

Still Singing “Kiss My Ass” to a Wagner Melody: Anténor Firmin, Bronislaw Malinowski, and the Establishment of Twentieth Century Ethnography

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Abstract

The emergence of ethnography as the principal research methodology in social anthropology was hailed as an historic departure from the earlier ethnologic tradition of organizing cultural and physical human differences hierarchically along evolutionary schemas. Yet classic era ethnographers (circa 1900-1950), despite the good intentions of some, on the whole acquired their attitudinal and political bearings through the dominant ideas and mindsets of the historical periods they were situated in. The 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. Anténor Firmin recognized this paradox as early as the mid-1880s. Shortly after arriving in Paris in 1883, Firmin joined the *Société D'Anthropologie de Paris* – regarded as the most important anthropological organization in nineteenth-century France. It was here, amidst this learned society of supposedly liberal thinkers, that Firmin experienced firsthand the incomprehensible and illogical pairing of rational intellectualism and racialist thought which prompted him to write *The Equality of the Human Races*. Whereas 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 Comte de Gobineau – his thesis, if sufficiently advanced, had powerful potential implications for the course of twentieth-century ethnographic investigation and anthropological theorizing. Several of anthropology's most important post-War developments – including the rise of indigenous ethnography and researcher self-consciousness – were anticipated in Firmin's prescient insights on human equality and the fundamentally humanistic character of anthropological inquiry.

This article situates *The Equality of the Human Races* in relation to developments in social anthropology taking place across the English Channel between the 1880s and 1920s. I specifically place Firmin's critical interventions in conversation with the shift from a Tylorian-dominated model of 'armchair' anthropological theorizing, through the "Cambridge School," and ultimately to the Malinowskian approach to ethnographic fieldwork which has become the standard in anthropology for nearly a century. In moving the discussions surrounding the historical importance of Firmin's work from the physical science of race to the social science of culture, I argue 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.

Introduction

On the December 1917 evening when Bronislaw Malinowski sang the words "kiss my ass" to a Wagner melody to chase away the dreaded Trobriand *mulukwausi* (translated as "flying witches" [Malinowski, 1922/1966, p. 181]) he was continuing a tradition of colonial suppression.¹ As an aspiring researcher engaged in what conventional (twentieth-century) anthropology historicized as first-of-its-kind ethnographic fieldwork, neither the content nor the form of Malinowski's gesture should be viewed as incidental, or assumed accidental. Indeed it is unlikely that the intense and ambitious Malinowski, who had already published several tomes on elementary forms of religion, would have left the business of protecting himself from supernatural forces to chance. In his effort to codify a transformative methodology for the nascent science of ethnography, Malinowski privileged the empathetic connection between researcher and subject. Trobriand terrors were thus real, or were to be treated as such. Beyond any colloquial offensiveness, the declaration "kiss my ass" – code for "go to hell" – would have served as an appropriate nocturnal precaution that positioned the European scientist over his paranormal would-be tormenters. In exclaiming that the *mulukwausi* should kiss *his* ass, Malinowski effectively pronounced himself their master – master of witches, even, perhaps, their devil.² The choice of a Richard Wagner melody was no less fitting. Certainly the work of the German composer was at the time tremendously influential; and Malinowski had presumably been exposed to plenty of Wagner during his two years studying at the University of Leipzig. Wagner was both born in Leipzig and had studied there during the 1830s. Malinowski recalls his own brief time in Europe's "unique centre of musical culture" (Young, 2004, p. 129) as featuring an intense surrender to "musical hedonism" (p. 135).³ Extremely rational and explosively emotional, Malinowski would have been drawn to Wagner's operatic innovations in musical drama, which paralleled the ethnographer's endeavor to present the dramas of Trobriand life.

Wagner's devotion to the racist ideas of Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau led him to found the Gobineau Society in 1881. Malinowski, in turn, would have been familiar enough with Gobineau to understand that, despite its title, Gobineau's monumental *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853-55) was as concerned with presenting the supposedly catastrophic effects of miscegenation as it was with articulating a theory of fundamental racial inequality. True to the classic ethnographer's paradox, Malinowski saw Trobrianders as his colonially subordinate equals. He observed them man to man *and man to woman*, and thus knew to be wary of flying witches in the night.

Polish born and British educated, Malinowski was very much a product of both his semi-aristocratic upbringing (Wayne, 1985) and new academic home. Having travelled to London in pursuit of romance in the Spring of 1910, he quickly became acquainted with a community of social anthropologists associated with Cambridge University – i.e. the Cambridge School – who were actively involved in formulating the ethnographic methodology that Malinowski would go on to found⁴ and popularize. This was the heyday of the British Empire, on which the sun never set. Malinowski's ambition to articulate a revolutionary approach to social research – premised on longterm residence, language acquisition, everyday familiarity, and, above all else, “grasp[ing] the native's point of view” (1922/1955, p. 25) – should have forced him to confront the ethnocentric and racist perspectives inherent to his position as a cosmopolitan, British-trained, white, male, social scientist living among the people in a remote South Pacific island village. Yet looking back from our twenty-first-century vantage point, it is clear that Malinowski was only fractionally successful in redefining the colonially infused relationship between anthropologists and the communities they study.

