

# Joseph Anténor Firmin: Racial Equality, Solidarity, and Sovereign Body Politic

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## Résumé de l'article

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## **Joseph Anténor Firmin: Racial Equality, Solidarity, and Sovereign Body Politic**

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**Abstract:** Joseph Anténor Firmin was a Haitian diplomat and scholar, Pan-Africanist, and an early participant in the birth of French anthropology. After long being neglected, Firmin's articulations of Pan-Africanism in the Caribbean environment are finally receiving their due. In active correspondence with other thinkers of the African diaspora, Firmin was an early proponent of developing a Caribbean confederacy. Although his seminal anthropological study, *The Equality of Human Races: Positivist Anthropology* (1885), has received the most scholarly attention to date, his contextualization of Haiti on the world stage, developed in *Mr. Roosevelt, President of the United States, and the Republic of Haiti* (*Mr. Roosevelt, président des États-Unis et la République d'Haïti*, 1905) remains understudied to this day. Firmin situates his nation in the larger North American landscape of U.S. imperialism and Haiti's longstanding ties to the French Republic to examine how to most rationally promote Haitian prosperity. His notions of political determination for African diasporic nations appear early in the timeline of the fields of anthropology and sociology. This article will explore Firmin's contributions to history, anthropology, and self-determination of nations.

**Keywords:** *Firmin, Francophone, race, self-governance, body politics, Caribbean*

In the August 8, 1901, issue of the French diplomatic and political paper, *Le Moniteur des consulats et du commerce international* (*The Consulates and International Commerce Monitor*), politician Joseph Anténor Firmin was given a front page spread upon his receiving the officer's cross of the Legion of Honor from the French government (p. 1-2). Director and editor-in-chief August Meulemans praises Firmin's intelligence, public speaking ability, and contributions to improving Haitian-French relations in glowing terms (1904, p. 1-2). As was typical for the paper, the front page includes a large headshot of its subject (Figure 1). Firmin looks studiously in the distance against a plain backdrop, and the overall effect is dignified, representing nationhood, tradition, and nobility.

**Figure 1.** Joseph Anténor Firmin on the cover of *Le Moniteur*.

However, the medal itself is not a guarantor of material benefits, at least not to awardees; initially, it was part of Napoléon I's propaganda machine and it continued to promote the legitimacy of the Third Republic administrations (1870-1940), who had the power to bestow these medals (Caille, 1997, p. 71). The Legion of Honor is endowed with heavy if vague symbolism for French patriotism and idealized citizenship, while simultaneously associated with the ousted French Empire, metonymically tied to Napoléon I and traditional values of "*Honneur et Patrie*" ("Honor and Fatherland," Caille, 1997, p. 77, 86). The illogic of French imperialist discourse quickly breaks down with a close reading of *Le Moniteur's* engraving. Meulemans's reportage is situated in an international consulates journal, implying Firmin's foreignness to France. Meuleman also praises Firmin for his ability to bridge the two countries, which point to Firmin's status as a foreign diplomat (1904, p. 2). Despite ostensibly friendly relations between the United States and the French Third Republic, Meulemans congratulates Firmin on his stance against U.S. invasion during the Port-au-Prince incident of 1891, in which Firmin served as a main Haitian diplomat (p. 2). Firmin's two-page spread frames him as a willing, honoured participant in receiving the award, with the awarding itself a process of reproducing French nationhood. Yet, the award has always been difficult to turn down and, to this day, only in rare instances is the Legion of Honor conferred on non-citizens, marking awardees ideal French citizens or symbolically French. The basic requirement is that the "citizen" must have served the Fatherland for at least 20 years and be of upstanding character—what Frédéric Caille ambiguously calls a "super-citizen" (1997, p. 85). The presentation of Firmin's award in *Le Moniteur* depicts him as at once a foreign diplomat and an ideal citizen, and this blurring of

Firmin's identity rhetorically promotes France as the Fatherland—where value systems (what honours are worthy of noting, and in what way) are produced and reproduced. Yet Firmin is also a diplomat, a citizen of a country outside France. The representation of Firmin's country of birth, Haiti, is also contentious. Meulemans refers to Haïti without any article (or the full name of Republic of Haiti), although the definite article is typically used in French to signal an autonomous nation (for instance, *le Canada*). Firmin himself would go on to link Haitian appellations to political intent, noting that U.S. proponents of annexing Haiti refer to the nation as Saint Domingue, its colonial name and one that bears very little resemblance to the name of the independent country (*M. Roosevelt, président des États-Unis et la République d'Haïti*, 1905, p. 431; henceforth *Mr. Roosevelt*). This linguistic detail continues to be significant, considering that the dictionary and encyclopaedia *Larousse* defines Haiti without the definitive article, a discourse that suggests a sense of holdover to pre-republic times (2017).<sup>1</sup> Overall, Meulemans frames Firmin as a diplomat of a country that is not recognized as a nation. Stretched to its logical limit, this implies a lack of national sovereignty and respected international borders and also the capacity of the French Fatherland to name or not name the former colony.

