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“Make the Separation Physical”:  
(De)legitimizing Black Separatism in  
Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*

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**Abstract**

The 1890s have often been described as perhaps the low point of the United States’ race relations. Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) imagines a complex solution to this racial nadir, a proto-Black Nationalist plot that would create an “empire within an empire.” The title of Griggs’s text acknowledges America’s imperial power, while also imagining an alternative narrative of utopianism. Furthermore, the novel anatomises the systematic removal of African Americans from the nation’s dream of a white future, offering a threatening antithesis to the ideals that sustain that future. However, the novel clearly does not present a model of doctrinaire nationalism, but rather a divided and unresolved striving for a new way out of America’s racial nightmare. Rather than producing a coherent solution, Griggs’s novel outlines various solutions to the problems of his age. Two approaches to black leadership, militancy and cooperation, are embodied by the novel’s two protagonists, Bernard Belgrave and Belton Piedmont, respectively. The novel ends oscillating irresolutely between ambiguous conciliation and fantasised insurrectionary threat: two resolutions that are crucially engendered by each character’s familial situation, and by each character’s relationship with the broader conceptual ‘family America.’ The novel finds only temporary resolution, or “philosophical pragmatism,” a provisional solution to a racial nightmare that centres on the persistently resonant dream of the American family.

**Keywords:** Sutton E Griggs; *Imperium in Imperio*; New Negro Movement; Black Nationalism

### A New Negro?

Slavery, according to the narrator of Sutton E. Griggs's most famous work, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), had robbed African-American manhood, leaving only the "cringing, fawning, sniffing, cowardly Negro" of the plantation. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, that type had "disappeared," and a "new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights was at hand" (46). This is one of the first uses of the term "New Negro," which appears, in fact, to have been coined in an editorial in the *Cleveland Gazette* on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1895. That article describes a "class of coloured people, the 'New Negro,' who have 'risen up since the War, with education, refinement and money'" (Coleman 255), and indeed 1895 has often been highlighted by African-American intellectuals as a historically significant year. It is the year in which W. E. B. Du Bois became the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard University; Booker T. Washington achieved national fame with his first Atlanta Compromise speech, and Frederick Douglass died after a period of what are generally considered to be the most disillusioned and despairing speeches and essays of his career. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. cited 1895 as the start of a period of what he terms "black intellectual reconstruction": an era that, he believes, is more culturally important to African Americans than the actual Reconstruction (1867-1876):

I see this period between 1895 and 1925, rather than the narrower one between 1867 and 1876, as the crux of the period of black intellectual reconstruction. For the literary critic, there is little choice. Between 1867 and 1876, for example, black people published as books only *two* novels, one in 1867 and one in 1871. Between 1895 and 1925, however, black writers published at least sixty four novels. (131)

Similarly, Houston A. Baker, Jr. has described the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1895 and Booker T. Washington's ten-minute opening address at the Negro exhibit of the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition as the moment at which "African Americans had burst on to the scene as a *national* rather than a regional phenomenon, engaged in an enterprise of

cultural redefinition that was to be renewed and revised throughout the twentieth century” (Baker 15; see also Dubey 156).

In highlighting the eighteen nineties as the beginning of “an enterprise of cultural redefinition,” and citing novel-writing as a yardstick to measure the success of that enterprise, Baker and Gates opened up a fertile field of literary study. They also helped delineate the apparent drop off in published black writing post-slavery. Broadly speaking, the Reconstruction era black novelist seems to have struggled for a subject: “as if,” as Gates’s essay speculates, the “great and terrible subject of black literature – slavery – found no immediate counterpart when blacks were freed” (131). This was to change in the post-Reconstruction era.

The post-Reconstruction period, beginning with the “compromise” in which Republican president Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew federal troops from the Southern states in 1876, saw changes in American life that were to change African-American authorship in profound ways. Compromise meant, in simple terms, the end of federal control over the Southern States, and the resultant creation of a system of segregation and black disenfranchisement. It inflicted wrongs upon African America that were not legally ameliorated until the Second Reconstruction almost a century later. And yet, as the optimism of the Reconstruction era evaporated, the effect on African-American cultural production was, ironically, a flourishing of literary output. Gates describes this as a “paradox of [African American] intellectual history:” that “once Redemption had established itself as a new form of enslavement for blacks, blacks regained a public voice, louder and more strident than it had been even during slavery” (131). There are many reasons for the apparent anomaly. First among these the effects of a system of institutionalised separation must be considered. “After the failure of Reconstruction,” as Hazel Carby argues in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), “social conventions dictated an increasing and more absolute distance between black and white as institutionalized in the Jim Crow laws” (89). Moreover, this “absolute distance” was cognitive as well as spatial.

