

## Deanna Bowen: Deconstructing God of Gods: A Canadian Play

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### *The Invented Indian*

Peter: The last part of the song is the – he told us, William Wasden, he told us the [hums] – it’s a bird on the beach at Alert Bay and it’s the song that the bird sings when it first sees the light come up. It’s a bird song. Yeah. Of course, I mean, you know, I’m a northern person and I’m sort of, like, trying to hear with my northern Tahltan ears, Kwakwaka'wakw words. So, and I sang this song 100 times because Simon Reece told me, “If you want to learn a song, you have to sing it 100 times.” And then, Alex Nelson, a really smart, wonderful Kwakwaka'wakw Elder, he said, “Well, when you sing it, it doesn’t sound right.” [Laughs] I was like, well, you know, because I’m not Kwakwaka'wakw. I’m learning the song in a different language, listening with Tahltan Nation ears, and I realize that when I sing it, it sounds more Tahltan than it – than, you know, Kwakwaka'wakw. Yeah, so, that’s my disclaimer [laughs].

Deanna: Thank you, though.

Peter: A song for the children that we worked with who were removed from their communities so that they could have a song to sing themselves home.

Deanna: Thank you. Thank you all for coming from far and from nearby, just around the corner. Thank you for coming. So, just to set this up properly and to set up our conversation properly, I’m going to read a bit of a narrative that kind of gives everybody a sense of where we’re starting from. And, of course, everybody who’s going to ultimately watch the video will get a sense of where we’re coming from, as well. So, if I stumble, it’s just because I haven’t rehearsed 100 times. So, this project stems from a chance discovery of painter and former UofT German prof Barker Fairley’s name that showed up in a work of mine called *The 1911 Anti-Creek Negro Petition*, which is currently touring in Lisa’s group exhibition *carry forward*.

The petition was generated by Alberta businessmen who demanded that Prime Minister Laurier stop an influx of Afro-Creek people who were fleeing racial violence and mass lynchings in Indian territory, which is now known as Oklahoma. The petition insisted that they would resort to anti-black lynch mobs if he did not heed their demands. My great grandparents’ and my grandparents’ siblings were a part of that migration. Our family has been in Canada for over 100 years. This research leads me here to this stage, to this Hart House building, where I’m working through the extended implications that Fairley’s signature highlights via his critical role in crafting and championing the Group of Seven’s unpeopled landscapes as emblems of Canadian culture and their role in Vincent Massey’s ambitions for a white Canadian nation.

These ambitions are evident in Fairley and Massey’s writings, many of which are housed in UofT’s Hart House and Fischer Library archives. I chanced upon the script for the play, *The God of Gods*, while researching in the Hart House digital archive. The work is a redface play written by apple farmer, playwright, director Carroll Aikins in 1922. Fairley, Massey and several other key players of Toronto’s social elite sat on the Hart House Theatre’s Board of Syndics with Fairley serving as Secretary for the Art Committee that approved staging Aikins’ play. Aikins was influenced by the burgeoning ideas of the little theatre movement that was rampant in the US and Canada when he founded the home theatre in Naramata BC in 1920 in Penticton area.

His nationalist pandering caught the eye of Hart House's Board of Syndics, which led to his tenure as the Hart House Theatre's first Canadian-born artistic director in 1927 through 1929. Quoting the Hart House Theatre's website bio, Aikins was born of a family that had a long history of wealth and prestige. Carroll's maternal grandfather, the honourable C.C. Colby, was Stansted's Member of Parliament from 1867 to 1891, and the President of the Privy Council under Sir John A. MacDonald while his paternal grandfather, Sir James Cox Aikins, was a Senate appointee and served under MacDonald as the Cabinet Secretary of State from 1869 to '73, and then again in '78 to 1880 before he became the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba in 1882 to 1888.

Carroll's father, John Sommerset Aikins, served in the Manitoba House of Assembly for a single term between 1879 and 1883. Aikins was part of the same social circles as Fairley, Massey, the G7 painters, A.J. Casson, A.Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris, JEH MacDonald, and a constellation of artists, writers and society figures that include author, painter Bertram Brooker, poets Jesse Middleton and Albert Smythe, Confederation poet and bureaucrat Duncan Campbell Scott, newspaper publisher William Southam, businessman Timothy Eaton, OCAD Principal GA Reid, G7 painter and OCAD Vice Principal Arthur Lismer, composer Ernest MacMillan, painter Walter Phillips, and the former Hart House Theatre artistic directors Bertram Forsythe, Frederick Coates and Roy Mitchell, architect Barry Cleveland, anthropologist Marius Barbeau and mezzo-soprano ethnomusicologist Juliette Gaultier.

Put another way, this network of politically and financially wealthy white people had mutual interests and shared values that would become the primary mandate of the governments, businesses and cultural institutions that shape every facet of Canadian overculture to this day. You know about the mythology of the Group of Seven painters and Governor General Vincent Massey. Amongst the other things, that these other characters did, polymath Bertram Brooker, was understood to be Canada's first abstract painter, Jesse Middleton wrote foundational chronologies of the City of Toronto on the Province of Ontario, with both detailing and enshrining the major society figures of their times. Albert Smythe founded the Toronto Theosophical Society.

Duncan Campbell Scott was Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to '32. William Southam owned newspapers in Hamilton, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Windsor and Montreal, of which all of Carroll Aikins' positive reviews were published in those newspapers. Who else have we got? Marius Barbeau would stage the first exhibition of Indigenous objects, along with new works by several Group of Seven members at the AGO in 1927. Juliette Gaultier sang Indigenous songs at the opening reception clad in Indigenous garb, and redface make-up. Timothy Eaton's department store was a longstanding patron of the Hart House Theatre.