Meulemans's astonished praise of Firmin's "erudition" and "intelligence" reads as racist; for instance, he lists the relatively underwhelming honour of calling Firmin an economic organizer ("*un organisateur*", 1904, p. 1) as a primary accomplishment. The modern reader might question whether Firmin himself considered his primary motivation to be improving Haitian-French relations or if he was also concerned with protecting his country's sovereignty. The prosperity of his nation was not only materially menaced by governmental unrest, but also theoretically menaced by political theorizations that a Black nation or a Black Chief of State "scientifically" could not prosper (1905, p. 457). Firmin would add his Legion of Honor title at the end of his signature (cover page); however, his signature began with titles he had earned in Haiti rather than those he was just bestowed with, including Former Secretary of State, Former Secretary of Finance and Commerce, and Former Officer of Public Instruction, suggesting that his career accomplishments spoke for themselves. In fact, as indicated in *Mr. Roosevelt*, his primary concern at the start of the 20th century was rationally determining the easiest path to Haitian prosperity, a path calculated in considering its U.S. neighbour as either potential investor or imperial "menace" (p. iii) and to Haiti's political and linguistic resonances with the French Third Republic. Firmin mobilizes his vast knowledge of history and science to proceed explicitly along Comtean positivism, critiquing scientific racism in *The Equality of Human Races: Positivist Anthropology* (1885; henceforth *Equality*) and mobilizing the discourse of sociology to argue against Haitian isolationism in *Mr. Roosevelt*. Given this sociological grounding, Firmin's concept of an autonomous nation is one that signals solidarity with other nations of the African diaspora and, as such, can be read as a call to action—one that remains relevant today in modern theorizations of race and one that is now earning its long overdue recognition.

### Recuperating Firmin's Scholarship Today

To place the ongoing relevance of Firmin's *Mr. Roosevelt* in context, it is important to recognize efforts to recuperate his scholarship over the past few decades. As Carolyn

Fluehr-Lobban notes, “Antenor Firmin is a forgotten founder of anthropology whose contribution to French anthropology could have been fruitful but was ignored. It appears that the members of the Paris Anthropological Society [to which he belonged] never opened *De l'égalité des races humaines*, and were not able to receive its message” (quoted by Dorestal, 2023, p. 11). Firmin could have been canonized for decades for his prescient thinking, which would have had implications for how we teach our students and imagine alternate futures, but his positivist lines of inquiry are not typically the first taught to undergraduates of French, anthropology, or sociology. The relative erasure of his scholarship is itself a subject of study. Michel-Rolphe Trouillot’s vast scholarship on the history of Haiti supports the relevance of Firmin’s concern for Haitian prosperity: Trouillot characterizes the milieu of 19th century Haiti with disruption, corrupt governments, and lack of democracy, but also in terms of investments from Germany, England, and the U.S. (1990). Beckett and Rath both contribute to current understandings of Firmin’s scholarship and of its exclusion from the canon, including a depiction of the normalized scientific racism accepted by the Paris Anthropological Society. Despite Firmin being accepted as a member in the society, “Firmin found himself, participating in sessions during which the inherent inferiority of the Black race was repeatedly discussed and accepted as scientific fact” (Beckett, 2021, p. 216). The logic of Firmin’s anti-racist conclusions must be situated within the field of the birth of French social sciences which, as Beckett notes with regards to anthropology, was entangled with apologies of racism and enslavement. Beckett states, “In this sense, French anthropology was less an objective science and more a folk model of difference naturalized” (2021, p. 222). Despite these dubious beginnings, this current moment in scholarship affords us the intellectual and pedagogical opportunity to respond to Firmin’s call for action. Notably, in the field of French and Francophone Studies, the Spring 2016 special edition of the esteemed journal *L’Esprit créateur* features Keith Louis Walker linking Firmin’s *Equality* with the intellectual work of Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, all of whom negotiated their Caribbean identities with their African heritage. The edition also includes Daniel Desormeaux’s praise of *Equality* for its interweaving of literary criticism and anthropological arguments, which itself is a caution that canonicity is not innocent but supports larger, sociological arguments: of all the historical narratives that could be included in the canon, stories relating experiences of the Caribbean have tended to be overlooked (p. 26).

The relative recentness of this scholarship might imply a lack of access to Firmin’s original texts, at least to the average emerging scholar. Asselin Charles only translated Firmin’s *Equality* into English in 2002, 117 years after the fact. In terms of the scholarship for this article, I have relied on the French originals of Firmin’s texts, which is important because Firmin quotes scientists and philosophers in their original languages, a fact consistent with our understanding of him as a cosmopolitan thinker open to learning from multiple civilizations. I include Charles’s translations of *Equality* in this article; the other translations are my own. The edition of *Lettres de Saint-Thomas* I consulted was a 1976 reprint from Port-au-Prince (not the edition originally published in Paris in 1910), which begs the question of how much access an earlier reader might have had to the earlier edition. Firmin’s *Mr. Roosevelt* was published in French but not English in 1905. Gershom Williams (2014) notes that Gobineau’s racist text, *On the Inequality of Human Races* (1853-1855), was translated within a year into English, in time to possibly have an effect on the

Dred Scott case in 1857 (p. 9). While this fact might be considered a historic oddity, Williams contrasts the immediately widespread accessibility of Gobineau's text with the lack of accessibility of Firmin's opposing narrative, finally translated by Asselin Charles into English in 2000 "at the disposal of twenty first century scholars, students and lay persons," particularly those involved in similar struggles for Black liberation across the African diaspora (p. 19). The inaccessibility of antiracist texts to a larger audience versus the linguistic accessibility of racist essays points to an underlying value system in which one narrative is used to canonize certain types of (racist) stories and other narratives are funneled out, devalued, and not made immediately accessible to an international audience. An analogy would be Roderick Ferguson's question of what is left out of the shot in the picture frame: a productive line of inquiry is what identities and perspectives are just out of the shot (2004). Considering these gradations in knowledge transmission, it is worthwhile to note the knowledge that has been recuperated from Firmin's theories of race and nationhood.

