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Imperium in Imperio: Sutton Griggs's
Imagined War of 1898

Just once the convention lost complete control of itself. A tall slender youth had spoken some moments in a vein so modest that the chairman interrupted: "Gentlemen," said he, "the speaker hasn't much to say for himself, so I'm going to put in a word of my own. I can't help it. That man, gentlemen—that man there was in the front of the charge at San Juan!" At that the air seemed suddenly to be composed of equally active parts of handkerchiefs, hats and hilarious cheers. The slender youth bowed acknowledgements and said his speech ought to take a military turn, but that he hesitated to say the thing he had in mind. "It was not a pleasant thing."

"Say it out!" Yelled twenty voices.

So he said it out. He was disappointed in Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, said he, had slandered the Negro soldier; and there was really no braver soldier in the world. The Negro never flinched, never retreated. "Why, gentleman, way back in the old there was a Negro in the fight. And as for what Col. Roosevelt says about Negro soldiers being dependent upon white officers, I'll tell you the truth. There wasn't any officer in control on San Juan Hill—or rather every Negro private was a Negro captain!"

—Henry J. Barrymore's account in the *Boston Transcript* of Sergeant-Major Frank Pullen's speech at the August 1900 Meeting of the Negro Business League from Booker T. Washington's *The Story of My Life and Work*¹

In October 1898, Booker T. Washington was invited to speak at the Peace Jubilee in Chicago. Several weeks earlier, the black troopers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry had returned to the United States following victory in the Cuban Campaign. Washington had strongly supported the American intervention in Cuba, claiming that, if asked, he could enlist 100,000 enthusiastic African-American soldiers.

Before an overflow crowd of 16,000 including President McKinley, Washington celebrated the triumphs of the African-American soldiers:

When you have gotten the full story of the heroic conduct of the Negro in the Spanish-American War—heard it from the lips of Northern soldier and Southern soldier, from ex-abolitionists and ex-masters—then decide for yourself whether a race that is thus willing to die for its country should not be given the highest opportunity to live in its country.²

Washington's rhetoric highlights the hopes shared by many African-Americans that black participation in the Spanish-American War would win respect from whites and improve black status at home. Before the war, Edward Cooper, the conservative editor of the Washington *Colored American* urged African-Americans to respond to McKinley's call for volunteers so that "the Negro's manhood [can be] placed directly in evidence." Furthermore, in his address, Washington depicts the war as a vehicle for defusing and ameliorating racial antagonism: "recognition [of black heroism in Cuba] had done more to blot out sectional and racial lines than any event since the dawn of our freedom." Cooper echoed Washington's sentiments when he proclaimed to his readership: "Our soldierly qualities have been proven . . . The asperities of sectional and race hatred have been wonderfully softened."³ Washington's Peace Jubilee address was warmly received and widely reprinted in the national press.

Within the African-American community, the black troopers became immediate folk heroes:

In Negro homes pictures and plaques depicting the charge at San Juan occupied places of honor. Books, which celebrated the deeds of black soldiers in Cuba, found a ready market. Hundreds of poems ranging from the polished verse of Paul Laurence Dunbar to the crude rhymes of unknown poets extolled the exploits of Negro troops.⁴

In Cooper's terms, the soldiers were direct evidence of black manhood tested and proved. Furthermore, for a brief short-lived moment, even the white press championed the black soldiers. In October 1898, after the 10th Cavalry marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the cheers of the citizens and a review by McKinley and his Cabinet, the *Army and Navy Journal* commented, "Never in history has the Negro advanced so rapidly in public estimation as in this war."⁵

Ultimately, the hopes of the African-American community would be disappointed. Almost immediately, attention given to African-American heroism dwindled. As Amy Kaplan has shown:

While African-American newspapers repeatedly lambasted the white press for never mentioning the names of individual black soldiers and for ignoring their contributions, Roosevelt's account [the subject of Pullen's tirade] raised special outrage for its blatant distortions of those accomplishments which had entered the public light.⁶

In James Roberts Payne study of poetry written by black soldiers—as well as Dunbar's "The Conquerors: The Black Troops in Cuba" and James Weldon Johnson's short lyric "The Color Sergeant: On an Incident at the Battle of San Juan Hill"—Payne points to a progressive sense of disappointment, as the poems oscillate between "themes of extreme idealism and embittered disillusionment."⁷ In late October 1898, only two weeks after the Peace Jubilee, Charles Knox of the *Indianapolis Freeman* lamented, "The millennium that is to be has not dawned. El Caney and Santiago may as well not have been."⁸ Sergeant-Major Pullens's outburst in the form of his speech to the Negro Business League shows that this anger remained two years after the event.