Crucially, during the same period, the African-American middle-class – characterised by Du Bois as the “talented tenth” – grew at a sufficient rate to create both sophisticated and ambitious novelists and poets ready to present this counter-narrative and a small but growing

audience ready to hear it. Through migration, urbanisation, and post-bellum educational initiatives, a new black professional group grew up between 1890 and 1920, particularly in northern communities. The new group, according to Michael Fultz, "was distinct from the older African-American upper class in several ways, notably in terms of their racial philosophies and their relationship with the existing black community" (106). This relationship transcended class to a greater degree than ever before. "The new middle-class and professional group," Fultz writes, "forcefully advocated self-help, character-building, social uplift, and race patronage and solidarity" (130).

And yet, despite this newfound class "solidarity," there is here, as in Du Bois's 1903 depiction of "exceptional men" who would 'save the race,' a potential implication of social stratification involved in the black bourgeoisie's "race patronage." Seizing on the almost exclusive use of elite periodicals as a means to discuss "the race question," black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier launched a concerted attack on the African-American middle-class throughout the first half of the twentieth century. "Although the Negro press, including magazines as well as newspapers, claims to be publishing in the interest of the 'race,'" Frazier charged, "it represents primarily the interests of the black bourgeoisie and promulgates the bourgeois values of the make-believe world of the black bourgeoisie" (179).

Literary histories have adopted similar attitudes to the black middle-class, presenting the group as straightforward assimilationists, desperate to enter the white mainstream, and producing bland copies of white American art, rather than genuine expressions of their own culture (Turner 125). The term, "New Negro," is now, of course, most commonly associated with Alain Locke's 1925 anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, a volume that greatly emphasises the contrast between the "Old Negro" of the nineteenth century and the assertiveness and self-confidence of the "New Negro" during the years following World War I and the Great Migration. Locke's model, therefore, defines itself against the imagined nineteenth-century 'middle-class assimilationist' type. The "assertiveness" that Locke highlights was, however, already in evidence in Griggs's 1899 use of the phrase – despite the fact that Griggs situates the most militant aspects of "New Negroism" within a nineteenth-century and middle-class

background. The phrase appears at three points in *Imperium in Imperio*, on each occasion when African Americans are engaged either in insurrectionary plotting or in outright physical challenge to white authority. Indeed, the link between the paradigmatic New Negro and the growth of a new form of Black Nationalist radicalism is also well established. Rollin Harte, in 1925, attempted to define the Harlem Renaissance concept of the New Negro with a single phrase: “The New Negro: you hit him, and he strikes back” (qtd. in Redding 98).

For a time, literary histories attempted to place Griggs as a champion not just of the New Negro, but of “New Negro militancy.” In 1969, Hugh M. Gloster wrote an introduction to *Imperium in Imperio*, describing Griggs as the “most neglected Negro writer of the period between the Spanish American War and World War I,” and attributing that neglect to Griggs’s position as a writer brave enough to “espouse black beauty, black pride, black militancy, and black separatism” in an America that was hostile to such ideas (i). Gloster laid the groundwork for later critics to define Griggs with such labels as “militant black novelist” (Fleming 73), and “literary Garveyist” (Moses 203). Before Gloster’s piece, Griggs scholarship was scarce and tended to form a much less clear-cut picture of his fiction. Robert A. Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), for example, points to the fact that Griggs’s radicalism was tempered by a “more moderate, and realistic approach.” Bone brands Griggs “ideologically confused,” alternatively “militant and challenging” and “conciliatory to the point of servility” (33). The argument is summarily dismissed by the succeeding generation of Black Arts critics:

When Robert Bone . . . argues that Griggs is an impostor , that he is not the forerunner of the New Negro , that his militant Black Nationalism was a facade beneath which he hid his accommodationist philosophy, he is not to be taken seriously. For an understanding of Black Nationalism, not surprisingly, Bone consulted his own imagination. Griggs, on the other hand , through association with black people, knew firsthand the conflict facing the Black Nationalist. (Gayle 61)

Addison Gayle’s rebuttal reveals not only the desire of Black Aestheticism to appropriate Griggs as “unequivocally” nationalist (67), but also the critical shorthand by which “New Negro” and “Black

Nationalism" had, by the mid-twentieth century, come to be considered paradigmatic synonyms.

Of course, Griggs's nationalism was *not* unequivocal, and eludes any easy definition in a number of important ways. Indeed, as Andrew Hebard notes, Griggs's later novels "reconfirm" his ultimate opposition to militancy and "include protagonists who repeatedly reject the possibility of a race war" (Hebard). Furthermore, despite the radical timbre of his fiction, he was "funded by whites as an acceptable race leader" (Gillman 74). In his political tracts, he criticised both W. E. B. Du Bois's radicalism and Booker T. Washington's moderation, at various stages, espousing both domestic cooperation and African emigration as solutions to America's "race problem." Susan Gillman's work on the writer describes him as a "bundle of paradoxes," a man whose "nationalism . . . run[s] the gamut of positions usually associated with opposed programs" (74).

