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### Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Re-markable Print: Historiography and A Seconding Instinct in the Work of Sutton E. Griggs

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2022

## ABSTRACT

Sutton Griggs's 1899 novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, is widely recognized as an early African American militant novel. It depicts an underground all-Black government dating back to the American Revolution whose documented history is private until the novel's fictional narrator submits it for publication. Twenty years later, Sutton Griggs would publish his nonfiction *Guide to Racial Greatness; or, The Science of Collective Efficiency* wherein he argues that members of all great races must possess the spirit of seconding through "the ready support of another's deeds." (132) By imagining the ways Griggs's theory of *seconding* theorizes a print practice rooted in collaboratively recording history, we can read his earliest novel as a reflection on the crisis of record-keeping and -making during the age of New Journalism. This involves tracing a rich tradition of African American print practices during the long nineteenth century, which reveals that newspapers were initially heralded as the ideal medium by which to achieve Black self-determination. They curated historical records meant to instruct readers on how to live and encompassed multivocal historiographical projects, cultivating historical consciousness by regularly intervening on white supremacist myths about Blackness. *Imperium in Imperio* both emulates a historical record by presenting itself as a found manuscript and undermines its own authenticity by employing multiple narrative frameworks that present contradictory accounts of its characters. These formal elements work to make the processes of historical writing, circulation, and interpretation transparent for readers to warn of the dangers of single-authored histories and destabilize our notion of historical knowledge as fixed.

Sutton Griggs was an African American novelist, pamphleteer, activist, and Baptist minister, best known for writing one of the earliest African American novels to suggest radical Black militancy. Published in 1899, *Imperium in Imperio* tells the story of an underground all-Black government working to secure the rights of African Americans in Post-Reconstruction America. Two prominent members of the Imperium, Bernard Belgrave and Belton Piedmont espouse conflicting beliefs about the road to racial uplift: Bernard is militant and calls for a violent war against the United States, while Belton argues for accommodationism, urging the Imperium to work with, even admire, white sympathizers. Their disagreement ultimately leads to the execution of Belton and the dissolution of the Imperium before the secret government can achieve its purpose. In 1914, Griggs published *The Story of My Struggles*, an autobiographical account of his writing career. Of *Imperium*, Griggs writes that his lofty expectations for the novel's capacity to garner a substantial readership were dashed:

As the days dragged slowly by and my earlier hopes were bruised and then fully crushed by a perfect silence, nation-wide in scope, and including all sections of the race, I slowly drifted to the conclusion that I had somehow failed to deliver the right message of the needed kind. (10)

Between 1899 and 1930, Griggs would publish six more novel-length works of fiction and dozens of nonfiction books and political pamphlets aimed at rallying Black Americans toward upliftment through literacy, making him one of the most prolific Black authors of the early twentieth century. To disseminate his novels, Griggs continually called on the press to publish endorsements of his newest work in prominent newspapers. In *Story of my Struggles* he writes, "With the comments [about *Imperium*] that came in from these leaders and from the public press, appeals were framed and given to the Negro public. And here I received my second great shock.

The masses of our people were as unresponsive to these written appeals as the leaders had been.”

(9) To Griggs, print would “deliver the right message of the needed kind” to his race by conveying his vision for social upliftment, but his call for support of the novel—financial, political, instrumental, or otherwise—would not be answered as urgently as he had hoped.

