

Race-Thinking Turned Against Itself: Three Early Texts of the African Diaspora

The twentieth century saw the rise of global black radicalism. Transnational liberation struggles linked the African diaspora from Ghana to Massachusetts to Grenada — and farther afield, too.¹

Thus, in 1946 B. R. Ambedkar writes to W. E. B. DuBois that “there is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.”² An increasing amount of attention has in particular been paid to how concepts of “blackness” have been mobilized by such transnational movements. In both activist traditions and intellectual currents, “black” is not only repurposed as a catalyst for positive action but is also broadened beyond any racial referents.³

What I hope to unsettle with this paper is how we arrived at this understanding of blackness (and similar racial categories). How was race-thinking developed by European naturalists and philosophers repurposed by the very people they purported to classify? When, why, and how did these people begin to mobilize with the tools used to oppress them? How did we arrive at a time where it seems obvious and even right that anti-imperialist struggle would mobilize using race language?

I respond to these questions by focusing on three specific texts: Quobna Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787/1791); the Baron de Vastey’s

¹ See the excellent overview in Slate, *Black Power beyond Borders*.

² Ambedkar, “Letter from B. R. Ambedkar to W. E. B. Du Bois.”

³ Thus, Caribbean activists “redefin[ed] black as anyone, anywhere, who was being exploited by metropolitan or imperial policies and attitudes”; Hoetink, “*Race*” and *Color in the Caribbean*, 28. Liberation theology is the example *par excellence* of a serious intellectual attempt to put to use this kind of blackness; see Cone, *God of the Oppressed*.

The Colonial System Unveiled (1814); and Anténor Firmin's *The Equality of Human Races* (1885).

I read these texts both proleptically and assiduously. I argue that these writers create a discourse of race-thinking by people who we assume to be oppressed by it. This discourse is characterized by the common conflation of the personal and the political and strong roots in Christian thinking, and by reference to hegemonic paradigms of race-thinking that develop alongside them. These traits, as I will show, are not only evident in all three of our texts but are also developed through intertextual allusions and common readings.

Cugoano

The first writer I turn to is Quobna Ottobah Cugoano. He was born in 1757 on the coast of what is today Ghana, and sold into slavery in 1770. In 1772 he was taken to England, where he eventually became one of the first African-born critics of slavery and of European colonialism in the New World. After 1791, little is known about his life.⁴ This information is essential to understanding his writing. For instance, Cugoano arrived in England just after the 1772 Somerset case, a landmark of abolitionism. Cugoano later wrote of this case in his seminal work, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*:

The kind exertions of many benevolent and humane gentlemen, against the iniquitous traffic of slavery and oppression, has been attended with great good to many, and must redound with great honor to themselves, to humanity and their country; their laudable endeavours have been productive of the most beneficent effects in preventing that savage barbarity from taking place in free countries at home. ... The noble decision, thereby, before the Right Hon. Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, and the parts taken by the learned Counsellor Hargrave, are the surest proofs of the most amiable disposition of the laws of Englishmen.⁵

⁴ See Vincent Carretta's introduction to Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115. This Penguin edition of 1999 publishes both the 1787 ("Humbly Submitted to The Inhabitants of Great-Britain") and 1791 ("Addressed to the Sons of Africa") versions of *Thoughts and Sentiments*; this particular passage is only present in the 1791 edition. Future reference to *Thoughts and Sentiments* are in parentheses.

Here we can begin to draw a connection that is crucial for understanding Cugoano: the identification of the personal with the political. In this instance, Cugoano's *personal* freedom is a result of a *political* act, the Somerset Case. (Although the latter is really legal, for us the key distinction is between the private and the public — which encompasses both the law and politics.)

Indeed, this mixing of the personal and the political is a common reading of Cugoano and much writing of the African diaspora. Since the 1960s, scholars such as Arna Bontemps, Paul Edwards, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have read Cugoano's writing as part of the genre of slave narratives; for many scholars, these are the precursors to the African-American literary tradition.⁶ Thus, for instance, Gates argued that “the slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her membership in the human community.”⁷ Cugoano does indeed spend a good deal of time narrating his personal experiences. Pages 12 to 16 of his *Thoughts and Sentiments* are devoted to “some account of the Author's captivity” and “reflexions on his deliverance from Grenada.” But these are prefaced by a sort of motivation for documenting the personal:

What I intend to advance against that evil, criminal and wicked traffic of enslaving men, are only some Thoughts and Sentiments which occur to me, as being obvious from the Scriptures of Divine Truth, or such arguments as are chiefly deduced from thence ... Some of those observations may lead into a larger field of consideration, than that of the African Slave Trade alone; but those causes from wherever they originate, and become the production of slavery, the evil effects produced by it, must shew its origin and source is of a wicked and criminal nature. (10–1)

In other words, the personal is adduced in service of the political. Anthony Bogues urges us to read Cugoano's writings not just as demonstrations of literary proficiency (important as those are

⁶ Bontemps, *Great Slave Narratives*; Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*.

⁷ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 128.

in humanizing black voices) but also as “discursive practices of slave criticism and critique that probed alternative meanings of racial slavery, natural liberty, and natural rights, and countered the dominant eighteenth-century ideas of racial plantation slavery.”⁸ In other words, Cugoano’s participation in the human community is not just about his personal experience and testimony, but also about his political and philosophical ideas and arguments. This intertwining of the personal and the political is a theme that we will continue to see in other writings later in this essay.

There is another theme of Cugoano’s writings that emerges from this passage and resonates with other texts: his foundations in Christian thinking. Cugoano writes just a little later that

the ensnarings of others, and taking away their liberty by slavery and oppression, is the worst kind of robbery, as most opposite to every precept and injunction of the Divine Law, and contrary to that command which enjoins that *all men should love their neighbours as themselves, and that they should do unto others, as they would that men should do to them.* (11; cf. 50)

This reference to Matthew 22:39 is quite literally an appeal to the Bible as the source of moral authority. Is this just a rhetorical move to abolish slavery by appealing to British Christian sensibilities? Not quite. Later, Cugoano wishes that it

should ... please the Divine goodness to visit some of the poor dark Africans, even in the brutal stall of slavery, and from thence to install them among the princes of his grace ... In a Christian aera [*sic*], in a land where Christianity is planted, where every one might expect to behold the flourishing growth of every virtue, extending their harmonious branches with universal philanthropy wherever they came; but, on the contrary, almost nothing else is to be seen abroad but the bramble of ruffians, barbarians and slave-holders, grown up to a powerful luxuriance in wickedness. I cannot but wish, for the honor of Christianity, that the bramble grown up amongst them, was known to the heathen nations by a different name. (24–5)

Not only spiritual but also political salvation (in the form of emancipation) comes from Christianity. Thus, Cugoano’s appeal to Christianity seems to be more than a rhetorical move. It

⁸ Bogue, *Black Heretics*, 27.

is motivated equally by the desire to extend the benefits of Christianity to Africans and by the reprimand of slaveholders in the name of Christianity.

This is not to downplay Cugoano's political astuteness. Indeed, his appeal against slavery is founded at least in part in a desire to "protect" Christianity from its own excesses. Christianity should expand; to have it associated with slavery is, in an instrumental sense, bad for its expansion. Again, these political moves should be put in the context of Cugoano's personal biography. Shortly after his emancipation, Cugoano was baptized. The parish register entry on 20 August 1773 for St James's Church reads "John Stuart — a Black, aged 16 Years" (152, n. 5).⁹ It is impossible to know whether this conversion was a result of "genuine belief" (or even whether that's a category it makes sense to think with in this context). But it is important to note that Christianity was not something Cugoano was raised with: the principles he alludes to above were learned, just as was the language in which he wrote. Both these traits set him apart from later writers, including many of the African diaspora. But the emphasis on Christianity is common. For Cugoano as for other black writers, Christianity is fundamentally an appeal to religious solidarity in place of ethnic difference.

The Christian underpinnings of Cugoano's thinking come through in one particular trope he treats at length: the curse of Ham. He writes that

it came to pass, in the days of Noah, that an interdiction, or curse, took place in the family of Ham [Noah's son], and that the descendants of one of his [Ham's] sons should become the servants of servants to their brethren, the descendants of Shem and Japheth. This affords a grand pretence for the supporters of the African slavery to build a false notion upon, as it is found by history that Africa, in general, was peopled by the descendants of Ham; but they forget, that the prediction has already been fulfilled as far as it can go. (31)

⁹ See also Woodard, *African-British Writings in the Eighteenth Century*, 40.

