

Another Look at a Knowledge Organization Pioneer: Traces of Racism in Paul Otlet's Writings

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Fidelia Ibekwe is a Full Professor of Information Science at the School of Journalism & Communication, Aix-Marseille University in France. In her early research season, she developed language technology models and prototypes for text mining, knowledge acquisition, terminology structuring, information visualization and information retrieval. She then turned her attention to studying the historical and theoretical foundations of Information science as well as the implications of algorithmic governance and data-driven inquiry on science and society. Currently, her research interests are focused on issues pertaining to racism, racial and ethnic discriminations, (big) data colonialism, decolonial perspectives, oppressive social and political systems. Methodologically, she leverages Critical Race Theory (CRT), critical sociolinguistics and language technologies to analyse traces of institutional cultures and policies that enable systemic and structural racism, with a view to producing actionable knowledge that will inform more efficient anti-racism policies that may reduce their effects on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) worldwide.



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Abstract: Critical strand of studies in Knowledge Organization (KO) and Library and Information Science (LIS) have been focused on gender bias and power inherent in the classification of knowledge artefacts. From the mid-2000s, attention turned to other types of biases notably racial biases. These studies have exposed and rightly critiqued how the supposedly "universal" classification and knowledge artefacts designed by LIS and KO pioneers were designed mostly by white men. Wiegand (1996) demonstrated that Melvil Dewey, the creator of DCC, was a notorious racist and antisemite. This paper raises the issue of how the LIS and KO communities have dealt with the legacy of one its most celebrated pioneers, Paul Otlet, whose writings had imprints of white supremacist ideologies at least in two of his texts '*Afrique aux Noirs*' and '*Monde. Essai d'universalisme*'. In particular, we speculate about the quasi-omerta that had surrounded Otlet's writings on race and racial relations considering the amount of exegesis done on his works. The one-sided narrative portraying Otlet mostly in a positive light and magnifying his works has led to epistemicide and "documentary injustice".

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1.0 Introduction

Critical studies in Knowledge Organization (KO) and Library and Information Science (LIS) have focused on gender bias inherent in universal knowledge organization artefacts. From the mid

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