

# Circling COVID

## Making in the Time of a Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The following is an account of some current Indigenous artistic trends and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has resulted in Indigenous artists adapting social media to maintain COVID-disrupted knowledge networks about traditional making. In so doing, they have reimagined how to continue links within and beyond their own cultural communities. Art has become both an outlet and a connection to neighbours, friends, and strangers across geographic boundaries. Indigenous textile artists are refashioning their art and materials to maintain and reflect contemporary Indigenous issues and values that emphasize their community and reflect survivance, all while safely at a distance. The artists highlighted and discussed in this article include Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit women with whom I have worked and who have contributed to my research in the Northwest Territories (NWT), as well as other Indigenous artists from across North America well known for their creative work. Because the coronavirus has all but eliminated non-essential travel to the NWT, the information that is presented has been developed through online exchanges with these women and by observing the artists' public social media accounts over the course of six months.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Indigenous artists; textile arts; cultural survivance and ethos; social media; online community

**Résumé:** Cet article rend compte de certaines tendances et réponses artistiques autochtones en cours pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. Du fait de la pandémie, les artistes autochtones ont adapté les médias sociaux afin de préserver les réseaux de connaissances sur la création traditionnelle que la COVID a perturbés. Ce faisant, ils ont repensé la façon de maintenir les liens dans et hors de leurs communautés culturelles. L'art est devenu à la fois un exutoire et un moyen de se connecter avec les voisins, les amis et les étrangers au-delà des frontières géographiques. Les artistes textiles autochtones remodèlent, avec une distance de protection, leur art et leurs matériaux pour maintenir et refléter les questions et les valeurs autochtones contemporaines qui mettent en valeur leurs communautés et témoignent de leur survivance. Parmi les artistes

présentés et abordés dans cet article figurent des femmes dénées, métis et inuvialuites avec qui j'ai travaillé et qui ont contribué à mes recherches dans les Territoires du Nord-Ouest (T.N.-O), ainsi que d'autres artistes autochtones issus des quatre coins de l'Amérique du Nord qui sont connus pour leur travail créatif. Le coronavirus ayant pratiquement mis fin aux voyages non essentiels dans les T.N.-O., les données présentées ici ont été élaborées par les échanges en ligne avec ces femmes et par l'observation des comptes de médias sociaux des artistes sur une période de six mois.

**Mots-clés :** COVID-19; artistes autochtones; arts textiles; survivance et éthos culturels; médias sociaux; communauté en ligne

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## Introduction

For the past year and a half, I have been travelling to communities in the Northwest Territories' (NWT) Mackenzie Basin region to visit with tufting artists to speak with them about their work.<sup>1</sup> During this time, I had the privilege of being invited into peoples' homes to hear their stories and learn from them. I was permitted to attend and witness the opening ceremonies of a hide tanning camp, and I visited many Indigenous art fairs across the North.<sup>2</sup>

I was planning to return to Yellowknife in March to continue my conversations with artists and initiate discussions with the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, the territorial heritage centre and museum, to curate a small tufting exhibit. I had been following the news of COVID-19 coming out of China and I became increasingly aware of the potential threat it could, and most likely would pose in Northern Canada. In the end, because of the possibility of myself being a spreader and the strict quarantine requirements for non-essential visitors to the NWT, I decided to postpone my travels knowing that with the spread of COVID-19, my arrival could be met with concern and ambivalence, and that the spread of the virus to Northern communities would be extremely devastating.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous peoples across North America have historically dealt with epidemics like smallpox and continue to witness resurgences of others, such as tuberculosis. Although outsiders consider these illnesses largely remediated, they continue to be remembered and have an effect in many Indigenous communities.

It is now months after postponing my trip, and I have kept in close contact with many of the artists I work with via email, Facebook and Instagram.

Although confirmed COVID-19 cases are reportedly few in the North, at the moment, communities are taking the same precautions as the rest of Canada. The border between Northern and Southern Canada has been shut, with RCMP patrolling non-essential travel, flights have been greatly reduced between small communities and Yellowknife, and people are self-isolating and distancing, except for daily walks. As I sit here writing this, I too am self-isolating at my home, and although it is difficult for some, we will manage. However, I began to wonder what social-distancing/isolation would mean for artists for whom making is a way to support themselves and their families. And this led me to think about how making is not just about economics, but also a social activity that incorporates cultural meaning, represents a safe social space to meet, to share stories and knowledge, and to teach and learn.

