

# The African American Museum and Library at Oakland: An Interview with Curator and Director Rick Moss

by

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The following interview was conducted in September 2014 with the Chief Curator and Director Rick Moss, M.A. of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland (Oakland, California, USA)



**IMZ:** First all, thank you Rick for this interview, I know you have a host of duties as Chief Curator and Director of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland (AAMLO), a post I believe you've held since July 2001 (and I believe we were originally introduced when you were the Program Manager of History at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, California when I was working at UCLA).

**RM:** Itibari thank you for inviting AAMLO to participate in this important survey. You are so correct. We first met years ago while I was working at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. Time has time has flown. It is hard to believe that I have been at AAMLO longer than I was at CAAM. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to work at both of these institutions.

**IMZ:** In reading the history of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland (AAMLO), the collection began as a private collection in 1946 which in 1964 became the East Bay Negro Historical Society, then via a name change it became the Northern California Center for Afro-American History & Life and finally in 1994 the collection was incorporated into the City of Oakland in 1994 as AAMO.

In the development of library history in the U.S. one may consider such history as unusual, but in 1926 the New York Public Library added the personal collection of the distinguished scholar and bibliophile Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (a man of African heritage) to the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints of its 135th Street Branch Library with Schomburg as curator of the division from 1932 until his death in 1938 which was renamed in his honor in 1940, and in 1972 it was designated as one of the research libraries of The New York Public Library, now known as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the world's leading research facilities devoted to the preservation of materials on the life, history and culture of African world community which functions as the national research library as it provides free access to its vast non-circulating collections.

In this context, would you say AAMLO is following in the tradition of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture or is it even more specialized via its regional focus, i.e., Northern California and the West Coast of the U.S.?

**RM:** I absolutely agree with that statement. The tradition and distinction that was established by the New York Public Library with the founding of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is definitely something to be admired, appreciated, and if ever the opportunity presents itself, replicated. Without question AAMLO is following in those footsteps. I can recall during the early 90's when the merger was being considered a focus group convened in Oakland to ponder exactly what kind of institution might result from the merger. I, Robert Haynes, Drs. Albert Broussard, Shirley Ann Moore and others were part of that group. I also seem to recall that Dr. Howard Dodson was there or at least had been invited. So, from the very beginning the Schomburg model was under consideration. The fact that the majority of the archival and history collections focused on the history of African Americans in northern California and the west gave it a more regional focus. While this focus determines our collections policy, we are free to explore national or international aspects of African American art, history and culture through our exhibitions and public programs.





**IMZ:** The African American Museum and Library at Oakland has the distinction of being the premier public reference and research repository on African American history and life on the West Coast. What other distinctions does it hold that the general public may not be aware of?

**RM:** The general public may not be aware that this building was designated as a City of Oakland Landmark #48 in 1981. It is listed on the National Historic Register (1983) and in 2004 received an award for outstanding restoration and preservation from the California Heritage Council. After being significantly damaged during the 1989 Loma Preita earthquake and lying vacant until the mid-90s, the African American architectural firm of Michael Willis & Associates led the restoration and retrofit effort. The restoration cost total \$11.5m dollars. It is one of the largest Carnegie libraries, and in my opinion, one of the most aesthetically pleasing.



Ceiling architecture of the African American Museum and Library at Oakland

**IMZ:** In providing quality and inclusive programming at AAMLO in the past, and possibly presently, you partnered with the Oakland Unified School District and other community agencies. In your opinion, has that kind of collaboration increased or decreased over the years, and if so why, and if not, why not?

**RM:** Honestly, we would love to collaborate a lot more with the Oakland Unified School District. If successful, a grant that I am currently writing to the IMLS will help remedy that. I am not sure if teachers within the system are aware of the resources AAMLO has to offer, and the kind of assistance it might provide with respect to supporting the standards that are outlined in the California History and Social Science curriculum. I do believe that we can do a better job of making that known to an obviously beleaguered school district. We are doing a lot of work with various community groups and communities. Our goal of raising the AAMLO profile over the past fourteen years has resulted in a greater visibility in Oakland and the knowledge that AAMLO is a welcoming place and a center for dialogue. Here is one example. A collaborative effort involving the First Unitarian Church, AAMLO and Dr. Susheel A. Bibbs will result in the taping of an October 2014 stage performance, and later a video documentary, on the lives of the Hyers Sisters- Anna Madah and Emma Louise- African American operatic prodigies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. AAMLO welcomes unique partnerships that extend the boundaries of traditional library or museums services not only because it is key to our survival as viable institutions, but also because it is the right thing to do.



Archives section of the Museum section of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland

**IMZ:** AAMLO has over 160 collections in its archives that contain the diaries of prominent families, pioneers, churches, social and political organizations, local and national newspapers on microfilm (e.g., *Freedom's Journal*, the *Liberator*, *California Voice*, *Sun Reporter*, *Muhammed Speakers*, the *Black Panther*) and an oral history collection of interviews with local civil rights activists, educators, writers, and musicians. In your opinion, what are the most unique aspects of these collections, and why do you view them as such?

**RM:** These collections are unique because they document the activities of a well established African American community specifically in Oakland, which often gets an undeserved bad rap and the west coast in general. We know this applies not only to Oakland, but to Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento and Seattle. They shed light on the pattern of activities that historically occur in any community, regardless of race or ethnicity. These collections document and place African American people on the stage; as actors, and not a group of folks always waiting for something to happen to them. They give life to what has operated as a deficit theory of history when it comes to understanding and appreciating our contributions to the development of the west.

