

The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation. Carrie Smith and Lisa Stead, eds. New York: Routledge, 2013. xi, 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-8153-4658-6

GILLIAN DUNKS

William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections

McMaster University Library

This 2013 anthology, edited by Carrie Smith and Lisa Stead, scholars of English literature based out of the University of Exeter, has its roots in a 2010 University of Exeter conference on literary archives. Boundaries, the book's central theme, are defined by the editors as the physical and conceptual borders that affect archives as sites of knowledge (p. 2); the editors are interested in "the archive" as a subject, not just as a source (p. 1). Archives are not neutral and passive sites for literary discovery; rather, they are shaped by the exigencies of collecting institutions, donors, and archivists (p. 4). Engagement with "the archive as a subject" may lead – as the book's title suggests – to critiques of the formation of literary canons and the recovery of writers who have been excluded from the Western literary canon in particular.

These promising topics are taken up by the volume's contributors, most of whom are United Kingdom-based literary scholars employing a wide range of methodological tools in their study of writers' archives; the remaining articles are authored by working archivists or archival scholars in North America. Given the differences in professional training and focus between the two groups, it is unsurprising that gaps emerge in the book's conversation. Archivists centre archives in their work, but they tend to obscure the impacts they have upon records – and by extension, literary canons. Literary scholars, by contrast, are

skilled at interpreting the minutiae of writers' manuscripts but often ignore the significance of archives as heavily mediated creative constructs. Neither group of contributors addresses the ways in which archives and literary canons are shaped by colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, cissexism, heterosexism, and classism – nor, crucially, do the editors. This, it could be argued, leaves the book's titular promise of "reclamation and representation" unfulfilled.

The book is divided into four sections. The first is "Theorizing the Archive," which contains three theory-based essays about literary and archival scholarship. Wim Van Mierlo leads with a discussion of genetic criticism – also called *critique génétique*¹ – an approach to literature that takes as its object of study all the records that precede a publication (sketches, notes, drafts, and the like) and that together form a network (the *avant-texte*) informing the final work (p. 16). For Van Mierlo, the goal of this methodology, which he calls the "archaeology of the manuscript," is not to reify or chart authorial intent but to provide insight into creative composition processes, particularly those of English romantic poets John Keats and William Wordsworth (pp. 18–27). Iain Bailey's subsequent essay grounds itself in genetic criticism as well, using examples from Samuel Beckett's archive to highlight intersections and tensions between exogenesis (a sub-category of genetic criticism with a focus on compositional processes) and intertextuality (relationships between texts; p. 32). For Bailey, Beckett's archive is ultimately not a "reassuring material foundation" from which a critic can draw certainties about the incorporation and functioning of intertextual references in what Van Mierlo might call the *avant-texte* (p. 36). Instead, it highlights within exogenesis a methodological tension between "pre-textual elements and an idea of movement or process" (p. 33). Jennifer Douglas concludes the section with a piece on original order, a key tenet of the archival theory of provenance, and its bearing on the Douglas Coupland fonds (p. 45). Douglas argues that personal archives like Coupland's complicate notions of a single original order, since creators and custodians of archives constrain, obscure, and shape the archive over time, potentially giving it many orders (p. 49). Instead of focusing on an original order emanating fully formed from a writer's practice, archivists should attempt to represent the state of the records, or the narrative of the archive's creation and shaping by custodians (p. 54).

1 Genetic criticism emerged in French scholarship in the early 1970s, hence some contributors' use of the phrase *critique génétique*. For further information, see Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden, eds., *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

In section two of the book, “Reclamation and Representation,” contributors make a case for several 19th- and 20th-century writers who are, for the most part, not considered part of the Western literary canon. To rectify this, contributors attempt to reconstitute writers’ archives intellectually and rehabilitate their reputations through critical analyses. Isabelle Cosgrave explores the heavily edited papers of 19th-century writer Amelia Opie, arguing that Opie’s posthumous reputation of “Victorian respectability” was curated by her biographer, Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, whose reproductions of extracts from Opie’s manuscripts remain some of the only extant manuscript sources due to the loss of a significant portion of Opie’s papers (pp. 62–63). Fran Baker evaluates the role that Charles Dickens played in the creation and transmission of Elizabeth Gaskell’s short story “The Ghost in the Garden Room,” arguing that Dickens’ editing of this work shapes textual criticism of the piece to this day (p. 88). Simon Barker takes up the case of John Galsworthy, a once-prominent 19th-century writer who has since fallen out of literary fashion and whose archive is consequently dispersed (p. 93). In his bid to restore Galsworthy’s reputation, Barker includes in his essay information that would not be out of place in a contemporary finding aid, such as a detailed custodial history of Galsworthy’s archive (pp. 99–101). Lastly, Jane Dowson discusses the papers and reputation of English poet Elizabeth Jennings from the perspective of biographical criticism (p. 106), arguing that Jennings’ papers can “set the record straight” about her life and provide a context for reading her work (pp. 108–109). Dowson is especially interested in highlighting how Jennings’s papers reveal the “hidden turmoil” and “unresolved suffering” that informed her poetry (pp. 108–112).