Reid and Lismer were Senior Administrators at Ontario College of Art. Most, but not all, of these people were members of the Arts & Letters Club, and several sat on the executive boards of Toronto's most important cultural institutions, including Hart House, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Ontario College of Art, the Arts & Letters Club, the National Gallery, and the Royal Ontario Museum. In 1926, '27, Vincent Massey worked to establish *The God of Gods* as an example of seminal Canadian theatre in his two-volume edition *Canadian Plays from the Hart House Theatre*. Contemporary scholars have rationalized the overt racism of *The God of Gods* by arguing that the ideologies of the play reflect the ideas of the time. That is that to say that anti-Indigenous racism was intrinsically woven into everyday life in Canada.

Additional justifications point to the ideological influences of theosophy, and the global art trends, such as primitivism and modernism. Given the platform and the historical context of my exhibition - we're here because it's Hart House's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I thought this was an ideal opportunity to unpack and highlight or reveal the ecology that *The God of Gods* emerged from so that we can deconstruct the text for its ongoing historical and contemporary impact. Our discussion today revolves around how *The God of Gods* stage play cannot be re-enacted, but I say that with an understanding that we can also have a conversation about why it should. So, that's where we start. I have other questions for you, but I actually want to start with a question of whether or not you think this kind of a play could be re-enacted.

Archer: To me, the only purpose in restaging this particular work and the other work, the many, many, many other works like it, some of which are still being produced today, would be to do it as a meta-narrative where the – sections of the play would be presented and then reframed with contemporary understanding. The excuse that, you know, this reflected the values of the day, absolutely. All of our works do, no matter what we're doing. But, what really came to me just as you were speaking, Deanna, was how little has changed. I mean, when I talk to regular Canadians about Native folks, it's clear that they don't know a damn thing about us. Like, just not a damn thing. And, they are still struggling with these ridiculous and antiquated notions of who we are, what we are, why we are, what we do, what we believe, what we think, you know, who we are.

Yeah, there were a few moments where I was quite outraged, you know, as I expected to be, reading the play. And then, it dawned on me, it's like, well, there's nothing to be outraged about. This is profoundly not about us. There is nothing Indigenous about this play. This reflects – I mean, I am not an Indigenous ethnographer, you know, but I've been a few places and whenever I go somewhere, I always try and find the Indians and see what's going on. And there's literally not a single thing within the play that reflects in any way, shape or form any Indigenous culture I've ever come in contact with. So, that really helped me. That gave me this tremendous space in which I could just read the play and go, "Mm, ooh, how about that. Hmm, look at that. Hmm, look at that." And, I just had to keep coming back to –

Deanna: It's not real.

Archer: It's not even that it's not real, it is – that's the problem, it is real. That's the problem. It is real.

cheyanne: But the thing that it's real about is the deep foundation of white supremacy in Canadian culture. And so, this meta-narrative that you propose of a hypothetical, you know, presentation of the play today, it would involve an all-white cast [laughs], you know. It would ... it would hopefully be able to acknowledge that the politics of the time that are not so different from now is this undergirding of white supremacy. It would link between then and now, and put, like, the real content at the centre of it.

Archer: I would propose a Native cast in whiteface.

cheyanne: [Laughs]

Archer: I would.

Deanna: I'm kind of feeling that. The additional layer of whiteface, right? And, like, a super – and, actually, it's a question that I've been kind of grappling with, I came to the play

and I invited you all here largely because of my understandings of blackface and what that means, right? And redface, and what that means. But, what exactly would whiteface – what would that look like, and what would its political impact be? I don't know that we have to have a question – an answer to that. But, I think it's something to consider as a counter-gesture.

Peter: I did a performance Ayumi Goto and I, we, it was called "First Contacts" And we were putting on the literary racist imaginations concerning our specific bodies. So, she became – I became a red man and, you know, she became a yellow woman or – and it actually – so, I put on the redface, like, I put on this thing, and it hurt. It really hurt a lot, actually. And I think, of course, performance is this other piece around expansion of your body and rupture and risk, and in the moment I was putting on the redface in order to meet my co-partner in the performance, I realized how much I fought to not have those things touch my body, you know. And so, I wonder about this idea of whiteface, too, because I'm like, I don't want to put that on. The harm that happens inside of us just to even propose it, the physicality of it is also a thing. Like, I'm not sure, I'm not sure if I'm – I mean, I'm a pretty good performance artist I think, but I don't know if I'm that good, you know. Like ... but also, I would be up to the challenge [laughs].

Deanna: From my perspective, I'm going to tell – I'm going to talk about my mom and this understanding of how, as far as blackness goes, that there's such a thing as a white voice. So, when my mom's in front of white people, she shifts into a different persona. And literally, the language, the way that she speaks, is different, the way that she engages is different. So, in many ways, I kind of imagine that as already being a kind of whiteface mask.

Peter: Okay, yeah.

Deanna: So, I'm wondering if, you know, literally the kind of the gesture of painting that on the face and kind of taking up that kind of space, whether or not there is a kind of political power in that. Does that make sense?

Peter: It totally does, yeah.

Deanna: I mean, because we all ultimately put on a face of some sort in order to engage with everyday life, right, and to engage with white people, for the most part, right? There's – I am well aware, certainly within my life, that – or our queerness really, right? I am well aware that I put on a various – all kinds of different faces in order to engage with these people. So, would making that face visible, what would it do?

John: Well, it would function very differently, right, because in terms of the culture we're in, whiteness is the unmarked. So, you know, blackface, redface, function because those are – because it's our marked racial categories. And so, to mark yourself with the unmarked default, it's awkward [laughs], right? And so, at the time, the time this was being written, the social context, it's, yeah, in the States under Jim Crow in Oklahoma where, you know, the – in your introduction around this, the anti-Creek Negro Petition of a people fleeing Oklahoma were – the people fleeing were categorized as black, but the Indians in Oklahoma were white at that time.

