

CHAPTER 27



Transnational Memory and Haunted Black Geographies: Esi Edugyan's *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez

This essay draws from memory studies in locating Esi Edugyan's first novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004), within the practice of memory work. This novel undertakes an excavation of the history of Black people in Alberta, thus performing an intervention into Canadian cultural memory designed to bring to light Black memories and experience. By "cultural memory" I understand the dynamic processes of remembering and forgetting that preserve or erase social symbols, meanings, and practices within the shared past of a community (Erl 6–12), in this case the Canadian nation-state. Moreover, my essay subscribes to the view that cultural memory is a political field within which different stories struggle for their place in history (Hua 199). Because Edugyan's approach to Canadian cultural memory in the novel relies heavily on the transnational trajectories of Black subjects, her revision entails the incorporation of what is inescapably a transnational memory. As John Sundholm suggests, this transnational memory "is not anti-national, but non-national and ambivalent, taking into account the increased mobility, due to immigration/migration, dual citizenship, circulation of labour force, not to mention all those numerous historical events that have shaped new nations and altered state boundaries."

The essay also draws from the fields of geography and cultural studies in order to read the fictional space of Aster as a paradigmatic "third-space" that brings together the three dimensions of spatiality (perceived space), historicity (imagined space), and sociality (lived space) (Soja 70), thus fruitfully exploring the matrix of space from both a historical and a social perspective. It is my purpose throughout this essay to show how Edugyan's *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* challenges the perceived whiteness of Western Canada by re-inscribing a historical Black presence that

is full of discontinuities and erasures, thus attesting to what Vernon has called “the difficulty of finding an adequate ‘home’ for prairie blackness” (67). While her inspired creation of the fictional northern Albertan town of Aster was drawn from archival history concerning Black immigration to the Amber Valley, Edugyan has inserted into this newly whitened space a family of Ghanaian immigrants who must again negotiate local racist resistance to their arrival as well as tensions with former Black settlers. Therefore, Aster constitutes a kind of “Black geography” as defined by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, that is, one bearing “a history of brutal segregation and erasure” (4). Moreover, in showcasing several waves of Black migration, the novel also enacts the geography of Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic,” which he describes as a crisscrossing of historical arrivals and departures, and thus as a flowing network of cultural influences within the framework of the Black diasporas in the West. The first part of the essay will describe historical evidence regarding the presence of Black people in Western Canada and its representation in Edugyan’s fiction. Next, because “the quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (Hua 198), it will turn to the complex representation of memory as both forgetting and remembering, pausing to consider the conceptualization of the Tyne house as a site of memory in Pierre Nora’s sense of the term, that is, as a placeholder for the memories of Black Albertans.

“HAUNTED BY LACK OF GHOSTS”

The title of Northrop Frye’s famous essay cited above was inspired by the last line in Earle Birney’s poem “Can. Lit.”: “It’s only by our lack of ghosts we’re haunted” (qtd. in Frye 478). In it, Frye identified Canadian poetry’s defining traits, among others the themes of loneliness and alienation, silence and absence. “Haunting” is a suitable concept to bring to bear on a reading of *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* for several reasons, perhaps most prominently for its Gothic aesthetic.¹ Ghosts and ghostliness have also been used to signify the lack of home or the disconnection between past and present homes in diasporic contexts, as Radhakrishnan points out: “The diasporic/ethnic location is a ‘ghostly’ location where

1 Sugars and Turcotte have provided an illuminating account of Gothic haunting in Canadian literature in their introduction to *Unsettled Remains* (vii–xxvi). See also Marlene Goldman and Joanne Saul’s introduction to a special issue of *University of Toronto Quarterly* (645–55).

the political unreality of one's present home is to be surpassed only by the ontological unreality of one's place of origin" (175). Vernon, perhaps with added urgency, has formulated a similar idea for Black writing in Western Canada: "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" (67). For writers such as Edugyan, then, literature becomes the medium of remembrance, for as Erll and Rigney have remarked, "collective memories are actively produced through repeated acts of remembrance using both a variety of media and a variety of genres" (112), outstandingly among them literature. In conversation with Wayde Compton and Karina Vernon, Edugyan has admitted that, having grown up in 1970s and 1980s Alberta, in which there seemed to be very few Black people, the discovery of the existence of historical Black settlements in the province fascinated her and became the novel's main spur (Compton, Edugyan, and Vernon).