Griggs's attitude towards middle-class blackness is instructive here. He saw the black middle-class as "educated malcontents" (91), ready to progress, but blocked from doing so, and becoming increasingly frustrated by their situation:

He found scores of young men just in his predicament. The schools were all supplied with teachers. All other doors were effectually barred. Society's stern edict forbade these young men resorting to lower forms of labor. And instead of the matter growing better, it was growing worse, year by year. Colleges were rushing class after class forth with [college] education, and there was no employment for them.. (90)

He therefore eschews the simple distinction between middle-class "assimilationism" and proletarian "separatism" presented, for example, in Gayle's treatment of the era. The novel's ultimate lack of commitment to either the separate black nation, or the integrated nation family must be understood in the context of the "New Negro," in Griggs's understanding of that term: a group of educated African Americans ideologically amenable to the ideals of the white mainstream, but also revolutionary in their urgent push to achieve that utopia.

He ultimately frames this drama as the struggle of African Americans to enter the nation family that had been "reconstructed" after the Civil War; countering the erasure of African Americans from the

national conscience by imagining the revolutionary spaces occupied by African American separatists. Though this leads Griggs's first novel towards the rhetoric of black separatism, attentive reading of that text reveals at best an ambiguous engagement with militancy. The New Negro of the eighteen nineties was not a doctrinaire nationalist movement, but rather a divided and unresolved generation searching for a way out of America's racial nightmare (Briggs 153). Rather than producing a coherent solution, Griggs anatomises various solutions to the problems of his age. In *Imperium in Imperio*, two approaches to black leadership, militancy and cooperation are embodied by the novel's two protagonists, Bernard Belgrave and Belton Piedmont, respectively. The novel ends oscillating irresolutely between ambiguous conciliation and fantasised insurrectionary threat: two resolutions that are crucially engendered by each character's familial situation, and by each character's relationship with the broader conceptual 'family America.' The novel finds only temporary resolution, or "philosophical pragmatism" (Hooper), a provisional solution to a racial nightmare that centres on the persistently resonant dream of American family.

Griggs creates two exemplary New Negro men at the heart of his narrative *Imperium in Imperio*: two characters who are intended to show that the new educated and emancipated African American has already taken his place as a "man among men," literally creating an "empire within an empire." The title of Griggs's text bows to the singularity of America's own imperial power, but also imagines an alternative narrative of utopianism, one that delineates the systematised removal of African Americans from the nation's dream of a white future, while simultaneously providing a threatening antithesis to the underlying ideals that create that future.

### White Pseudoscience and Black Separation

In a peculiar and macabre episode of Griggs's novel, a chapter entitled "On the Dissecting Board," one of the novel's two central characters, the dark-skinned Belton Piedmont – having been jailed for transgressing Louisiana's Jim Crow laws – is "measured" by a white physician. Spying

Belton disembarking from a southbound train, the doctor eyes the black specimen "cadaverously." Belton, we are told, is a "fine specimen of physical manhood" whose "manly appearance always excited interest wherever he was seen" (99-100), and later, after an innocent incident involving him and a white woman, a lynch mob is mobilised by the white doctor with the instruction to murder the black man, keeping his body "whole in the interest of society" (105). Having been hung from a tree and shot through the head, Belton is presumed dead, though he miraculously lives. As the incident unfolds, he endures a partial autopsy in silence and without flinching, heroically escapes by killing the villainous doctor, is tried and convicted of murder, and wins a Supreme Court appeal against that conviction thanks to the intervention of the novel's second main protagonist, the mixed-race Bernard Belgrave. The chapter reveals both Griggs's conception of the destructive role of pseudoscientific interventions into the race question during the era and his conviction that that role can be overcome, however improbable it may seem, through the agency of the educated New Negro.

Belgrave's role in defending his former school colleague before the highest court in the United States lifts him to the "acme of fame." He becomes the "most noted negro of his day" (110) and attempts to complete his happiness by marrying the beautiful and idealised black woman, Viola Martin. Pseudoscience intervenes again here, however, and that marriage never takes place. Viola, though "highly educated" and "most remarkably well-informed on all leading questions of the day" (100), reads a white supremacist tract that convinces her that the ideal family she craves with Bernard can never be.

It is thematically fitting that pseudoscience here serves to frustrate the efforts of this seemingly perfect black couple to form a family. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, as America reached its racial "nadir," there was a flowering of literature published to demonstrate and theorise the 'pathology' of the African-American family. Eric Sundquist writes:

No fact was more often or more scurrilously claimed by racist commentators than that the "failure" of the black family was a sign of racial degeneration. Whether or not the fault was said to lie in the history

of slavery, the archetype of the black rapist, the assertion that black women were licentious, and the charge that black families were “naturally” at home in squalor and filth were all common pronouncements in the post-Reconstruction interpretation of so-called black family pathology. (394)

“In home life,” Howard W. Odum lamented, the “Negro is filthy, careless, and indecent, . . . as destitute of morals as many of the lower animals. . . . There is little knowledge of the sanctity of home and marital relations” (150-175). Many agreed, believing the “filth and indecency” of black family life to be the root cause of the “Negro problem.” Each black community, it was argued, “is but an aggregation of ignorant homes, and each home is but a circle of thoughtless individuals” (Shaler 61).

