Change in Plans

Meanwhile, one of my dearest friends once spoke about the act of pandemic parenting as juggling, with some of the balls rubber and others glass (see Figure 10). She suggested that the trick is to triage the rubber balls in mid-act and to keep one's eyes on the glass balls to avoid having to stand among dangerous shards (J. Lo, personal communication, February 24, 2022). Whether we run with Lo's analogy of juggling or mine of beading, we are both telling a story of standing knee-deep in glass —and we are most certainly not isolated cases (Proudfoot, 2021).

FIGURE 11. Wild Blue Flax, Restitched

That I chose to bead this quadrant of the wheel in blue, filling it with blue flax instead of black beads (see Figure 11), is a nod to teachings about the medicine wheel that I received from Tracey Lindberg. The teachings of the use of blue over black in Cree territory brought another learning opportunity in the form of a mistake I made when beading for someone I didn't know all that well. When I gifted them a medicine wheel with a blue quadrant, I learned that this was considered an insult, as their teachings required that black hold the space in the west. It was a painful public learning experience and a story I cannot write down, but it is an important one that I carry with me as I move through other spaces. Now, when I see blue in a medicine wheel, I am reminded to always keep an open heart and mind and to walk with humility, honesty, courage, and respect for the multiplicity of teachings that exist across nations. By beading this invisible teaching into the piece, I hope that the wearer will also carry themselves in this way as they move through the world.

In the North, the white of the Elders' quadrant (Beaulieu, 2018) is filled with Labrador tea and white fireweed (see Figure 12). Labrador tea grows across Canada under a variety of conditions, ranging from bogs to tundra (Belcourt, 2007, pp. 31–32) and boreal forests to the subarctic (Marles et al., 2012, pp. 14–15). Beyond its many medicinal uses, it is commonly consumed as a beverage, earning it the name "Medicine tea" in Métis communities (Belcourt, 2007, pp. 31–32). Sometimes referred to as muskeg tea, Labrador tea can be used to soothe nerves (Belcourt, 2007, pp. 31–32) and "quiet nervous people or relieve tension" (Marles et al., 2012, pp. 179–180) It is also said to promote "relaxation and restful sleep" (Armstrong, 2020, p. 105), two things that many sorely missed during the pandemic. Beyond its use as medicine for my physical body, the taste

FIGURE 12. White Quadrant

of Labrador tea brings me waves of love of community, for on more than one occasion, it has been gifted to me by learners and colleagues. Waves of love: soothes nerves and promotes relaxation, indeed.

I also have a particular relationship with fireweed, a plant that earned its common name from its tendency to grow in devastated spaces, as it is often among the first plants to emerge following forest fires; teachings relating to this "colonizing" wildflower (Vizgirdas, n.d.) that thrives in poor soil (Arsenault, 2006) find their way into my day-to-day life on a surprisingly frequent basis. The flowers make frequent appearances in my beadwork practice, and have adorned an entire collection of traditional garments built around "Ob-la-di, Oc-to-pus (Life Goes On): Modern Métis Fire Bag." Perhaps equally important, the first time my beadee beaded for me, they beaded fireweed. The plant, sometimes known

FIGURE 13. Fireweed

as willowherb, is used for both nourishment and as medicine in a wide array of ways by Indigenous nations from coast to coast to coast (Marles et al., 2012, pp. 211–212). Fireweed has had a broad range of traditional medicinal uses in Métis communities: it is sometimes used to aid in the healing of cuts, to prevent infection and clean wounds, or to reduce inflammation (Belcourt, 2007, p. 25). It has found a home in the calming circle for one medicinal property in particular: fireweed leaf tea serves as a tonic for the nerves (Belcourt, 2007, p. 26). The beaded fireweed gently reaches over the yellow blooms (see Figure 13), a nod to the Elders watching over the little ones.

FIGURE 14. How Many Legs on an Octopus? 2... Many.

Each of the four front legs of the fire bag carries four juniper berries in shades of blue and green, chosen by my beadee through a series of text messages and online consultations (see Figure 14). Juniper, which grows on islands in and around Georgian Bay, the home of my beadee, was chosen for several reasons beyond its topical use, in oil form, on "nervous conditions" (Armstrong, 2020, p. 104) or the consumption of "one berrylike cone ... as a cure-all medicine" (Marles et al., 2012, p. 83).

