

Contesting Inequality. Joseph Anténor Firmin's *De l'égalité des races humaines*, 133 years on

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Abstract

*Methods of comparison have been a central element in the construction of different races and the modeling of scientific racism, such as Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853). Nevertheless, these racist ideologies didn't remain uncontested, and it was especially the intellectual legacy of the Haitian Revolution that played a key role in shaping what has recently been referred to as "Haitian Atlantic humanism" (M. Daut). However, 19th century Haitian diasporic intellectuals have frequently been omitted from international research tracing an intellectual history of the Atlantic sphere in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution. Publications by intellectuals like Louis Joseph Janvier and Joseph Anténor Firmin, both Haitians residing in Paris in the second half of the 19th century, have too easily been discarded for their embracement of nationalism or their 'imitation' of French forms. Only recently has research highlighted their importance in thinking a "hemispheric crossculturality" (M. Dash) as well as for pan-African and pan-American thought. In publications such as *De l'égalité des races humaines* (1885), 19th century Haitian diasporic intellectual Joseph Anténor Firmin contested anthropological methods of comparison which provided a basis for racist ideologies. Similarly, Haitian intellectual Louis Joseph Janvier, who was trained as a medical doctor and anthropologist in France and author of *Un peuple noir devant les blancs* (1883), contributed to the modeling of an Atlantic humanism. As members of the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* and French literary circles, both of them were acknowledged members of intellectual communities in the French capital, while at the same time being in continuous exchange with intellectual leaders of independence in the Americas, such as Ramón Emeterio Betances and José Martí. This essay discusses how methods of comparative anthropology were contested by Haitian-diasporic writer Anténor Firmin. It argues that Haitian diasporic thinkers not only put their birthplace and the legacy of the Haitian Revolution at the center of their work, but also actively shaped intellectual circles on the European continent. It thereby foregrounds a permanent, and also permanently neglected, entanglement between 'Europe' and the Americas.*

Keywords: Contesting Inequality, Joseph Anténor Firmin, Haiti

Contesting Inequality. Joseph Anténor Firmin's *De l'égalité des races humaines*, 133 years later

"Le préjugé, qui fait croire qu'une couleur plus ou moins blanche est une signe de supériorité, restera-t-il éternellement ancré dans les meilleures têtes, malgré tous les faits qui en trahissent la fausseté?" (Firmin 661)

What would a world without prejudices look

like? Would presuppositions of racial superiority always be present in scholarly thought, although their falseness had already been proven? At the end of the 19th century, when Haitian diasporic author, diplomat, and politician Joseph Anténor Firmin wondered about the future of racial ideologies during his sojourn in the French capital, such thoughts still belonged to "utopian futures" (Chaar-Pérez 29).

In 2018, 133 years later, the "revolution of love" (Chaar-Pérez 11), leading to a "future beyond race" (Dash, "Nineteenth-Century Haiti" 49) that Firmin and other Caribbean diasporic

intellectuals such as Puerto Rico's Ramón Emeterio Betances envisaged, is not only still pending but seems to have drifted into a far away, ungraspable future. [1] The first decade of the 21st century has given rise to a revival of white supremacist thought and nationalist movements in Europe as well as in the Americas. Within the European Union, "racism and ethnic discrimination remain at levels that raise serious concern". [2] It is thus evident that racism does not belong to the past and neither does the category 'race'. The latter continues to haunt everyday life as well as scientific realms. As the anthropologist Jean-François Veran (246) states, "it has been impossible to bury this past, and it has become obvious that in spite of claims about its scientific irrelevance, the heritage of raciology cannot simply be dismissed, at least in its political consequences and continuities." [3]

In the light of these developments, a reexamination of publications such as Firmin's *De l'égalité des races humaines*, a text that stood up to anthropology's comparative anatomic methods and racialization at a very early stage, seems more than urgent, and not just to imagine "alternative histories" (Chaar-Pérez 29) and provide a different view of the 19th century. This essay discusses how methods of comparison were contested and shaped 'Haitian Atlantic humanism'. It argues that Haitian diasporic thinkers not only put their birthplace and the legacy of the Haitian Revolution at the center of their work, but also actively shaped intellectual circles on the European continent. In this essay, this reexamination will thus lead us to ask: How can the "utopian futures" envisaged in the past be reactivated for the present?