Twenty years later Griggs published his *Guide to Racial Greatness; or, The Science of Collective Efficiency*, a theoretical guide to racial uplift that lays out the necessary attributes of historically prosperous societies. Of them, *the spirit of seconding*, which all people must possess, is emphasized. *Seconding* is defined as “the ready support of another’s deeds;” every member of a “great race” must possess the urge to lift one another up. (132) I explore how seconding as a print practice represents an important element of Black print counterpublics, which mobilized to correct racializing national myths during the highly competitive Gilded Age of the American press. Not only does an emphasis on support through seconding reflect his earlier frustrations with attracting a readership for *Imperium*—i.e. the disappointment of a call unanswered—but imagining seconding as a practice of contributing to the dominant historical record helps to inform our understanding of postbellum Black historiography. As John Ernest discusses in his *Liberation Historiography*, Black historiography after Reconstruction was a multimodal process, involving both newspapers and novels, which worked to shape and circulate historical knowledge through a variety of intellectual strategies. Reading *Imperium in Imperio* through the lens of seconding, and its many iterations,—*to support, to endorse, to repeat or add to, to record*—reveals a perspective on historiography deeply concerned with the ways historical narratives were recorded, circulated, and remembered at a time when print possibilities exploded.

This chapter will explore how the work of Sutton E. Griggs can enrich our understanding of the Black print sphere after Reconstruction. *Seconding* as a print practice encourages the

collaborative control of Black historical narratives through the creation of literature and the practice of journalism. Considering communications history alongside *Imperium* helps to contextualize Griggs's ideas about Black newspapers as instruments of historiography: Griggs believed they were critical recordkeepers in an era of sensationalized news that misrepresented or outright denied Black historical actors. His novel, written at the height of yellow journalism in the United States, emphasizes the instructional value of historical information, asking "to what extent can a record empower, as opposed to enthrall, a reading public?" I argue that his first novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, imagines a powerful Black print counterpublic through the metaphor of a secret society. It blends literary genres such as the found manuscript novel and elements of African American realism, which Andréa N. Williams writes was intended to not only "reflect social conditions with a near ethnologic accuracy," but also "contemplate solutions to race and gender relations." (*Literary Realism, 1865-1914*, 189) *Imperium's* generic unevenness destabilizes our notion of what constitutes a historical record and makes transparent the continuous process of narrativizing histories, revealing the ways journalism and fiction borrowed from nineteenth-century literary genres to shape historical knowledge. Lastly, through the novel's unrealized rebellion, *Imperium in Imperio* suggests that the lasting work of insurgency lies in the instructional value of the historical record and its afterlife.

Sutton Griggs developed his ideas about Black print practices in his *Guide to Racial Greatness; or The Science of Collective Efficiency*, a nonfiction guide to racial uplift published in 1923. It defines collective efficiency as "the crowning work of the co-operative spirit in a race," and that a group "possesses collective efficiency when it has the capacity for, and the habit of concentrating all of its potential and necessary forces behind the joint tasks of mankind." (23) For Griggs, individualism is antagonistic to collective efficiency because it has no perception of

the joint nature of tasks. As a result, cooperation cannot exist in individualist societies. A significant portion of *Collective Efficiency* details essential traits possessed by those within a collectively efficient group, including a keen sense of personal responsibility, honesty, reliability, self-control, and a “ready tendency to second.” (126) Seconding is an unselfish act of support for another enacted most successfully in print. *Collective Efficiency* places a seconding instinct above all others, describing it as inherently associative. This means that individuals within a collective always understand themselves and their roles in relation to their fellow group members. Griggs writes:

Regardless of what one may be doing in his own chosen line, he should have the feeling that he owes a debt of some sort to every worthy activity of his group; and though leading in a single sphere only, he should be a ready seconder in all other spheres. Observation will demonstrate that the life of any group is decidedly unhealthy, regardless of the ability and the success of individuals, if these individuals are devoid of the seconding tendency and keep their eyes fastened only on their respective tasks. (132)

More than a vocalized act of agreement, seconding plays a crucial role in Griggs’s thinking about historiography: “One man performs and another records, and thus we get history... But in groups where the units are characterized by the individualistic outlook on life, each fellow is so intent upon what he himself is doing that he has not the heart of a historian.” (132) This definition of historiography insists that the seconding instinct is at the core of the process of historical recognition. Historical writing becomes the latter part of a joint task: one individual seconding—by recording—the deeds performed by another. Thus, “The seconding spirit,” writes Griggs, “will insist on finding a way to convey in some form tokens of remembrance.” (153)

