

IndigiQueer the Space: An Interview with Ty Defoe

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[See table of contents](#)

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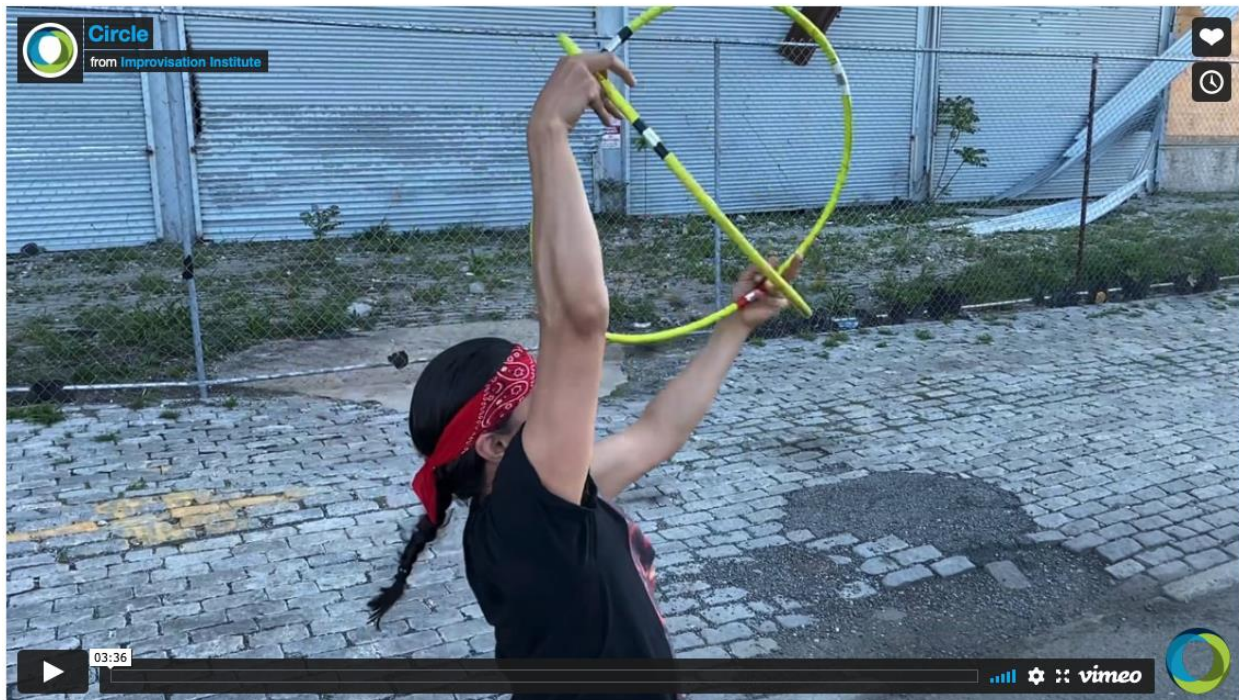
Article abstract

Ty Defoe is an Oneida and Ojibwe interdisciplinary artist. This contribution includes a video entitled “Circle” and an interview with Nic Gareiss, in which Defoe discusses the ways in which he has worked to Indigenize, decolonize, and queer a variety of spaces, including online digital spaces, during the pandemic.

