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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" (Youngman et al. 2022).

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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 (Olson 1998; Green 2015). From the mid-2000s, attention turned to other types of biases notably racial (Furner 2007; Furner and Dunbar 2004; Honna 2005; Adler and Harper 2018; Santamaria 2020). These studies critiqued how the supposedly "universal" classification and knowledge artefacts designed by LIS and KO pioneers were designed mostly by white men — it is true at a time when women were rarely admitted in the scientific arena. These "universal" KO systems were imbued with racist pseudo-scientific ideologies of the western world in which anything produced elsewhere (Africa, Asia) was deemed inferior or barbaric. In particular, Wiegand (1996) recalled that Melvil Dewey, the creator of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DCC) was a notorious racist, misogynist and antisemite. In recent years, North American LIS and KO practitioners and scholars have commenced a critical reassessment of Dewey's legacy. In 2019, the American Library Association (ALA) voted to remove his medal from their list of honors [1]. On the other hand, Paul Otlet, the European pioneer of LIS and the creator of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) has so far escaped any such critical race-theoretic scrutiny.

A tradition of scholarly work in LIS and KO has spent decades analyzing Otlet's documentary works and writings. His visions of an international network of remote

documentary services have been touted as foreshadowing the invention of the web. His pacifist and internationalist efforts and his advocacy for the society of nations have been much lauded. Indeed, his teammate and co-founder of the UDC, the Belgian lawyer Henri Lafontaine was the recipient of the Peace Nobel Prize in 1913. When criticisms have been formulated around Otlet by scholars studying his documentary *oeuvres*, they have been focused solely on the positivist and somewhat megalomaniac nature of his documentary visions and realizations. See for instance (Rayward 1994; 2017).

Yet, Otlet's writings also bore the imprint of blatantly racist and imperialist ideology that permeated European science from the Enlightenment (17th century) till recent times. We ponder in this article about the scholarly treatment of Paul Otlet's legacy by the LIS and KO communities. In particular, we speculate as to the reason for the quasi-silence that has surrounded Otlet's writings on race and on racial relations until recently.

Going from the premise that the works and writings of a person ultimately bear traces of their personal views, epistemological assumptions and ideologies, it is important to not only study the works and writings of LIS and KO pioneers in isolation, but also to examine how their views, ideologies and epistemological assumptions may have shaped their works given the importance that knowledge artifacts have had for centuries and continue to have in determining how things and people are perceived and thus treated.

Our encounter with the problematic nature of Otlet's writings on race and on colonization illustrates the power of serendipity. It came through reading a doctoral dissertation by Perret (2022) in which the author examined if Otlet's documentary realizations fully implemented the network epistemology and ideal he espoused in his writings and if indeed Otlet, as often claimed but rarely demonstrated, was a forerunner of the web. In a brief passage, Perret (2022) observed that Otlet's problematic writings on race and on colonization had gone quasi un-highlighted in the hundreds of publications devoted to his legacy. He writes^[2]:

Discussions of Otlet's positivism generally place him in the context of universalist, internationalist and pacifist thinking. It is rarer that they mention his relationship to civilization and colonization. On the basis of certain publications, Elodie Mugrefya considers his thoughts and work to be “profoundly racist” (Mugrefya, 2019). Some of Otlet's writings are indeed questionable. His text *L'Afrique aux noirs* (Otlet, 1888) perfectly illustrates the ideology of the "great division" between savages and civilized. But it is especially *Monde* (Otlet, 1935) that is perplexing: in the pages devoted to "Races and human varieties", Otlet asserts that the notion of race should not be the basis for a feeling of superiority towards certain men; yet he then writes that "*in the Negro species, the brain is less developed than in the white species*". Mugrefya's text thus raises undeniable questions that some authors may wish to explore more rigorously, particularly in their implications for Otlet's achievements. In knowledge organization for example, this seems to us to be part of the research trend which develops a pragmatic approach to systems such as classifications - by examining the values carried by these systems and the effects they produce ^[3]. (Perret 2022, 44).

Hitherto, my impression of Otlet's works had been shaped by the mountain of prolific exegesis produced by his interpreters and admirers which are enough to occupy anyone scholar for an entire academic career. The clamor and noise around how wonderful and visionary Otlet's realizations and writings were had succeeded in obscuring and deterring any critical study of his views on race and on colonization which had all along been written down, in plain sight, as his other much studied texts and sometimes even within the same much studied texts.

The time has come to pull off these “romanticized blinders” and take another look, a critical race-theoretic one at Otlet's writings. We thus embarked on reading the original passages of his two incriminated texts: ‘*Afrique aux Noirs*’ (Africa for the Blacks) and ‘*Monde*.

Essai d'universalisme (World. Essay on universalism). In the following, we provide a translation into English of Otlet's original text in French and use emphasis in bold to highlight passages that are of particular relevance to our argumentation.

2. *L'Afrique aux Noirs*: A pamphlet on the superiority of the "white race"

Paul Otlet was born on 18 August 1868 and died on 10 December 1944, a few months before the end of World War II (WWII). *L'Afrique aux Noirs* is a short text of seven pages that Otlet published in 1888 when he was twenty years old. In this text, Otlet contributed to a debate by American newspapers about a formerly enslaved Black person named Gilles Moss who lived in Evansville, Indiana. Gilles Moss gained renown by advocating for a return to Africa of enslaved Black Americans for them to attain complete emancipation through conversion to Christianity. Moss had become known as the 'Black Moses' due to his proficiency. Thus, the title of Otlet's text, '*L'Afrique aux noirs*,' refers to this project of a return to the mother continent Africa championed by this Black Moses. First, let us begin by acknowledging that the idea of returning formerly enslaved people to Africa was not Otlet's. Some prominent Pan-Africanists, including W.E.B. Du Bois, had championed this idea. Indeed, some formerly enslaved Black Americans did return to Sierra Leone (Freetown). Hence, it is not on this specific project that our criticism of Otlet's thoughts resides but rather in what his terminology and phraseology reveal about his racist ideology.

In this text, Otlet systematically refers to the African Americans and Blacks as "*nègres*" (negroes) which was the racial derogatory terminology of the day. He first acknowledged the hypocrisy and injustices Africans had endured at the hands of their white American oppressors and enslavers:

But emancipation has not given them a homeland. Free today under the government of those who were their masters, they cannot fully enjoy their liberty; rich, they do not dispose of their wealth as they please; equal in law before the American constitution, they will never be in fact, before the proud Yankees. - The jobs of the country, where they are counted by the millions, are never for them; the ranks of society do not open to receive them: they meet everywhere only disdain, repugnance and crumpling of self-esteem. (...) The Negroes of America, who have been yearning for so long for a land where they can enjoy their freedom without suffering inevitable vexations, without having, as in the United States, to deplore their origin as freedmen, respond to the call of their Moses by crying out, "*Africa for the Negroes!*"^[5]

When Otlet turns to the role of Europeans and particularly of his own country Belgium, he appeared to lose his critical stance about the realities of the colonial and imperialistic project:

We Europeans who went to colonize African soil, we Belgians in particular, who took a direct part in the civilizing **work of the Congo**, must we, can we, stand by with our arms folded as the great movement of repatriation takes shape across the Atlantic? **The work of the Congo is above all a humanitarian and Christian work.** These are men and brothers who need to be rescued from a moral and intellectual decline that has lasted too long. It is also a whole section of humanity that must be called to material progress and economic development."^[5]

Leopold II, the Belgium King during the second half of 19th Century (1865-1909) annexed the Congo as his private property which he ironically called "Congo Free State". While Leopold II never set foot on the Congo, it has been deemed "the largest private estate ever

acquired by a single man ^[6]”, being sixty times the size of his tiny Belgium. Otlet will not have been unaware of the atrocities committed in the name of “civilization” and “progress” by European colonizing nations, nor of his own sovereign’s colonization of the Congo. Under Leopold II’s particularly brutal regime, Congolese people were subjected to excruciating forced labor. Those deemed recalcitrant had parts of their anatomies severed (hands, legs, etc.). The horrific abuses committed by Leopold’s colonial army were denounced at the time by abolitionists and human rights campaigners in the UK and the US:

The history of Leopold's rule over the Congo has long been known. It was first exposed by American and British writers and campaigners at the turn of the century - publicity which eventually forced the king to hand the country which had been his private fiefdom over to Belgium.^[7]

The American writer, Mark Twain even published a satirical pamphlet entitled ‘*King Leopold’s Soliloquy*’ in 1905 where he mocked the Belgian king for “railing against American missionaries, British consuls, and other “tiresome parrots” who turned a harsh light on the Congolese atrocities” and for cloaking his rapacious pillaging of Congo under benevolent guise (Wright 2014, 54). Several converging sources estimate that the Belgian occupation under Leopold II led to the death of half of its population, i.e., “an estimated 10 million Congolese deaths through murder, starvation and disease^[8]. This puts Leopold II’s crimes on par with the Holocaust of the Jewish people during World War II ^[9].

Paul Otlet could certainly not have been ignorant of his Sovereign’s doings in Congo, but he clearly saw the latter and his country Belgium as the “white savior” who were leading the Congo to civilization. Subsequent paragraphs of his text leave no room for doubt about his innate belief in the superiority of his “white race”:

However, by importing our complex civilization into Africa in one piece, are we not creating a formidable antagonism between two social states too disparate to merge? By bringing **the refined white man, and the still savage black man into direct contact**, are we not harming rather than helping the recent and glorious advent of the black continent? The history of all social evolutions teaches that we must beware of progress that is too rapid and without transition; and that of all colonisations establishes that the blood of the emigrant must be mixed with that of the native. (...) Our role in Africa, as people of the North, **must be limited to a right of high trusteeship**, to a general direction of its material and moral development; and, as a consequence, to the establishment of useful commercial relations [...]" ^[10]. Let the vast independent State of the Congo open its doors to these American citizens who are its children: **they constitute the best means of fusion between African barbarism and European civilization; let it ask them to go and complete, under the guardianship of the sovereign whom Europe has chosen**, the considerable work of the political, social and material organization of these immense regions."^[11]

Thus, for Otlet, African-Americans stood a better chance of bringing Africa out of its innate barbarism because they had been somewhat "civilized" by their contact with an "advanced civilization" no matter that this supposed refinement was achieved through savage brutality and the dehumanization of slavery and segregation.

As Otlet weighed in on this project of formerly enslaved Americans returning to Africa, he dismissed an alternative suggestion to bring promising young Congolese men to Belgium to be educated so they could go back later and develop their country as being too costly for his country. Instead, he espoused the Black Moses's project of sending African Americans back to

Africa to develop the continent, naively proclaiming that if this project became reality, in a century, African cities would become the “Chicago and New York and Washington of the African continent”:

Africa for the blacks! This is the work we must do. It is up to Leopold II to make his word heard again, to take the initiative in the repatriation of American Negroes. Repatriation of the American Negroes. Let him get in touch with the Black Moses, let him offer land and positions to those to those who are enthusiastic about the word of this new prophet, and thus our King will gloriously complete the noble task he has set himself: to call to civilization the African continent. Give Africa back to the blacks”.^[12]

Otlet’s text is spectacularly naïve as to be almost farcical in its condescension, paternalism and whitewashing of the realities of colonization, especially given the legacy of his own monarch Leopold II. But was Otlet naïve or simply self-serving? It seems that the latter is the case. Indeed, Wright (2014) already revealed that Otlet’s family was involved in king Leopold II’s imperialist endeavor in Congo. Thus, Otlet aspired to be in the good graces of his monarch in order to advance his own megalomaniac documentary projects.

3. *Monde. Essai d’universalisme* (1935). Polygenism and racial anthropology

An indulgent mind may be tempted to attribute the racist views in ‘*Afrique aux Noirs*’ to misguided youthful exuberance and intellectual immaturity. However, *Monde. Essai d’universalisme* was published forty-seven years later, in 1935, when Otlet was 67 years old and a year after the publication of his *Traité de documentation*, in 1934. The two books represent “Otlet's intellectual testament and his ‘*magnum opus*’ ” (Perret 2022). Highlighting

some of the megalomaniac and utopian views expressed in this treaty, Perret (17) considered that *Monde* was Otlet's:

attempt at a systematic and synthetic description of the world, placing documentation at the heart of the problem of knowledge. *Monde* ends with an "equation of the world" that would make a mathematician smile, but which can be seen as a symbol of Otlet's career, projected towards an ideal of knowledge, held back by the physical limitations of a man (...) and by the technical limitations of his time.

A worrisome trend in some of Otlet's writings is that he often ventured into topics he was not an expert on, propounding simplistic, naive and positivist theories and assertions in his quest to bring everything and everybody into a hierarchical straitjacket. Wright (2014, 56-7) attributes this to the influence of Auguste Comte's positivism which ran through all of Otlet's intellectual endeavors. Otlet believed in the idea of immutable scientific traits that governed the classification of humans in the same way that naturalists found factual criteria to classify fauna and flora (Carl Linnaeus), that geologists classified rocks, and biologists classified mammals and other living organisms. The problem with all such classifications is that the "type", "class" or "race" the classificationist belongs to invariably ends up at the top of the hierarchy. In contrast, other types are relegated to the bottom of the rung, thus providing pseudo-scientific justification that paves the way for the subjugation and exploitation of the "inferior" classes.

In a subsection of *Monde* entitled "*Races and Human Varieties. Unity and plurality*", Otlet devoted four pages (84-87) to a discussion on the origins and types of human "races". He first recalled the existing opposing scientific theories: polygenism posits the existence of several centres of human creation and thus the existence of several "races" while monogenism

posits a unique source of human creation. On the latter, he reported that the ‘The Universal Congress on Races’ which took place in London in 1911, reached a conclusion that “there were only varieties of humans between which there were no insurmountable abyss, and thus invited people to combat racial prejudice because they cause uncountable suffering on Humanity and were founded on generalisations unworthy of science”. (Otlet 1935, 84).

Thus, when he was writing *Monde*, Otlet was well aware of the consequences of polygenism and the fact that it led to the establishing of a racial hierarchy, which is the bedrock of racism. Yet, under the heading “Ethnic species” (*Espèces ethniques*), Otlet went on to classify humans into distinct “races”:

On the other hand, we are composed of various races, which had to differentiate themselves at indeterminate times (...). Let us mention the black races (Negroes, Melanesians, etc.), the Australian races (Dravida, etc.), the Semitic races (Indo-Afghans, etc.), the Aino- and Polynesian races, the so-called American Indian races, the Eskimos, Tartars and Mongols, and finally the so-called European races, mixed with Brachycephalians and Dolichocephalians. These races are divided into innumerable varieties that can almost only be distinguished in Europe (...) (85) ^[13].

Otlet’s next paragraph removes any doubt about his own racist and segregationist project of keeping his “white superior race” apart from the danger of contamination from the “inferior polluting black race”:

On the other hand, **we must carefully distinguish from our superior races the truly inferior races, with smaller brains**, such as the Weddas, the Axas, the Negroes, etc. Here, error is no longer possible: **cross-breeding, which is good in the European races, becomes bad in the mulattoes** (See Deniker, Manouvrier, Rod Martin, Forel).^[14]

Arguing that “differences in human races” are not only linked to skin color but also manifest themselves by differences “in the blood, in the muscular tissues and especially in the shape and form of the skull”, Otlet classified humans into: 1° the white or Caucasian race found in Europe, southern Asia, northern Africa and in America; (2) the yellow race or the Mongols in oriental and northern Asia, in the Arctic regions, in Europe and in America; 3° the Black or African race in central and southern Africa, America and Oceania, 4° the olive race or Malaysian in Oceania and South East Asia; 5° the red or American race in America which is today occupied by the white race and its mixed varieties. He then singled out the “Black race” for racial profiling based on dubious anthropometric measurements:

The races, in so far as they have been observed, give rise to their own characteristics. Thus, **in the Negro species, the brain is less developed than in the white species**, the convolutions are less deep and the nerves which emanate from this center to spread to the organs of the senses are much more voluminous (...) In fact, the Negroes have more developed hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch than the whites. **For intellectual work, they have little aptitude**, but they excel in dancing, fencing, swimming, horse-riding and all physical exercises (86-87).

