

BOOK REVIEWS

HELTON, Laura E. 2024. *Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History*. New York: Columbia University Press. Pp. xx + 305. ISBN 9780231212748, Hardback \$140. ISBN 9780231212755, Paperback \$35. ISBN 9780231559546, eBook \$34.99.

The year 2025 marks the centennial of Alain Locke's editing of the special issue of *Survey Graphic* on "Harlem: Mecca of The New Negro" and the subsequent anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. The twin publications would do much to crystallize what we've come to know as the Harlem Renaissance and are striking in their showcasing of what are still considered many of its most canonical works. One of those works, Arturo Schomburg's essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past," accounts for its flourishing moment by recovering its long history, as conveyed in its opening declaration: "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future" (699).

Following Schomburg's edict, Laura E. Helton uncovers how an array of African American collectors, archivists, and librarians in the first half of the twentieth century contributed to a reframing of the past through individual determination and collective action — often against dominating cultural, political, and economic forces. In doing so, Helton impressively limns the current contours of archival studies and brings these to bear on Black intellectual and cultural history, suggesting how important archives were, and continue to be, for understanding the Black experience in the first decades of the twentieth century while simultaneously underscoring the real world historical and political stakes of archival theory and practice. Presented in roughly chronological order, each of the six core chapters deftly explores a different archival dimension through the work of an exemplary figure. This organization is one of the clear strengths of the book. It dramatizes personal struggle and triumph while simultaneously making more general structural arguments that can be extended to other individuals and historical moments.

Unsurprisingly, the first chapter focuses on Schomburg and his foundational "collection of books on the Negro race" (qtd. in HELTON, 34), which by 1914 totaled some eight hundred books and bibliographical

items related to the African diaspora. The namesake of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is the most recognizable of Helton's figures and the one who has received the most scholarly attention. (Helton also co-edits an in-progress digital edition of Schomburg's papers, "Remaking the World of Arturo Schomburg".) Even as the chapter is centered on Schomburg, however, it pushes back on over-individuation as it sketches out a community of collectors and emphasizes the social history of collecting. Helton also contributes fresh insights in teasing out the differences between individual collecting and the act of archive-building that requires infrastructure and anticipates further use. This move from collection to archive demands a reckoning of literary-cultural and economic value: while these value systems were generally at odds with one another in Schomburg's collecting, so that touchstones of Black intellectual production could often be purchased for relatively little money, the ultimate selling of the collection to the New York Public Library for \$10,000 in 1926 suggested some convergence in which there was an increased (white) public and monetary valuing as well. As Helton notes elsewhere, this process would repeat throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, where prestigious white institutions would often buy up Black collections.

Schomburg's attempts to gather evidence of a long Black intellectual history is counterpointed in the next chapter through a focus on the scrapbooks of L. S. Alexander Gumby — a Southerner who migrated to New York City to take on odd jobs and who would gain some notoriety as a flâneur and host of neighborhood salons. Contributing to an emerging scholarly conversation (perhaps best exemplified by Ellen Gruber Garvey's 2012 book *Writing with Scissors*) that has taken scrapbooking seriously as cultural production, Gumby's scrapbooks are examined as archival structures in which fragments of Black experience are salvaged from a predominantly white print culture and through their assemblage offer a negotiating and resistant narrative. Against a backdrop of Harlem's queer community of artists and writers that scholars have more fully recovered in recent years, Gumby "wielded scrapbooking's inefficiencies — its attention to improvisation and aesthetic detail — to obliquely record insurgent formations of race and sexuality" (69). Underscoring their contingent value, however, many of these scrapbooks were lost before making their way into formal repositories.

As different as their archives were, Schomburg's and Gumby's archives shared similarities both in being products of individual collectors (even as they circulated in their own coteries) before they were institutionalized, and in being

based in Harlem. By contrast, Helton's focus in later chapters on Virginia Lee in Roanoke, Virginia, and Vivian Harsh in Chicago speak to the role of public libraries in fostering Black intellectual engagement beyond the hub of Harlem. Lee's experiences emphasize the difficulties of building a Black library (that is, a library with Black writers and for Black readers) and retaining a record of Black public life in the Jim Crow South. This meant contending with surveillance and censorship and providing clandestine access to controversial books in the library's basement. As Helton notes, such branch libraries were not merely book repositories, but in holding classes and community meetings, "became key sites of communication and convergence for the heterogeneous Black publics of these remade metropolises" (82). If such activities were conducted in the South under a watchful eye, in Chicago (one terminus of the Great Migration), the Hall Branch Library's public role was more prominent not only in building an archive of Chicago's South Side, but in creating public bulletin-board displays of archival objects and transforming into a "community's study hall" for such groups as the DuSable History Club (133).

The foregrounding of Black materials in branch libraries was facilitated by an epistemological shift regarding the cataloging of Black history and intellectual endeavors made possible by such figures as Dorothy Porter. Porter's catalog at Howard University's Moorland collection challenged the reigning Dewey decimal system's reduction of the Black experience to a single call number, 325.26, by offering a reordering of topics and a more robust classification of Black subject matter, as well as by removing "Negro" racial designations so that Black intellectual contributors would be placed alongside their white counterparts. While Dewey's editors prohibited Porter's changes to the system, her influence would be felt through networks of correspondences (with such other libraries as the Library of Congress frequently turning to her to answer patron queries) and through emulation by other institutions. These chapters demonstrate in particular how instrumental women librarians were in preserving and fostering Black intellectual tradition.

As Black readers increasingly saw themselves reflected in book collections and archives, they were enticed to contribute to those archives. This is evident in the "call-and-response" collection of WWII soldiers' letters, part of the Schomburg Collection that L. D. Reddick would come to direct in 1939 following Schomburg's death, in which the general public was encouraged to add their own correspondences and to see the collection as available for more radical political ends. Reddick's campaign also signals another structural undercurrent through Helton's study: a general trajectory from more individual to more collective archival practices

as we move from Schomburg's and Gumby's collecting efforts to local engagement with patrons in branch and academic libraries to national calls for archival engagement.

A century after Schomburg's insistence that the Black past must be dug up in order to remake the future, Helton excavates just how this past was retained and recovered in the first half of the twentieth century by a variety of collectors, archivists, and librarians, concluding that "the politics and ethics of that tradition endure not just in *what* they collected, but in *how* they built their collections and the risks — intellectual, material, and political — that work entailed" (183). Similarly, *Scattered and Fugitive Things* will endure as a significant academic contribution not only in its showcasing of central and often obscured bibliographical sites and actors, but also in how it weaves together many strands of archival studies and Black studies, and in doing so enriches both.

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Work Cited

SCHOMBURG, Arturo. 1925. "The Negro Digs Up His Past". *Survey Graphic*, 6.6: 699–700.