

Guest Editor: Gershom Williams



Gershom Williams (bennuinstitute@yahoo.com) is a cultural historian, teacher, lecturer, bibliophile and community activist. For over thirty years he has conducted extensive study and research into the "pre and post" enslavement heritage of continental and Diasporan Africans. His special areas of interest and concentration have been in the African origins of humanity, the African presence and influence on Nile Valley/Egyptian and Western Civilizations and the foundational impact of ancient African people on Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions. He is currently is a professor of African American and United States history at Mesa Community College in Mesa, Arizona. He has taught for the Maricopa Community College District for 20 years, he is a founding member of the East Valley Kwanzaa Committee, and he is a co-founder of The Bennu Institute of Arizona. He attended Indiana University where he majored in African American Studies and Sociology, and he has an honorary D.D. from Amen-Ra Theological Seminary. Also, he has served as president of the African American Historical and Genealogical Society in Arizona, and published essays in the *Arizona Informant* newspaper, the *Journal of African Civilizations*, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* (print and electronic), *Odyssey West Magazine*, and *The Desert Griot*.

Acknowledgements

As guest editor of this seminal volume of scholarly essays celebrating the intellectual life and work of Haitian scholar and statesman Joseph Anténor Firmin (1850-1911), there are several extraordinary individuals that are worthy and deserving of our deepest thanks and appreciation. First, *The Journal of Pan African Studies (JPAS)* expresses its appreciation to Larry Obadele Williams who first mentioned the name Anténor Firmin and the title of his monumental 1885 text during one of our long distance phone exchanges from Atlanta, Georgia to Phoenix, Arizona in the spring of 2012.

Next, I must extend my sincerest gratitude to the senior editor of *JPAS*, Itibari Zulu, who readily embraced my idea and trusted my vision for the journal to host this special edition (and a print edition) that would remember and pay homage to the pioneering work of Firmin as an anthropologist, Egyptologist and pan-Africanist in the late nineteenth century.

We also acknowledge and give thanks to Asselin Charles for his recommendation of Celucien Joseph as a credible and qualified scholar who could translate the essay on Anténor Firmin written and published in French by the renowned Congolese Egyptologist Dr. Thèophile Obenga, a longtime friend and colleague of Cheikh Anta Diop,.

Next, we acknowledge Dr. Mario Beatty of Howard University and international president of the *Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC)*, who contacted Dr. Obenga on behalf of *JPAS* to gain permission to translate and re-publish his essay on Firmin for an English speaking audience. Therefore, we thank Dr. Beatty for his invaluable assistance, and Dr. Obenga for granting us permission to publish his essay.

Much appreciation and thanks also go to Celucien L. Joseph who vigorously worked on translating Dr. Obenga's essay while completing his own essay to contribute to this special issue.

Thanks to all of our contributing writers for their support and patience with this challenging but rewarding literary project for students and researchers in anthropology, ancient Egyptian studies, Haitian/Caribbean studies, Africana Studies, Pan-African Studies and Colonial/Post-Colonial studies.

And last, I express my warm and sincerest thanks to my beloved wife and soul mate of almost forty years, Mrs. Deborah Kirkendall-Williams. Mrs. Williams patiently and faithfully served as typist and proof reader of my personal paper as well as my introduction. May the creator and the ancestors be pleased!

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Introduction

“...This race of Blacks who nowadays are slaves and the objects of our extreme contempt, is the very one to which we owe our arts, our sciences and even use of the spoken word; and finally to recollect that it is in the midst of the people claiming to be the greatest friends of liberty and humanity that the most barbarous forms of enslavements has been sanctioned and the question raised whether Black men have the same quality of intelligence as White men.” – C.F. Volney (1783)

In 1857 the young Black intellectual Edward Wilmot Blyden published his first major text titled, *A Vindication of the Negro Race*, in which he conducted a rigorous examination that challenged and refuted the so-called biblical myth or Curse of Ham. Several centuries prior to the invention of ‘scientific racism’ in the mid to late nineteenth century, the religious racial myth of Ham or Canaan was imagined and propagated by American intellectuals and lay persons who supported African enslavement and innate racial inferiority.