If Otlet’s naïve attempts to reduce the complexity of human societies into a “mathematical equation of the world” can make other scientists smile, his attempts to classify human races into hierarchies can be no laughing matter given the dehumanizing consequences such classifications have had and continue to have on the “races” deemed inferior. Given that Otlet was neither a naturalist, anthropologist nor a biologist, one wonders how he arrived at this classification of ‘human races’ that he so emphatically stated as though they were indisputable

facts. How did he measure differences in muscular tissues and skull size? Was he simply copying and amplifying the pseudo-scientific theories of other Western naturalists and eugenicists who preceded him?

4. European Enlightenment thinkers as proponents of slavery, imperialism and colonisation

Theories about the origins of the human species have been propounded since the 17th century by European “enlightenment” philosophers and scientists. In 1684, François Bernier published ‘*New division of Earth by the different species or races which inhabit it*^[15] in which he divided humans into four “races”: Europeans, Far Easterners, Negroes (blacks), and Lapps. In 1779, John Friedrich Blumenbach divided humans into five races based on crania research (description of human skulls) either as Caucasian, Mongolian, Aethiopian, American, or Malayan^[16]. However, Blumenbach specifically refuted the idea of the superiority of the white race and affirmed the intelligence of the black “race”. By contrast, Joseph Arthur the Count of Gobineau’s ‘*Essay on the inequality of the human races*^[17], published in 1853 upheld the myth of the superiority of the white “Aryan” race over the others and advocated for the segregation of the white race from the inferior “races”. Six years later, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) refuted the thesis of a hierarchy of races. As Mugrefya (2019) surmised concerning Otlet’s choice to espouse such theories:

Thus, if anti-racist thinking was already available in Otlet's time, this demonstrates the extent to which his racism was not an epochal flaw but rather a conscious refusal to confront his racist conceptions deeply rooted in the heritage of European thought. Indeed, I say confrontation not by chance, for if Otlet, and many other European intellectuals, were to admit that African people were their equals, the whole colonial system would

lose its civilizing splendor and become a monstrous enterprise driven essentially by the capitalist machinery. Where, then, could the beautiful thoughts of the Enlightenment that theorize individual freedom as a natural human element be located if Africans were also part of the same human category? [...] The dehumanization of Africans had to be made real in order to perpetuate the atrocities while retaining the humanistic greed articulated by the Enlightenment. Cornel West and Achille Mbembe, in their critique of slavery and colonialism, brilliantly draw attention to this point: "*White supremacy is an integral part of European progress, and the odious enslavement of Africans is a precondition for progressive breakthroughs in the modern world.*" "*As a progeny of democracy, the colonial world was not the antithesis of the democratic order. It has always been its double, or its night side. There is no democracy without its double, its colony, whatever the name and structure.*"^[18]

Otlet's classification of human "races" appears not to have been informed by any scientific work he had done but to be the result of his paraphrasing and borrowing phrenologist and physiognomist fantasies on "barbarians" written by European "enlightenment" thinkers. Indeed, Mugrefya (2019) observed that the style and language used by Otlet to describe Africans bore the same hateful fetichism and fantasies found in Europe's intellectual heritage. She went on to observe that "The similarity of ideas and the language used are particularly striking and demonstrate the extent to which Otlet was not appealing to any personal imagination, but rather to his European heritage rooted in the works of racist thinkers such as Kant"^[19]. She cited a passage from Immanuel Kant which exhibited the same fantasies of the savage found in Otlet's writings:

The Negroes of Africa have not received from nature any feelings that rise above stupidity. Among the whites, on the contrary, it is constant that some rise above the lowest rabble and acquire a certain consideration in the world through the excellence of their superior gifts. So essential is the difference between these two human races! And it seems as great in the faculties of the mind as in the color of the skin.

The issue of whether many European Enlightenment thinkers upheld racist views and theories has been the object of heated debates within several scientific circles, amongst white philosophers who have the luxury of such debates. Several passages in Kant's texts leave no room for doubt that he believed in the inferiority of non-whites "races". In his *Physische Geographie* (Physical Geograpy) published in (1802), which is a series of lectures reconstructed from Kant's manuscript and notes taken by some of his students, he is quoted as stating that:

Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples (Kant cited in Abundez-Guerra, 2018)

Kant's belief that Africans lacked humanity and feelings and thus should be treated as animals transpires in the following excerpts from his writings:

So fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man... it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color" so that "a clear proof that what [a Negro] said was stupid" was that "this fellow was quite black from head to foot." Kant's advice does not end here however, for when it comes to whipping blacks

Kant advises that we “use a split bamboo cane instead of whip, so that the ‘negro’ will suffer a great deal of pains (because of the negro’s thick skin, he would not be racked with sufficient agonies through a whip) but without dying.”^[20] (Abundez-Guerra, 2018).

It is not surprising that Kant is considered to be the “founder of European racism^[21]” Eberl (2019). Abundez-Guerra (2018, 121) further observed that:

The point is that Kant presumably did not consider people outside his European community to be humans. It is quite possible that when Kant claimed that “all humans deserve dignity,” all he meant by humans were rich land owning European males.

While the so-called “enlightenment” thinkers advocated freedom and emancipation for the white common man, they provided pseudo-scientific theories to legitimize the enslavement and dehumanization of brown and dark-skinned people. For a period dubbed as that of ‘enlightenment’, aimed at the emancipation of people through knowledge and not dogma, these centuries (17th–19th) were replete with some of the most harmful and heinous ideologies in human history.

In the wake of George Floyd’s racist murder in 2020, many Western scientific institutions are beginning to confront their racist legacies. In this vein, the University of Harvard’s library acknowledged the consequences of polygenism, espoused by one of their own scientists:

Some 19th-century scientists, like Harvard’s Louis Agassiz, were proponents of “polygenism,” which posited that human races were distinct species. This theory was supported by **pseudoscientific methods like craniometry**, the measurement of human skulls, which supposedly proved that white people were biologically superior to Blacks.

Early statistical health data was weaponized against Black Americans in the late 1800s, as it was used to claim they were predisposed to disease and destined for extinction. By the early to mid-20th century, polygenism and biology-based racism were widely disproven, and racism in social science had gained popularity (Harvard n.d.).^[22]

5. The man who wanted to classify the world

Dubbed "*The Man who Wanted to Classify the world*^[23]", Otlet's attempts to classify and catalog every knowledge artifact including ones he knew nothing about was consistent with the imperialist ideology of European scientists and thinkers bent on proving the superiority of their "white race" at the expense of rigorous science. As someone whose self-appointed mission was to index and classify the world's knowledge artifacts into a "universal classification" system, Otlet had documents sent to him from all over the world. His racist ideology can, therefore, not be dismissed on the grounds of insufficient information, given his monumental achievements in collecting, indexing, and classifying all the written documents of his time. Let us recall that his '*Office International de Bibliographie*' (OIB) was created in 1893. By 1900, his '*Répertoire Bibliographique Universel*' (RBU) (Universal Bibliographic Directory) had produced 2 million cards cataloging the majority of documents printed since 1894. The RBU also won a prize at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris. Therefore, Otlet had privileged access to documentary evidence that most people of his time could not hope for.

