

Arturo Schomburg's Place in an Antiracist Curriculum

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue the benefits of incorporating a study of the life and archival works of scholar Arturo Schomburg into the canon of an antiracist, culturally responsive and sustaining education curriculum. Scholars traditionally study Schomburg in the context of the Latin American independence movements or in relation to his involvement with the Harlem Renaissance. In this paper, I discuss Schomburg's life and show how two of his works, *Excerpt from Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges* and "A Negro Digs Up His Past," mirror the rhetoric used by antiracist educators and activists today. Finally, I describe the pedagogical merit in Schomburg's archival work as a basis for a culturally responsive and sustaining education unit of study in a New York City high school English class.

Keywords: Arturo Schomburg, antiracist curriculum, intersectionality, antiracist rhetoric, archival project

Introduction

With the recent rise of movements addressing systemic racism, the term "antiracist" has become part of the mainstream vernacular. In the United States, many educators are capitalizing on this momentum and making efforts to modify their curricula to be more aligned with antiracist ideologies. Developed by a panel of experts in 2018, New York State's culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) education framework was created to do just that. Recognizing that a "complex system of biases and structural inequities is . . . deeply rooted in our country's history, culture, and institutions" (New York State Education Department, n.d., para 2), the CR-S framework offers educators suggestions about how to make their classrooms more antiracist by emphasizing the importance of inclusive curricula and assessments. For the urban educator attempting to revise their curriculum to be more aligned with the New York State CR-S framework, a study of the life and work of Arturo Schomburg holds promise. Schomburg was a Puerto Rican-born bibliophile—and, later, a New Yorker—whose work collecting artifacts from the Black diaspora led to the creation of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. By studying Arturo Schomburg, educators, particularly those in New York City, can revise and revitalize their curriculum to be more aligned with the antiracist goals of the CR-S framework and to facilitate important discussions about identity with their students.

Schomburg's Personal History: The Origin of His Scholarship

To understand the antiracist application of his works, it's important to learn about Arturo Alfonso Schomburg's life. He was born in 1874 in Cangrejos, Puerto Rico, to an Afro-Puerto Rican mother and a father of German ancestry (Holton, 2007). It's said that, as a young child, Schomburg was told by one of his teachers that Black people had no history, a comment that inspired his work with the New York Public Library later in his life (Valdes, 2017). In 1891, at the age of 17, Arturo Schomburg moved to New York City and became an active participant in the Cuban and Puerto Rican independence movements, working in the masonic lodges with notable nationalists José Martí and Pachin Marin. While he worked with his fellow Latinos for independence, Arturo lived in San Juan Hill, a Black neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan. There he met and married Elizabeth Hatcher, an African American woman, with whom he had three sons (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010). Some scholars credit his proximity to Black Americans as the catalyst for his later work during the Harlem



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Renaissance. However, the actual catalyst for this shift was his work with the Prince Hall Masons, which led him to meet civil rights activist John Edwards Bruce and to become heavily involved with a community of African American intellectuals (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010). When the United States took control of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, the liberation movements disbanded, and Arturo shifted away from lodge work. He co-created the Negro Society for Historical Research in 1911, became the president of the American Negro Academy in 1920, and collected what at that time was the largest collection of artifacts from the African diaspora (New York Public Library, n.d.b).

Some scholars view Schomburg's shift in priorities from independence to the African diaspora as an effort to "exile himself from the Boricua community because he felt more at home among African Americans" (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 254), but that's not true. As evidenced in the books he collected, the articles he wrote, and the translations he provided between English and Spanish throughout his life's work, it's clear that Schomburg never disavowed his identity as an Afro-Borinqueño. Rather, his work expresses a "quintessentially Boricua doubly bound racial articulation, in which Blackness is not necessarily Black by U.S. standards, and what appears White is not necessarily White by U.S. standards, but race and racism are nevertheless the definitive concerns" (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 254). An Afro-Latinx person in New York City at that time could expect to encounter the same kinds of segregation that Black Americans did, a fact sometimes overlooked by leaders in the movement who were not people of color. Jose Marti famously stated that in a liberated Cuba "there would be no Blacks and Whites, 'only Cubans'" (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010, p. 70). While this argument was meant to inspire unity, it also implied a color-blind nationalism that was not representative of the lived experiences of Afro-Latinx people like Arturo, who lived in a city that was divided by the color line (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010). As Hoffnung-Garskof (2010) wrote, Schomburg believed that "African American institutions in the United States would offer the best structure for achieving freedom and equality for" those of African American descent in both the U.S. and Cuba (as cited in Holton, 2007, p. 232). Thus, his move to African American scholarly pursuits reflects less of a shift in alliances and more of a clarification of Arturo's already long-held intersectional beliefs.

