Memorandum from W. E. B. Du Bois to New York Public Library, November 23, 1931

Addressed to Catherine Latimer; later version of a memo to Franklin Hopper concerning incidents of racial prejudice transpired at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library and making four requests regarding staffing thereat. Revised version of mums312-b060-i153 and mums312-b060-i154.

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Discrimination in employment --United States
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Sir:

The undersigned have been increasingly alarmed during the last few years at the relations of the New York Public Library to the colored population of New York City. For years the Library ignored the Negroes, even in the districts where they predominated. They were not made welcome and no literature was arranged to meet their wants or needs.

This was changed when Miss Ernestine Rose came to the 125th Street Branch, and we had for years high hopes of what would happen. Negro literature was furnished. Negroes were welcomed to the Branch, and some colored persons were admitted to the regular library staff.

Then, to our disappointment, the development stopped. Miss Rose identified herself with the community less and less. Her time has been increasingly taken up with outside interests, the number of colored employees has not increased with the colored population, while promotion for Negroes in library work has been increasingly difficult.

We have been assured that these developments were not due to race prejudice but rather to the deficiencies of candidates and difficulties in their education and background. For a long time, we were satisfied with this explanation. But recent occurrences lead us to doubt it. A graduate of the Library School of the University of Pittsburgh with a degree from Oberlin College entered the service some years ago. She was not able to succeed in her work. She withdrew and entered the library service of the public schools, where apparently she served with great satisfaction. She writes us:

"My criticism of the New York public library system is that promotion is given to those who catch the eye and favor of some of the powers that be. Those who refuse to ingratiate themselves in
their favor are not promoted.

"I have just finished four very happy years as a librarian in the Seward Park High School as an employee of the Board of Education of New York City."

There is now a colored graduate of the Library School of Simmons College in the service. She was entitled to a Second Grade position but was kept waiting a year in an unclassified position. Two or three years ago it took repeated petition and effort to secure for a colored girl who is today giving satisfaction as First Assistant the promotion which she deserved, and for a long time it was Miss Rose who stood in her way.

At that time it was said:

"Mrs. Ames' resignation was a great loss to the Library. Mrs. Latimer likewise advanced in the service and has for some two years been in Grade 2 in charge of the Division of Negro History and Literature at the 135th Street Branch, which includes the remarkable Schomburg Collection bought by the Library in 1925. This collection made by Mr. Arthur A. Schomburg, who as you know is colored, is one of the best in this field. The advancing of both Mrs. Ames and Mrs. Latimer was as rapid as is ever the case. There are now seven young colored women on the staff and we need more."

Today, there are only four colored persons in the service and we learn with regret and astonishment that Mrs. Latimer is liable to be displaced from her position in charge of the Division of Negro Literature and History.

We are not taking up the defense of any particular employee or pretending to pass upon qualifications which must be known best to the library authorities, but we are indignant at the method by which Mrs. Latimer is apparently to be displaced. We know of no
complaint made concerning her work. On the contrary, repeated com-
mandations have been expressed and printed from authors and scholars
for the intelligent help which she has given.

It is not customary in the New York Public Library to displace
Third Grade assistants except by promotion or transfer to another
branch. No charge of inefficiency has been brought against Mrs.
Latimer. On the other hand, she has received no encouragement,
no opportunity for visit and study and has repeatedly suffered from
little humiliations which appeared to be deliberate and intentional.

Finally, with the inception of the Adult Education program, a
concerted effort to displace Mrs. Latimer is evident and for this reason
and without Mrs. Latimer's knowledge, the undersigned are sending this
letter to the colored members of the Advisory Committee. Our effort
is not to defend any single person or place, but to keep open the
opportunity for library service and promotion to Negroes.

Money is being given to the Library by various Funds to conduct
an Adult Education campaign. Two experiments are being made among
Negroes: one in Atlanta and one in New York City. Under these cir-
cumstances, it would be wise that the campaign should be largely under
the direction of Negroes and be done by Negroes. Such is the case in
Atlanta; but in New York City, Miss Rose refused the services of the
very person which the Atlanta group welcomed. Moreover, Miss Rose
seems to be planning to use the money given first to displace Mrs.
Latimer in the regular library service by a person who is not in the
regular service, is not recognized as such, nor is he in line for pro-
motion.

We have the highest respect for Mr. Schomburg. He is an expert
in Negro literature and deserves to be recognized as such. But instead
of that being made an excuse to displace Mrs. Latimer from her position,
it should rather be a reason of confirming her in it, and Mr. Schomburg should be used in the Adult Education campaign for which the money to be paid him is furnished. When years ago the Schomburg collection was opened and it was suggested that Mr. Schomburg be put in charge, Miss Rose replied that the collection must be put under a trained librarian. Now, after the collection has been successfully conducted under a trained librarian, Miss Rose first asked Mrs. Latimer to give up her work and accept work as house-to-house canvasser under the Adult Education campaign. Mrs. Latimer refused. She was then told that Mr. Schomburg was to be put in charge of the Schomburg collection and she has since been unable to ascertain whether this means her dismissal or demotion or transfer.

We understand that Miss Rose herself proposes to conduct this campaign in New York with one Jewish assistant and one colored woman. This is unfortunate. Her work in the library is such as to be such as to take up the whole of her time. In Atlanta, the Librarian of Atlanta University is not at the head of the Adult Education campaign. She is simply a member of the Committee of Control, while the workers are Negroes with a Negro in charge. That is precisely what should take place in New York City.

At any rate, it would be shameful if a movement for the betterment of the colored people was turned into a method of denoting without cause one of their permanent representatives in the library system.

There is no reason which prevents the New York Public Library from having in its system a reasonable number of intelligent and well-trained colored people. We believe that race prejudice and jealousy on the part of administrative officials and branch librarians prevent this and Miss Ernestine Rose is a major element in this situation. From long observation, we have come to the conclusion that
she does not wish to have colored people of independence and
ability connected with her branch of the Library and that she lacks
real acquaintance with Harlem and its problems.

Miss Rose started with the good will of Harlem. She has not
retained it. She is regarded by the best class of our people as
indifferent if not inimical to our best interests. These charges
are naturally not susceptible of mathematical proof but they are
widely believed.

The undersigned, therefore, sincerely believe that:

1. That another Librarian be put in charge of the 135th Street
Branch of the Library.

2. That Mrs. Latimer should not be demoted from her present
position except for cause.

3. That the Adult Education campaign should be put under a
colored director with a mixed staff of helpers, and that
it be not allowed to disturb the status of colored persons
in the employ of the New York Public Library.

4. That a sincere effort be made to encourage the entrance
of a reasonable number of well-trained young colored
women to enter the library service and that no discrimina-
tion, either against colored people or white people, be
permitted in the library system.

We insist upon the above because the experience in other cities
where the library system is under the Civil Service and is conducted
by examination based on merit, the colored people have received better
recognition and treatment than in New York City. We see no adequate
reason why Chicago, with a smaller colored population than New York,
should have four colored branch librarians and at least thirty colored
assistants.
It is quite possible for a private corporation, like the New York Public Library, under proper supervision, to conduct a fairer and better system than the city government. But, on the other hand, if such a private corporation is not fair and is not just to a group of its citizens, these citizens not only have the right but the duty to appeal to the public for a change in attitude or a change in organization.

It is, of course, always possible and under circumstances which give colored citizens restricted knowledge of what is really going on, that some of the facts assumed above are untrue or only partially true. In this case, we would be only too glad to have them corrected. At any rate, this is our present knowledge and belief and we are putting these facts before you and would be glad to have from you at your early convenience your advice and co-operation.

Very respectfully yours,