

OSSERVATORIO

The critical race-theoretic turn in library and information science

by Fidelia Ibekwe

*If you are free, you need to free someone.
If you have power, you need to empower someone else.*

Toni Morrison

Introduction

Decades of research have disproved any scientific foundation of the existence of different 'races' or of any hierarchy of races. Nobles *et al.*¹, Barkan² and Biondi and Rickards³ concluded that «there is no genetic basis for race, because humans share 99.9% similarity and have a single origin, in Africa». Despite countless resolutions, laws, political statements, discourse and awareness-raising actions against racism made by international organisations⁴, racism continues to resist every attempt to stamp it out. The protests and affirmations against racism that followed George Floyd's brutal murder in May 2020 and the rise of Black lives matter (BLM) movement have not been followed by a real change to root out systemic and structural racism which is at the core of racial inequalities. On the contrary, extremist views, racism, hate speech and hate crimes continue to proliferate. In many western countries which like to think of themselves as bastions of democracy, right-wing populist parties riding on strong anti-immigration rhetoric have either been elected or have become major political forces. The four-year term presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020) in the United States not only revealed just how fragile democracy is but it also showed the

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1 Melissa Nobles [*et al.*], *Ending racism is key to better science: a message from Nature's guest editors*, «Nature», 610 (2022), p. 419-420, DOI: 10.1038/d41586-022-03247-w.

2 Elazar Barkan, *The retreat of scientific racism: changing concepts of race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

3 Gianfranco Biondi; Olga Rickards, *The scientific fallacy of the human biological concept of race*, «Mankind Quarterly», 42 (2002), n. 4, DOI: 10.46469/mq.2002.42.4.2.

4 Jonathan Furner; Fidelia Ibekwe; Briony Birdi, *From words to actions: assessing the impact of antiracist declarations in Library and Information Science*, proceedings of the 11th International Conference on conceptions of Library and Information Science (Oslo Metropolitan University, May 29th-June 1st 2022), «Information Research», 27 (2022), DOI: 10.47989/ircolis2202.

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troubling links between law enforcement agents and the violent white supremacists who stormed the Capitol, threatening the lives of US lawmakers. In Brazil, extreme right-wing supporters of Jair Bolsonaro attempted to re-enact the Brazilian version of the US insurrection on January 6th in 2023 by storming government buildings in an attempt to overturn the results of a democratic election which saw the defeat of their extremist and populist leader. The situation in Continental Europe is also very concerning: the extreme-right wing Rassemblement National is now the second political force in France and it is poised to win the next presidential election; Italy has just elected the populist and fascist party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) to power in 2022; right wing parties are either in power or have become major political forces in Hungary, Poland and Sweden.

In the wake of the George Floyd racist murder, many scientific fields have embarked on a critical self-examination of their legacy towards the current levels of systemic or implicit racism. There is now a consensus that it does not suffice to say that one or one's institution is not racist. One needs to be actively 'anti-racist' by aligning one's policies, institutional procedures and cultures on clear anti-racism values and ethos.

In the last five years and especially since 2020, research and publications on anti-racism have surged. Some of the top ranked scientific journals have launched a series on racism (see for instance as *Nature's* series on *Racism: overcoming science's toxic legacy*⁵ and *The Lancet series on racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and health*⁶).

Following the popular saying that «charity begins at home», this paper will review the current state of the critical race-theoretic current that is sweeping across scientific disciplines in order to take stock of how Library and Information Science (LIS henceforth) is engaging with it. It will also dwell on the role that education plays in combating racial prejudice and all forms of injustices. It will end with some thoughts about the relevance of LIS regarding current major societal issues.

Science grappling with its conscience?

No human activity, especially in the professional sphere, is entirely devoid of ideology or of epistemology, whether the performer articulates it or not. The feminist critic and post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak aptly captured this when she wrote: «One cannot of course “choose” to step out of ideology. The most responsible “choice” seems to be to know it as best as one can, recognize it, and, through one's necessarily inadequate interpretation, to work to change it, to acknowledge the challenge of»⁷.

Science does not take place in a *vacuum* and cannot be detached from other aspects of life (economics, politics, culture and ideology). At some level, science is fundamentally a political enterprise.

Indeed, some of the most horrific evils that humanity has experienced originated from so-called scientific advancements and experiments. The roots of racism and of racial discrimination are firmly rooted in European pseudo-science which was used to justify oppression and exploitation through slavery and colonisation. It is indeed in the hallowed seats of learning that racist ideologies were propounded, legitimised and disseminated to the rest of the world. Tinsley recalled how the concept of «whiteness» first appeared in the 17th century in the British Thomas Middleton's play *The triumph of truth* and how it was used by colonial powers to justify the enslavement and oppression of millions of Africans:

5 See <<https://www.nature.com/immersive/d42859-022-00031-8/index.html>>.

6 See <<https://www.thelancet.com/series/racism-xenophobia-discrimination-health>>.

7 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The politics of interpretation*, «Indian secular visual culture», September 12th, 2018, <<https://indiansecularvisualculture.wordpress.com/2018/09/12/essay-the-politics-of-interpretation/>>.