Cugoano is here alluding to an important trope of race-thinking. This idea had been around in various forms throughout medieval Christianity (and Islam). It was not always negative; as Robin Blackburn describes, “a late fifteenth-century Nuremberg genealogist” even “claim[ed] that no less a personage than the Emperor Maximilian was of Hamitic descent.”¹⁰ But the myth was there, ready to be used when necessary for justification. By the eighteenth century, it was a common story. Cugoano accepts two key premises in circulation: not only that Ham’s descendants are cursed, but also that they now live in Africa. So how does Cugoano defend against the advocates of slavery? He says that the curse has been fulfilled already, by the Canaanites:

But the prediction and curse rested wholly upon the offspring of Canaan, who settled in the land known by his name, in the west of Asia, as is evident from the sacred writings. The Canaanites became an exceeding wicked people, and were visited with many calamities, according to the prediction of Noah, for their abominable wickedness and idolatry. (32)

But Cugoano also goes a step further. Not only is Canaan the end-point for the Hamitic curse, but it is also a land that Great Britain might assume if it were to follow the Christian path and abolish slavery:

But if any nation or society of men were to observe the laws of God, and to keep his commandments, and walk in the way of righteousness ... they might soon see blessings and plenty in abundance showered down upon their mountains and vallies ... [and] then might the temperate climes of Great-Britain be seen to vie with the rich land of Canaan of old, which is now, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants, in comparison of what it was, as only a barren desert. (103–4)

Cugoano thus draws from his personal experience with Christianity and slavery to make a political appeal, in effect inaugurating a tradition of prophetic critique (as Cornel West would characterize it). As Vincent Carretta writes, “Cugoano transforms the curse of Canaan from one of color to one of behavior, and the recipients of the curse from the enslaved to the enslavers.

¹⁰ Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 71.

Like a new Moses, he offers the wayward British a path back to the promised land.”¹¹ The establishment of Great Britain as the new Canaan plays on a popular idea, first mentioned in Strabo’s *Geographica*, that Phoenicians settled Cornwall. Here, as with the curse of Ham, Cugoano seems to uncritically accept popular opinion.¹² We thus see a strong relationship that Cugoano maintains with Christianity and with race-thinking of his time. What he does not seem to employ is the emergent forms of scientific racism. Indeed, he may not have had access to many of the sources, especially since he likely did not speak Latin; although the first edition of Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* was published in 1735, William Turton’s English translation did not come out until 1802 at the earliest. Cugoano does not stress *blackness* per se. Instead, he focuses on Africa (having been born there himself) and Christianity (having converted in England) in his political and personal work.

Vastey

For all his radicalism, Cugoano was constrained by his position as an Afro-Briton; his writings broadly aligned with a British form of liberal Christianity. By contrast, the Baron de Vastey wrote in the first independent state of the African diaspora: Haiti. As such, Vastey had fewer constraints on his ability to speak his mind. Vastey was also influential in his time, though largely unknown today. His work was reviewed by publications in France, the USA, Germany, and Great Britain, and quoted by many abolitionists in the US.¹³ Later on, his work was referenced by W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Vastey would appear in Aimé Césaire’s 1963 play *La tragédie du roi Christophe* and still later in

¹¹ Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, xxviii.

¹² For insight into the development of this theory, see Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 70–76.

¹³ Daut, *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism*, xv–xviii.

Derek Walcott's *Haitian Trilogy*. Here, then, we see a strong participation in the tradition and expanse of the Black Atlantic. Vastey, more explicitly than Cugoano, was part of a world that reached backward to earlier writers like Cugoano; across the Atlantic to abolitionists in North America, Great Britain, and France; and forward to the world of global black radicalism.

Vastey served as the secretary to Henry Christophe, a general of the Haitian Revolution who assumed power in the north after the death of Dessalines. Vastey's early works are generally concerned with factional struggles in the new state.¹⁴ By contrast, his 1814 *Le système colonial dévoilé* (*The Colonial System Unveiled*) focuses on criticizing European colonialism. This is the work of Vastey's that has received the most attention, particularly in the past ten years or so. This may be because Vastey here explicitly cites and critiques European race-thinkers, in contrast to the other works that focus on internecine fighting. The preference for *The Colonial System Unveiled* thus reflects a still-persistent distaste among historians for the factional disarray of post-revolutionary Haiti. As Chris Bongie puts it, scholars tend to see "the sequence of events leading from the emancipatory moment of 1804 to the ignominious manumission of 1825 ... [as] little more than yet another discouraging example of what happens to revolutionary politics."¹⁵ Ironically, it is Bongie himself who perpetuates this distaste in some form by translating *Le système colonial dévoilé* for the first time into English, in 2014.

