

Deanna Bowen's *On-Trial The Long Doorway* is commissioned and produced through a partnership between Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art, Toronto, and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

In Toronto, leading support is provided by Partners in Art. The project will be expanded in 2018 commencing with a residency in Vancouver supported by the Vancouver Foundation leading toward a future exhibition.

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A theatrical performance of *On-Trial The Long Doorway* will be in development after the exhibition, with support from the Theatre Centre, Toronto. Special thanks to the Theatre Centre, Toronto, in particular Franco Boni.

*On-Trial The Long Doorway* is curated by Georgina Jackson.



**Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art**  
1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada  
(one block east of Lansdowne TTC Station)  
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Gallery Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 11AM – 6PM  
Tours every Saturday at 2PM – Free, all welcome

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Cover image: Deanna Bowen, *Annotations (The Long Doorway)*, 2017.  
Printed text and ink, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

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## ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

**Deanna Bowen** makes use of a repertoire of artistic gestures in order to define the Black body and trace its presence and movement in place and time. In recent years, her work has involved rigorous examination of her family lineage and their connections to the Black Prairie pioneers of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the Creek Negroes (Black Indians) and All-Black towns of Oklahoma, the extended Kentucky/Kansas Exoduster migrations, and the Ku Klux Klan. The artistic products of this research were presented at the Royal Ontario Museum of Art, Toronto (2017); Art Museum at the University of Toronto (2016); the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (2015); McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton (2014–15); and the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2013). Her works and interventionist practice have garnered significant critical regard internationally. Bowen has received several awards in support of her artistic practice including a Canada Council New Chapter Grant (2017); Ontario Arts Council Media Arts Grant (2017); John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2016); and the William H. Johnson Prize (2014). She was part of a contingent of invited Canadian presenters in the *Creative Time Summit* at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015; and her writings and art works have appeared in numerous publications including *Canadian Art*, *Transition Magazine*, *Towards an African-Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance* (all forthcoming), *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, *PUBLIC Journal*, *North: New African Canadian Writing - West Coast Line* and *FRONT Magazine*.

**Dr. Seika Boye** is a dance scholar, artist and writer. She is a Lecturer at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies and Director of the Institute for Dance Studies at the University of Toronto. Her current work explores blackness and dancing in Canada in early-mid 20th century and utilizes dance-focused research to confront historical omissions of Canada's Black population. Boye's recent projects include co-curating the gathering *Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation for Communities of Colour* (Concordia, 2017) with Thomas F. DeFrantz (Duke); and movement dramaturgy for Djanet Sears' *A Black Girl in Search of God* (Centaur Theatre/National Arts Centre, 2015). Recent published writings have included *The Dance Current*, *Dance Collection Danse Magazine*, *alt.theatre*, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* and *Performance Matters*. Boye lives and works in Toronto with her husband and two sons.

**Shaista Latif** is an award-winning Afghan-Canadian writer, performer and facilitator. Her works explore the politics of inclusion and class. For further information see: [howlearnedtoserveya.com](http://howlearnedtoserveya.com)

**Georgina Jackson** is the Director of The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin. She was the Director of Exhibitions & Programs at Mercer Union from 2013 until 2017.

**Liz Park** is a curator and writer currently based in Pittsburgh as Associate Curator of *Carnegie International 2018*. She has curated exhibitions at the Western Front, Vancouver; the Kitchen, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; and Seoul Art Space\_Geumcheon. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications including *Afterall Online*, *Afterimage*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Performa Magazine*, *Fillip*, *Yishu: A Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Pluto Press and Ryerson University Press, among others.

## Launching at Art Toronto

**Mercer Edition 2017: Duane Linklater**

**27–30 October 2017**

Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Booth B23

For its second edition, Mercer Union has collaborated with Duane Linklater to produce 12 decoys cast in solid bronze. The decoys are modelled after tamarack versions made by artists in the James Bay, Treaty 9 area. These decoys are not actually used for the annual goose hunt (which is still an important spring and fall event in James Bay), but are instead made for tourists who wish to purchase something 'authentic' from Omaskeko Ininiwak people in far Northern Ontario.

