

being fundamentally discriminatory and a further push to marginalize the Muslim population in India. Activists have protested the Act on the basis that it is the first step toward delegitimizing and criminalizing not just Muslims but hundreds of ethnic or Indigenous minorities.

### Works Cited

Roy, Arundhati. *My Seditious Heart: Collected Nonfiction*. Haymarket, 2019.

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Karina Vernon. *The Black Prairie Archives: An Anthology*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2019. Pp. 593. CAD \$44.99.

In a recent lecture, the novelist Suzette Mayr described the “electrifying” effect of reading Cheryl Foggo’s *Pourin’ Down Rain* (1990) as a Black person living on the prairies. She noted that Foggo’s book brought to light the crucial and long-standing presence of Black families in Alberta. Like Foggo’s biographical work, Karina Vernon’s *The Black Prairie Archives* documents Black presence on the prairies to show that Black folks are not an anomaly but are rather part of a larger web of reciprocal social relations. To demonstrate how these relations have been forged, Vernon meticulously engages with the works of sixty-one Black authors who have produced oral literature, experimental poetry, autobiography, history, and ethnographies. Vernon explains that an archive “as blackness” is a method of engagement with these modes of writing that empowers community members “to tell the story they want to be made public” (5). This process of engagement is radically different from and in opposition to an archive “of blackness,” which “constructs blackness as an object of knowledge in the European archive” (5). By gathering an archive *as* Blackness, she not only reminds readers of the complicated ethics of presenting stories about Black communities that require a lengthy and necessary process of securing permissions from authors but also brilliantly challenges the dominant national archives *of* Blackness. This distinction between archives of Blackness and archives *as* Blackness is a central point in Vernon’s introduction to the anthology.

The introduction admirably attempts to redefine the last 150 years of Black presence on the prairies. Vernon provides a fresh lens through which to scrutinize the state archives and simultaneously proposes a different archive that purposefully constructs a radical shift in the way the prairies are perceived. The prairies, she rightly argues, have been mainly imagined through a so-called “prairie realist” school of writing. Writers working within this genre, who are mostly men, and all white, have produced a “sanitized and bounded”

archive of the prairie that fails to mirror its Black presence. Therefore, *The Black Prairie Archives* radically reconstructs the imagination of the prairies at multiple levels. For example, reading Dr. Alfred Schmitz Shadd's speech to the electorate and Reverend George Washington Slater, Jr.'s article about organizing a co-op provides important knowledge of how these Black leaders were heavily engaged in policy making and journal writings that transform the way Black presence has been monolithically narrated in the state archives. Making these important stories and histories public is a crucial step in exposing the complicity of nationally run archives and museums in concealing Black activism and Black community engagement across the history of the Canadian prairies. Vernon explains how she found "virtually nothing" about Black presence on the prairies when searching literary histories and regional anthologies. She eloquently describes her mixed feelings when she discovered that there *is* a Black history of the prairies. To her, this realization means that she "also discovered the erasure of it" (9). She further explains the difficulties of obtaining some of the materials because they were "buried in unexpected places," archived in "out-of-the-way rural historical societies," or "hidden in plain sight" (8). Thus, the book offers a pioneering contribution that presents these documents to the public, often for the first time.

Vernon sets four goals for this book. These goals vary from transforming the imagination of the prairies as a white space to establishing a Black prairie literary tradition. Another important goal is "to assist readers' close engagements with the literature, thus opening up new scholarly and pedagogical possibilities" (1). Vernon aims to establish practical guidelines to implement these critical frameworks in her introduction. The goal of learners and educators of CanLit and Canadian history should be, according to Vernon, to pry open and identify new spaces and possibilities that revitalize conversations within these fields. *The Black Prairie Archives* facilitates this task and further assists readers to engage with these alternative views.

Vernon structures the anthology in chronological order based on authors' dates of birth. The chronological structure provokes readers' imaginations to wander back in time and enquire about the beginnings of this book project and Black history on the prairies. In her introduction, Vernon vividly describes the moment of inspiration that eventually brought this project to life. She narrates her experience upon reading a British captain's travelogue that was composed in 1873. The captain, on his journey from Manitoba to British Colombia, witnessed a "black paddler" (Vernon 6) in the river. Vernon states that she was "stunned" to read this passage as it reinserts Blackness into a space that has been overdetermined as white (6). The Black paddler leaves Vernon (and the readers) wondering about details of his life such as his

job, family, and daily activities. Vernon cannot (as of yet) reveal these details because of a lack of archival material. However, instead, she provides readers with similar stories to that of the paddler. For example, Martha Edwards' honest account of homesteading in Amber Valley offers a detailed and important perspective of the first woman to settle in that place. She describes her isolation and the difficulties of "having to give birth and raise children without the community of women" (105). Edwards eventually forges a relationship with the surrounding Indigenous communities and meets a Métis woman who helps her give birth to her first child. The anthology purposely brings these systematically ignored and entangled stories to our attention.

*The Black Prairie Archives* essentially sets out to examine the complex and difficult histories of Black presence in the prairies. This work is groundbreaking and fills in significant knowledge gaps in Canadian studies. For those researching, studying, or teaching Canada's history, sociology, politics, or literature, this book is a must-read. To make these records accessible, Vernon and her research assistant (Tavleen Purewal) exerted extensive efforts in editing and collecting them. For instance, Vernon tells her readers about the process of "negotiating permissions" and the long conversations she had with authors to explain the purpose of the book (4). Some of them refused to even have their work published. Sharing stories with the archive means sensitively negotiating editorial powers and researchers' input. Silence expresses, then, an anxiety about the proposed project of assembling the Black archive, one that is attentive to the complications of this process. There are no more excuses for us, as educators, to ignore this significant and integral part of the formation of Canada. As the book invites readers to fundamentally reimagine the prairies, it is time to open up new conversations in Canada and rid ourselves of illusions about an inclusive and progressive country. Our silence, as teachers and researchers, on the explicit and implicit discrimination against Black peoples in state archives may be making us complicit in upholding it. By exposing neglected and radical perspectives about the history of the prairies, this anthology will assist in reorienting our relationship with the place we live in (Turtle Island) and its history, particularly with regards to Blackness.

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#### Work Cited

Mayr, Suzette. "Let's Talk: The Value of Black Literature with Dr. Suzette Mayr." Black History Month, Community Development Learning Initiative, 25 Feb. 2021, University of Calgary Faculty of Arts, Calgary, Alberta. Lecture (Zoom event).