For centuries, universities and schools across Europe formalised the notion of white supremacy through knowledge production and dissemination. The Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus taught that every living being could be categorised and classified into types. The German naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach claimed that human beings were divided into five “scientific” races based on skull shape with the “Caucasian” skull described as “the most handsome and becoming”. [...] And as scientific racism became mainstream, whiteness was naturalised and framed as “common sense” for generations of students. [...] In the 20th century, the humanities and social sciences, too, were agents of white supremacy. Sociology sought to explain modernity by universalising the experiences of European and North American societies, while either depicting African and Asian societies as “primitive” or writing them out of history⁸.

Nobles *et al.* also recalled that

James Watson, a Nobel laureate and co-discoverer of the DNA double helix, voiced the opinion that black people are less intelligent than white people. In 1994, the psychologist Richard Herrnstein and the political scientist Charles Murray claimed that genetics was the main determinant of intelligence and social mobility in American society, and that those genetics caused African Americans and European Americans to have different IQ scores⁹.

For a historic account of how European and western scientists developed racist ideologies and a racial hierarchy of humans, consult *Nature's* special series on the legacy of racism in science¹⁰.

In the field of LIS, a first generation of critical race-theoretic publications focused on the pioneers of the field and the knowledge artefacts they developed over a century ago. A group of scholars located primarily in North America¹¹ published extensively on the gender and racial biases that undergird much of LIS celebrated ‘encyclopedic’ classification languages such as Dewey Decimal Classification and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH).

The focus on the racist and sexist legacies of LIS’s classification pioneers and their artefacts has meant that the discipline had for a long time avoided examining its current structures and communities which continue to perpetuate structural racism

8 Meghan Tinsley, *Whiteness is an invented concept that has been used as a tool of oppression*, «The Conversation», July 14th, 2022, <<http://theconversation.com/whiteness-is-an-invented-concept-that-has-been-used-as-a-tool-of-oppression-183387>>.

9 M. Nobles [*et al.*], *Ending racism is key to better science* cit.

10 See <<https://www.nature.com/immersive/d42859-022-00031-8/index.html>>.

11 Hope A. Olson, *Mapping beyond Dewey's boundaries: constructing classificatory space for marginalized knowledge domains*, «Library Trends», 47 (1998), n. 2, p. 233-254, <<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/8169>>; *Ead.*, *The power to name: locating the limits of subject representation in libraries*. Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002; Jonathan Furner, *Dewey deracialized: a critical race-theoretic perspective*, «Knowledge Organization», 34 (2007), n. 3, p. 144-168, DOI: 10.5771/0943-7444-2007-3-144; Jonathan Furner; Anthony W. Dunbar, *The treatment of topics relating to people of mixed race in bibliographic classification schemes: a critical ace-theoretic approach*, «Advances in Knowledge Organization», 9 (2004), p. 115-120; Rebecca Green, *Indigenous peoples in the U.S., sovereign nations, and the DDC*, «Proceedings from North American Symposium on Knowledge Organization», 5 (2015), p. 25-40, DOI: 10.7152/nasko.v5i1.15178.

and the dominance of the western hegemonic viewpoint. The cosmetic language revisions and substitutions made to some of the classification schemes have served as band-aids on deep wounds whose depths have not been probed.

The critical race-theoretic current sweeping through western institutions and especially in teaching and research is an opportunity to question the claims to universalism and normativity of LIS's knowledge artefacts which have had the effect of erasing other ways of knowing and doing. Calls to decolonise the curricula are multiplying in many western institutions. Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the late 1980s from the law (critical legal studies) around authors such as Derrick A. Bell¹² and Delgado, with the aim of examining the implications of American law in the systemic nature of racial discrimination.

Recalling how CRT spread to other fields, Delgado and Stefancic wrote:

Although CRT began as a movement in the law, it has rapidly spread beyond that discipline. Today, many in the field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT's ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement [...]. Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better¹³.

Achilleos, Douglas and Washbrook further explained the objective of critical theory:

Critical theory assumes that power is transmitted and maintained tacitly by dominant ideologies in society for domination and that any critique of society should lead to action. Foucault's concept of power and Gramsci's theory of hegemony are tenets of critical theory. For Foucault, power and knowledge are interrelated so that everyone has, and can, execute power. Domination is not a natural way of life but the result of hegemonic processes that need to be explored through critical reflection. By hegemony, Gramsci proposed a process by which a small social class can maintain control over the majority in society, a process that can be overturned by organic and traditional intellectuals establishing a counter-hegemony. Critical race theory (CRT) is one such critical theory. Within this research "race" is acknowledged as a social construct, born in response to the treatment of black people within the American legal system. It is argued that racial categorisation and factors associated with race are constructed by society. Delgado and Stefancic state that: "...race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality: rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates or retires when convenient"¹⁴.