Although the presence of scattered Black people in the prairies can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, the arrival of large numbers, coming from the south, was delayed until the early 1900s. Mensah records that approximately 300 Black people from Oklahoma settled in Alberta in 1910, many of them in a northern community originally known as Pine Creek and later named Amber Valley. He stresses the hard beginnings of the settlement: "As usual, they were promised good farmlands but, upon arrival, were given poor land and had to create farms from dense bush and swamps with rudimentary implements" (51). To these hardships were added the petitions and town-council resolutions passed throughout the prairies variously advocating the total exclusion of Black people from the area, or at least the limitation of new arrivals, or even their segregation. These resolutions encountered such strong support that medical inspections were used to turn away Black immigrants at the border, and information meant to discourage them was widely circulated, stressing how the climate was allegedly particularly harsh for Black people. Most infamously, the city of Edmonton banned Black people altogether in 1911 (Mensah 52).

These Black pioneers are represented in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* by the Porters, the only Black family remaining in Aster by 1968, when the novel starts. Saul Porter stands for what is known as the "first"

African diaspora, that is, those Black people struggling with the legacy of slavery. He came with his father from Oklahoma looking to escape post-Civil War segregation and systemic racism in the United States: “It was not being able to read that kept the vote from us in Oklahoma, sent us north in the first place. We always been the bottom of the pecking order. No respect” (163). Furthermore, Porter embodies the living memory of the Black pioneers, orally transmitting the story of how his father Harlan, born in Georgia, went west when the Civil War gave him his freedom, moving across Kansas, Utah, and Oklahoma, but thirty years later “things weren’t any easier. Good for nothing but barbers and bootblacks—if your luck was buttered, you became a porter” (164). These migration trajectories within the wide space of the United States paved the way for the transnational route that would send the family north, answering the call of the “Last Best West” to become ranchers and farmers. On arrival they found a brutal land and neighbours that despised them and campaigned against their presence. Ironically, even disenfranchised groups in the area such as women and francophones sent petitions against them to the federal government. However, what Porter most eloquently describes is “the gift of close-knit community” (166); as his memory idealizes the lost all-Black settlement, he looks back with nostalgia from a time when the line of its founders has all but become extinguished. Saul Porter is the exceptional Black presence in what is otherwise a completely White northern Albertan rural landscape. Interestingly, his presence is completely invisible for many pages. Although his actions are indirectly felt or talked about from the beginning of the narrative, Saul’s interaction with other characters is delayed until midway through the novel (123), a device that casts a veil of mystery on his actions and motivations. The result is that his motives become especially hard for the main character, Samuel Tyne, to fathom.

In contrast to the Porters, the Tynes stand for the “new” or contemporary African diaspora, that is, those waves of immigrants arriving in the New World since the late nineteenth century. Paul Zeleza has distinguished three main waves: colonization, decolonization, and structural adjustment. Samuel Tyne and his wife Maud would fall into the first of the three waves, which according to Zeleza includes those students who went abroad to study and stayed, many seamen, and others whom immigration regimes in the host countries allowed to become citizens (36). The Tynes consistently refer to their country of origin with the colonial

name of “Gold Coast.”² Samuel comes from a wealthy cocoa farming family, and he left for Great Britain to study on a grant, later arriving in post-Second World War Canada alongside “[w]ar brides, Holocaust survivors, refugees of every skin [. . .] seeking new lives in a quieter country” (8). His only remaining connection to the old country is his dislike of Western food, a clock marking Ghanaian time, and family letters requesting more money or berating him for failing to return home and do his bit for his country. Samuel’s is a diasporic location, “one of painful, incommensurable simultaneity: the [. . .] past as counter-memory and memory (depending upon one’s actual generational remove from one’s ‘native’ land) coexists with the modern or the postmodern present within a relationship that promises neither transcendence nor return” (Radhakrishnan 175). Even within this wave of migration one can find stark differences based on class and gender. Maud Tyne’s rejection of the ancestral country is even stronger than Samuel’s. Unlike her husband’s privileged background as a chieftain’s son, Maud’s childhood was marked by the absence of her mother, who died at childbirth, and by her father’s regular beatings. She eventually left Ghana for Canada as a nanny to a family of missionaries returning home. Whereas Samuel arrived as an educated man who obtained a comfortable position in the civil service, Maud’s only heirloom was her father’s curse. While Samuel was supported by his Uncle Jacob during the first hard months, Maud was impoverished and utterly alone, living in the basement of churches. There she practised reading aloud from the New Testament, “enunciating to shave her origins from her voice. By the time she met Samuel, only her tribal marks, still visible under face powder, gave her away” (21).