Mercer Editions is an initiative of Mercer Union to commission work from Canadian and international artists to benefit its activities as an artist-run centre. Projects under this banner may take different forms that reflect the diversity of artistic practice presented in its galleries and programs, and support the work of the centre. For more information, contact [york@mercerunion.org](mailto:york@mercerunion.org)

## Mercer Multiplier 2017

**Tuesday 14 November – Doors open at 6PM – Draw at 7PM**

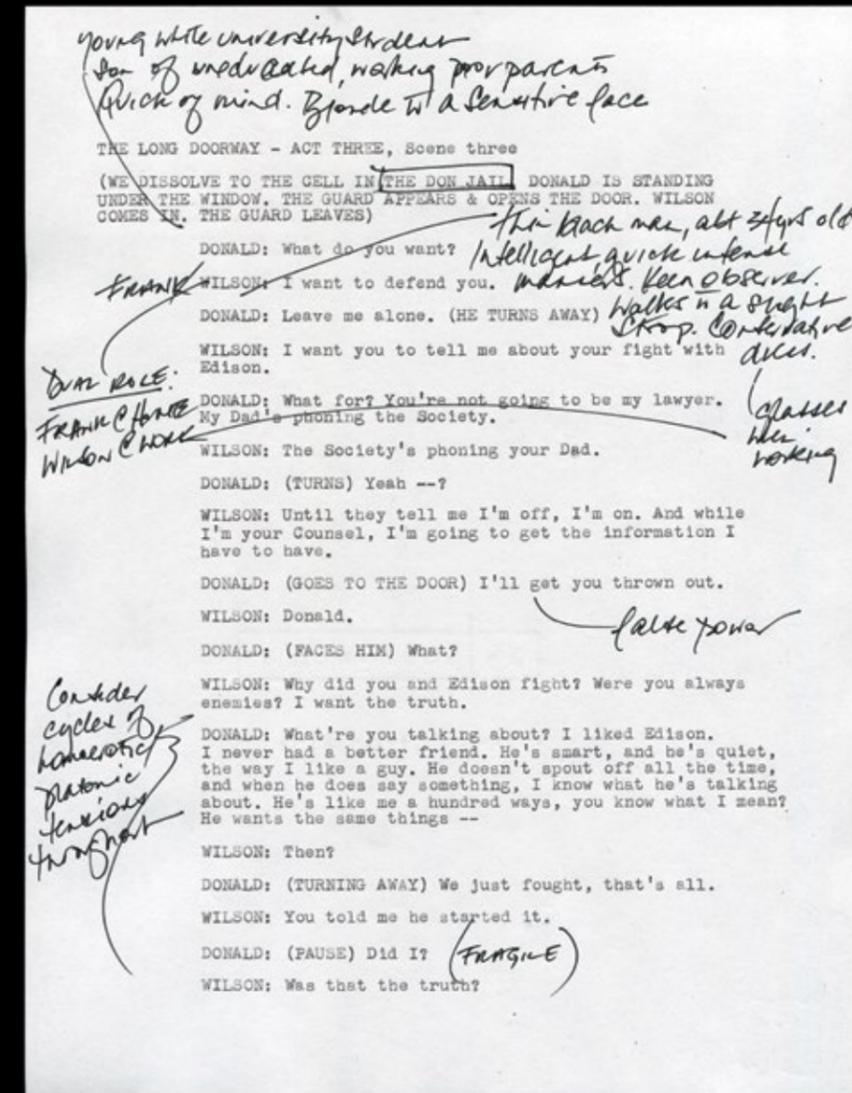
Mercer Union, 1286 Bloor Street West

Mercer Union has asked 25 artists to each contribute works in limited editions of five, less than or equal to 20x30". That means 125 chances for you to take home a unique work of contemporary art, while supporting Toronto's leading artist-run centre. Purchase a ticket to be guaranteed a work at the event – ticket numbers will be drawn in random order giving you one minute to select. Enjoy complimentary food and beverages as participants vie for their favourites!