12 Derrick A. Bell, *Who's afraid of Critical race theory*, «University of Illinois Law review», 4 (1995), p. 893-910.

13 Richard Delgado; Jean Stefancic, *Critical race theory: an introduction*, 3rd ed. New Delhi: Dev Publishers & Distributors, 2017, p. 3.

14 Jess Achilleos; Hayley Douglas; Yasmin Washbrook, *Educating informal educators on issues of race and inequality: raising critical consciousness, identifying challenges, and implementing change in a youth and community work programme*, «Education Sciences», 11 (2021), n. 8, DOI: 10.3390/educsci11080410, p. [9].

The off springs of CRT close to our field include critical pedagogy, critical information literacy (CIL), critical archival studies (CAS) and critical librarianship. According to Sierpe, critical librarianship

draws on critical race theory (CRT) and feminist studies. It is based on the observation that continued adherence to a principle of 'neutrality' or 'colourblindness' only preserves the *status quo* and the maintenance of the interests of the dominant group at the expense of others. It therefore aims to redefine professional practice through awareness of the importance of social responsibility in professional practice¹⁵.

Critical archival studies (CAS) is broadly defined as

an approach to exploring and explaining the injustice of current archival practices and research and practical proposals for effecting change. [...] It is the assertion that archivists have a duty to act when archives serve as instruments of oppression¹⁶.

The heinous apartheid system in South Africa needed archives to effect segregation and oppression of 'people of colour'.

Critical Knowledge Organization (CKO) poses the question of whose interest a specific system of KOs or information system serves. The emergence of journals such as *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, *Journal of Radical Librarianship* are all signs of this critical current. Other mainstream LIS journals such as *Library Trends*, *Journal of Education in LIS* (JELIS) have published studies devoted to race, diversity and inclusivity. *Education for Information* has launched an ongoing on race relations in LIS of which two issues have appeared (*Critical race theory collective* and *Race relations and racial inequity in LIS*)¹⁷.

However, it should be noted that currently, the race-theoretic turn¹⁸ in LIS is driven mainly by research emanating from North-America followed by the UK, New

15 Eino Sierpe, *Confronting Librarianship and its function in the structure of white supremacy and the ethno state*, «Journal of Radical Librarianship», 5 (2019), p. 84-102.

16 Julie Botnick, *Archivists as amici Curiae: activating critical archival theory to confront racialized surveillance*, «Journal of Radical Librarianship», 5 (2019), p. 153-172.

17 See <<https://content.iospress.com/journals/education-for-information/38/4>> and <<https://content.iospress.com/journals/education-for-information/37/2>>.

18 Todd Honma, *Trippin' over the color line: the invisibility of race in library and information studies*, «InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies», 1 (2005), n. 2, DOI: 10.5070/D412000540; Melissa Adler, *Classification along the color line: excavating racism in the stacks*, «Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies», 1 (2017), n. 1, DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v1i1.17; Melissa Adler; Lindsey M. Harper, *Race and ethnicity in classification systems: teaching knowledge organization from a social justice perspective*, «Library Trends», 67 (2018), n. 1, p. 52-73, DOI: 10.1353/lib.2018.0025; Michele R. Santamaria, *Concealing white supremacy through fantasies of the library: economies of affect at work*, «Library Trends», 68 (2020), n. 3, p. 431-449, DOI: 10.1353/lib.2020.0000; Mónica Colón-Aguirre; Kawanna Bright, *Incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into research*, «Journal of Education for Library and Information Science», 63 (2022), n. 3, p. 237-244, DOI: 10.3138/jelis-2021-0013; Renate Chancellor; Shari Lee; Anthony Dunbar, *Guest editors' introduction to special issue on race relations and racial inequity in LIS*, «Education for Information», 37 (2021), n. 2, p. 171, DOI: 10.3233/EFI-211508.

Zealand, and Australia¹⁹. The Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in the UK was amongst the first to publish its anti-racism policies and set targets to combat racism and increase ethnic diversity within its leadership positions²⁰. The European LIS on the other hand has done very little soul searching and very little research on its current institutional cultures, policies and epistemologies which are permeated by white centrism.

