

Anglo-American Reviews

CLOUTIER, Jean-Christophe. 2019. *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN 9780231193306, Hardback \$105.00. ISBN 9780231193313, Paper \$35.00. ISBN 9780231550246, eBook \$34.99.

In 1990 Fisk University's Dean of the Library Jessie Smith cautioned against histories of black archives that focus on loss. "Some uninitiated Americans have assumed", she wrote, "that black studies and supporting collections began with the advent of the civil rights movement in the 1960s" (SMITH 1990, 59). She continued, "That is a 'civil wrong', for as long as black people have lived they have preserved their history and culture" (59). Indeed, black archives were built, and primarily by black bibliophiles and librarians and at historically black colleges and universities. Early organized efforts include the 1911 founding of the Negro Society for Historical Research, whose constitution called for collecting books "written by Negroes", and the 1915 creation of the Negro Book Collectors Exchange, dedicated to contacting "all Negro Book Collectors" across five continents, by John Wesley Cromwell, Sr., Henry Proctor Slaughter, and Arthur Alonso Schomburg while attending the American Negro Academy (SINNETTE 1989, 43; WESLEY 1990, 10). The year before, Howard University's Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Kelly Miller persuaded alumnus and trustee Reverend Jesse Moorland to give his alma mater his six-thousand-item collection, and ten years later, Schomburg sold his to the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library. Twenty years after that, Howard University purchased, at the behest of head librarian Dorothy Porter Wesley, Arthur B. Spingarn's private library, and Atlanta University acquired Slaughter's.

Though Jean-Christophe Cloutier does not cover this early history in detail, he recognizes that it was foundational to the mid-century rise in building repositories of contemporary black writers' papers. A master at archival sleuthing, Cloutier has two interests: (1) how twentieth-century black writers' collections came into being; and (2) an "archival impulse" he calls the "invisible hallmark of twentieth-century African American literary practice", and, in particular, the "underappreciated archival sensibility" in the writing practice and fiction of Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Ann Petry (2, 12).

Devoting his first chapter to chronicling the fate of a wide range of writers' papers, Cloutier gives pride of place to Yale University's James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection (JWJ), founded in 1941, and underscores that its founder Carl Van Vechten was assisted by many, including Harold Jackman, Dorothy Peterson, and Walter White. He recognizes that not everyone was enamored with Van Vechten's outsized role. Early on Ellison contributed a few items to the JWJ Collection, but ultimately chose the Library of Congress, believing the nation's library was the right place for his papers. McKay also contributed to the JWJ Collection, upon its founding, but three months later wrote to Van Vechten that both Slaughter and Schomburg were also interested, and coyly wondered what the "Negro intelligentsia" would think if he were to give "two or three manuscripts to a white person and none to colored collectors" (quoted in CLOUTIER, 48). Meanwhile, HBCUs were also collecting contemporary black writers' papers. Atlanta University received three hundred titles from Jackman's private library. Fisk University librarian Arna Bontemps secured the Jean Toomer Papers (later moved to the Amistad Center at Tulane University, and then to Yale) and Charles W. Chesnut's papers (beating out Van Vechten, who five years earlier claimed they were coming to the JWJ Collection).

For context, Cloutier reviews the aggressive mid-century acquisition efforts of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. Though famous for paying top price for the papers of twentieth-century writers, the Ransom Center rarely used its ample funds to purchase the papers of black writers. In a 1964 celebratory exhibition of one hundred writers in the collection, James Baldwin was the only black author represented. Yale, despite its commitment to the JWJ Collection, also seems to have been reluctant to dedicate much of the library's sizable annual budget to acquiring the papers of black writers. In 1964, when Yale purchased more than a dozen boxes of McKay's papers for \$2000, a librarian apologized to his daughter for having to make payments in installments. By contrast, in 1960 the Ransom Center was willing to pay \$18,200 for a single E. M. Forster manuscript.