Four of Vastey's other works had been translated into English in his life time "as part of a well-conducted media campaign in Britain on behalf of the Christophean regime" (6). Indeed,

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Vastey, *The Colonial System Unveiled*, 3. Future parenthetical references are to this source (which includes a large scholarly apparatus and front matter), followed by page numbers for the original French edition, available at <https://archive.org/details/lesystemecoloniaoovast/>. The work was also published in Haiti in 2013 in a modernized French edition, which I have consulted for reference.

this appeal to the British is present in a great deal of *The Colonial System Unveiled*, too. Like Cugoano, Vastey advocates some kind of essential goodness about the British:

Noble and generous England! To you it falls to heal [*cicatriser*] the most horrendous, the most terrible wound ever to afflict humanity; to you it falls, now, to bring about the regeneration of half the inhabitants of the globe, by conveying the light of knowledge and civilization to the hearts [*dans le sein*] of our African brethren. (85; vi)

Vastey goes on to catalog many abuses of European colonialism (with reference to Las Casas and the abbé Grégoire, among others) and castigate the exploitation of the New World. He then turns to explicitly criticize the slave trade in harsh terms (94–5). He says that “posterity will be amazed that a system so horrific, which is based on violence and theft, on pillaging and lying, on the most sordid and impure forms of vice, should have found zealous apologists among the enlightened nations of Europe” (93; 50). This latter reference is probably not ironic: he soon turns again to Great Britain. Vastey offers an alternative to the slave trade:

To civilize Africa, by bringing the sciences and arts to it, by making agriculture and commerce prosper [*fleurir*] there: that glorious enterprise is worthy of a magnanimous and enlightened nation. It is worthy, in sum, of the great nation of Britain, which will add this grand undertaking to the growing list of its claims to glory and to the gratitude [*reconnaissance*, lit. recognition] of humankind. (95–6; 18)

We here see much the same motive as with Cugoano. Personal experience of the horrors of slavery (supplemented in Vastey’s case with an extensive bibliography) is coupled with reference to hegemonic paradigms of race-thinking to make strong political exhortations.

How in particular does Vastey make reference to European race-thinking? He alludes to a number of anatomists, who he calls “egregious sophists saddled with prejudices” — “*archisophistes encombrés des préjugés*” (103–4; 31). Like Cugoano, Vastey discusses the curse of Ham:

Hannemann maintains that the colour of blacks originates in the curse that Noah pronounced against Ham; others affirm that our colour and our reprobation can be traced to Cain, for killing his brother Abel. I have strong reasons for believing that it is actually the whites who are of the

race of Cain, for I find in them that primitive hatred, that spirit of envy and arrogance, and that passion for riches of which scripture speaks, and which led him to sacrifice [*immoler*] his brother; it is this same spirit that animates those who traffic in human flesh and feeds their predilection for persecuting us as the descendants of Abel. (104; 31–2)

Vastey vehemently refutes the European race-thinkers. Cugoano had cast doubt on the curse of Ham by accepting its premises and then suggesting an alternative interpretation consistent with the Bible; Vastey is uninterested in this. He goes on to catalog other traits anatomists were assembling into racial characteristics, including “facial angles,” and “the frizzled wooly hair that is another one of the causes of our moral inferiority” (104). His ultimate refutation, though, still rests on scriptural authority:

One must be truly blinded by arrogance [*orgueil*] and prejudice to allow oneself to put forward claims that are so erroneous, and so utterly lacking in common sense. As if defending such a bad cause were not enough, did one then have to prop it up with such worthless [*misérables*] arguments? *With errors and blindness God smites [frappe] the arrogant and the impious* [this is not a line of scripture, but rather Vastey’s attempt to sound biblical, it would seem]. Who would stand in the way of his designs by debasing what he created; but *there is, scripture states, no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord* [Proverbs 21:30], and it is themselves whom they have debased [*avilis*].