Pseudoscientific racist theorists were also in general agreement about the root cause of black familial instability. They highlighted the baseless trope of black sexual aggression as a “fact” that prohibited the creation of a normal family. What R. W. Shufeldt termed “sexual fury” was seen as the race’s defining characteristic. Shufeldt, a medical doctor, claimed that he had never known an African American to “have congress with the opposite sex, having in mind the making of a child. . . . Negroes copulate solely for the gratification of the passion – for the erotic pleasure it affords them” (qtd. in Stember 56). Many believed this fabled sexual proclivity to be an inherited physiological trait that naturally prohibited the race from settling into the institution of marriage. In 1965, historian I. A. Newby wrote that it was popularly seen as a “fair conclusion” that “sexual immorality among Negroes was so debilitating that a large percentage of their children were born dead or entered the world so starved and diseased that half of them died before their first birthday” (120). “Under such conditions,” it was concluded, “family life was impossible, and the race was deprived of the moral and social influence of a stable home environment” (122). “Sexual fury,” declared Hubert Howe Bancroft, rendered the African American “more animal than thinking” (qtd. in Newby 123) and robbed him of the basic preconditions of civilisation. Thus, he became, in Odum’s infamous phrase, a “mass of physiological reactions and reflexes” (188).

Odum’s phrase calls to mind Paulo Freire’s observation that “[o]ne of the characteristics of colonisation is that in order for the colonisers to

oppress the people easily they convinced themselves that the colonised have a mere biological life and never an historical existence" (10). White theorists were able to use the trope of "abnormal family" to reduce African Americans to the level of sheer physiological or biological life. The reduction of racial others to the level of "sheer biological life" clearly enables the dominance of the subaltern culture by the hegemonic culture; and the pathologising of the black family is a central trope in this process. What the white supremacists are establishing here is, in Donald Pease's terms, the trope of "hemispheric entitlement," a concept that turns on the ability to depict the "colonised" as a void – "mere biological life," as Freire would have it, without a "historical existence" (10). Black culture before white control conforms to a sort of Hobbesian "pre-society."

One tract that was particularly influential amongst white supremacists at this time was J. H. Van Evrie's notorious *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination, or Negroes a Subordinate Race and (so-called) Slavery Its Normal Condition* (1868). Though written around 1860, Van Evrie's book was not published until after the Civil War and quickly went through several editions in the South. The book seemed to strike a chord with the indignation of the defeated Confederate nation, reaching the height of its popularity in the eighteen nineties, as Southern racism became more acceptable, and the instances of lynch law reached a horrendous peak (Hutton 89). Van Evrie's central theme is that white Caucasians form the top tier of a racial hierarchy, and that other races' (particularly black Africans') innate relation to whites is one of servitude. Because blacks are naturally inferior to whites, he claims, it is the natural order of things to hold them as "slaves" – though Van Evrie contests the term "slavery" on the grounds that blacks are "naturally subordinate," and are therefore only free when put to such labour. Van Evrie's thesis holds that the hierarchy of races is generated by interracial relationships, and that, since white genes are "superior" to black ones, those with more "white blood" are considered to be more physically, intellectually, aesthetically, and culturally advanced. Moreover, because Negro/African blood is described as being so weak, it becomes "whitened" by interracial unions, leading the darker race to eventually become extinct: an assertion that is ironically at odds with the idea of the "one-drop rule," which holds

that the white race is instantly erased when exposed to interracial liaisons with Africans (Van Evrie 48-66; Park 19).

When Griggs came to write *Imperium in Imperio*, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination* had reached the height of its popularity in the United States, and it is this very text that intervenes as Bernard Belgrave attempts to establish an ideal family life with Viola Martin. The prevalence of contemporary antiblack pseudoscience ultimately “prevents the fulfilment of a conventional romance plot and threatens not only individual black lives but the formation of black families”(Karafilis). Griggs had certainly read the tract, and his novel produces a strange and ambiguous dialogue with Van Evrie’s theory. Though Viola loves Bernard, and agrees to marry him, she mysteriously commits suicide on the night of his proposal. In her suicide letter to Bernard, Viola reveals:

[T]wo years prior to my meeting you, a book entitled, “White Supremacy and Negro Subordination,” by the merest accident came into my possession. . . . That book proved to me that the intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race. It demonstrated that the fourth generation of the children born of intermarrying mulattoes were invariably sterile or woefully lacking in vital force. . . . Thus, the white man was slowly exterminating us and our total extinction was but a short period of time distant. (118)

The logical conclusion to Viola’s tragic acceptance of the central premise in *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*, is that African Americans must “[e]rect moral barriers to separate [the races]” and failing that, “make the separation physical” (118). She herself commits suicide because of a “solemn pledge” she has made never to marry a mulatto man – an action made all the more tragic by her acknowledgement that “[theirs] would have been an ideal home” (119).