Legally white. And that's how they could become citizens, because of the Citizen Naturalization Act. Not elsewhere in the States, but in Indian country, while – and then something similar with Duncan Campbell. Scott being, you know, a very large, looming figure in the assimilationist agenda of Canada was also around this idea of

turning Indians white and killing the Indian in the child of – as a benevolent gesture. And so, there's something interesting in here, in the – like, I see this as a play not about Indians, it's not about, you know, it's based in B.C. broadly [laughs]. It's based, yeah –

Lisa: Are you getting that just from the – this sort of scenic landscape type --?

John: Yeah, from the landscape and from where Carroll is from and where he's writing this. But, it's also just – it's completely, like, it's based on – it's invented Indian at the time that's made for the construction of white Canada. And so, of this creating a primitive – like, if you are grown up thinking of, like, of the evils of religion through a lens of Catholicism through the veiled references to Islam in here of, like, thinking of organized religion and where the evils can reside in idolatry, and when it becomes too much a cult of personality, then so there's trying to imagine what would be a very primitive form of this type of organized religion that I'm familiar with as a privileged white male in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada?

And, finding – trying to trace back to this primitive form of religion that I'm familiar with and seeing where a pure form of it could exist, where that rupture happened and trying to identify that and rescue a form – like, there's a crisis in there of wanting a spirit – a pure spirituality and seeing the corruption around you. And then using, you know, the most proximate, the closest, primitive that you have in your imagination to – as a tool for that. So, it's strange to find, like, you know, this is almost in very stark contrast to that assimilation, because it's trying to find – trying to take – invent an Indian that we can occupy, that we can, you know, use as a tool to purify – to find a pure whiteness, to find a pure form of humanity that can work as a foundation for the Canada that we want to construct. This universalist Canada that also is, you know, so that a simultaneous ...

Lisa: So, I like what you're saying. So, redface is whiteface. Blackface is whiteface.

Deanna: Say it again.

Lisa: Redface is whiteface.

Deanna: Yeah.

Lisa: Blackface is whiteface, if you're thinking about what you're saying about by assuming these – this identity, that it's this constructed identity. Well, creating it and then assuming it is part of a whiteness.

Peter: It's marking themselves, right? If I'm understanding correctly, like, it's making a space for that whiteness. You put that on, and then – so, it's all a white mask on a white body for a white place [laughs].

John: This is a moment where that white mask is being constructed, where Canada's version of it is still very much under construction [laughs].

Deanna: So, the piece is about white people.

John: Well, for me.

Archer: It's sure not about us!

- Lisa: Yeah, it points to what – very much what you were saying about white supremacy in Canada. So, it's like thinking about Said's *Orientalism*, like, the construction of the East was what, you know, it really spoke about what the West – it was about what the West stood for, if I want to, like, break it down into that kind of thing.
- cheyanne: I think it also wants to construct an Indigenous population for a white colonizer that can absolve the guilt or violence of the colonial project through a subsumption of Indigenous identity as white. So, by having white actors put on redface to tell the story about the crumbling of an Indigenous community, it has, I imagine, one of the consequences of that at the time would be that for the actors, or more precisely for the audience, that they would feel themselves in alignment with – that somehow, like, Indigenous identity and white identity could be conflated so that the presence of a settler population here becomes naturalized or neutralized in some way to allow the perpetuation of colonialism without guilt. This is part of, like, the imagination I imagine that these networks of white men, perhaps, inadvertently, but very powerfully, were constructing or enacting, you know, this, like, cleansing.
- Lisa: And theosophy is part of that, I think, too.
- Peter: But also, I don't know how, like, the list of names that you read at the beginning, I'm like, how many of them felt guilty about their involvement, you know?
- cheyanne: Well, I don't think that they probably did. But, I do think that there's something in, like, the background that ...
- Deanna: Like, a paternalism?
- cheyanne: Yeah, or, like, yeah, well, I mean, I don't think that they felt guilty. But, I do think that they needed to make themselves feel more at home.
- Lisa: That's assuredness, yeah. I don't think there was ... I don't know how to put it into words exactly, but there was an assure – I'm sure there was an assuredness about their –
- Deanna: Their right.
- Lisa: -- Their position, yeah. And that – and there wasn't even a reflection on it. But, you know, I wasn't there, but I feel like I get that from this whole scene.
- Archer: It's also important that ...
- cheyanne: I just feel like also the construction of the Indigenous community in this play is so degrading that it – I can imagine it becoming a kind of justification for colonization. Like, these people, you know, if this stands in as a representation of the forms of life that were here when the colonizer arrived, like, of course they needed to be saved by us, or something, right? It's, like, the construction of a population that needs these men, that, like, perhaps this goes back to not guilt, but paternalism or, like, a hero complex or something.
- Deanna: Which is the way that slavery and anti-black racism was justified, right? Same logic of, look at just how they can't take care of themselves, how they procreate endlessly. Like, all of the stereotypes that go with blackness. And, of course, we also see that happening, literally, right now. We have a current American political situation of a government that is taking the position of one, creating the crisis, the kind of ground-

level situation that makes people – creates poverty, creates all of the kind of things that they also like to come back and point to for all of the reasons why they need to eradicate or – and, you know, or kill or, sorry, take care of or ...

Archer: ...manage.

Deanna: ... manage, or survey.

