

## Deanna Bowen's Shadow Histories

You could keep some remnant of it, a talisman that would become rare and fine, worn over time into something familiar. It would naturally become more thin and precious the more the air wore it out, like the bones of a saint. After all, it was only an object in the physical world, not something more potent, like something in the mind: memory.

But the original, the thing itself, would never come back. It had passed away from the world. You could conjure it, though, the emotion that kept it alive inside you, with a trigger: an image, a smell, a combination of sounds that formed it into a picture that stayed in your mind. That was the life of the thing after it died. The only thing that could bring it back.

This is what a word is worth.

*The Names of Things: Life, Language and Beginnings in the Egyptian Desert,*  
Susan Brind Morrow.

They have dealt treachery against the LORD: for they have begotten strange children.

*Imitation of Life (A Hypothesis),* Deanna Bowen.

They seem so simple, so innocent, really, their faded colours and tattered bindings now rendered curiously just right, brilliant in the inkjet enlargements. *Joyful Praise, Songs of Faith and Hope, Christian Praise* — now forever closed, revealing nothing beyond the frame in which they rest — what anguish and what transformative power have these small hymnals wrought? To what exactly, now, do they testify?

Perhaps what haunts the artifact most closely is the knowledge that whatever their larger social existence may have entailed, they were, each and every one, once owned by someone, once treasured, cared for, protected, fondled. Even loved.

Loved? Yet what has love to do with it? We know that these hymnals betray lives of misery, dispossession, sorrow and tragedy. We know that Deanna Bowen's work stands as an address to both the historic trauma of the black diaspora and the personal trauma of familial dysfunction inscribed within the search for redemptive dignity that lingers within the pages of these songs of praise.

Roland Barthes, discussing certain images from Eisenstein's films, suggests that what separates art from document is a third level of meaning — flirtatious, supplemental, carnivalesque — which he names the "obtuse." "I believe that the obtuse meaning carries a certain *emotion*. Caught up in the disguise, such emotion is never sticky, it simply *designates* what one loves, what one wants to defend: an emotion value, an evaluation."<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense that Bowen's images of the hymnals paradoxically open themselves up to us as testimonials of a faith in the power of vision.

Vision? Curious word, linking faith with what is to be seen, what can be shown or revealed. Curious, too, when considered from the perspective of rhetorical power and the domain of words, a domain entrenched within the family history that Bowen sees as a microcosm of black American experience. If rhetorical power in this instance invokes the image of the sharecropper-turned-preacher in *Imitation of Life (A Hypothesis)*, then Barthes' insistence that art, in its obtuseness, is "indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories" finds full expression in Bowen's rejection of the moralistic claustrophobia of family history and its alignment with black fundamentalist Christianity that held its parishioners in thrall to the history of oppression. If her family of preachers held fast to a vision of moral rectitude, that vision spawned hatred and violence, and the rejection of sons and daughters in search of another truth.



Truth? No more conflicted term can have ever been devised, and Bowen's work circles the question of truth, wary of its overlapping layers, wary of her contradictory duties to both protect her family and to reveal the cancer of rectitude that paradoxically eats at its soul. In an important sense, the several works that comprise this exhibition form a single project devoted to a single family, her family, and what *particular* people have done at particular times. How could it be otherwise? To designate what one loves is to make the particular known, to enable us to hear its voice. What is universal begins with a single voice.

Voice. To tell a story is not to be a gossip, and Bowen has disguised her witnessing. If the revival meeting calls for transcendental clarity that can ultimately descend into fiction and finally into obsession and lies, then her work begins with disguise, with a 'cover.'

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(left) Video stills from *Shadow on the Prairie* 2009; colour DVD; 7:20:00 mins.; looping single-channel video projection  
(right) Video still from *Imitation of Life (A Hypothesis)* 2008; colour DVD; 08:26:22 min; looping single-channel video projection

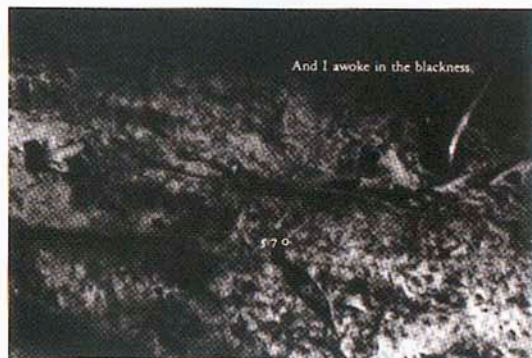


To recall the hymnals, now reduced to their covers, is to be reminded that art can be viewed as a palimpsest, where one story is read through another. Here the cover works to disguise the text, a doubling that is especially evident in *Shadow on the Prairie*, in which one story — that of the tragic bride in Gweneth Lloyd's 1951 ballet of the same name — assumes the task of speaking for another, that of Bowen's great uncle in the face of her family's homophobia and interracial intolerance.

But there is as well another characteristic to the cover and to Bowen's project. It is important to note that while Barthes' concept of the obtuse rejects moral *categories*, it does not reject ethical considerations. To take on disguise, to play, is to assert a moral framework independent of, and consequently free from the decline into posture and transcendental fetishism that masks the desperation of organized truth. Which raises the particular point of the frame,

and its *apositioning*, one might say, or indeterminate definition with respect to that which is framed and that which is not.

One thinks of course of picture frames or sculptural pedestals, even the surtitles one receives at the opera, but the frame includes the *act of framing*, which in Bowen's hymnals is the image itself, and in her *Shadow on the Prairie* is the cover story that exists *both within and without* the buried story of her family. In seeing through the frame — unavoidable and necessary — the frame's indeterminacy takes on the nature of an oscillation. It both is and is not, just as to disguise or to play — to work under cover — is to be at one and the same time both there and not there, conjoined and apart, required to *reconstruct* the frame. Ironically, Bowen — whose family reaches back to ante-bellum America and the dislocation stemming from Southern Reconstruction — finds herself inheriting a role that demands another, consequent reconstruction, this time out of the detritus of that old-time religious fervour that contributed to her ancestors' survival.



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This exhibition covers two distinct projects — *Gospel* and *The Vancouver Project*, both centred on the real life stories of Bowen's own family. Common to each is the long historical rhythm of dislocation and relocation, of oppression and the struggle to live

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(left) *Worship in Song* (Lillenas Publishing Company, Kansas, Missouri, 1972) 2007; archival inkjet print on Epson photo paper; 61.6 x 78.1 cm

(right) Video still from *Imitation of Life (A Hypothesis)* 2008; colour DVD; 08:26:22 min; looping single-channel video projection

in dignity. Also common is the formal means by which Bowen has chosen to restage historical truth as a transcendental longing, a project she shares, though very differently, with the culture whose structures have formed her estrangement. At the core of Bowen's work, then, there is a structural integrity, a logic that is not so much historical as apprehended, not given, but lived. The life of the thing, after it died.

Ian Carr-Harris

Toronto, May 2009

#### Notes

1 "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills" (1970). In *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag, New York, Hill and Wang, 1987, p.324.

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(left) Video stills from *Shadow on the Prairie* 2009; colour DVD; 7:20:00 min;  
looping single-channel video projection

(following page) *Joyful Praise* (Song Book Press. Booneville, Arkansas, 1960) 2007;  
archival inkjet print on Epson photo paper; 61.6 x 78.1 cm