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Remembering Pura Belpré's Early Career at the 135th Street New York Public Library: Interracial Cooperation and Puerto Rican Settlement During the Harlem Renaissance
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This article recalls the first decade of Pura Belpré's career in New York City, a period during which she moved from library assistant to the first Puerto Rican librarian for the New York Public Library. She began her creative writing in this period, inspired, perhaps, by the activity of the Harlem Renaissance. Belpré's presence at the library in Central Harlem reminds us that Puerto Ricans did settle in Central Harlem even though this settlement is poorly remembered. Belpré's experience represents one example of interracial cooperation that contributed to the formation of New York's Puerto Rican community. There is little in the existing history of Puerto Rican migrants that addresses cooperative relationships that crossed racial and ethnic lines. 

**Key words:** Pura Belpré, Black Puerto Ricans, Interracial Cooperation, 135th Street Branch Library, Harlem Renaissance

*Abstract*

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THE HISTORY OF NEW YORK CITY’S ETHNOSCAPE includes encounters between established groups and new Puerto Rican migrants, encounters that were constituted through a series of interactions and interrelations that scholars and first-person accounts have characterized most commonly as racist. However, a close look at one Puerto Rican woman’s unusual experiences in New York, that of Pura Belpré, reveals that there were cooperative working relationships between Puerto Rican migrants and members of other ethnoracial groups as early as the 1920s. These working relationships contributed to the formation of Puerto Rican migrant communities and the development of migrant culture in New York. The present article adds to the existing historical narrative by offering more possibilities of understanding cross-racial relations between Puerto Rican migrants, U.S.-born Whites, and African Americans as they intersected in and around the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL) in Central Harlem.

Much of this article recalls the early career of Pura Belpré, a Black Puerto Rican woman, who was among the most accomplished of her generation of Puerto Rican pioneros, but not a figure who is well remembered within Latino/a studies. But there are other protagonists of this story who also have been forgotten and are worthy of being remembered as significant to the formation of New York’s Latino/a communities. First is the Puerto Rican community, possibly a predominantly Black Puerto Rican community, that lived in Central Harlem. Second is the library and its head librarian, Ernestine Rose. The library is present as public space in which interracial cooperation and alliances could and did form. Viewed from this historical perspective, the library emerges as an institutional space that allowed individuals to resist unjust racial hierarchies, beyond better-recognized institutions of resistance such as progressive political parties and unions.

Remembering examples of interracial cooperation can affect the narration of other historical examples as we continue to construct the history of Latinos in the northeastern United States. Interracial cooperation may not be as well remembered as racial violence and hostility because the hostility was more prevalent, but it is an important societal dynamic to recall for students and scholars of Puerto Rican history who are often in the position of interpreting the past based on incomplete information.
The brief biographical summary of Belpré’s early work history I present illustrates my argument that Belpré encountered an opportunity structure in New York City, specifically Harlem, that was rare for the pre-civil rights era. It is not intended as a thorough biography of Belpré’s life, although other scholars have provided valuable information that I reference and at times, reinterpret (Hernández-Delgado 1992; Sánchez González 2001, 2005). Earlier scholarship on Belpré’s life has focused on her career after she left the 135th Street Branch. There has been no notice made that Belpré worked in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, nor that she was present at the same time the Schomburg archives were being established, nor that her tenure overlapped with that of Arturo Schomburg at the library.

At the 135th Street Branch Belpré encountered a unique series of opportunities, what I refer to as an opportunity structure. Those opportunities include being among the earliest staff people hired in an integrated library setting, working for a public library system so large that it established its own training school; attending this training school to professionalize; receiving encouragement to publish her stories; and having a paid job in the center of Harlem when writing and publishing in the Black diasporic community was very much on people’s minds. In interrogating her experience, I ask, if Belpré received a unique opportunity to work in the NYPL, to what do we attribute this opportunity? Was it because she in some way was unusual, perhaps of an elite background that would have positioned her to enter a white-collar profession? What significance is there in the fact that Belpré’s career began in Central Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance? Does the working relationship between Belpré and her employer, Ernestine Rose, represent more than just a good working relationship between two individuals? In summary, is this an historical example we should understand as demonstrating interracial cooperation or just a unique moment in time among enlightened individuals?

**Belpré’s Early Career with the NYPL**

Belpré arrived in New York City in 1920 as a part of the first wave of post-1898 migration from Puerto Rico. She was hired at the 135th Street Branch as the Spanish-speaking assistant in 1921, and her career at the branch spanned from 1921 to 1927 (Belpré n.d.[c]: 2). Belpré credits the library staff for having the foresight to reach out to a new Puerto Rican community that was establishing itself around the 135th Street Library in the 1920s. She recalls that head librarian Ernestine Rose became

...aware of a sudden sprouting of Spanish business around the place, thought it was the beginning of a Spanish speaking community and requested the services of a Spanish assistant. The position was offered to my newly wed sister, Elisa, but she had other plans, and suggested I go. I did, was interviewed, and was accepted. Thus I became the first Puwrto (sic) Rican Librarian in the New York Public Library. (n.d.[d]: 1)

Neither Belpré nor her employer could have predicted the historical significance of this hire, as Belpré has become known as the first Puerto Rican to work for the New York Public Library, the first Puerto Rican librarian, and, given the concentration of Puerto Rican migrants in New York City, most probably the first Puerto Rican librarian in the continental States. The community of library scholars has remembered Belpré’s work, but beyond this academic community, Belpré’s legacy is not well remembered. Working as a librarian was just one of her contributions as she was the
author of eight books, a folklorist, storyteller and a puppeteer. One reason that her work is poorly remembered is that her books are mostly out of print. She has been the subject of recovery work by Puerto Rican studies and feminist scholars.

Initially, Belpré worked in both the adult room and the children’s room, but her work in the children’s room became more compelling and central to her career. The kinds of work Belpré would have been involved in as a Spanish-speaking library assistant would have included re-shelving and organizing books, helping to translate for Spanish-speaking patrons and helping them to find books. In explaining how she developed a mission for her library work, Belpré describes one of her early library experiences:

One of my duties in the children’s room was to “read” the fairy tale shelves. Thus the folklore of the world opened for me. As I shelved books, I searched for some of the folktales I had heard at home. There was not even one. A sudden feeling of loss rose within me. (n.d.[d]: 1)

Belpré, as a Puerto Rican who had grown up in a family with a storytelling tradition, was aware of Puerto Rican folkloric tales and, being in the environment of the library, she could have imagined the presence and the power of those stories for Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican children alike (n.d.[f]: 1, 2).

In an oral history, she points out the differences between her notion of storytelling and the public library’s notion of storytelling.