1. "[...] le crâne, il reste muet": Against Comparative Anatomy

In 1885, only two years after his arrival in Paris, Joseph Anténor Firmin published *De l'égalité des races humaines*. In Haiti, Firmin had been given a classical education in European languages and cultures, then studied law and became a successful attorney and politician in Cap-Haïtien and Caracas before moving to Paris as a diplomat, where he stayed until 1888 (Chemla, "Anténor Firmin"; Fluehr-Lobban 450).

As the title indicates, Firmin's book was clearly directed against Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* dating from 1853 (Hurbon 65). In his text, de Gobineau famously argued for a golden age of 'arianism,' that was inexorably in decline, and the superiority of whites over blacks (Chemla, "Anténor Firmin"; Fluehr-Lobban 449; Banton 55).

Firmin's publication *De l'égalité des races humaines*, however, was not a mere polemic against de Gobineau, but rather a systematic study (Lewis 317). His analysis provided readers with a general overview of the most established European and American scientific positions – which comprised, among others, the Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist Carl von Linné, French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, German physiologist Friedrich Tiedemann, German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Kant, and Goethe. It also presented the different positions intellectuals took in contemporary debates such as monogenism vs. polygenism, i.e. the discussion of if humankind had singular or multiple origins, the question of hybridity and its moral and physical effects, or the debate on whether physical differences between humans should lead to the conclusion that humankind consisted of different 'species'. However, Firmin's study was not only a detailed survey of different intellectual positions, but also a targeted critique. Due to its precise structural frame, in which every argument is followed by a counterargument, Firmin's study can be related to juridical rhetoric: *De l'égalité des races humaines* is a written objection to the majority of scientific positions of the era.

Firmin had been elected as a member of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris in 1884, where he was one of two non-white members, along with Paris-based Haitian diasporic intellectual Louis-Joseph Janvier.[4] His essay therefore not only confronted de Gobineau, but was also a "groundbreaking critique of scientific racism" (Murphy 38), a fierce attack on the views most members of the Société held, along with the 'scientific' methods they had developed.[5] Firmin's analysis was especially directed against the legacy of the then already deceased French anatomist and anthropologist Paul Broca, who had founded the Société d'Anthropologie de

Paris in 1859. Although not the first organization which sought to promote this emerging academic discipline in Europe, the Société was the first scholarly association to use the term ‘anthropologie’ (Wartelle 126).[6] Decades before ‘anthropology’ would be recognized as an academic discipline at the end of the 19th century and Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss would introduce a shift towards sociological parameters at the beginning of the 20th century (Fluehr-Lobban 453), the Société placed its focus on anthropology as a natural science, especially racializing physical anthropology. Its members employed methods such as anthropometry and craniometry in the comparative and racializing interpretation of human physical data, which “viewed the inferiority of the black race as an incontestable fact” (Fluehr-Lobban 453; see also Douglas 56ff.).

Firmin’s own definition of the discipline as “positive anthropology” in the subtitle of his study and his personal approach differed from the consensus on racial hierarchies most of his colleagues had reached. Beyond physical data, Firmin incorporated cultural, social, linguistic, historical, and archeological dimensions into his study, which, in this respect, predates posterior anthropological approaches such as the one developed by Franz Boas by decades (Denis 332). [7] Consequently, *De l’égalité des races humaines* is also a critique of the one-sidedness of anthropological methods of the era. Firmin’s repudiation of compared craniometry – the measurement of human skulls that ultimately resulted in parallels drawn between the size of the skull, brain, and intelligence, particularly promoted in France by Broca and his successors – concerned not only the comparison of, but, more fundamentally, the attempt to classify human physical data.[8] According to Firmin, any attempt of classification could only be arbitrary and was always led by subjective criteria, trying to impose order where nature had put its “most capricious irregularity” (Firmin 23). It was thus only logical that different scientists had established different systems of classification, thereby causing a “fluctuation” of arbitrary classifications (Firmin 26; 40). What was at stake was, according to Firmin, not only anthropology’s reputation, but science itself:

Les anthropologistes, en étudiant la forme et le volume du crâne, cherchent surtout à découvrir les différences qui existent entre les races humaines, après [sic] avoir assigné arbitrairement à chaque race une certaine forme ou une certaine capacité crâniennes spéciales. Plus tard, il est vrai, on s’appuiera sur ces mêmes spécialisations pour proclamer que telle race est inférieure ou supérieure à telle autre; mais cette conclusion, sans avoir plus de poids que celle des phrénologistes, ne sera pas moins revêtu d’un semblant scientifique. (Firmin 180) [9]

While de Gobineau, with his well-known publication from 1853, had preceded the foundation of the anthropological society, its members, rather than questioning de Gobineau’s hypothesis, had “imagined” scientific practices in order to confirm, mainly on a physical basis, the superiority of whites in comparison to non-whites, according to Firmin (Firmin 213). This also held true for other comparative methods from the “arsenal of anthropology”, that only led to an “imagined comparative proceeding” (Firmin 228). In the end, all of the established approaches in craniometry were in vain, Firmin argued: One could twist and turn the skull, but it still remained silent (229).

2. “Tous les hommes sont l’homme”: Haitian-Atlantic Humanism, Revisited

For Firmin (495f.), comparative anatomy was not the only anthropological method that produced too many insufficiencies. His critique also targeted comparisons of attributions concerning moral judgment, grades of civilization, and evolution. For the author, comparisons of physical, moral and/or other non-physical attributions were clearly “comparaisons imaginées dans le but d’établir ou de consolider la doctrine de l’inégalité des races humaines” (Firmin 215; emphasis added). According to the author, these comparisons did not prove fruitful because historical factors and probable future progress were not sufficiently considered. As Michael Dash (“Nineteenth-Century Haiti” 47) has rightfully argued, “Firmin’s main thesis is not essentialist but universalist as he sees the differences between cultures and civilizations as not based on any innate, genetic qualities

but historical and material conditions are used to explain cultural difference and evolution.” His understanding of ‘race’, consequently, is equally based on historical and social factors rather than biological ones (Denis 328).

While Firmin did not go so far as to completely renounce the concept of ‘race’ – consistent with the consensus of his era – he vehemently disputed the idea of a ‘purity’ of races as well as the “anti-philosophical and pseudo-scientific” idea of racial inequality (Firmin 95; 204). For Firmin, insistence of the inequality of human races clearly served only one purpose: the legitimization of enslavement and servitude (Firmin 209) as well as men’s exploitation by men (Firmin 204). Science, the author argued, had made itself an “accomplice” to the “dumbest prejudice” and to the “most unjust system”, either due to “flattery” or due to “insufficiency of observation” (Firmin 489). If anthropology only served to proclaim that black men were destined to serve white men, Firmin insisted, he had the full right to say to this “false anthropology”: “Non, tu n’es pas une science!” (Firmin 230). [10] At the same time, Firmin also denounced false condemnations of enslavement in Europe. As the author argued, such condemnations could only be contradictory when they were brought forward while simultaneously maintaining the argument of the “comparative inequality” of human races (204f.). [11]

In accordance with the title of his publication, Firmin thus came to the following conclusion:

[...] les hommes sont partout doués des mêmes qualités et des mêmes défauts, sans distinction de couleur ni de forme anatomique. Les races sont égales; elles sont tous capables de s’élever aux plus nobles vertus, au plus haut développement intellectuel, comme de tomber dans la plus complète dégénération. [...] C’est qu’une chaîne invisible réunit tous les membres de l’humanité dans un cercle commun. (Firmin 661-662)

This, the author argued with Victor Hugo’s famous words, “Tous les hommes sont l’homme”, was where his argument was leading to. He closed his study with the biblical invitation to love

one another (Firmin 662).