Schomburg's Archives

Arturo Schomburg's most significant contribution to modern scholarship is his archives. Stemming from a desire to uplift Black scholarship and prove his childhood teacher wrong, Arturo Schomburg was an avid collector of the books, pamphlets, menus, manuscripts, and artwork of Black authors and artists. It is important to note that this collection was not centered solely around the Black American experience but, rather, included various examples of artwork from the entire African diaspora, including his fellow Afro-Latinx people. While he was not the first scholar to suggest the connection with those of the Black diaspora, Schomburg's archival project was nonetheless "an important site of Afrodiasporic cultural memory, [which] . . . provided a pedagogical foundation for contemporary Black internationalist politics and for subsequent political, cultural and intellectual efforts" (Holton, 2007, p. 221). His personal collection made him an "invaluable resource for such important scholars and writers as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Alain L. Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Eric Walrond, and Claude McKay" (Valdes, 2017, p. 2), and his Brooklyn home was frequented by visitors. In 1925, Schomburg sold his collection—104 crates containing more than 5,000 books, 3,000 manuscripts, 2,000 etchings and paintings, and several thousand pamphlets—to the New York Public Library for \$10,000 (New York Public Library, n.d.a). This donation became the "seed library" for the modern Schomburg Center, which currently houses more than 11 million items that shed light on the richness and beauty of global Black history, arts, and culture (New York Public Library, n.d.c). Through these archival materials, Schomburg's legacy lives on today.

Schomburg's Writings

In addition to being a remarkable collector, Schomburg was an avid writer who used many of his written works as an opportunity to further his archival goal of uplifting Black people and scholarship. In his 1913 address to the teachers' summer class at the Cheney Institute, entitled *Excerpt from Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges*, Schomburg addressed the lack of consideration given Black scholarship in the university curriculum. He was "not [trying] to revolutionize existing standards, but simply to improve them by amending them so that they will include the practical history of the Negro Race from the dawn of civilization to the present time" and "inspire us to racial integrity" (Schomburg, 1913, p. 5). Schomburg argued that Black people should seek to uncover their common history as part of the African diaspora, writing that "the Negro must strive to follow in the good example of the Jews—they cling to their customs and traditions, no matter whether they live in [Timbuktu] or in the highest peaks of the Andean Mountains; they cling together and uphold the maxim that 'in unity there is strength'" (Schomburg, 1913, pp. 6-7). Drawing parallels with the Jewish diaspora, Schomburg argued for unity among the people of the African diaspora, who he said should strive to hold on to their own cultural traditions and customs, regardless of where they currently live. In Schomburg's view, the meeting ground for international Black unity is not the practice of common traditions but, rather, an understanding of international Black history (Holton, 2007, p. 222). To construct that meeting ground, that space for international Black unity, Schomburg argued for the formation of "a course of study in Negro History and achievements" and set the foundation for the Black studies movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Schomburg, 1913, p. 6). In another important piece of writing, Arturo Schomburg advocated for the study of Black history and the reframing of traditional historical narratives to include Black contributions. In his 1925 piece, "A Negro Digs Up His Past," Schomburg wrote that "the Negro has been considered a man without history because he has been a man without a worthy culture" (p. 670). Schomburg argued that scholars traditionally lack understanding of Africa's "true role and position in human history and the early development of culture" and, moreover, that mainstream scholarship either neglects Black contributions to history or regards their contributions as "exceptional," unfairly disassociating those contributions from the group (p. 670). Schomburg directs us to pay attention to what we deem as worthy of collection and reminds White historians that their racism is causing large chunks of history to be erased. The need to recover this history is crucial: Schomburg argued that "the recovery of Black history will lead to liberation from the 'social damage of slavery,'" and that "the subjugation and manipulation of knowledge" allow the legacy of slavery to continue (Holton, 2007, p. 228). In other words, decolo-