It was then that I said to myself I am going to do something with these stories, but the only thing I could think of was storytelling which was happening all the time around me—to want to do that and to be able to do it were two different things, not because —maybe I could not have done it (sic) but because in the New York Public Library no one tells a story unless the book from where the story comes is on the table with your flowers and your wishing candle...the children look for it. (López n.d.)

Because the library’s style of storytelling only accepted storytellers who could read from published texts, we can see that the library was promoting a type of literacy based on published texts from its earliest years. Whether library staff was aware or not of oral literacies, they sanctioned only written literacy.

Belpré points out the nexus between her training as a librarian and as a writer in discussing her education in library school which she began in 1925, “[t]he next step in that profession took me to the New York Public Library School, then at 42nd Street and 5th Avenue. It was here where my writing for children started” (n.d.[a]: 1). Belpré took her first storytelling course in library school from Mary Gould Davis. She wrote her first folk tale, “Perez and Martina” in Davis’ class. It was from Davis that she needed to seek approval before beginning to tell unpublished stories in the library. Belpré recalls that any individual who wanted to tell stories had “to be approved by supervisor of storytelling before you are free to tell stories in your public library. I could not use my stories because I did not have the books...” For this reason, she found a printed story, not by or about Puerto Ricans, to use for her first audition as a storyteller.

Belpré persisted with her request and was successful in receiving approval to tell her own stories. She states: “Miss Davis said, ‘Tell your stories but only tell the children that none of these stories have been written but maybe some day they will’” (López n.d.). What is humorous in the present is the ethnocentric assumption that children would expect to see a book when hearing a story. Nonetheless,
Once having received approval, Belpre began telling the stories that ended up in her second book, entitled *The Tiger and the Rabbit* at the 135th Street Library. Although the ethnocentrism of the library’s demands can be critiqued, its demands were probably a motivating force for Belpre to advance her endeavor by publishing her stories, and perhaps a catalyst for the library staff as well to support her in publishing a storybook. It is likely that Belpre’s connections with two important children’s literature specialists at the time, Anne Carroll Moore and Mary Gould Davis, were forged during her time in library school. One of the most remarkable successes Belpre had was publishing her first book with a noted publisher of the time, the Frederick Warne Company, publisher of Beatrix Potter’s extremely successful Peter Rabbit books. Belpre’s connection to the Warne Company may have come about because of a link between Moore and Beatrix Potter.3

IN A NUMBER OF HER UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTS, BELPRE MAKES A SPECIAL EFFORT TO RECOGNIZE THE NYPL’S ROLE IN THE PROMOTION OF LITERACY IN PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT COMMUNITIES, AND SHE ALWAYS NAMES THE INDIVIDUALS WHO PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN MAKING THIS WORK HAPPEN.

The ways in which Belpre contributed to literacy practices in Puerto Rican communities were not limited to her work in children’s librarianship, but this was certainly the base of her work. In a number of her unpublished documents, Belpre makes a special effort to recognize the NYPL’s role in the promotion of literacy in Puerto Rican migrant communities, and she always names the individuals who played an important role in making this work happen.

The vision of the New York Public Library also made possible the special work being done today with the Spanish-speaking reader. From the start of the first migration from Puerto Rico, the library made its facilities available to these new citizens, adding a Puerto Rican assistant to the staff. First Ernestine Rose, then, Ann Caroll Moore and Mary Gould Davis, pioneered this effort to introduce the Puerto Rican immigrant to American life, and permit the convergence, and mutual respect, of the two cultures. (n.d.[g]: 1)

Although Belpre mentions a number of library staff, she repeats Ernestine Rose’s name a number of times and cites her as the source of “the first vision”; noting that
“the seeds she planted have taken roots, and grown, and the harvest has been good” (Belpre n.d.[g]: 8–9).4

Belpre lived a long life; in speaking about her years in Harlem, I refer only to the first phase of her career. In her role as a librarian she was positioned as a mediator between Puerto Rican migrant communities and the broader U.S. society; and she demonstrated agency in defining and shaping this role to include oral storytelling and transforming the stories she knew (I hesitate to call them her stories) into written books and puppet plays. After she married at age 40, she quit her job at the library and dedicated herself in the second phase of her career to writing and publishing. When her husband died in 1960, she returned to the library. The third phase of her career began in the context of the war on poverty of the 1960s when she was recruited to work in the South Bronx where the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans was to be found. In the present, Belpre’s work in the South Bronx is perhaps the best remembered period of her career, yet the first phase of her career contributes to the history of Puerto Rican women in the early twentieth century.

Identity and Opportunity
Belpre’s experiences at the library were undoubtedly shaped by her class, racial, and gender identity. Because Belpre achieved a high level of success as an early Puerto Rican migrant, she is arguably the most accomplished woman of the generation of los pioneros. I questioned whether some of her success in the U.S. could be attributed to social capital she was born into or developed in Puerto Rico. In attempting to establish Belpre’s class background, I noted that the few sources on Belpre draw no conclusions on this topic (Hernández-Delgado 1992; Sánchez González 2005; Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños n.d.). There are hints of a middle class background that lacked a stable income. For instance, Hernández-Delgado (1992) notes that Belpre’s father worked as a building contractor which led the family to move to different parts of the island during Belpre’s childhood as he sought work.

BECAUSE BELPRE ACHIEVED A HIGH LEVEL OF SUCCESS AS AN EARLY PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT, SHE IS ARGUABLY THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED WOMAN OF THE GENERATION OF LOS PIONEROS.

She was born in Cidra, a small town in the central region of Puerto Rico and attended schools in a series of other small towns: Cayey, Arroyo, Guayama, and the larger urban areas of San Juan and Santurce (Belpre n.d.[c]: 1). Belpre graduated from Central High School in Santurce, an unusual achievement for a young woman of her era. Her enrollment in the University of Puerto Rico for one year in 1920 is a more definitive sign of middle class status. Her sister worked as a teacher in Puerto Rico for ten years before migrating to New York, another sign of the Belpre family’s cultural capital (Belpre n.d.[c]). Short of making a guess at
the Belpré family’s socioeconomic standing in Puerto Rico, the record proves at least that she accumulated the social capital of a secondary education and the aspirations for a college education that would position her for a professional job in Puerto Rico or the continental United States.

Belpré did not comment directly on her racial identity, so I address this topic somewhat speculatively. Photos of Belpré reveal her to be a Black woman, an identity she does not discuss. Whether she would have been viewed as a light-skinned black woman or a medium-complexioned woman is hard for me to judge after having seen her image in a video interview as well as numerous photos. Her graduation from Central High School in Santurce, Puerto Rico, may signal that she came of age in a racially integrated community in Puerto Rico, an island culture that suffered from social and economic segregation. Because Santurce was historically a community with a large Black population, there may have been positive role models and associations with Blackness in her community.

