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How We Became What We Are: Deanna Bowen's Forensic Gaze

Interview by Jacob Gallagher-Ross

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In the fall of 2019, in what feels like another lifetime, I attended Deanna Bowen's exhibition *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, at the University of Toronto's art museum—the school I attended as an undergraduate, where I am now on faculty. Commissioned as part of the hundredth-anniversary commemorations of Hart House, the University's centre for student life, *God of Gods* returned to the scene of the 1927 premiere of Carroll Aikins's *The God of Gods*, a modernist play riddled with primitivism, in which Indigenous characters were performed by white actors in redface makeup. The play was both a landmark in the history of settler-Canadian art, and a symptom of the cultural genocide that was indivisible from Canada's aspirant cultural nationalism. Hart House Theatre, where the play premiered, is often considered Canada's first "art" theatre, and the circle of (white) artists that frequented its plays overlapped significantly with the Group of Seven, who were then already being established as founder-figures in the emergent narrative of settler-Canadian art.

Bowen, a descendant of the Alabama and Kentucky-born Black Prairie pioneers of Amber Valley and Campsie, Alberta, locates Aikins's play within a wider "ecology" (to use curator Maya Wilson-Sanchez's evocative phrase) of social connections and influential players in the Toronto cultural scene of the 1920s. The staging ground for new narratives of Canadian identity, it becomes not just a symptomatic event, but much more: the script for Canadian racism. It was evident to me then that Bowen's exhibition was a landmark of both art-historical and theatre-historical investigation: a fierce reckoning with Canada's unacknowledged past hiding in plain sight, and one of the most important art or theater events I'd attended in Toronto since returning to Canada from the US in 2016. The exhibition's clear-eyed engagement with the intergrowth of white supremacy and Canadian cultural nationalism felt like an obligation to my citizenship. Thinking alongside Bowen's work was a rigorous pleasure I couldn't ignore.

The exhibition stayed with me in the ensuing months, and my poring over it culminated in a long essay-review for *Theater*, Yale's journal of theater criticism, reportage, and new plays, piecing through the exhibition's implications for the history of Canadian theatre, the Canadian museum, and, indeed, for the theatre of Canadian identity—the national drama— itself.¹

1. Jacob Gallagher-Ross, "Twilight of the Idols," *Theater* 50, no. 3 (November 2020): 29–47, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-8651179>.

Sometime later, as she was preparing a major installation for the National Gallery of Canada, Bowen and I met on Zoom to discuss where the *God of Gods* exhibition—which, as is common with Bowen’s shows, was already shifting and transforming into new configurations for new publics—fits into her larger body of work, and her broader historical inquiry.

The following is condensed from her remarks. Bowen’s conversation is as historically minded as her art practice, and the epic scale of her investigation unfurled as we spoke. She departs from her family’s complex border-spanning North American experience, and her art opens into a reckoning with buried geopolitics. Bowen returns Canada and Canadian nationalism to the crossroads of a bloody imperial world—still very much in thrall to British ideals, despite burgeoning self-assertion.

As she searches for the answers that locate her family in a history that was determined to exclude them and destroy traces of their presence, she’s also identifying hidden currents in the Canadian story, currents that explain what we are better than comfortable myths. Beginning with private stories, her work is public art in the most important sense: a challenge to look beyond inherited ideology to discover new, more encompassing definitions of Canadian-ness.

In her answers, you can observe that telescoping analysis at work, bringing distant historical events closer—so close, you can see them again with fresh eyes, against a new backdrop. —JGR

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On a very intimate level, [my practice] comes from a need to know my family history in and of itself. Coming from a family that talked very little about its past, I can look now and see it’s a deeply traumatized family: not talking about its past, not talking about its present, the profound, not just dysfunction, but the profound depression of this family. And, not knowing health records, or really anything about my father, all that silence is what got me to dig in the first place. That started with birth records. And birth records led to census records, all of those things. And probably around 2008, 2009, 2010, I started working through white archives to actually trace family members. If we’re talking about the slavery era, we’re looking at the reality that Black people are property. The only way I’m going to find them is through the wills of white men who have bequeathed them to the next generation. So, the knowledge that there will be no naming of names on the census record, prior to the end of the Civil War, was also a recognition that the surface-level kind of archive of “you just want to know, and there it is,” is not going to happen for Black bodies—certainly not in the United States, but also definitely not in Canada. And the disparity between the two countries became the cue for another kind of questioning.

