

**Deanna Bowen: *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*.** Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto. September 4 – November 30, 2019. Curated by Barbara Fischer with research by Maya Wilson-Sanchez.

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*God of Gods: A Canadian Play* was commissioned as part of the centennial programming for Hart House,<sup>1</sup> an institution that has become woven into the fabric of the University of Toronto and its larger academic, social, and cultural circles over the last 100 years. The exhibit is a project by Deanna Bowen, a Toronto-based autoethnographic, interdisciplinary artist and a descendant of Black Albertans who migrated from Alabama and Kentucky, through Oklahoma and Kansas. Bowen's work, which often engages with race, slavery, migration, and white supremacy, "examines history, historical writing and the ways in which artistic and technological advancements impact individual and collective authorship."<sup>2</sup> As such, her work frequently engages with and refigures archival source material.

Upon entering the Barnicke Gallery in the fall of 2019, visitors might assume they have encountered a typical centennial display – that familiar sight of framed archival records, arranged in clusters, perhaps by decade or theme, intended to celebrate the institution, its major actors, events, and achievements. On each

1 The full centennial program is described on the Hart House website: <https://harthouse.ca/series/hart-house-100>.

2 "Deanna Bowen CV," Deanna Bowen, accessed November 14, 2019, <http://www.deannabowen.ca/biography-cv/>.



FIGURE 1 Installation view, *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, September 4 – November 30, 2019, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto. Source: Photo by Dominic Chan.

wall hangs a series of photographs, newspaper articles, archival records, and art, gathered together to tell a story (Figure 1). Yet this assemblage of archival records tells a different story – or perhaps the same story, told through a different lens.

Bowen's consideration<sup>3</sup> of Hart House's history begins with a play, *The God of Gods*, written by Carroll Aikins in 1918<sup>4</sup> and staged at the Hart House Theatre in 1922 under the theatre's second director, Bertram Forsyth (Figure 2). As the exhibit's opening text explains, the play "projects the horrors of war into a loose adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* – using 'native' motifs and white actors performing red-face." Deciding against a restaging, an approach she has taken

- 3 The exhibition brochure explains that the work was "commissioned to consider the one-hundredth anniversary of Hart House" (emphasis added).
- 4 The exhibition dates the play to 1919, although a recent critical edition indicates it was written in 1918 and premiered in Birmingham, England, in 1919. See Carroll Aikins, *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play: A Critical Edition*, ed. Kailin Wright (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2016).



FIGURE 2 *Production still from God of Gods, Hart House Theatre, Toronto, Canada, 1922.*  
 Source: University of Toronto Archives, Hart House Theatre Fonds, A1975-0009/013P (God of Gods).



FIGURE 3 *Installation view featuring Arts and Letters Club membership cards (right), God of Gods: A Canadian Play, September 4 – November 30, 2019, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto.* Source: Photo by Dominic Chan.

with past works,<sup>5</sup> Bowen uses the play as a point of entry into a larger story. The exhibit's clusters of framed records, gathered and reproduced from institutional archives<sup>6</sup> and the artist's own collection, document the play and its larger context: "the foundations of Canadian cultural identity as shaped by nationalist, White, and settler ideals within the social networks of Toronto's political, economic, and cultural elite in the early 20th century."<sup>7</sup>

Alongside photographs of the play's staging, program, script, and (largely negative) reviews, the exhibit documents those who moved in Aikins' and Forsyth's circles, including prominent Canadians like Vincent Massey, the Group of Seven, artist Frederick Coates, anthropologist Marius Barbeau, and artist and University of Toronto professor Barker Fairley. It also notably includes George Agnew Reid, principal of the Ontario College of Art (later OCAD University), and Duncan Campbell Scott, influential poet and Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs. Bowen situates this social and professional network in several institutions, including Hart House, the Art Gallery of Toronto, and the Arts and Letters Club of Toronto. In one frame, she assembles copies of these individuals' Arts and Letters Club membership cards, evidencing the self-perpetuating networks of elite Canadian men who moved through these spaces and shaped the Canadian cultural landscape for decades to come.<sup>8</sup> We see the parade of names unfold under the glass: Massey, Fairley, Aikins, Scott, Forsythe, Coates, and so on (Figure 3).

5 See, for example, *On-Trial The Long Doorway*, which included the restaging of a 1956 CBC television show "that tells the story of a rising Black legal aide lawyer assigned to represent a young white student accused of assaulting a fellow Black student that unfolds in locations across Toronto." "On-Trial The Long Doorway," Western Front, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://front.bc.ca/events/on-trial-the-long-doorway/>.