This essay considers the development and legacy of the ethnographic methodology credited to Malinowski within the context of an under-recognized tradition of anthropological thinking that can be traced back to the late-nineteenth century Haitian scholar Anténor Firmin. Firmin's *De l'Égalité des Races Humaines (Anthropologie Positive)*, published in 1885 – the year after he became a member of the prestigious *Société D'Anthropologie de Paris* – is a remarkable work of nineteenth century critical scholarship that was completely neglected by the community to which it was directed. In the late 1990s, Firmin's foundational text was recovered, reintroduced, and for the first time translated to English in 2000 (hereafter referred to as *The Equality of Human Races*). The following essay joins a chorus of recent scholars in justifying the place of Anténor Firmin as a pioneer of both anthropology and post-colonial studies. Whereas observational studies of human behavior predate even philosophy, the scientific study of humanity through discreet disciplinary formations is a post-industrial-revolution phenomenon (Bender, 1965). Through (a) situating Firmin within the late-nineteenth-century French anthropological environment that inspired his book, (b) sketching the ethnographic research traditions his ideas, if rightfully advanced, would have informed, and (c) looking back to *The Equality of Human Races* from the perspective of late twentieth and early twenty-first century developments in anthropology, I punctuate his prescient insights and demonstrate how the recovery and recognition of his foundational text can move ethnography forward along the unending path of self-critique and correction.

Personal History: The Politics of Anthropology

Anténor Firmin was born in 1850 in Cap-Haitien in northern Haiti. A member of the third post-independence generation, Firmin was formally educated in the best Haitian schools, where he received a solid foundation in the classics and humanities, and was exposed to the anthropological writings of Europe (Fluehr-Lobban, 2000b, p. 450). Despite his working-class background and dark complexion – which was and continues to be consequential in Haitian society – he excelled in both school and civic activities, and by the age of thirty was regarded as an exceptionally promising young statesman (Trouillot, 1994).⁵ In 1883 Firmin, who had recently married the daughter of former Haitian president Sylvain Salnave (Trouillot, 1994), exiled to France amidst political turmoil surrounding the presidency of Lysius Salomon (Magloire-Danton, 2005). Shortly after arriving in the French capital, Firmin was invited to join the *Société D'Anthropologie de Paris*. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban lists anatomist Ernest Aubertin, archaeologist Gabriel de Mortillet, and fellow Haitian scholar Louis-Joseph Janvier as Firmin's three (required) membership sponsors, going on to remark that he was admitted “with majority vote by secret ballot” on July 17, 1884 (2000a, p. xvi).

Learned Societies had flourished in nineteenth century France as an intellectual alternative to universities and academies of science and letters. As principally urban organizations, established as forums for discussing “bourgeois enthusiasms” (Williams, 1985, p. 333) and, what were considered at the time, “unorthodox views” (Schiller, 1979, p. 131), such societies were instrumental to the development of several academic fields. The *Société D'Anthropologie de Paris* (hereafter referred to as simply the *Société*) was not the first French Learned Society devoted to anthropology, but after being founded in 1859, and under the leadership of the anatomist/surgeon Paul Broca, it quickly developed into “the most important anthropological society anywhere in the world” (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 365). The maverick position of the field at the time of the *Société's* founding is confirmed by reports that, during its initial years, the French government required that a plainclothed police officer was present at all meetings to prevent the members from discussing issues related to French society, the church, or the government (Schiller, 1979, p. 135; Hammond, 1980, p. 118). The *Société's* interest in matters of human physical and cultural evolution made it a potential threat to the political and religious orthodoxies of the day.

By the time of Anténor Firmin's election to the society, both the plainclothed officer and Broca were gone – the latter having expired only a few years earlier in 1880. Elizabeth A. Williams suggests that one of Broca's “greatest contributions” to the *Société* “was to preserve an amicable spirit and forestall conflicts” (1985, p. 336). In the years immediately following his death, a power struggle ensued between prominent factions of the organization, most notably Broca's protégé and presumed successor Paul Topinard and Firmin's eventual sponsor Mortillet. The conflict appears to have included philosophical differences regarding the nature of research, opposing views on the future of anthropology, and, by the eve of Firmin's majority vote election, personal squabbles.