The Canadian archive is just so much more obscure: at least in American archives, there is a transition where Black bodies have an agency and they’re able to speak up for themselves, right? That doesn’t happen in Canada in

the same way. By blessing of the census records, I can say that I know when my family came. But then: growing up knowing that we're here, but not finding us again in the Canadian archive at all. Or when we are, it's through criminal records, quite honestly, or surveillance. The amount our family has been surveilled since we came here is great, and weird. Why is this particular community of Black people being documented as extensively as they are, through newspapers or television news, or whatever? Why is that?

That question starts opening the door to: Oh, yeah, why? What else is going on in this timeframe? And that opens the door to bigger questions around context. So, the first thread of research was just: where are they? Second is, in what context do these things exist? What is the nature of the archive itself? And then: why aren't we, for example, in other archives that are more honorific? My approach is really a bottom-looking-upwards strategy: from the basement up to the top of the archive. That's the way that I'm thinking: a deep forensic view, with the dead way below, and then coming to the surface to see how they're concealed. The thing that's on top of all of this is the splashy, purposefully obstructing mythologies, the lies that people tell about themselves, particularly famous, rich, or political, white bodies. And that retelling of their history will mix in with the "debris" of the archives of the less desirables.

How all of this intersects with art is actually through a petition generated by Frank Oliver, who was the Minister of the Interior and Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs from 1905 to 1911.

He was an Alberta politician, newspaperman, part of the federal government, deeply racist, and [he worked with] a bunch of Alberta tradesmen and boards of trade to generate this petition which I've ultimately turned into a work. [The] petition was directly related to my family's migration into Canada. It was a petition that was preceded by an ongoing chain of correspondence between Prime Minister Laurier and boards of trade in Alberta, and there was a conscious construction of the petition. In and of itself, it was like: "Whoa, what the hell is this?" Because in my family, the narrative up until I found that petition was "everybody got along, no problems, everything was cool. We (Blacks, Eastern European immigrant, and First Nations People) all work together." And I'm sure that everyday, farm-labourer kind of reality is true in a sense. But I do know that, contextually, they lived in Klan territory, Frank Oliver's Alberta, so the petition itself was a revelation. The fact that [the petition] was constructed consensually between the federal government was another deep blow. And then the eureka moment was to turn it into a piece. So that's a 236-page document with, give or take, 4300 signatures of white people saying that they're agitated for this influx of Black people that are coming in, and if the government doesn't intervene, they'd be obliged to resort to lynch mobs, right? So effectively, just explicitly saying, if you don't come and get these people, if you don't deal with this, we're going to kill them. Definitely not what my family was saying, and the difference between that and what I was raised in is massive. And obviously, that's

trauma. That's fear that's learned, learned silence, all of that stuff. That was enough.

The petition was part of my solo show called *Invisible Empires* at the Art Gallery of York University for 2013. That whole exhibition was about tracing the migration of the Ku Klux Klan into Canada. Again, there's this notion that Canada doesn't have a Klan. The show was about that, tracing the origin, and then discovering that, in the 1920s, the Klan in Canada was as large as it was in the United States, with a massive presence in the prairies where my family grew up. So that was the beginning of it. And then I never, for that show, it was just way too traumatic—I wasn't doing a word by word reading of [the petition], certainly wasn't paying attention to the names. But the reception of that piece—suffice to say that nobody really knew what to do with it. The show happened, and then it ended. And there was no critical response. There was nothing, it was just met with silence for the most part. I thought it was dead.