However, though Van Evrie’s racist pseudoscience is the sole cause of this tragedy, Griggs’s novel does not directly refute Viola’s folly. Arlene Elder has suggested that, although it is “never clear” whether Griggs “takes seriously” Viola Martin’s concern around mixed race families leading to the “sterility and ‘devitalization’ of the race,” it is nevertheless true that the novel “obviously views racial purity as essential to the Blacks’ struggle” (101). Griggs’s seeming reticence on this issue is

difficult to explain. Within the frame of the novel, Van Evrie's thesis goes unchallenged. Given that Viola's suicide letter has pointedly beseeched him to "secure" Van Evrie's book in order to "study the question of the intermingling of the races" (119), Bernard Belgrave's failure to do this seems peculiar. We can only presume that Bernard does not "secure" the book at all but rather accepts Viola's assessment uncritically. To him, Viola's suicide is a mandate for political militancy. "By the eternal heavens," he pledges, "these abominable horrors shall cease. The races, whose union has been fraught with every curse known to earth and hell, must separate. Viola demands it and Bernard obeys" (120). Like his fiancée, Bernard believes the myth. His outrage is directed not at white racism, but at the scientific "fact" that the races cannot coexist without the erasure of one by the other.

Bernard's omission here, coupled with the idiosyncratic range of readings of obscure ethnographic theorists that punctuate Griggs's prolific non-fiction output (Moses 27), accounts for Elder's suspicion that he "takes seriously" the Van Evrie hypothesis. To say, however, that, within Griggs's schema, "racial purity" is a prerequisite for African American struggle seems a misstatement. As Gillman points out, though Griggs's two central protagonists are to varying degrees 'obsessed' with "racial purity," both characters end up "undone," rather than empowered by that obsession (95): the search for "racial purity" in the novel simply proves to be "an impossible search" (109).

Elder's interpretation does, however, point to a very interesting paradigm. Griggs is often interpreted as a writer who responds to the increasing racial division of his times with a "fanatical nationalism" (Gillman 77), as if his version of Black Nationalism should be understood as a dark twin of the fanatical separatism of the post-Reconstruction era. Indeed, there is ample precedent for such an interpretation. C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1971) points to a situation of "procrustean politics," in which opposing political factions, black and white, ran to positions of doctrinaire extremism on either side: positions that rendered them perversely similar. Paul Gilroy has recently and controversially cited the famous 1922 meeting between Marcus Garvey and the Ku Klux Klan and Garvey's statement that the Klan

shared with his Back-to-Africa movement similar ideals of purifying and standardising race, as an example of the “profound kinship” or “fraternalist mirroring” between black separatists and white supremacists (231-37). This is a provocative reading that positions black nationalism as the “darker brother” of racial fascism within a near-gothic family America. Gillman follows the implications of this model by reading Griggs against Thomas Dixon to present two writers who dramatise the “borders between inside and outside, as racial unity appears to be both threatened and shored up by forces from within and without” (110). Dixon presents the spectre of racial admixture as “festering Black Death” to the American body politic (436), having one of his characters ask at one point, “*Can you build, in a Democracy, a nation inside a nation of two hostile races? We must do this or become mulatto, and that is death*” (242). That Griggs’s novel of the black “empire within an empire” also seems to accept the thesis that mulattoism was “rapidly destroying the Negro race” (118), therefore, seems crucial.

To ultimately agree with Elder’s characterisation of “racial purity as essential to the Blacks’ struggle” in *Imperium in Imperio* (Elder 101) is, however, a more difficult matter. Such an interpretation seems to be undercut by the conciliatory, almost assimilationist role that the “racially pure” Belton Piedmont plays in the text. Though the darker-skinned of Griggs’s two heroes, Belton’s militancy is guarded, and his belief in the values of American liberalism ultimately overrides his temptation to join in insurrectionary activity against the nation. Given that Piedmont’s experience of the white world encapsulates the entire range of outrages committed against his race, how can we explain his ultimate conciliation with white America? The name “Belton Piedmont” is certainly not lightly chosen, suggesting the progress that African Americans had made since emancipation, and the antidemocratic measures that the white South took to block that progress. During Reconstruction, the “piedmont” counties around North Carolina’s “black belt” were notable success stories in the effort to mobilise the black vote towards its political agenda. In those areas, as Eric Foner has noted, “blacks comprised a minority or small majority of the population and the two parties were evenly divided,” and lynchings and Ku Klux Klan activity, particularly directed against

interracial coupling, became especially "concentrated" (430) – suggesting an obvious though imperfect correlation between black political progress and white hysteria over the fiction of black "sexual fury." Two of Griggs's other novels, *Unfettered* (1902) and *The Hindered Hand* (1905), are more overt in exploring the "connections during the 1890s between the prevalence of lynching and the renewed visibility of the black vote" (Gillman 80). The suggestion is that, as the black body politic becomes a solid and coherent block, the fiction of monstrous racial hybridity becomes perversely more prominent. As will be discussed, Belton, the embodiment of the "solid" blackness, suffers greatly for this fiction. However, his progress towards utopian Americanism is so complete that it overrides the bitterness of his situation.