Griggs also carves out the role of newspapers and journalism in societies dedicated to collective efficiency, writing that newspapers should be social institutions that function based on the cooperation between the publisher and the public. A newspaper run by individualists will seek financial success at the cost of public welfare by “giving prominence to noted individuals, without regard to their services to the public,” as opposed to what a cooperative publisher would strive toward, namely, honoring “individuals in proportion as they serve the public.” (69) By linking the goal of newspapers—to honor public servants in print—and the goal of the historian—to second the deeds of others through a written record—Griggs connects newspapers to historical writing by emphasizing the need for publicized forms of esteem.

A *seconding instinct* is helpful for studying early African American historiography for several reasons: Firstly, seconding is a written process of *recording*, or concretizing in print what has actually occurred. This acknowledges the challenge of early Black historians to create and control their own historical narratives and insert themselves into the dominant historical record. John Ernest’s *Liberation Historiography* dates some of the earliest African American historical writing back to the eighteenth century in various Black-authored petitions to Congress questioning laws that forbade the manumission of enslaved people. These petitions were usually sent back to the petitioners unanswered: “In addition to avoiding the issues the petitioners addressed, by returning the petitions Congress maintained control over the historical record. . . the sealed and returned petitions speak today of the untold stories, the hidden lives, to which nineteenth-century African American literature is devoted.” (Ernest, 43) In short, seconding tends to the problem of historical *omission* by printing and circulating a historical record, which acknowledges the ways Black historiographers have fought to establish African American life as a historical fact.

Seconding as an act of social *endorsement* also signals a tradition of African American historical writing that insists on multivocal perspectives, narrative fragments, and the productivity of public debates. In the early nineteenth century, Black-run newspapers acted as recordkeepers of national convention meetings, routinely publishing both sides of delegate debates with which readers could engage. When we imagine seconding not as an act of overt agreement, but social support through public engagement, we acknowledge the value of ideological conflict and open debate in an African American print tradition. Newspaper editors, many of whom were convention delegates with staunch viewpoints of their own, often broadcasted debates to invite readers to take a side, well aware of the catalyzing power of political disagreements. Publicly opposing another's viewpoint with counterpoints embodies, then, an act of public support through *disagreement*. The upshot of thinking through public disagreement as a form of support allows us to shift our attention from the interlocutors and our assessment of their ideas to the impact debates made on the reading public. In this sense, when paired with *Imperium's* refusal to resolve its established tensions, Belton's death becomes symbolic of the ways debates outlive their original hosts. In other words, Belton's execution does not result in Bernard's ideological victory. Instead, Belton's accommodationist ideas so affect Berl Trout that they are recorded in the manuscript he produces, only to be iterated again, and differently, by Griggs.

Seconding also allows us to think through the processes of historical writing and interpretation temporally as well. Second, meaning, "constituting 2nd in a sequence," or seconding in an *additive* sense, such as, "additional to that already existing," helps us visualize the ways historical narratives reproduce themselves, whether they represent or misrepresent, agree or disagree with, their subjects. "African American historical writing," writes Ernest,

“begins, in other words, with the recognition that history is not limited to the argument or effect of any single work.” (47) Ernest adds that Black authors were aware of the ways historical records had lives of their own (47), continuously shaping and being shaped by written memory. When print technology advanced in the late nineteenth century, the momentum with which newspaper records could be produced and reproduced in both White and Black print spheres sped up and spread out, resulting in intertextual efforts that both intervened in whitewashing historical practices and imagined alternative histories through fiction.