If our enemies had been more religious, they would have been less given to subtle distinctions and malicious reasoning, and would have been possessed of a great deal more sense, a sound [*sain*] judgement and, especially, a good and tender heart. (105; 33–4)

On the one hand, then, Vastey is in closer proximity to European race-thinking than Cugoano: hence his citations of all these anatomists. He was able to do so in part because of the flourishing of publications on race, which coincided with the post-Enlightenment rise of science.¹⁶ On the other hand, Vastey flat-out rejects any semblance of race-thinking. He does not play on the terms of race-thinking, accepting some premises and rejecting conclusions (as Cugoano does); instead, Vastey generally refers to “Africans” and the “Haytian people.”

¹⁶ See the wonderfully detailed footnotes provided by the editors in *Ibid.*, 156–60.

Firmin

This line of direct criticism of race-thinking reaches a peak in 1885, when Anténor Firmin, another Haitian, wrote a refutation of the classic 1855 racist tract by Arthur de Gobineau.

Gobineau's work was called *De l'inégalité des races humaines*; Firmin's title is *De l'Égalité des races humaines*.¹⁷ Firmin is the latest of these three authors, writing about one hundred years after Cugoano. In this interval scientific racism had reared its ugly head. Cugoano was writing just as



Figure 1. The 1877 engraving of a lost 1818 portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture, used as a frontispiece for *De l'Égalité des races humaines*. Source: [an online exhibition at the John Carter Brown Library](#).

Linneaus was publishing his taxonomies; by contrast, Firmin addressed a world that already knew Darwin and anthropology. Firmin is distinctive because of how directly he challenges this background straight-on. His work is truly remarkable for its rigor and forethought. As Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban notes, Firmin provides a coherent challenge to race-thinking in anthropology decades before Boas.¹⁸

¹⁷ My parenthetical citations are to the 2002 English translation, followed by citations to the original 1885 volume (which I was able to consult thanks to the Princeton University Library) when appropriate — and sometimes only to the latter volume. There is also a 2005 French re-edition published in Montreal.

¹⁸ Firmin, *The Equality of the Human Races: Positivist Anthropology*, xviii.

At almost 700 pages, Firmin's book is truly monumental. The first thing one notices about the book is the portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture that faces the title page (figure 1). The second is the touching dedication:

Puisse ce livre être médité et concourir à accélérer le mouvement de régénération que ma race accomplit sous le ciel bleu et clair des Antilles !

Puisse-t-il inspirer à tous les enfants de la race noire, répandus sur l'orbe immense de la terre, l'amour du progrès, de la justice et de la liberté ! Car, en le dédiant à Haïti, c'est encore à eux tous que je l'adresse, les déshérités du présent et les géants de l'avenir. (v)¹⁹

This is pan-Africanism or *négritude avant la lettre*; it is Derek Walcott, after all, who speaks so eloquently of the Antillean sky in his work a century later.²⁰ The third thing one notices is the remarkably personal preface Firmin begins with. He writes:

There is an element of chance in all human endeavors. When I arrived in Paris, it never entered my mind [*je fus loin de penser*] to write a book such as this one. I am pre-disposed, both by my profession as a lawyer and by my studies [*mes études ordinaires*], to concern myself with questions pertaining to the moral and political sciences. I had no intention, then, of entering a field in which I could be considered a layman [*un profane*]. (liii; vii)

Through a number of acquaintances, Firmin began to read anthropology. What he read shocked him deeply: how could his friends espouse such virulently racist views?

In arguing the thesis at the core of this work, I wanted essentially to justify the warm welcome [*l'accueil bienveillant*] I had been given by the *Société d'anthropologie de Paris*. I hereby pay homage to each of its members, my honorable colleagues. I often happen to challenge [*contredire*] most anthropologists and to harbor opinions contrary to theirs, but I still respect and

¹⁹ In English:

May readers of this book meditate on its content, and may it help to accelerate the movement of regeneration in which my race is engaged under the limpid blue skies of the Caribbean!