6 Archival records are sourced from the Archives of Ontario, the University of Toronto Archives, Library and Archives Canada, the Canadian Museum of History, Arts and Letters Club of Toronto, and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

7 From the exhibit's opening curatorial statement.

8 A well-made account of the collaborations and parallels between Hart House and the Arts and Letters Club is by Karen A. Finlay, in *The Force of Culture: Vincent Massey and Canadian Sovereignty* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). Like Hart House, the Arts and Letters Club was an exclusively male club. Women were not admitted until 1985. Mary Willan Mason and Patricia Wardrop, "Arts and Letters Club of Toronto," *Canadian Encyclopedia*, December 15, 2013, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/arts-and-letters-club-of-toronto-emc>.

The depth of archival research performed for this project is clear,<sup>9</sup> and Bowen's project is one that, as Ketelaar reminds us about all archival activations, "leaves fingerprints" on the archive, giving rise to "the infusing and exhaling of values" in a "membranic" record.<sup>10</sup> The exhibit tells the story not of these men's "great achievements" but of the simultaneous exclusion and fabrication of Indigenous and racialized others in their construction (through artistic, literary, academic, curatorial, economic, and political means) of a post-First World War Canadian national identity. Bowen retells many chapters of this story as they unfolded in the decades immediately before and after the play's staging: the minstrel shows at the Arts and Letters Club, the salvage ethnography and curatorial practices of Franz Boas and Marius Barbeau,<sup>11</sup> the red-face performances of Juliette Gaultier on the Hart House stage, and so many more. The display's ostensible centrepiece – an enlarged reproduction of the title page of Vincent Massey's 1928 volume *The Making of a Nation*<sup>12</sup> – underscores the focus of the exhibit.

The final room of the exhibit contains the only nod toward a "restaging" of the play: a projected film of Bowen discussing the play with Indigenous artists and curators Archer Pechawis, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, John G. Hampton, and cheyenne turions, as they sit around a table on the Hart House Theatre stage (Figure 4). The film plays a central role in refiguring the past, and a photograph of this scene appears on the exhibit's brochure and website, where it is juxtaposed with an oft-published photograph of a group of men gathered around a table at the Arts and Letters Club in 1924: Frederick Varley, A.Y. Jackson, Lawren

9 The project's archival work was discussed in one of three public talks organized around this exhibit: a conversation between Bowen and Wilson-Sanchez titled "On Mining the Archive for the Play" (public talk, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, Toronto, Ontario, September 28, 2019).

10 Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 137, 138.

11 Archives house the fruits of salvage ethnography, which – while it may have preserved language and culture – extracted knowledge, cultural objects, and even human remains while perpetuating discourses of disappearance and the teleology of a Canadian state that has insisted on eventual assimilation, invisibility, and/or disappearance of the people and nations of this land. See, for example, Judith Kaplan and Rebecca Lemov, "Archiving Endangerment, Endangered Archives: Journeys through the Sound Archives of Americanist Anthropology and Linguistics, 1911–2016," *Technology and Culture* 60, no. 2 (2019): S161–S187; and Harry Whitehead, "The Agency of Yearning on the Northwest Coast of Canada: Franz Boas, George Hunt and the Salvage of Autochthonous Culture," *Memory Studies* 3, no. 3 (2010): 215–23.

12 The volume publishes a 1927 speech delivered at Milton Academy in Massachusetts, in which Massey, then Canadian Ambassador to the United States, described "how Canada grew from a few scattered hamlets of French and English settlers in the primitive 'bush' into that something which we call a nation." Vincent Massey, *The Making of a Nation* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1928), 5.



FIGURE 4 Deanna Bowen, *Production still of Archer Pechawis, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, John G. Hampton, and cheyanne turions in conversation, from Deconstructing the God of Gods: A Canadian Play, 2019, video, 2:24. Source: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery.*

Harris, Barker Fairley, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and J.E.H. MacDonald (Figure 5). The film effectively speaks back to the play and its larger contexts – presenting a new view, a new assemblage of voices and perspectives.

As these new commentators observe, despite its “native” motifs, there is no authentic Indigenous voice to find in Aikins’ *God of Gods*. As Pechawis describes it, the play is “profoundly not about us. There is nothing Indigenous about the play.”<sup>13</sup> The exhibit’s archival records provide ample documentation of this dynamic: the cultural construction of Indigeneity as a homogenous blank slate that conflates distinct nations, symbols, practices, languages, and lands – an

<sup>13</sup> Deanna Bowen, *Deconstructing the God of Gods: A Canadian Play, 2019, video, 2:24*. Even while so-called Indigeneity is performed, the play is emblematic of Lorenzo Veracini’s characterization of settler colonialism as a “non-encounter,” expressing a “recurring need to disavow the presence of indigenous ‘others.’” Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing *Settler Colonial Studies*,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 2. The cultural “non-encounter” is exemplified in Massey’s seemingly unoccupied “primitive bush” (see note 12 above) and the Group of Seven’s empty landscapes, a recurring theme in Bowen’s exhibit. See, for example, John O’Brian and Peter White, eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).



