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Black Words and White Space: How Cheryl Foggo's Pourin' Down Rain Claims a New Understanding of the Canadian West

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Black Words and White Space: How Cheryl Foggo's *Pourin' Down Rain* Claims a New Understanding of the Canadian West

The subtitle to Cheryl Foggo's autobiographical work *Pourin' Down Rain* is *A Black Woman Claims Her Place in the Canadian West*. In "Nothing's Shocking: Black Canada," Katherine McKittirck argues that Black presence is continuously perceived as shocking or unexpected by non-Black settlers in Canada because it contradicts the Eurocentric history that Canada continues to tout as its true past. The Prairies are a space where Black presence is considered particularly shocking due to the whitewashed canon of literature emerging out of the region, even though "the prairies is the *second* most densely populated black region in Canada" as of 2016 (*The Black Prairie Archives* 22). Using the narrative form of a memoir, Foggo archives Blackness in the Canadian Prairies, revealing a repressed Black history in the "White West," and illuminating how the historical and current ideological space of the Prairies is constructed out of Whiteness ("Black Civility" 85). *Pourin' Down Rain* disrupts, challenges, and claims space for Blackness in the Canadian West by remapping the region as an area inextricably linked to Blackness.

Autobiography is a narrative form that allows for the most freedom for archiving Blackness, and especially geographical Blackness, because it allows Black people to explore their relationship to Blackness in the context of their lived spaces. In *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, Joanne Braxton argues that "the archetypal patterns and narrative concerns established in early [Black female] autobiographies renew themselves in contemporary works" (13). One of these patterns is the "maturation of consciousness parallel[ing] geographical movement," which can be traced all the way back to slave narratives, as geographical displacement brought about social and cultural displacement (186). It is important to note that *Black Women Writing Autobiography* only really looks at Black women from the United States, but because Foggo's family lived in the U.S. for some time and she has American descendants, an analysis of this literary lineage still applies to Foggo's memoir. Foggo's maturation is inextricably tied to geographical

location in *Pourin' Down Rain*. Her memoir spans from Calgary, where she grew up, to her mother's home in Regina and her grandparents' home in Manitoba. In fact, Foggo first notices the way "Black people [...] use language" to code-switch by "listening to [her family speak] when they were together in the security of their parents' home" (Foggo 16-7). Her grandparents' home acts as a transformative setting for her own understanding of Blackness and its relationship to the space surrounding it. Foggo traces her way across the Canadian Prairie provinces as she grows up and the movement between these geographical locations helps her make sense of her life.

Another aspect of Foggo's memoir that stems from this literary lineage is one even more particular to Black women's stories: an emphasis on community and family. As Foggo grows older, she writes that she has "begun to see [her] family as a group of people with a shared history that bore a great deal of influence on the life that [she] was leading" (75). Her life is in constant conversation with the lives of her family members. Unlike in male slave narratives, where Black men are more readily able to represent themselves as solitary heroes, female slave narratives tend to celebrate the collective contribution to freedom. This characteristic is due to the fact that enslaved women were more connected to the home and to childcare, meaning that they already existed in a collective. Likewise, these stories often include "the female slave (or former slave) trying to protect her family and create a hearth and home for them" (Braxton 16). This pattern is extended in "the postemancipation accounts of slaves" (Braxton 40), where "the central concerns for family and self-sufficiency do not cease but extend the ideal of service to one's community, state, and nation." *Pourin' Down Rain* is Cheryl Foggo's story, but her journey is one that brings her family's stories to light, thus participating in a movement to claim a wider history of Blackness in the Canadian West. She is creating a home for her relations in a space that has discounted the existence of Blackness and, more explicitly, its continued entry into this space. *Pourin' Down Rain* documents the presence of Blackness through a central concern for the family, the collective, and the self.

Foggo's incorporation of photographs is significant to documenting Blackness in her text. When Black communities are no longer visible, photographs become a way of reclaiming visibility and resituating space. In "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," Okwui Enwezor explains how photography is considered both "the archival record" and "documentary evidence" (12). Photography

is immediate evidence of existence: the viewer is presented with the material reality of an image's subject. Photographs inform the reader of Foggo's age at the time of certain traumatic events. A photograph of young Foggo accompanies the story of the time she is first called the racial slur n—, captioned: "Me around the time of the experience I described to Sharon" (Foggo 38). Including this visual produces a visceral reaction because it compels readers to confront the tragic reality of a little Black girl being expected to navigate racism, which invokes sympathy in the reader. Aside from documentings the existence of its subjects, photography also serves as a way of understanding the time and place in which a photo was taken. Photographs substantiate the information communicated in writing, conveying the exact appearance of the house owned by Foggo's mother on Ottawa Street, and confirming that her Canadian ancestors were successful enough to wear nice suits. The photographs of Foggo and her family in various locations across the Canadian Prairies and the United States visually supplement her memoir's objective of claiming a place for Blackness within these spaces. Photographs add to Foggo's written narrative, but their function extends beyond their role as visual aids that merely complement the text. Rather, the images serve as evidence that she and her family existed in a particular way, lived within specific places, and left their mark on these spaces.