Her racial identity within Harlem’s Black community most probably would have been affected by whether she was judged as a light- or medium-skinned black woman as the “color line within the color line,” was operative at this point according to a number of observers and commentators. West Indian journalist Edgar Grey criticized two of Harlem’s Black community institutions, the Urban League and Harlem’s YWCA, for favoring light-skinned women on their staff in this era (Watkins-Owens 1996: 159).

Belpré’s silence on her Black identity is not surprising given the fact that Latinos have begun to comment on issues of race most commonly in the post-civil rights period. One caveat to this statement is Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, a Puerto Rican who was a generation older than Belpré and who oriented his entire work life around the exploration and explication of Black identity. Belpré did comment on the need for Spanish-speaking services and on stereotypes in Puerto Rican children’s books. She commented more openly on her ethnic identity as a Puerto Rican rather than on her racial identity. Lacking her perspective on her racial identity, I can only surmise that Belpré’s identity in New York was as a Black Puerto Rican, who developed closer connections to African Americans than might a white Puerto Rican. In his historical study of the interactions between Black Puerto Ricans and other African descent communities in New York, Winston James argues there was a relatively “low race consciousness” among working class Puerto Ricans both at home in Puerto Rico and in the United States in the period of the pioneros. James’s comments refer to Arturo Schomburg and his milieu.

The particular circumstances of Belpré’s life as a woman with no children who married at forty may have contributed to her record of accomplishment as well. She was offered her job at the NYPL after it was first offered to her sister. Some of the holding forces in women’s lives at the time that did not affect the young Belpré were the constraints of respectable womanhood that a husband, a father (or a mother) could impose, and children. Gender-based discrimination in the workplace did not seem to affect Belpré because librarianship was a female-associated occupation, although opportunities were limited in number. Belpré first worked in the U.S. as a garment worker, a much more common occupation for Puerto Rican migrant women (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños n.d.). In her study of early 20th-century Puerto Rican women migrants, Sánchez-Korrol writes,
profound changes occur in the work world to which they were committed since they neither demanded nor were given the opportunity to control strategic resources or educational facilities. (1996: 66)

Belpre’s experience contradicts this statement in that migration separated her from the role of a dutiful and respectful daughter. Her experience suggests that migration did prompt shifts in gendered expectations, an idea that other Puerto Rican migrant women writers express in their writing, such as Esmeralda Santiago. It is indeed true that the NYPL was a male-dominated institution, yet women were making great strides in establishing the field of professional librarianship, and Rose and Belpre contributed by presenting models of the ways in which this occupation could resist the racism of the time.

**Remembering Black Puerto Ricans in Harlem**

The example of interracial cooperation I explore here occurred in parts of Harlem referred to either as Harlem, West Harlem, or Central Harlem. The Puerto Rican community in this area is a community whose existence has essentially been erased because it was small and didn’t grow in size. East Harlem, understood as a separate neighborhood, has become associated as the heart of the New York Puerto Rican migrant community, but this was not the case in the 1920s. The existing historical record tells us of a small number of Puerto Ricans who lived in Central Harlem, notably, all of whom were Black. Understanding the setting of Harlem and recovering the memories we have of Black Puerto Ricans in Harlem in the 1920s is one new element in the story of Puerto Rican settlement in New York City that emerges in examining closely Belpre’s early career.

We don’t know where Belpre lived when she got her job, but we do know that a policeman first told her about this branch’s location, which suggests she lived in the neighborhood around the library. Her records indicate she lived in Harlem in 1931 at 1884 7th Avenue between 114th and 115th (Belpre n.d.[e]). Belpre’s marriage to an African American, Clarence Cameron White, speaks to the effects of living in a neighborhood with a Black diaspora in which relationships could and did build across ethnoracial identity lines. Her husband was a successful Harlem musician, and her marriage is surely one reason why she settled in Harlem for the later 40 years of her life. They lived together at 409 Edgecombe Avenue between 153rd and 154th Street in Harlem (Apt. 11F).

There are no estimates of the number of Latinos/as or Puerto Ricans in Harlem in this period. According to census reports, the black population in Harlem in 1915 included African Americans and others, approximately 28 percent of the entire group, who were foreign-born including many from Caribbean islands, but others from Panama and Cuba (Watkins-Owens 1996: 45). In the early 1920s, West and Central Harlem were associated with African American and Black Caribbean communities who constituted at least 50 percent of the population. By 1920 the neighborhood had already undergone major transitions from being a majority White neighborhood, with many Jewish residents, to a highly mixed neighborhood. A great deal has been written about Harlem in this era, but there is little mention of Latino/a residents or Puerto Rican migrants.

The boundaries of different parts of Harlem are not exact. Watkins-Owens states that African American Harlem extended from 130th to 145th street from South to North, and by Madison Avenue on the east side and 7th Avenue on the west side in
1920 (1996: 186). Gradually, West and Central Harlem extended from 110th Street at the most southern point, to 159th Street to the north (just short of Washington Heights), and from 5th Avenue on the east side to Riverside Drive along the Hudson River on the west side. As I move forward in this article, I refer to Central and West Harlem simply as “Harlem.”

Census figures tell us there were 7,364 Puerto Ricans in New York City in 1920; at the time, New York City was home to the largest number of Puerto Rican migrants to the United States. Los pioneros, or the pioneer generation, settled in many New York City neighborhoods including Harlem, the West Side (site of the 1950s play West Side Story), Chelsea, the Lower East Side, and in many Brooklyn neighborhoods. Sánchez Korrol’s definitive history of the generation of los pioneros in New York makes clear that the newly arrived Puerto Rican migrants organized themselves through social clubs, lodges, and political clubs (most commonly democratic and socialist) in the neighborhoods in which they settled; thus, a review of Puerto Rican clubs in the area can confirm the presence of Puerto Ricans. Duany’s research notes the founding of a social club, “Los Jíbaros” on West 113th Street in 1928. About this group Duany writes, “Years before highland peasants became cult figures on the Island, the group [Los Jíbaros] celebrated a festival in which you could wear typical costumes of the noble jíbaros boricuas” (2002: 188).

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UNDERSTANDING THE SETTING OF HARLEM AND RECOVERING THE MEMORIES WE HAVE OF BLACK PUERTO RICANS IN HARLEM IN THE 1920S IS ONE NEW ELEMENT IN THE STORY OF PUERTO RICAN SETTLEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY THAT EMERGES IN EXAMINING CLOSELY BELPRÉ’S EARLY CAREER.

Bucchioni write that the first church designated for Puerto Ricans by the Catholic Archidiocese of New York was La Milagrosa, established in a former Harlem synagogue in 1926 on Seventh Avenue between 114th and 115th Streets (1974: 7).