FIGURE 5 Frederick Varley, A.Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris, Barker Fairley, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and J.E.H. MacDonald, Arts and Letters Club, c. 1924, Toronto, Canada. Source: University of Toronto Archives, University College Archives fonds, A2016-0040/P.

“imaginary Indian”<sup>14</sup> onto which white settlers project their fears, desires, and nation-building narratives.<sup>15</sup> The figure of Duncan Campbell Scott looms over the exhibit as a clear manifestation of this dual movement between representation and erasure. One photograph selected by Bowen depicts a Hart House Theatre staging, during its 1926–27 season, of Scott’s *Joy! Joy! Joy!*, wherein a young woman is killed when her sister dons a “gorgeous and barbaric garment” with grizzly bear paws and a “demon-mask,” which “must have belonged to an Indian princess.”<sup>16</sup> This play offers one example of Scott’s artistic oeuvre, in

14 Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011).

15 Even contemporary reviews of the Hart House production of *God of Gods* were critical of its blurring of cultural practices, geography, and music. Reviews of overseas productions were less critical of its inauthenticity. Kailin Wright, “Introduction,” in Aikins, *The God of Gods*, xxviii–xxxiii.

16 University of Toronto Archives, Hart House Theatre Fonds, A1975-0009/034, Duncan Campbell Scott, *Joy! Joy! Joy!* [script].

which literary and dramatic works evoke distorted Indigenous cultural imagery. Meanwhile, at his day job, Scott enacted policies that sought the decimation of Indigenous cultures, including a 1920 amendment to the *Indian Act* that made residential school attendance mandatory for all Aboriginal children aged 7–15 years.<sup>17</sup> As Bowen and her co-commentators make clear, this type of dualism is not a peculiarity of Scott's, but rather an intrinsic part of the colonial project.

If Aikins' *God of Gods* is not about Indigenous people, Bowen offers, then "the play is about white people," leading Lisa Myers to the provocative statement that, perhaps, "red face is white face."<sup>18</sup> This exchange offers a poignant framing for one of Bowen's main theses. Her consideration directs an oppositional ethnographic gaze<sup>19</sup> back onto the systems and practices of a group of powerful white Canadians, transforming the institutional archive into a counter-archive – a reckoning with the institution's history and its exclusions. In this exhibition, institutional archives are read "against the grain," not to uncover the underrepresented subjects of records, but to shed light on what is unwritten in colonial archives – that is, the contours of the colonial project itself, or as Ann Stoler describes, "what was 'unwritten' because it could go without saying and 'everyone knew it,' what was unwritten because it could not yet be articulated, and what was unwritten because it could not be said."<sup>20</sup>

Yet, it is important to note that Bowen's intervention is one of reassemblage, not pastiche. Her work relies on the records' strength as trustworthy evidence, despite their reframing outside their home repositories. As the artist explained at one of the exhibit's gallery talks, if she was going to be "effectively taking apart the house in the house . . . I need my receipts in order."<sup>21</sup> Bowen has preserved

17 John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999).

18 Bowen, *Deconstructing the God of Gods*. Bowen's positioning of whiteness resonates with Michelle Caswell's positioning of canonical archival appraisal theory and thinkers as a view from somewhere, rather than nowhere. Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," ed. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020).

19 bell hooks's description of the "oppositional gaze," vis-à-vis Black women's media spectatorship, is also traced back to the gaze of slaves, who "defiantly declared, 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.'" bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

20 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

21 Deanna Bowen, "Deanna Bowen and Lynda Jessup in Conversation" (public talk, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, Toronto, Ontario, November 6, 2019).

the archival bonds of records by carefully framing and sourcing each record separately, always tracing it back to its archival context in the captions. Many of the reproductions remain uncropped, using a wider frame that reveals their archival homes in the margins and edges, including glimpses of bindings and opposing pages, post-it notes, and reading room tables.

One of the most persuasive of these “receipts” comes from one of Bowen’s earlier autoethnographic installations, *1911 Anti Creek-Negro Petition*, in which she reproduced every page of a long, yet ultimately unsuccessful, Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) petition to prohibit people of African and Indigenous descent from entering Alberta from the United States.<sup>22</sup> In *God of Gods*, Bowen reassembles four pages of this petition, one featuring the signature of Barker Fairley, a professor of German literature who transferred from the University of Alberta to the University of Toronto in 1915. Fairley was good friends with the Group of Seven, and his efforts to champion their work are considered instrumental to their prominence in Canadian art.<sup>23</sup> Fairley was also a painter himself, and many of his works are held in Hart House’s permanent collection, whose first purchase was, not coincidentally, a work by A.Y. Jackson in 1922.<sup>24</sup> The petition offers an example of Bowen’s deliberate strategy of reassemblage: she maintains the petition’s links to its original archival context while enhancing its evidentiary strength through careful juxtapositions that create new archival bonds. Fairley’s signature on the petition hangs above his painting of W.J. Alexander (Chair of English at University College), alongside that oft-published photograph of Fairley and his friends at the Arts and Letters Club in 1924, and adjacent to a photograph of a 1918 minstrel show at the very same club, as if to say, “Yes, he painted this. And yes, he sat and talked with these men. And did you know they did this? And this too?” Like those of Duncan Campbell Scott, the racist activities of these individuals are displayed as neither aberrational exceptions nor unfortunate footnotes to their lives. Instead, as Bowen reveals, these activities contributed to