Instead of the war leading to Washington's vision of racial lines blotted out or Cooper's image of racial hatred softened, the war precipitated a wave of mob violence against African-Americans. To many Southern whites, the victory over Spain—rekindling the martial spirit of the old Confederacy—was proof of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Returning black soldiers, often encamped in the south, were targets of white attack. Nowhere was the connection between the triumph in Cuba and assertions of white supremacy clearer than in the infamous November 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina white race riot. There, self-appointed vigilance committees created to quell black assertion, referred to themselves as "Rough Riders." By late 1898, Dunbar, dismayed by post-war events, feared that he detected, "a new attitude produced by the war which was anything but favorable for black

citizens.⁹ By 1900, W.E.B Du Bois confirmed indeed that Knox's millennium had not come. In his customary tone of distanced irony, Du Bois remarked that "the Spanish War and its various sequels have greatly increased some of our difficulties in dealing with the Negro problems."¹⁰

Written in the aftermath of the betrayal of the black Cuban War soldier and the upsurge of Negrophobia in the wake of the Spanish-American War, in 1899 Sutton Griggs, a Nashville Baptist minister originally from Texas, published his first novel, *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Problem*. The novel tells the story of the creation of the Imperium, an underground government founded in Waco, Texas to protect and enfranchise black Americans and to "unite all Negroes in a body."¹¹ Within this context—racial marginalization and violence—I read *Imperium* as Griggs's attempt to recover or recoup lost discursive terrain. Fundamentally, Griggs's goal is not merely to repudiate or rebut the white history of the Cuban Campaign, but instead to rewrite the War of 1898 in which the important events take place not in Cuba but in the Imperium's headquarters in Waco.

Griggs wrote almost exclusively with an African-American audience in mind. *Imperium* is one of the few novels of the day to include only black major characters and was virtually unknown to white Americans. The extent of *Imperium's* popularity is unclear; Griggs sold the book at religious revivals but sales were poor, probably due to widespread black illiteracy. Nonetheless, William Gatewood argues that *Imperium* probably circulated more widely among black readers than the fictions of Chesnutt, Dunbar, and other more prominent African-American literary figures.¹²

In the novel, the Imperium, numbering several million members, has established its own Army and a Congress that gathers in a hidden compound in Waco. The pivotal events take place in the months leading up to the April 22, 1898 US Declaration of War against Spain. First, the Imperium's Congress learns of the February 15th destruction of the *USS Maine* in Havana:

At length an insurrection broke out in Cuba, and the whole Imperium watched this struggle with keenest interest, as the Cubans were in large measures Negroes. In proportion as the Cubans drew near to their freedom, the fever of hope correspondingly rose in the veins of the Imperium. The United States of America sent a war ship to Cuba. One night while the soldiers slept in fancied security, some powerful engine of destruction demolished the vessel and ended the lives of some 266 American seamen [22 of whom were African-American].¹³

As highlighted here by Griggs, from the outset of Cuba's struggle for liberation from Spain, black Americans expressed great sympathy with the rebel cause. Pronouncements supporting the insurrection emphasized the considerable black population in Cuba and the role played by black soldiers in the Cuban revolutionary armies. As war seemed likely, following the destruction of the *Maine*, there was considerable division of opinion among black Americans as to their role should war come. Pro-war spokesmen like Washington urged blacks to rally around the flag just as they had done during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Pro-business conservatives like Cooper argued that economic opportunities would open up for blacks once the islands came under American influence. Anti-interventionists maintained that it was hypocritical for the American government to undertake a crusade to free Cuba from Spanish tyranny unless it was prepared to insure the constitutional rights of black citizens at home. Anti-interventionists warned—correctly—that a Jim Crow war would result in a Jim Crow empire, which would inevitably doom black Americans.

The next major event in the novel occurs several weeks after the explosion of the *Maine* when news of a shocking atrocity reaches the Imperium's headquarters in Waco. In 1897, President McKinley had named Frazier Baker, an African-American, as Postmaster in the predominantly white hamlet of Lake City, South Carolina. Apparently, Baker's appointment was deemed satisfactory; however, on February 22, an angry white mob set fire to his house, shot and killed Baker and wounded his wife and children as they tried to escape. In response, the President of the Imperium, Bernard Belgrave, concludes that the time for action has come:

This incident [Baker's murder] naturally aroused as much indignation among the members of the Imperium as did the destruction of the war ship in the bosoms of the Anglo-Saxons in the United States. Bernard regarded this as the most opportune moment for the Imperium to meet and act upon the whole question of the relationship of the Negro race to the Anglo-Saxons.¹⁴

The reaction of Bernard and the Imperium closely paralleled actual responses to the Lake City tragedy. One black editor in Lexington, Kentucky suggested that if "Remember the Maine" was the white-man's watchword," then "Remember the murder of Postmaster Baker should be the Negro's."¹⁵

Angered by the assault, the Imperium's Congress convenes for a special session at the Capitol building just outside Waco:

The session began on the morning of April-- the same day in which the Congress of the United States had under consideration the resolution, the adoption of which meant war with Spain. These two congresses on the same day had under consideration questions of vital import to civilization.