In addition to the organizational hints of a Puerto Rican community in Harlem in the 1920s, several Puerto Rican writers have presented their memories of this era, including journalist and activists Jesús Colón (A Puerto Rican in New York) and Bernardo Vega (Las Memorias de Bernardo Vega). Jesús Colón’s memoirs are a beginning place for building a memory of Puerto Ricans in Harlem told from his perspective as a Black Puerto Rican. In writing his humorous sketch, “How to Rent an Apartment Without Money,” he recalls a plan he hatched with his brother, buying a new suit on credit and then selling it to a pawn shop to raise money for
one of his first apartments in Harlem, an apartment on 143rd Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues. He does not give the exact dates, but his story takes place during World War I. He writes, “In those days the few Puerto Ricans around lived in the heart of the Negro neighborhood together with the Negro people in the same buildings; many times as roomers in their homes” (2002: 44).

Because few historical accounts address the history of the interaction between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, it’s hard to know if Colón’s statements about boarding houses is more accurate than the history described by Owens-Watkins, who states that it was more common that Black Harlem families would take in boarders of their own ethnorracial background. However, she cites at least one example from the early twentieth century of an African American, A. Philip Randolph (of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), who had a Cuban cigar maker boarding in his home. This buttresses Colón’s statement that African Americans and Latinos/as did cross ethnorracial boundaries in this period (Owens-Watkins 1996: 48).

Bernardo Vega, in his memoir, recalls memories connected to Puerto Ricans in Harlem as well. Of particular interest to this article are Vega’s comments about Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, another Black Puerto Rican who lived in Harlem. Vega writes,

...until the time of the Spanish-American war he lived in the Puerto Rican community. He later moved up to the neighborhood where North American Blacks lived, and there he stayed. This led to quite a few Puerto Ricans who knew him to think that he was trying to deny his distant homeland, but nothing could be further from the truth. He always had a deep love for Puerto Rico. But his interest in the history of the Negro, their African origins and contributions to American society, led him to identify closely with black people in the United States. (1984: 195)

Vega’s comments suggest that, in spite of wide dispersion among Puerto Ricans in New York City, there were identifiable Puerto Rican communities in early twentieth-century New York City, and even though Black Harlem had yet to develop its most distinctive identity, there was an uptown presence of Blacks that attracted Schomburg. Sinette explains, “...Schomburg followed the northward movement of Manhattan’s black population...” —in part because his work as a collector of Afro Americana led him to closer relationships with African Americans (1984: 34). In 1906 Schomburg moved to W. 99th Street, then to W. 115th and then to W. 140th Street. In 1916 he moved to Brooklyn where he lived until his death (Sinette 1989: 35).

Another Black Puerto Rican, Antonia Pantoja, writes about her mother, who traveled to New York City for a year in the early 1920s and lived with the sister of musician Rafael Hernández, Victoria Hernández, on 120th Street and Amsterdam Avenue in Harlem (Pantoja 2002: 50). Rafael Hernández and his sister both later relocated to East Harlem, which became the cultural center of New York’s Puerto Rican community as the Puerto Rican population in the city grew. It may be the case that Belpré’s family, as well as other Puerto Ricans of all racial groups, might have been drawn to Harlem because of racial discrimination that was a barrier to them in other New York City neighborhoods. Pura Belpre’s essays along with the aforementioned sources tell us that Puerto Ricans and other Latinos did not grow to occupy a significant presence in Harlem as the decade unfolded. But in a letter he wrote in 1934, Schomburg stated that “many Spanish speakers come to study” in the 135th Street Branch (Sánchez González
perhaps they were not neighborhood residents. Black Latinos in Harlem emerge as significant in a racial incident, The Harlem Riot of 1935. The incident that provoked the riot took place between a store clerk and “a dark skinned Latino boy, Lino Rivera,” identified as a Puerto Rican, on 125th Street, an area of Harlem in which Black community members were protesting employment discrimination in local stores (Lewis 1982; McKay 1935). The store clerk accused Rivera of shoplifting a knife, and the altercation that followed was rumored to be worse than it probably was, but riots followed. The riots reflected the anger over the rumored incident but also over broader economic injustices that were occurring during the Great Depression and were affecting Black Harlemites more severely.

The power of texts to hold the memory of early Puerto Rican migrant communities in different neighborhoods cannot be overestimated. Scholars, novelists, and memoirists have written far more on Puerto Rican communities in East Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, solidifying the memory of these neighborhoods as the spaces in which Puerto Rican migrant communities formed. Belpré’s memories of the community in Central Harlem highlight the partiality of the existing memory.

**The Harlem Renaissance as a Backdrop to Interracial Cooperation**

Part of what made Belpré’s experiences as a Puerto Rican migrant so unique was the cultural milieu into which she entered at the library: the Harlem Renaissance. The 135th Street Branch gained importance in this period as it was located at the center of action. Writers, artists, and actors all used the library as a space for cultural activities. In an undated oral history interview, Belpré comments, “I did see the beginning of what came to be the Negro Renaissance because it really began there” (López n.d.). She describes her reaction to this early period in her career stating,

> I enjoyed those years because you are talking about those things that I lived there, beautiful, richness... I have a great deal of respect for public libraries because it’s what is happening inside there is real jewels, and for the neighborhood to have something like that and for the librarians to get to the public and vice versa, this is a beautiful thing. (López n.d.)

In a separate undated autobiographical statement, Belpré elaborates that her experience at the library was “most rewarding,” because,

> It acquainted me with Black Culture, and I experienced the Black Renaissance of art and literature, and the upsurge of Poets, Novelists, Dramatists and Musicians (sic). I saw the beginning of the now Schomburg collection come into being. (n.d.[c]: 2)

When considering the possibility of interracial cooperation in the case of the 135th Street Library, I had to question whether the work discussed in this article occurred as the result of an alliance between groups of people, or as the result of the work of a committed individual, head librarian Ernestine Rose. Indeed, head librarian, Ernestine Rose, used her power to integrate the staff from the moment she arrived in 1920. Arna Bontemps, in his history of the library, states that Rose was hired as the librarian for that branch based on the experiences she had in other NYPL branches adapting the library to specific ethnic communities (new immigrant communities in the other cases). His assessment is that the NYPL had an interest in addressing its African American community
surrounding the branch, and he writes, “Perhaps the idea of building up a
collection that would give the Harlem public a sense of background had already
occurred to Miss Rose. The New York Public Library’s general policy of buying
books of special neighborhood interest would suggest this” (1944: 2).

