

Griggs and Corrothers: Historical Reality and Black Fiction*

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Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* and James D. Corrothers's "A Man They Didn't Know" are two early Afroamerican fictions which suggest a black alliance with foreign powers in the face of unrelenting racial injustice at home.¹ *Imperium in Imperio*, published in 1899, has been described as "the first political novel" by a black American;² and "A Man They Didn't Know," appearing in 1913, is probably the first Afroamerican fiction to suggest a specific alliance between American blacks, groups in Mexico, and the Japanese. Sutton E. Griggs is currently undergoing rediscovery, and *Imperium in Imperio* is by now well known to students of Afroamerican literature, if not to students of American literature in general. However, aspects of the historical context of *Imperium in Imperio* have been overlooked by literary scholars at significant cost to a complete appreciation of what Griggs is doing in the novel. Corrothers's "A Man They Didn't Know" has been overlooked in all respects. This highly interesting fictional work, comparable in important respects to Griggs's novel, needs to be brought to the attention of students of American culture of various disciplines, and, like *Imperium in Imperio*, to be fully understood, it must be read in its historical context.

In *Imperium in Imperio* Griggs projects a secret, underground organization of blacks, the Imperium, the purpose of which is to defend the rights of Afroamericans. In despair over seemingly unyielding American racism at the end of the nineteenth century, a militant leader of the Imperium eventually proposes that the organization declare war on the United States and, working in concert with "foreign allies," attempt to wrest Texas and Louisiana from the Union. The Imperium would then proceed to set up a black state in Texas. Louisiana would be ceded to the Imperium's foreign allies in return for their support. Such bold, imaginative thematic development has led to Griggs's novel being described "as one of the major

contributions to black fiction before the [Harlem] Renaissance years,” and it is seen as a clear precursor of present-day black militant attitudes.³ The publication date of *Imperium in Imperio* is 1899, and it opens with an authenticating note (actually part of the fiction) which describes the “documents and papers of the Secretary of State of the Imperium” on which it is purportedly based. This opening note is signed “Sutton Griggs” and is dated March 1, 1899. Thus, the actual publication date of the novel and the internal, fictional date of the “authenticating note” coincide with the year following the Spanish-American War.

The Spanish-American War was motivated by a variety of interests and supposed interests. President McKinley’s new Republican administration may have seen war with Spain as a way of unifying the country and diverting popular attention away from the government’s blatant favoritism toward monopolies. William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, who sensationalized war news in their “yellow” journals for a public hungry for sensation, may have seen the war as a means of boosting circulation. Many Americans were taken in by the popular slogan “Remember the *Maine!*” And, of course, some Americans sincerely wished to help Cuba gain its freedom from Spanish imperialism.⁴ Much of black America held special, if ambivalent, attitudes toward the war. Cuba was viewed by some black Americans as largely a black nation deserving assistance in its struggle for independence. Yet in the final years of the nineteenth century, an era of rampant segregation, lynching, and disenfranchisement of blacks, many in the Afroamerican community questioned the wisdom of supporting their country’s involvement in foreign adventures while there were such immense, unsolved problems at home. Black spokesmen asked why their people should be called upon to make sacrifices in war for a country that refused to protect its black citizens.⁵

The murder of a black federal official in South Carolina in February 1898, just when excitement about the impending war was spreading, is indicative of the vulnerability of America’s black community in the era. Early in 1898 Frazier B. Baker, a black Republican, was appointed postmaster at Lake City, South Carolina. Local whites lost no time in expressing strong displeasure over the appointment, many proving their point by carrying their mail to a nearby town for posting. On February 22 a mob of whites set fire to Baker’s house and proceeded to shoot at members of his family as they tried to escape. Baker and his infant son were killed; his wife and three other children were wounded. The incident provoked a national outcry. Black

spokesmen believed that even though the national government had been notoriously lax in protecting black Americans since the end of Reconstruction, federal authorities would act promptly and vigorously to apprehend and prosecute Baker's assailants because he was a postmaster. Black leaders in Chicago dispatched Ida Wells Barnett, a nationally prominent anti-lynching activist, to Washington to lobby for effective action by the attorney general. But Barnett soon learned that her efforts would fail. Excitement about "avenging the *Maine*" and with helping the Cubans had diverted attention away from such domestic problems as the murder of a small town postmaster.⁶ But black Americans remembered the Baker lynching and others perceived lynchings to be on the increase. One black newspaperman summarized his view of the situation with "if 'Remember the Maine' was 'the white man's watch-word,' then 'remember the murder of postmaster Baker . . . should be the Negro's.'" ⁷