According to the estimate of his most assiduous biographer, Otlet was a prolific author who wrote more than 500 documents of various types including letters to the press and preprints (Rayward 2017).

At the time when Otlet published *Monde* in 1935, racial theories and the controversies surrounding them had been around for more than two centuries. There had been heated debates

on slavery. The British navy's "Blockade of Africa" between 1807-1870 which forced other slave trading European countries trying to evade the blockade to give up their transatlantic commerce of human beings had happened. Publications by anti-slavery and anti-racist campaigners, as well as scholars, had appeared. Segregation was already in place in the United States since 1849 under the Jim Crow laws and only officially ended in 1965. The segregationist model was later reproduced in South Africa between 1948 and 1994 by the brutal apartheid regime. The First World War had also happened (1914-18) with devastating consequences. Another ugly racial theory had reared its head in the shape of Hitler's Nazi party which seized power in neighboring Germany from 1933 and was enforcing his ideology of the superiority of the "Aryan race" with the tragic consequences that the world beheld for Jewish people and other victims. Thus, Otlet could not be in ignorance of the fraudulent nature of the pseudo-scientific physiognomy and craniometry research he was basing his classification on nor of the dehumanizing consequences of these racist theories for Black people.

It would appear then that Otlet chose, in full conscience, to subscribe to the most evil theory on the human race, i.e., polygenism, physiognomy and phrenology, of which Arthur the Count of Gobineau's '*Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*' (*Essay on the inequality of the human races*) remains a classic text for white supremacists.

6. Epistemicide and documentary injustice of information professionals

At this point, we have to ask the following questions: how have Otlet's writings on race and colonization been ignored for so long by the academic fields he helped to found and which have been celebrating his legacy? How has Otlet come to enjoy such an unblemished reputation as the founder of modern documentation, as a pioneer of the web and of LIS while in the same texts that have been amply studied, paraphrased, and glossed over, lay in plain sight, entire

pages where he exhibited blatant white supremacist ideologies, a romanticization of the colonization of Black people couched in paternalistic pseudo-Christian tropes that have served to justify centuries of atrocities, of wealth and land grab, and of oppression of Africans by the West?

Even if one were to limit one's scrutiny to Otlet's documentary *oeuvres*, one would find his conceptual approach problematic. His megalomaniac and utopian ideals, his positivist approach to knowledge acquisition and representation led him to adopt a narrow and simplistic view that ignored complexity of phenomena, the multiplicity and diversity of viewpoints, and that of users. As Rayward (1994, 247) acknowledged:

Otlet's primary concern was not the document or the text or the author. It was also not the user of the system and his or her needs or purposes. Otlet's concern was for the objective knowledge that was both contained in and hidden by documents. His view of knowledge was authoritarian, reductionist, positivist, simplistic - and optimistic! Documents are repetitious, confusingly expressed and filled with error as well as with what is factually true and, therefore, of use. But he betrays no doubt that what is factually true and likely to be useful can easily be identified. It is merely a question of institutionalizing certain processes for analyzing and organizing the content of documents. For him that aspect of the content of documents with which we must be concerned is facts. He speaks almost everywhere of facts.

Buckland (2012 citing Frohmann 2008) goes in the same direction:

He considered books and articles to be inefficient, opinionated, and duplicative. His idea was to extract facts from texts, like peas from pods, and to organize the facts into an authoritative semantic web using concise unitary factual statements ("monographs")

described, positioned, and collectively associated using the Universal Decimal Classification system (4).

Suzanne Briet, the other founder of European documentation was equally very critical of the rigidity of universal classification schemes such as the CDU and CDD. She judged such schemes too unwieldy and inadequate to meet the information needs of subject specialists (Maack 2004). She was quite scathing about Otlet's *Répertoire Universel de Bibliographie* (RBU) of which she wrote in her manifesto '*Qu'est-ce que la documentation*':

Documentology has lost nothing by being relieved of the burden of a Universal Bibliographic Directory which the whole world has called a chimera, and which did not offer the same level of interest as the most localized of collective catalogs. "(Briet 1951, 9)^[24]

Briet advocated instead for the development of specialized classification languages, tailored to the documents to be indexed and taking into account end users' concerns ((Ibekwe-SanJuan, 2012) . Indeed, some of Otlet's contemporaries considered his ambitions of classifying the world as "mad, idealistic, megalomaniac and utopian" (Van Acker, 2012).

Concerning the treatment of Otlet's legacy by LIS and KO communities, Buckland (2017, 2) who knows a thing or two about the archeology of ideas of pioneers had this to say:

Interest in Paul Otlet increased in the 1990s and led to many studies of his work. However, I believe that we would understand Otlet better if we studied him less and studied his context and his sources more. Otlet collected ideas as well as bibliographical records and museum

specimens. So a suitable strategy is to assume that his selection and presentation of ideas were original, but that the ideas themselves were not, and then look for sources of his ideas.”

Unfortunately, studies of Otlet’s ideas and writings have avoided scrutinizing his problematic writings on race and colonization and eschewed highlighting the racism that permeated the *milieu* in which Otlet grew up, and thus shaped his ideologies, world views and documentary *oeuvres*.

Two important sources of biographical information on Otlet are: Boyd Rayward’s *The Universe of Information: The Work of Paul Otlet for Documentation and International Organization* (Moscow: VINITI, 1975^[25]), and Alex Wright’s *Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

To the best of our knowledge, Rayward (1975) does not mention Otlet’s views on race and colonization. Wright (2014), on the other hand, devoted several pages to detailing Otlet’s family’s implications in their monarch Leopold II’s colonial ventures in the Congo:

Spurred on by the king’s rhetoric, Belgium launched its first civilian expedition to the Congo in 1886, organized and financed by none other than **Édouard Otlet** (...) The trip’s leader did return with the son of a Congo chief, a young man called Mayalé, who went on to work as a servant in the **Otlet household**. **Otlet’s later expeditions** were overtly commercial in nature and came in the wake of a series of secret government-sponsored expeditions financed by Leopold and led by the world-famous Henry Stanley. Officially, the king framed these expeditions as purely exploratory in nature. But in his private correspondence, he freely acknowledged his ulterior motives. “*I’m sure if I quite openly charged Stanley with the task of taking possession in my name of some part of Africa, the English will stop me,*” he wrote. “*So I think I’ll just give Stanley some job of exploration which would offend*

no one, and will give us the bases and headquarters which we can take over later on.” Soon enough, Stanley had helped the king engineer the acquisition of the Congo. (...) The Belgian Congo might seem far removed from the quiet life of an adolescent Paul Otlet puzzling out his schemes for the library catalog. But directly and indirectly the Congo project would influence Otlet’s life and work for years to come (Wright 2014, 53-56)^[26].

Despite the fact that Wright devoted several pages to outlining Otlet’s (father and son) complicity and culpability in Leopold’s rapacious and racist enterprise in Congo in a book published in 2014, none of the bibliographic records and summaries of Wright’s book produced by information professionals reflected this ^[27]. How then can anyone discover Otlet’s views on race and colonization when the pages of Wright’s book detailing it were omitted in the documentary analysis of the book? As most of what we know comes to us through secondary sources (Fricker, 2006), their importance as knowledge discovery artifacts cannot be overstated. Bibliographic records, abstracts and book reviews are often the first window into the content of a publication that determine whether an information seeker will go on to read the full text or not. They can therefore determine whether a particular facet of information is discoverable or lost forever. This point was well articulated by Adler and Harper (2018, 58):

As access to information is fundamentally made possible via structures, naming, and control, it is important for all workers in information professions to understand how KO techniques influence the circulation of content, whether it is in article databases, on library shelves, or over social media.