In the southern U.S. especially, the postbellum period produced a wave of particularly damaging portrayals of Black men in print as African American newspapers repeatedly intervened in American journalism to correct white supremacist myths about Blackness. W.E.B. Du Bois criticized national historical narratives for omitting Black actors from their records. In the final chapter of *Black Reconstruction* (published 12 years after *Collective Efficiency*), called “The Propaganda of History,” Du Bois defines the role of the historian in his critique of racist histories of Reconstruction:

In the first place, somebody in each era must make clear the facts with utter disregard to his own wish and desire and belief. What we have got to know, so far as possible, are the things that actually happened in the world. Then with that much clear and open to every reader, the philosopher and prophet has a chance to interpret these facts; but the historian has no right, posing as a scientist, to conceal or distort facts; and until we distinguish between these two functions of the chronicler of human action, we are going to render it easy for a muddled world out of sheer ignorance to make the same mistake ten times over. (722)

There are several parallels between Du Bois and Griggs in their definitions of historians: both reject the notion of the historian serving their own interests—Du Bois calls this one's "wish and desire and belief," while Griggs labels it "individualism"—and both position historians as empiricists. Du Bois calls on objectivity and explicitly compares the historian to a scientist, while Griggs quantifies historiography through a ratio of public service to recognition in print. Regardless of their differences, both perspectives highlight an approach to Black historiography which fought to establish historical records in print.

Ida B. Wells famously anticipated Du Bois's plea to know "the things that actually happened in the world." Her journalism in the 1890s not only pointed to the importance of recordkeeping but demonstrated that newspapers had the power to intervene on false histories in the making. Wells's famous 1892 editorial in the *Memphis Free Speech* worked to register the lynching of innocent Black men as a historical fact. Her article blatantly called out the false narrative of Black men inflicting sexual violence against white women. Resultantly, a white mob destroyed the office of the *Free Speech* in the following days. Wells, who posthumously received the Pulitzer Prize in journalism for her reporting on the violence against African Americans during this era, is a compelling example of how Black newspapers daily fought to record what the white press both ignored and outright falsified. Wells inserted a historical record of racial violence into a white-controlled narrative in the spaces between its issues. "[T]he African American periodical press could eavesdrop on the presentation of history in white publications," writes John Ernest, and in turn, editors could reveal historical inconsistencies by reframing southern publications in their papers (*Liberation Historiography*, 288).

Like many activists, Griggs entered the Black print sphere at precisely the moment the white American press famously became "the fourth estate." A separate entity from government

branches with similar power to influence public sentiment, the American press was known as the voice of the people which upheld their right to information. Educational and technological expansion allowed newspapers to reach readers across the country, and a new age of imperialism led journalists to frame national politics against a global background. By 1898, one year before Griggs published *Imperium*, the press became a vital instrument of imperialism when the United States officially entered into the Spanish-American War. James Creelman, a reporter-turned-soldier for *The Journal*, claimed to have led troops on an attack of the fort at El Caney. He wrote of the experience, “I thought of the [Spanish] flag. . . It was the thing I had come to get. I wanted it for the *Journal*. The *Journal* had provoked the war, and it was only fair that the *Journal* should have the first flag captured in the greatest land battle of the war.” (Smythe, 190) Creelman’s pseudo battle story proudly centers the American newspaper within the narrative of the Spanish-American War; it also illustrates the extent to which reporters would exaggerate their own experiences. Luckily for Creelman, the fort at El Caney had been all but destroyed by the time American troops arrived. Similarly, Richard Harding Davis and Theodore Roosevelt furnished autobiographical reports from Cuban soil and attained celebrity status because of their publications; Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” was based on his experience in a shipwreck as a newspaper correspondent while traveling to Cuba. “The Open Boat,” published in Scribner’s Magazine in 1897, elevates the war correspondent to the level of archetype, portraying him as an all-knowing, rational, heroic white man.