Another historical assessment of Rose’s work states,

There in the 1920s, white librarian Ernestine Rose was determined to prove that an
integrated staff would foster greater appreciation for cultural diversity and better
services for patrons, including immigrants from Puerto Rico and the West Indies
and migrants from the South. (Malone 2000: 80)

Pura Belpré was one of the first people of color hired by Rose, although Catherine
Latimer Allen, an African American woman, was already working at the library
when Belpré first visited the branch.

The library originally opened in 1905 through funding from Andrew Carnegie to
serve the surrounding neighborhood that at the time was predominantly Jewish;
a neighborhood that underwent a rapid transition to one where one half of the
residents were Black by 1920 (Bontemps 1944: 1).14 Too big for its existing building,
the library moved to its second location on 136th Street in 1941 and was renamed the
Countee Cullen Branch in 1951 after Cullen’s death, which is its official name in the
present. (I refer to this library as the 135th Street Branch because this was its name in
the historical period I discuss here.)15

The library was approaching one of its first moments of glory in the period when
Belpre was present. Historian David Levering Lewis (1982: 105) described the library
in the following manner:

Near Lenox Avenue, along 135th, was the neo-Classic Harlem Branch of the
New York Public Library, Miss Ernestine Rose’s little world of poetry readings,
book discussions, and general literary activity. It was Ernestine Rose whom George
Schuyler praised for helping to make Harlem’s cultural life more than the archy
(Harlemese for “stuck up”), “thin reality it often was elsewhere....” The intellectual
pulse of Harlem throbbed at the 135th Street library.

During the Renaissance, the library sponsored readings and lectures by the important
writers of the day, including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon
Johnson; it sponsored annual art exhibitions as well as a community chorus.
About their unusual outreach techniques, one library staff person of the period wrote,

If you are familiar with Harlem, you are aware of the fact that the streets are
frequently made impassable by the many soap box speakers and their enthusiastic
audiences. It occurred to us that if people will listen to politics and patent medicines
they will listen to education, too, provided it is well presented to them. So we
employed one of the most eloquent and the most popular of these speakers and paid
him to address large crowds at strategic corners of the streets of Harlem. Once a
week these people were urged to come to a meeting at the library.
Some two thousand were reached each week. If, out of these, fifty appeared at
the library, we were confident that something worthwhile had been accomplished.
This was one of our most successful attempts to reach the “common man.”16
Tibbets writes that the combined forces of the Renaissance and the library’s own activities created a situation in which “demand for books on blacks far exceeded the available supply. Residents were caught up in the growing interest in black and African history and could not quench a relentless intellectual thirst” (1989: 26).

As a result, Rose organized a committee in December, 1924, including prominent African Americans and Blacks from other parts of the diaspora to oversee the development of its collection (the officers included Arturo Schomburg and James Weldon Johnson). This committee envisioned the development of a research collection on black culture that would include books, sculptures, and photographs and was formally named the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints. On May 8, 1925, a formal opening was held for the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints in the library (Tibbets 1989: 21–2). The committee, together with support from prominent African Americans and The Urban League, sought successfully a grant of $10,000 from the Carnegie Corporation in 1926 to purchase Schomburg’s personal collection that included more than 10,000 items at the time (About the Schomburg n.d.). In 1940, the Negro Division was renamed the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature, History and Prints. Library staff moved the Schomburg Collection back to the original 135th Street building in 1954 so that it would have more space.

The evidence presented here, that Rose integrated the staff she hired; that she formed a committee of community members to plan the creation of a special research collection; and finally, that she paid attention to the culture of the community as she attempted to knit the library into the community, all point to the conclusion that Rose did not work from a position of dominance in relation to the subordinated Black and Puerto Rican communities in which she was based. Rather, she sought to work as an ally.

The presence and influence of this library on Black communities and Black culture in New York has been extensive. Novelist Nella Larsen worked in the children’s room from 1923–1925, which overlaps with the period in which Belpre worked in the children’s room. In reviewing the records of the library in this period there is no mention of Larsen or her activities. Like Belpre, Larsen attended the NYPL’s library school and went on to work as a children’s librarian. She also developed an interest in creative writing, by some accounts influenced by the intense literary activity at the library. Larsen, a married woman, left the NYPL in 1926 to write and published Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) soon thereafter.
(Howes 2001: 228). Jacob Lawrence researched the Black migration at the library in 1940–41 while painting his masterful series, *The Migration of the Negro*. Other famous users include writers Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Alice Childress all were involved in the American Negro Theater that met in the basement of the library. Belpré and Schomburg’s experiences tell us that the library also significantly impacted Black Puerto Ricans in New York, first by presenting a model to Belpré of active library involvement in community’s cultural lives; and second by creating a home for information on the Black diaspora including Black Puerto Ricans.
Belpré and Rose: Women Shaping the Profession

In 1929, the NYPL transferred Belpré to work as an assistant to the children’s librarian at the 115th Street Library in Harlem, where it was noted that the Puerto Rican community was growing (Hernández-Delgado 1992: 429). Belpré notes, “This truly became the Spanish branch, with a complete program for the children’s room as well as for the adult department” (Belpré n.d.[c]: 2).

Hernández-Delgado (1992) describes the 115th Street Branch as beginning to play a role in the Spanish-speaking community similar to that being played by the 135th Street Branch in the Black community.

Librarians at the 115th Street Branch organized many literary readings and outreach activities to migrant community organizations. Hernández-Delgado writes, “the 115th Street Branch emerged as the cultural mecca of the Spanish-speaking community of New York City. Hispanic residents flocked to this branch for Spanish books, lectures and entertainment” (1992: 431). Belpré notes that they organized for the first time a Feast of the Three Kings at the library, and created a puppet theatre in which puppet shows were presented in Spanish and English (Belpré n.d.[c]: 3). An undated postcard addressed in Belpré’s distinctive handwriting to Jesús Colón announces a lecture by famed Mexican artist Diego Rivera at the library. In the vicinity of the 115th Street Branch, Belpré supported a group of mothers in carrying out Spanish language storytelling and a teen reading group, both in the Milagrosa Church (Sánchez González 2001: 79). Through these activities we see the way a woman shaped the relationship between the NYPL and the new Puerto Rican community with the 135th Street Branch and its activities during the Harlem Renaissance. It may be seen as a precedent: Belpré stayed at the 115th Street library until 1939, which coincides with Hernandez-Delgado’s statement that “by the close of the 1930s, the Hispanic era of the library came to a close; the focus on Spanish residents declined when African-Americans became the community’s dominant ethnic group” (1992: 431). Belpré then transferred to the 110th Street Branch in East Harlem most probably because that had emerged as the center of the Puerto Rican migrant community. Adding together the years at the 135th Street and 115th Street Branches, Belpré worked for sixteen years in Harlem before arriving in East Harlem.