This omission underscores a second point already made by several LIS/KO researchers that the claim of neutrality and objectivity of viewpoint in indexing is at best naïve and at worst, a *façade* behind which information professionals hide their own convictions, biases or their support of dominant ideologies and theories. By omitting to reflect the aspects of Otlet that showed him in a negative light in the abstracting and indexing of Wright's book, information professionals have participated in an enterprise of selective omission. Patrick Wilson (1968, 6) rightly observed that:

To have bibliographic control over a collection of things is to have a certain power over those things; what things, and what sort of power, it is our business to discover or decide.

In the case in point, many people may be unaware of Wright's book or may be unable to access its content in its entirety with the result that Otlet's problematic views on race and colonization have remained hidden in plain sight for decades.

To further ascertain whether the abundant exegesis on Otlet's work had highlighted his views on race and colonization, we searched several bibliographic databases (ScienceDirect, Emerald, EBSCO, JSTOR, Scopus) with the terms "Otlet AND (racism OR racist)" but did not locate any relevant publication. We then turned to that vast web of documents by performing a Google Scholar search on 30st October 2023 for 'Paul Otlet' after his death, thus from "1945-2023". This yielded 13.900 hits, confirming that his works and publications have been abundantly analyzed and commented upon by various scholars. We then restricted the previous result by adding the terms "racist OR race OR racism". This yielded 284 results, thus a mere 1,8% of the 13.900 documents found by Google Scholar on Otlet after his death. To ascertain if these publications dealt with Otlet's racism, we perused the first two pages of the results and

found that the rare publications that acknowledged Otlet's racism were two recent papers by the author of the present article (Ibekwe, 2023), (Birdi et al., 2022) When racism was mentioned in connection with Otlet in some of the other results, a perusal of their contents showed that it was quickly dismissed with the argument that his views were largely shared by the Western society at that time or that Otlet was a friend of Africans and had advocated for their emancipation. We will not debate the first baseless argument which seeks to absolve Europeans of their imperialist greed and its consequences both past, present and future. Let us tackle this second more pernicious counterargument. In his 1888 pamphlet *L'Afrique aux Noirs*, Otlet did indeed advocate sending Africans back to Africa but at the same time, his sovereign Leopold II had claimed ownership of the Congo and his colonial force was brutally assassinating Congolese people. Since the Berlin conference of 1885, European nations had drawn and quartered African nations, sharing them amongst themselves. How could Africans then be free in a continent which Europeans had appropriated? Secondly, Otlet did indeed host a Pan-African congress at the Palais Mondial in Brussels between August 31–September 2, 1921, where the fledgling US-born National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) convened, including historic figures of Pan-Africanism such as W.E.B Du Bois. Otlet undoubtedly had a paternalistic and benevolent approach to the “African problem” but from the comfort of his imperialist Belgium and at the same time his family and his country benefitted from the wealth accumulated from the Congo while atrocities were committed on more than half of Congolese population by the army of his beloved monarch.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that while Otlet hosted this second pan-African congress in 1921, he was instrumental in defending the *status quo*, i.e. the Western imperialist agenda on Africa, by adopting an ambiguous and self-serving position that ultimately led to a split in the pan-African movement and undermined the more progressive and radical position defended by

Anglophone black freedom fighters. Concerning the outcome of this second congress, Wright (2014, 172) wrote:

A schism arose between two broad groups, with the American and British black attendees forming one bloc, opposed by their French and Belgian counterparts. The issue at hand came down to passing a series of resolutions coming out of the conference. On the one hand, the American and British attendees wanted to pass a strongly worded resolution condemning the exploitation of colonial Africans. But the French presiding official balked, instead stewarding through passage of a less vigorous resolution calling for the establishment of research institutes to study the state of black affairs in each colonial power. The author of that resolution was Paul Otlet, who hoped such institutions would ultimately participate in the vast worldwide network of institutions that he had long envisioned.

Finally, Otlet's short period of supposed advocacy for Pan-Africanism was followed fourteen years later by his treatise *Monde, Essai sur l'Universalism* written when he was much older, and which revealed his deep-seated racial prejudice and beliefs about the innate inferiority of Africans. It was therefore not without a considerable amount of consternation that we discovered, during our documentary search for a critical appraisal of Otlet, a 2023 publication with yet another glowing eulogy of Otlet and of his racist pamphlet *Afrique aux Noirs*:

Otlet, a philanthropist and bibliographer, worked with Farnana^[28] and the 1913 Nobel Peace Prize winner Henri La Fontaine to guarantee a prestigious venue for the Pan-African Congress, the Palais Mondial in Brussels. He had long championed the cause

of African peoples. As early as 1888, he wrote a pamphlet titled *L'Afrique aux Noirs*, a proto-Pan-African essay. His thesis posited that European civilization was too far removed from African reality to engage in effective missionary activity. Europeans needed allies closer to African customs and culture, a kind of intermediate layer between the Old World and the Dark Continent, and these were the “millions of Negroes already Christianized, accustomed to regular work, and endowed with all the requirements of an advanced civilization” (Otlet, *L'Afrique aux Noirs* 12-13; my translation), that is, African Americans in the United States (Nidi 2023, 250).

That the author of this commentary considered “*L'Afrique aux Noirs*” a text championing African people’s cause makes me wonder if we read the same text. This type of sanitization of what Otlet actually wrote by picking and choosing a few nice-sounding words and recasting them in positive terms is at least misleading and, at worst, another attempt to whitewash Otlet’s somber relations with race and colonization.

The avoidance and whitewashing of Otlet’s thoughts on race and on Africans by his interpreters and admirers constitute a case of epistemicide and documentary injustice. Epistemicide occurs when other narratives and ways of knowing are devalued, silenced or killed, resulting in epistemic injustices, which are themselves a result of systemic and oppressive systems (Patin et al., 2021). Documentary injustice occurs in “situations or environments where certain historical accounts are privileged and preferred over others”, and thus “poses a serious threat to the accuracy of our collective memory.” (Youngman et al., 2022).

7. To be constituted, the myth of origins needs to forget its history ^[29]

With the notable exception of Wright's 2014 book '*Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age*' which a reviewer of this paper brought to our notice, and Elodie (Mugrefya, 2019)'s critical article "*Mise en Valeur et Omission*" (Enhancement and Omission) which is freely available on the web, we had not located any critical study of Otlet's writings on race and on colonization within the field of LIS and KO before our own very recent publications (Ibekwe, 2023), (Birdi et al., 2022). When researching on Otlet, Mugrefya was confronted with the same hegemonic romanticized narrative:

Paul Otlet became a celebrated figure of Belgian intellectualism in the last twenty years, romantically portrayed as a tragic hero, the eternal misunderstood genius. The research I did into this character has given me the portrait of a brilliant, passionate, and benevolent man. Effectively, he was defined among others as a universalist, a utopian, a documentalist, an internationalist, a pacifist, a socialist activist and a visionary.^[30] (...) I have not been able to find any comments or criticisms of this text. Likewise, the Constant projects mentioned above were content with simple mentions, as if the text did not deserve to be discussed; as if it was in no way a reflection of the person that Paul Otlet was and of the heritage in which he positioned himself (Mugrefya 2019)^[31].

She also arrived at the conclusion that *Afrique aux Noirs* was neither an aberration nor a result of youthful misguidedness:

My argument is that *L'Afrique Aux Noirs* is just as significant as Paul Otlet's other texts, works and projects. Nor is it an embarrassing *faux-pas* that can be ignored under the pretext of a youthful mistake. If at no time in his career Otlet went back on his words, it is because on the contrary he would confirm them through his professional projects (Mugrefya, 2019).^[32].