As Professor David M. Goldenberg writes in the introduction to his comprehensive and definitive text on the subject, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (2003),

“This biblical story has been the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years. It is a strange justification indeed, for there is no reference in it to Blacks at all. And yet just about everyone, especially in the antebellum American south, understood that in this story God meant to curse Black Africans with eternal slavery....”. Early pro slavery proponents passionately defended the peculiar institution with the false and fabricated mythical story in the biblical book of Genesis.

At the dawn of the American Civil War, supporters of African enslavement and African intellectual/biological inferiority developed a more advanced sophisticated, pseudo-scientific argument to validate their ideological claims of White supremacy and cultural hegemony. New methods and techniques of racial ranking and classification were developed under the umbrella of ethnology and anthropology. The ‘scientific racism’ of the nineteenth century produced several offshoots of what Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould terms ‘the mis-measure of man’; Craniometry, craniology, phrenology- the measure of human skulls in an attempt to scientifically determine or prove the racial superiority of the Caucasian group over non-White population groups.

A very recent, powerful example of the ‘pseudo-science of phrenology’ was illustrated in an enlightening fashion to all viewers of the Quentin Tarantino block buster movie *Django Unchained*. In an article titled *Django Unchained and the Racist Science of Phrenology* written by James Poskett, we borrow the following commentary: “Why don’t they kill us?” asks Calvin Candie, the southern slave owner. He wants to know why the African slaves he brutalizes do not rise up and take revenge. Before long, he has the skull of a recently deceased slave on the dinner table. “The science of phrenology,” he announces, “is crucial to understanding the separation of our two species.” He hacks away at the back of the skull with a saw, removing a section of the cranium and pointing to an allegedly enlarged area. In African slaves, Candie claims this bump is found in the region of the brain associated with ‘submissiveness.’

For Candie (played by Leonardo DiCaprio), phrenology not only explained slavery, it justified it. Needless to say, phrenology has now been thoroughly debunked: The idea that the shape of the skull can be used to infer mental characteristics is just plain wrong and inaccurate. But it was extremely popular all over the world during the 19th century.

Although I enjoyed most of the movie’s illuminating scenes that forced movie goers to remember and reflect on the great enslavement (Maafa) of African descended people, the dinner table scene surrounding the pseudo-science of phrenology left a lasting and deep imprint on the brain inside *my* skull. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* would like to welcome readers to our special edition that remembers and celebrates the intellectual struggles of a ‘great African centered thinker’ who brilliantly refuted and rejected the scientific arguments and claims of Euro-American phrenologists and anthropologists who sought to prove Black inferiority and White superiority. Haitian scholar and statesman Joseph Anténor Firmin (1850-1911) publically articulated his most forceful and persuasive counter arguments to reject and defeat ‘scientific racism’ in his literary tour de force *The Equality of the Human Races: Positivist Anthropology* (1885).

We begin with an essay authored by Gershom Williams titled, *Deconstructing Pseudo-Scientific Anthropology: Anténor Firmin and the Reconceptualization of African Humanity*. In his exploratory paper, Williams endeavors to present a critical review of the anti-racist, vindicationist tradition of African American and Haitian intellectuals who challenged, rejected and refuted the ‘scientific racism’ of Euro-American ethnologists, anthropologists, Egyptologists, historians, philosophers and physicians. Williams remembers and pays homage to those pre Anténor Firmin public intellectuals who dared to disagree with popular opinions regarding the discourse of race and proceeded to debate the ideological fallacy of White supremacy.