Bernard delivers a stirring speech and the excited Congress loudly proclaims, "War, War." Bernard calls for war. . . not against Spain, but against the United States! Bernard proposes seizing Austin at all costs—"No soldier of the Imperium [will] leave the field of battle until the ends for which this war was inaugurated are fully achieved"—including the declaration of an independent black Texas.¹⁶ Some black radicals presented Griggs's premise of black insurrection during the Spanish-American War as a very real possibility. In 1899, Clifford H. Plummer, the secretary of National Colored Protective League from Providence, RI, asserted:

During the war with Spain 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.¹⁷

While Plummer's claim is probably not historically accurate, it suggests that Griggs's audience would not have seen Bernard's scenario as wholly implausible.

In Waco, General Bernard Belgrave can be imagined as a black martial hero, preparing the Imperium's formidable army for its own national/separatist crusade. When set against white narratives of the Spanish-American War, the mere invocation of a possible General Belgrave makes *Imperium* a threatening, if not seditious, text.

In the end, however, the radical vision of the Imperium cannot be sustained. The Imperium's war with the United States never materializes. Belton Piedmont, Bernard's Vice President, persuades the Imperium's Congress to reject Bernard's Declaration of War. Bernard then offers Belton an even more aggressive plan. Belton again rejects the Declaration of War. He resigns from the Imperium, accepting the mandatory punishment of his execution that must follow.

After Belton is executed, Berl Trout, the Imperium's Secretary of State determines that Bernard is insane and that "our well-organized, thoroughly equipped Imperium was a serious menace to the peace of the world."⁸ Trout decides, "to prove traitor and reveal the existence of the Imperium that it might be broken up or watched."⁹ Trout is himself sentenced to death. The final fate of the Imperium is unresolved but, apparently, its force will dissipate. Two leading members are dead; its President may be mad, and its Congress is left in chaos.

The narrative structure of *Imperium* works to both display and limit the subversive potential of the Imperium. Griggs uses the "found manuscript" genre, which appears frequently in African-American writing of the period. In the preface, Griggs claims that, prior to events in Waco, he himself was "unacquainted with the Imperium." Rather, on the eve of his impending execution, Trout, the Imperium's Secretary of State, supposedly offered Griggs his account of the Imperium, which Griggs then edited. The novel opens with a "Dying Declaration," Trout's confession of betrayal, and ends with an item labeled "Personal" in which Trout expresses his fear of Bernard. The intervening sections are Griggs's third person reconstruction of Trout's story. Given the constraints of the period, Griggs's indirect use of Trout's incendiary narrative is perhaps the only mechanism by which Griggs can represent the Imperium. At the same time, as Griggs highlights his reliance on Trout's fragmented recollections, he becomes uneasily distanced from his own production and its potential implications.

The relationship between Bernard Belgrave and Belton Piedmont lies at the core of *Imperium*. Belton grows up in poverty; his well-to-do mulatto mother raises the lighter-skinned Bernard. Later in life, Bernard learns that he is the grandson of a Governor and the son of a Congressman. Both are academic prodigies. Bernard (secretly funded by his father) attends Harvard and wins honors in classics and the law. Following Harvard, Bernard returns to Virginia where he is elected to the House of Representatives. Belton attends the all-black "Stowe University" and then pursues careers as a journalist, teacher and college president but his advancement is undermined by discrimination. The two men, who had been schoolboys in Hampton, Virginia before going their separate ways, are re-united in Waco. Belton reveals to Bernard that he, Belton, has been a long-standing member in the secret Imperium. Belton tells Bernard that, given Bernard's unprecedented achievements, the Imperium has offered him its Presidency. Bernard accepts, setting in motion the series of events leading to their tragic rupture in 1898. Ultimately, the Imperium fails because there seems to be no way that Griggs can imagine a fully successful "black martial subject." In the end, the novel cannot resolve the tension between

Belton, the racial accomodationist, and Bernard, the militant mulatto. Within the dynamics of the story, as a mulatto, Bernard supposedly suffers from a hereditary taint, while Belton seems to be compromised by his attachment to the white body.

Introducing Booker T. Washington

Several critics have noted similarities between Booker T. Washington and Griggs's characterization of Belton Piedmont. Arlene Elder says Belton, given his rise from poverty, intellectual achievements and his position as college president, is almost surely modeled after Washington.²⁰ Hannah Wallinger claims that Belton is "the fictional representative of the real-life controversy between the conciliatory Washington and the more radical Du Bois."²¹ Elder and Wallinger reiterate the argument that Washington stood for pacifism, compromise and cooperation while Du Bois's more militant views on black resistance contemplated various forms of black nationalism and separatism. At the same time, while Belton's foil, Bernard Belgrave, speaks against conciliation, it does not seem that Belgrave is modeled after Du Bois. In "'The Sweetness of his Strength': Du Bois, Teddy Roosevelt and the Back Soldier," Mark Braley has shown that despite his militant reputation, Du Bois was "generally opposed to war, and while he never failed to support the black soldier, his soldier was a reluctant one." As Braley wrote, "over against Roosevelt's 'big stick,' Du Bois poses the peaceful assertiveness of Alexander Crummell"—an approach generally shared by Washington.²²