Firmin's best-known work, *Equality*, is our point of entry in approaching an examination of his scholarship and, as Fluehr-Lobban indicated above, a cornerstone text delineating the field of anthropology, its value, and its accepted use of evidence and modes of investigation (Firmin, 1885, p. 1-14). In this text, Firmin mobilizes the methodology that continues through *Mr. Roosevelt*: using established positivist discourse to investigate both sides of a social question, and then demonstrating the evidence supporting anti-racist conclusions. In *Equality*, Firmin specifically critiques Gobineau's racist work on the inequality of human races (Russell, 2014, p. 47). A fundamental binary in the scientific study of race at the time was the monogenism versus polygenism debate, which dealt with whether human races originated from one origin (Biblical or otherwise) or multiple origins. Leading scientists of the day could use either the monogenism or polygenism position to argue for the natural state of racial inequality across the globe. Firmin considers possible evidence from both sides of the debate, evidently at face value, to arrive at his support for monogenism. He uses the accepted evidence and discourse of 19th century science—in this case, "the theories of evolution and sexual selection formulated by Herbert Spencer and Darwin" (Firmin, p. 193), quoting all scientists in their original language, a fact that seems especially noteworthy when held in contrast to Gobineau's writing, which embraces 19th century science to demonstrate so-called racial inequality.

To further Firmin's point, and as a case-in-point to what is meant by Firmin's Comtean positivist approach, he examines the accomplishments of Ancient Egypt in great detail. Referring throughout *Equality* and *Mr. Roosevelt* to the value of civilization, Firmin describes the richness of natural resources available to Ancient Egyptians, including the Ethiopian flora and fauna they used, as an argument that Egyptians had the wealth to support an advanced civilization (Obenga, 2014, p. 116). As did Frederick Douglass, Firmin argues that the Ancient Egyptians must have been Black Africans. Firmin uses linguistic analysis, arguing that the rhotic /r/ prevalent in both Ancient Egyptian and Cushitic languages is evidence of a common heritage and shared culture (Magloire-Danton, 2005, p. 159; Obenga, 2014, p. 116-117). Firmin's argumentation was explicitly against those of scientific racists, who hinged their claims on the falsehood that there had never been an advanced Black civilization. However, as Firmin points out in *Mr. Roosevelt*, the white supremacist arguments were not substantiated by linguistics or natural history, as his

analysis was; in fact, white supremacy itself was built on such illogical, arrogant premises that it “posed a threat to humanity” (1905, p. 77). Instead, Firmin makes similar arguments to those Walter Rodney would make in his historical materialist analysis of African and European history: different civilizations have their ups and downs, and it was Africa that was materially and intellectually more advanced than Europe in Antiquity (2018, p. 60). Currently, according to Firmin in *Equality*, Haiti and countries of the African diaspora were denied progress because of U.S. and European imperialism; indeed, in *Mr. Roosevelt* he described the cruelty of the slave trade and the conditions of enslavement to demonstrate the impossibility of Haitian progress before liberation. Consistent threads that run through *Equality* and *Mr. Roosevelt* are Firmin’s universal belief in the intellectual capacities for all humans, the teleological drive towards progress among all nations, and the innate value in material prosperity given the flora and fauna of each nation. *Equality* explicitly disproves the notion that human races are anything but categorically equal; any differences in material outcomes can be explained by deprivation in resources, both intentional (as in the modern-day case of nations of the African diaspora) and natural (as in the case of Ancient Europe).

Using Ancient Egypt as an example of a summit of civilization, Firmin moves on to consider the potential of his fellow Haitians, concluding that they—along with every nation on Earth—have the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral potential to reach the highest levels of civilization. He notes, “Haiti is, to repeat Dr. Janvier’s rather strong term, ‘a sociological field of experimentation.’ It is in this field, then, that one should deploy all the means by which to achieve the intellectual, moral, and physical development of a race” (1885, p. 312). Citing a variety of accomplished Black contemporaries, including Janvier, the metaphor of “experimentation” demonstrates that the project of Haitian prosperity is as-of-yet unfinished. Embedded already within this theorization is the notion of racialized civilizations, of entire groups being marked as “raced.” Given the natural intellectual gifts of all humans, as well as the rich natural resources of Haiti, Firmin goes on to explore unequal outcomes in the geopolitical sphere in *Mr. Roosevelt*.

### **Towards a Prosperous Haitian Civilization**

Like *Equality*, *Mr. Roosevelt* (1905) is an extensive study running hundreds of pages. Given the thoroughness of Firmin’s scholarship, the remaining focus of this article will be on Firmin’s methodology, Haiti and its likely republican allies (the United States and France), and on the racialization ascribed to Haiti. The first half of *Mr. Roosevelt*’s chapters are dedicated to U.S. history and the second to Haiti, going in chronological order in both cases from pre-independence to the 20th century. In the preface, Firmin explains that the text fills a gap in knowledge of U.S. history for Haitians using a methodology of sociology (p. iv-v). Knowledge of history is important because the “question of race” determines Haiti’s future and because racial hierarchies will always still be in place (p. vii). Six chapters then recount the history of the United States, beginning with Christopher Columbus and continuing through to the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, alluding to a possible shared arc between the two figures. Six chapters tell the story of Haiti’s history from the cruel slave trade and enslavement, through independence and successive governments and

unrest, to its politics and needs. The book finishes with the relationship between Haiti and the Roosevelt administration.