Arguing that Otlet's academic pursuits cannot be dissociated from Otlet the person who was "fundamentally racist" [33], Mugrefya observed that Otlet was so favorable to his monarch Leopold II's colonial domination of the Congo that he sought to build his *Palais Mondial* in the Parc de Tervuren close to what at the time was called *Palais de Congo* which symbolized Leopold II's possession of a whole African territory and its people. Wright (2014, 56-7) also underlined Otlet's unfailing support of his monarch:

Long after the atrocities in the Congo had come to light, Otlet continued to see King Leopold II as a visionary. In 1927, he penned a tribute to the late king (who had died in 1909), in which he acknowledged the problematic aspects of the Congo project but nonetheless judged the king a master "sociologist" and celebrated him as "a great man whose memory we must keep." Leopold was "a king of big ideas and grand visions ... a Worker, a Builder, a Man of Accomplishment." (...) Otlet and Leopold II shared a conviction in the superiority of European culture—and in this they were scarcely alone.

Not surprisingly, Mugrefya's critique of Otlet's *Afrique aux Noirs* was met with the well-known avoidance strategies and discrediting that many critiques of Western racism are familiar with. First, the anti-racist critique is dismissed, ridiculed or attacked as being "decontextualized", "personal" and "polemic", then the white person accused of racism is excused on some baseless grounds, especially if it concerns someone who is long dead, as though the effects of slavery and colonization disappeared with the deaths of their proponents, perpetrators and victims, as though the current spike in racist crimes and murders, in right-wing ideologies, violence and exploitation of dark-skinned people are somehow disconnected from

this historic racism and colonization which still shape relations between Black and White people today:

The first and most unbearable defense consists in excusing Otlet's words because they are, after all, the reflection of an era and not of a man. The second defense is to absolve the character because of his young age when he wrote *L'Afrique Aux Noirs*, Otlet was 19 at the time. I want to remove the first argument, which is typically expressed in response to the formulation of a deconstruction of texts by European figures of the past. This argument has the effect of situating the white European point of view as the default value in which the other, the black, is the strange, the savage. Through this apathetic reflection, hatred, contempt and violence towards the Africans are excused and normalized. This European point of view presents itself as a cardinal point of intellectual thought with its atrocities atoned for under the guise of the alleged exceptionalism of white European people. It is precisely this positioning that has produced the belief that, as a cardinal point, the West then has the right, even the duty, to rule over the rest of the world, to arbitrate what is good and what is not, to decide who lives and who does not.”
(Mugrefya, 2019)^[34]

Mugrefya (2019)’s text is a solid rebuttal and a deconstruction of the “rhetorical gymnastics that some people are prepared to engage in order to keep a glorious, but fantasized, European heritage intact. A heritage in which certain characters are the major references, thus making them untouchable”.^[35]

Concluding thoughts

Racism, prejudice and colonization are not things of the past. Belgium, the home country of Paul Otlet exhibits the same brand of racism today as its forebears of past centuries. This case of a gruesome racist murder of a black Nigerian immigrant woman in 1999 by the Belgian police foreshadowed George Floyd's murder in 2020, save that it did not elicit the same worldwide protests:

Last September, the Belgian immigration service succeeded in suffocating one of them, a Nigerian woman called Semira Adamu, 20, on board the plane that was to take her home, by shoving her head under a pillow. The police videoed themselves chatting and laughing while they pushed her head down. It took them 20 minutes to kill her.^[36]

The whitewashing of Otlet's legacy is a reflection of today's Belgium which is largely in denial and unrepentant of its colonial legacy. Mugrefya (2019) wrote about the outrage expressed by Belgian public opinion "at demands to remove statues of men, including Leopold II, who were the leaders of one of the most murderous regimes in history, with an estimated 10 million people killed". Yet, the same Belgian society continued to indulge in singing "racist songs at a music festival, revelers in colonial dress, students in blackface"^[37].

After the racial awakening that followed George Floyd's racist murder in 2020 and the rise of Black Lives Matter movement worldwide, Europe and the West are witnessing a rise in far-right sentiments and ideologies. Calls for the West to confront its colonial crimes and the systemic racism against dark-skinned people are being met with fierce resistance in order to maintain the status *quo*.

The absence of objectivity displayed in the scholarly treatment of Otlet's legacy is ironic for a field that has always used this very argument of neutrality and objectivity of viewpoint to justify decades of promoting only the hegemonic Western viewpoints in knowledge

organization systems (SKOS) and of avoiding uncomfortable legacies of some of its pioneering figures. That it took authors from outside the field of LIS and KO^{[38][39]} to lay bare one of LIS and KO's most celebrated pioneer's troubling views on race and on the colonization of Africans is very disconcerting for a field whose self-proclaimed *raison d'être* is to provide the world with trustworthy information services, and "objective" knowledge discovery and organization systems. One cannot pontificate about Otlet's documentary visions, about his realizations on classification, extol his legacy as an internationalist and a pacifist while ignoring passages in the same texts where he displayed bigoted and racist views, upheld white supremacy and the European imperialist agenda when the consequences were the brutal murder of 10 million Congolese, the deaths of more than 30 million Africans through the slave trade and colonization, and the continued exploitation of dark-skinned people under the current geopolitical world order.

Following the well-known fact that history is written by the conquerors, the narrative on the legacy of Otlet appears to have been shaped mostly by white people who either did not feel any revulsion at the racist views and thus lacked empathy or; were embarrassed by it and thus eluded putting it under the spotlight because it would reveal that their hero had feet of clay. Short of doing a number on equilibrium, they perhaps did not see how to evolve a coherent portrait from the opposing images on both sides of the coin. Mugrefya (2019) again aptly summed up this dilemma:

The silence around the text *L'Afrique Aux Noirs* is a manifestation of an enraged protectorate towards a fantasised legacy, thus giving rise to a desire to clear the text with a wave of the hand so that one can focus on the good, true legacy of Paul Otlet. As if this were not a whole that must be considered in its entirety in order to flush out the deeply racist and colonial nature of Otlet's person and legacy. The study of European canons

such as Otlet or Kant, in the European context, functions by emphasis and omission, revealing on the one hand a privilege in those who can afford to ignore hateful ideas, and on the other hand, the violence that acts on those who simply cannot close their eyes.

Just as his contemporary Melvil Dewey was the “genial” inventor of the DCC, but at the same time also a sexist misogynist, racist and anti-semitic^[40], Otlet, the European documentation visionary, humanist, pacifist, internationalist, was also an imperialist and bigoted racist ideologue.

After decades of romanticizing Otlet’s true legacy, attention needs to turn now to a serious archeology of how his views on colonization and on racial hierarchy may have shaped his documentary and classificatory *oeuvres* and how this may have contributed to reinforcing racial inequities that still underscore the exploitation of millions of dark-skinned people worldwide.

It is not only a matter of moral and ethical responsibility, it is also a question of deontological commitment to accurately represent documentary evidence of historical events. This should have been a golden rule for a field that claims to be about the faithful preservation and representation of documentary archives and of museum objects for the “enlightenment” of current and future generations.

Endnotes

1. Andrew Albanese. ‘ALA 2019: ALA Votes to Strip Melvil Dewey’s Name From Its Top Honor.’ Jun 24, 2019. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/80557-ala-votes-to-strip-melvil-dewey-s-name-from-its-top-honor.html>.
2. We are providing the English translations of all the French sources used in this article.
3. In Perret’s original text in French: “*Les discussions sur le positivisme d’Otlet le replacent généralement dans le contexte d’une pensée universaliste, internationaliste*”

et pacifiste. Il est plus rare qu'elles mentionnent son rapport à la civilisation et à la colonisation. Sur la base de certaines publications, Elodie Mugrefya considère que sa pensée et son oeuvre sont « profondément racistes ». Certains écrits d'Otlet posent en effet question. Le texte L'Afrique aux noirs illustre parfaitement l'idéologie du « grand partage » entre sauvages et civilisés. Mais c'est surtout Monde qui rend perplexe : dans les pages consacrées aux « races et variétés humaines », Otlet affirme que la notion de race ne doit pas fonder un sentiment de supériorité vis-à-vis de certains hommes ; il écrit pourtant ensuite que « dans l'espèce nègre, le cerveau est moins développé que dans l'espèce blanche ». Le texte de Mugrefya soulève donc des questions indéniables que certains auteurs pourraient vouloir explorer plus rigoureusement, notamment dans leurs implications vis-à-vis des réalisations d'Otlet. En organisation des connaissances par exemple, ceci nous semble relever du courant de recherche qui développe une approche pragmatique des systèmes comme les classifications – en examinant les valeurs portées par ces systèmes et les effets qu'ils produisent”.