Members of Topinard's 'le groupe Broca' upheld principles of positivism, which included measurements, statistics, and comparative anatomy; 'le groupe Mortillet,' was comprised of materialists emphasizing classification and the analysis of rank order facts (Harvey, 1983, p. 292). Broca, who founded the *École d'Anthropologie* in 1876, has been recognized as pioneering the "four-field approach" that became a hallmark of American anthropology (see Brace, 2005). Yet as a researcher, the famed "explorer of the brain" (Schiller, 1979) was principally committed to the study of physical anthropology, specifically race, and sought to establish a discipline that steered clear of the political debates of the day – most notably "the question of slavery" (Tax, 1964, p. 16) – and very much resembled the natural or medical sciences (Bender, 1965; Hammond, 1980). Mortillet, by contrast, was a free-wielding thinker whose radical political commitments included defending "the 'right to theft' for those denied the right to work" on the grounds that human survival takes priority over property rights (Hammond 1980, p. 119). He sought to advance anthropology beyond biology and into an engaged and applied science of past, present, and future society (Williams 1985).⁶

Thus Firmin did not simply join a community of progressive intellectuals with specialized pursuits. He more likely found himself dropped into a political cauldron of factionalism and established frictions. To add insult to awkwardness, he entered an organization that primarily existed to discuss and debate the signal factor in his presence there: race.⁷ "It must have been quite dramatic, or a 'cruel paradox,'" writes Fluehr-Lobban (2000a, p. xvi-xvii) to participate in "conferences and lectures in which the inferiority of the black race was viewed as incontestable fact." That Mortillet, who appears to be the chief instigator of the *Société's* post-Broca upheaval,⁸ and Janvier, who at the time of nominating Firmin would have been a member for less than two years, led the effort to elect him suggests that the inclusion of Haitian members could have been strategic⁹ – an attempt to disrupt the organization's business-as-usual and/or to affirm the radical politics 'le groupe Mortillet' espoused. Social evolutionist Charles Letourneau is reported to have presided over the meeting in which Firmin was elected (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 369). Like Mortillet, Letourneau aspired to create a radical social science committed to addressing societal problems through calls to justice – and in discussions of this period in the *Société's* history, the two men are often allied (see Bender, 1965; Hammond, 1980; Harvey, 1997).

Firmin's entry into the *Société* should be considered in the light of the collusive maneuverings and splintered organizational structure that he, in all probability, became enmeshed within. Such revision beckons a reassessment of his subsequent experiences within the *Société*. According to Fluehr-Lobban (2007), Firmin is on record as only having risen to speak twice. On one of these occasions, when he challenged a comment made regarding white racial superiority, a member responded by asking Firmin if he had any white ancestors – presumably as an explanation for his intellectual aptitude. There is debate as to whether the question came from Clémence Royer (Fluehr-Lobban, 2007) – at the time, the only woman member of the organization (Harvey, 1987) – or from *Société* President Arthur Bordier (Bernasconi, 2008).¹⁰

Bordier was a medical doctor who has studied under Broca (Callen, 1995, p. 8). Royer, although not a hard scientist, appears to have been allied with several members of the organization's more conservative faction (Harvey, 1987) and was clearly someone Firmin had differences with (see below).

Robert Bernasconi astutely characterizes the inquisition into Firmin's possible white ancestry as a moment when the Haitian was instantly transformed from a participant in the *Société's* discussion to an object of its members anthropological gaze (2008, p. 383). This experience of being subject to the *Société* members' scrutinization, as if a problem to be examined, has a notable parallel in W. E. B. DuBois's famous 'greeting card incident' described in the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the other . . . shut out from their world by a vast veil" (1903/1996, p. 4). DuBois goes on to remark about the peculiarity of being compelled to see one's self through the eyes of others, which he famously labels "double-consciousness" (p. 5).

Firmin must have realized the potential for such scrutiny, and adopted a double-conscious outlook early on. Bernasconi recounts a particular exchange that took place at the meeting in which Firmin was elected. During a discussion on creolization and the impacts of the American environment on racial characteristics, Janvier "responded at some length, arguing that to understand the creolization of the black race one would do well to look to Haiti" (2008, p. 370). Bernasconi interprets Janvier's lengthy remarks – as recorded in the *Bulletins de la Société d'Anthropologie* – as "an attempt to make the point that one hardly needed to rely on [ethnological] reports to find out about creolization in the Caribbean with Janvier and now Firmin present at the meetings" (p. 370).¹¹ Yet whereas Janvier likely intended that as Haitian scholars, who knew the peoples and cultures of the Caribbean firsthand, he and Firmin should be *looked to* for their expertise, members of the *Société's* less-sympathetic faction may have received his remarks as an invitation to be *looked at* as specimens. During the final decades of nineteenth century, anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic was attempting to move away from the problematic reporting of travelers and missionaries and toward more systematic scientific methods of data collection (Urry, 1972). As an authority on the Caribbean – a social scientist with a lifetime of participant observations of Caribbean society – Janvier, in his offer, anticipated developments that would eventually push anthropologists out of their armchairs and into the field. However, this was also a period when non-white peoples were frequently brought to Europe and the United States to be exhibited in the interests of science and entertainment. Notably, the *Société* maintained both a laboratory and a museum (Williams, 1985). Under normal circumstances, the *Société's* Haitian delegation could be viewed as either esteemed experts or living specimens, even both simultaneously. Amidst the organization's hostilities, which the Haitians' presence would have possibly exacerbated, and racist beliefs/anxieties of time, for members of 'le groupe Broca' the pendulum likely swung towards the latter.