### Legitimacy and Illegitimacy in *Imperium in Imperio*

Crucially, Belton's progress is symbolically framed as the progress towards the utopian space of middle-class American domesticity. Early in his journey through the post-Reconstruction South, Belton's thematic access to a utopian vision of the American family is firmly established in a strange prophetic dream. In the dream, a "large drove of fatted swine" feed on the acorns of tall oaks. The hogs consume so many acorns that they themselves become oaks, as tall as the trees they had been feeding from and are instantly engaged in a 'furious' combat with the old oaks. The combat rages in stormy weather for several days until a voice, like the voice of God, calls out "Know ye not that ye are parents and children? Parents, recognize your children. Children, be proud of the parents from whom you spring" (35). Belton interprets his dream as follows:

The swine were the negroes. The oak trees were the white people. The acorns were the doctrine of human liberty, everywhere preached by Anglo-Saxons. The negroes, feasting off of the same thought, had become the same kind of being as the white man, and grew up to a point of equality. The hurricane was the contest between the two races over the question of equality. The voice was intended to inform the whites that they had brought about these aspirations in the bosom of the negro, and that the liberty-loving negro was their legitimate offspring, and not a bastard. (35-6)

The lesson that black people had risen to a position of legitimacy within the nation-family is thus foregrounded in Belton's narrative. It is a lesson that is instantly reinforced by the novel's next episode, in which Belton is invited to the house of white philanthropist, Mr. V. M. King. On approaching the white man's house, Belton discovers Mr. King "sitting on his front porch, between his wife and aged mother" while his children play on the lawn. Situated pointedly *amongst* the generations of white family, Belton reaches the heart of utopian America. It seems significant that the education that King's benevolence allows Belton sends him to "Stowe University" in the South, and that there, the institution's President, Dr. Lovejoy, urges Belton, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Tom, to make it a "cardinal principle of his life . . . to allow God to avenge all his wrongs" (56).

Belton, however, does not follow the model of "passivity," "piety," "gentleness," and "self-sacrifice" that Elizabeth Ammons argued, made Uncle Tom the "ultimate heroine of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (158). In one of the political testimonies that punctuate the second half of the novel, Belton characterises the United States government as too weak or indifferent to protect African Americans from disfranchisement and racial violence, meaning that "[t]he Negro must therefore fight to keep afloat a flag that can afford him no more protection than could a helpless baby" (124). His course is one of manly bravery that refutes the Tom stereotype in a way similar to much of the black writing produced during slavery, not least Frederick Douglass's fictionalisation of Madison Washington. In Belton's most complete speech to the Imperium Congress, he proclaims:

We should let him [the Anglo-Saxon] know that patience has a limit; that strength brings confidence; that faith *in* God will demand the exercise of our own right arm; that hope and despair are each equipped with swords, the latter more dreadful than the former. . . . he may see the New Negro standing before him humbly, but firmly demanding every right granted him by his maker and wrested from him by man. (163)

Having learned the lesson to "allow God to avenge all his wrongs" (56) at Stowe University, Belton modifies it to suit the urgent need of the New Negro. Like Douglass's Madison Washington, he transforms domestic "passivity" through the foundational symbology of the Revolutionary

Fathers. As in Douglass's autobiography (1845), the moment of masculine challenge to paternalistic authority is encapsulated in the most resonant phrase of the American Revolution – Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" (Griggs 163; Douglass 86). The lesson is that the New Negro has "arrived at the stage of development as a people," where they can fulfil the promise of liberty that had heretofore been the sole preserve of white America. Douglass's *Narrative* had argued that slave insurrection did "more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death" because all that could be achieved was "doubtful liberty at most," and what was risked was "almost certain death if we failed" (86), a model that coheres with his strategy, in writing "The Heroic Slave," of overgoing the ideals of American manhood. Griggs's model inaugurates a new utopianism that imagines the New Negro's consummation of the American Revolution. Belton, as Robert Nowatzki points out, "patterns his conception of *black* manhood after the example of Anglo-Saxon manhood set by the slaveowner Henry" (62-3) – again, cohering with Madison Washington, who rejects passive paternalism in order to become an active, and hence legitimate, heir to the founding fathers, making revolutionary challenge the basis for inclusion into the American family idyll.