Edugyan establishes another powerful contrast between the Tynes’ colonial, assimilationist attitudes and a representative of the decolonization diaspora: Saul Porter’s second wife, Akosia, a Ghanaian who, having arrived in Canada after the struggles for independence, takes exception to the name “Gold Coast.” She is also outraged to find out that the Tyne children are unable to speak any Ghanaian language because Samuel and Maud speak only English at home, and she accuses them of killing their

2 According to Mensah, Ghanaians constitute one of the leading sources of Black Africans in Canada. They are heavily concentrated in Ontario, the hub of their settlement being Toronto, but there are other sizable Ghanaian populations in Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Hull, and Edmonton, in that order (111-18).

heritage (168). In other words, Edugyan has painted a complex picture of Black people in Alberta, torn apart not only by the different chronologies of migration and their own transnational trajectories, but also by diverse identity features. As Anh Hua observes: “There are always power struggles within diasporic communities, disjunctures produced by the diverse intersectional experiences of gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, generation, disability, geography, history, religion, beliefs, and language/dialect differences” (193).

At the same time, the experiences of everyday racism of these later Black diasporas are remarkably similar. The Canadian-born Tyne children, Yvette and Chloe, try on headscarves to hide their hair because they are “tired of being black” and of being bullied at school in Edmonton (27–29), while their guidance counsellor complains to Maud that “their speech is pretty sluggish, not very clear. Though I suppose we’re just not used to the accent” (23). Maud herself, with all her careful enunciation exercises, is the target of similar comments at Aster’s town-hall meeting (95), and she has to put up with the racist views on immigration held by their neighbour Ray Frank, although she permits herself an occasional taunt: “Aren’t your ancestors foreigners, if you go way back?” (133–35). Maud’s struggle to belong is reinforced by the White female friendships she forms, first in Calgary with Ella Bjornson and in Aster with Eudora Frank. These church-going pillars of middle-class decency prevent her from taking a single step away from utter conformity, even to the extent of nipping in the bud any new friendship she may make. In turn, Maud unsuccessfully tries to perform the same role for Akosia, who resists all attempts to erase her difference and merge into the mainstream.

Nevertheless, Maud and Samuel’s attempt to assimilate, to blend in, is constantly thwarted by their twin daughters’ unpredictable and contradictory behaviour. Yvette and Chloe embody doubleness, that is, the ways migrants are pulled in opposite directions: on the one hand, the desire to belong, to be and look the same as everybody else, and on the other, the equally strong compulsion to hold on to what makes them different. The girls constantly perform these diametrically opposed attitudes, for instance when Yvette asks her mother to buy her new clothes, similar to those their White guest Ama Ouillet wears, and then Chloe cuts them to shreds (90–92). Their knack for appearing and disappearing turns them into ghostly presences in the novel, most often only felt by their effects. Their more destructive behaviour surfaces when they

feel threatened by other people's animosity, for instance when Yvette sets fire to the old diner in response to the hostile stares of its patrons, that had made her walk out of there earlier: "I hate that," said Yvette, trembling. "Even though this town used to be all black, everywhere you go they stare at you" (85). In Andrea Davis's words, it is the teenage bodies of the twins that "are made to bear the scars of cultural displacement and racism" (44).³ There seems to be critical consensus in attributing the impact of a racist society as well as emotional neglect as the main causes for the twins' psychosis, although for Brenda Cooper it also relates to African beliefs on the unnatural condition of twins, conveyed as well in the pervasive Magic-Realist atmosphere and Gothic features of the novel (60).⁴ Edugyan herself has admitted to using Gothic or Magic-Realist conventions in her portrayal of the twins due to her literary influences at the time of writing, even though she has also stated that "every element of the twins' behavior is based in some measure in reality" (Compton, Edugyan, and Vernon), specifically on two famous cases of twins in California and Wales.⁵ Diana Brydon, however, emphasizes the postcolonial condition's dual allegiances as the root of the novel's aesthetics, and states that for that reason "Edugyan's novel is based on a true story of disorientation, suffering and loss, where magic [. . .] retains its capacity to terrify" ("Global Friction" 7). One may conclude that Edugyan has managed to depict the intricate trajectories of Black bodies across national and transnational borders without obliterating their distinctive historical features while using Gothic features that help convey how they are haunted by the past. The next section will turn to the literary inscription of Black memory on this Canadian space.

"WE SPEAK SO MUCH OF MEMORY BECAUSE THERE IS SO LITTLE OF IT LEFT"

Pierre Nora's famous dictum cited above (7) captured the guiding principle of his work, that industrialization has done away with the traditional

3 However, Davis downplays the importance of the theme of racism in the novel, claiming that it is only "a subtle subtext" (44).

4 Some recent fiction by Black British women writers also features oddly behaved twins of West African ancestry. See my essay "Double Consciousness in the Work of Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans."