Williams argues that the Haitian scholar and statesman Joseph Anténor Firmin did not rise out of an intellectual vacuum to conduct study and research for his massive and masterful manuscript *The Equality of the Human Races*, but evolves out of a long standing vindicationist tradition inherent among diasporan intellectuals in the Caribbean and the United States. Firmin, a descendant of the Haitian intellectual Maroons was not intimidated by the dominant thinking of the advocates of racial ranking and hierarchy. A bold and brilliant thinker of the late nineteenth century, he re-envisioned and re-conceptualized the image and pre-colonial cultural heritage of African descended people. Lastly, Williams articulates in his essay his essential purpose is to convey to the reader(s), particularly students, that prior to the invention and propagation of the ‘race myth’ of White superiority, the concept and belief in Black inferiority was non-existent. By confronting and deconstructing the multitude of racial myths and stereotypes fashioned by Euro-Americans centuries ago, Anténor Firmin and others who believed in liberty, equality and fraternity could dismantle and destroy the foundational pillars of scientific racism.

Dr. Nana A.P. Boaduo’s essay is titled *Undeniable Complacency of Western World Anthropology Scholars Ignorance in Acknowledging the Equality of Human Races: Revisiting Anténor Firmin in the New Millennium*. In his investigation and re-visitation of Firmin’s monumental literary treatise, Dr. Boaduo cites a powerful prediction made by Firmin in chapter 17 of *Equality* as sufficient evidence to strike the first and most powerful blow against western world anthropology scholars’ thesis of racial inequality. Firmin optimistically predicted that “in less than a century from now, a Black man might be called to head the government of Washington and manage the affairs of the most progressive and powerful country on earth.”

When one critically examines the racial and global political climate in 1885, this was a positively bold, radical and progressive, almost prophetic prediction issued by a son of enslaved and colonized Africans but whose people in Haiti were self-liberated and intellectually self-determined. Professor Boaduo contends that two of the most heinous atrocities perpetuated by the European colonists were the classification of the human race, especially Africans as biologically inferior and the derogatory, stereotypical concepts used to define and describe them- Coloureds, Kaffirs, Blacks, Negroes, Slaves, Savages etc.

In her essay *Positivism and Progress in Firmin’s Equality of the Human Races*, Camisha Russell posits that Anténor Firmin offered the world its’ first sustained philosophical book length response to scientific European racism. With the publication of the English translation in 2000 and again in 2002, we in the Anglophone world finally have the long overdue opportunity to reclaim Firmin and his work as a part of Black intellectual history.

Russell argues that for modern day readers Firmin's critical project researched and published over a century ago, systematically counters the key 'scientific arguments' in favor of racial inequality. Russell contends that Firmin in 1885 puts forth an original philosophical and progressive thesis about the origin, development, advancement and ultimate equality of the human races. In the final analysis, she believes Firmin's *Equality of the Human Races* belongs not only to the history of the study of race but to the history of the philosophy of race as well.

Asselin Charles in *Race and Geopolitics in Anténor Firmin's Work*, advances the ideological position that Anténor Firmin is Haiti's greatest thinker and statesman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Fortunately, non-French speaking students and scholars can also recognize that Firmin's intellectual legacy rests primarily on his literary achievement in publishing *The Equality of the Human Races* in (1885). Firmin's masterly deconstruction of race and refutation of racial hierarchy, twin notions invented and given a scientific veneer by early western anthropologists of race for purposes of conquest and domination of non-western peoples. Charles presents the idea to the reader that Firmin's notion of the equality of races and nations is of great significance as it regards modern geo-politics. In his essay, Charles analyzes Firmin's understanding of the role of race in relations among nations and examines the implications of his concept of absolute equality 'de Jure and de Facto' among races and nations for the geo-politics of his day as well as for the present world order. In summary, Charles argues that given today's global arrangement revolves around national polities rather than races, Firmin's idea of equality among nations as a foundation of the global geo-political order may well be his more enduring intellectual legacy, positioning him not only as a pioneering anthropologist and slayer of the false science of race, but also as a political scientist and philosopher for a contemporary world still marked by rapports of domination and subordination among nations.

In his essay *Sill Singing 'Kiss My Ass' to a Wagner Melody: Anténor Firmin, Bronislaw Malinowski, and the Establishment of Twentieth Century Ethnography* , Anthony Kwame Harrison argues that Anténor Firmin recognized the paradox of early ethnographers of the classic era (circa 1900-1950) despite the good intentions of some in the historical periods they were situated in. Their perspective of history reveals the deep-seated arrogances and illusions of European racial superiority which shaped the views and practices of, what at the time were considered progressive human scientists. Harrison reveals to readers in his essay that shortly after his arrival in Paris in 1883, Firmin joined the Société D' Anthropologie de Paris, regarded as the most important and prestigious anthropological organization in nineteenth century France.