Belton's early initiation into this broad national paradigm helps to explain his ultimate commitment to non-militancy. While sitting with Mr. King, he is advised to acknowledge the good within the Anglo-Saxon race and to remain unprejudiced against the white man – advice, he assures his benefactor, he will "treasure." King's gesture teaches Belton simply "to never class all white men together" (37), thus eschewing the Manichean mindset of the post-Reconstruction South. Indeed, it may be significant that Belton, as a character from an underprivileged, but "racially pure" black family – a character who embodies the supposed "racial unity" of procrustean post-Civil War Southern politics – is able to resist the urge towards fictions of racial separatism in a way that the more racially ambiguous Bernard Belgrave cannot. Bernard is himself the privileged child of a famous white senator's secret marriage to a mulatto woman; he is "born of distinguished parents, reared in luxury, gratified as to every whim, successful in every undertaking, idolized by the people, [and]

proud" (175). At the Reconstruction school he attends with Belton Piedmont, he is favoured and spoilt by the white schoolteacher because of his light skin. Though his white father never publicly acknowledges him, he does help him in private, enabling Bernard's path towards fame and success. With his father's secret assistance, he becomes an attorney and runs successfully for Congress, becoming an obvious race leader. However, Bernard initially enters politics not through an interest in civil rights, but essentially out of personal ambition: "he decided to become the obedient servant of the people," we are informed, "that he might thus make all the people his servants" (68). It is only after Viola's death that his political leadership gains an obvious ideological vent as, following the logic of Van Evrie's thesis, he attempts to, as Viola's suicide note had pleaded, "make the separation physical" (118).

To this end, Bernard gains access to, and ultimately control, of the titular "Imperium in Imperio" – a secret nationwide organisation of educated African Americans bent on either a complete redress of grievances or the formation of a separate black state. Literally meaning "empire within an empire" or "a government independent of the general authorised government" (Brewer 586), the Imperium is described by Belton Piedmont, who inducts his old school friend into its secret workings, as "[a]nother government, complete in every detail, exercising the sovereign right of life and death over its subjects . . . organized and maintained within the United States for many years. This government has a population of 7,250,000" (129). The task of the *Imperium* is twofold: first to secure the rights of African Americans at home, the second "to secure the freedom of the enslaved negroes the world over" (130). It is, therefore, a pan-African organisation that precedes W. E. B. Du Bois's Niagara Movement by six years, and in many ways foreshadows Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa initiative. That the dark-skinned Belton, born in poverty, should initiate the privileged mulatto Bernard into this pan-African movement suggests an African-American unity that transcends issues of colourism and class. However, when Bernard asks why he has, until now, been excluded from the Imperium, Belton responds:

The relation of your mother to the Anglo-Saxon race has not been clearly understood, and you and she have been under surveillance for many years. It was not until recently deemed advisable to let you in, your loyalty to the race never having fully been tested. I have been a member for years. (133)

Despite his position as the "most noted negro of his day" (110), Bernard's light skin, therefore, makes him a target of suspicion.

In the end, Bernard Belgrave leads the organisation into catastrophe, seizing absolute control of the Imperium to fulfil the project of forceful racial separation initiated by his personal familial tragedy. The ambitious Bernard, who had entered politics for individual glory, ultimately allows his private situation to drive him into maniacal radicalism. Bernard's plan involves resolutions to "enter into secret negotiations with all of the foreign enemies of the United States," remove "all Negro families" into the State of Texas, "seize the capitol" of that state "and hoist the flag of the Imperium," "wreck the entire navy of the United States in a night" – creating for the African American "an empire of his own, fertile in soil, capable of sustaining a population of fifty million people" (147-50). It is courageous to the point of recklessness. Ironically, his method of effecting this plan, as Jack Beckham has claimed, "contains the same conspiracy, trickery, intimidation, and jingoism of manifest destiny employed by the United States and groups like the Ku Klux Klan" (86). There seems to be a question, therefore, over whether the mulatto ultimately justifies the inherent suspicion that his hybridity has inspired.

There is an irony in the fact that the middle-class mulatto Bernard becomes the driving force behind this revolutionary plan. Having never suffered from prejudice or discrimination, having benefited to a far greater extent than any other character in the text from white financial aid, having been unrestricted from achieving personal ambitions, Bernard, it may have been supposed, should have taken a different course. Conversely, Belton, who has been lynched and beaten and who has struggled for the most basic human rights, sacrifices his life for the cause of America. The seeming anomaly is best explained by the two characters' symbolic relationship with the white American family. Belton's placement within the American family idyll of the Kings contrasts sharply with the young Bernard Belgrave's acutely felt powerlessness to claim legitimacy within

his white family. Bernard, as stated, is a child of privilege, though not of acknowledged legitimacy. Indeed, in his only encounter with his father, the white senator sends him into a life of politics to achieve a singular goal. "Make it possible," he urges his unacknowledged son, "for me to [acknowledge] you ere I pass out of life. Let your mother have the veil of slander torn from her pure form ere she closes her eyes on earth forever" (66). Following the traumatic Viola Martin episode, in which Bernard is denied an idyllic family for a second time, he begins to see the African-American presence within the nation family not only as difficult to achieve, but actually as totally undesirable.