The nineteenth-century scientific discourse on race, for which the emerging field of anthropology was the principal breeding ground (Brace, 2005), was founded on hierarchically arranged notions of difference which rationalized white superiority and ranked African descended peoples as closest to the anthropoid ape. In terms of both their physical and social development, Black people were cast as losers of a human evolutionary race. As the first free Black republic in the Western hemisphere, Haiti, through pseudo-ethnographic narratives of sensationalized and misrepresented ‘voodoo tales,’ was a particular target of European and North American scorn (Magloire-Danton, 2005). This combination of political autonomy and biosocial debasement was paradoxically experienced by Haitian intellectuals. Gérarde Magloire-Danton (2005) elaborates:

While they rejected colonial domination of the West, which rested on notions of racial inferiority, they had little choice but to develop along Western norms so as to be accepted in the concert of free nations (p. 154).

Firmin’s virtual silence can be viewed as an effort to avoid becoming the object of scientific scrutiny by his fellow *Société* members. Yet as an intellectual of African descent and a Haitian, “shocked” by the dogmatic assertions of racial inequality he encountered among the *Société* (Firmin, 1885/2000, p. liv), Firmin was motivated to rehabilitate the standing of his homeland and his race. The curiously apologetic Preface to his book, attests to an awareness of this delicate subject/object duality, which, if not carefully addressed, could easily overwhelm his human standing in the eyes of the *Société’s* members:

At the opening of our meeting at the end of last year, I could have requested a debate . . . in order to elucidate the scientific reason why most of my fellow scientists divide the human species into superior and inferior races. But I risked being perceived as an intruder and, being ill-disposed against me, my colleagues might have rejected my request without further thought. Common sense told me that I was right to hesitate so. It was then that I conceived the idea of writing this book (1885/2000, p. liv).

In deciding to state his case through the publication of a 650-page volume, Firmin was essentially making a bid to be judged on the content of his ideas rather than the color of his skin. It is unclear if Firmin was present at the October 1, 1885 meeting in which a signed copy of the book was presented to the *Société*. In any event, he did not take the opportunity to introduce it (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 366), no review of it appears, and beyond the customary record of it have being received, it is not mentioned in the *Société’s* periodical, *Memoires d’anthropologie* (Fluehr-Lobban, 2007, p. 168). Thus Firmin’s plea to be considered a person, someone with ideas worthy of *Société* members’ meditation, was rejected without further thought.¹²

There are a number of ancillary explanations for why *The Equality of Human Races* was so neglected. The first has to do with the nexus of philosophical and political divisions within the *Société* and with which Firmin was aligned. Firmin considered himself a follower of Comtean positivism, going so far as to subtitle his book *Anthropologie Positive* (or *Positivist Anthropology*). To the extent that his membership should be viewed as resulting from disruptive maneuverings on the part of members identifying with ontological materialism (i.e. ‘la groupe Mortillet’), his decision to reference positivism in his title was a risk that possibly wound up alienating the progressive faction of members who most supported his presence. A second potential explanation is offered by Bernasconi who, meditating on the relatively short time between Firmin’s July 1884 entry into the *Société* and his book’s pre-October 1885 appearance in print (the Preface is dated May 11, 1885), suggests that it must have been completed in a “frenzy of activity” (2008, p. 382).¹³ Bernasconi goes on to cite several mistakes or unusual omissions which arguably suggest that the book could have been received as second-rate scholarship. Conceding these shortcomings, *The Equality of Human Races* contains enough thorough research and critical dismantling of other scholars’ lapses in logic, to lead me to believe that any such (second-rate) reception of the book would have been a byproduct of the racist projections placed on its author.