Aside from incorporating visual media into her written memoir as an alternative narrative technique, Foggo also employs oral storytelling to construct a counter-narrative: a narrative that contrasts the way history is typically recorded. Oral storytelling counters the written form of *Pourin' Down Rain*, and the inclusion of orality is vital to Foggo's memoir because it is the method through which Foggo learns her family's history. Foggo's understanding of her family history largely comes from her Great Aunt Daisy, whose recordkeeping, in the form of handwritten manuscript pages, provides the basis for the recorded conversations between the two relations. These recorded conversations, in turn, provide the information that Foggo organises into her published memoir. History has long privileged written records over oral histories, but Foggo combines the two methods, shaping the written form of her work out of an oral tradition. Foggo describes how Great Aunt Daisy brings the family history to life through oral storytelling:

Rather than simply saying, "Father walked all the way to Arkansas from Texas," [Daisy] would say, "Papa travelled on, walkin' in that heat and the dust until the shoes was just rags on his feet."

She would draw the word “rags” out for several beats and then cut off sharply on the word “feet.” In this way, after seeing the overworked leather of the shoes, it was very easy to see the rest of the man [...] She would retell an encounter so that you could see the speakers and know just how black that man’s face was [...]. (100)

The way Daisy tells a story speaks its characters into existence and allows that existence to survive. Foggo incorporates oral tradition into her text, and shows how incorporating the rhythms and cadences of spoken language can effectively enhance written meaning. She archives her family’s history in a way that recognizes oral storytelling’s role in its survival, countering the written word’s hegemony within the archive.

Oral storytelling is also significant to reclaiming space. In “When Place Becomes Race,” Sherene Razack refers to the sense of individualism that the Age of Enlightenment brought, defining the enlightened individual as: “the subject who maps his space and thereby knows and controls it” (12). As they map their geographical space and understand who and what is there in relation to themselves, they create a new subjectivity closely tied to the control they have over their space. In “Talk that Talk: Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition,” JoAnne Banks-Wallace claims that during the time of American slavery, “Storytelling provided an opportunity for enslaved people to commit to memory the language, sights, sounds, smells, and textures of their homeland. It also provided a means of [...] learning more about their new environment” (Banks-Wallace 412-13). Oral storytelling is closely related to how one remembers space and how one navigates the feeling of existing in a certain space. Foggo writes that “When [Daisy] remembered the Saskatchewan River that rolled through the countryside near her father’s homestead, [Foggo] saw its banks, crowded with poplars that reached out over the water. [She] heard the rush and lap of the water beneath the shouts of the semi-naked Black children of the settlement who fished and hung from the trees” (Foggo 95). Oral storytelling brings characters to life, and fills the space around them with life, establishing their sense of control over their space. Incorporating traditional Black oral storytelling helps map the space where Foggo’s family has been in order to claim their place in these lands.

Finally, *Pourin’ Down Rain* can be understood as a counterstory in the way it resists the white ideological space of the Prairies. Karina Vernon states, “the prairies—more than any other region in Canada—has been imagined into being through a particular archive of writing,” within the realist tradition, which

is “read as representative of the prairies’ regional essence” (*The Black Prairie Archives* 16). Prairie realism presents a particular image of Prairie life, often focusing on the harsh, flat geography and how it informs its peoples’ cultures and characters—an image dominated by the white perspective. In her book *Looking Back: Canadian Women’s Prairie Memoirs and Intersections of Culture, History, and Identity*, Leigh Matthews explores the memoirs of Canadian Prairie women from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to broaden the cultural and historical understanding of settlement in this part of Western Canada. These memoirs, though, are all written by white women, which Matthews touches on when deconstructing the image of the Prairie Woman. Matthews states: “The white, English-speaking Prairie Woman image [...] assumes a precise correspondence between the label itself and some culturally understood meaning that does not often allow for differences in experience, whether those differences are accounted for by personality, cultural background, class, geography, marital background, etc.” (Matthews 3). Differences in race, although not explicitly stated here, are obviously not included in the white Prairie Woman image. *Pourin’ Down Rain*, while a nonfiction text, contradicts the dominant literary representation of the Prairies and the figure of the Prairie Woman by claiming a place for Blackness in this geographical and ideological space.