Peter: Well, I mean, like, right now, it's beautiful to have these kind of conversations, and I love how these coming together, or these gatherings, always open up a different avenue or different pathway for thinking. And I just like the – right now, it just sounds like legal language, justification or we have to prove this in court later so we have to, like, talk about this sort of, like, thing, you know. Like, justification for racism or colonialism or something, you know. And I'm like, when did the people beyond that list, the white people beyond that list, actually start becoming aware that these things were going on, you know? I'm not sure.

Deanna: What do you mean?

Archer: Which things?

Peter: The colonial manifest destiny as perpetrated and the machinations that – maybe I'm just picking on these – that list, 'cause it's quite a list, you know.

Deanna: There's more.

Peter: Oh, yeah, there's always more, you know. But, the out folding of it, like, when, you know, like, the out folding of the resource extraction and the killing and the violence and the pushing people onto reserves and, you know, killing of every – killing of bodies that are non-white and not invited into these rooms, you know. Those specific rooms, right? Because, you know, I'm just also thinking about what John was saying, the invented Indian. Like, that's, you know, like, for years it was the imaginary Indian, which is so elusive and – but the invented Indian is a whole other thing. Like, I could get in that, like, that – this is an invention. Indian bodies can get inside of that invention and play around. I was also, like, imagining the maps of the invented landscape and the – how cartographers are, like, you know, reading accounts of things of these territories and sort of dreaming up a map, you know. There's more culpability with invention and more responsibility, I think.

Deanna: How so?

Peter: Isn't there – you have sort of an investment in the output...

Deanna: Sure.

Peter: ... of the invention.

Deanna: The enterprise.

Peter: Yeah. Yeah.

John: So, when you're talking about the, when did they become aware that this was happening, so that they could justify it, makes me think that this isn't, like, it's not a conscious justification of the colonization, because that's just something that's – that they would breathe, right? And so, I imagine this is, like, that – the perceived intent of

this is probably quite – this is quite benevolent, right? It's quite learned and tolerant, like, theosophy is a doctrine of tolerance that underlies the fiction or the belief of a multicultural Canada of this self-perception of being very accepting and benevolent. And, you know, and the introduction about the theosophy, it talks about it being really rooted in this research into religion, this research in tolerance into religion, which is just deeply hypocritical [laughs], this idea that... it's the complete ignorance that goes into the portrayal of Indigenous people in this play, while speaking of the ignorance of these – of Indigenous people, of, you know, that they think that the world is round, like a sheep's bladder [laughs]. That line in there...

cheyanne: Some kind of bladder anyway.

John: Portraying the ignorance of the Indigenous people in this deeply ignorant place [laughs].

Lisa: And also, the – but, I also think within that benevolence is a kind of cultural capital by saying, here in Canada, we have these Indians and here we can present this as sort of, like, one of the sort of topics that you are thinking, you know, gave us question ahead of time was around, you know, this being uniquely Canadian theatre. And so, like, marking, you know, the – so, it's used as this kind of cultural capital in a way that is really – kind of gets tied up in all of that, too.

John: That's how this unknown playwright got his play mounted in the UK, like, through, you know, "We've got something – here's something new. We've got these Indians" [laughs].

cheyanne: Although, I think it's a really interesting proposition to take this story that is serving some kind of purpose in a colonial project, and then follow the vector of colonization back to the heart of empire, and part of the history that is written in this critical edition is that when the play was brought back to Europe, to the UK, that it flopped as play. And I find that really interesting. Although it was written about as a success when the narrative was brought back to Canada, but what does it mean that, yeah, you take a story about colonization, you plop it down in the heart or, you know, the engine or a colonial project, and people don't care to engage? I don't know, not that that's a better or worse response than it being, you know, positively lauded here in Canada, but it is – gave me a moment of pause when I was reading through it.

Deanna: The one time – so, the play was restaged ... two times in the UK, the latter one was 1931. So, Aikins finished here in '29, and then it was restaged in '31. But what was interesting about the '31 version of it is that it was performed much more as a minstrel show, and then that was where the soul, kind of the – they only favourable review out of the UK productions came out of the fact that the minstrel aspect of it made it that much more comical. And so, I'm fascinated by that for the ways that how was that – how does that cross pollinate, how is it acceptable to kind of cross particular types of stereotypical representation? If that makes any sense at all.

Blackface, like, that whole thing, it was always going to be acceptable, clearly. And, this idea that blackface, redface, is somewhat interchangeable, but then, there's something about redface needs to be kind of done in a better way in the UK for it to be received. And its failure, they introduced something that does have legs, so to speak, which is blackface and the whole minstrel aspect of it all. So, I'm fascinated by how that happens. And, what is the thought process behind the exchange, other than, you know, straight up business concerns about how do you keep a play – how do you make it break even?

Archer: To my mind, I can visualize the failure of the play in England, in London especially, because look at these pathetic wretches. What glory is there for the empire, in us vanquishing a people such as these? Whereas, the more popular entertainments of the era were the ferocious, dangerous Indians who we managed to overcome because God was on our side, essentially.

cheyanne: And we are so powerful and masculine.

Archer: And we're better. We're just better. So, I want to back up just quickly and say that I am in no way suggesting remounting this play with Native people... in whiteface There's so much to do.

Deanna: Beyond this.

Archer: Beyond this.

Lisa: It was just a thinking exercise.

Archer: It was purely a thought experiment. The one thing that I loved about this play, because I kept waiting for it to happen, and I think this is maybe a cultural thing that started later with the writings of – oh, brain fart, German guy ...

cheyanne: Karl May?

Archer: Karl May, yeah, Karl May's writings, was that I kept expecting the Great White Hero to appear and become better at being Native than all the Natives combined, because that is typically the narrative.

cheyanne: I mean, that is Carroll himself.