Yellow journalism often documented the deeds of African American soldiers by portraying them as inherently inferior to White soldiers. As Amy Kaplan writes in “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill” from *Cultures of Imperialism*:

Roosevelt's narrative was involved in the struggle over writing the history of that [the Spanish-American] war, a struggle in part against an African American narrative that had gained some currency... Roosevelt's account raised special outrage for its blatant distortions of those accomplishments [of black soldiers] which had entered the public limelight. (227)

The "African American narrative that had gained some currency," refers to the possibility that African American soldiers, who would risk their lives in serving the country, could rightfully "challenge the internal coherence of . . . [the US] empire by demanding participation and representation as equals." Roosevelt's account raised the white fear that the imperial war would require the U.S. to permanently heal the internal rifts caused by the Civil War. (Kaplan, 225)

Several leaders in the African American community anticipated this healing, like Edward E. Cooper, who ran the *Colored American* in 1898. Cooper listed the benefits to be reaped by the Black community as a result of their men's proven soldierly qualities, including better representation and more financial capital. At the Chicago Peace Jubilee in the same year, Booker T. Washington called for unity between Black and white soldiers, arguing that the "trenches which [they] forever dug around Santiago shall be the eternal burial place of all which separates [them] in [their] business and civil relations." (Gatewood, 108)

Willard Gatewood Jr.'s *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* charts the responses of Black Americans to the nation's quest for imperialism. Gatewood's study details the treatment of Black soldiers by the white press during the Spanish-American war, arguing that it was virtually nonexistent when it wasn't working to stereotype them in print. By August of 1898, despite twenty-six Certificates of Merit and five Congressional Medals of Honor given to Black soldiers for their performance in Cuba, many civilians and soldiers expressed their

disappointment with the treatment of Black soldiers by the white press. (Gatewood 104) When they were recognized in print, Black soldiers were made anonymous, described by Calvin Chase, editor of the *Washington Bee*, as “nameless beings,” often identified only as a “Negro soldier[s].” Edward E. Cooper vehemently called for a Black war correspondent to be sent to Cuba during the wake of the Battle of San Juan Hill, and when attempts failed to produce an individual for the post, soldiers “bombarded the black press with communications detailing their role in the Santiago campaign” in an effort to record themselves. (Gatewood, 104-105)

Because of the efforts of the African American press, and with the return of the army from Cuba, Willard writes that Black soldiers “enjoyed the status of national heroes” for a few brief weeks. (Gatewood, 106) Black newspapers published stories and editorials extolling the gallantry of their service, and volumes of poetry including work from Paul Lawrence Dunbar celebrated the virtues of soldiers during this time. His 1899 poem, “The Conquerors: The Black Troops in Cuba,” promises that the historical truth will reverberate despite current evidence to the contrary:

Far through the cycle of years and of lives that shall come,  
There shall speak voices long muffled and dumb,  
Out of fear.  
And through the noises of trade and the turbulent hum,  
Truth shall rise over the militant drum,  
Loud and clear. . . (13-18)

Despite the period of print accolades that circulated primarily within newspapers, the tone of the Black community remained largely disappointed concerning the impacts of the war on race relations back home. The great social healing which Washington and Cooper had hoped

would occur was slow, and in light of increasing racial terror in the South and continuous Jim Crow machinations, many felt that "as long as lynchers such as those who murdered Postmaster Baker went unpunished, all official rhetoric about humanitarianism in Cuba would continue to smack of hypocrisy." (Gatewood, 106) Du Bois wrote that "the Spanish War and its various sequels have greatly increased some of our difficulties in dealing with the Negro problems" alluding to the rise of Negrophobia fed by the martial patriotism of the period. ("The Twelfth Census and the Negro Problem") South Carolina's Wilmington Massacre of 1898, a political coup designed by white supremacist editors of the town's newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle*, which resulted in the massacre of hundreds of Black residents, was branded as a race war by the white press. Charles Chesnut's fictional portrayal of the event in his *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) was motivated by Chesnut's disappointment in the federal government's failure to record the events as an orchestration of racial terror.

