

## Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature

By Jean-Christophe Cloutier. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 408 pp.  
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EPUB ISBN 978-0-23155-024-6.

In *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature*, Jean-Christophe Cloutier presents an intricate and thought-provoking discussion of the lives and afterlives of African American writers' materials during the mid-twentieth century. He "trac[es] the underappreciated archival sensibilities of novelists Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellison" to show "how these writers first preserved then reanimated their own living collections through novelistic practice" (p. 12). Cloutier credits a visit to the Library of Congress to use the Ralph Ellison papers as a doctoral student in Columbia University's Department of English and Comparative Literature with giving him "the fever" (p. xiii) for archives. He spent three years as an archival intern at Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where he received training to arrange and describe collections. At the time of the book's publication, Cloutier was an assistant (but is now associate) professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. He teaches classes on literary archives and research methodology.

*Shadow Archives* features the author's research in manuscript repositories, collaboration with literary estates, and textual analyses. The volume includes an introduction that establishes the book's framework, a survey of the development of selected African American manuscript collections set within the broader context of the mid-twentieth-century rise of interest in contemporary literary papers by institutional collectors, three "investigative deep dives into the papers of specific writers" (p. 13), and two first-person accounts (a chapter and a coda) focused on research methodology. The case studies examine the various ways in which these writers "redeploy[ed] their records" (p. 13), which sometimes, unintentionally, occurred over lengthy time spans (in some cases, after their deaths).

The publication's title is adapted from poet and library director Kevin Young's taxonomy of "shadow books," which refers to the "unwritten, the removed, and the lost,"<sup>1</sup> the many books by African American authors that have been and are denied life. Cloutier provides a well-crafted summary of the development of the records life-cycle concept, a backdrop against which to set writers' archival materials, generally, and twentieth-century African American authors' manuscript collections specifically. "Literary records may adopt a multiplicity of

lives over an extended career—all the while remaining in the hands of a single creator,” he notes (p. 12). They can “live” again—in countless ways—once they find permanent homes in libraries and archives.

Chapter 1, “Black Special Collections and the Midcentury Rise of the Institutional Collector,” covers much ground as “an overview of the upheavals fundamental to the history of twentieth-century black special collections—and of literary collections” (p. 94) as a whole. Cloutier addresses Black authors’ struggles for visibility and value within the special collections arena during the post-war era, with a particular focus on the experiences of the writers highlighted in the book. One of the more striking elements in the chapter are the lists sampling collections of Black authors that are housed in larger repositories—their processing completion year contrasted with their years of acquisition. In the chapter’s last section, Cloutier describes the causes of the phenomenon of “split collections,” which often besets the papers of living writers generally. He ends with an intriguing consideration: divided collections of Black writers as a metaphor for a form of diaspora. The materials in these collections can reflect “vanishing itineraries, literary migrations, families separated, the search for a new life and home, perpetual threat of relocation, failure to live up to expectations, the experience of being discarded, being ‘lost,’ being forgotten even by one’s own creator. . . .” (p. 94).

“Claude McKay’s Archival Rebirth: Provenance and Politics in *Amiable with Big Teeth*,” chapter 2, explores the later years of the Jamaican American poet, novelist, and investigative journalist. Although created in 1941, McKay’s final novel, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*,<sup>2</sup> was not published until 2017 because it was suddenly rejected by its original publisher and, apparently, lost. Cloutier himself found the manuscript in an archival repository. In this case study, he asserts that the novel is not typical “historical fiction” but a work that “chooses the immediate past as its . . . context” (p. 140). It is a “roman à clef, [that] employs the same archival tactics, using historical figures and material evidence gathered through extensive research to weave a dramatic tale” (p. 140). McKay essentially “remixed” (my term) the archival materials that he had used in a nonfiction work to write this final novel.

In chapter 3, “‘At Once Both Document and Symbol’: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and the Lafargue Clinic Photographic Archives,” Cloutier tells the complicated tale of Black writers and artists who preserved documentation of their photographic collaborations, some of it thought to be lost. Inspired by the work of the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic in Harlem, an important grassroots psychiatric center founded by Dr. Fredric Wertham, Richard Wright and the team of Ralph Ellison and photographer Gordon Parks undertook documentary projects. For his photo-essay, “Psychiatry Comes to Harlem” (1946), Wright

“turned to photography as a tool that would lend power to his ongoing efforts to document the clinic and thus ‘prove’ its existence in the first place” (p. 147). The piece appeared with photographs by Richard Saunders. Ellison and Parks’s photo-essay project, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” was to appear in a magazine. An unexpected and disappointing interruption altered its course and changed the nature of the documentation they produced. Ellison and Parks would go on to find new uses for their creations and carefully build their archival collections.

I most enjoyed reading chapter 4, “An Interlude Concerning the Vanishing Manuscripts of Ann Petry,” which centers on Cloutier’s research quest to find an unpublicized collection of Petry’s papers. Petry’s debut novel, *The Street* (1946), was the first by a Black woman to sell more than a million copies. Although she closely guarded her private life and tended to destroy her nonliterary papers, Petry did place some of her materials in repositories. Cloutier was working with Petry’s papers housed at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, but encountered a lead to an unpublicized collection at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Ann Petry’s daughter Elisabeth Petry has published a tributary memoir and was a research source during this process. Cloutier raises, but does not answer, an interesting ethical question aimed at his fellow archival researchers regarding deceased authors: “Should we limit the types of documents we make use of or even consult, or is everything fair game in the name of knowledge production” (p. 211)? The chapter even ends with the hint of possibly yet another literary mystery, this one concerning the manuscript of *The Street* that the Beinecke Library houses.

