

Writing a Home for Prairie Blackness

Addena Sumter Freitag's

Stay Black and Die and

Cheryl Foggo's *Pourin' Down Rain*

In the late 1950s, the deteriorating log cabin of Alberta's best-known black pioneer, the cowboy John Ware, was relocated from its original site in Brooks to Dinosaur Provincial Park. The Dinosaur Natural History Association started a John Ware Cabin Restoration Fund to rebuild and refurbish the nineteenth-century cabin. Today the log house remains at Dinosaur Provincial Park, and there tourists encounter the preserved home of the black pioneer who invented steer wrestling, discovered the Turner Valley gas fields, and rode against the 1885 Riel Rebellions. In the museum's interpretive material, the wider history of black settlement on the prairies is left unremarked. By effacing the larger frame of black prairie history, the museum makes both the cabin and John Ware's presence on the prairies intelligible only through the rhetoric of extinction; they become relics divorced from their place in the history of the migration of hundreds of black Oklahoman and other black settlers to the Canadian prairies in the early part of the twentieth century. Alongside the bones and fossilized remains of extinct dinosaurs, John Ware's cabin becomes another dusty relic, curiously outside history and outside the fabric of national culture. What John Ware could have been doing in Canada at the turn of the century, why he might have chosen the prairies in particular as his home, and what his sense of belonging to this prairie geography might have been are questions that for the tourist to Dinosaur Provincial Park remain unanswered. The Ware cabin is a testament to the difficulty of finding an adequate "home" for prairie blackness.

The sense of home as a fraught space haunts black prairie cultural production. Like black writers in other regions of Canada, black prairie authors

must constantly negotiate the erasure of their history in both the official accounts of the region and in the national and regional imaginaries.¹ For instance, in the 1970s and 80s and even into the 90s, when regionalism was being theorized as a healthy heterogeneity—even a radical response to the perceived cultural and political dominance of central Canada—several regional anthologies and histories of prairie literature were produced. Among them are Robert Kroetsch's *Sundogs: Stories From Saskatchewan* (1980), Birk Sproxton's *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing* (1986), Mark Duncan's *Section Lines: A Manitoba Anthology* (1988), Wayne Tefs, Geoffrey Ursell and Aritha Van Herk's *Due West: 30 Great Stories from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba* (1996) and George Melnyk's *Literary History of Alberta* (1998), to name only a few. Looking at these volumes, one would assume that few black writers live or produce work on the prairies. In constructing and delimiting a particularly "prairie" literary production, such volumes effectively place the history of black cultural production on the prairies under erasure.

Despite the regional discourses that continue to overdetermine the prairies as a racially homogeneous (white) microcosm, and the regional anthologies that continue to ignore the work of black writers, the prairies have been the site of a unique and important black history that spans the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, according to recent critical histories, such as those of Bruce Shepherd (*Deemed Unsuitable* 1997) and Robin Winks (*The Blacks in Canada: A History* 1997), between 1905 and 1912 at least one thousand black settlers seeking refuge from the rising tide of racial discrimination in Oklahoma and adjoining states responded to Wilfrid Laurier's call to settle the Canadian west. Black farmers and their families migrated northward, settling in large numbers in northern Alberta's Athabasca region, where the all-black communities of Amber Valley and Keystone were established. In Saskatchewan, black settlers homesteaded in Maidstone, and in Manitoba, in the Big Woody District near Swan River. By 1911, fearing that the numbers of black immigrants moving north threatened to transform the Canadian west into the "black prairies,"² the Federal government drafted an Order-in-Council prohibiting for one year "any immigrants belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada" (Shepherd 1). By 1914, after an intensive but unofficial program undertaken by the Federal Liberal government to halt black immigration to the prairies,³ the Oklahoman blacks' interest in Canada waned. Those already in Canada tried to forget their hostile recep-

tion and concentrated on building their communities. According to Winks, by 1929, when an acting Deputy Minister for Immigration reported, mistakenly, that none of the original black settlers remained in the west (313), it seemed that nearly everyone had forgotten them. But the first influx of settlers in the early part of the century endured, and after 1955 the black population on the prairies both increased and diversified (when restrictions on West Indian immigration began to be relaxed) with new arrivants from the Caribbean, Africa, the U.S., and other parts of Canada. That this history has been largely repressed in the prairie imaginary makes black spaces on the prairies feel like fraught, un-home-like places.