In 1900, Washington, along with Reverend N.B. Woods and Mrs. Fannie Barrier Williams, published *A New Negro for a New Century*.²³ Washington devoted his section to an extensive tribute to the black trooper in Cuba, framed as a response to Roosevelt's accounts of the Cuban Campaign. First, Washington cites an October 1898 address given by Roosevelt at the New York Lennox Lyceum following Roosevelt's return from Cuba. At the Lyceum, Roosevelt praised the heroics of the black trooper:

As I [Roosevelt] heard one of The Rough Riders say after the charge at San Juan: 'Well, the Ninth and Tenth men are all right. They can drink out of our canteens.'

They and we went up absolutely intermingled, so that no one could tell whether it was the Riders or the men of the Ninth who came forward with the greater courage to offer lives in the service of their country . . .

When you have been in fire with a man and fought side by side with him, and eaten with him when you had anything to eat, and hungered with him when you hadn't, you feel a sort of comradeship that you don't feel for any man that you have been associated with in other ways, and I don't think any of the Rough Riders will ever forget the tie that binds us to the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry.²⁴

Given the prevailing codes that enforced racial segregation and white supremacy, Roosevelt's recognition of the courageous black troopers and the vivid tableaux of intermingled black and white soldiers are indeed remarkable. Here, Roosevelt's rhetoric contains highly charged images of bodily affinity and identification: shared canteens, physical merging, common hungering and psychic bonding—images that Washington admires.

Washington's pleasure with Roosevelt's story of the Cuban War is, however, short-lived. Washington says, "In view of this pronouncement [Roosevelt's at the Lyceum] there was a very great deal of surprise when, in his story of *The Rough Riders*, Colonel Roosevelt published the following."²⁵ Now, Washington inserts one of Roosevelt's passages in which Roosevelt claims that without white officers the black soldiers were inert or hesitant:

None of the white regulars or Rough Riders showed the slightest sign of weakening; but under the strain the colored infantrymen (who had none of their officers) began to get a little uneasy and to drift to the rear, either helping wounded men, or saying they wished to find their own regiments. This I could not now allow, as it was depleting my line, so I jumped up, and walking a few yards to the rear, drew my revolver, halted the retreating soldiers, and called out to them that I appreciated the gallantry with which they had fought and would be sorry to hurt them, but that I should shoot the first man who, out of any pretense whatever, went to the rear . . .

I ended my statement to the colored soldiers by saying: "Now, I shall be sorry to hurt you, and you don't know whether or not I keep my word, but my men can tell you that I always do;" whereupon my cow-punchers, hunters, and miners solemnly nodded their heads and commented in chorus, exactly as if in a comic opera, "He always does; he always does." This ended the trouble.

To which Washington responds:

This makes very nice reading, but it is not history, in which it is always hazardous to sacrifice truth “to make the period round.” It is therefore fortunate that one of the Afro-Americans who was with Colonel Roosevelt at the time and knows all about the scandalous incident he relates should write a correction of the Rough Rider’s statements.²⁶

The “scandalous incident” is not just that Roosevelt says that the black soldiers drifted to the rear or, at another point, that, “they [the black troopers] were, of course, peculiarly dependent on their white officers.” It is as much what Roosevelt has written in *The Rough Riders* but what has been discarded from the October speech. In *The Rough Riders*, bodily bonds have disappeared. Shared canteens have been replaced with Roosevelt’s menacing pistol; comradeship is displaced as the power to hurt; the Lennox Lyceum has given way to a comic opera. In the Lyceum Speech, Roosevelt seemed to have granted the black troopers a kind of equivalent martial manhood via idealized images of black cavalrymen and white Rough Riders as one. In *The Rough Riders*, that grant has been rescinded.

Washington follows with the strongly worded rebuttal by the black trooper Presley Holliday first printed in *The New York Age*, one similar to that voiced by Sergeant-Major Pullen before the Negro Business League:

I could give many other incidents of our men’s devotion to duty, of their determination to stay until the death, but what’s the use? Colonel Roosevelt said they shirked, and the reading public will take the Colonel at his word and go on thinking they shirked. His statement was uncalled for and uncharitable and. . . altogether ungrateful, and has done us an immeasurable lot of harm. I will say that when our soldiers who can and will write history, they [the white reading public] will see in print held up for public gaze, much to their chagrin, tales of those Cuban battles that have never been told outside the tent and the barrack room, tales that it will not be agreeable for some of them to hear.