But my good friend Lisa Myers, who is a member of the Beausoleil First Nation, was doing a show on documents related to Indigenous artists. And by then I was quite clear about my family's Indigenous lineage. I'm not claiming that I'm Indigenous, but I am saying that I am well-aware of our lineage and interconnectedness going back to the late 1700s. The complexity of claiming status is a long story, another story, but suffice to say, Lisa's inclusion of the petition in the show felt like a welcoming affirmation and an important re-dissemination of damning anti-Indigenous, anti-Afro-Indigenous documents. In that context the petition came alive again, in a super powerful way. The registrar at the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery was reading the pages in order to get the grid structure of the petition installed. In that effort to put up the petition, she started reading the names, and that's when she discovered Barker Fairley. I was preoccupied with the overall impact of the collection of pages, and it was Crystal Mowry and Lisa Myers who informed me about the significance of the discovery.

Barker Fairley connects to the Group of Seven and that whole Victorian cultural community [in Toronto] we're talking about. Before he taught at U of T, he was teaching at University of Alberta when he signed the petition saying that he was behind the lynch mob killings of Black people. He transferred to U of T, and taught the rest of his career there, was on the culture committee at Hart House and was responsible for the hiring of Carroll Aikins, particularly for his white-nationalist perspective, and all the white-nationalist programming that preceded it, and then actually came after it. Barker Fairley, the well-known scholar at U of T. His papers are in Special Collections, you know, it's handled with kid gloves. What does it mean that if this guy, the biggest advocate for the Group of Seven, is fine with killing Black people as they come into the country? What does that mean? And what does that say about the group of Seven's landscapes, and the relationship between Hart House and theatre, and the performativity of the arts, and the way that culture is used to transmit nationalist ideas?



Figure 1. Deanna Bowen, *God of Gods: A Canadian Play* (installation view), September 4 to November 30, 2019, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto. Curated by Barbara Fischer with Inaugural Curatorial Resident Maya Wilson-Sanchez. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Figure 2. Deanna Bowen, *Deconstructing the "God of Gods: A Canadian Play,"* 2019. Video, 1h 24min. Archer Pechawis, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, John G. Hampton, and cheyanne turions in conversation. Installation view from *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Figure 3. Deanna Bowen, *God of Gods: A Canadian Play* (installation view), September 4 to November 30, 2019, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto. Curated by Barbara Fischer with Inaugural Curatorial Resident Maya Wilson-Sanchez. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Figure 4. Deanna Bowen, *God of Gods: A Canadian Play* (installation view), September 4 to November 30, 2019, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto. Curated by Barbara Fischer with Inaugural Curatorial Resident Maya Wilson-Sanchez. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

We have all been taught that this is the foundation of the nation, this is who we are. And there's almost no interrogation of the fact that all these [Group of Seven] landscapes, all these works that are being produced at this time, dance, theatre, literature, everything, are inundated with this British colonial ambition for a white nation. The timeframe that my family came to the country was literally the time that Canada was being built as Little Britain: as white as it could possibly be. There's tons of documentation about that. So again, that belies everything my family has ever said.

Of course, this all opens up the bigger question: if Barker Fairley is doing this shit, who else is in on the joke? Then you come to see that every single cultural player in Toronto in the early 1900s is part of this network of like-minded individuals who share the same ideas about what art can do for the shaping of a nation and conveying its message. And then that gets *really* interesting.

How do we not know this about these people? You want to go even further back? How do we not know that John MacDonald's second wife's whole family fortune is from slavery? How do we not know that? If you keep going backwards, what you come to understand is that these folks that built Canada's earliest cultural identity are all Brits, right? Their family, their forefathers came across just at the early founding of the nation. This is a nepotistic lineage that actually goes back to the very beginning of Canada. John A. Macdonald and his second wife, they're not the only people that came over to Canada after the abolition of slavery. They came with their wealth that they had from their slave-owning past. All of this is entangled in the national narrative, and we don't know this. This truth is obviously deeply problematic, and completely the opposite of what my family taught me about who we are and where we live.