4. We are providing the English translation of Otlet's original text in French and putting the emphasis on aspects that highlight his innate beliefs of white supremacy and the “civilizational work” of his “race”. In Otlet's original text : *Mais l'émancipation ne leur a pas rendu de patrie. Libres aujourd'hui sous le gouvernement de ceux qui furent leurs maîtres, ils ne peuvent jouir pleinement de leur liberté ; riches, ils ne disposent à leur gré de leurs richesses ; égaux en droit devant la constitution américaine, ils ne le seront jamais en fait, devant les orgueilleux Yankees. — Les emplois du pays, où ils se comptent par millions, ne sont jamais pour eux ; les rangs de la société ne s'ouvrent pas pour les recevoir : ils ne rencontrent partout que dédain, répugnance et froissements d'amour-propre. (...) Les nègres d'Amérique, qui aspirent depuis si longtemps après une terre où ils puissent jouir de leur liberté sans subir d'inévitables*

vexations, sans avoir, comme aux États-Unis, à déplorer leur origine d'affranchis, répondent à l'appel de leur Moïse en demandant à grands cris : "L'Afrique aux noirs !".

5. All the emphasis in bold are ours. In Otlet's original text : "*Nous, Européens, qui sommes allés coloniser le sol africain, nous, surtout Belges, qui avons pris une part directe dans l'oeuvre civilisatrice du Congo, devons-nous, pouvons-nous assister les bras croisés au grand mouvement de rapatriement qui se dessine au-delà de l'Atlantique ? L'oeuvre du Congo est avant tout une oeuvre humanitaire et chrétienne. Ce sont des hommes et des frères qu'il s'agit de relever d'une trop longue déchéance morale et intellectuelle. C'est aussi toute une fraction de l'humanité qu'il faut appeler au progrès matériel et au développement économique*".
6. The hidden holocaust, *The Guardian*, 13/05/1999. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/13/features11.g22>
7. The hidden holocaust, *The Guardian*, 13 May 1999 01.30 BST. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/13/features11.g22>.
8. According to a book written by the American author Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (1999,) whose findings are hotly contested by current day Belgian white supremacists and guardian of the temple of Leopold II's memory.
9. Jennifer Rankin, Belgium forced to reckon with Léopold's legacy and its colonial past. *The Guardian*, 12/06/2020. Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/belgium-forced-to-reckon-with-leopolds-legacy-and-its-colonial-past>.
10. In Otlet's original text: "*Cependant, en allant importer d'une pièce sur le territoire africain notre civilisation si complexe, n'allons-nous pas créer là-bas un formidable antagonisme entre deux états sociaux trop disparates pour se fusionner ? En mettant*

directement en contact le blanc raffiné et le noir encore sauvage n'allons-nous pas nuire plutôt qu'être utiles au récent et glorieux avènement du continent noir ? L'histoire de toutes les évolutions sociales enseigne qu'il faut se garder de progrès trop rapides et sans transition ; et celle de toutes les colonisations établit que le sang de l'émigrant doit se mêler à celui de l'indigène. (...) Notre rôle en Afrique à nous, gens du Nord, doit se borner à un droit de haute tutelle, à une direction générale de son développement matériel et moral ; et, comme conséquence, à l'établissement d'utiles relations commerciales”.

11. In Otlet's original text : *“Que le vaste État indépendant du Congo ouvre ses portes à ces citoyens américains qui sont ses enfants : ils constituent le meilleur élément moyen de fusion entre la barbarie africaine et la civilisation européenne ; qu'il leur demande d'aller achever, sous la tutelle du souverain que l'Europe a choisi, l'oeuvre considérable de l'organisation politique, sociale et matérielle de ces immenses contrées”.*
12. In Otlet's original text : *“L'Afrique aux noirs ! Telle donc l'oeuvre à laquelle il nous faut travailler. A Léopold II de faire entendre de nouveau sa parole, à lui de prendre l'initiative de ce rapatriement des nègres américains. Qu'il se mette en relation avec le Moïse noir, qu'il fasse offrir des terres et des positions à ceux qu'enthousiasme la parole de ce nouveau prophète, et qu'ainsi notre Roi achève glorieusement la noble tâche qu'il s'est proposée : appeler à la civilisation le continent africain. Rendre l'Afrique aux noirs !”.*
13. In Otlet's original text : *“Par contre, nous sommes composés de diverses races, qui comme telles, on dû se différencier à des temps indéterminés (...) Citons les races noires (nègres, mélanésiens, etc.), les races australiennes (Dravida, etc), les races sémitiques (Indo-Afghans, etc.), les races aïno et polynésiennes, les races dites indiennes*

d'Amérique, les Eskimos, Tartares et Mongols, enfin les races dites européennes, métissées de brachycéphales et de dolichocéphales. Ces races se divisent en innombrables variétés qu'on peut presque seules distinguer uniquement en Europe (...). Les races pour autant qu'elles ont pu être observées donnent lieu à des caractéristiques propres. Ainsi, dans l'espèce nègre, le cerveau est moins développé que dans l'espèce blanche, les circonvolutions sont moins profondes et les nerfs qui émanent de ce centre pour se répandre dans les organes des sens sont beaucoup plus volumineux. (...) en effet, les nègres ont l'ouïe, la vue, l'odorat, le goût et le toucher bien plus développés que les blancs. Pour les travaux intellectuels, ils n'ont que peu d'aptitude mais ils excellent dans la danse, l'escrime, la natation, l'équitation et tous les exercices corporels”.

14. In Otlet's original text: *“Par contre, il faut distinguer avec soin de nos races supérieures les races vraiment inférieures, à cerveau plus petit, comme les Weddas, les Axas, les nègres, etc. Ici, l'erreur n'est plus possible : le métissage qui est bon et chez les races européennes devient mauvais chez les mulâtres. (Voir Deniker, Manouvrier, Rod Martin, Forel)”.*
15. In French *“Nouvelle division de la terre par les différentes espèces ou races l'habitant”.* (Gossett 1997, 32–33).
16. ¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicalraceconcepts>.
17. Originally in French *‘Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines’.*
18. In Mugrefya's own text: *“De ce fait, si la pensée antiraciste était déjà disponible à l'époque de Otlet, cela démontre à quel point son racisme n'était pas un défaut d'époque mais plutôt un refus conscient d'affronter ses conceptions racistes profondément ancrées dans l'héritage de la pensée européenne. En effet, si je parle d'affronter ce n'est pas par hasard car si Otlet, et bien d'autres intellectuel-le-s d'Europe, en venait à admettre que les personnes africaines étaient leurs égales, c'est*