### **Dimensions of Making**

Art is going to lift us all up and I call on artists and designers to create and cover the world with their love and creations because this is going to help us [artists] get through, and you get through by joining us together and having a connection. (Anonymous 2020)

This statement was made by an artist with whom I have worked and I have found myself reflecting on it, almost daily, while in my own lockdown.<sup>4</sup> I have also come to notice a new significance of art in our changed everyday lives and how it has come to redefine new forms of community and collective health. I think many, whether they are artists or art appreciators, have noticed the importance that art carries at this time. We have seen images of rainbows appearing in our neighbourhoods and across the world, we have noticed the appearance of murals on the facades of now-closed stores, and we have witnessed rooftop concertos, all while at a distance. I, too, have found deep meaning in making at this time, having again taken-up sewing to make masks for family, friends, and neighbours. Making has also become an avenue of self-meditation and a way of re/connecting with distant friends and strangers, with whom I share an implicit goal of togetherness.<sup>5</sup>

The same is true for Indigenous artists in the Canadian North and across North America who have also reimagined boundaries around making and gathering in response to the coronavirus. Artists have rearticulated their artistic practices, taking up fabric instead of beads and quills to make masks for their communities. Others have reimagined traditional materials to fit the current times, while some have begun gathering on social media forums such as

Facebook and Instagram to meet, inspire, and make, while safely in the confines of their home. Just as hide camps and makers' circles sustained cultural values in pre-pandemic times, Indigenous artists now, in spite of social and geographic isolation, imbue and reproduce these values by embracing electronically-mediated collaboration and community. Their artistic reimaging is also reflective of continued Indigenous survivance. Survivance, as defined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008, 11) is an "active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry." The continuity of important Indigenous artistic practices during COVID-19 is only the most recent illustration of Indigenous survivance.

I have been asked many times to describe or explain what I mean by "making." At first, I was puzzled. To me, making and what it means is self-explanatory. However, because of this questioning, I seriously started to think further about the term and to think about what I meant in using it. Academically, "making," as an ideological concept, is best associated with Tim Ingold. He explains (2013, 7) that within the field of material culture studies in anthropology and art history, the emphasis is largely on finished products, object use, social biographies, and object interpretation. What is often missed in these essentializing approaches are the creative and productive processes that bring these objects into being.

Making, in part, is really about the creativity that shapes the material. I think of making as a multi-tiered process, a process that considers engagement with the material as well as a correspondence/connection. At its base, any form of making involves practice. During the initial stages of learning, one gets a feeling for the material to be shaped, for the rhythm involved in the process, and over time, one's making becomes better. Even I, when I picked up my sewing needle and thread after many years, had to reacquaint myself with the process. In weeks, my stitches went from wide and loose to close and tight.

But making is more than a technical process. It produces and continues knowledge, and its practice creates a relatedness amongst peoples (Racette 2017). As will become clear throughout this piece, there is not only engagement with making and with art by artists during this time, but by a community of non-artists that is facilitated by our shift towards the online world and social media. For example, before the appearance of COVID-19, a child's drawing of a rainbow would have been seen as "cute." Now, Indigenous pieces, made more accessible by online platforms, engage us in a new way and communicate messages of community and relatedness.

## Art as Community

Textile arts, like hide sewing, embroidery, quilting, quillwork, beading, and tufting can, be performed at home. However, they are often done in the company of others. Métis scholar, Sherry Farrell Racette (2017, 119) states that there is a “rhythmic experience of sewing together.” According to Lois Edge (2011, 118), beading circles present an opportunity to actively engage in a traditional cultural activity, and to teach and learn about traditional methods and artforms. Artist and member of the One Arrow First Nation Angela Schenstead explains (as quoted by Malbeuf 2016, 12) that:

like many craft practices... [they are] taught in person, by way of hands on and oral transmission. For many people, the stories shared while crafting is [sic] just as important as the techniques exchanged. This is how cultural knowledge is passed on from one person to another, from one generation to the next.

Sharing in this making practice (space and place) is significant in the continuation of Indigenous artistry and knowledge.

