At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect

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Vernon's The Black Prairie Archives: A Discussion

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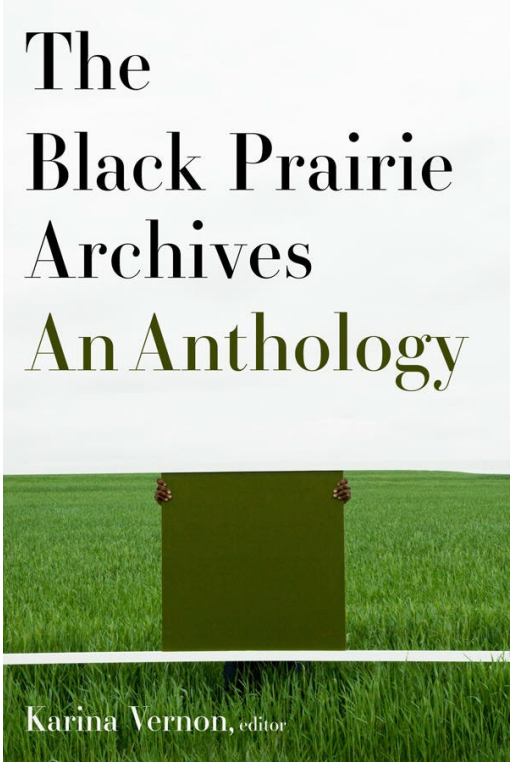
The Railway Porters Union Band of Winnipeg poses here in front of the Bank of Montreal at the corner of Portage Ave. and Main St., May 1, 1922. Foote 291, L.B. Foote Fonds, P7393/4, Archives of Manitoba.



Front cover of The Black Prairie Archives: An Anthology by Karina Vernon.

The two-story brick building at 795 Main Street in Winnipeg is for sale again, priced at $300,000 for a store front and a living quarter. This building has been many things since it was built in early 1894: a furniture store, a drug store, a grocery store on more than one occasion, and a Chinese restaurant. Built nearby the city's railway stations, 795 Main Street was a convenient location for the communities that made their livings working there. This included the seventy-six Black men who worked as sleeping car porters for the Canadian Northern Railway in 1909. In 1917, the Order of the Sleeping Car Porters (OSCP) began to represent the specific interests of Black railway porters.[1] It was in the interwar period that 795 Main Street became the office, meeting halls, and social hub of the OSCP.[2] Throughout the middle decades of the 20th century, 795 Main Street would remain the hub of Winnipeg's Black community.

Like so many institutions representing Indigenous, racialized, or immigrant communities in western Canada, the OSCP's Winnipeg headquarters was many things to many people. It was known as "Unity Hall" or the "Porter's Club," and served as what historian Sarah-Jane Mathieu calls the "nerve center, the black community's very epicenter" in early and mid-20th century Winnipeg.[3] It had a lunch counter, a pool hall, a beer parlour, and a meeting room where fraternal clubs met and the Railway Porters' band of Winnipeg rehearsed. On weekends, 795 Main Street functioned as a jazz club. It sometimes attracted the attention of the city's police. In August 1920, thirteen Black men were fined for gambling, and one man for keeping a gaming house at the building.[4] Records held at the Archives of Manitoba make clear the connections the Winnipeg Porters maintained with Black communities across western Canada, and document the important work of women to maintaining this community space in the middle years of the 20th century.[5]

For all of this, there is nothing at 795 Main Street to alert a passerby to this building's significance to Black prairie history. There is no plaque. The building is not among the thousands of buildings listed in the City of Winnipeg's List of Historical Resources.[6] This erasure of Black prairie history is called into question by Karina Vernon's magisterial The Black Prairie Archives. This is the first of two companion volumes to be published by Wilfrid Laurier University, drawing together a wide range of Black prairie writing produced between 1872 and 2019. Published in 2020, Vernon's book makes Black prairie history and life visible and accessible, and has implications for how scholars of the prairies think, write, and work.