May it inspire in all the children of the Black race around this big world the love of progress, justice, and liberty. In dedicating this book to Haiti, I bear them all in mind, both the downtrodden of today and the giants of tomorrow. (li)

²⁰ Thus, in "*In the Virgins*," Walcott writes of an Antillean harbor as follows:

the only war here is a war
of silence between blue sky and sea,
and just one voice, the marching choir's, is raised
to draft new conscripts with the ancient cry
of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' into pews
half-empty still, or like a glass, half-full.
Pinning itself to a cornice, a gull
hangs like a medal from the serge-blue sky.

honor their great intellectual worth. I fervently hope [*il m'est agréable de penser*] that they will reflect on the various controversial points I have raised and that they will reconsider their opinions regarding the abilities of my race. (lv; xi)

Firmin sees his relationship with white scholars and activists as one of respect and cooperation. Cuguoano and Vastey had both sung the praises of abolitionists like Wilberforce and Mansfield. Their attitude varied between genuine admiration and sycophancy; it was clear they were trying to curry favor to advance political ends through any means they could. (This is especially true of Vastey, who was quite openly a propagandist for the Christophe regime.) Firmin stands in stark contrast to their attitude. He approaches his French colleagues with an admirable mixture of respect, disgust, and cautious optimism. Firmin is genuinely hopeful that he will open up a dialog for anthropologists to revise their ideas of race.

One of the most complex aspects of Firmin's thought is his connection to religion. His language is a far cry from Firmin, or of course Cuguoano. There are few if any scriptural references to be found. But his use of science has many parallels to religion. One is the repeated use of *dévouement*, which can be translated as “devotion” or as “dedication.” In other words, Firmin's attitude towards science is quasi-religious:

I am Black. [*Je suis noir.*] Moreover, I have always considered the religion [*culte*] of science as the only true one, the only one worthy of the attention and infinite devotion [*dévouement*] of any man who is guided by reason. ... reality itself, which never lies, would make me realize every minute that the systematic contempt hurled at the African reaches me in my entire being [*m'enveloppe tout entier*]. (lv–lvi; xii)

His religious devotion is not just to science. It is also to his race. Thus we see for the first time among our three authors race-thinking really turning against itself. Firmin clearly works against racism, but in so doing reifies “race” — making it something you can worship:

I take myself neither for a hero nor for a scientist. [*Je ne me crois ni un preux, ni un savant.*] I bring only my sense of dedication [*dévouement*] and my good will to the cause of the truth I wish to defend. ... This book is a humble and respectful offering I make to the race in a religious spirit. Others will do better than I some day, but no one will ever hope more for its regeneration and

wish for its glory than I do. (lix; xvi)

Note too Firmin's touching humility. Although he may figure race as religion, he does so because he wants to be part of a greater project than himself.

Before leaving this subject of religion we should revisit another old specter: the legend of Ham. Firmin identifies this as one of the reasons the myth of the inequality of human races has become so widely accepted:

Tous ceux qui répètent que les noirs sont inférieurs aux blancs ne font donc qu'offrir une preuve patente de l'influence qu'exerce encore sur eux l'héritage intellectuel et moral d'un autre âge [viz. the curse of Ham]. (614)

For him, the curse of Ham is nothing more than an old religious canard, to be dismissed without further thought now that "la théologie ... est devenue la bête noire" after "les fils de Voltaire et de Rousseau ont tout envahi" (614–5). Besides, proper Christian theology today would throw out the curse of Ham anyway:

la théologie dogmatique, en acceptant même que les descendants de Cham aient été maudits par le saint patriarche et subalternisés vis-à-vis de la postérité de Schem et de Japheth, la vertu de cette malédiction, qui avait toute son efficacité sous la règne de la loi mosaïque, disparaît avec l'avènement du Christ. (615)

Here we begin to see how Firmin goes beyond a simple critique of something as racist as the curse of Ham, to instead offer resources for thinking differently.

Indeed, in general Firmin's work is not just a critique — a call to address unchecked prejudice in anthropology. He is instead offering an insightful *positive* vision of the field. He grounds this vision in a remarkable reading of German idealism. Thus, Firmin speaks of the

... formal changes undergone by Kantian thought in its journey from the master to Hegel. The latter indeed has ruined the prestige of metaphysical speculations with his habit of making the clearest idea a subject of controversy. Still, Hegel has ventured into every field of human knowledge in a series of works which, however somewhat confused, sometimes yield brilliant insights [*fulgurations brillantes*] through the thicket of an excessively arbitrary but always erudite terminology [*une terminologie trop arbitraire pour être toujours savant*]. (5; 6)