Given this historical and cultural context, so much black prairie cultural production has needed to inscribe a “home” for prairie blackness. *Stay Black and Die* (1996) and *Pourin’ Down Rain* (1990) are part of the large nineteenth- and twentieth-century archive of the neglected literature of black prairie culture. Seldom noticed by black cultural studies in Canada,⁴ and overlooked by Canadian letters, black prairie literature, a literature that dates back to 1873, has much to offer both disciplines. In the context of contemporary debates about Canadian regionalisms as “new dominants” (Davey 16)—they present themselves as natural formations but serve particular race, ethnic, class and gender interests—black prairie literature reveals the extent to which regional designations such as “the prairies” have historically gained purchase on their identities by eliding minority, and in particular black, history and literature.

Addena Sumter Freitag, a playwright who was born and raised in Winnipeg’s North End, and Cheryl Foggo, a Calgary-based children’s author and family historian, both write about the difficulty of achieving a sense of belonging, despite generations of family history on the prairies. Far from abandoning the sense of home, these authors struggle toward a new realization of it. By writing their stories about growing up, dramatizing the problems of finding security, reassurance, and community, they archive their personal, historical, and cultural memories. Whereas home is traditionally thought of as a place of stability, a rooted or bounded space, these examples of black prairie cultural production push us toward a sense of home as the archive of racially-inflected history, memory and cultural consciousness that black writers and orators produce. By theorizing home in this way, as an archive for historical and cultural memories rather than as a territorial phenomenon, I seek to counter the theorization of long-standing Canadian blackness as “native,” “aboriginal” or “indigenous.”⁵ This move, I argue,

elides First Nations histories and needs to be addressed as a paramount concern in black cultural studies in Canada.

As if responding to the way John Ware's cabin has been constructed as a dusty, museum-piece curiosity, Addena Sumter Freitag's unpublished one-act play, *Stay Black and Die*, first performed in 1996, opens with every window and door in the house being thrown wide open, and the sub-zero winds of a Manitoba winter blowing it clean of cobwebs and the smell of sleeping bodies. This purging, the play's protagonist, eleven-year-old Penny, explains, was one of her mother's tactics to ensure home as a place of belonging:

MOTHER: Get Up. Get Up! Get your lazy asses out of bed. You can run the streets all night and yea can't get your black asses up in the mornin' Get Up!!

GIRL: That's the sound of my mother's voice, and that's the sound we'd wake up to every morning; Walter and Leslie, my two brothers, and I, and my dad. My sister June had escaped by getting married, and she moved as far away as she could. . . .

And she'd open up every door and window in the house, and the wind would blow 'frost clouds' through our little house and my Mother would come and stand menacingly in our bedroom doorway, expecting us to jump up and clean everything, (in, and outta' sight). (2-3)

Though the play has never before been considered in an academic context, I would argue that for black studies in Canada, and for scholars of Canadian prairie literature, *Stay Black and Die's* unsentimental account of growing up black on the prairies makes it a vitally important social and literary document. In the context of the Canadian racism of the 1950s and 60s, as well as the continued erasure of black prairie history, Sumter Freitag dramatizes the difficulties of creating a place of safety and belonging for the black subject. The characters at home in this play struggle with isolation from the larger black communities of the Maritimes, central Canada and the United States. They struggle with the difficulties of achieving a self-assured blackness, where it sometimes feels like yours is the only black family in the city, and all black cultural products are either absent or must be imported from elsewhere. Penny struggles in particular to come to terms with the differences between her mother's boisterous, Maritime-inflected blackness and her own, quieter, emergent prairie blackness.

While Penny and her brothers were born in Winnipeg, Mrs. Sumter tells us she was born in Truro, Nova Scotia, a place she calls "more prejudice than Alabama" (20). She remembers the race riots when she was a child:⁶

All of them White people got up in a big mob, and they were comin' down, to our district, "*The Island*" . . . to kill 'all of us Black people.' Why, we were all hiding in the swamps, for days! And in the slews.

And the men moved away the 'Out-Houses' . . . [THE MOTHER REACTS AS IF SHE IS PICTURING THIS MEMORY] and they hid us kids in the SHIT . . . up to our necks. (19–20)

Mrs. Sumter moved to Manitoba in the 1940s. The sparseness of the black community in Winnipeg and its short history relative to Nova Scotia's meant she found the anti-black racism of Winnipeg not as deeply entrenched. She remembers, for instance, that

I was the first Black person to sit down and eat **inside** a restaurant in Truro, Nova Scotia in 1950. When me and the kids went there during the 'Big Flood' here.

Remember dad?

[SHE YELLS AT HER HUSBAND]

Sumter . . . Walter! Are you listening to me! . . . I said do you remember 1950?

[SHE CONTINUES TELLING THE KIDS]

We had a big flood here in Winnipeg and I took all of you kids home with me to Truro, (and I left dad here to clean up the house.) I went inside the restaurant, and my cousins started 'calling me out of there', knocking on the window, sayin':

"Daisy, Daisy, come out of there "Daisy." (They call me Daisy). Daisy come out . . .