nizing history may be the only path to liberating Black youth from the legacy of slavery. The need to reexamine history is vital, as it provides Black youth with the “spiritual nourishment of [their] cultural past” (Schomburg, 1925, p. 672). This theme of sustenance or, as he phrased it, “spiritual nourishment” is often repeated throughout Schomburg’s writing, thus illustrating his point that an archive of Black history is not only important but absolutely necessary to Afrodiasporic subjectivity and the future of Afrodiasporic peoples (Holton, 2007, p. 219). Without an archive of Black history, Schomburg argued, the spirit starves.

Comparing Schomburg to Antiracist Activists

Significantly, Arturo Schomburg’s arguments align with the goals of many antiracist educators in the United States. The goal of contemporary antiracist educators is to confront the “White dominant culture” that has historically shaped “educational structures and policies [and controlled] how students are expected to behave, communicate and interact” (Osta & Route Chatmon, 2018, para. 3). Antiracist educator and activist Dena Simmons (2019) offered a list of recommendations for teachers to follow to create an antiracist educational space. Her first two recommendations ask educators to “engage in vigilant self-awareness” (para. 3) and acknowledge that racism and White supremacy exist. Her third recommendation calls for educators to elevate narratives that promote the intellectual achievements of students of color. In her 2019 article, “How to Be an Antiracist Educator,” Simmons writes:

For too long, we have taught U.S. history devoid of a true depiction of Black excellence and have focused on erasing the truth of racial oppression and uplifting Whiteness. Our curriculum superficially talks about slavery and civil rights (notably, textbook provider McGraw-Hill called enslaved Africans “immigrants” and “workers”), and teaching practices risk traumatizing Black students by enacting mock slave auctions, slave games, and underground railroad games. Alternately, resources such as Henry Louis Gates Jr’s PBS documentary series on Reconstruction or the *New York Times Magazine’s* 1619 Project provide a comprehensive opportunity to learn and discuss history and race with colleagues and students. (para. 8)

It bears noting that these words mirror the rhetoric of Arturo Schomburg, who highlighted the importance of providing a comprehensive opportunity to learn and discuss history from a non-White-centric point of view. As Schomburg remarked in “A Negro Digs Up His Past,” it is this lack of representative history that allows the legacy of slavery to continue (Schomburg, 1925), sentiments Simmons (2019) echoed when she referenced the “racial oppression” inherent in our common core curriculum (para. 8). In another example, Bettina Love, noted antiracist scholar and board member of the Abolitionist Teaching Network, has argued that “the current curriculum is not responsive to [Black and Brown children’s] histories, their identities, or their desired future selves” (Haymarket Books, 2020). This process of neglect results in the “spirit murder” of our Black and Brown youth (Haymarket Books, 2020). Love’s (2020) use of the term “spirit murder” hearkens back to Schomburg’s (1925) calls to reframe history to ensure the “spiritual nourishment” of Black youth. In Love’s and Schomburg’s work, the White-centric history taught in our schools is doing spiritual damage to Black and Brown youth: for Schomburg, Black people’s lack of representation leads to spiritual starvation; for Love, it’s spirit murder. Thus, Schomburg’s writings align with the antiracist educational frameworks being established by leaders today. By studying Schomburg’s writings, teachers who may previously have been unaware of his work can gain valuable insight into the history and interconnectedness of these antiracist movements. Students, too, can benefit from this instruction as part of a CR-S-aligned curriculum. In an English class, for example, students could compare and contrast the rhetorical strategies employed by Arturo Schomburg and contemporary antiracist activists, noting similarities and differences in their ideology and expression.