Archer: Yes, but it doesn't actually transpire within the context of the play, right? So, I was – I had to say, okay, you know, I'm just going to give you a gold star for that. It didn't bring in the white guy who's better. Like, because that is constantly the narrative, right?

Deanna: Okay, so, yes, it doesn't happen within the play, but it happens in the city.

Archer: But, well, it's happening in the context of the culture, and it's also very important to look at this piece and when it was written and mounted in the context of what was happening culturally at the time, going back to our dear friend Duncan Campbell Scott.

John: Failed poet.

Archer: I was going to say war criminal.

Deanna: Potato... Potahto..

Archer: You know, he was very much instrumental in the whole, you know, the residential school systems, the systematic starvation of us, post-treaty signing, and for me, critically, the mass arrests that followed the big potlatch in Alert Bay in 1923 [1921] when all of the Chiefs were arrested and faced with, you can sign away your – this is when they started enforcing the ban on ceremony. Because they didn't enforce it – they enforced it very spottily from 1873, I think, up until the '20s, and that's when they brought the hammer down and they arrested all the Chiefs and said, "You can,

you know, if you agree to not potlatch any longer, we will return your regalia,” which was a lie. Train loads of regalia, masks, ceremonial objects, left Alert Bay. A lot of Chiefs refused and went to Oakalla prison in Vancouver and spent a considerable amount of time there. And this was Scott. This was all Scott. So, that’s – to me, that’s the framework of this play. And that’s something that I always have to keep coming back to.

cheyanne: So, if you think about it, then, you have this person writing a play that has Indigenous people practicing Indigenous way of life, albeit an invented one, at the same time that real Indigenous people are being persecuted under Canadian law for being Indigenous.

Archer: Exactly.

John: Repressing ceremony and inventing new ones.

Deanna: And, Indigenous culture is being actively performed by these same white people at the same time. So, there’s this other layer that’s also happening of – and so, it does bring us back to this idea of white people performing Indigeneity better than Indigenous people, right? So, that was actively happening, right? And there is – I can’t remember where I saw this, it could’ve been Arts & Letters Club – but, there is an understanding, maybe it’s Bertram Brooker’s *Seven Arts* articles, that there was an understanding that it was these white men. These white men were literally kind of caretakers of Indigenous culture, and they had defined what was Indigenous culture. So, anything prior to their discovery was “authentic,” and anything that happened after that was not authentic, one. And then, two, the other part is that they felt it was their responsibility to interpret Indigenous culture and teach it back to Indigenous people.

Lisa: The salvage paradigm. Another layer to it is, it’s – the play was performed originally by all men, right?

Deanna: Yeah.

Lisa: So, the other layer is, you know, men assuming – performing as Indigenous women, which is hugely disturbing. And I don’t know if I picked up that detail until, like, maybe when I got here today. So, that added a whole other thing that I’ve been thinking about.

Deanna: Barbara Fischer and I were talking about this because on paper, on the actually play bill for the piece, it says that there are a number of women that were performers. But, Hart House didn’t allow women at that timeframe. Hart House didn’t allow women on this – in this building until the 1970s. So, and that included performers, at least that’s understood to be the story that women were not allowed in here, except to be an audience, right?

John: ‘Til the late ‘70s?

Deanna: ‘70s. 1970s.

Archer: Theatre is ceremony, and what if someone’s on their moon time? I mean, come on [laughs]!

Deanna: What are we going to do about that?! What would we do [laughs]?!

John: ...what Waning Moon means [laughs].

Deanna: So, here's the thing, though, on paper, it says that there are women. The photographs, however, speak otherwise. So, in this critical edition, there are photographs that illustrate that there are men performing the female roles. So, Barbara and I were talking about, okay, so, what is true? I can't possibly see how it would be that women weren't allowed in the 1960s or anything prior to 1970. I've seen Duncan Campbell Scott staged a play here in 1926 that had a female lead, so, I know that that – and there's photographs of that. So, it brings us back to this other question, which is whether or not the mythology was something that was constructed and maintained for its own purposes, or whether or not there legitimately were women that were brought into the campus and that was okay, or what's what.

I'm not quite sure. It might be a mixture of all of these things. But certainly, for this play, the photo documentation points to the reality that the women's roles were performed by men. The UK performances have women. I think that that's important to consider. And certainly, at the very least, the photographs that speak to what was staged here does illustrate that switching of roles. And so, yeah. What does it mean? I mean, there's something else kind of going on here. I have my own thoughts around this fraternity of men and the deep, deep friendships that are kind of documented over the course of these men's lives. And I don't know what queerness looks like in that timeframe, but I have my suspicions. So, do we call it drag, is the short of it. Deeply, deeply, deeply, deeply racist drag.

Archer: There's so many layers of drag going on there, right? I mean, the thing that I – and this is – I'm veering off topic now, but ... just how debased and degraded the culture that is depicted is. I'm just – just, like, really, this just is savage, decayed, immoral, debased thing. You know, like, every page is, like, wow, okay.

cheyanne: But within that community, even, it's the female characters that are caring that debased-ness and degradation. So, you have Waning Moon who is at the heart of why the religion of the tribe is fundamentally a sham, and then it's inherited by Suiva who then cannot even carry the weight of that religion for a 24-hour period. So, [laughs] I don't know. It's intersectional.

Deanna: So, *The God of Gods* was championed as a prime example of Canadian theatre. Do you have an opinion about the implications of this perspective as it relates to colonial violence, cultural erasure, or Canadian cultural identity?

Archer: Yeah, I might have a thought or two on that.

Deanna: Give it to me.

