

## Critique

Professor Payne, in his two selections of seminal writings from the pre-World War I period, has performed a remarkable service for *Explorations* readers in presenting significant work tersely argued, well-written, and comprehensively considered. Griggs's and Corrothers's fiction contains all of the possibilities for political change that were considered during the 1960s and 1970s. From Montgomery to Nixon's re-election, advocates of different relationships between the white establishment and blacks presented their cases. Each relationship—maintenance of the status quo, exodus, alliance with foreign powers, secession, revolutionary training within the armed forces, and evolution—was written by either Griggs or Corrothers a half century before J.F. Kennedy's first day in office. All of the strategies for accomplishing the desired relationships were based upon the ideal of the American Dream, the unfulfilled promises of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

The difference between Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, protagonists in *Imperium in Imperio*, or between Jed Blackburn and the dissident blacks in "The Man They Didn't Know" is of the same quality as the difference between Andrew Young and Stokely Carmichael: Some believe the dream can be fulfilled, others do not. All of us make the same decision, if not in words then in actions.

Is there any significance to either Gloster's claim that *Imperium in Imperio* was the "first political novel" by a black American or Payne's deduction that "A Man They Didn't Know" was the first Afro-american fiction to suggest a specific three-part alliance? Significance other than competition or historiography could be shown if either piece had been included in the political education of subsequent black leaders.

That Griggs was well-known to his audience is documented by Payne's research. Griggs's writing style indicates that he also knew his audience well. The style is archaic, with its parable form and moral tone. Was it written in this style because Griggs intended it to be read aloud? Long speeches, parenthetical asides to the reader, and suspense-building by revealing future conclusions only in the most general terms all point to the affirmative.

That Corrothers also knew blacks of his time well—enough to create a plausible story out of black interest in foreign affairs of the nation using white and black archetypes—is no surprise if one also knows he was an accomplished folklorist, as well as a poet. Corrothers's story could easily have been titled "A People They Didn't Know."

Indeed, even now the majority ignores the direction blacks point. That direction is toward the fulfillment of the American Dream. The majority have opted for the selfish fulfillment of their private wants in what is considered a pragmatic approach to governance. The potential that blacks have for determining chaos or order in the nation is illustrated by an analysis of the Presidential election returns of 1980. The majority chose the “privatization” of community interests, excepting war preparedness. Blacks chose orderly progress toward democratic and equitable fulfillment of the American Dream.

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James Payne’s thoughtful and carefully documented essay stresses the importance of evaluating ethnic American, specifically Afro-american, fiction within its historical context. The historical information he provides in his essay concerning the Afroamerican response to the Spanish-American War and to America’s paranoia of a supposed “Yellow Peril” does indeed shed light on how Griggs and Corrothers each imaginatively re-invested a specific social reality with an Afroamerican revolutionary furor—a rage which ironically had the best interest of the country at heart.

We learn from Payne’s essay that Afroamericans and their terrifying encounters with white violence during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were virtually ignored by the American government—the one segment of the American social structure which could have done something constructive about it. Both Griggs and Corrothers were using fiction to protest this total disregard of the Afroamerican community’s welfare and, above all, the American disregard of the intense devotion and loyalty which most Afroamericans had for the country at that time. As Payne so aptly summarizes in his essay, both *Imperium in Imperio* and “The Man They Didn’t Know” were intended as warnings to their respective white American audiences that the Afroamerican community had the potential to justifiably abandon the United States in favor of an alliance with other peoples of color who had been the victims of Anglo-Saxon violence and aggression.