Washington concludes, “So much for Roosevelt’s statements.”²⁷

In Holliday’s speech are the echoes of Washington’s sense of betrayal resulting from words uncalled for, uncharitable and ungrateful. More so, when Holliday tells the black soldier to make public untold and disagreeable tales, he seems to be repudiating not just Roosevelt’s words but also Roosevelt’s white authority. In

a way, Holliday's call for a black history anticipates Bernard's secessionist speech before the Imperium.

In contrast, while Washington uses Holliday's narrative to bolster his critique of Roosevelt's reversal, Washington's rhetoric does not speak out against Roosevelt's authority to tell the story of the Cuban Campaign. Fundamentally, Washington's critique itself relies upon his initial endorsement and praise for Roosevelt's Lyceum address. If Roosevelt had not reversed himself, Holliday's call for a new history would be both muted and mute. Finally, when Washington preserves the Lyceum speech, he preserves images of black soldiers on San Juan Hill whose manhood is inextricably bound and defined by the relationship to their white counterparts and Roosevelt's authority.

Belton Piedmont—the Imperium's surrogate Washington

As the novel follows Belton from his graduation from Stowe University to his fateful decision to abandon the Imperium, Belton's trajectory is marked by a series of troubling and bizarre encounters with the white establishment. As mentioned, Elder and Wallinger aptly point to resemblances between Belton and Washington. In these episodes, I do not draw parallels between Belton and Washington *per se*. At the same time, it is crucial to see the great lengths Griggs goes to construct Belton as always vulnerable to white power, physically and psychologically.

The first such encounter takes place in Richmond where Belton is happily married but unable to find suitable employment. Frustrated by Jim Crow oppression, Belton decides to "endeavor to find out just what view the white people were taking of the Negro and the existing conditions." To do so, he concocts an unusual scheme leading to a strange set of events. Belton travels to New York where he purchases a wig "representing the hair on the head of a colored woman" and an "outfit of well fitting dresses and other garments worn by women."²⁸ Returning to Richmond, Belton dresses himself as a woman and hires himself as a nursemaid so that he can spy upon his white employers

Not surprisingly, Belton discovers that the white man was almost entirely ignorant of black conditions. More significantly, the cross-dressing experiment places Belton in an odd position. He becomes the object of white male desire:

The young men in the families in which Belton worked seemed to have a poor opinion of the virtue of colored women. Time and time again they tried to kiss Belton, and he would sometimes have to exert his full strength to keep them at a distance. He thought that while he was a nurse,

he would do what he could to exalt the character of the colored women. So, at every chance he got, he talked to the men who approached him, of virtue and integrity. He soon got the name of being a 'virtuous prude' and the white men decided to corrupt him at all hazards.

While Belton was spying on the white men, they were ogling him—leading to further complications:

Midnight carriage rides were offered and refused. Trips to distant cities were proposed but declined. Money was offered freely and lavishly but to no avail. Belton did not yield to them. He became the cynosure of all eyes. He seemed so hard to reach that they began to doubt his sex. A number of them decided to satisfy themselves at all hazards. They resorted to the bold and daring plan of kidnapping and overpowering Belton. After that eventful night Belton did no more nursing. But fortunately they did not recognize who he was. He secretly left . . . The town was agog with excitement over the male nurse, but none suspected him.²⁹

But what exactly happened that eventful night? A group of angry white men is intent on gangraping a black nurse, only to discover—a 19th century *Crying Game*—that their victim is a man. Yet they leave Belton physically intact, untouched by the rope or the knife. How did Belton placate the white mob? How did they satisfy themselves? The text is silent. Belton escapes, only to encounter more victimization.

Upon returning home, Belton discovers the seeming consequence of his absence. Soon afterwards, to Belton's great joy, his wife learns that she is pregnant. At the child's birth, however, Belton is horrified to discover; "The color of Antoinette was brown. The color of Belton was dark. But the child was white!"³⁰ Belton abandons his wife and erases her from his heart. One irony is clear: while Belton was espousing the virtue of the African-American woman, a white man apparently impregnated his adulterous wife. Furthermore, Belton has shared his wife's fate, evoking the trauma of that eventful night.

Belton endures one more crisis. While traveling to Louisiana, Belton encounters Dr. Zakeland: "A thin, scrawny looking man with a very long beard, very, very white. His body was slightly stooping forward and whenever he looked at you he had the appearance of bending to see you better." The creepy and peering Zakeland observes Belton:

Belton was a fine specimen of physical manhood. His limbs were well formed and well proportioned and seemed strong as oak. His manly appearance always excited interest wherever he was seen. The doctor's eyes followed him cadaverously.

It is not difficult to see erotic desire in the doctor's gothic gaze, especially when he displays his wish: "I'll be durned if that aint the finest lookin' darkey I ever put my eye on. If I could get his body to dissect, I'd give one of my finest kegs of whiskey in my cellar."³¹

Zakeland gets his wish when a white mob decides that Belton is fomenting discontent. The mob knocks Belton unconscious and plans to lynch and burn him. Zakeland, however, intercedes, offering the mob the keg of whiskey if they deliver Belton's intact body. The mob brings Belton, wounded and inert, to the good doctor. Thinking Belton is dead, Zakeland, exuding necrophilic zeal, stands over his naked form with scalpel intent on dismemberment: "Dr. Zakeland came to the table and looked down on Belton with a happy smile. To have such a robust, well-formed handsome nigger to dissect and examine he regarded as one of the greatest boons of his medical career."³² Ultimately, Belton returns to consciousness, escapes and kills Zakeland in the process.