Indigiqueer the Space: An Interview with Ty Defoe

Ty Defoe Interviewed by Nic Gareiss

Ty Defoe (Giizhig), from the Oneida and Ojibwe Nations, is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, shapeshifter, and Grammy Award winner. Ty aspires to an interweaving approach to artistic projects with social justice, indigeneity, Indigiqueering, and environmentalism. Ty's global cultural arts highlights: the Millennium celebration in Cairo, Egypt; Ankara International Music Festival in Turkey; and Festival of World Cultures in Dubai, UAE. Awards: Global Indigenous Heritage Festival Award, a Robert Rauschenberg Artist in Residence, Jonathan Larson Award, TransLab Fellow, Cordillera International Film Festival Finalist. Works created: *Red Pine*, *The Way They Lived*, *Ajjaak on Turtle Island*, *Hear Me Say My Name*. Ty is an [artEquity](#) facilitator, co-founder of [Indigenous Direction](#) (with Larissa FastHorse), member of [All My Relations Collective](#)—DTWG at the Public Theater, *GIZHIBAA GIIZHIG | Revolving Sky* at Under the Radar festival's "Incoming!" Publications: *Casting a Movement*, Pitkin Review, Thorny Locust Magazine, Howl Round, and Routledge Press. Degrees from CalArts, Goddard College, + NYU Tisch. Movement Direction: *Mother Road* [Dir. Bill Rauch, Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF)], *Manahatta* (Dir. Laurie Woolery, OSF + Yale Reparatory Theatre), and Choreographer for Tracy Lett's *The Minutes* (Broadway). He appeared on the Netflix show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and made his Broadway debut in Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* (Dir. Anna Shapiro). He lives in NYC and loves the color clear. He|We, tydefoe.com.



The following interview was conducted on August 16, 2020.

Nic Gareiss: Where are you right now?

Ty Defoe: I am located right now in Manahatta, Lenapehoking land, New York City, but specifically in Brooklyn. There are similar tree species to where I grew up in northern Wisconsin, in the Woodland Nation, and also Algonquin-speaking peoples that steward this land. So, it feels

good to be here. Really vibrant.

NG: Can you talk about how you think about identity: your personal identity, your artistic identity, your Indigenous identity?

TD: My name is Ty, but my native name is Giizhig, which means Sky, Large Sky. It's a storytelling name. This name was given to me when I was very young, and it means that wherever I go, I make friends, or the grass turns green. I grew up in ceremony of the Anishinaabe people, or Ojibwe people, in the Northern Midwest. On my mom's side, I'm Oneida, or Haudenosaunee. I'm both Turtle Clan (from my mother's side) and Eagle Clan (from my father's side). I also identify as niizh manidoowag, which is Two-Spirit, a term folks are using for queerness if you identify as being Indigenous, but I like to refer to it as having more of a gender spectrum, or that you're transcending gender, which is another interpretation of that word, specifically from the Anishinaabe people. I'm also a contemporary artist and an interdisciplinary artist. So, I say that I'm Indigiqueer, which is an Indigenous person that likes to Indigenize spaces and also queer spaces at the same time.

NG: You refuse to have just one of those aspects of your identity at play at a time. Whenever I hear you speak or see you perform, there's this "always already-ness" that's happening. How has the pandemic affected that, and affected your creative practice?

TD: For me, there has been a resurgence of thinking about how I can evolve the art forms and use technology to interface and interact with people. I belong to a collective called *All My Relations Collective*, a theater/film/TV group of folks here in New York City. What we have done has definitely utilized technology as a form of building relations to create impactful partnerships, as well as to decolonize and Indigenize for folks.

In terms of the art practice itself, I've taken time to do some inward reflection about paths forward. I've also had to be completely—even more—enthusiastic about trying to reach people and connect with people through technology. Just as Indigenous ancestors and queer ancestors have done, the idea is about not just surviving but thriving. My über-goal is to create a multiplicity of platforms to amplify Indigenous and queer voices. I'm like, how can I do that right now? When you have nothing, you need to use technology.

NG: Totally. I've been trying to learn about the ways that improvisation can be part of my technological engagement, which feels like such a challenge. How are you improvising in digital spaces at the moment?

TD: For me, there's an extra step of preparation, like setting up multi-camera. Something like doing a Hoop Dance expands in its form depending on who's watching and who's intaking that cultural knowledge, but it also evolves as a cultural art form. Something as simple as the Hoop Dance, through my lens, an Indigenous lens, is a dancer weaving in and out of hoops with their body and making various formations and telling a story through physical movements. How do I keep that improvisation alive on video? I'm dancing with these objects and I don't know what's going to happen: the hoops go in various directions in the space. I do have a type of control over them, but it's toggling back and forth.

