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Shadow archives: the lifecycles of African American Literature, by Jean-Christophe Cloutier, Columbia University Press, New York, 2019, 408 pp., US\$35 (paperback), ISBN 9780231193313

There are two ways of reading Jean-Christophe Cloutier's *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* – first, from the archival perspective, and, second, from the literary perspective. Neither perspective detracts from Cloutier's ability to weave together very compelling stories from his archival searches, but the differences are there and can shift how the reader (if an archivist) takes in the book.

What may stand out in the title for an archivist is the use of the term lifecycles, a term that means something very specific in archival studies. Cloutier makes the concept of the archival lifecycle central to his argument. It is here that reading from an archival perspective manifests itself. Taking Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* as a springboard, Cloutier uses the lifecycle concept to describe the literary works and archival drive of four African American writers from the 1930s-1950s: Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Ann Petry, as well as Ellison's work with photographer Gordon Parks. Cloutier ties together the writings of Schellenberg and his subject through the era that produced them all, while relying heavily on lifecycle metaphors to describe how the archives of each author was created and deposited at various libraries in the United States.

Cloutier himself has some experience working in archives, having been an intern at the Columbia University library, and it is clear that creativity and excitement was sparked within him from this period. His writing, however, exists outside the archival studies field. Cloutier does cite some well-known archivists and archival journals, primarily in the introduction. After this, the citation of archivists or archival theory essentially vanishes. Given the citations he uses, it is unclear if this book will draw non-archivists into the vast literature written by archivists on similar subjects. It is obvious though in reading the book that 'the archive' as subject matter here never strays far from the literal definition of the personal papers of the authors in question. While it is at times perhaps too elementary for experienced archivists, there are still elements that are not only enjoyable to read but can also have an impact on the field.

For the readers of this journal, the introduction to the lifecycle would be well-worn territory, while for most readers of the book, the introduction to the lifecycle would most likely be the first foray into anything approaching archival theory. From the archival perspective, this reliance on the lifecycle model as a central narrative force lessens some of the impact of the book. The records continuum makes one appearance


in the book, with Cloutier noting '[d]espite being the target of some important critiques – notably the alternative “records-continuum” model – the lifecycle concept has largely been embraced by the archiving profession’ (p. 11). Cloutier knows of the continuum model, yet shies away from making it his focus, despite statements such as ‘records may adopt a multiplicity of lives over an extended career’ (p. 11), ‘these writers first preserved then reanimated their own living collections’ (p. 11), ‘a record may lie dormant indefinitely until it is suddenly brought back to life’ (p. 18). These are but a few of the quotes that I would argue fit more into a continuum reading of these archives rather than a lifecycle-dominated one. He also uses a passage from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to say of the archive, ‘[i]t is all now’ (p. 15); two pages later he states that literary archives are both ‘being and becoming’ (p. 17). Both these quotes directly align with Sue McKemmish’s idea of the archive ‘always in the process of becoming’ and are far removed from the lifecycle model.

There are questions asked that may sound radical to those who never pondered them – like ‘how long does a collection sag like a heavy load in the backlog before it is processed?’ (p. 68) – that to archivists are daily frustrations that are well understood. Cloutier questions original order and provenance in relation to these literary collections, but these are critiques that are becoming well established in the profession and citing more archival literature on these debates could have provided an extra context.

With all this in mind, I come back to the two perspectives in which to read the book. If viewed from a literary perspective – a journey through archives, how they were created and what was added or omitted – this book becomes completely different to archivists. It truly is remarkable the stories Cloutier tells using these archives. It highlights how invaluable timely and thorough processing is, how necessary clear and detailed descriptions are, and how difficult it can often be to locate what was there all along. Framing it through the archival experience of African American writers compared to their white counterparts in mid-century America is also enlightening.

We learn of Carl Van Vechten’s hunt for literary archives to deposit in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University. His at times tumultuous relationship with the subjects of the book is contrasted with the relatively easy – and financially rewarding – experience white authors have with archives. Cloutier describes in detail his discovery of Claude McKay’s novel, *Amiable with Big Teeth* in Samuel Roth’s archive at Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library. While researchers claiming to ‘discover’ catalogued archival material can be justifiably upsetting to archivists, in this case Cloutier backs up his claim. As an intern and processing archivist of the Roth collection during his doctoral research, Cloutier was the first person to know of the unpublished novel’s existence in decades.

The introduction and the use of the lifecycle as the narrative thread may be tedious to anyone with a passing knowledge of the lifecycle and continuum models, but once that is overcome, the archival biographies Cloutier tells are fascinating and make for an enjoyable read for those interested in literature and archives – or the way people record and save their own papers.

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