More specifically, *Pourin’ Down Rain* opposes the common trope of Prairie isolation in Prairie stories. In *Migration and Mental Health: Past and Present*, Marjory Harper notes, “Isolation was a dislocating phenomenon for prairie settlers” (Harper 117). Notable Western Canadian author, Nellie McClung, writes about Prairie isolation in her fiction. As Harper describes, “the land itself was a harsh protagonist, wearing down the human spirit. The vast expanse of the prairie and the long distances between homesteads created a profound sense of isolation” (138). Foggo mentions the settler conditions in her own family’s history that characterise Prairie isolation in white narratives, such as the harsh land, the rough climate, and the challenges of establishing a homestead and a farm. Among these trials and tribulations, though, there is an emphasis on community, not isolation. When listening to her Great Aunt Daisy narrate what Autumn of 1916 was like on the homestead, Foggo describes it as “a time for communion with neighbours, baseball, feasts, [and] barn-raisings” (Foggo 114). The story of her family on the Prairies is a story of survival in a new land, but this survival is not a solitary confinement experience. *Pourin’ Down Rain* is a story of collective survival, of survival *through* the collective, and in this way, it challenges this key isolationist aspect of the

dominant literary representation of the Canadian Prairies.

Additionally, any isolation that Foggo and her family experience is due to the cultural and political landscape, not the geographical one. This landscape is political particularly in the sense that it was the Government of Canada's own actions that restricted the number of Black people who migrated to the Canadian West. Foggo's family migrated to the Canadian Prairie provinces from Oklahoma between 1910 and 1912, during a period of massive African American migration from the southern United States to the Canadian Prairies. This migration lasted until the Canadian government started discouraging African American migration to Canada in response to complaints from its white citizens. Foggo describes that when Black immigration slowed after her family arrived in Canada, they realised "it would be a struggle for their community just to survive, let alone be an example of Black success and racial harmony to the rest of the world" (110). The political landscape threatened the survival of their community. Likewise, Foggo experiences isolation as a result of the Canadian government's decision to discourage Black settlers from migrating to Canada. Foggo's sense of isolation comes from growing up in an area without a larger Black community. When she was in high-school, Foggo "began to retreat from what [she] perceived to be 'White culture'" (52). As a result of this, "[her] social circle was drastically pared down" (52). She became more isolated in her predominantly white high-school community due to her perceived indulgence in her Blackness, and she resented the way she was "raised in isolation from other Blacks" (52). A sense of isolation on the Prairies exists for Foggo and her family, but not in the same way that it does in white Prairie narratives. Rather than the geographical landscape being blamed for this isolation, this isolation is the result of the cultural and political landscape, of being Black in a predominantly white space.

Understanding how isolation appears differently in Black and white narratives ultimately reveals how Blackness and whiteness are treated differently within a space. In *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, Radhika Mohanram states that this difference is: "First, [that] whiteness has the ability to move; second, [that] the ability to move results in the unmarking of the body. In contrast, blackness is signified through a marking and is always static and immobilizing" (Mohanram 4). During the Oklahoma migration in which Foggo's ancestors immigrated to Canada, Black people had the ability to move until the Canadian government actively discouraged their movement. However, it is also important to note that

while Canada's land advertisement efforts in America played a role in this migration—with the goal of having immigrants settle the Prairies for the benefit of the nation state—Black people were also moving in response to escalating racial violence in the United States and Oklahoma's decision to strip them of voter rights (Foggo 105). The kind of movement that has motivated Black migration in North America, from the transatlantic slave trade, to the plantation slave trade that uprooted Foggo's ancestors in America and compelled their ultimate escape to Canada, is a violent and racialized movement against the Black body. Blackness can barely move, and the little inch it can budge erases it from its previous space. Blackness is made to disappear in targeted and violent ways: geographies mapped by white settlers will always struggle to be white, decimating whatever colour they need to in order to maintain this whiteness. *Pourin' Down Rain* resists this erasure by tracing Blackness through spaces that have tried to push it out.

In conclusion, Cheryl Foggo's *Pourin' Down Rain* uses memoir to archive Blackness in, and challenge the ideological space of, the Canadian Prairies. Her story contributes to a legacy of Black women's autobiography, and it uses alternative narrative techniques that counter the way history is expected to be archived, and the way Blackness is perceived to exist. *Pourin' Down Rain* challenges the dominant literary representation of the Canadian West by claiming a place for Blackness in the Western Canadian literary canon. If the Prairies continue to be conceptualised as a white space, then it will be harder for Blackness to exist there; if people do not expect a certain group to exist in a space, no effort will be made to make the space liveable for that community. This reason alone necessitates a shift in our perception of who populates Western Canada, and for stories, like Foggo's, that archive this existence to become part of the region's literary canon. *Pourin' Down Rain* reconfigures the white space through its Black words, showing its readers that Blackness is not something that just happens to be in Western Canada, but that Western Canada is Black.

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