22 Valerie Hill, “Artist Uses Family Conflict and an Unknown Element of History as Inspiration for Her Work,” *Waterloo Region Record*, October 22, 2017. <https://www.therecord.com/whatson-story/7677787-artist-uses-family-conflict-and-an-unknown-element-of-history-as-inspiration-for-her-work/>

23 Rodney Symington, “Barker Fairley,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, December 16, 2013, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/barker-fairley>. Another early champion was J. Burgon Bickersteth, Warden of Hart House from 1921 to 1947.

24 The permanent collection committee was steered by Massey, Bickersteth, and Fairley. Finlay, *The Force of Culture*, 103.

the very discourses and structures that supported their celebrated achievements. The assemblage reorients what we commemorate and what we remember, to put each on equal footing, equally bound up.

*God of Gods: A Canadian Play* effectively demonstrates how cultural products are often created in the image and service of existing power structures. The collection of raw material generated in Bowen's critique presents us with a proposal: a re-conceptualized, re-oriented archive. In order to facilitate this meaning making, she includes further resources: an essay by Maya Wilson-Sanchez<sup>25</sup> in the exhibition brochure, select biographies of the exhibit's subjects, and a detailed bibliography for further reading, available online and placed in plastic sleeves on the gallery's seating.<sup>26</sup> Bowen relies on her audience's willingness to accept these invitations to read her new archive. If they do, there are so many threads to follow, weaving expressions of racism, nationalism, and settler colonialism through painting, literature, performance, advertising, and broader cultural and curatorial practices.

For archivists, this exhibit provides pause for thought – for consideration of the role that archives have played in these aspects of settler colonialism. But perhaps even more compelling is Bowen's argument that settler conceptualizations of Indigeneity are actually reflections of settlers' desires and anxieties (*and* worth our attention and study), rather than honest depictions of Indigenous lives and cultures.<sup>27</sup> Melissa Adams-Campbell, Ashley Glassburn Falzetti, and Courtney Rivard warn against a number of approaches that reify settler colonialism in archival approaches to Indigenous material, even in this era of reconciliation, including celebrating Indigenous "culture" while glossing over land rights and sovereignty, "lumping together all Native knowledge as 'Indian' and casting this knowledge in the past," and presenting Indigenous material as "an indistinct and antiquated pre-history of the seemingly natural and inevitable

25 Wilson-Sanchez is a Toronto-based writer, researcher, and curator who worked as a researcher on this project.

26 Exhibition resources are found at "God of Gods: A Canadian Play," Art Museum at the University of Toronto, <https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/deanna-bowen-the-god-of-gods/>.

27 This work, then, takes up calls to study whiteness, thus destabilizing its purported neutrality/naturalness, for example, as in Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 291–309. Recent work by Michelle Caswell seeks to do something similar with appraisal theory, by identifying the appraisal "canon" as arising out of particular perspectives that supported dominant culture, rather than as "views from nowhere." Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints."

settler state.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Trish Luker cautions against reconciliatory activities and discourse that continue to centre settlers through performances of their emotions (shame, guilt) in the ultimate service of the (re)construction of an ideal nation.<sup>29</sup> In recent archival efforts toward reconciliation and the surfacing of Indigenous content, who will these new activations be “about”? Can archivists frame colonial archives as being distinctly *about* settlers, not Indigenous people, while simultaneously providing space – as Bowen does – for speaking back?

28 Melissa Adams-Campbell, Ashley Glassburn Falzetti, and Courtney Rivard, “Introduction: Indigeneity and the Work of Settler Archives” *Settler Colonial Studies* 5, no. 2 (2015): 110, 111. Similarly, Jane Griffith critiques recent presentations of archival material about Indigenous peoples as reproducing narratives of discovery and nation-building: “Indigenous peoples are important, but only so far as they helped create Canada.” Jane Griffith, “Settler Colonial Archives: Some Canadian Contexts,” *Colonial Studies* 9, no. 3 (2019): 326.

29 Trish Luker, “Decolonising Archives: Indigenous Challenges to Record Keeping in ‘Reconciling’ Settler Colonial States,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91–92 (2017): 111.