Each \$200 ticket entitles the holder to one edition, to be selected by numbered draw the night of the event. Improve your chances of getting first pick of your favourite work by purchasing a Collector 3 Pack for \$500. All ticket purchasers will have an hour to preview editions on offer before the ticket draw begins. Check [www.mercerunion.org](http://www.mercerunion.org) for event updates and ticket sales.



Curator/Artist (and former Board member) John Hampton's number gets called at Mercer Multiplier 2016 (Photo: Natalie Logan)



**Deanna Bowen**  
*On-Trial The Long Doorway*

**15 September – 4 November 2017**

Opening Thursday 14 September, 7PM

Presented with leading support from Partners in Art



## Deanna Bowen: *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway*

Six Sets: Jail Cell, Living Room, Kitchen, Legal Office, Court Room, Locker Room  
Five Actors: Kato Alexander, Tarick Glancy, Ahlam Hassan, Mamito Kukwikila, Abigail Whitney  
Dramaturge and Historical Consultant: Seika Boye  
Directing Consultant: Shaista Latif  
Eight Live Rehearsals: Saturdays 16, 23, 30 September; 7, 14, 21, 28 October; 4 November 2017

These components comprise Toronto-based artist Deanna Bowen's solo exhibition *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway* at Mercer Union. Based on a 1956 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation production of a teledrama of the same title, Bowen's project is at once a media installation, a video studio and theatrical sets. While experimenting with casting and stage direction, the artist remains faithful to the original script, which delivers a tale of a Black lawyer's struggle to defend a white college student accused of assaulting his Black peer. The story is neither a crime nor a legal drama. Instead, it focuses on the characters who variously question whether the lawyer is capable of impartial defense. Prejudices, biases and opinions of all kinds surface in the story with no definitive ending to affirm anyone's position.

Besides being a rare cultural production that deals with Black/white race relations in Canada, Bowen's interest in the teledrama stems from the fact that her great uncle Herman Risby played the role of the complainant. The Bowen/Risby family history has been an important subject of investigation for the artist, who is currently developing a suite of interconnected works about her maternal lineage. The Risbys, as part of the post-Reconstruction Exoduster Movement of former slaves from the American South, migrated as far north as the Canadian prairies. This family connection is an anchor for Bowen's personal investment in the story. For her, history is intimate and personal, and for her art, politics is where the individual feeds into the collective.

The political potency of Bowen's work lies in her ability to recharge the power of historic and archival documents. In the past, she has worked with audio recordings of a civil rights era journalist and newspaper records of the Ku Klux Klan's activities to not only re-examine what was, but to take stock of what is. In a similar way, her project at Mercer Union activates a script written more than 60 years ago and raises questions that resonated then and regrettably still do.

The characters in the play dispute the supposed neutrality of blind Justice. When her sword systematically falls on the most vulnerable and the least protected, is her (colour) blindness itself a bias? Broadcast only five months after the not-guilty verdict of the Emmett Till murder trial, the Canadian production contrasts the gross injustice delivered by the all white jury in the American South with a relatively liberal circle of characters in Toronto. Nonetheless, each character reveals their racial and class prejudices, which collectively undermine their faith in the judicial system: the defendant's parents, working class and uneducated, doubt the Black attorney's ability to defend their son; the claimant's father, wealthy Black business and community leader, accuses the attorney of attacking his "own people;" the head of Legal Aid Society staunchly believes in the attorney's ability to do his job with no compromise even as his colleague accuses him of "being purposely blind."

At the centre of these opposing views, the proud attorney sees his mirror image in the bright but troubled young man. Like the defendant, he had to work his way through school, and their shared ambitions for upward socioeconomic mobility from working class backgrounds forge a deep bond. It is not only race but class that emerges as a visible seam in the social fabric of the play's setting, 1950s urban life. Here, Bowen enters the story to tear at this seam and to add more layers of complexity.