Belton has survived all his violations but at a cost. Belton's self-fashioning as a coquettish woman, the eventful night with his white suitors, his wife's seemingly adulterous liaison with a white man in his absence, his grisly encounter with Zakeland's erotic gaze and menacing knife imprint him with the signs of the white body and white mastery and foreshadow his final decision to remain loyal to white America.

Bernard Belgrave—the Imperium's Man on Horseback

Throughout most of the novel, Bernard Belgrave seems to possess all the requirements of a superman. Given his stunning successes in the United States Congress, Bernard is envisioned as the savior of his race: "The colored people hailed Bernard as the coming Moses. 'Belgrave, Belgrave, Belgrave,' was on every Negro tongue. Poems were addressed to him." Bernard, "the most noted Negro of his day," becomes engaged to the accomplished Viola Martin, who loves him but kills herself because she believes that she cannot marry a black man with mixed ancestry.³³

Viola leaves Bernard a suicide letter that reads more like a political tract than farewell to life:

My father was a colonel in the Civil War and when I was very young he would sit by my side and make my little heart thrill with patriotic fervor as he told me of the deeds of the daring and gallant Negro soldiers. As a result, when nothing but a tiny girl, I determined to be a heroine and find some outlet for my patriotic feeling. This became my consuming passion.

Viola invokes a powerful image, the heroic black Colonel (foreshadowing Bernard's later ascendancy to Commander-in-Chief of the Imperium's army). Daring and gallant Bernard would seem to be the ideal vehicle for Viola's consuming passion. Viola explains why Bernard cannot fulfill that ideal. Two years before meeting Bernard, Viola had read J.H. Van Evrie's *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*, a racist polemic against miscegenation.³⁴ Viola says the book proved that:

The intermingling of the races in the sexual relationship was slowly but surely exterminating the race. It demonstrated that the fourth generation of children born of intermarrying mulattos were invariably sterile or woefully lacking in vital force. It asserted that only in the most rare instances were children born of this fourth generation no such children reached maturity.

While this intermingling was impairing the vital force of our race and exterminating it, it was having no such effect on the white race for the following reason. Every half-breed, or for that, every person having a tinge of Negro blood, the white people were cast off. We receive the cast off with open arms and he comes to us with his devitalizing power. Thus, the white man was slowly exterminating us and our total extinction was but a short period of time . . . I determined to spend my life fighting the evil. My first step was to solemnly pledge to God to never to marry a mulatto man.³⁵

The text offers no clues as to whether Viola's fears about Bernard's mixed ancestry are meant to be read as literally (i.e. genetically) valid or whether Viola has fatally misinterpreted white propaganda. It is never even clear if Bernard himself rejects Viola's conclusions. On the one hand, robust and manly Bernard, the black Moses, would seem to refute Viola's theory. On the other hand, if Viola's prophecy is correct, then Bernard contains the seeds of impotence and degeneration, "invariably sterile

or woefully lacking in vital force.” Hugh Gloster has described how white authors of the period characterized the mulatto:

Unmistakably again and again is the hypothesis that white-Negro hybrids have acumen and attractiveness because of their white ancestry, that they deserve pity because the blood of Caucasian fathers flows in their veins, and that their misery, bitterness, defiance, and ambition are traceable to proud paternal forebears.³⁶

By contrast, in her terrified response to Bernard’s mixed ancestry, Viola posits the opposite: white blood threatens black strength. Ultimately, the implications of Bernard’s white blood trigger the demise of the Imperium. Unlike Theodore Roosevelt who will be galloping up the slopes of San Juan Hill, a Bernard Belgrave on horseback will never be leading an all-black Army through Tampa, or reprising the heroics of Viola’s gallant father in the Civil War.

The End of the Imperium

After Bernard makes his call for war before the Imperium’s Congress, Belton delivers a conciliatory speech, urging patience and restraint. That evening Bernard goes to the Congress with an even more militant scheme, including infiltrating the United States navy with black sailors. Belton rejects Bernard’s fantastical scheme, one that conflicts with Belton’s deepest feelings:

Candidly, Bernard, I love the Union and I love the South. Soaked as Old Glory is with my people’s tears and stained as it is with their warm blood, I could die as my forefathers did, fighting for its honor and asking no greater boon than Old Glory for my shroud and native soil for my grave. This may sound strange but love of country is one of the deepest passions in the human bosom, and men in all ages have been known to give their lives for the land in which they have known nothing save cruelty and oppression. I shall never give up my freedom, but I shall never prove false to the flag.³⁷

With this declaration, Belton goes a long way toward confirming the contention that Griggs indeed had Booker T. Washington in mind when he imagined the character of Belton Piedmont.

