

ARTS & CULTURE

Deanna Bowen and the Case of the Hidden Black History

Written by [Eliana Sinicropi](#) / on March 30, 2020



Artist Deanna Bowen first burst onto the Canadian arts scene in the 1990s with her films *milk-fed* and *sadomasochism*. Bowen, who was originally trained as a potter and sculpture, serendipitously stumbled into filmmaking by landing a job at a film co-op in Toronto. Since then, she has focused on combing through historical archives to reenact the little known lives and events of black people in Canada. By relying on historical archives, Bowen is essentially, as she describes it, creating “another way of writing history by presenting evidence of an alternative narrative.” This evidence often differs from the common, erasive narrative available to the public.

Bowen is the recipient of the 2020 Governor General Award in Visual and Media Arts, an honour she was nominated for by her mentor and inspiration, Vera Frenkel. However, Bowen is no stranger to acclaim. Bowen’s list of accomplishments is long and includes a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Johnson Award. Bowen speaks of these accomplishments with humility and a touch of awe. A quick perusal of her artwork will show you that the acclaim is much deserved.

Bowen’s work specifically focuses on the black history in the post-slavery era, a part of history that is all but lost in the haze of white-European history which populates our history books. Bowen emphasizes that “there’s a way that Canada has presented itself as benevolent and free of racism and that is just fundamentally not true.” Canada often boasts of its cultural mosaic, but it is plagued with an unseemly habit of erasing the history of racialized communities. Bowen’s art endeavours to shed light on these missing pieces of black history.

Today, she is focused on two projects which expand on the presence of black people in Canada.

A Harlem Nocturne, held at the McMaster Museum of Art, depicts the overlooked black arts scene in Vancouver in the 1940s and 1970s. Drawing inspiration from her childhood in eastside downtown Vancouver, this project aims, in Bowen’s own words, to “poke some holes at this idea that there is no black community in Vancouver.”

Bowen’s second project, *God of Gods*, is far more ambitious. In 1911, an assembly of Albertan businessmen began a petition against the immigration of black and black-Indigenous peoples. If the petition was not obeyed, the group threatened black migrants with lynchings and hangings. Among those that signed the petition was Barker Farley, one of the most ardent advocates for the national importance of the Group of Seven — perhaps Canada’s most well-known arts collective, who are famous for their landscape painting, and who are a staple of nearly every young Canadian’s education.

Based off of Caroll Aikins’ play *The God of Gods*, Bowen attempts to shed light on how these white socially-elite artists, including the Group of Seven and Aikins, were pedaling white nationalist propaganda and contributing to the erasure of the black narrative. Bowen told *The Ontarion* that ultimately she attempts to “shift the cannon to a more historically accurate narrative” in order to recognize that “there has been a long history of blackness and other racialized communities.”

Bowen’s work is dominated by her own genealogy. She has painstakingly traced the migration of her family from Kentucky and Alabama to Canada. Using her family’s lineage as a focal point, Bowen then pulls from history to construct the social world around them and translates this into her artwork. A large part of her art is attempting to understand her own family’s history, most simply described by Bowen as “who we are and what we’ve become.”

Bowen advises young artists “don’t be afraid of your family story, even if it’s messed up.” Bowen explains that it is only through oral and family histories that we can glean the role of those deemed unimportant by formal historical institutions.

“don’t be afraid of your family story, even if it’s messed up.”

— Deanna Bowen, Artist

Photo by Lucius Dechausay, Courtesy of Stéphanie Nazywalskyj

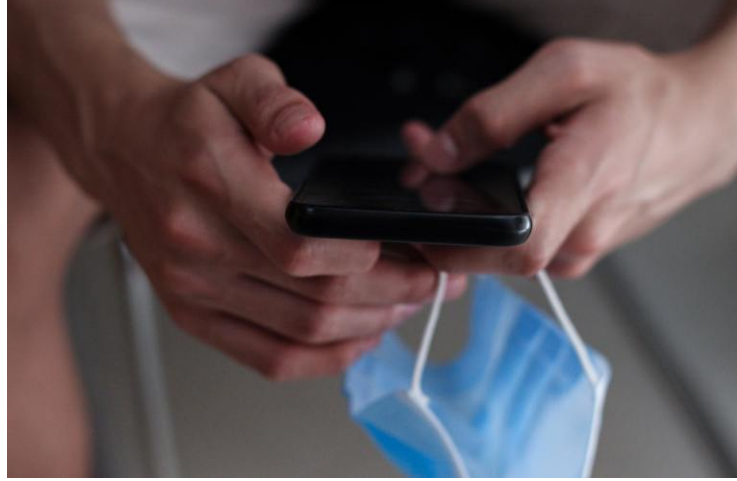
A version of this article appeared in print in *The Ontarion* issue 188.3 on March 12, 2020.

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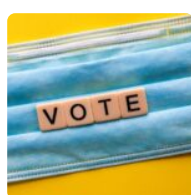
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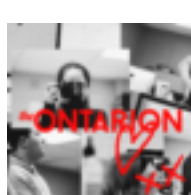
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o the administration of the University of Guelph, Like thousands of other



A Letter of Solidarity

This past Saturday was the Guelph Solidarity Protest to Support Black



A year already?

hen I was young, time was slow. I remember being so impatient and

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The Ontarion is the University of Guelph’s independent student newspaper. It began in 1951 as part of the Ontario Agricultural College and then began to represent the entire University of Guelph once it amalgamated in 1964. *The Ontarion* incorporated in May 1970 as The Ontarion, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation registered with the province of Ontario.



ABOUT

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