

Holding Space in these Uncertain Times

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Article abstract

âpihtawikosisâniskwêw artist Moe Clark is a nomadic songbird with wings woven from circle singing and spoken word. Originally from Treaty 7, she has called tio'tia:ke (Montreal) home for over a decade. In this interview, she speaks with Laura Risk about continuing to create music and build community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Holding Space in These Uncertain Times

Moe Clark Interviewed by Laura Risk

âpihtawikosisâniskwêw artist [Moe Clark](#) is a nomadic songbird with wings woven from circle singing and spoken word. Originally from Treaty 7, she has called tiotia:ke (Montreal) home for over a decade. Her last solo album, *Within*, toured North America in 2017 and her video poem “nitahkôtan” won best Indigenous language music video at the ImagiNative film festival and was later featured at the Skabmagovat Film Festival (Finland). Apart from performance, she facilitates creative workshops; she directed the first bilingual edition of the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word; and in 2016 she launched [nistamîkwan](#), a transformational arts organization. Her work has appeared the world over, including the Lincoln Centre (US), UBUD Writers & Readers Festival (Indonesia), and Origins Festival in London (UK).

The following interview was conducted on June 10, 2020.

Laura Risk: Tell me what happened for you as a performer at that moment when everything changed.

Moe Clark: I had just returned from two weeks in Hawaii with my partner. We were thirty-five improvisers from across North America and Europe, gathered for six days of vocal improv, pedagogy, and conversation around sound healing and community development through improvisation. Long-term mentor, Rhiannon, organized the vocal improvisation summit.

I flew home the day of lockdown and went straight into quarantine. Over the next two weeks, my life started to unravel. I was supposed to do a few festivals and university events, and record the rest of an album of nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) songs. The album producer is from Greenland and we were hoping to meet in Belgium to finish the last five tracks. I was also supposed to perform in Quebec City for National Indigenous Peoples' Day.

I was supposed to finish my fourth and final year of Sundance ceremony. My partner was going to join me from Australia for this ceremony, among others. They've all been cancelled. Together, we were supposed to co-facilitate a land-based embodiment and improvisation workshop with 2Spirit artists emphasizing queering relationships to land, voice and movement. That's been cancelled. We were supposed to visit elders out West, do sweat lodge ceremony, gather medicines. Cancelled.

It's a little overwhelming when I start to talk about it all. I can feel in my own being this sense of grief and loss. Everything's cancelled until at least December.

I was supposed to go to Germany for a World Book Fair this fall, as part of a special delegation from Canada. I was supposed to go to Belgium with *Kiciweok : lexique de 13 mots autochtones qui donnent un sens*, a theatre piece I created music for, featuring thirteen Indigenous artists. That's all been cancelled.

We were planning a summer retreat for Land as our Teacher, which is an ongoing land-based project in collaboration with Indigenous youth, community, elders, and Concordia University. It supports 2Spirit youth and Indigenous youth by facilitating space for them to learn with elders, community and with one another on the land—space for them to reaffirm their nationhood, their cultural identity, and their two-spiritedness, through connection with ceremony.

LR: So much of what you do is about bringing people together physically in the same space and connecting with the land. But that involves travel.

MC: The pandemic has brought up questions about how to continue land-based practices. When it comes to traditional ceremonies, community relationships, connections, it's challenging. Elders and people living with compromised immune systems are vulnerable, yet we need them and the land more than ever now. We need to be able to activate and maintain those relationships with the land. If we're stuck to a computer screen, how do we do that? How do we use technology with the same level of sacredness or intentionality that we would a pipe ceremony or a sweat lodge? All of these tools that are keeping us connected right now have also been pulling us away from the core values and teachings for a healthy, balanced community.

I'm doing my best to continue to build those relationships. Web of Virtual Kin is a series of online gatherings, teachings, and ceremonies that we've been hosting since the onset of the pandemic. At a May gathering, we invited four Indigenous women song carriers to share their relationship to song and story: the value and importance that song has in their communities, cultures, ways of knowing, and ultimately our relationships with one another towards healing. We were honoured to receive Mere Boynton, a Maori artist from Aotearoa; Sedalia Kawennotas Fazio, a local Mohawk elder; Nina Segalowitz, a Chipewyan and Inuvialuit throat singer and vocalist; and our feature artist, Pura Fé, the superstar Tuscarora musician and founding member of Ulali. It was amazing: in two weeks, we put together and hosted an event with international artists through Zoom. We didn't have to think about travel, hotel accommodations, hospitality, or a venue. We could create this space just by making a few calls and sending an email invitation.

The sound was peaking and cutting out but there was something so essential that still permeated. Pura Fé sings canoe songs from North Carolina, from the Tuscarora people, and she had her looping pedal. Layer upon layer of voice. It felt like we were sitting around an old gramophone, listening to the scratchy, distorted sound of this voice. Everybody that joined for the Zoom—which we broadcasted live to Facebook as well—commented that it was like nothing they've ever experienced.

We are still the conduits of the sounds of this music. We are still in relationship to the spirit, to the ancestors, and to the land through the land of our bodies. Now we're projecting those relationships into a virtual space. It's distorted but I hope that it will still be transmitted and received. I attribute this to the generosity of the people who are participating and listening, and to a different form of listening. We have to shift what we hear and how we hear, because we're hearing it through a screen, through another medium. Our eardrum and our body aren't the first to receive the sound. We're converting this electromagnetic energy from the computer audio into our bodies and still feeling the life force of those relationships.