[SHE SUCKS HER TEETH EXAGGERATEDLY]

I called the waitress over: "Miss! Miss!"

*Look, (I told her) I ain't one of them 'fools' from **here!** . . . I'm from Winnipeg now, and honey . . . you tell your manager, if you don't serve **me** some food, this 'crazy nigger' is going to redecorate this restaurant!"*

[SHE GESTURES PROUD, AND STANDS EVEN TALLER]

"I KNOW THEY SERVED ME!"

We went to Halifax after that, for a visit. Honest to God, Sumter, I still remember all their faces when me and all these kids stood **at the front desk of the hotel**, and I said: *"I want rooms for four!"* They knew I wasn't from Nova Scotia. . . . Not no more!" (20, emphases in original)

For Kathleen Sumter, shifting herself to the prairies entailed a shift in her blackness. While growing up in the richness of a large and long-standing black community had shaped for her a more self-assured blackness than her daughter's, the less deeply entrenched racism of the prairies allowed more expansiveness to come into her voice and into her desires; it allowed her to speak back to power. Penny remembers how in the North End of Winnipeg in the 1950s, the robustness of her mother's voice became legendary. She recalls the time her mother threw the landlord out of the house "for trespassing":

She actually threw him, down the stairs, and then (my brother Leslie said), she kicked my baby carriage down the stairs after him, and it went bouncing down the stairs, right over top of him, and right through the 'plate glass' door in the landing. And then she said:

MOTHER: He's got his fuckin' nerve comin' in MY house and askin' for his rent. It's only the first of the month. I don't owe him no rent yet. I don't owe him nothing till the day's over. I bet he didn't go askin' none of the honkies for their rent, and they're always "skippin' out." You don't see no Darkies "skippin' out on their rent."

GIRL: And then she leaned over the banister and she yelled down at him:

MOTHER. And next time, you knock before you come in MY house 'Sucker.' You may own this shack, but I pay the rent here. Makes it MY house. And if you come in here, you'd better respect me in my house. (4)

As heartening as it is to watch the spirited Kathleen Sumter defend her home ground, her ability to create a safe home for her children is compromised by her own mis-treatment of them. At times it is Mrs. Sumter herself, not the racist bully Larry, who is the most threatening figure. Penny remembers and re-lives on stage the beatings she received for small infractions, for dawdling, daydreaming, and losing fifty cents. Her mother hit her with the cord of the electric frying pan until the raised welts made her look fat (15).

Penny also remembers a childhood home haunted by isolation. Though other black families lived in the neighbourhood and attended the Colored Baptist Church, the Sumters kept to themselves:

There were Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, a few Chinese, and one Japanese, (the Harmattas). Huh . . . oh, and one of us.

We were the only black family in that part of the "North End."

Well there was only bout 4 or 5 black families that lived in the North End of Winnipeg at that time, but we never saw 'em, we never saw 'em. They lived way across town, way across town! near Higgins and Maple Street. (emphasis in original 6)

This largely immigrant, mostly Eastern European neighbourhood was not only a hybrid space, it was also a hybridizing place: "My family loved living in the North End," says Penny, despite the lack of other black folks there. "They fit in" (6). But a neighbour, Mrs. Adolph, casts the situation in another light when she remarks, "*purr-haps dey fit in too vell*" (6). Mrs. Adolph laughingly recounts how the youngest Sumter, Les, explained why the neighbour kids left him behind: "I zink it eez bee-cause I am German, and da War eez on!" (6). On hearing this, Mrs. Sumter decides the time has come to visit the Colored Baptist Church so her son can learn that, like the rest of the congregation, he's black:

MOTHER: Listen boy, you go inside that church you hear that music, you can snap your fingers, you can tap your feet, you can sway to the music, but don't you 'break out' and dance, 'cause 'them's' hymns in there, and it's a sin to dance to a hymn.

GIRL: Now, Les was 'just'a' grinning at the sounds of the choir coming from inside. He loved music, (My mom had a big record collection, of 'black artists,' songs that we never heard on the radio in Winnipeg).

You see, when anybody visited us from the States, or when any of the Porters on the railroad, 'ran' out of town, and went 'across' to the states, they always brought back all kinds of records for themselves, and their friends.

We had Jazz, we had Blues, we had Gospel.

Les was so excited he just burst right through the doors and marched right up the aisle, sat down and took a look around at all the people, and he let out a blood-curdling scream:

[GIRL MIMICKS LESLIE'S VOICE] Momma "Get me outta here, Oh mama get me outta here, get me outta here, I'm scared of all these people. [HE WHISPERS] They're all black!

GIRL: My mother, she got him out of there all right! And she beat him all the way home, for embarrassing her, and she stood him in front of the mirror and told him . . .