For some, beading circles often evoke earlier memories of making. Many indigenous women learned by watching and imitating their mothers, grandmothers, and other family members (Hail and Duncan 1989). Beading circles are, in some ways, an extension of those early lessons and experiences and both signify a deeper history of women-to-women transmission that is still deeply valued (Racette 2005).

In July 2019, I travelled to Inuvik to attend the Great Northern Arts Festival (GNAF) and meet with some artists. The festival takes place each year at the Inuvik Sports Complex. GNAF is an important annual festival for artists, communities, and collectors. Artists travel across Canada to attend GNAF, showcase their work, meet new artists, and see old friends.

Unlike many organized arts gatherings, where artists generally remain stationed at their assigned booths to both represent and speak about their artwork, the GNAF festival was divided between two large rooms in the complex. The first displayed each artist’s collection of creations that were for sale. The second room was intended as a demonstration room, where artist tutorials were organized throughout the week. Circular and rectangular tables were arranged in the centre of both spaces. In fact, at the GNAF, artists sat at their display tables and continued to do their bead and quillwork, sewing, and even metalwork, while engaging with visitors, bringing together the making and meeting

spaces that the organizers had separated. The social and cultural constancy of this artist-inspired integration is illustrated by the following observations.

During one of my days at the festival, I sat down to interview Métis artist Carmen Miller (@carmen.miller.bluecaribou). We started a conversation about her art and we were soon joined at her table by other artists. During “our” conversation, other festival participants came and went as we discussed topics ranging from bead and thread size to artistic cultural appropriation by both non-Indigenous and other Indigenous artists. I also witnessed the trading of materials, the sharing of tips, and was even called over by another artist to observe and learn about her beaded straps (side panels for moccasins). I cannot, with strict certainty, define this event as a beading circle. However, the discussion, the sharing of ideas and materials, and sometimes even the silences brought forth are many of the same ideas that are understood to be so important in beading circles (Malbeuf 2016). While the primary purpose of GNAF was for the participants to sell their artwork, it became apparent to me that for many of the artists, GNAF was a social space to share their art, to reflect on the social and cultural substance in their work, but also a space to connect, where they could continue to make and share their knowledge.

Edge (2011, 123) expands on this and writes that beading circles are more than gatherings to learn and teach. During her PhD research, Edge, herself Métis, hosted a series of beading circles in her home in Edmonton. She found that they served as

a place and space to come together as Indigenous women and share experiences in a supportive and nurturing environment. Individual strengths and weaknesses were accepted without question or judgment, and each could be safe, secure and nurtured in one’s identity as an Indigenous woman... A need to engage in an environment described as safe, secure and comfortable with other Aboriginal women became obvious at the outset as participants looked forward to the sharing of day-to-day activities and events, challenges and successes, at home, in the workplace and with others in a broader social context. (Edge 2011, 123).

Thus, beading circles are extremely important, whether they take place in a private home or in a public space. It is important to note that these principles are carried over into other forums and held in high regard by both Indigenous men and women. For example, the men value them as time for teaching and learning traditional hunting, and women, beyond the circle, appreciate

other instances of gathering, such as the hide tanning camp hosted by Dene Nahjo (@denenahjo) that I observed in Yellowknife. But we are currently in a situation where men and women can no longer easily meet and be in proximity to each other.

### **Circling COVID: Making Together**

In light of these times, Indigenous makers have responded in novel ways to the social, cultural, and economic constraints needed to reduce the spread of this disease. The approaches discussed below demonstrate the artists' re-envisioning of artistic practices and materials that reflect contemporary ideas, issues, and circumstances, thus ensuring Indigenous survivance (Malbeuf 2016). Additionally, it can be argued that these rearticulations typify visual sovereignty (Racette 2017; Richard 2017). For example, in March, Gwich'in jewelry artist Tania Larsson (@tania.larsson), based in Yellowknife, initiated an online beading circle through the popular video app Zoom. She was interviewed by Ojibwe Vogue writer, Christian Allaire (@chrisjallaire), in mid-March about this.

Larsson explained that the purpose of forming the online beading circle was for beaders, quillers, and other artists of all skill levels to be able to meet and continue to make. During these online meetings, participants can ask technical questions and show their work. Additionally, the online beading circle acts as an important support forum during this difficult time. She also emphasized that the meetings were important to uplift each other and reduce anxiety (Allaire 2020). Regarding health, Larsson said (Allaire 2020):

There's an underlying panic and anxiety, and people really fearing for things...Whenever you're in a circle, you get to talk about those anxieties. It's a nice way to be able to keep practicing our culture, sharing with each other, and giving each other tips on how to deal with the situation right now, so that you don't feel alone.