In his October 1898 Peace Jubilee address, Washington had presented black heroics in Cuba as a testament of devoted patriotism in the following terms:

When the crucial test comes [the battles of El Caney and San Juan], you are not ashamed of us. We have never betrayed or deceived you. You know that as it has been, so it will be. Whether in war or in peace, whether in slavery or in freedom, we have always been loyal to the Stars and Stripes.³⁸

In Waco, Belton can thus be seen as invoking rhetoric similar to Washington's in declaring loyalty to the America flag. In his final repudiation of black secession, Belton says he would gladly die fighting, not for the Imperium, but for Old Glory like his forefathers, whether in slavery or freedom.

At the same time, Belton's passions indeed do "sound strange." For, he may have been molested by a white mob, his wife impregnated by a white man, his body knocked unconscious by race vigilantes and then nearly dismembered by Dr. Zakeland. Yet Belton's allegiance is unwavering! In his final plea to Bernard, Belton reveals his attachments: his nation, his region, his native soil, and his flag. While Belton frames his love in terms of inanimate and symbolic objects, Belton must by extension love the men who inhabit the soil. And, in a sense, Belton may also love the white men who oppress him. For Belton, to separate from their bodies is unimaginable. Here, the narratives of victim and victimizer have merged.

Obdurate, Belton resigns from the Imperium and accepts the proscribed death penalty. Before his execution, Belton is allowed to visit his wife in Richmond. As he enters his home, his wife points to their son: "Belton! There is your white child! Look at him! Look at him!"

[Antoinette] eyed him eagerly. She rushed to her album and showed him pictures of the child taken at various stages of its growth. Belton discerned the same features in each photograph, but a different shade of color of the skin. His knees began to tremble. He had come, as the most wronged of men, to grant pardon. He now found himself the vilest of men, unfit for pardon.³⁹

Earlier in the story, it seemed that one of Belton's violations was the loss of his paternity at the hands of a white man. Yet, Belton's discovery, pointing to the apparent restoration of his manhood, seems to refute his loss. Antoinette was, in fact, faithful and Belton has, in fact, produced offspring. In the closing scenes,

Belton returns to Waco and is executed. The recovery of his black child does not really reverse the narrative in which Belton identifies with whiteness and is buried under the American flag. The novel suggests that Belton's short-lived idyll with Antoinette and their child is a tragic but ennobling compensation. It is only after Belton has rejected the separatist ideology of the Imperium that he can return to Antoinette and learn of her fidelity. The idyll itself—Belton's reward for accepting the authority of and dying for Old Glory—signals a fairy-tale of black contentment within the bounds of domestic harmony.

After Belton's death, Griggs returns to Trout's firsthand account of Belton's burial on the outskirts of Waco:

As Bernard stood by the side of Belton's grave and saw the stiffened form of his dearest friend to its last resting place, his grief was of a kind too galling for tears. He laughed a fearful, wicked laugh like unto that of a maniac, and said: "Float on proud flag, while yet you may. Rejoice all ye Anglo-Saxons, yet a little while. Make my father ashamed to own me, his lawful son; call me a bastard child; look upon my pure mother as a harlot; laugh at Viola in the grave of a self-murderer; exhume Belton's body if you like and tear your flag from around him to keep him from polluting it! Yes, stuff your vile stomachs full of all these horrors. You shall be richer food for the buzzards to whom I have solemnly vowed to give your flesh."³⁰

Shocked by Bernard's diatribe that "struck terror to my soul," Trout decides that Bernard has become insane or mentally unstable. Hoping to forestall Bernard's plans, Trout reveals to the world the existence of the Imperium and its plans for a black nation.

Belton, as the *Imperium's* surrogate Washington, does not present a radical threat either to the white order or the white military. When cast against *The Rough Riders*, Belton conforms to Roosevelt's depiction of the peculiar dependence of the black troopers. Like Booker T. Washington, Belton cannot quite imagine himself outside of his allegiance to the white body. Perhaps the only war Belton could imagine for himself would be charging up San Juan Hill intermingled with the Rough Riders. Bernard represents the greater challenge. Trout's invokes two images: Bernard, vehemently intent on prosecuting his War of 1898, and Bernard, seemingly mentally unhinged and on the verge of losing control of the Imperium.

The first image of Bernard's heightened black militancy, especially when set against Belton's passivity, collides with narratives that privilege white martial power.