**IMZ:** Public libraries seem to be in the forefront of providing free access to information about the African and African American community in the U.S. and around the world, such as: the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library of the Denver Public Library (focused on the history, literature, art, music, religion, and politics of African Americans in Colorado and throughout the Rocky Mountain West), the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History (a special library of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System) in Atlanta, Georgia, the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at Chicago Public Library (one of the largest repositories of information on the Black experience in the Midwest), named in honor of the first African American woman to head a location of the Chicago Public Library; and the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a 60,000 sq ft unit of the Broward County Library that features a museum, an art gallery, exhibit areas, a special collections vault, 75-seat seminar rooms, a gift shop, and an 300-seat auditorium.

This wealth of information and resources in my opinion is phenomenal, hence, how do you think we can best preserve this treasure in the mist of often dwindling public funding for these important special collection around the nation?

**RM:** As long as public library systems can avoid what has happened to public education. The attack upon public education has been unrelenting, until it is only a shell of the system in which you and I were educated. Significantly flawed as it was, nevertheless nurtured by the idea that a hall mark of a republican society was the manner in which it educated its youth, and that society at large shared the responsibility and cost of providing the resources to make that happen. We have watched public education in America be dismantled school district by school district until it is almost too late.



If the institutions that you mentioned are to survive we must be willing to take an active role in their survival. That means supporting their activities by our presence at their exhibitions and public programs. The importance of volunteer and friends groups to sustain these institutions cannot be overstated. We can promise ourselves to be educated on ballot initiatives and bond measure that might impact positively or negatively our local libraries or museums- and then act. It is not coincidental that library and library/museums are surviving and thriving. I think that is because in the face of ever shrinking public services, the one thing the public expects to remain is its public libraries. It is our responsibility to speak-up and support them.



Library section of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland

**IMZ:** In late October of this year, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture will host a two day conference titled the ‘State of Black Research Collections’ focused on issues concerning present and future access to and the preservation of African American and African world community materials in the wake of dwindling institutional budgets which ultimately create a high-risk environment for these collections. How do you think this situation can be remedied or at least minimized so that the collections can be better protected and preserved, in the present, and in the future?

**RM:** There is absolutely the need to hire or retain on contract professionally trained archivist and conservationist. If this is not a financial option fomenting a relationship with a local or regional library or museum studies program that often have graduate level interns and professors who are in search of practical hands-on experience to work on collections. Secondly, I am convinced that if our institutions are to survive then we must begin to cultivate the next generation of museum and library professionals. That means going into the middle school or high school classrooms and recruiting young people to work in our libraries and museums. Exposure to possible careers in these fields might provide the expertise that is so needed. Whether they choose to work in either of these areas or not, at the very least we may have cultivated the next generation of arts patrons, benefactors and supporters.



AAMLO mural of local and regional persons and eras.

**IMZ:** In my research, I was pleased to learn that last year AAMLO hosted “*The Griots of Oakland: Voices from the African American Oral History Project*”, an exhibit and book project concerning African American male youth who were instructed in oral history methodologies and videography to conduct peer-to-peer interviews with about 100 African American boys and men aged 6-24 throughout Oakland that in short was designed to highlight aspects of their reality that is often misunderstood and ignored by mainstream media and to alter discourse on how they are perceived within society. How and why did AAMLO become involved in the project, and is there a possibility of similar projects in the future?

**RM:** AAMLO was approached by the folks who spearheaded the project. Although I had some concerns about the fact that none of the administrative or exhibition staff were African American or African American males, I nevertheless supported their sincere attempt to address this important issue. I also had some concerns about whom and what is a griot? We know for example that in order to be a *griot* one must have lived a significant number of years and gathered enough of life's experience to share with others. So usually it is the elders in a community that are respectfully given the title of *griot*. My early assessment can be summed up as, "If you don't know ask somebody." These criticisms notwithstanding I felt that they could be addressed with public programs to overcome the interpretive deficiencies inherent in the book and exhibition. Prior to hosting *The Griots of Oakland*, we were considering doing an exhibition on this subject. A member of our friends group is currently researching grant opportunities to develop an ongoing youth mentorship program that will partly involve AAMLO in a comprehensive education program for children of incarcerated parents because that is a huge part of this equation that is not being addressed.

**IMZ:** In 2008 you opened *Visions Towards Tomorrow: The African American Community in Oakland, 1890-1990* as a permanent multi-media history exhibition for the African American Museum & Library that consists of photos, manuscripts, letters, home movies, and newspapers, as well as a touch-screen interactive media that shows interviews with 60 multiethnic and multigenerational Oakland residents. If you would update that exhibit, what would you include?

**RM:** I have been thinking a lot about that. The exhibition is a modular design that allows for the easy replacement of panels that might cover different aspect of community building and we have certainly not exhausted the long list of pioneers and persons of interest that deserve exposure. AAMLO has thousands of photographs, so replacing the huge banners would also happen. They are magnificent visual statements. I would love to select another group of Oaklanders to update and add to voices of Oakland via the interviews. That would be fun!



West wing of the Museum section of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland





AAMLO mural of local and regional persons and eras.

**IMZ:** AAMLO host traveling and original exhibitions, can you provide our readers with some insight into future or ongoing exhibits at the museum and library?

**RM:** Given the significant population of West Indians in Oakland at the turn of the century and the activities of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, I am seriously considering an exhibition of Marcus Garvey and the Garveyites in Oakland. Another exhibition under consideration is the history of 7<sup>th</sup> street, the commercial and cultural heart of the African American community in west Oakland until the 1970s.