The woman on the other side of the working relationship I describe here, Ernestine Rose, presents an example of how a young woman shaped a profession that had few precedents. As Tibbets comments, Rose’s effort to integrate the staff of the library occurred “at a time when it was not common for there even to be black librarians, and still less common to have a biracial staff” (1989: 20). Originally from the town of Bridgehampton, Long Island (NY), Rose was among the earliest generation of professionally trained librarians, graduating from the New York State Library School in Albany in 1905. 17 Rose entered a young field; at the time, free, public neighborhood branches were being built for the first time in New York City.

In 1906, she began working for the NYPL and in 1908, she moved to a branch on the Lower East Side, one of the centers of new immigrant life in New York City at the turn of the century. It was there that she developed her work of positioning libraries to work with communities. She wrote, “The integration of local libraries with their communities and their intensive use as community centers developed gradually and naturally as librarians became more conscious of social needs, and of their own responsibilities to them…” (Tibbets 1989: 26). From one library serving immigrants, she moved to the Seward Park Branch, also on the Lower East
Side, located in a Jewish immigrant neighborhood, a branch in which the whole staff studied Yiddish and Russian literature, “and staff meetings included book discussions and lectures from rabbis, educators, Jewish newspapermen, and other workers in the neighborhood” (Tibbets 1989: 15). Rose worked at the Seward Park Branch for two years; thus, she had significant experience in orienting library services to the community being served by the time she was hired as branch librarian at the library on 135th Street in 1920, a community predominantly composed of Jewish and Black residents. She worked at the Harlem Branch for 22 years and also taught in New York City library schools.

Belpre and Rose’s work relationship transcended a positive employer/employee relationship because it was merely one example of Rose’s work to integrate the library from the perspective of staffing and services offered to the community. Rose’s perception of the importance of the work in Harlem’s Black community is evident in a letter she wrote to her supervisor in 1937. She wrote,

In short, I am anxious that this work with the Negro group which has been somewhat experimental in character, which has grown and met a response of which I barely dreamed, should be given further chance to expand, that what was experimental be given permanent form, and that the needs which have become evident be met by efficient techniques and constructive methods of service. (Rose 1937a)

In spite of Rose’s commitment, the NYPL’s hiring practices raised criticisms of the institution’s commitment to integration beyond the 135th Street Branch.

Some evidence suggests that the NYPL may have used the 135th Street Branch as a ghetto for people of color interested in working for the library. Historian Ethelene Whitmire researched the experience of Regina Andrews, a woman of color who had worked in libraries in Chicago and applied in 1921 to work at the NYPL. Andrews was directed to apply for work at the 135th Street Branch, where she did get a job. Andrews’ experience raises the question of whether the NYPL was allowing integration to occur at certain branches that served communities of color, rather than demonstrating a broad commitment to an integrated staff in any of its libraries. In the mid-1930s, charges surfaced in the Amsterdam News that the only place that African Americans could gain employment in the NYPL was at the 135th Street Branch. Ernestine Rose wrote in to the newspaper to counter this perception and simultaneously wrote to her supervisors within the library system to argue that they should take steps to do away with this perception. She wrote, “It is abundantly clear that so long as colored librarians are appointed at one or two branches only, there can be little chance for wider experience, for promotion, or for new appointments of able applicants” (1937a).

Later in the year Rose felt compelled to write again to her supervisor and the local Amsterdam News to correct the impression that she was the only librarian appointing African American librarians or assistants in the NYPL. It is in this letter that Rose articulated in print the nature of the interracial work at the library, writing, “... I am glad to feel that this branch gives a valuable example of interracial cooperation and offers an interesting opportunity for Negro assistants to know more intimately one of the best collections of Negro literature in the world” (1937b). The example of interracial cooperation between Belpre and Rose was more than a positive, one-on-one experience because this relationship was not a completely unique case. A second example is the alliance that developed between Puerto Rican Arturo Alfonso...
Schomburg and the 135th Street Branch Library. The outcome of this work among allies is far better known than Belpre’s work.

A Parallel Example of Interracial Cooperation at the Library
Afro-Puerto Rican Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (1874–1938) collected books and other printed material about people of African descent as a means of “disproving the myth of black racial inferiority” (Dodson 1989: i). An autodidact, he left school in Puerto Rico at an early age and arrived as a migrant in the U.S. with little formal education but with a thirst for knowledge. As a Black Puerto Rican migrant who encountered an opportunity structure that allowed him to enter a professional class in New York, Schomburg shared an experience similar to Belpre’s at the library.

Rose persuaded the NYPL to acquire Schomburg’s collection in 1926. In the words of the Schomburg’s current director, Howard Dodson, “The collection brought immediate international stature to the branch’s recently established Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints” (1989: i). After Schomburg sold his collection, he continued his collecting activities, continued making donations to the library for which he did not receive payment, and served as an energetic volunteer and staff member to the library (Sinnette 1989). Of this period, African American librarian Augusta Baker recalled,

Oh my land, the branch was famous…. Well that’s where the beginning of the famous Schomburg collection was. By the time I went there, Dr. Schomburg himself was there… it already had all kinds of priceless things…. It was well on the way to being the most important research library for blacks…. (Tibbets 1989: 23)

Rose hired Schomburg to curate the collection at the library from 1932 to 1938. The years in which Schomburg worked at the library were the later years of the Depression and funds were tight. Rose argued strongly to her supervisor in favor of finding funding to support Schomburg’s work at the library, in spite of the financial limitations the library was experiencing (1937b).

Little effort has been made to connect Schomburg’s experience and that of Pura Belpre at the 135th Street library. There is one handwritten line in one of Belpre’s autobiographical documents, in which she states, “I met Arthur Schomburg, and often chatted in Spanish” (n.d.[c]: 2). To date, I have found no further description of how they interacted with each during their overlapping tenure at the library. Schomburg’s collection, as well as his long-term involvement with the library, clearly contributed to the library’s ability to serve the multiple Black communities that were forming in early twentieth century Harlem: African American, West Indian, Puerto Rican and other Latino/a communities as well. All of these communities included large numbers of recent migrants. Schomburg’s relationship with the library endured for more than ten years until his death. His efforts combined with the library staffs’ made this branch a central resource for the Black community in New York; it was an Africana collection not rivaled in the United States.