MOTHER: Boy! I want you to take a look into that mirror and see what nationality you are. You're the same nationality as all those people! You're not German! You're Colored, and don't you ever forget it. (7, emphases in original)

Later in the play, when Penny describes the humiliations of having to grow up wearing an eye patch for a lazy eye, a pink eye patch, no less, the kind made for white folks, it is difficult not to see the image as a striking inverse representation of double-consciousness. Growing up on the prairies with few positive signs of blackness around to bolster her, the challenge for the black subject is not the doubling of consciousness as W.E.B. Du Bois argued it was in his American context. Penny and her brother don't perceive themselves as experiencing the surplus of perception that comes from being—to paraphrase Du Bois—a Canadian, a Negro. Instead, as the characters' names suggest ("penny" and "less"), the play explores the anxieties of prairie people who consider themselves singly diminished black subjects.⁷ Penny remembers, for example, the experience of watching the civil rights struggles on T.V. and feeling "unworthy" of her black American brothers and sisters:

And in the States! Colored people are Rioting, and marching, and integrating into white schools. We used ta' watch them on TV. Men, women, and children, marching together . . . and Look! White people were marching with them too. TOGETHER. Knowing they'd get beaten. They'd get beaten in the heads with clubs! And fire hoses, and police dogs would be released on them . . . and we'd watch the dogs, slashing, and tearing at their flesh, and they would scream in pain.

. . . And I cried

Because I felt unworthy of 'my people.'

'Like' I believed in every thing they were fighting for, but I could never march knowing I'd get beaten, and they weren't scared, and I was. (21, emphases in original)

In his essays "Must All Blackness Be American?" (1996) and "Contesting a Model Blackness" (1998), George Elliott Clarke has noted how African America has long been held out, by both African Americans and black Canadians, as the authentic mode of blackness. Clarke writes that before reading the black and east coast history that would later strengthen his sense of himself as an

assuredly "Black Nova Scotian" . . . I reviled Halifax, my native city, for it failed, I worried, to provide an 'authentic' black experience. We had no seditious civil rights agitation, for school segregation had been velvetly abolished by the provincial government between 1954 and the 1960s. There was no righteously destabilizing Black Power activism, for our provincial community of less than 30,000 souls was too small and too conservative to tolerate more than a casually militant rhetoric. Consequently, I absorbed as much African-American music and letters as possible (27 "Contesting").

Significantly, in *Stay Black and Die*, not only the American model but Mrs. Sumter's Nova Scotian, country-inflected blackness is, for her urban, prairie-born child, the dominant, authentic model. Penny's own voice, she fears, echoes not with her mother's down-home cadences, but with the mixed rhythms of (white) prairie city culture. Distanced as she is from the reassuring tones of black community, Penny confesses that she often finds her mother's "negro proverbs" puzzling:

'O-ooooh.' Call them: "*Negro proverbs*," she had a million of 'em. We never understood any of them.

She used [to] always say: There are 3 methods of communication: tell a phone, telegraph, and tele-nigger!

You keep that up and I'm gonna slap all the Black offa you.

No, you can't have no coffee, kids shouldn't drink coffee . . . 'cause coffee is what makes you black . . .

Girl don't you let your mouth write no checks your ass can't cash!

Girl get that off, I told you no bright colors, especially Red, someone might think you're West Indian. (8)

Penny's voice, on the other hand, recites the accents I recall from my own days on the prairies. She longs for Mrs. Gratanowich's famous "pa de heh,"

and describes running down the street with a particularly prairie turn of phrase, “bootin’ it”: “She’d grab my hand and off we’d go, “*justa’ bootin’ it down the street, ‘Just ’a bootin’ it! . . .*” (12).

As long as Penny has access only to remote modes of blackness, such as the images of the civil rights struggle on TV, or her mother’s Maritime-inflected accent, her own quiet, burgeoning prairie blackness exists only as repressed absence. Much of the tension in the play is built on Penny’s feeling haunted by the caricatured image of blackness she sees in a lawn jockey she passes on her way to school each day. She remembers:

Those were the little metal statues everyone would stick out on the lawn every morning to water their lawn. They were ugly, ugly, black, black, black, boys. And they had big ‘poppy’ eyes and flat noses, (spread all over their face) and they had big, BIG, **ugly** lips, all outlined and painted in white, and they had a hose stuck down there. [SHE POINTS TO THE GROIN AREA] Down there.

And they’d gyrate around [SHE GESTURES] and water the lawn.