These meetings have also created a space for artists to meet and communicate; many artists could only have otherwise relied on large festivals to come together, or may not have had the will or opportunity to do so at all. Larsson's online beading circles have continued every week and she's seen recurrent participants as well as new ones. Larsson has also invited viewers into her hide tanning process, from start to finish, through a series of Instagram videos.

Other Indigenous artists have repurposed these online meeting spaces as not only substitute beading circles for established makers, but as a way to attract

both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. Shoshone-Bannock and Luiseño artist Jamie Okuma (@j.okuma), based out of La Jolla Indian Reservation in Pauma Valley, California, started using Zoom and YouTube to host online beadwork and quillwork tutorials. Recently, she has incorporated an online giveaway through her Instagram account in which participants must demonstrate their support of Indigenous businesses by submitting a recent proof of purchase. In so doing, they enter a draw for beading kits assembled by Okuma. Each kit is accompanied by an online YouTube tutorial that shows the winners how to use it and guides them through the project from start to finish. Okuma is quoted as saying: “you learn from each other... everybody beads differently; there’s no one way to do it” (Allaire 2020).

Similarly, Anishinaabe artist, Amber Sandy (@ambsandy), demonstrated her artistic process in the making of fish skin leather through Instagram. Over the past six months, artists such as Dene artist Elsie Canadien (@gahtua-designs), Métis artist Christi Belcourt (@christi\_belcourt), and Mi’kmaw artist Melissa Beaulieu (@the.beads.knees) have all tried their hand at dying fish skin.

Both Larsson, Okuma, and Sandy have identified a safe space that maintains many of the values that are so important to traditional beading circles. Both of their approaches prioritize community, communication, and creativity, while providing room for individuality, and, in keeping with the present environment, putting their skills to work to improve health in various ways. Beyond online circles, artists have also reimaged or repurposed their making. Some have moved away from beads, quills, and hairs to focus on fabric, an often underappreciated material utilized by Indigenous artists.

As a fashion designer, Okuma also transitioned to using much of her fabric to make masks for friends and family. Puyallup Coast Salish designer, Korina Emmerich (@korinaemmerich), had already been making “The Split Shot” face mask as part of her Anadromous Collection. The masks are made from blanket material and are designed to provide warmth and comfort throughout the year and are ideal for activities such as “motorcycling, biking, and fishing” (Emmerich 2020). Further, Emmerich’s masks are a political piece meant to represent the biological invasion and pollution destroying Indigenous lands, as well as symbolize the protests occurring across North America, such as the most recent events in Wet’suwet’en. With the onset of COVID-19, the Split Shot mask transformed into a piece of protection, and with the demand for masks growing, she began mass producing them to supply to customers. With each



purchase of a Split Show Mask, Emmerich matches and donates the same amount or masks to essential frontline workers.

In the Northwest Territories, Inuk master tufter and jewelry artist Inuk360 (@inuk360) started making masks for friends, her life givers, Elders, and hospital staff. Tania Larsson, along with her sister, has also started sewing masks for community members. In Hay River, Dene artist Elsie Canadien (@gahtuadesigns) began sewing masks for her small community, including friends and family, hospital staff and airport workers. Many of these artists make masks alongside their preferred artistry, which they continue to sell online. Furthermore, they are not selling these masks; rather, they ask that recipients 'pay it forward' by donating to organizations to help the cause. In response, many of these artists have received anonymous donations of materials, such as elastic and fabric.

Finally, some artists are innovating using traditional materials. Many doctors working long hours to fight COVID-19 noticed that the elastics on masks were too tight, pulling on their ears, and adding tension to an already strained situation. Chugach-Eyak artist Raven Cunningham (@made.by.raven), based out of Alaska, began making face mask ear protectors out of seal and sealion skin. The protectors included vintage buttons that the mask elastics could be fastened too. The buttons were donated by family members and friends. Like Korina Emmerich, Cunningham matches each purchase and donates her innovations to local healthcare providers.