In early June, I went out to a little park behind the train tracks on a Thursday night and there was a group playing music. Fiddle and banjo, socially distancing. I was overwhelmed to be in the presence of live music after two and a half months. It was stunning. It was so beautiful. It was like the light suddenly being turned on. . .

With Web of Virtual Kin, we had to look at our code of ethics. How are we ensuring, to the best of our ability, that these gatherings are safe? What does it mean to suddenly work in this onscreen square format—like Hollywood Squares—when we're so used to working in circles?

We developed a process around creating ethical space in a Zoom meeting. We have active listeners in the private chat and after-care for some of the workshops and events. We are finding different ways to embed systems of protocol for community, collective work, and accountability. It becomes part of our online practice.

And what about territorial acknowledgements? Whose territory are we acknowledging? Now that we're moving into a digital realm, there are people from the West Coast and the North and the South who are Zooming in with us. We might have an elder from Saskatchewan facilitate a workshop primarily for users in Montreal, but where are we all locally? It is our responsibility to acknowledge where we are, but what is this cyber-territory that we're also occupying? Whose territory is that? How do we create a system of ethics in that frame? I think that's where prayer and the activation of our languages and our songs is so crucial, because that goes to the heart of who we are. Through that space, we create a generative container that can uplift *mamâhtâwisiwin*,¹ our personal sacred gifts in relationship to the great unknown, together.

I've collaborated now with a couple of the Indigiqueer youth who are part of the Web of Virtual Kin. One makes their own beats and music, and I started sort of mentoring them. They send me beats, I send some feedback, they send it back and I send audio recordings also. We created a virtual musical exchange without ever meeting in real life.

I've built a lot of relationships during COVID specifically with 2Spirit youth. We've created systems of collective care and sharing through the digital realm, and I feel like it's made them more open to ask for support, or to ask questions and share. It's deepened a lot of relationships. I'll be really excited when we can actually be in the same physical space, like in an actual ceremony. Just imagine how deep that relationship will be.

LR: Improvisation is an important part of your practice. How have your improvising skills played into your response to the pandemic?

MC: Even though I'm still grieving, and I feel that sense of loss of everything being cancelled and of things shifting, I have a deep well inside me that trusts that whatever is meant to be, will be. I will somehow survive and to the best of my ability, I will adapt and find ways to thrive within whatever that uncertainty is: to be spontaneous, to still try my best to find creative ways through the challenges.

It makes me feel sometimes like I'm standing at the edge of an improvisation and someone proposes something quite unexpected. You just step in before having any clue what is going to come out. There's a trust. You're meeting that obstacle, that challenge, that proposition head on.

We can't dive into it blindly. We have to bring with us as much of us as possible. That's where I'm so grateful for the relationships that I have with kinship, with community, with ritual, with process, with these embedded practices that have been at the base of my practice for years now. It's very interdisciplinary and very connected. You remove one thread and the whole thing could fall apart, but there are so many ways those threads can be rewoven. That's improvisation. That's the ceremony of it all.

I miss performing with actual musicians. Jamming, singing, being on a stage with a five-piece band. But I've also been creating solo work with my looping pedal and my instruments and learning a lot through live sound and layers and effects. I've been playing with projections and video. It's definitely been an opportunity for me to slow down, to reorient and reconfigure.

Usually when I create, it's for a show or an event. Now I can create just for creation's sake. It isn't about producing something for a tour or a festival. It's actually just me having a process and a practice that is guided by intuition. That's been incredibly freeing and awakening.

I've had more time to reflect, to integrate, to consider my role, my place, my purpose, my gifts, all in relationship to community. You've got to step up into your power, step into your gifts, step out of whatever lingering insecurity, fear, shame, setbacks that you might hide or run from as a touring performing artist. It's about holding space in these uncertain times, not just for myself but to support others. To build systems of collective care in a different way. We're able to step back and ask, what are the real intentions here? What are we actually contributing to? What are the relationships we really want to be building and maintaining?

I get to decide what relationships I want to nurture and what relationships might actually be tokenizing or pigeonholing. Within the Indigenous creative and artistic worlds, I find it all too easy for people to think they're doing the right thing and to want to make a difference, but the difference they're making is not actually happening from the inside out. It's still just a placeholder, a checkmark. True community, true relationships, and true collective care actually need to be embedded into these systems and organizations. That's where I'm feeling more called to be in relationship.

LR: So, it's not just about restarting the performing arts?

MC: Definitely not. Please no. It needs to be different. It needs to change.

An accompanying audio offering by Moe Clark is available on SoundCloud, [here](#).

Notes

¹ mamâhtâwisiwin: in nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree language, 'y' dialect), this concept pertains to spiritual power, talent; giftedness.

Links

Web of Virtual Kin: www.facebook.com/Web-of-Virtual-Kin-113490970422355/

Land as Our Teacher: www.landasourteacher.ca

Rhiannon: www.rhiannonmusic.com/

Pura Fe: www.purafe.com/

Mere Boynton: www.sounz.org.nz/contributors/41

Nina Segalowitz: electriques.ca/filles/en/select/bio/?id=segalowitz_ni

Sedalia Fazio: montreal.ctvnews.ca/indigenous-voices-sing-out-for-healing-during-covid-19-pandemic-1.4864812

Kiciweok: theatredaujourdhui.qc.ca/13mots

Moe Clark: www.moeclark.ca

nistamîkwan: www.nistamîkwan.com