The early settlers that came across after the abolition of slavery came here to exploit the land. But even by nature of doing that, they would have had some kind of relationship to royalty when they left. So, it's just an extension. Those first settlers become the forefathers of the Masseys and the Harrises. They all run in the same society circles and it becomes apparent that really this is all just social networking that achieves these things. It's entirely arbitrary, but I think the power of it all is that we can dismantle this if we do the digging. It's just people, they're just people, you know what I mean? If we can take it apart and dethrone them, not with malice, but with a rigorous eye, then you can see the fallacy of the cultural narrative in and of itself. You can see the potential for reshaping the archive in a way that's much more truthful, and the potential for making a much more truthful Canadian narrative about who's here.

So that's how it starts. That's where it's going. The beauty and weirdness about the Canadian cultural scene, certainly the Toronto scene, is that it's so caught up in itself that it couldn't see me coming. And then the beauty of Barker Fairley and his preoccupation with German scholarship made for the connection to Germany, knowing about theosophy and its grounding, what and where Madame Blavatsky was doing and where she was in the

world—definitely a relationship to Queen Victoria and her family. This is where the tentacles of *The God of Gods* get teased out into a global framework. Theosophy was such a critical component of this cultural community in Toronto—across the nation, really. There is at least some kind of a cultural myth about Theosophy as the foundations of Nazi thought. So, you follow that through, and then you find yourself contending with German nationalism in the early 1900s, that whole superman kind of identity. And then you start looking at the ways in which the Canadian cultural scene is performing Indian and how that gets played out in Germany as well and the weird cross-cultural thing of Karl May.

Making connections between all of that for the University of Toronto Art Museum show gave me the opportunity to put Canada and these cultural players into a global framework. And when you start thinking about the Crown within Europe, you start thinking about “Well, shit, it’s Queen Victoria, right?” But what about Queen Victoria’s nine children who all marry into other royal families, and the *German* cultural history that is Queen Victoria’s reign because of her husband, Prince Albert, and the fact that the family is actually culturally German? So: I was looking at that and realizing how that German consciousness flows through the British lineage and how it flows out across Europe to all these other royal families that were created at the time. When you start thinking about the German throughline in the royal family, then you think about what the fuck was going on around the world as far as colonial conquest. You start thinking about the rape of Africa.² In this time frame, you think about the First World War, you think about the Boer Wars, and what that conflict was really was about and what Canada’s role was within it. You think about every other major turn-of-the-century colonial conflict: the Opium Wars in China, Afghanistan, Sudan—all of these things were happening in this timeframe. The consistent presence in these wars is British warlords like Lord Kitchener, the eventual namesake of Berlin, Ontario, who fought in Egypt, Sudan, and South Africa—these kind of connections reach back to this forensic idea of archiving from the bottom, going up. Or, in this instance the top going down forever. And, with this, the seemingly coincidental connection between “Kitchener-Waterloo” and “Lord Kitchener”—becomes a much bigger, insidious thing. You would think that this little town in southern Ontario couldn’t possibly be connected to this Imperial world, but it is. It’s a critical site for the founding of the Group of Seven, for the political ambitions of Canada. Vincent Massey, Lawren Harris, Mackenzie King—they all come from this neck of the woods, Homer Watson. All of these folks come from Southern Ontario in and around Berlin and Kitchener. These painters couldn’t possibly not know about Indigenous culture. When you start looking at all of those things, and how they all unfold, how Massey in 1927 became ambassador to the United States, and how that relates to his industrial conquest. It’s all interconnected.

