

The Schomburg and its Collections are Safe and Secure in Harlem: A Message from Howard Dodson

The recent announcement of my plan to retire in February 2011 has sparked a variety of reactions. Numerous individuals have written, called or spoken to me in person telling me that I simply cannot retire. The principle reason they give is that my leaving will result in the demise of the Center. While I appreciate these acknowledgements of my role in the development of the Center over the last 25 years, I have not done it alone. And while many say they won't be able to find someone like me as a successor, I'm not convinced that someone exactly like me is what the Center needs.

My successor will have to have an uncompromising commitment to preserving the legacies of our ancestors that are documented in the Center's collections and those that still need to be documented, preserved, interpreted and celebrated. But he or she will also need to be someone who is ready to grab a hold of the new technologies that are emerging everyday and use them to extend access to our rich and varied heritage nationally and globally. He or she will need to be entrepreneurial enough to find or make the money needed to support such effort. And he or she will need to be capable of establishing, maintaining and exploiting (in the best sense of the term) relationships with a vast array of economic, political, civic and social leaders (locally as well as nationally and internationally) and ordinary black people (if there is such a thing) domestically as well as internationally. Most importantly, the Schomburg has always been and must continue to be a forum for the free and unfettered exchange of ideas, a cardinal principle that my successor must be dedicated to defending.. Such persons do exist. And a person will be found. A competent, committed, truth-seeking director of the Schomburg Center can and will be found to succeed me. The search for the next director is being led capably by Library trustees Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gordon Davis. The Center will not die so long as black people are committed to keeping it alive, growing and serving. Ultimately, the future of the Schomburg Center is (as it has always been) in our collective hands, not just mine or my successor's.

What has moved me the most about the flurry of emails, blogs, and news stories that have appeared in print and electronic media has been the deep, passionate concerns that so many have expressed about the future of the Schomburg Center. This has, indeed, been heartening because it is clear evidence that so many of you care deeply about the Center's future and are prepared to support, defend and protect it. What has troubled me is that unfortunately, some of the concerns that motivated these expressions of commitment are simply not true, not based on fact. The most disturbing of the false rumors that are circulating and creating so much anxiety is the notion that The New York Public Library is planning to break up the Schomburg Center's collection and disburse them throughout its branch libraries. No proposal to do such a mindless and egregious thing has ever been proposed during my 25-plus year history here that I am aware of. A series of consulting firms working for the Library did recommend strategies for consolidating the research library operations that included centralizing research library functions and collections in the 42nd Street Building.

The New York Public Library is [on record](#) as saying that the Schomburg Center's collections will remain intact and its programs and services will be housed in its Harlem headquarters at 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard. The President of the Library, Dr. Paul LeClerc, and several board members have assured me that the Schomburg Center will continue to thrive in its current location. Gordon Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., took the lead on the Board of Trustees in assuring that neither the Center nor its collections would be moved from Harlem. Both of them have been incredibly responsive to my requests for help with fundraising and other support. Councilwoman Inez Dickens and Congressman Charles Rangel have also been actively involved with the Library in assuring that neither the Center's programs nor its collections would be moved from its Harlem-based headquarters.

Thanks to Councilwoman Dickens and the New York City Council, the Schomburg Center is in the midst of planning the second phase of its major renovation project. Ms. Dickens and the Council have committed \$10 million toward renovating the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, upgrading the Art and Artifacts and Moving Image and Recorded Sound Divisions, renovating the Langston Hughes Auditorium, replacing the roof on the Landmark Building, upgrading the HVAC and Fire Alarm Systems and redoing the streetscape in front of the complex along Malcolm X Boulevard and 135th Street. With full funding from Ms. Dickens and the Council in hand, architects have been hired and preliminary architectural plans are being reviewed. The Schomburg Center is being readied for decades more service from its Harlem-based location.

In late 2008, I asked Dr. Gates and Dr. Johnnetta Cole to chair a committee of leaders in the arts, culture, and academic fields, to assist the Schomburg in developing a strategic vision for a renewed Schomburg Center for the 21st Century. The report of that work is now available on the Center's website (www.schomburgcenter.org). In it, you will find a vision for a bright future for the Center, both in terms of the incredible significance of its work and its ongoing leadership role in communities local, national, and worldwide.

I urge you to read the [materials that are on the Center's website](#). I encourage you to visit the Schomburg in person and online. And I also encourage you to attend the Library's "What's Up @ the Schomburg: A Community Conversation," a forum that will be held in the Langston Hughes Auditorium on Thursday, July 29, 2010 from 5:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Thank you for your passion and for your continued support of the Schomburg.