*tout le système colonial qui perd de sa splendeur civilisatrice pour ne devenir qu'une entreprise monstrueuse essentiellement entraînée par la machinerie capitaliste. Où pourrait alors se situer les belles pensées des Lumières qui théorisent la liberté individuelle comme élément humain naturel si les Africain.e.s font également partie de la même catégorie humaine ? (...) La déshumanisation des Africain.e.s devait être rendue réelle afin de pouvoir perpétuer les atrocités tout en gardant la grandeur humaniste articulée par les Lumières. Cornel West et Achille Mbembe, dans leur critique de l'esclavagisme et du colonialisme attirent brillamment l'attention sur ce point : « La suprématie blanche fait partie intégrante du progrès européen, et l'odieux esclavage des Africains est une précondition des percées progressistes du monde moderne. » (Cornel West cité dans Norman Ajari, *La Dignité ou la Mort*, Editions La Découverte, 2019: 81) « Progéniture de la démocratie, le monde colonial n'était pas l'antithèse de l'ordre démocratique. Il en a toujours été le double, ou encore la face nocturne. Il n'y a pas de démocratie sans son double, sa colonie, peu importe le nom et la structure. » (Achille Mbembe cité dans Norman Ajari, *La Dignité ou la Mort*, Editions La Découverte 2019, 62).*

19. In Mugrefya's text: *“Les Nègres d’Afrique n’ont reçu de la nature aucun sentiment qui s’élève au-dessus de la niaiserie. Parmi les blancs, au contraire, il est constant que certains s’élèvent de la plus basse populace et acquièrent une certaine considération dans le monde grâce à l’excellence de de leurs dons supérieurs. Si essentielle est la différence entre ces deux races humaines ! Et elle semble aussi grande quant aux facultés de l’esprit que selon la couleur de peau.” (...) La similitude des idées ainsi que le langage utilisé sont particulièrement marquants et démontrent à quel point Otlet ne faisait pas appel à une quelconque imagination personnelle, mais plutôt à son héritage européen enraciné dans les travaux de penseurs racistes tels que Kant.”*

20. Quoted by Neugebauer from Kant's *Physische Geographie* in "The Racism of Kant and Hegel," 264. Cited in Abundez-Guerra (2018, 120).
21. Accessible online at <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/8-2020-8/kant-a-racist/>.
22. Online at <https://library.harvard.edu/confronting-anti-black-racism/scientific-racism>.
23. *L'homme qui voulait classer le monde* was the title of a 2004 documentary by Françoise Levie which participates in the media romanticization of Otlet's legacy. Accessible online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HieMJSgnkSE>. 05/04/02.
24. Our translation of Briet's original text : "*La documentologie n'a rien perdu à s'alléger d'un Répertoire Bibliographique Universel que l'univers entier a traité de chimère, et qui n'offrait pas un intérêt comparable au plus localisé des catalogues collectifs*" (1951, 9).
25. Available online at <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/692>.
26. Emphasis in this quotation is ours.
27. See for instance these sites: <https://ucm.on.worldcat.org/oclc/861478071>
<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/cataloging-the-world-alex-wright/1117230190>
<https://www.amazon.com/Cataloging-World-Otlet-Birth-Information/dp/0199931410>
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/cataloging-the-world-9780199931415?cc=es&lang=en&>
28. Panda Farnana was a Congolese activist, World War I veteran, and former Belgian colonial official.
29. This saying "*pour se constituer, le mythe des origines a besoin d'oublier son histoire*" is attributed to the French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician, Roland Barthes (1957:203), cited in Yves Jeanneret (2007) '*Prendre en considération l'aventure sémiologique*', published in Hermès, La Revue, 2007/2 (n°48): 109-116,

which discussed the simplistic narrative surrounding semiology and its relation with Information and Communication science. Jeanneret's text is accessible at <https://www-cairn-info.lama.univ-amu.fr/revue-hermes-la-revue-2007-2-page-109.htm>.

30. In Muygrefa's original text : *“Paul Otlet devint ces vingt dernières années une figure célébrée de l'intellectualisme belge, romantiquement dépeint comme un héros tragique, l'éternel génie incompris. Les recherches que j'ai effectuées sur ce personnage m'ont dressé le portrait d'un homme brillant, passionné et bienveillant. Effectivement, il fût défini entre autres comme un universaliste, un utopiste, un documentaliste, un internationaliste, un pacifiste, un militant socialiste et un visionnaire.”*
31. In Muygrefa's original text: *“Je ne suis pas parvenue à trouver de commentaires ou critiques portés à l'égard de ce texte. Pareillement, les projets Constant précédemment cités se sont contentés de simples mentions, comme si le texte ne mériterait pas que l'on s'y attarde ; comme si il n'était en aucun cas le reflet de la personne qu'était Paul Otlet et de l'héritage dans lequel ce dernier se positionna”.*
32. In Muygrefa's original text : *“Mon argument postule que le texte L'Afrique Aux Noirs est tout aussi significatif que les autres textes, œuvres et projets de Paul Otlet. Il n'est pas non plus un faux-pas embarrassant pouvant être ignoré sous prétexte d'une faute de jeunesse. Si à aucun moment de sa carrière Otlet ne reviendra sur ses propos, c'est parce qu'au contraire il les confirmera au travers de ses projets professionnels”.*
33. “Je vais tenter d'avancer l'argument duquel la personne mais aussi l'héritage de Paul Otlet est foncièrement raciste”. (Muygrefa 2019).
34. In Muygrefa's original text : *“La première défense, et la plus insupportable, consiste à excuser les propos d'Otlet car ils seraient, après tout, le reflet d'une époque et non d'un homme. La seconde défense revient à absoudre le personnage du fait de son jeune âge lors de l'écriture du texte L'Afrique Aux Noirs, Otlet avait alors 19 ans à l'époque.*

Je tiens à écarter le premier argument typiquement exprimé en réponse à la formulation d'une déconstruction de textes de figures européennes d'antan. Je refuse cet exposé selon lequel il faudrait re-contextualiser les propos d'Otlet au sein de son époque, celle-ci environnant la fin du 19ème siècle et le début du 20ème (1868-1944). Cet argument a pour effet de situer le point de vue blanc européen comme valeur par défaut au sein duquel l'autre, le noir, y est l'étrange, le sauvage. Grâce à cette réflexion apathique, la haine, le mépris et la violence envers l'Africaine se retrouvent excusés et normalisés. Ce point de vue européen se présente comme point cardinal de la pensée intellectuelle avec ses atrocités expiées sous couvert d'une prétendue exceptionnalité des Européennes blanches. C'est précisément ce positionnement qui a produit la croyance qu'en tant que point cardinal, l'Occident se donne alors le droit, le devoir même, de régner sur le reste du monde, d'y arbitrer ce qui est bon, ce qui ne l'est pas, de décider de celles et ceux qui vivent et de celles et ceux qui ne vivent pas".

35. In Muygrefa's original text: *"Ces deux arguments que je me suis attelée à déconstruire démontrent les gymnastiques rhétoriques auxquelles certains sont prêts à se livrer afin de garder intact un héritage européen glorieux, mais fantasmé. Héritage dont certains personnages en seraient les références majeures, les rendant ainsi intouchables."*

36. The hidden holocaust, The Guardian, 13/05/1999. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/13/features11.g22>

37. In Muygrefa's original text : *"Ou encore le public qui se scandalise aux demandes de retrait des statues représentant des hommes, dont Leopold II, qui furent les meneurs d'un des régimes les plus meurtriers de l'histoire avec une estimation de 10 millions de personnes tuées. Pourtant, régulièrement on s'offusque : des chants racistes à un festival de musique, des fêtards en habits de colons, des étudiants en blackface et il y en aura d'autres, j'en suis persuadé"*.

38. Alex Wright self-describes as amongst other things, a “journalist, researcher, designer, corporate manager, academic librarian, grill cook, and hacky banjo player. See his webpage at <https://alexwright.com/about/>. Accessed on 4th Nov 2023.
39. At the time of writing her 2019 text, Elodie Muygrefya worked for Constant, an association that is at the intersection of feminism, arts, technology and culture. For a presentation of Constant: <https://march.international/constant-study-practice-and-proximate-critique/>. Accessed on 4th Nov 2023.
40. North American LIS colleagues have embarked on an unflinching scrutiny of Dewey’s legacy. The Wikipedia page devoted him clearly mentions his sexist, racist and anti-semitic views. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvil_Dewey.

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