Firmin wrote both *Mr. Roosevelt* and *Letters from St. Thomas (Lettres de Saint-Thomas)* while in exile on the island of St. Thomas, meaning that his comments on Haiti's need for democracy and order may have been coloured by his own experiences. He alludes to his own exile in the preface, noting, "[I]t is the right and obligation for all to have a complete idea of the material [on the American question]" ("*[C]'est un droit et un devoir pour tous d'avoir une vue complète de la matière*", 1905, p. iii). It is only from this sense of duty that Firmin presses forward, noting that the absence of a good library in St. Thomas has impeded his scholarship, as he was obligated to write *Mr. Roosevelt* from memory (p. iv). The very general North American geopolitical context for Firmin's 1905 study, provided within the body of *Mr. Roosevelt* itself, was that the U.S. had already colonised Puerto Rico and the Philippines, annexed Hawaii, and completed the construction of the Panama Canal (p. 156-167). The U.S. had lost Cuba and had already attempted to gain control over Môle St. Nicolas in northwest Haiti, as it was a logistical stopping point for ships on the Atlantic Ocean–Panama Canal–Pacific Ocean circuit (Hooker, 2017, pp. 57-58, 216). Firmin and Frederick Douglass were both diplomats involved in the Haiti-United States negotiations. While Douglass was constrained by his service to the United States, Firmin views the American diplomat as in favour of "the independent existence of the Dominican Republic and Haiti as morally much more necessary to the cause of African Americans than their annexation by force by the Republican Party" (p. 148).<sup>6</sup> It is due to the general sympathy for African Americans that Firmin reads in the U.S. Republican party that Firmin concludes in *Mr. Roosevelt* that the United States is more of a potential investor than foe to Haiti; Firmin even includes a chapter of more than 100 pages detailing Roosevelt's biography. By 1905, Firmin had been reflecting on the potential for U.S. involvement in Haiti for at least a decade, and he supported U.S., Dominican, and Haitian members of the African diaspora in solidarity with one another, both in the example of his "honoured" fellow diplomat (1905, p. 148) and in the general geopolitical scheme. He also notes that Douglass spoke with "more brio" due to his solidarity as a Black man with the Haitian nation (p. 474). That is, Firmin was thinking of solidarity across the African diaspora on the individual and international levels. His nation's right to self-govern and prosper was continually at stake. The rich resources of his country, which the United States could exploit, included its geographical position vis-à-vis Panama, its beauty and natural resources (which implied potential business investments or, at worse, settler colonialism), and its's most important resource: its people (1905, p. v). Building from his previous scholarship demonstrating the equality of all human races, Firmin argues that Haitians must be thought of as having the capacity to far exceed their current level of prosperity. He explains, "As I believe to have irrefutably demonstrated in my work, *The Equality of Human Races*, the Black race is as perfectible as any other" (p. 231).<sup>2</sup> Given this absolute racial equality, the question is why the Black nation of Haiti has not yet reached its potential and what is to be done to promote progress for this nation of the African diaspora (p. 231). Firmin notes that racist detractors—namely, white Americans and Europeans who visit Haiti—use Haiti's current lack of prosperity as evidence of its impossibility, given Black leadership. Firmin uses the same type of naturalistic reasoning to refute the detractors' argument (inconsistent with his earlier findings in *Equality*, based on the equal potential of



all peoples), describing the prosperity of a huge Haitian plantation, funded by a foreign investor, Fritz Hermann (p. 461). This foreign investment benefits the entire community, affording financial security and regularity. For Firmin, what Haiti lacks is not whiteness but capital. Given the prosperity of this plantation, Firmin envisions “the greatest of ease to create civilization in Haiti by order, work, education and liberty” (p. 461).<sup>3</sup> As in *Equality*, for Firmin the solution to large questions about humanity should be found in scientific, objective investigation. In this case, the question of how to promote Haitians’ material and intellectual well-being lies in part on Haiti’s shoulders: the country needs to provide social order and consistency in government to allow for mass education. At varying points in *Mr. Roosevelt* he suggests that German, French, or (especially) U.S. investments could provide capital.

At its least, the text serves to raise Haitians’ awareness of their North American neighbour the United States, a purpose that reflects Firmin’s overall criticism of Haitian isolationism, and his belief that Haitians should not “lock themselves up,” when foreign investors could infuse their nation with what Firmin viewed as much-needed capital (“*s’enfermer*,” p. 456). The context for this critique was that the vast majority of Haitians were working without the income or social order needed to prosper, when their “well-being, enlightenment, and social justice” were needed in much greater quantities (“*plus de bien-être, plus de lumière et plus de justice sociale*,” p. 495). Firmin would take up this issue again in *Letters from St. Thomas* in his critique of the constitutional prohibitions against foreign long leaseholding: something that was comprehensible in the context of Haitians’ liberation, but that discouraged foreign investors from making the long-term investments with the largest pay-offs (1910, p. 5-6). Of note is that Firmin writes about society from his perspective as a lifelong public servant. For example, he worked to alleviate some of Haiti’s debt while working in the department of finance (1905, p. 449). In this vein, sociology is essential to his contributions to positivist thinking, because not only does he view human traits and potential as universal (as evinced in *Equality*), but he also locates Haitian society among “Afro-latins,” as he would go on to point out in *Letters from St. Thomas* (1910, p. 91). Given Haiti’s sociological (including language) differences from the potential “benefactor” of the United States, Firmin’s long career as a diplomat and writer was a response to what he viewed as deleterious isolationism. Consequently, his *Mr. Roosevelt* might be understood as an in-depth sociological exploration of the history of the United States, its major historical figures, and the geopolitical situation that was facing the United States, France, and Haiti.

