



Amy Hildreth Chen. *Placing Papers: The American Literary Archives Market*.

Amy Hildreth Chen. *Placing Papers: The American Literary Archives Market*. Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020. 183 p. ISBN 978-1-62534-485-4. US\$26.95 (paperback).

If you are tired of taking acquisition adventures from librarian and bookseller memoirs as proof of the larger trends at play within the literary archives market, this is the book for you. Chen's pithy study takes us through the views of each stakeholder connected to a typical American literary archival collection, from creator to end user, mainly through both quantitative and qualitative examples using her meticulous dataset of those authors included in the seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (hereafter *NAAL*).

Before discussing the roles of various stakeholders, Chen explores who actually decides what is or isn't an author's papers through the lens of Paul Moran's failed attempt to sell John Updike's trash. This continues with an overview of the financial, scholarly, and public value to be considered when dealing with a literary archive through the perspective of numerous constituents both inside and outside of the United States. The subsequent five chapters are broken into themes relevant to the different groups of people involved in the process: authors and families; agents and dealers; directors and curators; archivists and digital archivists; and, finally, scholars and the public. Through the concept of brand, Chen explores who really determines the amount of cultural capital available to an author or their family as well as how families can support or hinder an author's legacy through the placement of James Baldwin and Jack Kerouac's papers. The role of anthologies in creating the canon frames a quantitative comparison of the timing and age of placement for *NAAL* authors, showing that a white male placed his papers eighteen years before the first white woman and twenty five years before the first person of color. Through the concept of profit, Chen contrasts institutional attitudes towards literary agents and manuscript dealers. She also challenges a claim that agents are predatory through her *NAAL* data, though she also notes its limitations due to current archival standards for certain kinds of record keeping. Through the concept of competition, Chen determines the most active collecting institutions and uses library rankings and endowment indexes to explain the themes of institutional collecting practices by decade. She also reminds us that an institution 'is represented by individuals whose decisions over time generate the holdings seen today' (p. 64). These trends and the individuals responsible for them are more fully discussed through a comparison of acquisition practices at the University of Texas at Austin, Yale, and Stanford. Through the concept of provenance, Chen advocates for consistent recognition of an archivist's contributions to the understanding of an author's papers through individually signed finding aids. She also discusses

the More Product Less Process (MPLP) processing approach, digitization considerations, and future work with born digital content. Through the concept of access, Chen writes more broadly about literary scholars and the greater public's voyeuristic tendencies and fetishization of archival collections before a more in depth discussion of how both apply to the papers of David Foster Wallace. The conclusion focuses on ways that the Matthew Effect currently permeates all aspects of the literary archives market, such as how the ever growing cost of acquisition may impact the NAAL authors who have yet to place their papers, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, and how this concept will impact everyone moving forward.

Though undoubtedly carefully outlined, there were a few moments when I wished Chen's commentary and examples directly connected to her NAAL dataset instead of more generic ones. This was most noticeable in the discussion of archival processing methods, born digital archives, and the public's tendency towards voyeurism. Chen's real life experience with the different stakeholders shows through in each chapter, but is especially visible when discussing the various challenges archivists face in their work. While I appreciated the detailed overview of processing techniques and approaches, I would have also enjoyed learning if any NAAL collections had been through the MPLP method, how many had been digitized and when, and so on beyond the average size of the collections. Perhaps this is due to the fact that I work closely with archivists within my position as a rare books librarian. I would also have liked to read more about the types of born digital collections contained in the NAAL dataset and how they may enhance research than yet another emulation themed explanation of Salman Rushdie's computer. This specific complaint probably says more about the scholarly output and funding available to those professionals experimenting with born digital collection access than the text at hand. While Sylvia Plath is mentioned elsewhere in the text, the public's reaction to her collection could easily have served as an example of voyeurism instead of known abuser David Foster Wallace.

The work's format reminds me of that used in James L. W. West III's *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace since 1900*, where most chapters focus on a specific role within the publishing industry and how each role interacts with the others. Chen improves upon this approach by discussing not only the role each group plays in the process through case studies, but also the deeper financial or emotional motivations that affect each group and how her dataset confirms these general statements. Additionally, Chen has placed her entire dataset for the project online so that readers can learn more about these 102 authors beyond the commentary that this book provides.

Placing Papers's straightforward prose and organizational structure is a pleasure to read. This book serves not only as an excellent overview of who is involved in collecting literary archives and when, but it also serves as a near perfect framework for how to structure a scholarly work written around a timely, thorough, and meaningful dataset. Anyone interested in learning how literary archival collections came to be an important component of American cultural heritage institutions and how the market affects these institutions today should read this work.

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