One may contend that the US's legacy of historic slavery of Blacks on its soil, the egregious nature of segregation (Jim Crow laws) and the brutal racism displayed by its law enforcement institutions justify that the US should be doing most of the research on this topic. While that argument is not without merit, Europeans ought to remember their role in the foundations of scientific and historic racism. European countries continue to benefit from the cumulative inter-generational effects of slavery and colonisation. Also, Europe is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic region where 'people of colour' continue to be subjected to racism in all sectors of their lives. A 2012 survey by the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU MIDIS) on 23,500 immigrants and ethnic minority groups showed that «Sub-Saharan Africans, closely followed by Roma, experienced on average the highest overall victimisation levels, at 33% and 32%, respectively»²¹.

The power of language and of classification in perpetuating racial inequities

If «knowledge is power» as the English 16th century philosopher Francis Bacon is quoted as saying in *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597), language is equally power. In the 1983 text he wrote for the opening of an exhibition against apartheid in South Africa, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida²² wrote:

*There is no racism without a language. Racial violence is not just words, but it needs a word. [...] and this evil is not reduced to the principal and abstract iniquity of a system: it is also the daily suffering, oppression, poverty, violence, torture inflicted by an arrogant white minority (16% of the population, 60 to 65% of the national income) on the mass of the black population*²³.

19 For some figures see Fidelia Ibekwe, *The whiteness of European library and information science*, «Education for Information», pre-press, May 18TH 2023, p. 1-18, DOI:10.3233/EFI-230065.

20 See <<https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/520033/Embedding-Diversity-at-the-heart-of-CILIP-and-its-work.htm>>.

21 See <<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey-main-results-report>>.

22 Jacques Derrida, *Le dernier mot du racisme*, 1983, <<https://redaprenderycambiar.com.ar/derrida/frances/racisme.htm>>.

23 In the original text he wrote for the opening of an exhibition against apartheid in South Africa: «*Pas de racisme sans une langue. Les violences raciales, ce ne sont pas seulement des mots, mais il leur faut un mot. Bien qu'il allègue le sang, la couleur, la naissance, ou plutôt parce qu'il tient ce discours naturaliste et parfois créationniste, le racisme trahit toujours la perversion d'un homme « animal parlant [...] et ce mal ne se réduit pas à l'iniquité principielle et abstraite d'un système : ce sont aussi les souffrances quotidiennes, l'oppression, la pauvreté, la violence, les tortures infligées par une arrogante minorité blanche (16 % de la population, 60 à 65 % du revenu national) à la masse de la population noire. [...] Or le simulacre juridique et le théâtre politique de ce racisme d'État n'ont aucun sens et n'auraient eu aucune chance*

To name a thing is to acknowledge its existence. Just as racism recruits language to do its work, dismantling racism requires that this evil ideology be named without euphemism and confronted head on. The field of LIS gave the world knowledge organisation and indexing systems that are still widely used to classify documents and things in libraries, documentation centers and information on digital repositories. Classification is a powerful tool used to assign people and things an identity and characteristic traits. Thus, the choice of words used in knowledge organisation artefacts is neither neutral nor objective. It determines whether some groups of people can get justice or not, are treated fairly or not, are discriminated against or not. This in turn can lead to discriminations in free movement of people, in access to good jobs, to promotion, to good housing, schools and health services. In the extreme cases, it leads to loss of lives.

Adler looked at the way in which the very racialised structures put in place in the late 19th and early 20th century western societies were entrenched in the classification languages used in libraries. John Fiske who influenced the work of pioneering classificationists such as Charles Cutter and Melvil Dewey affirmed that «the conquest of the North American continent by men of the English race was unquestionably the most prodigious event in the political history of mankind». Not surprisingly, Melvil Dewey who gave the world the Dewey Decimal Classification (DCC) system was himself a notorious racist and antisemite:

Wayne Wiegand has written about Dewey's anti-Semitism, including the loss of his reputation and resignation of his position as State Librarian of New York upon protests regarding his exclusion of Jews and other ethnic and religious groups from membership in his elite Lake Placid Club²⁴.

The Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) widely in use in libraries in Europe and in many parts of the world was designed by two European pioneers, Paul Otlet and Henri Lafontaine who modelled it after Dewey's DCC. These supposed 'universal classification systems' carry with them the hegemonic and white supremacist ideologies that were pervasive in western societies and in the science of the time, proof once again that science is a political and ideological enterprise. Less studied and little known is the racism of the much-celebrated European pioneer of LIS, the Belgian Paul Otlet. At least two of his texts, *L'Afrique aux Noirs* published in 1888 and *Monde: essai d'universalisme* published in 1935, contain overtly racist exegesis in the pure tradition of European 'enlightenment' thinkers whose writings and discourse on Africa and Africans were odes to polygenism, phrenology and physiognomy.