Archer: And these are all points that have been touched on already, but what this – for me, what this play exists for primarily is a reification and justification of the colonial project as a whole, and white supremacy at its core, right? I mean, this is – it's just so plainly and visibly that. You know, which absolves any methodologies that are employed to rescue these benighted savages. Look at the way these people live. I mean, that is always the line, right? Like, look at the way these people live. It's like, well, if you actually looked, you might be surprised, right? But, there is no ... surprisingly, I guess, there's no single character who rises up as a beacon of hope for these people, right? Like, they're just –

Deanna: It's just dire.

Archer: It's just dire. Like, everything's wrong. There's no way out. You know, Suiva is – and yeah, at least she has some qualms about becoming this Charlatan-ess – is that a word? I just invented a word. But, also, like, running with what cheyanne's talking about, you know, she is too weak to overcome her base desires, right? She has to have – what's his name? Yellowknife?

cheyanne: Yellow Snake.

Archer: You know, she desires Yellow Snake so much, you know, she commits all the cardinal sins and bringing him into the space and doing all this stuff. You know, so, it really, it just is this – it is just another example of, you know, here is why manifest destiny is the best practice.

John: Well, so, Suiva's the hero in a sense, and the tragedy is that she trusts in the system, but there's a, like, Yellow Snake, you know, starts off – you start off suspicious of Yellow Snake, and then he proves himself. And there's an interesting part in the notes about speaking of this – them as progressives. Like, this progressive form of sexuality [laughs], that's not –

cheyanne: Doesn't require women to be virgins in order to be worthy of love [laughs].

John: Yes. Yeah, and so, showing – it's interesting, the leadership in the community demanding that chastity and then that – and there's something about their instincts being true over that leadership. Yeah.

cheyanne: I think Yellow Snake's supposed to be the hero, and the fact that he's murdered by the community is why Indigenous people are –

Deanna: Lost.

cheyanne: Yeah.

John: I couldn't tell if this was – so, when I first read it, I couldn't tell if this was, like, if this was anti-religion or anti-savage religion. And I think it's – and it's – there's a – the theosophical core is – gives – I'm confused around that. But, it does seem to me to, like, it's anti-organized religion, anti – well, it's promoting, you know, a personal path towards God. Like, trusting and instinct more than your Elders.

cheyanne: So long as your instinct –

Deanna: I thought the hero was the character who was looking in the pool.

cheyanne: Lerri?

Deanna: Yeah.

cheyanne: Well, he's definitely the one that speaks the truth.

Deanna: Throughout the whole thing.

cheyanne: Yeah, so, the mad character who –

Deanna: The mad character is the hero in the piece, which, I think, is interesting. I don't know what that would connect to in contemporary society of the time.

John: He's the fool, right? And the fool speaks the truth, right? The play's got some of these more – these broader –

Cheyenne: Shakespearean tropes –

John: – yeah, which it's, in a way, it's this broke – this more broke-ass version [laughs] of the collapse of the Roman empire. If the roman empire – the collapse of the Roman empire happened on the Rez ...

Archer: I was going to say that! [Laughs]

Look! There's Dan Caesar next to the band office!

John: And this invented Indian is something that's carried forward in contemporary understandings, because this is the corruption of the band council, right? This is finding the origins of those tropes and those things that, you know, we're going to take your potlatch away, we're going to invent new ceremonies, new governance, new tropes for you to now adopt and, you know, the – so, you can't look at this, but you can look at these plays, at Hollywood renditions, and to ... create these new role models.

Peter: [Laughs] The way John's putting it, I'm like – it just makes me feel sadder and sadder – I'm going to watch John Wayne movies to figure out how to be an Indian or something, you know. Like, I actually didn't read it as – I didn't find the – I don't know if I was looking for a hero, or, like, I didn't read that. I didn't look at these words that way. Like, I was attracted to the fool, I guess. Because there was – I think there was space around the dialogue that the fool was offering to the narrative, which I was very interested in. And, I wondered what that space meant.

cheyenne: Or, like, who would take up that space?

Peter: Yeah, yeah.

Deanna: In the piece?

Peter: In the piece, yeah, yeah.

cheyenne: Or, in the audience.

Peter: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yeah. But, I couldn't – and I did enjoy the Elder character a lot. But, I don't know, there's something – like, your question about how – right now, it just feels so insidious. All of this is just sort of, like, pouring out of this room, you know. Like, so, now I'm just, like, walking around – in my mind, I'm just walking around, like, okay ... how is this room and this play reflecting what I think my experience could be, and why the fuck do I care anymore? You know? Like ... you know, it's funny, it's a very funny room we're in, you know?

Deanna: This room?

Peter: Yeah. Yeah. And also, this – the multitude of moments of invented Indian and ... invented blackness and invented Asian-ness, you know. And how we're so trained to look at that.