They used to make me feel so ashamed. (10, emphases in original)

It isn’t until near the end of the play, when Penny’s mother shares her stories about the black scene in Winnipeg before World War II (and her father shares with her his African American history and the story of his immigration to Canada) that she begins to have a historical sense of herself as a black subject who belongs to the prairies. In the absence of official histories of black prairie habitation, Penny’s mother’s stories write their daughter home. “Oh there were thousands of stories,” Penny remembers:

Stories of when they first moved to Winnipeg, and how nice and clean Main Street was then. All the families would go for walks on Sunday down Main Street, or Downtown past Misha Pollock’s store. Then they went for chips at Keleckis’s Chip Stand. (It was just a ‘stand’ then. Before he even built his first restaurant!) . . .

Well, Colored People weren’t allowed to go to Night-Clubs “in those days.” Well! . . . the Big Bands weren’t allowed to **stay** in the Night Clubs, after they finished playin’ either! **SO** . . . they all went to places that ‘Colored people’ ‘ran,’ called “Bootlegging Joints.” (that’s what she called ‘em) and they’d **dance**, and **party**, and everyone would drink ‘bootleg liquor’ **all night long**, till mornin’!

Mom’s favorite Boot-leggin Joint was called, “The Rum Boogie,” cause (she said): *everyone drank bootleg rum, and danced ‘Boogie-Woogie’ “all night long!”* The man that ‘ran’ it, was named, “*Do Love*” . . . cause, like he said . . . “**I do love ‘ta’ party!**” (35, emphases in original)

Though the history itself is not comforting—it abounds with narratives of racism, segregation and poverty—hearing it allows Penny to think of

Winnipeg for the first time as a black space. This insight is so climactic that the play's resolution quickly follows. Penny is now able to face the lawn-jockey that has tormented her throughout the play. She is able now to see him—and herself—not as a grotesquely black, but in a sense, as beautiful:

The paint on him had 'long faded,' so he wasn't Black, Black, Black, anymore.
He was . . . just . . . "Black" . . .

He wasn't ugly!

He was . . . beautiful! and he looked . . . he looked . . . just like me! (38, emphases in original)

Although the epiphany appears a little too suddenly, and involves a mere reversal (but not a transcendence of) racist logic (where once the lawn jockey was ugly she can now see him as beautiful), the message still hits home. In the absence of official histories about the long habitation of black folks on the prairies, black prairie writers and orators must write their own way home.

Because of the repression of black history in the prairie imaginary, when black prairie authors write, the genre of the family memoir is dominant.⁸ Like *Stay Black and Die*, Cheryl Foggo's *Pourin' Down Rain* documents the stories of four generations of family history in Calgary, Regina and Winnipeg. *Pourin' Down Rain* shares with *Stay Black and Die* many of the same concerns with living black on the prairies: the experience of isolation, the need for black community, anxiety over feelings of inauthenticity and, ultimately, the discovery of the importance of oral family histories. Discovering black history is treated by both authors, but particularly by Foggo, as an awakening. Awakening to our own history is a defining experience of the current generation of black prairie subjects.

Like Sumter Freitag, whose play literally stages a black home space, Foggo's memoir narrates details of all the home spaces inhabited by four generations of her family. Of such central importance are these home spaces that Foggo structures her narrative around them. A chapter is devoted to her grandparents' house on "Ottawa Street"; another to "In Sharon's Room." Foggo's careful account of pot-bellied stoves, porches and water wells, writes the history that Foucault urges remains to be written, the history of "the little tactics of the habitat" (149). This history—or maybe it is properly called genealogy—gives the lie to the notion of blackness as a new or recent (immigrant) phenomenon to the prairies. Foggo, for instance, remembers how her grandparents met, at a gathering of one hundred or more of the black settlers who lived around Maidstone,

Saskatchewan. They had gathered to help one of their neighbours raise a barn or a house. "It was 1915," she writes. "Many of the Black pioneers had now been in Canada for five years, some for longer than that, and they had grown accustomed to this way of helping, of leaning heavily upon one another to survive in this strange climate of the country that was less than the promised land they had hoped for" (80). Black community, gathering itself together to build a home in a space in which they increasingly felt dislocated, becomes the signal motif of black prairie habitation.

Of her grandparents' home in Regina during the difficult Depression years of the 1930s and 40s, Foggo writes of a similar in-gathering of family and community expanding a black home space:

My grandparents started their large family on a farm near Lashburn, Saskatchewan. . . . The family moved frequently at first, always, as the family grew, in search of larger premises. . . . The big, old house on Ottawa Street with its reasonable six dollars per month rent was where they settled for a number of years and where dwell most of their childhood memories. . . .

The house was at the end of Ottawa Street. Beyond the Smiths was the prairie, no trees, just the hardy grasses and the gophers. When it rained, they were surrounded by mud of the sort that would swallow you, but when it was dry they had a boundless playground and a shortcut to school.