The classification schemes designed by these LIS pioneers at a time when racism was officially endorsed by western countries continue to be the foundations on which our contemporary century knowledge artefacts and information retrieval tools are built. Several examples of racial biases in Google's search algorithms have been exposed by the media. As Adler summed it up:

Classifications are never built-in isolation. They are informed by social processes and are in dialogue with one another. And the knowledge organization systems

hors d'un « discours » européen sur le concept de race. Ce discours appartient à tout un système de « fantasmes », à une certaine représentation de la nature, de la vie, de l'histoire, de la religion et du droit, à la culture même qui a pu donner lieu à cette étatisation». Italics and translation are ours.

24 M. Adler, *Classification along the color line* cit.

of the 21st century – Google, Wikipedia, the Internet, etc. – are similarly influenced by and build upon these and other systems. With regard to race, these systems sustain and complement one another's conceptualizations, as well as dominant, normative discourses. But their invisibility and ubiquity means that the systems and hierarchies are deeply embedded in our information retrieval systems, on the shelves, and across discourse communities. As Bowker and Starr have argued, the hiddenness and naturalization of classificatory infrastructures heightens their potency and secures their ground. As they become entrenched in information infrastructures, it becomes more difficult to resist or change them. Perhaps more importantly, cataloguers reiterate and reinforce the authorized classifications each time they apply them to a bibliographic text²⁵.

In an article discussing the benefits and risks of the algorithmic governance of the world, a software engineer, Dudley Irish, was quoted as saying:

All, let me repeat that, all of the training data contains biases. Much of it either racial- or class-related, with a fair sprinkling of simply punishing people for not using a standard dialect of English. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, out of the crooked timber of these datasets no straight thing was ever made²⁶.

Education as a tool of domination: the need to decolonise western curricula

As Elmborg observed, «Education is a profoundly political activity. Educators must either accept the dominant ideology of their society or intentionally resist it and posit alternative models. Neutrality is not an option»²⁷. Hall also wrote that

Schools represent a relatively stable system of inequality. They contribute to these results by active acceptance and utilization of a dominant set of values, norms, beliefs which, while appearing to offer opportunities to all, actually support the success of a privileged minority and hinder the efforts and visions of a majority²⁸.

The unlawful appropriation of cultural and historic artefacts from Africa and other southern countries contributed in erasing the history of scientific contributions by the conquered people from the manuals and curricula used in education worldwide, and thus to the loss of other ways of learning and establishing knowledge.

Building on a global momentum of protests such as the successful Rhodes must fall movement²⁹ which began in 2015 at the University of Cape Town in South Africa before spreading back to the UK, a wave of student-led initiatives for the decolonisation of western curricula and for anti-racism literacy is sweeping across campuses.

25 *Ibidem*.

26 Lee Rainie; Janna Andersen, *Code-dependent: pros and cons of the algorithm age*, «Pew Research Center», February 8th, 2017, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/02/08/code-dependent-pros-and-cons-of-the-algorithm-age/>>.

27 James Elmborg, *Critical information literacy: implications for instructional practice*, «The Journal of Academic Librarianship», 32 (2006), n. 2, p. 192-199, DOI: 10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004

28 Peter Hall, *Race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism: policy and practice*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 151.

29 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodes_Must_Fall/>.

In 2016, students at University College London in the UK launched a campaign entitled “Why is my curriculum white. Decolonising the Academia” which «created a wave of uprising against the ‘Whiteness’, Eurocentric domination and lack of diversity in the curricula with recent launches in Bristol, Birmingham, and Manchester, and an unwavering online presence» and forced many UK universities to take bolder and unequivocal measures to tackle racism on British campuses. Degree programs in black studies are also being designed (see for instance the MA global black studies, decolonisation & social justice³⁰ also in the UK).

Following the students’ lead, the UK Higher Education institutions have begun a racial reckoning of their legacy and «are reassessing how they engage with their chequered pasts»³¹. Imperial College has set up commissions of historians to investigate its legacy to slavery and colonisation and the state of diversity within its institutions.

The University of Sheffield has put in place an action plan to combat racism with identified goals to be achieved. With the help of a dashboard³², their communities as well as the general public can monitor the state of achievement of these action plans. It also created a BAME wall of fame portal as a space to celebrate its ethnic minority staff, and offer them a network to support each other. Defying their Education ministry, Universities UK³³ which gathers 140 British universities recently signed a race equality charter, run by the charity Advance HE, to fight racism on British campuses:

Universities UK (UUK) took on the education minister Michelle Donelan after she warned them to reconsider the scheme – which counts the majority of Russell Group universities among its members – aims to identify barriers to success for black, Asian and minority ethnic students. [...]As the spokesperson for Universities UK observed “The scheme is voluntary and provides a means through which universities can address racial inequality within the sector and we will continue our work with Advance HE to support this goal”³⁴.

