

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo by Uriah Roman

Infiltrating Institutions with Christopher Kai Morgan

by ankita

[Christopher Kai Morgan](#) is a choreographer, performer, educator, facilitator, curator, and arts administrator whose Native Hawaiian ancestry and wide-ranging international performance career influence all aspects of his work. I met him in his capacity as the Dance Program Director at [Art Omi](#), a collaborative residency he has been shaping for the past 20 years. Inspired by his facilitation, I asked to discuss how his Native Hawaiian ancestry shapes his role as a multi-faceted leader in artistic spaces. This is an excerpt from our full conversation.

Ankita Sharma: How do Hawaiian values inform your leadership?

Christopher Kai Morgan: An important Hawaiian value is ho'okipa, hospitality, welcomingness, and connecting people, making sure they have the resources that they need. It's not unique to our culture, but some cultures emphasize that more than others. The other aspect is making sure the ways I hold space allow everyone to feel welcome, to create space and time for people to self-identify and share themselves fully. No one is a monolith. Most of us are a mix of many identities.

AS: Hospitality feels contrary to extractive models of art-making. How does that tension hold when working in capitalist spaces?

CKM: A big part of counteracting the desire for more is, in Western language, to balance breadth with depth. When I was Executive Artistic Director of [Dance Place](#) in Washington DC, the first year of programming that I inherited had 47 weekends of programmed content, with a small team. Over the subsequent 2 seasons, we shifted our structure to match our capacity. Doing fewer producing weekends and adding development residencies allowed us more time to welcome touring artists and build community partnerships. So, to use another western capitalist term, it was right-sizing. Rather than doing more and most, we did less, more deeply

AS: How much do you think an artist should endeavor to do well and deeply?

CKM: I'm of two opposite minds. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, we are seeing white institutions embracing leaders of color. These institutions are frequently ill-prepared for these leaders. So, part of me wants to encourage artists to be circumspect about their labor. On the other side, we are seeing so much threat to our communities, to women and LGBTQIA2S folx. With funding sources threatened and legislation diminishing human rights, I feel a desire to activate, protest, infiltrate, and do all the work to transform against the havoc of right-wing politics. So, part of me is excited for artists to engage, but I'm thoughtful about artists' capacity and risk of burnout.

AS: How do you activate the spaces that you're in?

CKM: I think of myself as an infiltrator. In spaces with few queer folks and people of color, I am showing up, asking hard questions, and contributing missing perspectives. When I was younger, I was in protest spaces more; it brings up complicated feelings that I'm not now. But, my work has gotten me access to conversations in spaces like the [National Council on the Arts](#), where my ideas had impact prior to the recent presidential transition. So, I'm interested in: how do we have a full range of changemakers, working from within and without? Who are the artists that take to the streets and burn shit down? And who takes other approaches - with what they put onstage, how they manage students, how they show up in white, capitalist spaces?

AS: What sort of toll does this work take on you? And why do you do it?

CKM: It takes a big toll. It is confusing to be invited to things and to clarify for myself why I am being asked. Is it tokenization? Are my opinions genuinely wanted? When do I have to not give a fuck and just show up? Especially in advocating for Native and Queer communities, I have extended invitations to others to engage, and understandably, some have clear boundaries; they don't want to engage. I wish that I had that fortitude. But, I feel compelled to say yes. Like I watched this small committee coming together, and there was no queer representation. If none of the folks I was recommending stepped in, diverse representation in an important organizing body wouldn't be there. So, I said yes. But then, beyond the work of the committee, I have to engage in developing cultural competency. That adds to that toll. And circumstances have gotten dire, so I'm trying to bolster myself for more work, while inviting others in and respecting people with strong boundaries.

AS: What unique specificities do Native Hawaiians face? How do you allow for those specificities in artistic spaces?

CKM: Hawai'i had an independent nation that was recently illegally overthrown. We're not federally recognized. Native Hawaiians weren't forcibly moved. We are on our land but don't have our land. I am just short of 50% Hawaiian, so I don't qualify for land through the [Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1920](#). East Asians also colonized Pacifica. I'm part East-Asian, part White, and predominantly, culturally Hawaiian. Within my own bloodstream, I have been colonized by myself.

In 2025, I launched an initiative called [Wehiwehi](#) to gather Native Hawaiian contemporary performing artists to better understand and create beyond these unique challenges. Resistance also comes from our community. Artists are seen as traditional culture bearers who make sure that our culture survives colonization and capitalism. So, at times, we're resistant to the innovative approaches that contemporary practice might bring. How do we build access to contemporary work and clarify that our indigeneity is still rooted in who

we are as Hawaiians?

AS: You hold your lineage's expansiveness while guiding others to the same. I witnessed this throughline in your land acknowledgement. Can you speak to that?

CKM: In land acknowledgments, I always incorporate a welcoming chant in Hawaiian that embraces the diversity of who is present. I ask myself , *how do I want to say hello?* Am I saying hello as a visitor? Ok, then, how do I enter the space? I acknowledge I'm visiting and bring that sensibility: Hello everyone here, flora, fauna.

Then, to gently trouble performative land acknowledgements in institutions, I ask hard questions: Are you paying Native artists? Do you have Native staff? Is there access to see your programs? In [Native Intelligence/Innate Intelligence](#), we also ask audiences where their mothers were born. Who do we bring in the room with us? Ancestors? Families? Capitalism removes us from saying "I'm bringing multiple people with me," which is an indigenous way to enter space.

This practice is also an acceptance of myself. While co-curating [Indigenous performance at Jacob's Pillow](#), I remember saying I never imagined myself doing Hawaiian chanting there. Like, this is a space for modern dance; I shouldn't be chanting. Now I have, and I would feel comfortable busting out there if compelled to.

AS: What are you hoping is your long-lasting impact?

CKM: As much as I love making art, I don't think my long lasting impact is my art. It's about how my art has allowed me access to communities where I can hold open doors for Brown, Native, and Queer folks. Like come in while I have the strength to hold this open. You, and you, and you. Get in here, you beautiful, creative weirdos. Get in here and access these resources.

Capitalism and whiteness do not share economies, and they have taken predominance over all our lives, no matter our identities. That's not how many other communities, including mine, operate. Access comes with the responsibility to gain access for more people.

Homepage Image Description:

Christopher Kauai Morgan gazes off to the side, smiling serenely in a studio that radiates warmth. Outfitted in various shades of blue, his hands rest gently on his hips in the pockets of a navy cardigan, as his weight shifts over to one leg. He is an image of confident grace, wearing chunky high-heeled boots that add a splash of exuberance to his professional demeanor.

Article Page Image Description:

A still from Native Intelligence/Innate Intelligence. Christopher Kauai Morgan, dressed in all black, gazes down to the right over his shoulder, as a white, netted cloth billows out to the side of his body. The cloth seems to counterbalance his weight, which shifts to the left as his hip juts out and his arms softly open in a U-shape overhead. On the left side of the image, we see a large white set-piece that resembles a DNA helix floating above the stage.

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