These examples display a togetherness/relatedness and mutual companionship forged by shared necessity in a time where physical distancing is so vital, and artistry is a source of connection. Indigenous artists are contributing in different ways, such as initiating online beading circles, sharing design ideas, making and sending out facemasks, or donating fabric, buttons, and elastics to other makers. Taken together, these approaches epitomize core principles of survivance through the adaptation of social media and the formation of online beading circles that assist in the resurgence and continuation of Indigenous practices and knowledges. Further, these acts represent an active insurgence to COVID enforcements that hinder and impede Indigenous kinship, identity, and material culture (Nagam and Isaac 2017).

Artists are moving beyond any particular object or material, and even economics, and are using their gifts and knowledge to fulfill social needs rooted in cultural community that is, at this time, facilitated by online social media (Guglietti 2010). Online beading courses provide makers near and far with a

lifeline, and continued making and talking with others gives support to those who are struggling with anxiety and isolation. Face masks and mask expanders fill a need for physical health and safety. Additionally, artists' making not only provides solace to others, but to the artists as well. Online connectivity allows this art to extend beyond geographic and, especially, cultural divides to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, artists and non-artists.

Seemingly overnight, because of COVID-19, our lives were turned upside down, and we now are slowly getting accustomed to our new way of life. By adapting various forms of social media to sustain a critical cultural goal, Indigenous artists have been able to continue and to uphold important values in a time of disruption, ensuring survivance. The beading circle, reimagined in a sense, and made more feasible through social media, continues to act as a safe space, a source of conversation, of social connection, and cultural learning. These instances of adaptation to an unprecedented time, whether it be the formation of online beading circles or the making of face masks, is reflective of a larger primacy amongst Indigenous peoples. One that reflects and emphasizes their survivance and the importance placed on community, and thus, its centrality to the ethos of Indigenous society.

In speaking of the strength of Indigenous women, Cree activist Priscilla Settee says (2011, iii):

There is a force among women which I call âhkamêyimowak, or persistence, that provides the strength for women to carry on in the face of extreme adversity... Women are the unsung heroes of their communities, often using minimal resources to challenge oppressive structures and to create powerful alternatives in the arts, in education and in the workplace.

Indigenous peoples have had to adapt and readapt time and time again, asserting their agency in the face of harsh circumstances and practices (Racette 2009; 2017).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Moose and caribou hair tufting is an Indigenous embroidery style started in Fort Providence, NWT circa 1916. Its emergence is credited to two Métis women, Catherine Beaulieu-Bouvier-Lafferty and Madeleine Lafferty. The technique uses either moose or caribou hair that is knotted to create patterns that are in relief, or raised, from the surface. Tufting is used to decorate jewelry, clothing such as moccasins and gloves, as well as household items such as pictures, frames, and pillowcases (Hail and Duncan 1989).
- <sup>2</sup> This hide tanning camp was organized by Dene Nahjo (Yellowknife, NWT). Dene Nahjo hosts a series of urban hide camps designed to reclaim urbanized land in Somba K'e, as well as provide an Indigenous safe space for teaching and learning. Tanning camps are a space where Elders, artists, and community members of all ages can gather to scrape and tan hides, share stories, and learn from each other (<https://www.denenahjo.com/hide-tanning>).
- <sup>3</sup> Since the onset of COVID-19 we have seen a significant impact on many marginalized, and/or isolated communities. This includes poorer communities in the United States, often over-represented by African American and Hispanic peoples. The Navajo nation, spanning New Mexico and Arizona, is one example of an Indigenous nation being hit hard by the pandemic (New York Times 2020). Johns, Wahleah. 2020. "A Life on and Off the Navajo Nation: The Reservation has One of the Country's Highest Infections." *New York Times*, 13 May. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/13/opinion/sunday/navajo-nation-coronavirus.html>. Accessed 3 August 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> All artists referenced in this article are identified by their chosen artist name, followed by their Instagram handle/username.
- <sup>5</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, quilting became a popular domestic artform amongst women in Europe, southern Canada, and the United States, and sewing circles became an important space for the transfer of skills and artistic education (Berlo 2006). Similarly, the same became true of knitting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These gatherings acted as spaces where women could work on and finish pieces, as well as socialize, share knowledge, and learn. And in times of crisis, such gatherings took on a greater shared purpose. For example, an important contribution by women of the respective national "Home fronts" of all fighting sides during the First World War was to gather in knitting circles to produce socks for the troops at the battlefield.

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