These words will resonate with anyone who has struggled through the works of Hegel. But Firmin does not give himself enough credit. He draws on resources from Hegel to offer a wonderful vision of what the study of man ought to look like:

the method used in natural history to study minerals, plants, and animals inferior to Man, is not always fruitful when it comes to the study of the last addition to creation. Whereas the inferior beings are programmed essentially for vegetative and animal life, Man is programmed for social life, which he ultimately always achieves by making his own history [*celle de l'homme tend invinciblement à la vie sociale qu'il finit toujours par réaliser, en constituant sa propre histoire*]. (6; 9)

This is the point Marx famously made in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he too looks to Hegel.²¹ I would even suggest that Firmin is anticipating some of Hannah Arendt's insights. She spoke of how the world is created through action, through plurality; for her, philosophy talks of man — but “politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships.”²² Perhaps this is not a strong enough bridge to stand on, but the kernel is there. Firmin, like Arendt, is re-reading German idealism to think through what it means to talk about man in society. Thus he writes that

Man is the only creature who cannot stand alone. ... The fact is, Man needs Man in order to develop or even to know his individual personality [*le perfectionnement et pour l'étude même de sa personnalité propre*]. Goethe, joining the broad understanding of the poet to the naturalist's science and the philosopher's wisdom [*à la science du naturaliste et du philosophe*], says:

*Der Mensch erkennt sich nur in Menschen, nur
Das Leben lernt Jedem was er sei!*

Nothing could be truer. Man learns to know himself only by looking at his fellow Man [*dans son semblable*], and only through the intercourse [*commerce*] of everyday life does he learn his true value [*sa propre valeur*]. (7–8)

²¹ The quote is “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. ... Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

²² Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 95.

This is not to say that Firmin offers salvation. In his uptake of Hegel, Firmin also becomes invested in the hegemonic notion of progress — the teleology Hegel so famously peddles.

Hence, Firmin's radical equality of human races reifies both the idea of race and the idea of progress. Thus, he concludes his treatise as follows:

Les races sont égales ; elles sont toutes capables de s'élever aux plus nobles vertus, au plus haut développement intellectuel, comme de tomber dans la plus complète dégénération. ... Il semble que, pour prospérer et grandir, il leur faut s'intéresser mutuellement les uns aux progrès et à la félicité des autres, cultivant de mieux en mieux les sentiments altruistes qui sont le plus bel épanouissement du cœur et de l'esprit de l'homme. (662)

This smacks of nothing less than the progress of the world spirit. But Firmin ends with a gesture towards the heavens:

La doctrine de l'égalité des races humaines ... nous rappelle la plus belle pensée d'un grand génie : « Tous les hommes sont l'homme » et la plus douce parole d'un enseignement divin : « Aimez-vous les uns les autres ». (662)

To take Firmin seriously is not just to work against scientific racism in anthropology. It is to think differently about what anthropology does: that is, to think differently about Man. Firmin is not just a historical curiosity; as Leslie Péan puts it, “Firmin n'est pas du passé et n'est pas dépassé.”²³ But I would also push beyond Péan and other attendees at the 2011 colloquium organized in honor of Firmin, for whom he can “symboliser encore à nos yeux une **voix** et une **voie** d'un renouveau national possible pour Haïti.”²⁴ I would argue that Firmin is more than just a figure of national importance. His work, rooted in the Haitian experience, gestures towards the universal.

²³ Péan, *Comprendre Anténor Firmin*, 24.

²⁴ Hector, *L'actualité d'Anténor Firmin*, 8. Emphasis in the original.

Conclusion

We have attended to three thinkers of the African diaspora. The first generation is represented by Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, who was himself captured in Africa and brought to the West Indies before emancipation in the United Kingdom. By contrast, the Baron de Vastey and Anténor Firmin were both Haitian — the former a revolutionary and the latter an exile. All of them spoke against racism, whether in the general form of slavery or in specific instances like the curse of Ham. The means by which they did so differed markedly — from Cugoano’s intensely Christian polemics; to Vastey’s harsh, propagandistic tracts; to Firmin’s elegant, meticulous, magisterial treatise. They shared in common not just a relationship with religious thinking and a conflation of the personal and the political but most importantly a vexed relationship with hegemonic race-thinking. They all refuted some parts of it but in so doing reified other assumptions — whether the premises of the curse of Ham in Cugoano’s case or the reality of race in Firmin’s. None of them, in other words, offer an escape from colonialism. After all, they were deeply enmeshed in it. Instead, reading these three authors offers resources for us to pursue decolonial modes of thinking.

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