More than *Equality*, which was participating in the establishment of anthropology as much as defending anti-racism, *Mr. Roosevelt* mobilizes the new field of sociology to be of use to its Haitian readership, using the sociological lens for the benefit of his country. That is, unlike *Equality*, which defines and lays out the field of anthropology in full chapters, Firmin takes some knowledge of sociology and its value for granted: there is not a chapter spent explaining sociology and its value. How Firmin understands sociology can be inferred from the included anecdotes about the Môle St. Nicolas negotiations and the material success of Fritz Hermann’s plantation, which humanize his scholarship and invest readers in the outcomes of his people. He anchors the statistics and calculations he includes—productive in demonstrating Haiti’s potential—with the human and historical context necessary to appreciate Haiti’s relations with its potential allies and business partners. He

explains his approach rather close to the end of the text: “Sociology does not rely solely on demographics; in addition, it requires the enlightenment of history, explaining how the groups of facts that one studies were developed or modified in the course of time” (1905, p. 431–432).<sup>4</sup> “Pseudo-science” purporting to predict Haiti’s lack of success on the global stage, Firmin continues, is not, in fact, following established norms of sociology, because these types of claims do not account for Haiti’s historical reality and the brutalities of the slave trade (p. 431–432). Attending only to the current state of societies is not sociology and only provides a snapshot; we might add today that sociology without history is akin to Ferguson’s photograph, with missing material beyond the frame. Firmin goes on to provide an example of a judicious use of statistics. To demonstrate Haiti’s potential for growth, he notes that Haiti exported 258,964,240 pounds of goods in the 1903–1904 fiscal year, an increase from the colonial figure of 226,046,000 pounds in 1789, but that these figures alone mean little without context (p. 435). In fact, citing himself at a 1892 Parisian Conference, he continues:

One sees, in sum, that the gross weight of exported merchandise, instead of decreasing, rather increased, compared to the year 1789. But while the value of exportation figured at approximately 461,343,678 pounds, in 1789, it did not show more than about 100,000,000 francs, for the year 1891. All the difference comes from the value of the weight of raw and refined sugar (141 million pounds), a high priced commodity, compared to logwood (159 million pounds), whose market value is disproportionately low (p. 436).<sup>5</sup>

This view was in contrast to that of detractors, who might have argued that Haiti had simply stagnated since the white colonists were fought off the land (an implied argument voiced at the Parisian Conference). Instead, the story is more complicated. Not only was Haiti exporting more goods than Saint-Domingue, Haiti’s economy was diversified and not focused solely on enslaved labour producing as much sugar as possible, as Saint-Domingue had been. The logical course of action moving forward was to navigate the global markets, considering the millions of pounds each of logwood, coffee, cacao, and cotton that Haiti was already exporting (p. 436–437).

Reading this defence of sociology and line of reasoning at nearly the end of the book, it becomes clearer why the first 6 chapters were dedicated to the history of the United States and took a generally pro-United States tone: he heroically frames historical figures from American history like Abraham Lincoln to “inspire” his intended Haitian audience by example, demonstrating the prosperity a relatively new nation may hope to obtain (p. x), not only by investing in agricultural exploitation (which he would take up again in *Lettres de Saint-Thomas*), but also by establishing law and order. For instance, he depicts the American Revolution as in opposition to the “obstinate” George III, leading to the formation of the United States, and depicts George Washington as the “illustrious hero” in the U.S. War of Independence (p. 117–118). It is easy for Firmin to read resonances between the liberation of the United States and that of his own country because of his belief in the universal need for self-determination. One section of particular interest is his discussion of the consistent economic downturns under Democratic (pro-slavery) presidencies. He sees these as motivated solely by attempts to clear the land of Indigenous people and to maintain enslavement, as in the case of Buchanan’s presidency, in which the U.S. went into

a record \$291,750,000 debt (p. 142). In turn, he reads the failure of Reconstruction as due to the Confederates still being in open rebellion (p. 147). Although racism has been embedded in positions of political power in the country, Firmin does not wish for his Haitian readership to view the United States as a monolith nor to read it as untouchable: there were often financial crises, especially linked to administrations intent on preserving slavery rather than financial responsibility. Just as Haiti was undergoing financial hardships—perhaps due to an overreliance on the sale of logwood—so too had the United States, and it now served as an example of overcoming adversity over the course of history.

Reading the right to vote granted to African American men as a sign of political gains (especially with the general track record of voting in favour of this change by the U.S. Republican party, which Firmin reads as less likely to order an invasion of Haiti), he also notes that the United States continues to support racist leadership, and suggests that the question is whether the racism embedded in U.S. policy will be sustainable long-term. That the Black population was liberated as late as the 1860s is a “shameful” disgrace (p. 146), but this newly enfranchised group represents a population who would understand Haiti’s desire for self-determination, given the general loyalty of African American men to the Republican party (p. 481). He explains, “Enslavement of African Americans is forever abolished but, fundamentally, with the antagonism of race—in which dominates not only stupid pride but economic egotism which preoccupies them more and more...” (p. 482).<sup>7</sup> Seeing the more racist Democrats—more likely than not Southerners—as *stubbornly* racist and a threat to Haitian sovereignty, the important question for Firmin is if these egotistical Americans can be politically checked by the Postbellum amendments, voting African Americans, the long-term financial consequences of racist policies, and the Republican party.

Additionally, Firmin’s detailed reading of events in U.S. history from colonization to the Civil War and its ongoing fallout is consistent with his belief in universal progress. Specifically, as Georges Eddy Lucien notes, Firmin’s framework consistently supports the idea that the importance of geographical place—in terms of one’s neighbouring countries and one’s natural resources—has always been essential to the North American story (2021, p. 62). Firmin concludes the text by arguing that the United States is not a threat to Haitian sovereignty, given the Americans’ demonstrable concern for their bottom line and the cost of invading an erstwhile ally. In particular, he notes that the United States has enough resources to not need Haiti (p. 468) and statistically is “too rural,” with only a 36% urban population, to make settler colonialism practical (p. 479). Instead, the model of “American capital” (“*capitaux américains*”) must be adopted to assure the “normal” progress of Haiti (p. 483). It is the United States, not France, that is the most disposed to inject capital into Haiti, which would then show its “gratitude” with large payoffs for investors (p. 491).