It is by no means by chance that the first edition of *De l’égalité des races humaines* showed an image of Toussaint Louverture, hero of the Haitian Revolution, on the second page (Fluehr-Lobban 460). [12] Undoubtedly, Haiti and the intellectual legacy of the Haitian Revolution were at the heart of Firmin’s argument. Scientific racist positions of the era, amongst others de Gobineau, often used Haiti and the outcome of the Haitian Revolution “as proof of black incapacity for self-government, but Firmin and other Haitian intellectuals of his generation turned that logic on its head. Haiti was exemplary, yes – exemplary of black equality, achievement and potential” (Ramsey 95). This becomes particularly clear when we consider the dedication that opens Firmin’s study: *De l’égalité des races humaines* is dedicated to Haiti but also to all the “children of the black race”, “love of progress, justice and liberty”, and to the “dispossessed of the present and the giants of the future” (Firmin v).[13] At a moment when new European colonial expansions were being undertaken on the African continent, Firmin thereby underlined the importance of Haitian history as a symbol for and motor of universal equality and liberty in the future.[14] In this regard, *De l’égalité des races humaines* is a precursor of Firmin’s later transnational political argument for an “Antillean confederation” as well as a new “geographic imaginary where metropolitan France and post-independence Haiti [...] are no longer opposed” (Dash, “Nineteenth-century Haiti” 50; see also Chaar-Pérez 15).

Firmin’s position can be situated within the wider context of what has recently been named “Haitian-Atlantic humanism”, i.e. “a long-standing way of thinking about eradicating the problems of racism and slavery *through* and *from* the nation state of Haiti, but also *in collaboration* with European and American world powers” (Daut 12). For centuries, the Haitian Revolution has been regarded as an “exceptional event” that could be discarded or “silenced” from official records (Trouillot). In scholarly research outside of Haiti, this perception has shifted due to the increase of international interest in the Haitian Revolution during the bicentenary, a development which ultimately led to the “Haitian

turn” (Celucien 37). Within this context, scholars have focused on the universal importance of the Haitian Revolution (Dash, “Haïti Chimère” 10) and have emphasized its significance as part of a “modernity disavowed” (Fischer 38) as well as part of “universal history” (Buck-Morss x). However, within history of knowledge, currents of “Haitian-Atlantic humanism” have often been overlooked. Only recent research has highlighted the contribution of 19th-century Haitian diasporic intellectuals to “hemispheric”, cross-cultural thought (Dash, *Nineteenth-Century Haiti* 45), normally attributed to writers such as Cuba’s José Martí or Puerto Rico’s Ramón Emeterio Betances, as well as the importance for pan-Africanism and pan-Americanism and the transatlantic space, decades before writers such as Édouard Glissant or Paul Gilroy brought forward ideas on the “poetics of relation” or the “Black Atlantic”.^[15]

Indeed, Firmin is not the only Haitian intellectual residing in Paris in the second half of the 19th century whose contribution, both in his publications and his intellectual life, to the shaping of a “cross-cultural” thought has been widely ignored. The same holds true for other Haitian-diasporic intellectuals of his generation, such as Louis Joseph Janvier, author of *La République d’Haïti et ses visiteurs* (1883). Janvier was one of the members of the Société d’Anthropologie who made Firmin’s election possible. He had been trained as a medical doctor and anthropologist in France and collaborated with intellectuals such as the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher or Ramón Emeterio Betances in a collaborative work, *Les détracteurs de la race noire et de la république d’Haïti*. He was an acknowledged member of intellectual circles in the French capital and was close to the Parnassians Charles Leconte de Lisle, Judith Gautier, and Stéphane Mallarmé (Chemla, “Louis Joseph Janvier”).^[16] Firmin and Janvier, like other intellectuals of the era, used Paris as a “strategic site for spreading their political messages and as a locus of community that brought together Latin American exiles alongside French liberals” (Chaar-Pérez 27). As Michael Dash (“Nineteenth-Century Haiti” 47) has argued, these intellectuals thus employed a “strategy of performative cosmopolitanism”. However, within this performance – whether

intentionally or not – Europe was given pride of place.