But because we’re thinking about the land and conquest, and because we’re in Canada at a time [now] when we’re very conscious about who are

2. See W. E. B. Dubois, “Review of *The Rape of Africa* [fragment],” 1936. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

the keepers of the land, you can't help but think about Indigenous relationships with these German settlers. [T]hen you can't help but think about all the wars that have been fought in this region by nature of it being across the border from the United States, but also because it's this area of rural white boys who all enlist. It becomes a source of endless soldiers over the generations. You could confine it to the First and Second World Wars, but you can also take it back to the American Revolution, and then you're a hop, skip, and a jump away from Lieutenant-Colonel John Butler's "gift" of the Haldimand Tract to the Mohawk people. The mythology of this German community in the area that frames itself as peaceful German Mennonites is a facade, because Victoria and the British actually hired German mercenaries to clear the land long before the settlers came in. That's the real history of the flattening of the land, so to speak. Those mercenaries stay, and then that is the beginning of the settlement, and *then* German Mennonites come, and then the Oktoberfest and all that kind of stuff.

It's also the same land on which the Underground Railroad flows. And when you start looking at the conflation of all these different histories, the overlapping of all these histories, then you come to see the richness of the terrain, and its contrast to the narrative that the Group of Seven, etc., represent. These landscapes aren't empty. The land is much more densely populated with Black bodies, Indigenous bodies, slaves. All over the place: Joseph Brant brings back the Black girl from New York, one of many, brings her across the border and there's a whole narrative that's happening there. It's such a super-rich, history-laden, region. Super-dark: the blood that's in the soil is unfathomable. And we don't know any of this, and how it relates to the cultural narrative that we've all been taught, you know what I mean? So that's kind of where I'm at these days. I know it's a super-crazy lay of the land, but one thing leads to another, leads to another, leads to another and if we agree that the world is largely run by a select handful of people like the Royals, then it makes sense that everything would flow into each other.

I'm not anybody special, nor am I easy. I'm not an easy Black artist. I come to this work as a Black chick that comes from the very, very bottom, and it's grounded in my desire to understand my family. What I mean by "I'm not special" is I just necessarily figured the shit out along the way. I'm not seriously trained. And by nature of being just this chick who figured out how to do this stuff, I believe anybody can do this work. I don't want any of my exhibitions to ever be a passive experience, where folks get to say that they've been "educated" and then forget about it. I'm gonna make you, the spectator, do some work—read the work. I'm insisting on that from the perspective of being a Black artist, and often being passed over. Yes, I want you to do the work. You do it for other artists; you can learn how to read my work, too. This naturally flows into my pedagogy and teaching practice.

I take my access to the archive, my ability to read and write, very seriously, knowing that my ancestors could have died for being literate. And because of that, I want to make the things I find as readily available to the public as I possibly can, knowing that there are people that will never learn how to do

this, will never enter a library, or receive inclusive education, but that this is here. And if they just read through one image and learn something, I'm happy. It'll be a shift. It's not gonna be fun, but you're gonna learn something about power structures, or you're going to learn something about the ways in which we have been seen, or you're going to learn something about histories that have been buried. My grandfather had a third-grade education, I realize I've never heard a story about my grandmother going to school, my mom is one of three of her eleven siblings that finished high school. My literacy and agency mean something to me. This has always been about translation of my research so that I can come back to my mom and my family and say, "These are the forces that did the things that they did. This is how we become who we are. It names all of the unspoken traumas that would explain our collective sadness and sorrow and grief. I would tell them that all of that comes from the things that these people did."

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Deanna Bowen is a descendant of the Alabama and Kentucky born Black Prairie pioneers of Amber Valley and Campsie, Alberta. Her family history has been the central pivot of her auto-ethnographic interdisciplinary practice since the early 1990s. She is a recipient of Concordia University's 2022 Provost's Circle of Distinction Award, a 2021 Scotiabank Photography Award, a 2020 Governor General Award for Visual and Media Arts Award, a 2018 Canada Council Research and Creation Grant, an Ontario Arts Council Media Arts Grant in 2017, a 2016 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and the 2014 William H. Johnson Prize. She is Assistant Professor of studio arts at Concordia University. Her writing, interviews and art works have been published in *Canadian Art*, *The Capilano Review*, *The Black Prairie Archives*, and *Transition Magazine*. She is the editor of the 2019 publication *Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts in Canada*. ¶

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