Leading up to this presentation at Mercer Union, Bowen posted a casting call for "Black, African and Caribbean Canadian actors of all complexions" to perform select scenes. Every Saturday throughout the run of the exhibition, Bowen leads and video-records actors who perform roles that were categorically described as either Black or white in the original script. Dissatisfied with this binary conception of race, Bowen decided to weave a more complicated story about class, migration, mixed race heritage and violence within communities of the African diaspora. Each actor performs two to three roles in the script and all construct the racial identity of their characters by wearing cream to dark brown clothing of their own choosing. Bowen's call for actors of diverse backgrounds was informed by the demographic make up of Toronto in the mid-century, comprised of new migrants from the Caribbean, and the Ontario-born or American-born Blacks. The Black community in the mid-century Canada was by no means a cohesive whole. Class tensions were palpable between impoverished working poor, middle class and exceptional

cases of upper middle class Blacks; generational strife about religion, cultural representation and respectability, politics was evident in both rural and urban settings. Bowen's re-presentation of the teledrama highlights this plurality and contests reductive ideas of race politics. It is a call for solidarity based on sharing of divergent experiences and perspectives rather than a hierarchy of givens or even its inversion.

When the actors are present, *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway* is a live experience, with the artist responding to the dynamics that are at play on the spot. The results, therefore, are unpredictable. On most days, however, visitors to Mercer Union encounter a series of sets or a media installation loosely configured into five distinct areas where various scenes take place. Upon entry, the left half of the gallery space is divided into a living room and a kitchen; the right half a jail cell and a legal office. Copies of print media and ephemera from the period are strewn on mid-century furniture.

These spaces are not meant to create an illusion, but cue scenes of conflict, such as the inner turmoil of a character in jail, or a family dispute of values as they sit around a kitchen table. In each area, a copy of the script is available to peruse. Finally, the back gallery is transformed into a university locker room, the site of the alleged assault in the play. This is also where the previous week's rush of the rehearsal/performance is screened. The installation overall is an invitation to find one's place in the story. Difficult task, no doubt, to figure out where to stand, and with whom to identify and empathize.

Identification with the other is a tricky business. As a media producer and a consumer, Bowen is hyper conscious of the constant stream of images of Black and brown bodies that are either violated or enacting violence. To enter her work is to grapple with her the conundrum of seeking genuine fellowship and solidarity while consuming images of dangerous and damaged bodies.

In her 2001 book *The Bodies that Were Not Ours: And Other Writings*, the Cuban-American performance artist Coco Fusco anticipated the question of "how subaltern bodies are positioned vis-à-vis technology" in an increasingly digital world.<sup>1</sup> Noting the conspicuous disappearance of the body in the backlash against the 1990s identity politics, Fusco rekindles the discussion of how coloured bodies are represented and consumed. In the late teens of the twenty-first century, the body has become a popular topic again—think Jordan Peele's 2017 comedy-horror film *Get Out*. The black body is at once the subject of fear, envy, infatuation, scrutiny and ultimately the site of a violent occupation.

But there is always resistance. While new media technologies have magnified the existing structural problems, they have also amplified the voices of protest—Black Lives Matter and Idle No More being two prominent examples. Constituting the invisible backdrop to Bowen's work are such unfettered images from popular culture and of violence and protests in the news.

Bowen's work often creates tension by blasting apart assumptions around Black bodies. In a previous performance/ media presentation *The Paul Good Papers: Atlanta Reels* (2012), Bowen hired a Black woman to deliver the words of the eponymous journalist, a white Northerner covering the Civil Rights movement in the South. In a related performance, Bowen herself delivered the words of a Klansman interviewed by Good.<sup>2</sup> In another work, a short film titled *Paul Good at Notasulga* (2012), the journalist's audio reel documents the beating of a man by the white hate group. It is only later revealed that the victim is white. Nothing is a given in Bowen's work—most certainly not race and its construction.

Consistent with these past works, *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway* is part of Bowen's sustained inquiry into the question of how to represent a Black body. Working through the script and turning Mercer Union into a performance/ production studio, Bowen puts forward a number of proposals: as live actors in rehearsals; through objects and props in the sets, and finally in a series of video recordings. From the rushes of the rehearsals, Bowen plans to



Deanna Bowen "Paul Good/Robert Shelton Character Study, Daily live rehearsal," as part of *The Paul Good Papers*, 2012, Gallery 44, Toronto. (Photo: Gallery 44 and the artist)

create a new work that updates and further complicates the teledrama with more questions. How is class written on a body? Does it correspond to a color? How can an acknowledgement of class in conversations about race lead to solidarity rather than foment discord? At what point does looking at the body become so myopic as to lose sight of their humanity?

