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Review

Laura E. Helton, Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History

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Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History. Laura E. Helton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 305 pp. 978-0-2312-1274-8

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Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History, by Laura E. Helton, has broken ground by telling the story of how Black, primarily African American, bibliophiles, archivists, and librarians in the early 20th century used archiving and cataloguing as tools to build Black collections and, as the author argues, to thereby define what Blackness meant for them. The book was named one of the best Black history books of 2024 by the African American Intellectual History Society and was nominated by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) as a finalist for the annual ASALH Book Prize, which recognizes the best new books in African American history and culture.

Reading this book is an exquisite experience for connoisseurs of book history, archives, Black history, and the organization of information. The author, Laura E. Helton, a white historian who also formally trained and worked as an archivist for many years, has produced a text that is meticulously researched and tightly woven. Although each chapter covers a different influential Black bibliophile, librarian, or archivist, the narrative is whole. In chapter 1, the reader follows Arthur Schomburg, the respected Afro–Puerto Rican bibliophile as he searches for, bids on, and relishes in all books Africana. He amassed a dynamic collection of books on global Black culture and history over several decades, which was eventually bought by the New York Public Library in 1926 for US$10,000. The sale of the collection coincided, serendipitously, with the establishment of Negro History Week (later Black History Month) in the United States and was an important symbolic and affective action that demonstrated the historic

and monetary value of a Black collection. In chapter 2, the reader sits with L.S. Alexander Gumby in his Gumby Book Studio as he uses craft paper and homemade adhesive to preserve ephemera in the creation of a "History of the Negro in Scrapbooks" (p. 56). Gumby saw himself as a "vandal," crafting history from scraps that others might discard (p. 56). His scrapbooks focused on different personalities and events in Black history and eventually made their way to an academic library at a predominately white institution toward the end of his life.

In chapter 3, we leave Harlem Renaissance–era New York City to learn of the risks Virginia Lee, a Black librarian, took to collect, defend, and hide, when necessary, the "collection of works by and about the Negro" (p. 95) she built at the Gainsboro public library in Roanoke, Virginia, in the 1920s. In chapter 4, Dorothy Porter, a librarian at Howard University, intervenes in the anti-Blackness of the Dewey Decimal system by creating her own taxonomy while also creating prolific bibliographies that locate and document Black presence throughout a myriad of academic subjects. In chapter 5, we go to Bronzeville, a neighbourhood in Chicago that received large flows of Black migrants from the American South in the 1930s. Here, Vivian Harsh, the first Black woman librarian to head a branch of the Chicago Public library, established a reading room where everyday people were able to learn and quench their thirst for Black history and culture. Some notable patrons of the library included the girl who would grow up to become Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks and the boy who would grow up to be John H. Johnson, the founder of the Johnson Publishing Company and publisher of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. Finally, in chapter 6, we return to New York City, where L.D. Reddick became the curator of the Schomburg Collection after the death of its namesake. Reddick took up an ambitious project, which the author refers to as "call and response" archiving (p. 156): soliciting letters soldiers wrote to their family and friends to document genuine Black experiences in the US military during World War II.

At a talk Helton gave about *Scattered and Fugitive Things* in Chicago, a member of the audience prefaced a question about the author's interest in the topic by commenting that "these are not the kind of things we learn in library school."[1] Indeed, the passionate information work described in this book is a powerful and needed intervention in the world of library, archival, and book history and

1 Audience member, annual meeting of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, Chicago, October 17, 2024.

in the field of information and library science. The profiles presented in this book allow us to see the significant work Black people have done to ensure their archival materials reach the future. These are stories that can encourage and inspire other generations, especially as the field of library and information science continues to wring its hands about how to address the lack of representative racial and ethnic diversity among library students and professional archivists and librarians.

In writing this book, Helton both engages modern archival theory and concepts and shows the reader how the subjects of the book themselves theorized and understood their materials. The idea of archival abundance surfaces throughout the book. While modern readers may be familiar with the idea of information overload and with the notion that digital materials are produced at a rate beyond the capacity of information professionals, it is rare to hear the term *abundance* used today in reference to the records of Black people. Instead, we are accustomed to seeing terms such as *loss*, *silence*, *absence*, and *hidden* in descriptions of the archival records of Black communities. However, Helton successfully shows how those she highlights worked from a sense of abundance, and she credits Dorothy Porter as the first person to discuss the "Negro information explosion" (p. 178).

Helton presents the history of Black collecting and archiving in a manner that resonates with and can inform how we think about archival appraisal and description. From this book, we see that, even early in the 20th century, Black archivists, librarians, and bibliophiles understood intuitively, based on their lived experiences, the evidential nature of archival records: that the building of collections and repositories was inherently political; that archives could be made to be used in the present for activism; and that, as public places, they could be welcoming spaces for Black people and Black thought. These are all ideas discussed in current-day archival literature – especially in relation to community-based archives.

Helton is a sensitive, honest, and attentive author who weaves in important context about the world of Black archival activism and shows the connections and correspondences among the main characters. Helton sees the agency of the people about whom she writes and allows the reader to consider along with her the aims, challenges, and successes of Black archival practice. This book shows the long-term impact "Negro Collections" (chap. 3, n34) and collecting had on later Black intellectual and artistic movements. Harlem Renaissance writers

studied the Schomburg Collection; Black intellectuals began their studies at the George Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, which was managed by Vivian Harsh. And the ground these initiatives laid, in terms of locating texts, creating lists, and microfilming, facilitated the later formal establishment of the field of Black studies in the United States.

In *Scattered and Fugitive Things*, we are at the intersection of archival studies and Black history, as the author explains in the introduction. When we finish, we are not left to be naively inspired but are always witnessing the work of Black bibliophiles, librarians, and archivists and the risks they took as they insisted upon their community's visibility within the archival and historical record. We see vividly in this book how archiving was carried out as a service to the race. And yet, Helton brings us into the ever-precarious present to ponder the commodification of Black archival materials, which often puts them outside the reach of Black collectors and Black archival repositories.

For Black people, remembering and archiving have often seemed to be both urgent and transgressive acts. We are treated in this book to the formidable stories of "Black archives – not simply archives of blackness" (p. 5), created by Black people for Black consumption. Modern-day archivists and librarians can learn much from the narratives shared herein. May we recall Dorothy Porter's call to "develop an 'ever-vigilant eye'" and to "begin to search for unknown information on the Negro in your own town archives, in your public and university libraries and in private collections in your geographic area" (p. 128). This call very much needs to be heeded today.