What I've done is take the extra step of setting up a multi-camera shoot, and showing the crew some of the small details, so I don't have to focus on the technical aspects of filming. I'm free to be open and improvise. I show them the small details, like how the toe needs to point through the hoop to get my leg through. If the dance were in person, little ones who are seven years old,

who are sitting on the ground, they'd be able to see that. Or how someone who might not be able to visually see the dance would feel the wind brush past them as a hoop flies by their face. How do I get something that is both towards the sky and also the earth? I think about these directional elements in relation to this dance, and take the time to intentionally set up the cameras and the experience. It's both performing arts and filmmaking.

I'm so grateful to have the folks in the *All My Relations Collective*—Marika Kent, Kate Freer, Lux Haac—to help me think through all the steps. What is it to share with people in this new platform? What is the lighting going to look like? By setting up the technical aspects, I can take a deep dive into breaking all the formalities that need to be broken.

NG: I've heard you talk about a teacher who told you that if you're not dreaming seven generations ahead, then you're not dreaming big enough. How do you improvise with seven generations ahead in mind?

TD: I think about that so often, about dreaming seven generations ahead. It allows me to think about telling the story that I need to tell in this moment. If I were not here, or if we all weren't here, what would be left? How can the future weave the story back together if it ever gets lost? I think about accuracy, about archiving, about giving as real a depiction as possible of what's happening in the moment for me as an Indigenous queer artist. It makes me think about time capsules and portals and things—I definitely dream a lot about Indigiqueer futurism.

NG: I've been thinking so much about how to be a queer person who improvises in this moment, in the midst of the pandemic, and how to improvise outside of systems of violence and marginalization. How do your extemporaneous artistic choices help you improvise outside of colonizing, transphobic, patriarchal, and racist structures?

TD: I love the idea of improvisation. To me, improvisation is liberation. Part of the decolonizing work that needs to happen needs to be done through strategic steps, and it feels almost formulaic. It's almost overly detailed, but it has to be because that's how colonialism has taken such great effect over artists, even myself. These are the tools that I have, so that I know I can improvise, so that I know I can feel safe to improvise and feel safe to Indigenize spaces and places. What I have been doing with my art at this time is improvising landing on queering space. It is a form of decolonization and Indigenization.

Our minds and our hearts. Oftentimes these two things are so colonized that it's hard to know, even for myself, due to forced societal constructs. How can I undo that? How can we undo that? I listen. Take moments and find my answer there. There's the why to queering space.

NG: Let's talk about the pragmatics. This pandemic has been so traumatic for so many independent artists. We are seeing major shifts in the arts, including in funding structures. What are some of the ways that your work has changed in response to this pandemic?

TD: In thinking about some of the messages that I have, as my work relates to Indigenous people, and Black and Brown folks, and queer folks—people are in their homes now. Hopefully they are safe in their homes. And for folks who haven't encountered people who look, or talk, or express like them, now is a great opportunity to get out messages of hope and peace and connectivity. Forming relations with each other. There's a forced reckoning, that people have to deal with their spiritual selves in whatever kind of way, whether it's ritualizing practice or whether it's connecting with family. Something I've done to connect with people is having virtual talking circles, because we as human beings need connection, whether it's talking or dance or

drawing together or watching a movie together.

I'm incredibly grateful for the things that I do have, but of course you can't eat art. I've been applying for a lot of COVID artists' relief funds, but I feel very fortunate. I'm in New York City, and even though it was hit hard with COVID, I did the best that I could to reach out to others, including delivering iPads to grandmothers on my bicycle so that they could figure out how to use Zoom. There is something about the form of art, it creates a social impact. We are in the container of social impact.