Bernasconi also discusses a tone of hostility coming from Firmin that might have piqued his fellow *Société* members’ ire (2008, p. 369), if they had even bothered to read his manuscript. While I find Firmin’s tone sufficiently justified as a response to the blatant racism – directed at African descended peoples and, by default, Firmin himself – that he encountered,¹⁴ French intellectuals may have been affronted by a Haitian’s dismissal of their work as: “totally ignorant,” as Firmin said of the dearly departed Broca (1885/2000, p. 42); or not science but, rather, “a purely rhetorical game” as he said of the esteemed Jean-Louis Armond de Quatrefages (p. 154-155). Also consider the ominous tone with which Firmin closes a remarkably (and unjustifiably) misogynic challenge to Royer:

Despite the high esteem in which I hold [Royer], I cannot help but point out that she remains a woman. Nonetheless, she is quite a privileged creature who can, with impunity, ignore the compelling circumstances which force Europeans to accept the political and civic equality between themselves and Mongolians of Negroes. She may indeed forget, if she wishes to, that when political and civic equality, equality before the law, is not spontaneously granted, there are Negroes who will simply use force to take it (p. 271).

Is Firmin’s antagonistic tone an appropriation of the critical voice of “passionate” and “vehement” debating he had witnessed during his first *Société* meeting (Firmin, 1885/2000, p. 84)? And if so, was this the usual mode of French intellectual sparring or a consequence of the hostilities which pervaded the organization at the time he entered it?

Despite the obvious allusion to de Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, Firmin's book was clearly targeted at members of the *Société* (Magloire-Danton, 2005, p. 153); and as a foundational work of post-colonial criticism, Firmin spent more time discussing those he disagreed with than praising those he admired. In fact, supporters like Aubertin, Mortillet, and Letourneau are hardly mentioned. Whereas any of the above reasons could have contributed to the shallow reception of Firmin's text, it is unlikely that it would have gone so ignored were it not for the mantle of race.

Even if the *Société* had recognized *The Equality of Human Races*, by the mid-1880s the organization's internal fractures had left it in shambles. Williams writes that "[b]y 1890 the laboratory and museum had fallen into disarray; the library was closed to members; accounting books had been misplaced or hidden; and pieces had disappeared from collections (1985, p. 337).¹⁵ That Firmin's name remained on the *Société's* roster until years after his death in 1911 (Fluehr-Lobban, 2007) suggests either that he was so insignificant to the organization that they did not bother to keep a record of his whereabouts after he left France to return to Haiti or that the administration of such things had fallen into such disarray that there was no one assigned to the job.

Visioning Anthropology

Sol Tax (1964) credits a tradition of scholarship initiated by mid-nineteenth-century French ethnologists as critical to the development of modern anthropology. Accordingly, a favorable reception of *The Equality of Human Races*, as a formidable challenge to notions of racial inequality and black inferiority, would have likely impacted the course of twentieth-century ethnography – especially if the organizational and theoretical upheavals that weakened French anthropology at the dawning of the new century had not occurred. Between 1890 and 1920 the nation that had at one time been home to the “largest institution in the world for the instruction in human physical and cultural evolution”¹⁶ (Hammond 118), came to be outpaced by the institutional development of anthropology in universities across the English Channel as well as across the Atlantic. Although Anglophone scholars in England and the United States were capable of reading and/or translating French works, the decline of French anthropology – including its failure to recognize the contributions of a rising generation of Haitian intellectuals for who Paris (as Haiti's one-time colonial metropole) had become the European destination of choice – prolonged the development of a critical ethnographic consciousness within the discipline. As products of the first free Black republic in the Americas, Haitian scholars, like Firmin, could offer an important post-colonial perspective that would push the developing practice of ethnography towards greater accountability and self-critique.

Both the *Société d'Anthropologie* and Broca's later creation, *École d' Anthropologie*, were models for the institutionalization of anthropology abroad.¹⁷ The former inspired similar Learned Societies in both England and Germany, and the latter is recognized as the first effort to house archaeologists (for example, Mortillet), biologists (Broca and Topinard), linguists (Abel Hovelacque) and ethnologists (Letourneau) in a single academic department (Bender, 1965, p. 141) – a format that was later standardized through Franz Boas's school of American anthropology. One of the earliest Learned Societies established in Germany was the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* (the Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory in Berlin). Its founder, Rudolf Virchow, was a mentor to Boas and an admirer of Broca. The two physicians – Virchow and Broca – are regarded as having “remarkable parallels” in their careers (Schiller, 1979, p. 241).

Like Broca (Tax, 1964), Firmin developed a vision of anthropology as a dynamic whole for which ethnography played a central role. In the opening pages of *The Equality of Human Races* he remarks that the job of the anthropologist begins “when the ethnographer and the ethnologist have completed their work. The anthropologist compares Man [sic.] to the other animals in order to separate the subject of his study from all the surrounding subjects” (1885/2000, p. 12). In this brief excerpt from Firmin's comprehensive definition of the discipline, he anticipated two central pillars of British social anthropology that would not be realized for another quarter century. The first was a recognition of humans as part of the natural world – to be compared with other animals. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, in an effort to develop a more scientific mode of “descriptive ethnology” that did not rely on the slanted reportings of travelers, missionaries, and colonial officials, British researchers trained in natural science began making expeditions to observe and record human cultural differences (Urry, 1972, p. 46).¹⁸ The most celebrated of these was the 1898 expedition to the Torres Straits, off the coast of Australia, organized by zoologist Alfred Cort Hadden, and including psychologist William H. R. Rivers, and medical pathologist Charles Gabriel Seligman. These three men would go on to be pivotal in the development of the Cambridge School, and specifically, in mentoring Malinowski (Young, 2004). Firmin's second insight is the distinction between ethnography, which he defines as “the descriptive study of the different peoples around the world” (1885/2000, p. 11), and ethnology, which involves:

divid[ing] people into distinct races, stud[ying] their different organic constitutions, consider[ing] their typical variations . . . and finally tr[ying] to discover whether these are factors that might explain aptitudes which seem particular to each group (p. 12).

Writing in 1952, the venerable British anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown cited a 1909 meeting of the principals of Cambridge, Oxford, and the London School of Economics where it was decreed that “ethnography” would be the term used for “descriptive accounts of non-literate peoples,” as opposed to “ethnology” and “social anthropology” which were more historical, comparative, and analytical (p. 276). The fact that Firmin had developed both a holistic view of anthropology (Fluehr-Lobban, 2000a, p. xxi) and a precise and enduring understanding of the place of ethnography within it marks *The Equality of Human Races* as a significant text in the history of the discipline.

Malinowski came of anthropological age through the British tradition that Radcliffe-Brown refers to,¹⁹ yet clearly he had greater ambitions to affect a revolution in social anthropology through his Trobriand fieldwork (see Malinowski, 1967/1989, p. 289). Although the degree to which Malinowski revolutionized anything has been sufficiently questioned (Kuper, 1996; Urry, 1972) – the current view is that he was (among) the first to realize a methodology that had already been sketched by those that came before him – one of his greatest contributions to the ethnographic enterprise was his attention to “images and constructs in the mind that permitted the apprehension of reality to take place” (Thornton, 1985, p. 9). This effort to understand native points of view – combining the rigorous empiricism of a scientist with the imagination and vision of an artist²⁰ – for Malinowski, was enacted through participation in and the performance of Trobriand daily life.

Much has been made of the readings which inspired Malinowski’s unique approach to ethnographic authorship – his early exposure to James Frazier’s *The Golden Bough* has been thoroughly documented (for example see Kuper, 1996; Young, 2004), as have his reading of the methodological dictates of Rivers and the masterful prose of Joseph Conrad²¹ while in the field (Thornton, 1985). Had his fieldwork reading list featured the critical standpoint of pan-Africanist subalternity offered by Firmin, Malinowski’s revolution would have likely tapped into a dual consciousness which not only foregrounded the relationship of the observer to their subjects but also – in completing a hermeneutic circle – recognized subjects’ understandings of the research enterprise.²²

Ethnographic Self-Consciousness Emergence

When the University of Wisconsin Press inaugurated its History of Anthropology series in 1983, the first volume – focusing on ethnographic fieldwork and edited by George W. Stocking, Jr. – was aptly titled *Observers Observed* (1983). In explaining the title, Stocking specifically references the appearance of Malinowski’s *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967) as the uncovering of “what the culture-hero of the fieldwork myth [i.e. Malinowski] had ‘actually’ been feeling during his long and presumably empathetic immersion into the Trobriand *gemeinschaft*” (Stocking, 1983, p. 8).

Through the publication of Malinowski's private records – what Raymond Firth described as “a frank expression of his personal state of mind” (1981, p. 113) – the ‘father of fieldwork’ suddenly stood naked before his children, who were compelled to look. Attempting to come to terms with the cruder vulgarities of Malinowski's field diaries,²³ for anthropologists meant critically observing and even scrutinizing their colonial past.

In discussing the long history of Black people collecting “details, facts, observations, and psychoanalytic readings of the white Other,” bell hooks notes that “[a]s fantastic as it may seem, racist white people find it easy to imagine that black people cannot see them if within their desire they do not want to be seen by the dark Other” (1992, p. 165, 168). *The Equality of the Human Races*, as a direct effort to confront members of the *Société D'Anthropologie de Paris*, “on their own terms by studying their works” (Bernasconi 2008, 382), is an example of both the observers observed and the Black ethnographic gaze to which hooks alludes. The absence of any response or commentary on the part of the *Société's* members deprives us of what would unquestionably have been an important look into the self-consciousness of nineteenth century racial science.