There was a well in back of the house, a luxury which saved them the inconvenience of walking several blocks, as most of their neighbours did, to draw their water.

To their joy, the house proved to be actually large enough for their needs, with three bedrooms up and one down, a cellar with a big black, coal and wood stove, a living room, dining room and a large kitchen. . . . In the middle of the room stood the pot-bellied stove. Often, in the evenings, my grandmother would drag the rocking chair in from the living room, hold the twins or the babies, Bert and Dave, on her lap, the other children would settle themselves around her and she would tell them stories. . . .

It was a very fundamental life that they had. My grandparents struggled to provide basic care, food and clothing, but they raised their family with their full hearts and, from all accounts, the family was a happy one. They loved each other with what seems to be almost ferocity and the house was filled with a great deal of laughter. (23-5)

Foggo describes how the family pulled together and worked with dignity to survive the Depression. Her grandfather, she writes, found a position "pinning" chickens at Canada Packers:

The Smith children emulated their parents' attitude toward work. Aside from their chores—drawing water from the well, cutting, chopping and stacking wood, cleaning, cooking and laundry—the entire family congregated in the cellar in the

evening, pinning chickens to help meet expenses. In the mid-to late-thirties, pinning a chicken was worth five cents and the Smith children were allowed to pocket two cents from every nickel that they earned. (25)

Foggo also describes the black home spaces her family builds during the early 1960s, prior to the American civil rights struggles and the anti-colonial movements in Africa and the Caribbean, which would soon radicalize black subjectivity across the diaspora. The challenges of racism were primary. The worn and tired appearance of her aunt's house is suggestive of the Calgary black community's feeling after several generations of living on an often-times (racially—not climatically) hostile prairie:

They lived in a house that must have seemed small to the seven of them, especially considering the needy people that they often took in, but to me it was large enough to harbor many secrets, it was familiar and warmly faded. The house looked like a tired, very old woman trying to maintain her posture, but wanting to relax, to sag a little. (36-7)

Foggo describes how the architecture of this old house, with its cozy attic and creaking staircase (which gave away any eavesdroppers), created a space for nurturing, private conversations with her older cousin:

Sharon and I sat crosslegged on her bed, which was nestled into a nook created by the slanted ceiling of the attic and the wall. . . .

We were cracking and eating sunflower seeds. . . .

I looked down, pretending to search the foil bag for seeds that had already lost their shell. . . . After a time I spoke again. "Sharon?"

"Uhhhm mmmm?"

"What does nigger mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

I did not reply and I did not look up, so she continued.

"It means that the person saying it is ignorant."

"I know." I had heard that a hundred times. "But what does it really mean in the dictionary?"

"It's not in the dictionary, honey." Her tone was very gentle. "Who's been calling you nigger?"

"The Webber boys," I said, whispering.

I began to cry and she pulled me to her. . . .

"Do you know what it means?" Sharon was rocking me and humming. "It means that the person saying it is a nigger. When someone calls you nigger they are really talking about themselves." . . .

She quietly left the room after switching the table lamp on, familiar as she was with my dislike for dark places. She extinguished the overhead light and did not close the door.

I was very safe. (38-9)

In this vignette the architecture of the house itself forms a scaffolding around Cheryl's emergent blackness. This room structures their safety and allows Cheryl to ask—and Sharon to answer—frightening questions about racism. Though today we may find Sharon's analysis of racism limited (it avoids any question of power), it provides Cheryl with new-found security.⁹

Coming together in these black home spaces on a regular basis was one of the strategies Foggo's family developed to re-affirm one another's sense of themselves as black people. Though Calgary in the 1960s had at least one hundred black folks living there (Jamerson fonds, City of Edmonton Archives), in a population of about 311,000¹⁰ they were very much in the minority. Foggo remembers that during family get-togethers, their use of language affirmed their black identities:

I learned a good deal, at an early age from those gatherings. I learned how to tell a story, the importance of the family and our history and I began to learn the way Black people, at least the kind of Black people that we are, use language.

My mother spoke to her family in a way that she never spoke to our neighbours at home. Sometimes she said "ain't" or "don't" when she meant "doesn't" as in, "don't make no difference."

Why, I wondered, would she say "don't make no difference" when I knew quite well that at home she would say "doesn't matter?"

With the exception of Aunt Edie, who had married a man from a rural Black community and adopted some of his expressions and speech patterns, none of Mother's family used expressions like "y'all" as part of their natural speech. One would not have known it, however, from listening to them when they were together in the security of their parents' home. Their high-spirited conversation was heavily peppered with "y'all's" and "uhhmm uhhm uhhms" and other colloquialisms usually associated with rural Black American speech.