In this forum, four authors with a range of different expertise and perspectives respond to Vernon's The Black Prairie Archives. Historian Barrington Walker situates Vernon's book in the context of Black Canadian history. Writer Erica Violet Lee examines it as invocation to imagine Black and Indigenous prairie futures. Sonja Boon, as a scholar of feminist theory and life writing, reads Vernon's book through these perspectives and in light of her own history in the Black prairies. Betel Belachew reflects on what the stories contained in Vernon's book mean for today's Black Winnipeg.

Some of the long-standing silence about Black prairie pasts was punctured in 2020 and 2021. In June of 2020 some 15,000 people gathered in Winnipeg in the name of Justice4BlackLives. Early in 2022, viewers should be able to watch a television series inspired by Winnipeg's sleep-ing car porters, and it will be the biggest Black-led television production ever made in Canada.[7] We still know too little about Black prairie pasts, and Vernon's book, and these thoughtful responses to it, give us crucial ways to start better considering Black prairie histories.

References

[1] Mathieu, Sarah-Jane, 2010. North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870–1955 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

[2] On the history of the building, including the Order of the Sleeping Car Porters, see Christian Cassidy, "795 Main Street – Craig Block," West End Dumplings, 21 January 2016, accessed 22 December 2020, http://winnipegdowntownplaces.blogspot.com/2016/02/793-795-main-street-craig-block.html

Christian Cassidy, "Black History Month 2016: Labour leader George Beckford, 795 Main Street," http://westenddumplings.blogspot.com/2016/02/black-history-2015-labour-leader-george.html 21 February 2016, accessed 25 January 2021.

[3] Mathieu, 2010, p. 201.

[4] "Local Notes," Winnipeg Free Press, 28 August 1920.

[5] See "Porter's Social and Charitable Association Fonds, 1934-1952," Archives of Manitoba, 14234.

[6] https://www.winnipeg.ca/ppd/Heritage/ListHistoricalResources.stm

[7] See Randall King, "Getting details just right: The Porter, based on Winnipeg's Black history, is set in Montreal," Winnipeg Free Press, 12 June 2021.

Black Prairie Archives: Theory, Method, History, and Historiography

Barrington Walker, Wilfrid Laurier University

Karina Vernon's *The Black Prairie Archives*: *An Anthology* makes a key contribution, and it does so in a number of different and crucial ways. It is a key collection and cu- ration of an archive of Black prairie literature to be sure. But it is also a meditation on theory, method, history, and historiography.

This book is a product of many years of work in libraries and archives. Vernon skillfully navigates the reader through the challenges she confronted and the possibilities that she opened up in her collection. The work provides us with an archive of a Black regional experience that has long been in need of "critical attention." The work interrupts what Vernon identifies as the unrepresentative, "sanitized and bounded" archive that has predominated in standard literary work on the prairies and in the dominant prairie archive. These silences and limitations—the frustrations of finding few traces of Blackness upon her initial excursions in the traditional archives—is what initially animated her desire to look for, frame, and create the Black prairie archive. The archive is ideologically structured by Black writers, says Vernon, "not as a vast empty or null space," but rather a "place that is connected to and transformed by its relation to the black world, including the transatlantic slave trade and resulting cultures and networks of the Black Atlantic" (p. 3). This is an anthology that also pays careful attention to history, migration and the shifting demographic, and the colonial landscape (and stolen lands) in and through which the Black prairie archive emerged. Vernon identifies four eras driven by the "demographic diversity" of the Black Prairies: 1) 1790–1900: the era of fur trade and settlement, 2) 1905–1912: the Oklahoma

migration, 3) post 1960s–present, 4) 2012–present: era of neo-liberal immigration and asylum (p. 11).