3. Intruding into Europe’s Space and Time?

How, then, has it been possible that the reexamination of these intellectuals has been (and still is) undertaken mostly within a national frame, classifying them as ‘Haitian’ intellectuals and reading their work as part of a ‘Haitian’ canonical history of knowledge, while both their established position within intellectual circles in Europe as well as their work on transnational communities proves this view untenable?^[17] How come that, at the same time, Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* was not only translated into English almost immediately after its first publication but also edited as an “Oxford classic”, as late as 1966, after having served as an inspiration for Nazi ideology (Denis 326; Fluehr-Lobban 450); meanwhile Firmin’s *De l’égalité des races humaines* had to wait until 2002 for a translation into English (not to speak of a German edition) (Denis 325). Most certainly, all of these indicators point to the fact that Europe, on the one hand, has for a long time been – and still is – conceived as the opposite of the Caribbean (Randeria and Römhild 22); a position that seems even more untenable given not only Europe’s colonial past, but also the fact that present parts of the European Union are geographically situated in the Caribbean. On the other hand, this past and current history of reception of intellectuals such as de Gobineau and Firmin sheds light on the desire (or the unconsidered implication) to think of Europe as a space of ‘purity’, within which intellectual positions that stood up to and spoke out against the ideological framework of scientific racism from a position of transnational entanglements seemed and still seem unthinkable.^[18] Consciously or not, the continuous reception of de Gobineau and the marginalization of counterpositions such as Firmin’s – even by academics critical of scientific racism – have thus perpetuated the arguments of scientific racism and promulgated the view of the European intellectual space, as well as European scientific communities of the 19th century, as only conceivable within national

parameters.

In his introduction, Firmin (viii) acknowledged that while attending the Société d'Anthropologie's discussions on the inequality between human races, he came to the conclusion that counterarguments could only be brought forward in written form, for he felt he would have been regarded an "intruder" if he had directly expressed his arguments in the discussions. The result of this process was *De l'égalité des races humaines*, a work of almost 700 pages published by the Parisian editor Cotillon. Firmin's decision has ultimately made his objections more durable; it has provided a persistent and more effective form of 'intrusion' from within the European intellectual communities of the 19th century – an 'intrusion' can still be reactivated for the present. It also gives some rare evidence of the fact that the history of knowledge of the 19th century should be reconsidered beyond national boundaries. Europe's past, after all, has always been subjected to trans-national entanglements. This also holds true for its present and future, despite claims to the contrary.

Endnotes

[1] Ramón Emeterio Betances, Puerto Rico's leader of independence, coined the term "revolution of love" to refer to "revolutionary communities". See Chaar-Pérez 14.

[2] The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report comes to the disillusioning conclusion: "Seventeen years after the adoption of the Racial Equality Directive and nine years after the adoption of the Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia, immigrants and minority ethnic groups continue to face widespread discrimination, harassment and discriminatory ethnic profiling across the EU, as the findings of FRA's second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II) show. The European Commission supported EU Member States' efforts to counter racism and hate crime through the EU High Level Group on combating racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. It also continued to monitor closely the implementation of the Racial Equality Directive and of the Framework Decision. Although several EU Member States have been reviewing their anti-racism legislation, in 2017 only 14 of them had in place action plans and strategies aimed at combating racism and ethnic discrimination." (FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 8)

[3] Veran particularly refers to the unexpected, long-lasting effects of raciology, in which the strategic employment of 'race' has become a tactic, for instance for indigenous communities, to underline their territorial claims against agribusiness or real estate projects in Brazil. See Veran 249f.

[4] Three other members had arranged for Firmin's admission. French physician Ernest Aubertin, French anthropologist and archeologist Gabriel Mortillet and Haitian-diasporic anthropologist and intellectual Louis Joseph Janvier nominated him as a new member, whereupon he was elected "with majority vote by secret ballot of the society" (Fluehr-Lobban 453).

[5] Haitian anthropologist Jean-Price Mars argued in his biography of Firmin's life that this must have been a "cruel paradox" (cited in Fluehr-Lobban 453).

[6] Ethnological societies had previously been founded in Paris in 1839, in London in 1841, and in New York in 1842. See Fluehr-Lobban 453.