FIGURE 15. Pink Berry

Cree knowledge sharer Carrie Armstrong explains that during the bubonic plague in the 14th century, "doctors held a few berries in their mouths to avoid being infected by patients" (Armstrong, 2020, pp. 104, 143). This was a very different pandemic use of juniper than my beadee and I engaged in on our first visit together since March 2020; the pink juniper berry on the fourth leg is a nod to a specific memory of toasting to life after a year of separation (see Figure 15).

FIGURE 16. 16 Tassels

Tassels, handmade under the supervision of my nine-year-old son and with the guidance of Gregory Scofield and Amy Briley (2021, pp. 33–34), adorn all eight legs. They coordinate with the bag's cross-body strap, which is finger woven from variegated wool (see Figure 16).

FIGURE 17. Octopus Face, Startled

While patterns and beadwork designs on fire bags of Métis origin often favour floral elements structured along an "X" shape as a nod to the four cardinal points (Barkwell, 2010, p. 6), something the calming circle casually emulates, this piece

forgoes that balance in favour of adding, above the main beadwork, two beaded grommets through which the bag's cord passes (see Figure 17).

This design choice was a departure from my first fire bag and was influenced by the teachings of Elder Shirley Kendall in her contribution to the Sharing Our Knowledge Clan Conference (2016) in Juneau, Alaska, in 2015. In her presentation, "The Anatomy of an Octopus Bag," she insisted on the structure of beadwork patterns adorning fire bags, underlining the importance of the placement of two "eyes" and a "mouth" in the bag design to evoke the face of an octopus (Sharing Our Knowledge Clan Conference, 2016). In the calming circle, one can read the beads as the face of a startled octopus, with the maple leaf as the mouth and the grommets as the eyes (See Figure 17).

FIGURE 18. Embroidery Practice

Embroidered fireworks, created in a process of trial and error through my very novice embroidery skills and little patience for tangled embroidery floss, reinforce the lining fabric behind the beaded grommets (see Figure 18). Beyond traditional medicine and beadwork practice mobilized as medicine, an important coping and healing tool in many Indigenous communities is humor. Given the darkness of the times, levity is introduced into the fire bag through both tactile and textile elements. The lining of the piece, which features a Hocus Pocus-themed pattern of

FIGURE 19. Joyful Lining

witches on broomsticks, black cats, and various magical implements, deliberately borders on the absurd and never fails to make me smile (See Figure 19). I had enough fabric left upon completing the fire bag to support my first joyful foray into making ribbon aprons, a humble gift for the sister of my beading (See Figure 20), but the full story of those slightly crooked but very loving ribbons is perhaps one for another day. For now, it will suffice to sit with the broader context of Métis material arts practice offered by Racette (2004) when she wrote that "through the act of making, artists found personal healing, brought joy into their own lives and the people who used and viewed their work. Through collaboration and gift giving, they formed enduring bonds between family members that reached out into the larger community" (p. 279).

FIGURE 20. Ribbon Apron, In Progress

On the reverse of the bag are four beaded cat paw prints—one of which is heart-shaped and stepping forward in love. This is a visual joke that refers to my beadee's childhood nickname and the name of the black cat in Hocus Pocus, all depicted in beads (see Figure 21).

FIGURE 21. Binx Prints, Walking Forward in Love

What started with an impulse purchase of quilting cotton, a mental health crisis, and a silly GIF ended in a layered and complex wearable art. The therapeutic act of beading and hand-stitching the piece together brought me back to myself, and the final piece represents good medicine and moments of growth in my journey as a beadworker. Racette (2004) once wrote that "a piece of clothing or decorative item is only an object until it becomes animated through use or infused with memory and story" (p. 191). As my beadee moves through the world wearing the calming circle fire bag, my hope is that they will carry with them all the teachings, healing, and humor that I gently sewed into the garment, one bead at a time.

FIGURE 22. Form a Calming Circle: A(nother) Modern Métis Fire Bag

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