Alternative Perspectives on Migrants’ Settlement Experiences in New York
Constructing a historical narrative that interprets Belpre’s experience in the early years of her migration to New York City is something that I and other cultural studies scholars are doing in the present. It is possible that Belpre’s experience matches the description written by Sánchez González below:
Like some of her public intellectual contemporaries—among them, Arturo Schomburg, Bernardo Vega, Luisa Capetillo and Jesús Colón—Belpré experienced a rude awakening upon arrival to the mainland. She came into contact with the ignorance about and condescension toward Puerto Ricans that characterized Boricua (Puerto Rican) interactions with virtually all ethnic groups in New York City. (2005: 150)

However, in this article I have raised doubts about this blanket description of the Puerto Rican migrants’ experience in New York City and most assuredly about this description of Belpré’s arrival and settlement in New York. Although I cannot generalize about the experiences of Puerto Rican migrants based on this one individual, particularly given this migrant’s silence on discriminatory experiences, there are other Puerto Rican migrants discussed in this article whose lives also present settlement narratives that offer examples of encountering an opportunity structure that allowed them to enter and build unusual positions.21 About Arturo Schomburg, James has written, “Schomburg’s accomplishments, especially given his limited educational background, verged on miraculous” (1996: 105). That miracle came about in part through the talents of Schomburg, by many accounts an unusual individual, but can be attributed as well to some degree of interracial cooperation he encountered and to which he contributed.

RATHER THAN A STORY OF DISCRIMINATION THAT HORRIFIED NEWLY ARRIVING PUERTO RICAN MIGRANTS, MY READING OF BELPRÉ’S EARLY WORK LIFE IS ONE THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE HETEROGENEITY OF PUERTO RICAN MIGRANTS’ EXPERIENCES.

Rather than a story of discrimination that horrified newly arriving Puerto Rican migrants, my reading of Belpré’s early work life is one that highlights the heterogeneity of Puerto Rican migrants’ experiences. Although the vast majority of Puerto Rican migrants arrived in the U.S. and entered working class jobs, there were some who encountered and have left written record of unusual opportunities as is the case with Belpré and Schomburg. Recalling Pura Belpré also reminds the reader that she became the best published Puerto Rican author in the United States of her time. I have presented evidence that the library system encouraged Belpré to publish her stories, but it is undoubtedly true as well that the Harlem Renaissance and the rich literary activity at the 135th Street Branch inspired her as others who worked there were also inspired to write and publish. Librarians have led the way in recovering Belpré’s legacy, but a wider
reading of her experience can remind the public that Belpré was more than a librarian, and Puerto Ricans have a literary history that stretches back to the early decades of the twentieth century.

A focus on individuals who left texts can lead the critical reader to question whether it is misleading to overemphasize the importance of exceptional individuals (exceptional by virtue of the fact that they published texts and left archives) as the community overall had experiences more consistent with working-class lives. The lives of all working-class Americans were unusually difficult as the decade of the 1920s came to a close and the depression set in. Those economic difficulties were exacerbated by racial and ethnic discrimination reported by many Puerto Ricans who lived in this era.

I began this article by stating that I would challenge the uniform characterization that Puerto Ricans faced discrimination, hostility, and ignorance as they arrived early in the 20th century. My intention is not to negate or question the many instances of discrimination that Puerto Ricans have faced; one hypothesis I have proposed here is that Black Puerto Ricans may have moved to Harlem precisely because they perceived it to be a safer haven (not completely safe) from the discrimination they faced in other city neighborhoods. Rather, I seek to raise the sensitivity that we as students and scholars must use in discerning who faced this discrimination, where and when.

Black Puerto Ricans in the pioneros generation did have different experiences than did other Puerto Rican migrants; their first person accounts testify to this, often referring to racism they experienced. To the extent that they settled in Harlem, they had a more significant experience of intermingling with African
American and West Indian Black communities. Both Belpré and Schomburg married African Americans which demonstrates the significance of living in this Black diasporic community. To what degree Puerto Rican migrants settled around the library in the decade of the 1920s, as Ernestine Rose had predicted, is unclear. Belpré suggests that this Puerto Rican community did not develop in size, writing, “The Spanish community did not develop, what developed was my love for a new found profession” (n.d.[a]: 1). User records, names of school children who attended programs at the 135th Street Branch, readers’ adviser guides, and other library records do not indicate any real number of patrons with Hispanic surnames.  

The existing evidence suggests that Ernestine Rose and the 135th Street Branch staff were successful at reaching out to diverse communities in multiple ways, creative beyond the vision of the day for libraries of any race or ethnicity. The study of this history can contribute to prejudice reduction as we see Rose and her integrated staff and community volunteers challenging the prejudice that dominated the era. Rose also required some level of approval from the administrative librarians around her, suggesting that there was some institutional collaboration that contributed to her work. Most notable is Anne Carroll Moore, Belpré’s library school instructor. I do not want to under-credit Rose for the important role she played in this example of interracial cooperation. But beyond Rose as a librarian and public servant unusual for her time, is the fact that she was an employee of the NYPL, which could have stopped or defunded her neighborhood work at any point had they viewed it as inconsistent with its priorities or as objectionable. Yet other evidence raises questions as to the motive the NYPL may have had in allowing Rose to integrate the 135th Street Branch staff. The interracial cooperation described here between Belpré, Rose, Schomburg, the community, and the library launched Belpré’s professional work as a librarian and author in a historical moment when both occupations were unusual for Puerto Rican and Black women. As such, the working relationships described all represent examples of the library as an institutional space in which members of Harlem’s community could resist the policies and protocols of Jim Crow America. By at least three accounts
Belpré, Rose’s biographer, and Malone), Rose was not working in communities of color in a way that furthered the interests of the dominant White community; rather, she was countering the racial inequality of the historical period. Belpré, Rose and Schomburg crossed the racial lines that encircled racial and ethnic enclaves in New York City.

The existing literature on early Puerto Rican migration to New York emphasizes themes of community building, both social and political, within Latino migrant communities and many examples of racial discrimination. One overlooked theme is that of interracial cooperation and alliances that significantly assisted the advancement and settlement of migrant Puerto Rican communities. The history of interaction between Puerto Rican migrant communities and the public libraries of New York that Belpré recalls in her papers suggests that, over time, Puerto Rican and other Latino staff were successful in building bridges between Latino/a migrants and the public libraries, thereby encouraging reading and literacy development. My research into the nature of this bridge between the NYPL and Puerto Rican and Latino communities reveals that it was not constructed primarily during Belpré’s years at the 135th Street Branch. However, the induction into librarianship that Belpré received at the branch positioned her well to carry out the work of reaching out to new migrant communities in the other neighborhood libraries in which she worked. Belpré’s memories of her library career and the constant interest in her services throughout a fifty-year work history, attest to the bridge Belpré began building in the 1920s to Puerto Rican migrant communities.

NOTES

1 Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1991) coined the term ethnoscape, an obvious corollary to landscape, which is useful in the field of ethnic studies as it alludes not only to the ethnic and racial composition of a geographic area, but also to the nature and the character of that area. The documentation of the racism Puerto Ricans encountered can be found in a variety of first person and secondary texts by Colón (2002), History Task Force (1979), Pantoja (2002), Sánchez Korrol (1994), Sánchez González (2001; 2005), and Vega (1984).