The Ministry of Education in Scotland has also published resources for educators on promoting race equality and anti-racist education³⁵. In the face of continued racist crimes, other sectors of the UK institutions have been forced to create commissions to investigate the extent of racial discriminations and lack of diversity within their organisations. The findings of these commissions all concluded to the prevalence

30 See <<https://www.uwl.ac.uk/course/postgraduate/global-black-studies-decolonisation-and-social-justice?start=646&option=33>>.

31 Philip Ball, *Imperialism’s long shadow: the UK universities grappling with a colonial past*, «Nature», 610 (2022), p. 593-596, DOI: 10.1038/d41586-022-03253-y.

32 See <<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/inclusion/race/how-were-improving>>.

33 See <<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/about-us>>.

34 Richard Adams, *Universities to defy government pressure to ditch race equality group*, «The Guardian», June 30TH, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jun/30/universities-to-defy-government-pressure-to-ditch-race-equality-group?utmterm=62be714608926da1d6eab8af062a9573&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUKemail>.

35 See <<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/promoting-race-equality-and-anti-racist-education/>>.

of systemic racism in just about every sector of the UK society: the police³⁶, research³⁷, health³⁸, media³⁹ and sports⁴⁰. The heads of these UK institutions have made public promises to improve racial equality and diversity. The Church of England has also acknowledged its role in benefitting from slavery and pledged to spend a significant amount of money on projects «focused on improving opportunities for communities adversely impacted by historic slavery over the coming years»⁴¹. On the other hand, no such pledge was forthcoming from the Roman Catholic Church in Europe which blessed slavery and exploitation in Africa and bloodied its hand with the fruits of injustice and iniquities.

What these reports provide are facts and documentary evidence of, not only the existence of the extent of structural and systemic racism across all sectors of the UK society. This official acknowledgement is a first and necessary step towards taking actions to tackling it. It also makes denial and inaction untenable.

The initiative taken by the British Royal Society highlights the major role that LIS can and should play in this critical racial appraisal which requires expertise that the field has built over centuries:

The Royal Society in London is also reappraising its past, which began in 1660. As such, it often reflects “attitudes and practices of previous centuries that are unacceptable today”, says its head of library and information services, Keith Moore, who is white. [...] The Linnaean Society in London – the natural-history society where Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace first presented their

36 Vikram Dodd, *Police chiefs to apologise for ‘racism, discrimination and bias’ in race plan*, «The Guardian», May 20th, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/20/police-chiefs-to-apologise-for-racism-discrimination-and-bias-in-race-plan?utm_term=62888df41f1102266focd856_c0312527&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUK_email>; *Police race action plan published*, <<https://www.college.police.uk/article/police-race-action-plan-published>>.

37 Sophie Inge, *Structural inequalities found at leading research institution*, «Research Professional News», December 13th, 2021, <<https://researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-universities-2021-12-deep-structural-inequalities-found-at-london-s-lshtm/>>.

38 Andrew Gregory, *Radical action needed to tackle racial health inequality in NHS, says damning report*, «The Guardian», February 13th, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/13/radical-action-needed-to-tackle-racial-health-inequality-in-nhs-says-damning-report?utm_term=6209e1d5333e34006879d4fa2f39daf5&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUK_email>; *Id., White NHS nurses twice as likely as black and Asian colleagues to be promoted – study*, «The Guardian», June 8th, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/08/white-nhs-nurses-twice-as-likely-as-black-and-asian-colleagues-to-be-promoted-study?utm_term=62a01ec3faf71578f73340451e0183f8&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUK_email>.

39 Tim Westwood, *Finally black women are finding their voice against abuse in the music industry*, «The Guardian», May 2nd, 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/02/black-women-tim-westwood-dj-music-industry>>.

40 Jon Ungoed-Thomas, *New racism scandal rocks English football*, «The Guardian», November 20th, 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/20/new-racism-scandal-rocks-english-football>>.

41 Harriet Sherwood, *Church of England setting up £100m fund to ‘address past wrongs’ of slave trade links*, «The Guardian», January 10th, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/church-of-england-100m-fund-past-wrongs-slave-trade-links>>.

theories of evolution – was also conscious of a need to respond to the moment. The society is named after the eighteenth-century Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, whose classification of races is often seen as one of the foundations of scientific racism. “Linnaeus’s hierarchy, with Black people at the very bottom, stuck,” says Isabelle Charmantier, head of collections at the society, who is white. [...] Anonymous Indigenous people produced many of the natural-history illustrations in the society’s collection from the colonial era that show Indian and Caribbean flora and fauna, and the society had begun to delve into who the artists were. “It’s a really exciting new area of research,” says Charmantier. “It’s not about replacing or erasing history, but enriching it”⁴².

As Ball summed it up

Current discussions across UK institutions about their colonialist pasts mirror similar debates about Germany’s Nazi heritage in the decades after the Second World War and into the twenty-first century. And a “survey conducted by the analytics company YouGov in 2019, [...] showed that nearly 70% of the public supported teaching the role that the British Empire played in colonialism and historical injustice in the United Kingdom’s national curriculum”⁴³.