[7] Firmin (2) expanded the prevalent view scholars of his era held on anthropology and defined it not only as the "study of the nature of men" but also as the study of "the place he occupies", while at the same time arguing against specialization: "C'est surtout en anthropologie qu'il faut se mettre en garde contre cette spécialité exclusive qui resserre les horizons de l'esprit et le rend incapable de considérer les objets sous toutes leurs faces." (Firmin 5)

[8] For an overview of physical anatomy and craniometry, see Douglas 2008.

[9] "Comment parviendra-t-on jamais à une classification vraiment scientifique", Firmin (157) asked elsewhere in his study, "en suivant les principes de la méthode naturelle", quand les mesures anthropologiques, que l'on reconnaît comme les seules bases rationnelles, sont non seulement trompeuses, irrégulières, mais le plus souvent contradictoires?"

[10] Firmin's own concept of science was clearly shaped by the values of Enlightenment, above all reason. But also other references, such as the achievements of progress and civilization and Comte as an alternative reference give us some insight into Firmin's ideas. See Fluehr-Lobban 451; Denis 333; Murphy 38.

[11] This critique was explicitly directed at anthropologist Paul Broca who, according to Firmin (205), only condemned slavery because it did not fit in the theory of a polygenetic origin of humanity.

[12] The image is not included in the 1885 edition of the French National Library that was used for this essay.

[13] The dedication reads: "A Haïti [...] Puisse ce livre [...] inspirer à tous les enfants de la race noire, répandus sur l'orbe immense de la terre, l'amour de progrès, de justice et de la liberté! Car, en le dédiant à Haïti, c'est encore à eux tous que je l'adresse, les déshérités de présent et les géants du avenir." (Firmin v). Indeed, ever since the Haitian Revolution, in Haiti there has been a different understanding of 'black' and 'white', as Jana Braziel (5) states: "[...] [U]nlike the French *nègre* (in France, Quebec, and even in parts of the French Antilles), the Kreyòl *nèg* and the French *nègre* (in Haiti) not only does not pejoratively connote blackness (as in 'Negro') or less negatively (as in 'black man'), but moreover does not specifically reference race at all, except as a universal. In Haiti *nèg* (in Kreyòl) and *nègre* (in French) have both denoted 'man' or 'human' ever since

Jean-Jacques Dessalines – the first ruler of independent Ayiti – tore the white stripe from the French national flag to form Haiti's blue-and-red- striped flag and proclaimed all citizens of the island country *nwa* (noir), and all foreigners *blanc* (blanc), regardless of race. [...] All Polish soldiers, for example, who initially fought under Napoleon Bonaparte to subdue the Haitian slave revolutionaries but later defected and fought alongside the Haitian's for the country's independence, were granted citizenship by Dessalines and became *nwa* (in Kreyòl) and *noir* (in French). And to the surprise of many travelling African Americans visiting the country (and even some Haitian diasporics returning home after a long absence), they are *blanc*."

[14] Equality, for Firmin (xvi), thus also comprises equality of rights, and it is again Haiti that is chosen as an example: "Combien ne serais-je pas heureux de voir mon pays, que j'aime et vénère infiniment, a cause même de ses malheurs et de sa laborieuse destinée, comprendre enfin qu'il a une œuvre tout spéciale et délicate à accomplir, celle de montrer à la terre entière que tous les hommes, noirs ou blancs, sont égaux en qualités comme ils sont égaux en droits!"

[15] Along with other Paris-based Haitian diasporic intellectuals such as Bénito Sylvain, Firmin attended the First Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 (Fluehr-Lobban 460).

[16] On Janvier as a transnational intellectual see also Daut 2016.

[17] Intellectual positions such as Firmin's have been marginalized within the history of knowledge for decades. A reexamination in Haiti and, to a lesser extent, also elsewhere in the Americas and in Europe in the 20th century has been made possible by the insistence of farsighted – mainly Haitian – intellectuals (Fluehr-Lobban 449).

[18] On the afterlives of 'race' in contemporary France, see Stovall 2014.

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