Working across a wide range of twentieth-century black writers' papers, Cloutier considers acquisition and processing history, split collections, cataloging schema, and original order vagaries. The obvious point is that it behooves scholars to know an archive's history, and, of course, to pay attention to details and discrepancies. For example, he determined that the date for Ellison's gift to the JWJ Collection of the "The King of the Bingo Game" manuscript was not 1943, as marked on the file, but 1944. A close

reading of letters made Cloutier doubt the file date, which then led to further searching and ultimately the discovery of a dated receipt. But Cloutier is also making an argument about literary history. In this fevered acquisition context, writers developed distinct and sometimes self-conscious archival practices, giving thought to what they kept, threw out, reused, donated, or sold. And their interest in documents, their own and others — saved, repurposed, discarded, lost, and found — shows up in their writing. For Cloutier, close study of the idiosyncratic collecting of individual African American authors reveals a broader archival sensibility linked “to both politics and aesthetics, to both group survival and individual legacy” (9).

A researcher and reporter by nature, McKay honed his archival skills during his three years (1936–1939) at the Federal Writers Project. He imported some of his FWP work directly into his last published work, the non-fiction *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1941), and, according to Cloutier, indirectly into his last novel, *Amiable With Big Teeth*. Submitted to Dutton in 1941 but unpublished in his lifetime, *Amiable* centers on the tensions in Harlem between Communist Party organizers and pan-African black nationalists fundraising for Ethiopia after Mussolini’s 1935 brutal invasion. The novel is a satirical roman à clef, and historical accuracy was important to McKay. As he was conceptualizing the novel, he explained to Max Eastman that he was reading “newspaper stories of the period”, and as he was finishing he asked Simon Williamson, a former FWP colleague, to confirm “whether the Spanish Civil War broke out in June or July of 1936” (quoted in CLOUTIER, 104, 108). Through good detective work, Cloutier identifies correspondences to real events and people, and offers a persuasive reading of the thematic centrality of documents — their authenticity, reuse, and lifecycles — in the novel. In the final plot twist, for example, a letter from the Emperor of Ethiopia authorizing aid efforts in the U.S. is revealed to be a repurposed letter from twelve years earlier for a planned but never executed Ethiopian mission to Harlem. McKay was dedicated in these years to building strong, self-sufficient black communities, and in Cloutier’s reading of *Amiable*, McKay redeploys “carefully compiled records” and “appropriates for himself and in the service of his community the strategies usually reserved for institutional or imperial governance” (142).

Cloutier grounds his discussion of Wright and Ellison in a study of the essay each wrote about the Lafargue Clinic shortly after it opened in 1946. Staffed by volunteers, the Lafargue Clinic provided low-cost mental health services to Harlem residents for twelve years, defying skeptics who doubted its approach and viability. Perhaps because visual evidence seemed necessary to prove the existence of what Ellison called “an underground

extension of democracy”, both Wright and Ellison wanted photographs to accompany their essays. In “Psychiatry Comes to Harlem” (1946) Wright documents resistance to the clinic, offering a “list of medical objections to establishing a mental hygiene clinic in Harlem” (quoted in CLOUTIER, 165). To demonstrate the need, he draws on “official psychiatric court reports”. Complementing what Cloutier argues is Wright’s distinctly “documentary aesthetic”, Richard Saunders’s accompanying photographs are sedate, undramatic images that claim scientific legitimacy for the clinic.

Attentive to Wright’s interest in documenting what other records miss, Cloutier identifies a similar inclination in two earlier works — Wright’s introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s sociological treatise *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945) and his novel *Native Son* (1940). Drake and Clayton’s scientific work, Wright insists, presents “the facts of urban Negro life” in “their starkest form”, making visible “what whites do not see and not want to see”, and revealing what “courts, prisons, clinics, hospitals, newspapers, and bureaus of vital statistics” records do not (quoted in CLOUTIER, 159, 155, 160). In *Native Son*, Mary’s Communist boyfriend Jan tells Bigger that he wants to “see how your people live”, and Bigger’s transformation after murdering Mary is largely the ability to see visual facts more clearly, such as the squalor of his own apartment, as well as economic facts such as who owns and controls Chicago’s slums and the willful blindness of those around him (quoted in CLOUTIER, 160). In Cloutier’s reading, Wright’s social realism is crafted from “a counterarchive of social facts” found in sociological and psychological reports (149).