The book’s third section, “Boundaries,” features essays from the editors about the wide variety of materials available for study in the archive. Carrie Smith consults manuscripts from Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin’s 1975 collection *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*, examining the tensions inherent in ekphrastic poetic composition (pp. 124–27). For Smith, Baskin’s artwork is as important to understanding the text as are Hughes’ poetry manuscripts; thus, notions of the “literary archive” should remain flexible enough to accommodate hybrid collections (p. 135). Lisa Stead examines cinema fan magazines to glean insights into women fans as self-reflexive cinemagoers (p. 139). Letters in the archive act as evidence for the magazine’s female readership and testify to some aspects of women’s everyday experiences, though Stead cautions against building a “fantasy of the archival subject” (p. 151).

Section four, "Working in the Archive," contains essays from archivists Sara Hodson and Karen Kukil and literary scholar Helen Taylor. Hodson reviews the complex ethics around administering access to personal papers while simultaneously protecting the privacy of individuals represented therein (p. 158). She predicts the privacy-related challenges facing archivists will only grow, given increasing interest in the personal lives of famous writers (p. 167). Hodson touches on privacy in the digital environment very briefly, noting that archivists must consider privacy especially carefully before digitizing records, given the exponential reach digitized records can have in comparison to their physical counterparts (p. 167). Karen Kukil discusses teaching the "material archive," particularly the letters of Virginia Woolf and the papers of Sylvia Plath, at Smith College (p. 171). For Kukil, material formats affect literary forms and can reveal "the personalities of [record creators]." As such, she sees the material archive as invaluable in teaching (pp. 178, 184). Kukil sees digital technologies as useful in this context insofar as they aid in bringing together information about literary archives scattered among various repositories (p. 183). Helen Taylor concludes the section with reflections on broad forces that shape literary archives, including institutional collecting practices and relationships between institutions and writers' estates. Taylor draws on the example of the Daphne du Maurier archive, which features many access restrictions imposed by the du Maurier family (p. 197). Like others in the volume, Taylor comments only briefly on digital archives, noting that researchers have benefited from the digitization of archival finding aids and expressing general enthusiasm for digital collections (pp. 198–199).

Overall, literary scholars contributing to the anthology gesture toward a consideration of "the archive as subject" but continue to focus on the manuscript. Most contributors desire to interpret archival records as irrefutable evidence, either of creative and compositional processes or of the bearing of authors' psychological states upon these processes. Accompanying this desire is the feeling that an author whose work has not been preserved by a collecting institution will be excluded from literary canons. Both perceptions require further interrogation: archives and their impact are shaped by a number of forces other than custodial circumstance. In the case of living writers arranging the donation or purchase of their papers, archives may constitute a creative corpus in their own right that is as worthy as the manuscript of interrogation as a discrete literary artifact. Interpretations of the *avant-texte* that do not take into account the archivist's

effect on the records through appraisal, arrangement, and description will necessarily be incomplete. Interpretations of records as evidence of personal character or creative suffering are often impossible to validate; these interpretations are inherently limited by their tendency to reduce the scope of criticism to a construct of the creator as imagined by the scholar. Stead argues such imaginings have their uses (p. 151), but scholars must explicitly acknowledge them as such if they are to expand and further critical discourse. Researchers must also exercise caution when considering archives as evidence of compositional processes: interpretive claims about the significance of marginalia, writing supports, and the like are valid undertakings, but these claims must be framed as interpretive *readings* of the archival record in the way that literary scholars *read* literature, given that archives are deeply multivalent.

Finally, the volume does not explicitly take up the topic of the formation of the Western literary canon, which together with Western archives continues to be enmeshed with structures of oppression and exclusion. Any canon – and, by extension, the literary archives that inform it – will by definition continue to represent a narrow slice of world literature. Many scholars and archivists together have preserved narratives about literature that exclude racialized authors who do not write in English and do not produce what we might identify as “records” according to narrow criteria. It is unfortunate that these boundaries do not fall within the volume’s purview, as literary scholars and archivists who challenge them may aid in transforming for the better what literature is taught and preserved, and how what is preserved is understood.

Archivists who have contributed to the volume have a unique perspective to offer literary scholars. As discussed above, archivists are accustomed to thinking of archives as subjects and considering ways of structuring patron encounters with records. The essays from Douglas, Hodson, Kukil, and Taylor are among the anthology’s best. All offer insight into the ways archival creators and custodians shape archives, including their order and accessibility. These perspectives may be familiar to archivists, but they will add nuance to the conversations occurring among literary scholars working in archives. Unfortunately, contributions by archivists do not address the challenges posed by born-digital records, digital preservation, and copyright in any systematic or thorough way, so this book is necessarily rooted in time; it does not reflect meaningfully on the technological processes by which contemporary archives are being generated or interacted with.

Archivists reading this book may be struck by the number of opportunities for collaboration that it makes apparent: literary scholars frequently express a desire for tools that aggregate finding aid information from multiple institutions. In the case of scholars engaged in reclamation projects, many parts of the book speak to a desire to collect, preserve, and write finding aids for writers' papers that have been dispersed. Literary scholars represented in the volume see digitization processes and web tools as a means to this end; some, including Dowson, envisage websites dedicated to particular authors in which digital facsimiles of manuscripts exist alongside finding aids from several institutions. Archivists possess the theoretical frameworks and tools necessary to actively participate in such projects. While it is not possible for individual archivists with primary responsibilities to their collections to meet the needs of every literary scholar, some of the solutions to the challenges posed by digital records and dispersed archives will – in fact, must – emerge from collaborations between archivists at different institutions and literary scholars. Books like *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive* point intriguingly to some of the directions such collaborations may take.