By the 1920s, when French anthropology began to revive around the efforts of Marcel Mauss and his *Institut d'Ethnologie*, the Haitian postcolonial *bravade* had been sufficiently quelled under the cloak of American occupation, and subsequent economic dependence (Castor, 1974). A full recognition of anthropology as a Western imperialist mode of understanding and intelligence gathering would not occur until the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s. In the years following the publication of Malinowski's *Diary*, a number of “native anthropologists” – many of them African descended – began employed “theories based on non-Western precepts and assumptions” to highlight the damaging and exploitative effects of the ethnography's imperial allegiances (Jones, 1970, p. 31; see also Asad, 1973; Owusu, 1978; Magubane & Farris. 1985). As a Haitian scholar-ethnographer of white intellectual culture, Firmin adopted Western epistemological constructs but remained suspicious of the intellectual ends to which he observed their being deployed.

It is clear that European policies of colonization inspire certain ideas, which necessarily crystallize around race and come to permeate the thinking of individuals. These ideas constantly reinforce the prejudices stemming from the absurd ranking of the races, prejudices which would normally have weakened and disappeared had they not been supported by actual interests (Firmin, 2000/1885, p. 385).

Such prejudices would continue to warp and arrest anthropology's intellectual development through most of the twentieth century (Hsu, 1973).

The emergence of ethnographic self-consciousness, nurtured through a degree of post-colonial accountability, would not enter mainstream anthropology until the post-World War II era. Describing the disciplinary shifts that surrounded this, Dennison Nash and Ronald Wintrob observe that “[h]aving to contend with native viewpoints . . . the scientist would begin to raise questions about himself, his social location, and his point of view” (1972, p. 531). A respectful reception of Firmin’s nineteenth-century post-colonial perspective – which brought a pan-African agenda to his critical thinking (Magloire-Danton, 2005) – within the *Société* should have sparked the kind of “informed critical intellectual dialogue” between native- and non-native scholars that Maxwell Owusu (1978, p. 328) deems essential the development of reliable anthropological research.

Over the first half of the twentieth century, ethnography served as anthropology’s chief contribution to the colonial enterprise (Magubane & Faris, 1985, p. 99). In the decades since, as more members of former colonial peripheries have made their way to one-time metropolises, they have been subject to social, political, and economic marginalization (see Charles Taylor 1994, p. 63) reminiscent of the intellectual marginalization encountered by Firmin within the *Société*. In ignoring Firmin’s work, members of the *Société* perfunctorily dismissed the possibility of his ideas having any value to the rising science of anthropological inquiry. Yet *The Equality of the Human Races* re-examined in this historical moment of disciplinary re-orientation, offers important insights as part of an ongoing process to historicize the field. In re-presenting the history of ethnography as an exercise in scientific scrutiny and colonial surveillance – intended to confirm racist assumptions and pacify humanitarian consciences (Magubane & Faris, 1985, 91) – the value of Firmin’s text lies in what it might have contributed politically and critically to the formalization of this research methodology. Historicizing these issues through a re-investment in foundational texts, particularly those that have been historically neglected and/or overlooked, offers a crucial means of coming to terms with anthropology’s checkered past and moving it productively forward. In the ongoing effort to develop a truly liberatory social science (Harrison 1991/1997) – to use the master’s tools against him – ethnography must continue to confront its history, revising it through an awareness of the contributions of significant works like *The Equality of Human Races*.

Conclusion

Reviews of Malinowski’s *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* have commented on his racism (see n. 23) and expressions of sexual frustration. Indeed, one reviewer characterized all fieldwork, not only his, as “self imposed celibacy” (Forge, 1967, p. 223). This certainly would not have been easy for Malinowski. Both his personal and academic biographies – the latter includes his aptly titled *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) – spotlight his pre-occupation with sex (see Young, 2004, p. 203). In one of his field correspondences with Annie Brunton, the South African pianist who had captured his heart and exposed him to the music delights of Leipzig (see n. 3),

Malinowski teasingly included a picture of young South Pacific “sensual temptations” – presumably bare-breasted and scantily skirted (Young, 2004, p. 404-405). Her response – which included the implication that he should pray to St. Joseph and hope they are free from disease (p. 405) – gives us some glimpse as to why singing “kiss my ass” to a Wagner melody may have been an ethnographically appropriate means of warding off the proximate danger of Trobriand *mulukwausi* in the evenings when his mind turned to longings for far off love.

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Notes

¹ The incident is mentioned in the December 19th (1917) entry in Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967/1989, p. 157).

² Thanks to Karl Precoda for pointing this out to me.

³ The Leipzig years also included the start of two romances – one intellectual the other personal – which together would lead Malinowski to London and the study of anthropology. Furthermore, as Malinowski's published field diaries attest, longing for past romance is one of the lonely anthropologist's (Forge, 1967) favorite pastimes.

⁴ Or, more accurately, get credited with founding.

⁵ He held a law degree but much of his broad intellect is credited to self-education (Magloire-Danton, 2005).

