

An interview with Grant Wood Fellow: Christopher-Rasheem McMillan

By Madeline Smith, March 27, 2017

Chris McMillan finds the intersections between performance studies and religious studies and makes it work. As the 2016-17 Grant Wood Fellow in Interdisciplinary Performance, McMillan has toured small towns in Iowa, collaborated on one of his idol's pieces, and learned the no coast region of America has major talent. Read more about his time as a Grant Wood Fellow.

Tell me about yourself and your work that you do here at the University of Iowa.

CM: I got my Bachelor of Arts from Hampshire College and Masters of Fine Arts in experimental choreography from Laban Conservatoire in London. I received my PhD in Theology and Religious Studies from King's College in London. I work in the intersections between performance studies and religious studies. At the University of Iowa, as a Grant Wood Fellow, I teach choreography, co-direct our touring company, Dancers In Company, and teach theory classes. Religion comes into all aspects of my work, but at the moment I'm working more in performance arts with our students here.

What interested you to put religious studies and performance studies together? Why do those work so well together?

CM: I'm from a really religious family. My father is a pastor and I have a deep love for religion. For me, at first, I thought that they were separate ideas. Dance is a thing that I do on the side and religious studies is a thing I'm interested in, but I started making experimental works. One work showed in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, a performance festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, is called "Why Ate Jesus Naked." I disrobe and I serve communion naked to the people who are in the audience. A professor at King's College, named Ben Quash, Professor of Christianity and the Arts, said, "You should be doing a PhD in religious studies and you should be doing it with me." And so I started making works around religion and performance. So that sort of sparked this idea of like really focusing in on the intersections.

McMillan presents
"Practice as Research"
at a UI Religious
Studies colloquium on
January 26, 2017.



That's really interesting. So, tell me a little bit about your workspace and your process.

CM: I'm in a collaboration right now with Trisha Brown Dance Company. Trisha Brown was an American choreographer. She's recently passed, within the last week, so that's hard. I'm the first person who hasn't been a Company dancer who's been chosen to restage or do a reconstruction of one of her works. While I've been in residency here at Iowa, I've started the creation of *Black Lōkēs*, which is a recreation of her 1975 work, *Locus*.

Can you talk about other projects that you're doing throughout your Grant Wood Fellowship?

CM: I work with Dancers In Company, our touring company. Several choreographers set work on them, myself included. We tour to the greater Iowa community outside of Iowa City. The work that I have in this company is called *Follow the Broken Road Home* which is a sort of a recreation of both *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wiz* simultaneously. My role as a co-director, is really about selecting which pieces should go to which communities. If we're presenting to different places in Iowa we try to modulate or change to fit the community that we're presenting in to show the best, forward-facing ideas of the University of Iowa.

Dancers In Company co-directors, Jessica Anthony and Christopher-Rasheem McMillan, speak to a group of Grant Wood Elementary School students on April 13, 2017.



Had you heard about Grant Wood before you came to Iowa and his work?

CM: I did not. The most that I knew about Iowa was the writer's program. I didn't know that there was a whole wealth of things happening here that are exciting, useful, and interesting. Now I feel like I can be an ambassador for the program. I can tell people all about Grant Wood and his famous paintings. Having lived on the Colony, I feel like I've lived in the spaces that he's touched. I feel invited to continuously work on my own artistic practice and see that my practice touches communities and that I'm touched by those same communities.

Do you have something that stands out from your time as Grant Wood Fellow that really meant a lot to you while you've been here?

CM: I feel pushed. Part of the Grant Wood program is two other artists are in residency with me. Those two artists are visual artists, and I feel pushed by their practice to now make visual art. The piece I was telling you about at first, *Black Lōkēs*, is being made for a gallery space so, it's not actually being made for proscenium, which is where we usually produce, premiere, and show choreographies. I'm being impacted by my colleagues' art practices and being asked to think about my own making in a different way, in a way that I would not have thought about if I had not been here. So, all of a sudden the Grant Wood Fellowship, not only became the conduit to which I get a tenure track job which is unheard of; but also it's changed the way I think about my own artistic practices and serves as a catalyst for moving my work, my research, my artistic work forward and even my thinking forward.

McMillan performs *Black Lōkēs*.



What are you most excited about now that you've accepted a job here at the University of Iowa?

CM: I'm excited about so many things. I'm excited to tour *Black Lōkēs* internationally and nationally after I tour it in Iowa. I'm excited about developing and educating Iowans and not only with myself but participating in development and education of Iowans. I'm excited about finally having a place to call home, having been abroad and moving around for a good portion of my 20s and early 30s. And I'm excited about my colleagues, I really enjoy my colleagues and I love our students. So, it feels like a series of very fortunate events.