I began to understand, as I grew older, that they did this to entertain one other and to affirm their "Blackness." They were people with ambivalent feelings about their isolation from other Blacks. They had no desire to return to the America that their parents had fled, nor did they wish to be completely swallowed by the White society in which they all lived. (18)

The code-switching that Foggo describes is a survival strategy of black prairie culture. Their daily speech demonstrates to their neighbours (and to themselves) that black Canadians can speak "Canadian" English too. But "talking black" to one another allows them to also feel black, despite being raised almost exclusively in the dominant white culture. In a sense, then, long before writers such as Foggo and Sumter Freitag began consciously archiving their family stories, or academics like myself began writing about the strategies black authors use to inscribe a home, black writers and

orators have been archiving these stories. In their unique language, black prairie subjects remind one another about “the kind of black people we are.”

Despite her very fortunate connection to her large family, and to other black families in Calgary, Foggo writes that as a teenager she was still haunted by an anxiety that, “I was not black enough” (53). *Pourin’ Down Rain* echoes *Stay Black and Die’s* fears of inauthenticity in what feels like the outmost limits of the black diaspora. Just as Penny worries that she is “not worthy” of her black American neighbours, Foggo also describes how learning about the struggle for black civil rights in the U.S. precipitates a crisis in her blackness: “I was dimly aware that while I was spending my summers dodging trains on the Twin Bridges and gathering herbs from the hills to make ‘perfume,’ Black people in America were rioting. . . . Although the struggles of Black Americans had very little impact on my day-to-day life, after 1966 I became less comfortable in my White world” (43). In 1968, when Martin Luther King is assassinated, Foggo decides to make the march in his honour her first political act. But when the two-hundred-odd marchers convene for a rendition of “We Shall Overcome,” hardly anyone knows the words. “I was not black enough,” she concludes later that year. “Too many years in a White world had caused me to forget, once too often, that I was Black and that my blackness was the first thing seen and reacted to by every white person that I met Whether I liked it or not, the world was Black and White and I had been attempting to live in the middle. . . . I no longer believed Canada was a refuge from racism and resented being raised in isolation from other Blacks” (53).

As in Sumter Freitag’s play, when Foggo discovers her family’s oral histories she stops regarding her world in exclusively black or white terms. When Foggo’s grandmother and aunt Daisy relate to her (at separate times) their extended history on the prairies, Foggo realizes how long the prairies have been a hybrid place. Daisy’s story is truly remarkable for its long remembering. She takes Cheryl back through time, through the history of the Oklahoman migration that brought her ancestors to Saskatchewan, back through the history of slavery in Arkansas and Texas, back to the story of an African man named Kudjo, their ancestor who endured the voyage of the middle passage. This history becomes the sounding-line through time that finally connects Cheryl’s Calgary to the history of the black diaspora. Returning to Calgary with a head full of family stories, Foggo experiences a revelation akin to Penny’s:

I was growing toward a quiet confidence that I could not yet articulate, even in my thoughts. I had learned more about my family’s history, about what it meant

to be Black in North America, about my own blackness in eight months than what I had cared to know in all the previous years of my life. I was beginning to understand that I had a right to exist in my world.

This may not be comprehensible to someone who has not lived as a peculiarity, the idea that a child must one day tell herself, "I am allowed, I was meant to be, I have a right to exist." But when you are a Black child who looks out into the world and sees hostility toward Blackness, you begin to ask why, you look for rationality behind the hostility, until the day you realize that racism is not your responsibility, it is the responsibility of its perpetrators. That day you say, "I belong in this world. I belong here in Western Canada where my family has lived and worked for four generations."

We drove on, the miles peeled away. Back to Calgary and my life there. (83)

Characters in Foggo and Sumter Freitag's texts must learn to become self-confidently black (blackness having no guarantees in nature). Discovering an archive of stories about black prairie history, while it may not be capable of establishing a black identity in and of itself, infuses the subject with the sense of historicity and belonging-in-place that is necessary for a self-assured blackness. Both authors argue that the sense of reassurance and affinity, fitness and community that properly belong to our sense of ourselves and our home cannot attach to the prairies so long as the historical archive remains present only as a repressed absence in both official histories and in the prairie imaginary. By re-placing blackness into the regional imaginary, Foggo and Sumter Freitag challenge our inherited notions about the prairies as a homogeneous, unracialized microcosm. They encourage us to see how the prairies have long been a black space, and a hybridized place. Given the recent critiques by Canadian literary theorists of regional discourses as "new dominants," such as those of Christian Reigel and Herb Wyle, I would argue that we need the neglected archive of black prairie culture now more than ever. Because black prairie cultural production makes visible the repression of black history in the regional imaginary, it is as troubling as it is necessary to our inherited notions of what constitutes "prairie" history and literature and what regional Canadian literature is and means.