⁶ Specifically referencing both Broca and the *Société*, Sol Tax (1964) describes the period of 1840 to 1870 as a “thirty years’ war . . . between humanitarians whose science was related to their advocacy of a cause on one side and, on the other, pure scientists who separated scientific truth from all other human concerns” (p. 15). Although Firmin's entry into the *Société* occurred more than a decade later, it seems clear that Broca's recent death had unsettled the balance of power and re-agitated old disputes.

⁷ Because discussions of gender were strictly forbidden within the *Société*, Clémence Royer, at the time the only woman member, did not experience this peculiar discomfort (Harvey, 1987, p. 159).

⁸ Accounts of both Mortillet's aggressive temperament and the organizational conflict which followed Broca's death strongly suggest that the father of “combat anthropology” was the aggressor in most, if not all, that ensued (Hammond, 1983, 1985). Broca, notably, had the clairvoyant insight to once comment that Mortillet “will wreck everything” (Schiller, 1979, p. 293).

⁹ Bernasconi (2008) lists a third Haitian, J. B. Dehoux, who is reported to have been elected into the *Société D'Anthropologie de Paris* in June 1883 – seven months after Janvier and thirteen before Firmin. Presumably Dehoux's place in the organization was so marginal that several publications on Firmin have failed to even mention him.

¹⁰ There is similar confusion about the year this exchange happened. Bernasconi (2008) mentions it as having taken place in 1892 – when Bordier would have been President – yet Fluehr-Lobban (2000a) lists 1888 as the year Firmin left Paris to return to Haiti.

¹¹ Janvier may have simply been claiming that Haiti would make a fine “sociological field of experimentation” as Firmin quotes him as having once said in *The Equality of the Human Races* (p. 312).

¹² Writing in the early 1970s, Francis L. K. Hsu (1973) identifies a then-current disciplinary tradition of white anthropologists either ignoring or marginalizing the work of non-White colleagues.

¹³ Firmin himself references the haste of his undertaking in the book’s Preface (1885/2000, p. liv).

¹⁴ For example, Brenasconi discusses the “outright hostility” of describing Broca as “totally ignorant about what he was talking about” (2008, p. 369), but fails to contextualize Firmin’s comments as a response to Broca’s explanation that the “physiognomy of Negroes . . . is characterized by a narrow and sloping forehead; a flattened nose with flared nostrils; bulging eyes with a brown iris and a yellow sclera; extremely thick lips hanging forward and outward; and, finally, prominent snout-like jaws supporting long slanting teeth” (Firmin, 1885/2000, p. 41-42).

¹⁵ Unlike some members of the *Société* – for example, Broca, Topinard, Mortillet, Letourneau, and Bordier, who were all associated with the *École d’Anthropologie* in Paris (Hammond 1980) – Firmin did not have any affiliations with other anthropological institutions.

¹⁶ Namely, the *École d’Anthropologie*, founded by Broca in 1876 (Brace, 2005) and home to several of the *Société’s* members.

¹⁷ In his excellent essay on the development of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* – the handbook of anthropological questionnaires issued by the British Association for the Advancement of Science to assist travelers in collecting more “factual” (i.e. unbiased) field material – James Urry notes that the earliest examples of such questionnaires on record were French (1972, p. 45). He also cites an 1864 handbook authored by Broca (p. 56).

¹⁸ Similar developments were taking place through the Bureau of American Ethnology in the United States (Judd, 1967).

¹⁹ Urry (1972) suggest that although Radcliffe-Brown had been trained by Haddon and Rivers, because he had embarked on fieldwork in the Andaman Islands several years before Malinowski – at a time when the Cambridge School principles of “intensive study” had not yet been formalized (Kuper, 1996) – he was not as well positioned to transform the field.

²⁰ For discussions of the centrality of this scientist-artist duality in Malinowski temperament, see Redfield (1948), Thornton (1985), and Young (2004).

²¹ John Louis DiGaetani (1978) has commented on the presence of *Wagnerian patterns* in Conrad’s work. Tracing the links between Malinowski, Conrad, and Wagner – particularly surrounding magic gardens, the power of the sea, the curse of loneliness (p. 56) and tropical seductresses intent on destroying innocent goodness (p. 30) – would be a productive line of research for future scholars to undertake.

²² The closest Malinowski may have come to realizing this in his writing was in 1937 when authored the Introduction to Julius E. Lips’ *The Savage Hits Back* (translated into English in 1966).

²³ Including being driven to “a state of white rage and hatred for bronze-colored skin” (p. 261); ogling at the figure of “a finely built girl” walking ahead of him, who he later refers to as a “little animal” saying “[a]t moments like this I was sorry I was not a savage and could not possess this pretty girl” (p. 255); and being “highly irritated” that a “*bloody nigger*” dared to make a “disapproving remark” in response to one of his “coarse jokes” (p. 272) – Malinowski’s student, Edmund Leach, has explained the appearance of the word “nigger” in the diaries as resulting from an absurd and sensationalized translation (1967/2000, p. 63).