The persuasiveness and strength of Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, especially its imaginative concluding section, derive to a significant degree from Griggs's adept use of immediate historical contextual materials. Griggs locates his vividly imagined militant black organization, the Imperium, near Waco, Texas, in what to outward appearance is Thomas Jefferson College, Griggs's ironic nod to an earlier American revolutionary thinker, one who tried to ban slavery while keeping slaves himself. The leaders of the Imperium, like many American blacks of the time in fact, took an early interest in the Cuban nationalist insurrection which preceded the Spanish-American War because, as the narrator states, "the Cubans were in a large measure negroes."⁸

When the United States Congress met in April 1898 to consider resolutions that would result in war with Spain, the Congress of the Imperium, like a "shadow" government,⁹ met in special session to consider what should be its attitude "to this Anglo-Saxon race, which calls upon us to defend the fatherland and at the same moment treats us in a manner to make us execrate it" (207). While the Imperium shares the concerns of the United States Congress regarding the supposed attack on the Maine and with helping Cuba gain independence, the black leadership is also concerned with the epidemic of lynchings, about which the national government says it can do nothing. The Imperium is particularly concerned with the murder of one of its members, Felix A. Cook, whose seat in the meeting hall remains dramatically vacant and is draped in black. In developing the figure of Cook, Griggs clearly draws on the contemporary incident of the murder of Frazier B. Baker. Griggs's Cook, like

Baker, was appointed postmaster of Lake City, South Carolina, by President McKinley. And as in the antecedent Baker case, Cook was assassinated by a local mob which could not stand the idea of a black man as a postmaster.

Because the Frazier Baker murder is well-documented, we can observe just how Griggs reworks the historical material for integration into his fiction. Most remarkable is how Griggs, though writing a novel of black militancy and protest, actually tones down the attack on the postmaster and his family. In the actual case, not only the postmaster but also his infant son were killed by the mob. In Griggs's fictional representation only the postmaster is killed (202). Griggs wants to present the horrors of American racism to his readers, yet he omits a most gruesome detail of his historical material antecedent to the scene. Perhaps Griggs believed that his black readership, which was well-established,¹⁰ would not care to have every abhorrent detail of the lynching rehearsed, the likes of which would be already too well-known in the Afroamerican community of the day. And perhaps Griggs intuited that if he offered the full truth, many not of or not directly conversant with the Afroamerican community would turn away in disbelief. Ironically, a fuller presentation of what actually happened, including the shooting of the infant, might have made the novel seem "unrealistic" and exaggerated to some readers. In short, if he had used more of the grotesque actual detail of the Baker lynching, Griggs might have lost some of his readers to his essential truth.

Facing Cook's vacant chair, leaders of the Imperium Congress debate their proper course of action. The spokesman for a line of relative moderation, Belton Piedmont, makes a strong speech, but Bernard Belgrave ultimately wins the Imperium's endorsement of his revolutionary position advocating that the secret organization join with America's foreign adversaries in war on the United States to force the concession of Texas as the basis of a separate black state. Although Belgrave's plan may strike some as quite improbable, recent work in Afroamerican studies suggests its possible association with specific historical phenomena immediately antecedent to Griggs's representation of it. Willard B. Gatewood in *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* presents an assertion of Clifford H. Plummer, a black American spokesman at the time of the Spanish-American War, that in disgust with *fin de siècle* American segregation, lynching, and disenfranchisement,

... a proportion of the more enthusiastic of the colored people of New England and some of the Middle and Southwestern States

were ready to make an armed revolt against the United States and to espouse the cause of Spain It was the purpose of some of the people to raise troops as quietly as possible, to get out of the country in detachments, and to join the forces of Spain.¹¹

If we read *Imperium in Imperio* as working in tension with Afro-american historical phenomena, we see that Griggs is projecting in his fiction a potential radical alternative to a “loyal” black response to the Spanish-American War. What if those black citizens who had helped America acquire an empire from Spain had joined with the foreign adversary to force the United States to cede to a black Imperium two of its states? Appearing a few months after the important black role in the Spanish-American War was acknowledged in special ceremonies and in newspaper accounts across the country,¹² *Imperium in Imperio* challenges readers with the idea that black Americans have the potential of playing in a different sort of role in a foreign war than they did in 1898.