With the rise of the commercialized press after the Civil War came new incentives for recording and publishing news; instead of pushing explicitly partisan agendas subsidized by political leaders, individual financial competition, increases in literacy, and an explosion of politically independent papers across the country ushered in a new age of the press. This era of New Journalism produced reporters who sought out the news because papers needed to sell themselves to survive. In 1895, Charles A. Dana, journalist, editor, and part-owner of the New York *Sun*, published a series of lectures called *The Art of Newspaper Making*. They defined the role of the American editor and journalist at the dawning of the free press:

The first thing which an editor must look for is news. If the newspaper has not the news, it may have everything else, yet it will be comparatively unsuccessful; and by news I mean everything that occurs, everything which is of human interest,

and which is of sufficient importance to arrest and absorb the attention of the public or of any considerable part of it. (22)

Charles Dana's capacious definition of "news" as "everything which is of human interest" reflects the rapid momentum and resulting ephemerality of newspapers during this period. Contrastingly, Sutton Griggs's ideas about newspapers as instruments of historiography echo those uttered nearly 100 years earlier by the Committee on a "National Press, and Printing Establishment for the People of Color," formed at a National Black Convention in Troy, New York. Delegates argued that a periodical press was the ideal medium by which collective and continuous deliberation about Black advancement should be carried out. The 1841 New York Convention called for a national African American press, "that which shall cheer us from one end of the land to the other, by recording our acts, our sufferings, our temporary defeats and our steadily approaching triumph. . ." ("New York Convention," 258). The intended content of Black newspapers was initially articulated as *recordings* of Black "acts," "sufferings," "temporary defeats," and "steadily approaching triumph." Further, John Ernest writes that not only was the African American newspaper a consistent source of historical information but it was uniquely suited to the task of historical writing because its structure was inherently multivocal and multi-perspectival. (*Liberation Historiography*, 279) I make the comparison between "recordings" and "news" to point to the ways historical material could be transformed by American newspapers, either into an ahistorical commodity to be consumed daily or a historical record anchored in a particular local community.

Benjamin Fagan's *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* explores the ways an early Black print culture aligned itself in various ways with the belief that Black Americans were chosen to lead the world to universal emancipation. His work is helpful here because it

emphasizes the didactic qualities of Black newspapers, elucidating the role historical writing played in shaping future generations. Fagan writes that Black editors expected readers to engage with their newspapers in dynamic ways, showing that newspapers were intended to both carry information and instruct. A report of an 1841 Pennsylvania state convention quotes attendees who said that newspapers “contain, besides the ordinary news of the day, much useful knowledge, which tends to enlighten the understanding and improve the character...” recommending that “every family, who can possibly afford it, take one or more well conducted newspapers.” (“Proceedings,” 8) Speakers at an 1843 New York convention envisioned a national Black press as an “organ” that should “constantly point out the principles which should guide our conduct and our labors.” (“Minutes, 258” )

Fagan reminds us that the earliest conceptions of a national Black Press intended it as a guide to social uplift. This practice is rooted in early African American efforts to carve out a public space from which to socially constitute themselves. In “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic” Joanna Brooks historicizes a Black print counterpublic, a public sphere wherein Black voices could instruct and empower their communities without the legally recognized political presence of citizenship. Brooks writes:

Based on their shared experiences, African Americans did not simply petition for participation in the dominant public sphere. They formed their own counterpublics, their own countercultures, their own counternarratives, and their own distinctive traditions of using print to advance the political status of their community. . . (88)

Brooks’ work develops our understanding of the crucial role that the early Black print sphere played in racial upliftment, which, as Fagan suggests, relied on readers to actualize the ideas it

published in their everyday lives. Frances Smith Foster's "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture" writes that the African American press derived from the desire to record words and ideas "most precious" to their survival, and "to create and to preserve their history for themselves and for others." (723) The formation of a Black print sphere, thus, coincides with some of the earliest historical evidence of collective Black self-determination.