If Wright’s goal was to emphasize the Lafargue Clinic’s very existence, Ellison’s was to capture “the unreality that haunts Harlem” and the surreal truths about black life that the clinic must address. The point, he wrote in his notes for the photo-essay, is to “disturb the reader through the same channel that he receives his visual information” (quoted in CLOUTIER, 189). Ellison’s essay about the clinic, “Harlem Is Nowhere”, was to appear, but did not, in ‘48: *The Magazine of the Year*. Scholars have long assumed that the essay remained unfinished until 1964, when Ellison included it in his first collection of essays, and that the photographs by Gordon Parks that were to accompany the essay were lost. Indeed, in 1964 when Ellison published the essay in his collection, he also placed a condensed version in *Harper’s*, where it was accompanied by four photographs by Roy DeCarava. But, as it turns out, Ellison completed the essay in 1948 and Parks’ photographs exist, misplaced in a file labeled “Harlem Gang Leader” in the Gordon Parks Foundation holdings. Thanks to Cloutier’s superb detective work

and a careful reading of Ellison's photoshoot script and draft photo captions, we now have a window onto one of the most important mid-century collaborations. Indeed, with the help of others, Cloutier curated a 2016 Art Institute of Chicago exhibition and catalog, *Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem*.

Undertaken as Ellison was also beginning to write *Invisible Man*, the collaboration with Parks on "Harlem Is Nowhere" was, Ellison noted, "quite a time consuming project" (quoted in CLOUTIER, 178). The materials documenting their work include entries in Ellison's calendar scheduling photoshoots (Ellison also took photographs), negatives, contact sheets, layout notes, and captions. In a letter to Wright about the project, Ellison reports that he has been visiting the clinic and reading case files, and he believes that the clinic is starting to have an impact in court hearings. He was ambitious: if Parks is able to "capture those elements of Harlem reality which are so real to me", the project will be "something new in photo-journalism" (quoted in CLOUTIER, 181). And he was focused on his desire for dreamlike images, writing in one note for a photograph, "figure running through it so as to smear movement across negative", and in another that he wants "scenes that are at once both document and symbol" (quoted in CLOUTIER, 193).

For Cloutier the phrase "both document and symbol" is also an apt description of the guiding aesthetic behind *Invisible Man*. From identifying language in *Invisible Man* that comes directly from the essay's draft to limning the "overwhelming photographic motif" in the novel, Cloutier offers a fresh reading of Ellison's masterpiece and an analysis of Ellison's archival practice (199). He considers not only both 1964 versions of the essay, and the Parks images, but also drafts of the novel, Ellison's essay "Harlem's America", which was based on his testimony to the U.S. Senate on the Harlem riots of 1966, and his eulogy for Romare Bearden. Cloutier's claim, both in this case and more generally, echoes Antoinette Burton's argument that novels often serve as counterarchives, forcing us to "confront the limits of the official archive by acknowledging the power of literature to materialize those countless historical subjects who may never have come under the archival gaze" (quoted in CLOUTIER, 244).

The great strength of *Shadow Archives* is Cloutier's sleuthing, and he devotes two short chapters to accounts of his detective work: his discovery in 2007 of McKay's *Amiable With Big Teeth* in the uncatalogued papers of Samuel Roth, publisher of erotica and unauthorized excerpts of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and his more recent discovery at Yale of a manuscript for Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street*. Keen to explain his forensic process,

Cloutier walks us through the challenges and small advances, the puzzles that arise and lead to further research, the hypotheses that are proven wrong and those that yield answers.

These stories underscore what researchers know: comprehensive searching, meticulous attention to detail, an eye for discrepancies and incongruities, and an abiding awareness of the complex and often ragged history of collections, are all essential to good archival work. But Cloutier not only demonstrates what this level of archival work looks like. He is also arguing that the archival turn in literary studies must nurture new scholarly habits and a readiness to set aside disciplinary orthodoxies. He calls for deep immersion in the “scenario of the text”, and he assiduously practices what he preaches.

Shadow Archives is an impressive book. One scholar has taken exception to Cloutier’s “dematerialized” concept of the archive, suggesting that not every novelist’s use or reuse of documents from their own archives and from their research is proof of an archival sensibility (NISHIKAWA 2015, 197). And at times, “archival” seems to mean anything at all having to do with documents collected over time. But Cloutier situates his work in the larger context of archival studies and theories, makes important discoveries, and by immersing himself in the “scenario” of many texts comes to fresh insights about writers, works well known and newly discovered, as well as their notes, drafts, letters, lives, writing practices, politics, and aesthetics.

Stephanie Browner

Eugene Lang College–The New School

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