On the eve of World War I James D. Corrothers, now known primarily as a poet, published a remarkable short story entitled “A Man They Didn’t Know” in the NAACP journal *The Crisis*. Recalling *Imperium in Imperio* in its essential thematic concerns, Corrothers’s story opens with a presentation of an America in which victims of domestic racism, blacks and Hawaii-born Japanese-Americans, have joined with foreign victims of American expansionism, Mexicans, to overthrow Anglo-Saxon domination. Black American army units stationed along the southwestern border join forces with Mexicans and fire back across the border on American towns. In Hawaii, Nisei, “certain renegade whites and a wholesale importation” of blacks join forces to take political control of the islands with a view to annexation of Hawaii to Japan.¹³ The dissident blacks and Nisei and their Mexican allies gain the support of Japan, the only major nonwhite industrial power of the era, and soon units of the powerful Japanese navy are spotted in Hawaii and at a secret Japanese coaling station in Baja California. The end to unquestioned Anglo-Saxon domination of North America becomes obvious to all as black groups in Chicago demonstrate and make specific demands on the national government.¹⁴

Faced with spreading calamity, the American President calls in black leaders to try to find out how he can regain the confidence of black America. After a frank discussion and after the President’s proposal that the black spokesman Dr. Packer T. Jefferson be called upon to help is rejected as unsuitable, Jed Blackburn, a well-known former

boxer, is proposed as the man to help restore black support for the national government. Blackburn accepts and is made a colonel in the United States Army.¹⁵ He is successful in rallying significant Afro-american support for the national government, although dissident blacks continue hostilities. As leader of a large black contingent in what Corrothers pointedly describes as a multiethnic American army, Blackburn is instrumental in defeating the “yellow peril” (86), the alliance of dissident blacks, Nisei, Mexicans, and Japanese that is threatening the West Coast and the Southwest.

A summary of “A Man They Didn’t Know,” as we see, clearly suggests that on the eve of the Great War Corrothers is in effect developing the same basic theme that Griggs developed in his Spanish-American War era novel *Imperium in Imperio*. Black America is not to be taken for granted. The Afroamerican community has much to offer the country, as a figure like Jed Blackburn suggests. But chaos and destruction will be the result if injustice is perpetuated. More specifically, when we consider “A Man They Didn’t Know” in its particular historical context, Corrothers has elaborated on the “Yellow Peril” nightmare.

In January of 1908 the German Kaiser Wilhelm announced to the American Ambassador that he had evidence that thousands of Japanese soldiers were dispersed through Mexico and would move toward and attempt to capture the Panama Canal at an appropriate time. The Kaiser’s fabrication was part of an elaborate scheme which entailed promoting war between the United States and a Japan in alliance with Mexico—Mexico would be the primary battle ground. The Kaiser imagined that once American troops crossed the Mexican border, latent anti-Yankee sentiment would swell to a crescendo in Latin America, ending American predominance in the hemisphere and opening the way for more German trade and influence.¹⁶

Although the existence of a secret treaty between Japan and Mexico in the first decade of this century has not been established by historians, through various publicity devices including fake intelligence reports and press leaks the Kaiser managed to work on American xenophobia to the point that, as historian Barbara Tuchman put it, the “Yellow Peril became as popular as the turkey trot.”¹⁷ Part of the American fear of a Japanese-Mexican conspiracy was surely a projection from a guilty conscience over our treatment of the two countries. Restrictive laws on entry of Japanese laborers into the United States and restrictions on Japanese land ownership in California were of course more recent than the American annexation

of the territories of northern Mexico that now make up the U.S. Southwest, but all these were clear American actions against the two “Yellow Peril” nations that were out to get “us.” And, too, American anxieties were aggravated by actual friendly contacts between Japan and Mexico during the period. The Mexican dictator Huerta was furnished arms by Japan to President Wilson’s great annoyance. And, seeming to confirm America’s worst fears, during a state visit to Mexico in 1911, the Japanese Admiral Yashiro toasted the fraternity of the Mexican and Japanese armies and navies and spoke darkly of common action against a common enemy. Everybody knew who the common enemy was.¹⁸

When we consider “A Man They Didn’t Know” in history we see that in essence Corrothers has posed to himself the question, how might Afroamerica fit with the “Yellow Peril” anxiety? Significantly, he has ranged black Americans on both sides in his fantasy exploration of the question. Some dissident blacks ally themselves with Mexicans and Nisei to try to overcome Anglo-Saxon rule. Yet the powerful figure of Jed Blackburn is at the end depicted as leading black troops in concert with a multiethnic national force which overturns the “Yellow Peril.” Americans in general, Corrothers suggests, do not recognize how much men like Blackburn might contribute. He is “a man they didn’t know” symbolizing a people they didn’t know (138). Thus, in effect, in his political fantasy Corrothers offers his country a choice: Recognize the man, the people, it does not know, or expect ultimate chaos.

Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* and James Corrothers’s “A Man They Didn’t Know” are two early black fictions that are likely to strike the reader who approaches them apart from their historical context as rather improbable, at best escapist fantasies. When we study such works in relation to historical context, a context which is too often overlooked for early black fiction, our aesthetic appreciation of this literature is enhanced, and we begin to achieve more of a grasp of its political significance. For example, aesthetically, we put ourselves in a position to admire how imaginatively historical incidents like the Baker lynching may be drawn upon and modified for thematic purpose. When we study the historical context of “A Man They Didn’t Know” we open ourselves to the aesthetic pleasure of seeing with what bold imagination Corrothers answered the question he in effect posed to himself before writing the story: How would black America respond to the “Yellow Peril” if such a threat indeed materialized? It helps for the reader to know what the “Yellow Peril” was, and, perhaps even more, it helps to know something about black

America in the pre-World War I period. Only when we consider historical context, not just mainstream American history but Afro-american and other ethnic American histories, can we begin to fully appreciate the art and imagination with which writers like Griggs and Corrothers invested their work. And when we begin to work to understand the historical grounding of such early black fictions, we put ourselves in a position to start to take seriously their political implications. We are able to see most clearly how Griggs and Corrothers, in their fictions deriving from historical particulars of the pre-World War I era, present black America as being the potentially determining force for chaos or order in the nation.

Notes

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¹Sutton E. Griggs. *Imperium in Imperio* (1899; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1969). James D. Corrothers. "A Man They Didn't Know." *The Crisis*. 7 (1913-14) 85-87, 136-38. Arlene A. Elder. *The "Hindered Hand": Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978) ch. iii, gives a very useful biographical and critical introduction to Sutton Griggs. The best introduction to James Corrothers is still his autobiography *In Spite of the Handicap* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1916).

²Hugh M. Gloster. *Negro Voices in American Fiction*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1948) 58.

³Addison Gayle, Jr. *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975) 66-67.

⁴Samuel Eliot Morison. *The Oxford History of the American People*. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965) 800.

⁵On black America's attitudes toward and involvement in the Spanish-American War, see Willard B. Gatewood, Jr. *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903*. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975).

⁶Gatewood, 31-32. George Brown Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900*. (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1952) 255-256.

⁷Gatewood, 109, 32.

⁸Griggs, 201. Subsequent page references to the novel appear within parentheses in the text. Cubans were indeed "in a large measure

negroes”; the actual black percentage of the Cuban population was virtually one third, according to the 1899 census as cited in Hugh Thomas. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 1117.

⁹Griggs’s Latin title *Imperium in Imperio*, Government within a Government, suggests the nature and function of the secret organization.

¹⁰In his introduction to the Arno Press reprint of *Imperium in Imperio* (Griggs, ii) Hugh M. Gloster notes that Griggs’s “novels, though virtually unknown to white Americans of his time, were probably more widely circulated among Negroes than the works of Charles W. Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar.”

¹¹Herbert Aptheker, ed. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951) II, 824. Quoted by Gatewood, 210. Gatewood notes that Plummer’s statement still needs to be corroborated with additional evidence.

¹²Gatewood, 105-107.

¹³Corrothers, 85-86. Subsequent page references to the story appear within parentheses in the text.

¹⁴Thus, Corrothers’s “A Man They Didn’t Know,” with its explicit fictional projection of a strong challenge to Anglo-Saxon dominance in North America before World War I, clearly prefigures themes in recent black fiction, such as Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. (New York: R.W. Baron, 1969) in which black dissident groups forcibly challenge the ruling order. In both Corrothers’s fiction of 1913 and Greenlee’s fiction of 1969 the black revolt is spearheaded by men trained in the United States Army.

¹⁵“Dr. Packer T. Jefferson” appears to be a satiric reference to Booker T. Washington, the prominent moderate black spokesman of the pre-World War I era who had close working relationships with numerous top political and business leaders. Jed Blackburn’s being made colonel is highly significant in that it represents an important concession in an era when blacks were generally excluded from the rank of commissioned officer in the regular army.

¹⁶Barbara W. Tuchman. *The Zimmermann Telegram*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1958) 30-32.

¹⁷Tuchman, 34, 37.

¹⁸Tuchman, 41, 34.