It was here, amidst this learned society of supposedly liberal thinkers, that Firmin experienced first-hand the incomprehensible and illogical pairing of rational intellectualism and racist thought which prompted him to write *The Equality of the Human Races*. Firmin's masterful treatise is clearly a challenge to the dominant voices in nineteenth century physical anthropology and racial 'science' – most particularly the work of Joseph-Arthur Conte de Gobineau. Harrison suggests that Firmin's thesis, if sufficiently advanced, in his day, had powerful potential implications for the course of twentieth century ethnographic investigation and anthropological theorizing. In moving the discussions surrounding the historical importance of Firmin's from the physical science of race to the social science of culture, Harrison argues for the place of *The Equality of the Human Races* as a foundational text which from a twenty-first century vantage point, significantly furthers the ongoing project of critically assessing the shortcomings of anthropology's beginnings and moving towards a truly liberatory social science.

Next, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* is very honored and proud to have the unique opportunity to publish for an English speaking audience, a scholarly paper originally written in the French language by the renowned African Egyptologist, Dr. Théophile Obenga. This essay remembers and reflects on the intellectual role of Firmin as a pioneering Egyptologist of the late nineteenth century.

In *Homage to Anténor Firmin; Haitian Egyptologist (1850-1911)*, Professor Obenga informs us that Anténor Firmin is part of the dignified and noble heritage of the Haitian intelligentsia. Indeed, Haiti has given much to the African world community and all humanity in the personages of great thinkers and leaders such as Francois Macandal, Boukman Duty, Baron de Vastey, Toussaint L'Overture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henry Christophe, and Jean-Price Mars. As Obenga eloquently articulates "Anténor Firmin was a lawyer by profession, a pan Africanist by political choice and an Egyptologist, one of the first among Black people of Africa and the diaspora."

Obenga's insightful and instructive essay firmly has its foundational focus on Firmin as a pioneer African centered Egyptologist. According to Obenga, Anténor Firmin in 1885, develops and defends his argument that ancient Egypt is an African civilization by virtue of its geography, race, culture, spirit, values, sacred and divine kingship, aesthetics and linguistics. Obenga correctly proceeds to ask two pertinent questions in order to qualify Firmin as a credible and well qualified Egyptologist. What then is an Egyptologist and how does one become an Egyptologist?

Obenga, after reviewing the intellectual training and scholarly rigor of Firmin in studying Egyptian grammar and language, his knowledge of Egyptian (Kemet) names, the nature of Egyptian art and monuments etc., rightfully concludes that he is an Egyptologist in the same intellectual tradition as the late great Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal.

In *Anténor Firmin, 'The Egyptian Question', and Afro-centric Imagination*, Celucien Joseph examines Joseph Anténor Firmin's engagement with the racial situation in Ancient Egypt. He is particularly interested in Firmin's confrontational claim of the Black/African origins of Ancient Egyptian civilization. Professor Joseph's analysis also considers Firmin's thought along the line of Afrocentric (African centered) articulation of the historic contribution of Egyptian (Kemet) culture to classical Greece and other world civilizations as well as his plea for the 'formal' recognition of the achievements of the 'Black race' in the intellectual development of the modern world. A major aspect of his analysis is to explore precisely Firmin's Afrocentric imagination and the sensibility currently championed by Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University.

As the readers of this seminal volume of enlightening essays by all of our contributing writers will soon learn, the life and intellectual legacy of Joseph Anténor Firmin is perceived and presented from various viewpoints and perspectives. Firmin is understood to have had a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional impact on our intellectual universe. His heavy influence on the academic disciplines of anthropology, history, philosophy, Egyptology, Africology and Pan-Africanism are monumental.

Firmin has left an invaluable record and an intellectual body of work that will forever stand for the promotion of unity and equality of the human family.

Gershom Williams
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