With respect to France, Lucien reads Firmin’s writing as an attempt to free Haitians from their internalized attachment to French culture and history, due to the entanglement of the two countries created by colonization and because Haiti shares a common tongue with France (2021). Joseph notes that the threat of hegemony posed by the French language had psychological and geopolitical implications in Firmin’s reading, since it was used as the language of enslavement in Saint-Domingue: “These speech acts [in French] are veritable acts of identity that correspond to a dual process of identification: the

establishment of group belonging and the affirmation of a specific identity" (p. 65). Such attachment to French language and culture is linked to discursive power, due to the power of language to influence identity formation. According to Firmin, this "assimilation" might influence thoughts, which may influence actions (p. 485). Reading in this regard similar to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Firmin argues that Haitians' attachment to French language, morals, and history is akin to the rural Frenchman's idealization of the capital, although language continues to unite the two republics (p. 485-486). In *Letters from St. Thomas*, he goes on to nuance the conversation about language, noting the beauty, logic, and clarity of French, understood worldwide as a scholarly language (1910, p. 87). On a personal level, Firmin himself worked on nuances of translation and poetry (1910, p. 100). The issue is that French is isolating: Haiti is surrounded by Spanish-speaking neighbours, with the United States and Canada to the north (1910, p. 87). Consistent with the call for Haitians to have a more globalized perspective that he presents in *Mr. Roosevelt*, Firmin suggests that the lack of immediate understanding from shared drama, poetry, and idioms between Haiti and its neighbours impedes national growth. Haiti is left out of the "unity of language" ("*unité de langage*"; 1910, p. 88). In contrast, consistent with Firmin's belief in universal progress, he sees that the truly powerful and civilised nations ("*puissant et civilisée*") work together towards the progress of all nations (1905, p. 509). Given France's colonial history, French policy reveals itself to be uncivilized when threatening Haitian sovereignty. Thus, by Haitians familiarizing themselves with their geographically-closer neighbours, they may diversify their investments, as it were, in spite of the gap in language. A critically-minded Haitian would interrogate why France would *not* seek to help the progress of another republic: "to aid Haiti to elevate itself more and more" (p. 487).<sup>8</sup> That is, Firmin presents a pro-capitalist reason for seeking both American and French investments.

The financial potential of these investments thus presented, Firmin counters the racist arguments he has encountered against foreign investors: that white Haitians would have exploited the natural resources better (p. 232), or that Black nations did not originate from the heritage of Ancient Egypt (p. 478). Firmin demonstrates that race has *already* been ascribed to his nation, and his line of reasoning is intentionally pointed to counter these arguments already launched. If we think about this in today's terms, white nations were led by white men (1905), normalized and left invisible: these countries did not have to repeatedly prove their worth on the international stage. In contrast, writing directly to his compatriots of "Haiti, the black Republic," he nods to the racialization of Haitians ascribed on the world stage (p. iv).<sup>9</sup> It was not Firmin who introduced the social marker of race to his theorizations in *Mr. Roosevelt*; Haiti viewed as a "Black State," was already an integral spoke along which the geopolitical wheel turned, as he demonstrates with newspaper quotations describing the Haitian "Black State" in multiple languages (1905, p. 475). The importance of understanding the potential for the growth of Haitian civilization, however, is where Firmin makes his specific intervention. What we might call racialized nations in contemporary language were constantly needing to prove themselves on the geopolitical stage to entice investors. Possibly echoing DuBois's double-consciousness, Firmin recognizes Haitians' internalized doubts about the worth of their own nation, and that Haitians might wish to avoid the limelight of the international stage (p. vi), implying self-doubt among Haitian leadership. Furthermore, Firmin criticizes colour prejudice in

Haiti, which only “foment unrest” by pitting races against each other (p. 422-423). While it is unclear what sort of conversations DuBois and Firmin might have had with each other, it is documented that they met at the first Pan-African Conference in London 1900 (Williams, 2014, p. 27), for which Firmin was one of the main organizers and for which DuBois wrote the report. Given his critique of Haitian isolationism and as a Pan-Africanist thinker, Firmin was also in active correspondence with thinkers of the Caribbean African diaspora, what Puerto Rican independence leader Ramón Betances framed as their “revolution of love” (quoted in Celucien & Mocombe, 2021, p. 55). *Non*-racialized nations, such as the United States and France, benefited from the geopolitical equivalent of white privilege, whereas racialized nations, such as Haiti or Cuba, needed to fight (by the pen or sword) to secure and maintain their sovereignty. The bottom line, he explains, is that neither North American nor European republics will take Haiti or its investment potentials seriously unless both they and Haitians themselves confront their own classicism and colourism:

No matter what one does, if one speaks out loud or wishes to veil one’s thoughts in subtleties, the question of race fatally dominates the problem of Haiti’s destiny. For as long as blacks continue to be the object of dismissal by other men, white or yellow, Haiti will never be taken seriously; and the worst thing would be the abominable fact that it is among the Haitians themselves that the foreigner would find the example of these absurd and sacrilegious distinctions... (p. vii-viii).<sup>10</sup>

This is a recognition that U.S. racism might affect moments in which the United States would need to treat Haiti on a level geopolitical playing field (for example, as an investment partner). Although he notes that the possible threat of the United States was renewed with the recent election of “Big Stick” Theodore Roosevelt, as he is writing in French, it is clear that his intended audience are his fellow Haitians. He states, “Writing thus, a book becomes an action: my writing is such one” (p. iv).<sup>11</sup> Thus, his frame is to write as an act of patriotism. He explains that Haitians need the education, context, and historical background to understand the threat of U.S. paternalism, which frames his motivation for writing the book. He continues:

Haitians do not know enough about the Americans. This negligence in studying the history, the life, and the institutions of a large nation, with whom we have so many points in common, materially and morally, constitutes a serious gap and even a danger, which must be filled or addressed as soon as possible. It is for this purpose that I planned, perhaps for too long, to uncover this history, in large sociological sketches, to the eyes and in the spirit of my fellow citizens (p. iv-v).<sup>12</sup>

Addressing the intended Haitian readership directly serves as an alert for any fellow Haitians who might not have the United States, as a powerful nation that might be interested in expropriating the material and geographical resources of their country, at the front of their minds. It is because American systems might seem unfamiliar to Haitians that the United States seems like a greater, unassessed threat.