## *Naming the Unnamed*

- Deanna: We were talking about what historians were or were not doing and the naming the unnamed.
- John: Well, you asked what's – what were they – like, what conscious decisions would they have to make to not write about what these plays were doing, to not name the racism in it. And, I think that connects back to the beginning of our discussion around the unmarked. Because, these ... because it's this – it's an unmarked dialogue. The only thing that can be marked is the Indigeneity, not the position from which the writer is coming. So, they can have these conversations about the Native Canadians [laughs] in the play, but not about Carroll Aikins' identity.
- Deanna: But, that brings me back to this – I'm sorry, Peter [laughs]
- John: It's fine, it's fine, it's fine, we're trying things out, right?
- Deanna: I try to think about it practically, again, and that's kind of some of the exercise for me is, like, in the naming of the names of all of these people and all that stuff. Just imagining quite practically what an individual would have to do, like, the thought process, that would go through one's mind to read it, acknowledge it for what it is. And, I don't know where it would go from there. Would it be something like, I can't say this because ...? Or, you know, or whatever it is. And maybe how all of that, that thought process of seeing it and then choosing not to deal with it, ultimately kind of speaks to the way that racism functions within society.
- cheyanne: I mean, on that note, perhaps there were art historians who were, you know, historicizing it in this way, but those narratives are not subsumed into the great narrative of art history, or what have you, for precisely these same reasons.
- Deanna: Right, right. I mean, I can say quite honestly that I gave pause to this idea of chasing this down. I thought about the billions of dollars that has gone into the manufacture of this particular narrative, and the Group of Seven themselves, and how much money flows through the art world via the marketing and the dissemination and the touring of these works, right?
- And thinking about how much the AGO, as an example, is going through as they try to make an argument for deaccessioning Group of Seven paintings, right, in the current, like, right now, ironically enough, for the purposes of making space in their collection for other people that have not been in it. So, you know, I think a lot about, yeah, all of those things as it relates to kind of choices, conscious choices. And I don't know who is driving the beast by example at the AGO that's kind of making the decision to get rid of the Group of Seven or things like that.
- cheyanne: Wanda Nanibush. I mean, I don't know. If I were to hazard a guess – [Laughs]
- Deanna: [Laughs] Who could it be? I was going to say something really career-ending, so, never mind. The point of it all is, is that it does bring us back to a number of points that we've made around –
- John: What were you just saying about what stops people from saying things [Laughs]?
- Deanna: [Laughs] You're not supposed to be that smart. I invited you to be smart, but not that smart. Well, I'm just going to leave that, and I'm going to go forward a little bit and

then pose a question around – there was an article that was out there in the world – Ravi Jain from Why Not Theatre had put out an essay about the Massey Commission and the need for another Massey Commission, or something along those lines, to basically rethink all of the legacy of what the first Massey Commission and the creation of the Canada Council and all those things, what that means, what that could be, to kind of take it apart as a national kind of ... what, task, exercise, something along those lines. Could you see that? Could you see it happening? Could you, in the spirit of the fire that you're talking about when you were talking about past political actions, could you see a ground swell of people coming together to demand for another kind of Canadian culture?

Archer: If you framed it as, you know, this is an opportunity to get right down to brass tacks, I think a lot of people would throw their weight behind it. I mean, I'm pretty sure everybody at the table would. But, I think our peers would as well, and I think that we have enough clout these days. And let's not pretend that there's been real change so much as we're fashionable. We're quite fashionable right now. It's very much in vogue to have, you know, Indigenous engagement in institutions. And, as far as I'm concerned ... if the bees fly away from the hive and give me access to the honey, then I'm going to access the honey and I don't care why the bees flew away.

I mean, I do, because I like bees, but ... Yeah, I think we could do it. I think it would be a lot harder, because we weren't as worried about our – we weren't – we had a different set of stressors in the '90s, in the early '90s. Things are different. I also think that there is a growing backlash, which would really – it would be a real battle, I think. I think the ... forces of reaction and the forces of white supremacy are actually starting to feel a little worried, although I don't think they have that much to worry about, yet.

Deanna: As in worried and agitated and come to the surface.

Archer: Yeah, I think those things are coming to the – I mean, look at the rise of the alt-right. I mean, that is happening.

Deanna: The resurrection.

Archer: Yes, thank you, the resurrection of the alt-right. I mean, that is really happening in a really big way. And most people are just, you know, oh, no, no, no, can't happen here. Well, here's where it started. That's what I think.

John: When you said earlier that we're in a stasis then it's more of – I was thinking more of a precipice and that, you know, mentioning the AGO deaccessioning the Group of Seven works, that's a sound financial decision, I think, too, if you look at the investment in those works, I think that, you know, Group of Seven are at peak value now. They've just only been rising up, and I think that work that you're doing at this table and that's happening more widespread that can have, you know, you said it's dangerous work because it – you think about the billions invested, and so, there's literal financial implications to addressing these things in the drop of value of that work. But then, like, the danger, the thing that people are so petrified of is that this work is not going to be worth 10 million, it's only going to be worth eight million [laughs]. Right?

Deanna: Mm-hmm, and that's very serious for some people. Clearly, you know. If anything, I have a faith in the art market and how the major players absolutely do not want the art market to shift. I mean, everything's set up as it should be, if that makes any sense at all. So, the things that I'm proposing are catastrophic for the art market on the whole,

really. And, given we're talking about the Canadian scene and the non-existence of an art market in Canada at all, the fact that I'm coming at something so directly that is pretty much the only thing that has a market life – that's not entirely true – but going after this particular whale is a lot.

cheyanne: I really feel like for, you know, a hypothetical person who is feeling fear at the devaluing of work in that way is just a failure of imagination if they're invested in the art market and what they want is financial gain because –

Deanna: But there are people that function like that. There are people that buy work largely for the investment, it's just a different type of money.

cheyanne: I know, but there's so much work, you invest and it's going to be worth a bunch in the future, whatever, blah, blah, blah, like, I don't know. Hanging all of it on the Group of Seven just seems, like, somebody is really, like, not being very creative about – I don't know.

Deanna: That's a bigger conversation about the Canadian scene, right? There is that. I mean, really, the Group of Seven, in my mind, it is one of the biggest obstacles to the creation of any kind of new form of creative work. And I don't even paint, but I feel the impact of the Group of Seven in my world and what is possible to research, and what things can be said, and, you know, I think about the invisibility of these people that buy these kinds of works and the conservativeness of it and, again, I think about, you know, what white people that have power do when they lose control. So, I think all of those things are very real, and I think that the deconstruction of that world is legitimately dangerous for characters like us, and at the same time, thinking about in which activism is never safe. It has never been safe.

Archer: Not if you're doing it correctly.