To the best of our knowledge, no similar systematic reckoning of the legacies of colonialism and racism is happening in European countries right now. It is as though, after the emotional outpouring following the George Floyd murder and the BLM protests of 2020 that swept across EU capitals, people have folded their protest banners and gone back to business as usual. Silence or outright denial of the systemic nature of racism is again the *status quo*. Attacks and pressures directed against anti-racism activists and researchers are spreading in France, Italy and elsewhere. The most unequivocal anti-racism initiatives on European campuses are student led. Adhikari-Sacré and Rutten enumerated a series of students-led initiatives in Belgian universities:

Open letters, manifestos, research initiatives, panel discussions and inter-university think tanks have opened the discussions on decoloniality in Belgium, both in universities and university colleges. Deploying decoloniality as discourse, students and researchers have shifted the focus from inclusivity to unpacking racially loaded and biased curricula. [...] At the Flemish Free University of Brussels (VUB), students have mounted the platform #wedecolonizeVUB, seizing ‘the opportunity to learn more about (de)colonization and anti-racism’. At the French-speaking Free University of Brussels (ULB), a research project is invested in ‘better understanding the role of Belgian universities in the colonial history and the question of decolonizing these universities’. At the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), UNDIVIDED, an independent diversity platform for and by KU Leuven students and staff, launched the *decolonizekuleuven* manifesto, a document requesting ten institutional changes for anti-racism such as the ‘Decolonization of curricula is about epistemology. It interrogates the what, the who and how we are taught in our university’. At Ghent University, students engaged in anti-racism launched the open letter *Decolonize UGent*, signed by

42 P. Ball, *Imperialism’s long shadow* cit.

43 *Ibidem*.

more than 700 students and staff to request a proper anti-racist curriculum reminding their university that 'Education should aim to deliver critical students who dare to look beyond their own environment and are aware of structural inequalities in society'. [...] Students rethink race as a matter to be (un)learned. This pedagogical question, on racial literacy in the curriculum, is a response to diversity policies often silent about race and institutionalised racisms⁴⁴.

At Maastricht University in the Netherlands, students triggered the Actions against racism research in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, in order to survey experiences of students, faculty and staff from ethnic minorities, to collect grassroots insights into necessary organisational changes and to better understand current perceptions of what qualifies as racism within Maastricht University.

As part of its Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity (DEI) efforts, the School of communication media and IT and the Intercultural Competence Learning Lab at Hanze University of Applied Science (HUAS) also in the Netherlands developed several training programs for staff, faculty and students which are open to all departments for participants to share incidents of discrimination, including racial.

In 2021, Georg Augustat University in Gottingen organized a work shop entitled "Strategies against racism as a cross-cutting issue for European universities"⁴⁵ in order «to raise knowledge and to reflect on one's own position in the context of racism and further helps to open up paths to change».

France on the contrary has a history of denial or of victim blaming on the issue of racism. Following the 2020 BLM world protests and in the face of mounting evidence of the prevalence of racism and police brutality against people of 'colour'⁴⁶, some French universities announced ambiguous half-measures which consisted in creating symbolic anti-discrimination missions with little human resources (usually 1 or 2 people for a whole university) but with no measures of their efficacy. Also, the fight against racism is always bundled in France with all the other types of discriminations (anti-Semitism, handicap, gender, religion, ethnic) which serves to obfuscate its specific nature and the intersectionality of its cumulative effects while rendering any potential action or policy inefficient⁴⁷. An internet search on anti-racism degree programs in French universities turned up only two master's degree programs with the taboo word in them and little or no information on their actual content⁴⁸.

44 Hari Prasad Adhikari-Sacr ; Kris Rutten, *When students rally for anti-racism. engaging with racial literacy in higher education*, «Philosophies», 6 (2021), n. 2, DOI: 10.3390/philosophies6020048.

45 See <<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/strategies+against+racism+...+lecture+and+workshop/648369.html>>.

46 See the mediatized case of another murder of a black man (Adama Traor ) by the French police under dubious circumstances and ongoing investigations: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affaire_Adama_Traor%C3%A9>.

47 Romane Blassel [et al.], * tudier les discriminations dans l'enseignement sup rieur en France: quels enjeux?*, «The Conversation», May 15th, 2022, <<http://theconversation.com/etudier-les-discriminations-dans-lenseignement-superieur-en-france-quels-enjeux-181372>>.

48 The two programs are offered at the University of Paris 8, marked as a leftist bastion (DU Formation   la lutte contre le racisme et l'antis mitisme) and at the University of Jules Verne in the Picardie region (Nouveau: une formation pour comprendre et combattre le racisme et l'antis mitisme). Unsurprisingly, there is not much information about these programs on their webpages and one seems to be offered as a MOOC.