When Trout portrays Bernard, in the second image, as a madman incapable of leading the Imperium, Bernard's seeming flaws enact Viola's prophecy. Viola believed that Bernard's mixed blood—his disabling stain of whiteness—pointed to a latent but insufficient virility that presaged the inevitable decline of his vitality. To Viola, Bernard's black blood gave him the potential to become, like her father in the Civil War, his people's Man on Horseback. In *Imperium*, Bernard's white blood renders him unfit to lead the Imperium. In *The Rough Riders*, Roosevelt was intent on *un*-intermingling his men from the black trooper whose supposed weakness could only taint the white regiment. In Griggs's putative version of the Spanish War soldier, the danger is the reverse: black manhood not as peculiarly dependent but as potentially superior. Via his identification with white bodies, Belton could have a place in America's Cuban crusade. However, Belton's removal from the Imperium clears the way for a phantom vision: General Belgrave—tainted or not by his white blood—at the head of a black Army headed for Austin. In the end, of course, it is only a vision. Finally, Griggs, his character and his audience are left in a no-man's zone: unable to fully repudiate the white man's version of war and unable to fully create their own.

Notes

1. Booker T. Washington, *Booker T. Washington's Own Story of His Life and Work* (Atlanta: J.L. Nichols & Co, 1901) Chapter XV. Washington would later turn *Life and Work* into the shorter and better-known *Up from Slavery*, which did not include Barrymore's account of Pullen's remarks.
2. Washington, *Life*, Chapter XV.
3. William B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden 1898-1903* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1975) 109.
4. Gatewood, 107.
5. Jack Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974) 79.
6. Amy Kaplan, "Black and Blue on San Juan Hill." *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 227.
7. James Robert Payne, "Afro-American Literature of the Spanish-American War." *MELUS*, Vol. 10, No.3 (Autumn 1983), 19-32.

8. Gatewood, 110.

9. Gatewood, 110.

10. Du Bois's quote from "The Twelfth Census and the Negro Problem" appears in: Frederick Wegner, "Charles W. Chesnutt and the Anti-Imperialist Matrix of African-American Writing, 1898-1905." *Criticism*, Fall 1999, footnote 45. In his essay, Wegner sums up the Negrophobia of the period: "The Spanish-American War, by inciting a patriotic martial frenzy throughout the nation, had completed the South's post-Reconstructionist rapprochement with the North, at the expense of its black citizens." Wegner also discusses Charles Chesnutt's 1899 *The Marrow of Tradition*, which is based on the Wilmington Riots. In the novel, Chesnutt does not make any direct references to the Cuban War, although he alludes to American imperial ambitions. Unlike Griggs, Chesnutt wrote for a white audience; he sent copies of *The Marrow* to both President Roosevelt's Secretary of State and to Roosevelt himself.

11. Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Problem* (Miami, FL: Mnemosyne Publishing Inc, 1969).

12. Dickson Bruce, *Black American Writing from the Nadir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) According to Bruce, *Imperium* did not have a major impact within elite black literary and political circles. Griggs sent a copy of *Imperium* to Kelly Miller, a prominent educator and writer. Miller responded positively but when Griggs sent the novel to twenty other black leaders, he received no comments.

13. Griggs, 201.

14. Griggs, 203.

15. Gatewood, 32.

16. Griggs, 203.

17. Gatewood, 210.

18. Griggs, 268.

19. Griggs, 262.

20. Arlene A Elder, *The "Hindered Hand" Cultural Implications of Early African American Fiction* (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 1975).

21. Hannah Wallinger, "Secret Societies and Dark Empires: Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* and W.E.B Du Bois's *Dark Princess* from *Empire*": *American Studies* ed. by John G. Blair and Reinhold Wagnleitner (Tubingen, Germany: Narr Verlag Tubingen, 1997).

22. Mark Braley, "The Sweetness of his Strength": Du Bois, Teddy Roosevelt and the Black Soldier," *W.E.B Du Bois and race: essays celebrating the centennial publication of The Souls of Black Folk*, Chester J. Fontenot Jr. and Mary Alice Morgan, eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001) 97-121.

23. Booker T. Washington, N.B. Wood, and Fannie Barrier Williams, *A New Negro for a New Century* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

24. Washington, *New Negro*, 50-51.
25. Washington, *New Negro*, 52.
26. Washington, *New Negro*, 53-54.
27. Washington, *New Negro*, 53-54.
28. Griggs, 132-133.
29. Griggs, 134-135.
30. Griggs, 136.
31. Griggs, 144.
32. Griggs, 156.
33. Griggs, 109.
34. John H Van Evrie, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination; or, Negroes a Subordinate Race and (so-called) Slavery its Normal Condition* (New York: Van, 1868) vi. In his treatise, Evrie argued that freedom would prove detrimental to the well-being of blacks. Van Evrie contended that “governments can not exist an hour anywhere where these widely different races are forced into legal equality in approximate proportions.”
35. Griggs, 173-174.
36. Hugh Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948).
37. Griggs, 253.
38. Washington, *Life*, Chapter XV.
39. Griggs, 257-258.
40. Griggs, 26.



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and Richard Harding Davis.” http://wlajournal.com/14_1-2/28-44Kramer.pdf He is currently working on a documentary project about the 1964 Rochester riots.