This work is pioneering and incomparable in the best sense of both words. It is a foundational and a transformative text, and Vernon certainly achieves the overall purpose of the work that she lays out in her introduction. This work makes the Black prairie archive public, it transforms the dominant image of prairies through the recovery of the Black archive, it creates a Black prairie tradition, and it opens up "new scholarly and pedagogical possibilities" (p. 1). Non-specialist readers may struggle somewhat—as I did—with the rather expansive conceptualization of "literature" in this anthology and the boundaries, but more importantly the intersections, of literature and writing. Perhaps the praxis involved in curating and writing about and through the archive is what sutures the two terms? It would have been helpful for me to have had a bit more framing around curation. How, for example, do textual artefacts (such as note- books, personal letters, and recorded oratory) that seem to be, from my disciplinary vantage point, the purview of the archival historian, rest alongside forms and genres of writing that are more conventionally thought of and written about as literature? What do the more recent urban modes of expression such as hip hop tell us in relation to the captured orations of the 19th century? What are the continuities and the lenses of textual analysis that enable us to think about the early-20th century Polaris prize-winning rhymes of Winnipeg's Cadence Weapon placed in the same archive as the fur trade era ledger books? Lastly, there is a returning to the vexing issue of Blackness itself. I am thinking here not so much about what it means, but how the Black prairie archive gives us another way of thinking about how we might reframe how we think about the Black modern. This might have benefitted from a bit more exploration.

The eagerly awaited companion volume that will accompany this piece will undoubtedly help shed additional light on some of these connections. This is a wonderful book and an exciting time for Black Studies in Canada. Vernon's works are at the centre of this emergent and dynamic conversation.

Black and Indigenous Prairie Life

Erica Violet Lee, Saskatoon and Thunderchild First Nation

"The prairies is a geography intimately loved, but it is also a fraught racial relation. It is a site of dislocation, of repressed Black histories, but also, it is the future" (p. 3).

When Canadians think of the prairies—that is when they think of the prairies at all—they imagine a fly-over landscape of wheat, snow, oil, and not much else. As a young Nêhiyaw person growing up in Saskatoon's predominantly urban Native west side neighbourhoods, I grew up with a landscape created and traversed by Black and brown Indigenous people, but also a landscape which deliberately erases Black indigeneity and Black diasporic livelihoods and resistances. Karina Vernon's first volume of *The Black Prairie Archives: An Anthology* is at once an act of deep love for people and place, as well as a call to arms against centuries of oppressed Black history and presence on the prairies.

The first time I read Dr. Karina Vernon's work, I was on a plane from Toronto home to Saskatoon. Having completed my Bachelor's degree in Political Studies, Philosophy, and Indigenous Studies from a prairie university, I was well into my graduate program before I encountered this rich history of Black prairie life which Dr. Vernon carefully weaves into the first volume of her anthology. Vernon's skilled, exhaustive scholarship asks many questions of us as prairie scholars. How can we aim to redeem our work as scholars of political theory, policy, and Indigenous studies when all our study can- not account for Black people, Black thought, and Black movements? The answer is we cannot. And what do we do with "Prairie Studies" when it has come to function as a stronghold of white supremacist literature to the extreme erasure of Black prairie peoples? The answer is we must dismantle it.

"Black authors write the prairies as a crucial site for radical experiments in black community and citizen- ship, as well as experiments in racial identification, literary genre, and voice," Vernon states, as a reminder that by entering this history and coming to know the people and the voices within this anthology, we leave the pages after reading with a responsibility to all our Black, Indigenous, and diasporic kin on the prairies and beyond.

Rather than only consuming the stories that Vernon has gathered and presented, it is now the task of prairie thinkers to write and act alongside Black prairie history and presence, deliberately working to undo the violence of disciplines and institutions that have sliced through our solidarities as sharply as colonial borders cut rectangles across the grasslands.