Given the possible capitalist ties to the United States, Firmin’s goal for the Haitian elite was to promote the citizenry universally to a homogeneous standard of security. He mobilizes the metaphor of the body politic, “our social body so ill” (“*notre corps social si malade*,” p. 423). Just as Charles Mills developed the idea that social contracts have always

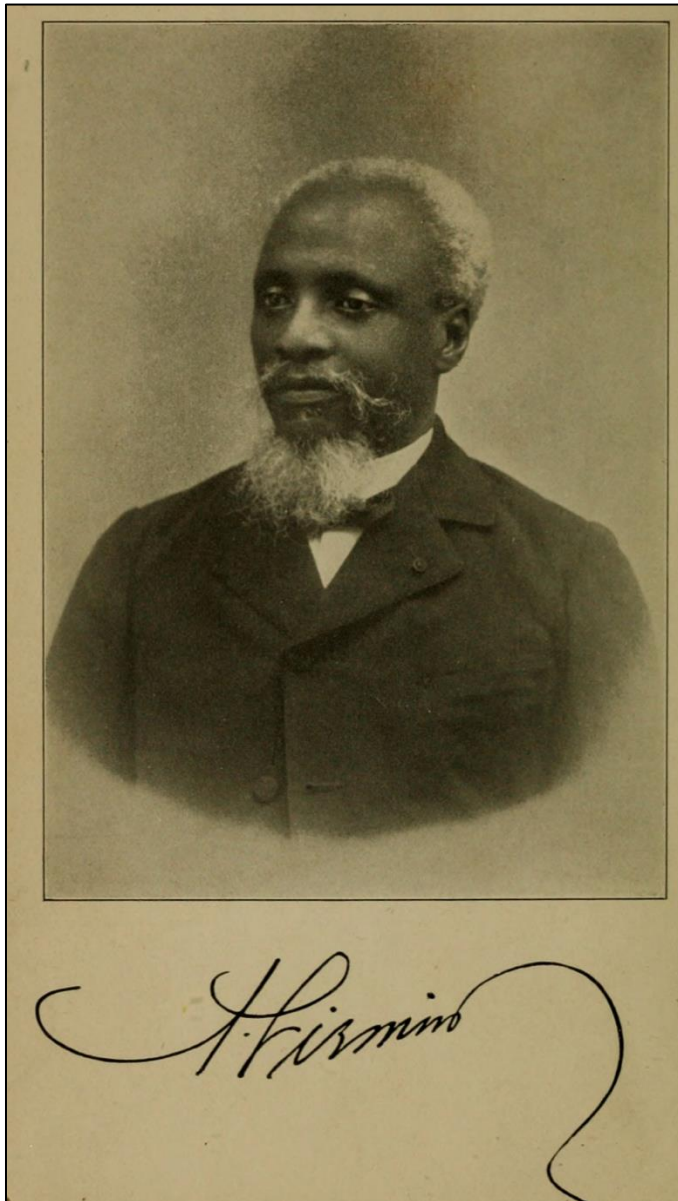
been racialized, and it is just not apparent when the discussion comes from the perspective of white privilege (1997, p. 97), we might read Firmin's notion of race as ascribed to Haiti on the world stage as an indication that the body politic has always been racialized, although Firmin, of course, would not have read Mills's late 20th century philosophy. For Firmin, it is Haiti's need for self-determination and greater agricultural exploitation that makes it crucial for Haiti to be well-received on the world stage, despite the fears among Haitian policymakers that this openness might threaten Haitian sovereignty. He states, "[A]n independent nation is, in the circle of nations, like a man in the social circle where he lives: both entities can only evolve and grow in consideration of those who surround them" (p. viii).<sup>13</sup> Although his purpose is less philosophical and more practical than that of Mills, Firmin's notion of "our national organism" ("*notre organisme national*," p. 427) scales up his insistence on the universal need for self-determination and development described in *Equality* and writ large for entire civilizations in *Mr. Roosevelt*.

Fundamentally, the benefit of his frame is that it provides a clear metaphor calling for Haiti to avoid isolationism for fear of being overly exploited by white Americans. Firmin's body politic frame allows for him to go back and forth between the scale of individual citizens—whom he argues ought to interrogate their own internal biases of class and colourism—to the country as a whole, which is rich in resources but constantly called upon to "prove" itself to the United States or France. Given the theory of absolute equality of races, as developed in *Equality* and summarized in *Mr. Roosevelt's* preface (p. vii-viii), he maintains the Comtean positivism he mobilizes in the former text: if all human races are absolutely equal, all have examples of sophisticated civilizations, and if nations are racialized "organisms," then Haiti has a right to self-determination and freedom from interference. If the American body politic is large and does not have to justify itself or its neighbours, Haiti is forewarned and forearmed and ought to position the United States not as a source of anxiety, but as inspiration for Haiti's "national destiny" (p. x).

## Conclusion

Firmin firmly supported the categorical equality of all races. Given his belief in the absolute equality of races, Haiti's defensive, isolationist position was illogical, and Firmin optimistically believed that the financial payout of *not* invading sovereign countries would win over American capitalists. Firmin's praise of the U.S. Republican party, written for his fellow Haitian scholars, pointed to a liberalism geared towards promoting his country's prosperity. Given the relative lack of emphasis in 20th century scholarship on *Mr. Roosevelt*, we might now keep the momentum going. As indicated in the expansive *Equality*, Firmin had a long term sense of history, and I will conclude with another image which, on its own, does leave out a great deal beyond the frame; however, as we continue to investigate more and more of these snapshots (literal or figurative), we may continue to accumulate our knowledge of Firmin's life.