Concluding thoughts

Subjected to centripetal and centrifugal forces that move them in different directions, scientific disciplines evolve over time. The centrifugal forces of the digital turn which began in the 1970s have driven training and research in LIS in different directions leading to the development of well-established research specialties such as digital libraries, information systems, information behavior, data science, health informatics, to name only a few. The critical race-theoretic current adds a new layer to the turns or paradigms that shape scientific fields. New turns or paradigms do not erase the previous ones but much like sediments, are layered upon them.

The fundamental question for LIS is whether it will continue to be driven solely by the functionalism and pragmatism that characterised its first decades of existence where the main motivation was «to get the job done»⁴⁹. In other words, will LIS remain a disembodied and abstracted ‘science of information and of documents’, detached from the big societal issues of our time or will it have the courage to transform itself into a truly human and social science that embeds moral and ethical values into its teaching, professional practices and research?

I contend that for LIS to continue to have some relevance to our 21st century society, it can no longer content itself with being a producer of knowledge artefacts (of indexes and classifications), of information systems, of metadata and archives, whether open or closed data, of document and information mediators. In all of these areas, LIS has been overtaken by AI algorithms running vast data warehouses powered by Google and other tech giants. The demands of our human societies are for a more sustainable and racially equitable world. Covid-19 demonstrated just how interconnected we all are and, in the words of Devakumar *et al.*, «a society with widespread discrimination threatens the health of everyone»⁵⁰.

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La svolta critica della teoria della razza in biblioteconomia e scienze dell'informazione

Nonostante decenni di ricerche abbiano smentito ogni fondamento scientifico dell'esistenza di razze diverse o di una gerarchia di razze, nonostante le innumerevoli risoluzioni, leggi, dichiarazioni politiche, discorsi e azioni di sensibilizzazione contro il razzismo da parte di organizzazioni internazionali, il razzismo continua a resistere a ogni tentativo di eliminarlo. Le proteste e le affermazioni contro il razzismo che hanno seguito il brutale omicidio di George Floyd nel maggio 2020 e l'ascesa del movimento Black lives matter (BLM) non sono state seguite da un reale cambiamento per sradicare il razzismo sistemico e strutturale che è alla base delle disuguaglianze razziali. Al contrario, le opinioni estremiste, il razzismo, i discorsi d'odio e i crimini d'odio continuano a proliferare in molti paesi europei.

49 Marcia J. Bates, *The invisible substrate of information science*, «Journal of the American Society for Information Science», 50 (1999), n. 12, p. 1043-1050: p. 1045.

50 Delan Devakumar [*et al.*], *Racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and the determination of health*, «The Lancet», 400 (2022), n. 10368, p. 2097-2108, DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01972-9.

Dopo aver esaminato lo stato attuale della corrente teorico-razziale critica che attraversa le discipline scientifiche, facciamo il punto su come la biblioteconomia e la scienza dell'informazione (LIS) si stanno impegnando in questo senso e sottolineiamo in particolare l'assenza della LIS europea in queste iniziative. La LIS e la LIS europea in particolare hanno l'obbligo morale ed etico di incorporare esplicitamente l'antirazzismo nelle proprie pratiche professionali, nei processi di reclutamento, nei programmi di formazione e di ricerca e nei risultati. La cosiddetta 'neutralità' o 'obiettività' del punto di vista quando si costruiscono gli artefatti di conoscenza e i sistemi informativi della LIS non è solo un'illusione, ma è servita per molto tempo come facciata per promuovere le ideologie occidentali dominanti e per produrre disuguaglianze reali.

The critical race-theoretic turn in library and information science

Despite decades of research disproving any scientific foundation of the existence of different races or of any hierarchy of races, despite countless resolutions, laws, political statements, discourse and awareness-raising actions against racism made by international organisations, racism continues to resist every attempt to stamp it out. The protests and affirmations against racism that followed George Floyd's brutal murder in May 2020 and the rise of Black lives matter (BLM) movement have not been followed by a real change to root out systemic and structural racism which are at the core of racial inequalities. On the contrary, extremist views, racism, hate speech and hate crimes continue to proliferate in many European countries. After reviewing the current state of the critical race-theoretic current sweeping across scientific disciplines, we take stock of how library and information science (LIS henceforth) is engaging with it and underline in particular the absence of European LIS in these initiatives. LIS and European LIS in particular have a moral and ethical obligation to explicitly embed anti-racism in its professional practices, recruitment processes, training and research programs as well as outcomes. The so-called 'neutrality' or 'objectivity' of viewpoint when building LIS's knowledge artefacts and information systems is not only an illusion, it has for so long served as a façade to promote the dominant western ideologies and effect real inequalities.