These questions point to the symptoms of today's deeply cleaved and polarized society. As a response, Black Lives Matter demands that anonymous bodies be recognized and respected as individual lives. Sharing that spirit, Bowen exploits many representational modes and strategies in order to create multi-dimensional characters out of the flat, stock characters in *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway*. What began with an interest in great uncle Herman Risby, an Exoduster's descendent playing a part for television, is now a story made richer, more nuanced, and therefore more confusing and complicated. It is now an open-ended story at the intersection of race and class, where personal histories and values collide with the collective performance of a community.

— Liz Park

## Dramaturge Notes/Historical Reflection

Deanna Bowen and I first met when we were on a panel together with scholar/curator Dr. Julie Crooks and writer/scholar Dr. Afua Cooper at the Art Gallery of Ontario in May this year. We had all been invited to discuss Crook's exhibition, *The Free Black North*, a collection of portraits from the mid-late 1800s Ontario. Together we discussed the power of the images of descendants of Black refugees who escaped enslavement in the Southern United States, the power of their omission from Canada's historical record and contested the idealism surrounding the mythology of Canada as *The Free Black North*. The images in the exhibition were of people, who had sat for portraits as an act of self-definition and so too a resistance to a systemically racist society. Soon after, Deanna discussed the *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway* project and invited me to be the Dramaturge/Historical Consultant. We have continued our conversation about the nuances of racism and resistance in Canada, and these conversations will become a part of the fabric of the exhibition as we discuss the weekly rehearsals on camera.

My current work questions the role of social dance in Toronto's black population in the mid-twentieth-century, the era during which the original teledrama "Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway" (1956) was set. I ask where people went to dance when they were excluded from other spaces due to both overt and covert segregationist practices. In many instances, the spaces were integrated—the crowds and couples—which was an exception, not the norm, and it is dangerous not be realistic about this. Alongside this integration was the insidious reality of the racism that surrounded the couple, even if momentarily suspended on the dance floor. In "Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway," many of the spaces where questions are raised are on the flip side of leisure and focus on the question of labour, ability and capability. Is Wilson, a Black lawyer capable of doing his job? That's the question, though never one that Wilson asks of himself. What is the impact of the doubt of others? The case assigned to him revolves around an incident that follows a 'leisurely' game of basketball at a university. The questions? Who is at fault and what incited the violence—questions that the perpetrator himself cannot seem to answer. It does not help that the understanding of so many around him lacks depth. What is the impact here? Stanley Mann's "Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway" dismantles or arguably pieces together the tensions of class, race, generation and education in mid-century Toronto that unfolds in the spaces of labour and leisure. The body itself is brought to life through vivid scene description; it is the site of these tensions.

My role as dramaturge will be to ask questions about how to embody a story when we do not have a shared knowledge of its historical context. Efforts to educate about what is missing from our historical narratives and records in Canada are critical, but first conversations, panels and lectures, often do not get to the heart of the matter, often having little nuance beyond anecdote. In Canada it all too often happens that dialogue is informed by either United States history or a mythology of Canada as ...the free black north. "Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway" is a virtually unknown text, there is not an available film document—there are no preconceived ideas to work with or against. It is, in many ways, new after sixty years and in so many ways, still deeply resonant of the world we live in.

The gift of Deanna's project is the space it provides for nuance to emerge, in the rehearsals, in the conversations, and in our perceptions. I look forward to seeing how my own interpretations shift as the actors embody the script. What are the possibilities and limits, week to week, and afterwards, for the participants in and spectators of *Ōn-Tria! The Long Doorway* in 2017?

— Dr. Seika Boye

<sup>1</sup> Coco Fusco, "Preface," *The Bodies that Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (Routledge: New York, 2001), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> This was the opening night performance for the group exhibition *Traces in the Dark* curated by the author, featuring Deanna Bowen, Harold Mendez, and Gregory Sholette, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia in 2015.