In "Black Life: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Freedom," Idil Abdillahi and Rinaldo Walcott make a call for policy which tangibly makes Black life livable. It is from this point of provocation that I will write alongside *The Black Prairie Archive* for years to come. In the form of stories and poems and lyrics, Karina Vernon and the contributors and their families have gifted our communities with a brilliant guidebook. And after reading it, what will we do to make Black life more livable?

Prairie Blackness, Home, and Belonging

Sonja Boon, Memorial University

There were no Black people in Alberta when I was growing up. Well, that's not true. There were. In my own family, even, and also in the small town in which we lived. So perhaps it's more accurate to say that there were no Black people in the *story* of Alberta. That story, at least as I learned it at school in the 1970s, during those heady first years of official multiculturalism, was that Alberta was settled by hardy eastern and western Europeans—mostly Ukrainian and German—but also by the English and the Scottish, whose resilience and moral character allowed them to civilize a wilderness and build the strong and powerful province in which I lived. Fort Edmonton told the story of a city led by McDougalls and Rutherfords. The Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, meanwhile, celebrated the hardworking Ukrainians who arrived in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The *Canadian Book of the Road*, my own immigrant family's bible, pointed us down lonely rural routes in search of giant *pysanka* and tiny orthodox churches. Nowhere was there any mention of Black histories, Black writing, Black voices, or Black concerns.

And so, in my child's eye view of the prairies, there were no Black people in Alberta. None at all. And if there were, they must have been, like our own

mixed- race family, interlopers. Outsiders granted admission, but not belonging. Imagine my surprise then, when I learned that Daniel T. Williams, author of the very first textual fragments in this collection, lived in Fort Saskatchewan, the same town I moved to in 1976. Black history was there, percolating just under the surface. But it never burbled up.

It is the weight and heft of *The Black Prairie Archives: An Anthology* that surprises me. So many stories that I had never read. So many voices I'd never heard. And many authors that I *did* know, but that I had never thought to bring into conversation with one another. And yet, at the same time, I wanted—and still want— more. *The Black Prairie Archives* is not nearly heavy enough: how do I reconcile the stories I am only just coming to know with the ghosts of those I will *never* know?

I wanted to start chronologically; I like order. But I found myself skipping around, and instead of a comfortable linearity, a whole patchwork of voices came into being. While the straight lines of highways, rural roads, and city streets mark my experiences of prairie travels, I meandered and paused here, circling back and jumping forward. Interestingly, this approach mirrors, for me, the gift of this book: it asks me to think critically and creatively about time and space.

There's the temporality in the rhythm of seasons that marks the early entries: rivers, ice, geese, rain, barley, oats, potatoes, but then also the rhythms of everyday life: marriage and family, of course, but also broader community building and civic engagement: newspapers, politics, debating clubs, literary societies, concerts, community organizations. From there, I think about the rhythms of migrations: Tanzania, Ghana, Guyana, Sudan, Trinidad, England, the USA, Angola, and more, but also of Black migrations across this place we now call Canada. "I'm from here; I'm from over there," writes Tchitala Nyota Kamba. "My culture is from here and from over there. / It is my source of inspiration and my strength" (p. 516). And from these migrations come the rhythms of the writing itself: the jostling rhythms of words, phrases, and gestures. These are texts that want to reside in my body, that want speaking out loud; my voice—and my tongue—garbling and tangling with stories that are both familiar and completely new.

Space, too, is both familiar and foreign. I recognize this prairie; in many ways, I long for its endless horizons, big sky, dry wind, rustling rivers. In the words of Nehal El-Hadi, "it's a landscape that gets in your bones" (p. 446). But this Black prairie is

neither empty nor wide open; it is a space that needs active imagining, constructing, developing, contesting, and living in. This space is both material and metaphorical, for within that Black prairie space is also, as Roland Pemberton observes, the imagined—and contested—space of Blackness itself: "How black did I need to be?/ How black would I need to be…/ And if I wasn't black enough/ How black was too black?" (pp. 529–530).