**Figure 2.** Firmin on the cover of *Mr. Roosevelt*.



The representation selected for the inside cover of *Mr. Roosevelt* is modern and modest (Figure 2). Wearing a black suit and bow tie, without medals, the photograph of Firmin shows dignified signs of ageing (white hair, moustache and beard). Including a photograph in his book, rather than an engraving, speaks to a claim of validity and of Firmin's own approval in this representation of himself, as does the accompanying signature. Such a representation, foregrounding the book of Firmin's political and historical ideas, is distanced from immediate association with French nationality. In contrast, the photograph of Firmin, while still mediated through the publication process, approaches a self-

representation that conveys dignity and self-esteem, a mature thinker in the cosmopolitan environment the Caribbean. As he describes the players on the world stage in *Equality*:

Equally imbued with dignity, each actor takes a turn at the main role. So things will continue to be until the day when actors on the stage can comfortably exchange roles and support and complement one another, effortlessly and without friction, in the larger enterprise which is to carry the intellectual torch that lights the moral and spiritual world as the sun does the physical and material world (quoted by Charles, 2014, p. 81).

### **Declarations**

The author has no competing interests to declare.



## Endnotes

1. *While it may be argued that this point is too minor to make or that Haiti is not accorded a definite article (Haïti, vs. la République d'Haïti), discourse and geopolitics are in a recursive relationship with one another, with potential holds on power at stake. Other republics, such as France, are consistently accorded the definite article in French that marks a sovereign nation. In contrast, according to the Legal and Administrative Information team of the French government, the French language constituted the Republic of France (Anne Duclos-Grisier, 2022). Detailed nuances in spelling and grammar is, in fact, the point of how the French government frames French patriotism: those details have been protected by l'Académie française since the Renaissance, and laws continue to be written to fossilize the French language in all of its details (most recently, as of 2021). The inconsistency between a centuries-long protection of small linguistic details, to protect the "constitution" of the Fatherland, and a neglected definite article of a former colony, on the other, seems too slippery to explain without legalized, institutional racism.*
2. *"Comme je crois l'avoir démontré d'une façon irréfutable, dans mon ouvrage De l'Égalité des Races Humaines, la race noire est aussi perfectible que n'importe quelle autre." I am using Asselin Charles's translations from Equality. All other translations are my own.*
3. *"Un tel exemple est aussi encourageant que démonstratif, fortifiant et salutaire ; il raffermirait ma foi dans la possibilité et même dans la grande facilité de créer en Haïti la civilisation par l'ordre, le travail, l'éducation et la liberté."*
4. *"C'est que la sociologie ne s'appuie pas seulement sur la démographie ; elle requiert en outre les lumières de l'histoire, expliquant comment les groupes de faits qu'on étudie se sont développés ou modifiés dans le cours du temps."*
5. *"On voit, en somme, que le poids brut des marchandises exportées, au lieu de diminuer, a plutôt augmenté, comparativement à l'année 1789. Mais tandis que la valeur de l'exportation figurait avec le chiffre de 461,343,678 livres tournois environ, en 1789, elle ne montre plus que 100,000,000 de francs environ, pour l'année 1891... Tout l'écart provient de la valeur du poids du sucre brut et raffiné (141 millions de livres), marchandise d'un prix élevé, comparée au campêche (159 millions de livres) dont la valeur marchande est démesurément faible."*
6. *"[L]'existence indépendante des Républiques Dominicaine et Haïtienne était moralement beaucoup plus nécessaire à la cause des Noirs américains que leur adjonction à la force du parti républicain."*
7. *"[L]'esclavage des nègres est à jamais aboli, mais au fond, avec l'antagonisme de race, dans lequel domine non seulement un orgueil stupide, mais un égoïsme économique dont les préoccupations percent de plus en plus."*
8. *"À aider Haïti de s'élever de plus en plus..."*

9. *“Haïti, la république noire” (p. iv). Although the definite article is missing in Firmin’s writing, in reference to Haiti (i.e., he does not address his writings to l’Haïti), if the racialization of Haiti is ascribed to the nation (as opposed to being embraced by Haitians), then Firmin is paraphrasing the type of terminology that ascribes race to Haiti.*

10. *“Quoi qu’on fasse, qu’on en parle tout haut ou qu’on veuille la voiler en des subtilités sournoises, la question de race domine fatalement le problème de la destinée d’Haïti. Tout le temps que les noirs continueront à être un objet de mépris par d’autres hommes, ou blancs ou jaunes, Haïti ne sera jamais prise au sérieux ; et la pire des choses serait le fait abominable que ce fût parmi les Haïtiens mêmes que l’étranger trouverait l’exemple de ces distinctions absurdes et sacrilèges...”*

11. *“Écrit ainsi, un livre devient une action : le mien en est une.”*

12. *“Les Haïtiens ne connaissent pas assez les Américains. Cette négligence d’étudier l’histoire, la vie et les institutions d’un grand peuple avec lequel nous avons tant de points de contact, matériels et moraux, constitue une grave lacune et même un danger, qu’il faut combler ou conjuguer au plus tôt. C’est dans ce but que je me suis complu, peut-être trop longuement, à faire dérouler cette histoire, dans ses grandes lignes sociologiques, aux yeux et à l’esprit de mes concitoyens.”*

13. *“[U]n pays indépendant est, dans le cercle des nations, comme un homme dans le cercle de la société où il vit : l’un et l’autre ne peuvent évoluer ou grandir qu’en jouissant de la considération de ceux qui les entourent.”*

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