NG: It's amazing how some arts funding resources have started to open up. You don't have to spend a year writing an application to get an emergency artist relief grant.

TD: To me, that falls under mutual aid and decolonizing wealth. That's what's happening. Decolonization through finances and fiscal health for artists is starting to happen, which is so amazing. For folks that do improvisation, you know, it's also about improvising funding!

NG: Tell me about the virtual talking circle you've been working on. How you are facilitating that?

TD: Taking breath, something as simple as that, is really important. It allows folks to take pause. Sometimes it's very hard to do, especially when you're with a group of people. You feel like you have to answer right away. But the talking circle, much like a restorative justice circle, allows breath to happen. You can just be in space and time and not have to worry about it. But that goes with having the container: who is holding that space so that everybody else can take a pause? What's the container, what's the basket, that we're using today, so that we can both move as a unit in the circle and keep a conversation going, and also take a pause and a breath when someone has said something that really needs to be heard that day? That could be in the form of language or as movement. It's about facilitating that space so people don't feel like they have to verbalize or use words as a form of communication, or even think that the English language is going to be the foundation of the conversation. Maybe it's a dance conversation that's going to happen. How are we going to facilitate that? Maybe it's singing. The art form of facilitation is reading that virtual room as best as you can. Not zooming out but zooming in, and paying attention to everyone.

NG: Beautiful, exactly! And do you use Zoom for it?

TD: Yeah, I use Zoom. I've used StreamYard, old school phone calls.

NG: You spoke earlier about how the pandemic has given a lot of people time to interact with ideas and lifeways that they might not have experienced before. If there was a vaccine tomorrow, what are the things that you think need to change going forward?

TD: I hope that, if there was a vaccine tomorrow, people would take the time out as a family or as themselves to just reflect. We shouldn't just move forward and erase this time that we all have gone through. I often feel like that is the case with a dominating society like the United States—settler colonizers who have dominant systemic power have a tendency to have historic amnesia. But we can learn from what's happening at this moment. I think of some of the beautiful things that are happening right now, amidst the atrocities of people dying and of family members getting sick. We have maintained compassion and empathy for each other. We haven't taken things as business-as-usual, because it's not.

As an Indigenous queer individual, I'm also noticing that people are speaking their truths and folks are listening. What is that? Is it the time that people have now to listen? Here in New York City, I drive around and I see Black Lives Matter signs everywhere. It's quite beautiful to see them, these signs that indicate that everyone is welcome. How important that is, to be a good host for others in whatever space you're occupying. My hope is that people take some of these lessons about listening, about empathy and compassion. Maybe it's checking in with family and friends and creating real relations instead of transactional ones. If you build these relations and the apocalypse happens—another one—you'll feel that much more connected and we can go another layer deeper with each other.

NG: Was there a specific moment in the course of these last five months that encapsulated for you what was going on in the pandemic, and your experience as an artist and an Indigenous queer person?

TD: I've been able to improvise and use different spaces, which is so great. I'm in New York City in Brooklyn in a brownstone apartment, so I hauled all of my gear and everything and went to the rooftop. On a clear day you can see way out to Governor's Island, to Staten Island, and in the distance, New York City and the mass of buildings. I started going up there. For me, it was solace. It was like gaining a different perspective. I do things with lots of birds, whether it's puppetry or Eagle dancing, things of this nature. So I'm like, this is wild that I've chosen to come to this rooftop so I can watch amazing sunsets and be with nature in this place that's filled with rocks and concrete and the subway. I got to see amazing sunsets and sunrises. And continuing to go back to this place as a nest or a safe-haven for myself, to see that city, New York, in the distance—Manahatta. And I went up there and I would just dance. I could feel the wind up there. Oftentimes it gets really hot in the summer here in New York City so there are some families that go to the rooftop to watch sunsets and do things like that. It was interesting to social distance and see people put on performances and shows on the rooftops. It was incredibly beautiful.