What has Blackness meant (and what does it continue to mean) in a prairie constructed as a white settler space? As the narrator in Esi Edugyan's *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* states, "what to do with the ones who'd already claimed land?" (p. 432).

How does prairie Blackness complicate facile under- standings of home and belonging? There's an expansiveness in this collection that moves beyond silenced and fragmented pasts and into the possibilities of hoped for but still unknown and uncertain Black futures. In the 1950s, William Sylvester Alpheus Beal looked back over his life, asking, "What will be next?" (p. 69). The answer to this question might be found in the final sentences of Miranda Martini's "The Drinking Gourd: Three Tales" (also the final sentences of the collection as a whole): "I take great comfort knowing that for all of the great chasms between us, we—John Ware, my mother, my great-great-grandfather, and approximately two thousand African American emigrants—we are all looking up, together, at the same map to freedom. This is the beauty of the stars: they are, in a sense, everyone's home" (p. 548).

Three Stories

Betchel Belachew, Justice4BlackLives, Winnipeg

My name is Betchel Belachew and I have found that my experiences as a twenty-two-year-old Black woman living in Canada has been further developed by the continued progression and journey of all Black Canadians that have sown this path that lies before me. As I read Karina Vernon's *The Black Prairie Archive,* I realized that integration in Canadian spaces has neglected Black people. Vernon's discovery of notable people has allowed the history of Black people in prairie Canada, which is not recognized as it should be, to become something for all Canadians to know and understand.

Three parts of the Vernon book stand out to me. The narrative of William Sylvester Alpheus Beal (1874–1968) offers a sort of autobiographical picture onto what his life had captured as a Black person living in 20th-century Canada. Beal's work primarily focused on education and literature, which led to his influential action of implementing a circulatory library in the Big Woody School District in 1912 (p. 63). When declining to enlist in the coloured troops in the First World War, Beal had found meaning in glass-photography; his work primarily focused on the residents of Swan River, though most of them were his friends (p. 63).

Woody Strode's life journey exemplifies the challenges of a Black person in creating room in a predominantly white space, where he was one of a few African American NFL players. Strode's integration into the NFL caused him great challenges. He states that the physical and emotional attacks from fans and players drained him entirely: "Integrating into the NFL was the low point in my life," (p. 133). Strode had then pursued a career in the film industry, acting in numerous films (p. 134). Strode's experience with the NFL and educational system had taught him on how to move oneself as an African American in society; he used this skill in his acting career to curate his success in movies. Strode's success in both the NFL and film industry was affected by racism and prejudice, though he still continued to offer himself as an advocate in creating a space for Black people in a predominantly white world.

Black and Indigenous people have long co-existed in relation to one another throughout Canada. The blood quantum rule has been used in colonial society to measure the identity of Indigenous peoples, further deciding who may remain to be within the community and who may not.[1] This is shown in Vernon's work in explaining the lives of Black people in Canada; this can be seen in the life of Woody Strode, who was Indigenous and Black, but had chosen his Black identity over the other (p. 11). This is seen in contrast with Sylvester Long Lance, who had chosen to pursue his Indigenous identity instead (p. 11). This understanding exemplifies that Black Indigenous peoples may not have claimed both their ancestries, further asking the question of just how many people were truly of Black and Indigenous ancestry, as it has been erased from Canadian history.

Note

1. Beals, A., and Wilson, C., 2020. "Mixed-blood: Indigenous- black identity in colonial Canada," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 16(1), pp. 29–37. https://doi. org/10.1177/1177180119890141, p. 31.

Acknowledgement

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Betchel Belachew graduated from the University of Manitoba with a BA in Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies. Previously, Belachew worked at the Centre for Human Rights Research conducting research on the safety of Indigenous women and two-spirit people when using public transit in western Canada. She co-founded the grassroots organization Justice 4 Black Lives Winnipeg and is passionate about immigration issues, as she experienced Canada as a newcomer with her parents.