Chapter 5 returns to Ellison. In “‘Too Obscure for Learned Classification’: Comic Books, Counterculture, and Archival Invisibility in *Invisible Man*,” Cloutier contends that comic books, materials considered by some to be ephemeral, have largely gone unnoticed as key elements in Ellison’s life and work. But close examination of Ellison’s papers at the Library of Congress and his published writings reveals the influence of mid-twentieth-century comic-book culture. In particular, major themes that Ellison explored in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*— “[t]he rapport between violence and heroism, youth culture and leadership, and Harlem and urban life” (p. 242)—are directly connected to this culture and reflected in comic-book allusions. Along with some of Ellison’s other sociological writings, Cloutier revisits the archival materials both created by Ellison and collected for the initial “Harlem Is Nowhere” project (discussed in chapter 3), because they also received new life in this novel. *Invisible Man* becomes a counterarchive, and comic books gain enduring value.

“Coda. Disappointed Bridges: A Note on the Discovery of *Amiable with Big Teeth*” offers a final case study that highlights Cloutier as archivist-in-training and persistent researcher. Returning to the final years and work of Claude McKay, he describes in detail how he serendipitously discovered McKay’s unknown final

manuscript, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, in a highly unexpected source—the Samuel Roth papers, a collection that he was processing. We join him on the thrilling search that he and his graduate advisor, Professor Brent Hayes Edwards, a McKay scholar, embarked on to authenticate the manuscript and establish its provenance, which took them to repositories around the country. Throughout the chapter, Cloutier reminds readers of the challenges that can befall researchers, reflected in his own experiences. The often-one-sided nature of correspondence, for example, might necessitate visits to other repositories in the hopes of locating recipients' papers. He also points to additions to collections, which he describes as “a reminder that archives are the opposite of static, lifeless things but rather ceaselessly in motion, gestating in hibernation. The phenomenon of additions and the timing of their arrival can potentially alter the course of an entire project” (p. 300). While Cloutier identifies these issues as particular to literary papers, they apply to historical collections as well.

Summing up the process near the final chapter's end, Cloutier says that “. . . part of the poetry of archival research entails following the romance of the trace down all those dead-end trails, temporary assumptions, and lingering mysteries that unfold with each acid-free folder” (p. 302). In a final caveat, he acknowledges the limitations of archival materials, noting that “[i]f we adhere to a naive hope that the archive can provide an answer to everything, it will always feel incomplete” (p. 304). Although as archivists we are already well aware of this notion, we nevertheless can appreciate his reminder of this reality. An appendix following the coda consists of helpful chronologies—“[a]rtifact biographies or vagabond itineraries” (p. 305)—that trace the journeys of documents discussed in the chapters on McKay's *Amiable with Big Teeth/God's Black Sheep* and the original “Harlem Is Nowhere” photographic essay project created by Ellison and Parks. Even in this section, Cloutier remains ever the literary detective: the last bulleted point includes a plea for a still missing print or contact sheet by Parks.

I question the organization of the chapters—namely, whether reversing chapters 4 and 5 might have enhanced the book. As published, the Petry chapter falls between two case studies on Ellison. This placement enables the Ellison chapters to remain distinct and keeps the two first-person methodological essays separate, but juxtaposing the discussion of Petry's “vanishing manuscripts” with the coda that describes Cloutier's “finding” of Claude McKay's final manuscript might have made a more interesting transition. Additionally, although well selected, a few of the documents chosen as illustrations are reproduced too small. At times, the image text cannot be easily read, and the detail in some of the photographs is lost.

In the acknowledgments, Cloutier remarks that “[a]s is typical of anything related to archives, this book has seen its lifecycle delayed, accelerated, flatline

[sic], and resurrected a number of times over the many years of its gestation” (p. xiii). Fortunately, *Shadow Archives* emerged from “the depths of [the author’s] backlog” (p. xiii) and took shape in the form of this imaginative and content-rich book. It might appeal most to scholars and students of African American studies, literature, history, and popular culture, who may be inspired to explore archival collections in innovative ways. Yet it could prompt archival educators, as well as archivists and special collections librarians who acquire, process, and provide access to such research materials to ask ourselves new questions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Claude McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, ed. Jean-Christophe Cloutier and Brent Hayes Edwards (New York: Penguin Classics, 2017).

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## Trusting Records in the Cloud

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The near ubiquity of “the cloud”—networked storage and infrastructure as well as platforms, software, business intelligence, and other services—may be one of the hallmarks of our daily lives in the twenty-first century. Beyond our personal use of social media, email, and collaborative tools such as Office 365 or G Suite, governments, businesses, and educational institutions have increasingly turned to cloud-based products for cost-savings and efficiencies, with a 2019 report from Gartner, Inc., noting a 17.5 percent increase in spending on public cloud services from 2018, growing from \$182 billion to \$214 billion.<sup>1</sup> The archives and records management fields have likewise joined in this shift, with organizations taking advantage of cloud storage as well as end-to-end digital preservation solutions (e.g., Preservica and ArchivesDirect) and emerging services such as the Emulation as a Service Infrastructure (EaaSI) project.<sup>2</sup>

While the benefits of moving archives and records management operations to the cloud may be defined in terms of cost savings to IT budgets and increased technical capacity, the challenges and risks associated with this transition are less clear. How can we collaborate effectively and responsibly with cloud service