Racial Identity

A study of Schomburg’s life can help facilitate a rich discussion about racial identity and help students develop a deeper understanding of their identities. As Simmons (2019) says, some educators express an “underlying discomfort with talking about race, identity, and difference in our nation’s classrooms” (para 1). Simmons continues, “When we shy away from open conversations about

race with young people, we sow the seeds of prejudice by inadvertently sending the message that something is wrong with people from another race” (para 9). Schomburg’s “quintessentially Boricua doubly bound racial articulation” opens up these kinds of important discussions and speaks to the idea that identity is fluid and doesn’t need to be defined by outside perceptions (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 254). As Hoffnung-Garskof (2010) wrote, “Although they frequently face the presumption that one is either Black or Latin@, Afro-Latin@s [like Schomburg] can have experiences and social contracts that link them to *both* communities. They negotiate parallel, if differently configured, exclusions as they move between Latin American and United States societies” (p. 88). In interrogating the multiple worlds Schomburg’s identity encompasses, students can gain valuable insight into the intersections that may be present in their identities and into the various ways society works to elevate or erase these identities. By centering these discussions around prominent scholars of color, educators are doing the work demanded by antiracist activists: reframing history and elevating the narratives of people of color. In this way, teachers can provide their students with the spiritual nourishment that is so necessary for children’s development.

An Archival Project

Students should work to create their historical archives as part of a yearlong exploration of community and identity that builds on the work of Arturo Schomburg. In the 1970s, scholar Michel Foucault developed the theory of the archive:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor [in] the historical a priori and the archive do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale. (1976, pp. 145-146)

Foucault notes that the archive is not just a collection of historical documents but, rather, a method of organizing and assigning significance to historical materials, allowing some to shine brightly like stars and others to fade away into obscurity. In a nutshell, an archive acts as a record of the history that society wants to remember. Even though he predated Foucault’s theory, Schomburg’s efforts to archive Black history “exhibit an awareness of the relationship between power and the archive that Foucault identifies” (Holton, 2007, p. 226).

Since artifacts are assigned cultural and historical significance through the process of archival work (Foucault, 1976), there is no better way to reframe our educational priorities than by putting our students at the center of the discussion. An archival project does just that. Students in an English class could submit their short stories, music, essays, poetry, pamphlets, artwork, or magazines to a class archive, which could then be presented to the greater school community. While there is a place for the standard five-paragraph essay, our curriculum too often reverts to these more traditional, White-centric expressions of mastery as being appropriate for academia and ignores the value of creative forms of expression. My 11th graders lament the fact that school feels like it’s all about tests. With the SAT, the ACT, and the Regents looming, I can’t blame them. By allowing students to submit pieces from a variety of genres, a class archive has the potential to disrupt this notion, thereby allowing the learning to be student-centered and telling students that their work is worthy of being remembered and showcased.

This archival project could easily be expanded to allow students the opportunity to explore their communities. As suggested in *5 Steps for Liberating Public Education from Its Deep Racial Bias*, offering activities that invite students to explore their communities and identities can “counter the effects of pervasive racial stereotypes and reduce stress in students of color,” as well as “reassure students about who they are and protect their sense of academic belonging” (Osta & Route Chatmon, 2018, para. 11). This ultimately leads to greater engagement and more positive academic

outcomes for students of color (Osta & Route Chatmon, 2018). An archival project would allow students to collect artifacts that highlight the beauty and richness of their communities. Teachers could send their students out into their neighborhoods to search for items to add to the community archive. Students could interview residents of their community about the history of their neighborhoods, collect pamphlets or menus from local businesses and restaurants, or get involved with local politics. Students could possibly even share their work with the Schomburg Center. Imagine how empowering it would feel for students' work and community research to be validated as items of historical significance that will be remembered for future generations. By elevating and uplifting all marginalized voices and experiences, this project would expand on Schomburg's goals and allow his legacy to continue to have an impact on future generations.

Conclusion

Arturo Schomburg's life and writings offer a wealth of opportunities for educators looking to develop an antiracist curriculum, strengthen their students' critical literacy skills, and transform their classrooms into student-centered, antiracist spaces. Intentionally or unintentionally, the U.S. education system still espouses racist values and produces racial inequities that negatively impact students of color. Simmons (2019) references numerous studies that illustrate this point, like the 2018 Southern Poverty Law Center study that recorded 3,265 incidents of hate or bias in the fall of 2018 alone, or the Federal Commission of School Safety report that showed that students of color are more harshly disciplined than White students (Simmons, 2019). The data are staggering and the need for reform is urgent. As New York City educators look for ways to incorporate CR-S-aligned pedagogy and revitalize our school system to become one that promotes justice, healing, joy, liberation, and spiritual nourishment for all scholars who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color, a study of Arturo Schomburg's life, and specifically his archives, is a promising first step.

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