5 For more information on these famous cases, see Davis (43–44).

way of life and brought about the collapse of collective memory. Faced with this acceleration of history, societies need to turn to memory props, sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) to replace the real environments of memory that we have lost (*milieux de mémoire*). This notion is particularly appropriate in relation to Black memory, because Black bodies and lives have historically been subjected to invisibility, erasure, and active or passive forgetting. Seldom have Black people's experiences been the subject of historical record and study,⁶ and traditional lifestyles were long ago disrupted or altogether suppressed as a result of slavery and repeated displacement. Toni Morrison has insisted on the weight that memory carries in her fiction, describing her job as "ripping that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (302). Consequently, memory in Morrison's writing becomes an antidote to historical amnesia, a statement that might be extended to a large number of Black writers, and one that would perfectly fit Edugyan's endeavour in this novel as well.

In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* the tensions surrounding Black presence in the White Canadian prairies are played out in terms of memory, forgetting, and space. The town of Aster that the Tynes encounter in the late 1960s bears hardly any trace of its remarkable Black history. The three remaining landmarks of Black spatiality are the two pioneers' homes (those belonging to the Tynes and to the Porters), located in the outskirts (and therefore neatly demarcating Black spaces from White), and the stone wall. This latter construction physically reminds Aster citizens of a past of mutual distrust and fear, because they believe it was built by the original Black families for protection against racist attacks. Like the Black population of Aster, which dwindled after the Second World War, the wall and the houses have suffered the erosion of time. The wall is now reduced to scarcely two inches, "a skirt of parched rock at the river's edge" (33), while the Tyne house is described as "famished" in the novel's opening sentence, and compared to its late owner Jacob Tyne in "its thinness, its severity, its cheerless decay" (1).

Yet, the Tyne house embodies Aster's rich history as the container of the memories of its many dwellers, therefore metaphorically standing for Alberta, or even for the Canadian nation-state. It was once among Aster's

6 I have argued elsewhere that Black-Canadian fiction has mostly taken over the task of recording Black Canadians' lives from historians. See my essay "The Racialization of Canadian History."

most salient architectural features, cutting “a splendid figure against the town’s purple dusk” (34). As a boarding house run by an old widow, it became a safe haven for weary travellers who were guided there by the beacon of its ostentatious, screeching weathervane. In order to accept more boarders, the widow decided to partition the rooms by building more walls, a beautiful spatial metaphor for the historical construction of an inclusive Canadian citizenship that changes shape to accommodate new arrivals. However, the walls have crumbled into piles of rubbish, and those times are long past when Jacob Tyne comes along and buys it. Samuel is warned that Aster’s town authorities had designs to appropriate the house and convert it into a heritage site. This attempted act of memorialization implies that the Black population is seen as a thing of the past, and has been very much consigned to oblivion: it simultaneously asserts their past existence and their current absence. The arrival of the Tyne family thwarts the town’s project and revives the Black community, but, as mentioned above, at the cost of rekindling past antagonisms and igniting some new ones.

Those altercations take place in and around the pioneer houses, which stand very close, separated by some fields. Ownership of these fields is a matter of dispute between Saul Porter and Samuel Tyne, another feature that articulates what McKittrick names “the where of blackness” because “[b]lack diasporic struggles can also be read [. . .] as geographic contests over discourses of ownership” (3). In this novel ownership of the land is an act of Black self-validation, underpinning the momentous trajectory from being owned to owning things, and specifically for both diasporic families it is the key to assert Black diasporic subjectivity and their right to belong. However, this kind of Black self-affirmation is always fragile, based on archival evidence and historical documents notoriously beyond Black people’s reach. In the novel, this issue is suggested by the fact that Jacob Tyne’s will is mysteriously missing. Saul Porter declares that the old man granted him his lands in gratitude for looking after him in his final years. Their neighbour Ray Frank also covets those lands to expand his property and experiment with new seeds, and he happens to be one of Aster’s town officials by whom Jacob’s will has allegedly been misplaced. Thus, the land becomes the source of friction between White and Black Albertans, and seemingly unimportant acts of intrusion on what Samuel considers his own place become the cause of increasing irritation, as surface signals of the

undergoing tug of war. Samuel finds the Porter ladder leaning on his house and resents that trespass, or the Tyne family notice “their” lawn has been mowed without their knowledge; later, trees are cut.⁷