2 I am grateful to Prof. Luis Marentes, who suggested that the library be placed in the context of institutions of resistance. Librarian Isabel Espinal has been a valued sounding board in highlighting the uneven history public libraries have of fighting discrimination and aspiring to be inclusive institutions. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their thoughts on this point and others.

3 Moore was the first Supervisor of Work with Children at the NYPL from 1906–1941.
She was an author and critic of children’s books as well. Her papers are held by the NYPL. They include her correspondence with Beatrix Potter (Miller and Mucci 2004: iii).

4 Sánchez González (2005: 149) writes that Belpé commented repeatedly about an African American woman who worked at that library, Catherine Allen Latimer, as an inspiration. My own research suggests that Belpé commented and remarked upon the vision of other librarians frequently, most prominently Ernestine Rose, but also Mary Gould Davis, the instructor of the storytelling course in which she wrote her first Puerto Rican folktale. Catherine Latimer’s great contribution was as the first librarian to work directly with Schomburg’s collection.

5 About the Black Puerto Rican community in Puerto Rico, Dr. Mina Perry, an African American who lived and taught in Puerto Rico for 14 years, comments, “I find that many Puerto Ricans do not know that in Puerto Rico there was a small professional class of Blacks who were very clear about their dual links and brought that knowledge to the U.S. There are distinct family names. They did not speak about it but it does not mean that there was no consciousness” (personal communication 6/20/06).

6 Walter White, an African-American leader, coined the phrase the color line within the color line in an article in the New Negro, edited by Alain Locke.

7 To my best knowledge, Belpé’s parents never migrated. In my opinion, some of her advancement professionally might be attributed to the fact that she was separated from the majority of her family of origin by migration, and thus from the expectations they may have imposed on her.

8 Clarence Cameron White (1880–1960) was a well-recognized violinist and composer. He played classical music and in the early 1920s began to work with African-American music and spirituals. His papers are held by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

9 Sánchez Korrol (1994), and Matos Rodríguez and Hernández (2001) are among the historians who have popularized the use of the term los pioneros, translated directly as “the pioneers,” to refer to the earliest generation of twentieth-century migrants. In a Spanish language context, the term pioneers does not conjure up the association with the expansion west of the United States as it does in English. Within the context of Latino studies, the term is used most commonly in Spanish, and I will follow this convention in this article.

10 jibaro is a folk term to refer to a Puerto Rican from a rural area. It is a changing signifier and over time has been used respectfully, disparagingly, or affectionately. The use of the term for this club formed by recent migrants suggests a nostalgic and affectionate connection to the identity of the jibaro, unusual for the period. A parallel term within African-American communities would be peasant, meant to refer to rural African Americans from the South, most of whom were disparaged in this era by northern urbanites embarrassed by them.

11 The religious denomination of this church is unclear. Hernández-Delgado (1992) refers to this church as the first to serve Spanish-speaking Catholics, and Sánchez González (2001: 79) writes that this was an Evangelical church.

12 A full discussion of the life and times of Schomburg, a bibliophile and early archivist of African Americana, is outside the scope of this chapter as his life has been fairly well researched; see Sinette (1989), Sánchez González (2001), and James (1996). Later in this chapter I address his experience at the 135th Street Library as a parallel experience to Belpé’s.

13 Where Belpé lived with her sister’s family is unclear as her archival record is least detailed in the period 1920–1930.

14 Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant, was a major philanthropist supporting the construction of public libraries at the turn of the century. His grants supported the construction of the first 39 of New York City’s branch libraries in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, including this branch. Today there are approximately 80 Branch libraries in the NYPL.
In 1940, the Negro Division was renamed the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature, History and Prints. Library staff moved the Schomburg Collection back to the original 135th Street Building in 1954 so that it would have more space. It became a part of the NYPL Research Libraries in 1972, at which point its name was changed one final time to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and it moved into a renovated and larger building at the same site in 1980 (see About the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, screen 2).

Anonymous report found in the papers of NYPL 135th Street Branch. Tibbets (1989: 25) attributes this report to Rose, yet the quote is found in a report "Advising Readers in Harlem," and the letterhead on which the report is typed indicates the reader's adviser is Sonya Krutchkoff. Krutchkoff authored another readers' advisor report found in the same collection which leads me to conclude she is more likely the source of this quote than is Rose.

Ernestine Rose shares a name with a noted nineteenth-century Jewish feminist, Ernestine Louise Rose (1810–1892). Born in Russian Poland, Ernestine L. Rose has no connection with the Ernestine Rose of Bridgehampton, Long Island, discussed in this article. Due to the shared name, it is logical to wonder whether Ernestine Rose of Bridgehampton was also Jewish. Although her religion is not directly referred to in the biographical information I have consulted, there is mention that a paternal uncle was a minister. After retiring in Bridgehampton, Rose joined the local Presbyterian Church.

Of her experience at the Seward Branch library, Rose wrote and published a pamphlet in 1917, "Bridging the Gulf; Work with Russian Jews and Other Newcomers."

The author of over 20 published papers and pamphlets, she also authored one book, The Public Library in American Life. The only personal papers that survive her refer to her work from 1945–47, after she left the Harlem Branch and worked at Columbia University. Her papers are at Columbia University's library.

Augusta Baker, an African-American children's librarian, went on to a celebrated career as a library-based storyteller and collaborated with Belpré later in both of their careers. In 1946 Baker published one of the first bibliographies of less biased books about African Americans, entitled Negro Life for Children (Del Negor 2000).

This is true of virtually all Puerto Rican migrants from the early twentieth century who have published their writing and about whom there exists historical information. Poet Julia de Burgos stands out as one obvious exception to this statement; however, she did suffer from debilitating alcoholism, which contributed to her destitution and her premature death in New York.

Children's Registration 1926-1930. New York Public Library 135th Street Branch Records (hereafter NYPLBR), Box 3, Folder 9; Reports 1919-1927, NYPLBR, Box 3, Folder 8; Children’s Room Report 1922-1929. Box 2, Folder 17; Children’s Registration 1926-1930. NYPLBR, Box 1, Folder 9; 135th Street Branch Adult Education 1932-1950, Advising Readers in Harlem. NYPLBR, Box 1; New and Better Methods for Helping Readers. NYPLBR, Box 1; Readers’ Adviser—Annual Report—1932; NYPLBR, Box 1.

Pantoja’s (2002) autobiography presents a number of important examples of interracial cooperation that advanced the work she undertook. One example is the working relationship she had with Frank Horne, who prodded her to develop the Puerto Rican Forum, offering a Southern organization of which he was a member, “The Forum,” as a role model.

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