It is at this point that he introduces his plan to the Imperium, provoking Belton, perhaps with the advice of his early benefactor still to the fore in his thinking, to launch an extraordinary prolonged defence of America and of the South: a speech in which he sounds a conciliatory note on everything, from the morality of slavery to the lynch-law (150-165). The power of Belton's oratory initially convinces the rest of the Imperium not to go to war, before Bernard's Machiavellianism leads them to a change of mind. Refusing to abide by any plan to attack the United States, Belton is executed, a martyr. Bernard's power thus becomes absolute, and his bitterness towards black involvement in the white nation family becomes mania. Looking over Belton Piedmont's coffin, draped in an American flag, he soliloquises:

Float on proud flag, while yet you may. Rejoice, oh! 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. (176)

It is a speech that totally inverts Belton's American dreamscape. In Belton's vision, African Americans had consumed white ideals of liberty and democracy as a model for progress (Sy). Bernard, on the other hand, having experienced primary familial dislocation from white America, culminating in his tragic encounter with white supremacist pseudoscience, sees America fatally consuming its own doctrines of hatred and racism,

becoming food fit only for buzzards.

It is, of course, significant that the food that made white America so consumable for African Americans was, in Belton's vision, the "doctrine of human liberty, everywhere preached by Anglo-Saxons," whereas the food which, according to Bernard, has left white America in the degraded state of festering carcass is clearly handed down from the white supremacist pseudoscience of writers like H. Van Evrie. Indeed, before Belton's tragic execution, he has already endured his own encounter with the trope of white/black vitality. Earlier, in one of the novel's most problematic episodes, Belton's wife, Antoinette, had given birth to a baby boy. In a nightmarish scene, Griggs describes Belton's first sight of the child as follows:

Eagerly, tremblingly, Belton pulled the cover from the little child's face, the nurse all the while watching him as though her eyes would pop out of her head. Belton bent forward to look at his infant son. A terrible shriek broke from his lips. He dropped the lamp upon the floor and fled out of the house and rushed madly through the city. The color of Antoinette was brown. The color of Belton was dark. But the child was white! (94).

In desperation, Belton calculates that "his failure to properly support her [Antoinette] had tempted her to ruin" (94), and he leaves his family to move through America as a new man in search of a new identity – a search that eventually leads him to the Imperium. However, his movement away from the family ultimately proves to be mere folly, as he later discovers – only weeks before his death – that Antoinette had been faithful throughout. Her child "grow[s] darker" (170) as he gets older, and she accosts her returning husband with the words: "Belton! There is your white child! Look at him! Look at him!" (171). Seeing the obvious resemblance, Belton realises his cruel error. "By and by it began to dawn on him that that child was somehow his child" – a realisation that is instantly confirmed by the irrefutable evidence of a series of photographs of the child: "Belton discerned the same features in each photograph, but a different shade of color of the skin." "O, God," he cries helplessly, "what crime is this with which my soul is stained?" (171-2).

Here, Van Evrie's paradigm of black becoming white is overthrown: the *pseudoscientific* eugenic theorising of white supremacists is

emphatically contradicted by the scientific fact of photographic evidence. Antoinette, a mulatta who – according to the theories that Viola Martin so tragically accepted – could only *whiten* the African-American race, actually produces a family that becomes *more black* over time. However, Belton's movement *away* from this idyllic family is not wholly unforgivable in Griggs's moral framework. In fact, Belton does redeem himself by making his movement *away* from his own black family a movement *towards* the larger topos of the nation family. Thus, we are provided with the moral conciliation that the act of "[fleeing] out of the house and rush[ing] madly through the city" (94), which starts Belton's journey, ultimately brings him figuratively 'back home.' Framing Belton Piedmont's achievement of this symbolic homecoming within the foundational symbolism of Revolutionary American manhood, Griggs creates a basis for legitimacy within the American domesticity for his most sympathetic character.

While Belton dies a heroic death and is buried wrapped in an American flag, Bernard, becomes "maniacal" and is ultimately betrayed by the novel's narrator, Berl Trout, a committed member of the Imperium, who "fears" Bernard's destructive potential (177). The novel thus tacitly endorses Belton's more moderate position in the end. However, this endorsement does not lead to an unequivocal rejection of Bernard's violent separatism. Bernard, like Belton, achieves the "perfect manhood" that Frederick Douglass had viewed as the requirement of the age. He is the embodiment of a perfected middle-class black Americanism, which is directed by him not towards the promise of American utopia, but rather to the logical conclusion of a race so totally removed from the particular domestic national myth. The cultural erasure of black presence within the nation family produces, in Griggs's novel, a fantasised manifestation of the spaces potentially occupied by the scorned "New Negro." Again, though this may lead *Imperium in Imperio* towards the rhetoric of black separatism, Bernard's decision to change the direction of the titular Imperium towards a militant nationalism is also the fulfilment of his own familial trauma: a trauma that is culturally produced by the exclusionary logic of his age – an exclusionary logic, itself produced through symbols of exclusive white domesticity. Conversely, through the decisions that

lead to his heroic death, Belton theoretically positions himself once again sitting amidst the idealised American family of Mr. King. So, while one of the justifications for black separation is homogeneity of family (an opposition to intermarrying), that separatism is ultimately rejected "in the interest of the whole human family of which [the African American] race is but a part" (Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* 6).

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