NOTES

- 1 Though in this paper I use the regional designation "the prairies," and sometimes "the west" to refer to the politically-, economically-, and culturally-defined geographies of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, one of my intentions is to deconstruct such regionalisms as ideological formations. While "the prairies" continues to operate in this paper both rhetorically and heuristically, my gesture of not capitalizing these terms indicates my intention to de-naturalize what have become reified concepts.

- 2 Winks records that in 1911 the Member for Lanark North, fearing the arrival of tens of thousands of black settlers to the prairies, told government officials that they must “preserve for the sons of Canada the lands they propose to give to niggers” (309). The conservative Member for Quebec’s Lisgar constituency admittedly argued for an all-white west (Winks 307), and Lethbridge Conservative C.E. Simmons urged against importing “Dark Spots” into Alberta.
- 3 Though the Order-in-Council was never passed, the Canadian government nevertheless moved swiftly and efficiently to eliminate black settlement. For instance, Canadian agents were dispatched to Oklahoma to discourage prospective immigrants, “pointing out the difficulties of the climate and the general prejudice which was sweeping over Canada against the negro.” During 1912, the Great Northern Railway sent notices to its employees warning that selling tickets to potential black immigrants between Saint Paul and the border should be prevented. And in March of the same year, the Superintendent of Immigration, W.D. Scott, publicly asked black Americans not to come to the prairies since opportunities for them were better in warmer climates (Winks 311–12).
- 4 Though it is beyond the scope of this particular paper, I would argue that one of the important questions for black studies in Canada might become: How has the pervasiveness of certain grammars for black, which emphasize its urbanity and postmodernity, deprived black prairie subjectivity, which has historically been elaborated in a rural, even pioneer, context?
- 5 Liz Cromwell introduces the term “native born Canadians” into black Canadian literary theorizing in 1975, in her Foreword to *One Out of Many: A Collection of Writings by 21 Black Women in Ontario*. In 1996 Anthony Joyette distinguishes between “aboriginal (descendants of early settlers)” and “naturalized (immigrant) African-Canadian writers,” a distinction George Elliot Clarke admires as “a fine classification” (“Introduction,” *Eyeing* xxii). Walcott posits a similar concept, “indigenous black Canadians,” a year later in *Black Like Who?* (1997), though it is, he writes, “for lack of a better term” (39). Though both Clarke and Walcott rightly recognize the way indigenizing metaphors have operated to maintain problematic divisions between long-standing and immigrant black communities, histories, identities and cultural production, the term is not interrogated for the way it in turn represses the only truly indigenous history in Canada, that of the First Nations.
- 6 The riot she refers to may be the Trenton, Nova Scotia riot of 1937. According to Winks, an angry white mob stoned a black man who had recently bought a house in Trenton. After being dispersed by the RCMP, the mob returned the following day, four-hundred strong, and destroyed the house and its contents (419).
- 7 George Elliott Clarke explores this question as well when he asks whether it is possible to think of the hyphen that floats in between “African” and “Canadian” “as an ampersand, or is it really a double-edged minus sign?” (“Contesting” 40). Clarke’s discussion of double-consciousness, however, goes on to revise the Du Boisian formulation: “Yet, the African-Canadian consciousness is not simply dualistic. We are divided severally; we are not just ‘black’ and Canadian, but also adherents to a region, speakers of an ‘official’ language (either English or French), disciples of heterogeneous faiths, and related to a particular ethnicity (or ‘national’ group), all of which shape our identities” (40). I agree with Clarke that black Canadian consciousness is multiple and fractured, but am less comfortable with the idea that black subjects “adhere” to their regional affiliations. Is there a way, I wonder, to theorize a black-inflected consciousness that has been shaped (and mis-shaped) by location without reinscribing the geographic determinism of regional discourses?

- 8 Memoirs, biographies, documentaries, historical literature and orature are not pre-eminent genres on the prairies alone. Black writers across Canada have felt the urgent need to record the unique histories of their particular locales, families, churches and communities. As George Elliott Clarke has put it, “because African-Canadian history is ignored in Canada, African-Canadian writers are forced to become historians” (Introduction, *Eyeing* xx).
- 9 Both Foggo and Sumter Freitag imagine safety in terms of the home. Foggo’s text, more than Sumter Freitag’s, works to extend the sense of security into the imagined space of the region. Significantly, both texts appear more interested in addressing civic and regional discourses than national ones (for instance, Sumter Freitag has named her production a “North-End Girl Production”). Perhaps the nation is only implicitly, rather than explicitly, addressed because both authors regard the nation as the original source of danger.
- 10 The January 1965 Calgary Civic Census puts the population of the city at 311,116. <www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/calgary/popchart1.html>

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