Porter’s claim over the land doubly upsets Samuel, on the one hand because he finds it hard to believe that Jacob, always so respectful of family hierarchy, might have deprived his own blood of their rightful legacy, and on the other because he is reminded that he neglected his own duties towards his uncle, who had worked so hard to support him for many years. Samuel is haunted by Jacob’s lingering presence in the house: “In the room of prayer mats, Samuel imagined Jacob kneeling, slow with age, and wondered if he’d been the subject of any of those prayers. In the ancient study [. . .] he pictured the old man sitting to write him a letter and being so respectful of Samuel’s peace that he set the task aside with great moral resolve” (65). Even the mattress where Samuel and Maud sleep carries “the smell of fevers and old age” (70). Thus, involuntary memories of Jacob, their life together, and their later estrangement are triggered regularly by the place itself and by various little objects left behind by Jacob, some of which are flaunted by Saul Porter to Samuel’s vexation.⁸

Accordingly, Jacob is another ghostly presence in the novel, all the more real because guilt over having neglected Jacob is compounded by Samuel’s painful awareness that he failed to perform the proper funeral rituals for his uncle, a sin for which Akosia Porter upbraids him:

Anyone who thinks himself above grieving has something wrong with him. Moving to another country does not exempt you from a proper burial and the forty days’ libation. Your uncle was a good, good man, deserving of his final rest. Do you think you are not bringing punishment against yourselves? Do you think we sleep in comfort knowing he has not received his proper rest? (122)

Strictly speaking, one might argue that Samuel’s omission represents the kind of forgetting that Paul Connerton defines as deriving from the construction of a new identity, that is, the ability “to discard memories that

7 Again in this context, the invisibility of the agent of these actions strengthens the Gothic atmosphere.

8 By involuntary memories I am referring to those awakened by sensorial impressions like the famous episode of Proust’s madeleine, attesting to the fact that “the body can play a crucial role in resurrecting the past” (Whitehead 106).

serve no practical purpose in the management of one's current identity and ongoing purposes" (63). A new set of memories often demands letting go of others. Yet, the narrative makes clear that even as he strives after his dream of ownership and entrepreneurial success, Samuel is falling apart by letting go of his Ghanaian identity, and this fracture is mirrored in the twins' growing psychosis, whom Samuel is shocked to find violently beating each other in utter silence (222). Although too late for the twins, the rift is repaired towards the end of the novel, when Samuel performs the ceremonial libation for Maud "and belatedly for Jacob, asking the ancestors to put them to peaceful rest. Jacob could finally stop wrestling and be blessed by his angel" (265).

However, before that happens, the conflict between the Porters and the Tynes (and, in the sidelines, the Franks) comes to a head when the twins allegedly set the Porter house on fire. The Tynes are ostracized and forced to institutionalize Yvette and Chloe and to share their home with the Porters, while the disputed fields are bought by Ray Frank in a move that reasserts White ownership of the land. In the last chapters, Aster's remaining Black citizens have to learn the way towards reconciliation. The house becomes a claustrophobic space in which they are forced to live together in resentful poverty. However, small acts of kindness and re-memory bring them closer over the years. This happens first between Samuel and Maud, who are finally united in their grief and guilt over the twins. Eventually, it happens as well between the Tynes and Porters. Maud and Akosia cook together, Maud giving in to using their mother tongue, which she had rejected out of hurt. Samuel helps Akosia raise her children after the deaths of their spouses. In a way, they have become a single family, reenacting once more the close-knit community Saul Porter used to reminisce about. The reestablishment of tradition and these acts of re-memory repair the tear in the fabric of collective memory caused by diaspora, suturing the disruption.

Consequently, the house is invested with a number of symbolic meanings in connection to Black-Canadian history. It is a true *lieu de mémoire*, that is, a site "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 7). By means of this lived space (but also a contested as well as a hybrid one, according to Soja's formulation of a "thirdspace"), Edugyan engages in the reconstruction and re-vision of a Black cultural memory, proving that spatiality is "crucial to the activity of remembering, and seems as important as temporality to both its conceptualization and its

practice” (Whitehead 10). One can concur with Davis as to the import of Edugyan’s fiction, insofar as the insertion of Black families into “the whiteness of the Canadian prairies represents a kind of spatial transgression, a critical disruption of the construction of Canadian cultural and national identity as primarily white and British” (33). However, it is important to stress that, despite its Magic-Realist aesthetic, the novel does not transmit a feeling of nostalgia for an idealized Black community. On the contrary, the realism of the novel’s ending, with the eventual dispersal of the Black families of this rural area of northern Alberta, as they variously drift towards the cities, their ancestral country, or simply their graves, suggests that Edugyan is performing here an act of critical memory. Realistic is also the overall rendering of the hardships of the Black settlement and the unattainability of the dream of success for many of them, so that most often “black Canada is lived as invisibility” (McKittrick 96). It is precisely that invisibility that Edugyan has masterfully managed to redress for Black Albertans in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*.

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