Deanna: So. Is it possible?

Archer: I think we would need younger artists to step up. I think a lot of the artists who were young back in the day doing that work are -- I think there'd be hesitation because of their positions. It would be – it's like, am I going to be committing career suicide by doing this? And, that's unfortunate, but that's also real. There's also, you know, our peers who would be like, lock and load mother fuckers. Let's do this. Right? So, it would be really interesting to watch. Well, it'd be interesting to be a part of.

Deanna: And watch.

Archer: And watch. Yeah.

Deanna: One last thing I wanted to kind of bring forward, we were talking about reparations and time. And I don't know if you had been following this in the US, Mitch McConnell had come out talking about how the United States should not be responsible for reparations to African Americans and slavery because nobody living had anything to do with it.

John: And who would we... how would we even know who to pay, he said.

Deanna: Well, yeah. So, that. And the fact that that conversation around reparations is being tabled right now I think is super important. I want to flag that it's happening in a bigger political moment in which black and brown Indigenous bodies are actively

being slaughtered. And so, again, I keep thinking about the risk that comes with political engagement. The fact that there are people that are taking the risk of having this conversation at this time just really kind of emphasizes what needs to be done generally, and then perhaps it highlights the fact that we need to be doing that work here.

And I think the challenge of offering that is that we're functioning on the Canadian landscape where anything political is just largely read as wrong. Just wrong. And why on earth would we be fighting against racism because there is none here, right? And all of those things, right? But, I think that the work, perhaps the first stages of work, would be the work of presenting the racism in and of itself, and undoing that mythology. And then, from there, bigger conversations around reparations, whatever that may be on this landscape, might be the next things that follow. I don't know if you have a comment to that, but I just wanted to bring that forward as something to consider.

John: I think there's a huge danger in reparations based on classification.

Deanna: How so?

Archer: Like, because we're really – I've got this little card in my pocket that says I am legally speaking an Indian, right? I have friends who are way more Cree than I am, speak Cree, look Cree, and they are legally Métis, right? So, which means next to nothing in terms of legal stuff. Or, no, they just changed that, my mistake. So, if there were going to be reparations, which I don't think are a terrible idea in and of themselves, how would that money – there is just so much room for internal – for yet more internal division and strife, right, based on – so, now we're going to do it on blood quantum? Is that the idea?

Deanna: Isn't that what happened 100 and some odd years ago?

Archer: Yeah. And, it's fraught, you know. It's really fraught. Do I think it's a bad idea in and of itself? No, I really don't. You know, I think some reparations would be a really great idea around our neck of the woods, you know. I don't think it would hurt, right? But, I do think it would be very difficult to do it in a way that was just.

John: Yeah, well, that's any form of – well, anything involving money has the potential for that strife and the corruption and the scrambling. But, then that also acts – like, that money is still there, it's still going to other people pockets, and at a more just way of doing it and maybe the conversation around reparations if it can exist – co-exist with some other larger discussion, maybe it needs a larger scale discussion of wealth inequality that's addressed as – so it's a part of a system as large as it is a part of.

cheyanne: I can imagine, like, reparations being paid to communities rather than individuals or investments in structures such as schooling or what have you. But, the thing about reparations as financial compensation is that that is a language that speaks loudly to many people, and that the hypothetical value of having reparations in a contemporary context for the ways that history continues to resonate in the present is that it makes that connection between history and now. And, in a way that is – many people feel vulnerable to hearing.

John: And, you know, a cheque is not wealth, too, right? Writing a cheque saying it's going away, that's not wealth, but, like, you know, reparations don't have to be something, like, redistributing this money to account for something. Like, it can just be going

back to honouring commitments that have already been made as, like, you know, honour treaties, honour the territory, you know, give black people their 40-acres and their mule, right? Like, these commitments that have been already made.

Archer: Yes. Absolutely.

Peter: All of this in this moment and sitting here with you folks and then returning to the idea of those paintings, and how those particular paintings, the Group of Seven paintings, actually make me feel like I'm suffocating. Yeah. And that's quite sad.

cheyanne: Maybe the reparation is we repair all those paintings with all of the things that were erased from them.

Peter: Exactly, or something, because, like, the unpeopled landscape, right? That evidence of, it's not – if you write a cheque, it's not wealth. These paintings are not wealth. But, we're taught to believe that they are, or I was just at the National Gallery and their opening, their Gauguin portraits, paintings, you know. And I'm just like, this is not wealth. This is —how do you think that this is wealth? I think it's a great idea to sell these paintings, you know. Get rid of them. Make space for the real artists. The artists of the territories here, the artists that ... people of colour artists, Indigenous artists. But it really, like, right now, I feel like those paintings make me want to die. So, that's an interesting place to be at, I guess.

Lisa: Listening to everyone, I was thinking ... when we think of reparation, we automatically think of money ... and it plays out here, you know, different kind of land settlement, land claim settlements, coming in the form of money often. But, if we could think outside of – like, I think you're tapping into it a little bit. What outside of money would be the reparations? So, yeah, maybe return of land. I'm thinking can we think outside of that [laughs], as outside of that kind of value. I'm not sure. But then, at the same time, I know that the sort of, the money – it has such a ... such a value to those that have to give it up, too. So, there's something to that, as well. But, yeah, it connects to what you're saying, too, that these paintings are not wealth. Yeah, so, where does the wealth – where does wealth reside for you, or for – yeah. Anyway.

Peter: It's funny, I'm getting emotional, and not funny. But, I just think they're not beautiful. I mean, we are beautiful. And those artists missed out that possibility of making beautiful paintings, because they left out our bodies, the bodies of all the people at this table. So, they're not actually beautiful. Why would you hold up something that's not beautiful?

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