In many ways, American newspapers as instruments of historiography entered a state of crisis while Griggs was a young author: Southern newspapers regularly incited white violence against Black communities and national papers racialized Black soldiers serving overseas—if they mentioned them at all—in the construction of a nationalizing myth of white saviors. Griggs himself experienced a kind of failure of the press when newspapers published reviews of his books which did little to garner him a readership: "As can be seen these are among the strongest daily newspapers of the world [*New York World*, *Chicago Daily News*, *The Philadelphia Press*, and *The Guide and Mail* of Manchester, England]. Their comments were gathered and sent broadcast by means of the Negro newspapers and otherwise. But no support came." (*Story of My Struggles*, 11) As a result, in 1901 Griggs founded the Orion Publishing Company to reach an African American reading public but found more success selling his novels door to door.

This last section will explore the ways *Imperium in Imperio* tends to this crisis of record-making and remaking in the 1880s and 90s, initially by empowering its secret society with a national print counterpublic that fervently records and refutes discriminatory acts against African Americans. I will also apply Griggs's notion of seconding and its theoretical valences in my close readings of the novel: Not only does *Imperium* utilize the found manuscript genre to present itself as a historical record in a fabricated act of seconding—one that *acknowledges* a

history—but its multiple narrators also illustrate the ways historical narratives evolve based on the identity of whoever is doing the telling. These frameworks mark and at times mar the history of the Imperium by reporting contradictory information. Treating Griggs and Berl Trout as narrators transposed onto one another allows us to view the novel’s narrative inconsistencies as information *additional* to the Imperium’s factual history. As such, readers must interpret it at their own discretion. Finally, Griggs portrays seconding through public *disagreement* as a potentially revolutionary act with the potential for social reconstitution in “Berl Trout’s Dying Declaration.” Trout’s decision to publish his manuscript is an act of betrayal that leads to both the dissolution of the Imperium and the possibility of something new.

*Imperium in Imperio* draws an explicit connection between the establishment of a Black print counterpublic and self-determination through the creation of the Imperium. Its conception was the material result of a wide-reaching print network: “In the early days of the American Republic, a negro scientist who won an international reputation by his skill and erudition. . . . By the publication of a book of science which outranked any other book of the day that treated of the same subject, this negro became a very wealthy man,” who “secretly gathered other free negroes together and organized a society.” (174) The Imperium’s origin story illustrates what scholars of Black print spheres<sup>1</sup> have described as the potential for self-actualization in print: one author’s widely popular publication leads to the organization of a completely self-sufficient society with a government, constitution, army, treasury, hundreds of millions of dollars at its disposal, and over seven million devoted members.

Further, the Imperium’s origin story is strikingly similar to that of the African American print sphere itself, the earliest publications of which were authored by Black Freemasons in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Derrick Spires’s work on print as a performance of citizenship in *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*.

late eighteenth century. In 1793, Prince Albert Hall, founder of the Black Freemasonry delivered an oration addressing violence against free Black people. The speech was published and widely circulated to Black Masons in Boston. Black Freemason's regularly appealed to the American government in print, as John Ernest has documented, often addressing the U.S. government's hypocrisy by utilizing the rhetoric of the Constitution. Joanna Brooks writes that these early efforts signal a "crucial moment in the history of black thought about the public sphere, when black people articulate in practice and enact for the first time in print key principles of black counterpublicity: collective incorporation, conscious differentiation, and criticism of dominant political and economic interests." ("Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," 75) *Imperium* continually references the tradition of a Black print counterpublic through its conception in the late eighteenth century as well as its constitution as a secret fraternal society. Belton tells Bernard that its earliest members, "turned their eyes to the federal government for redress and a guarantee of their rights," but "[t]he federal government said: 'Take care of yourselves, we are powerless to help you'" (209) in an anecdote that echoes John Ernest's retelling of early Black petitioners to the American government.

In a chapter called "Unwritten History," we learn that the *Imperium* has a meticulously documented political history that dates back to the Revolutionary period. Whenever a bill is introduced to the United States Congress affecting Black America, it is also introduced, debated, and voted on in the *Imperium*. One of the novel's main characters, Belton, congressman of the *Imperium*, tells Bernard that "A record of our decisions is kept side by side with the decisions of the United States" during Bernard's initiation. (217) The compulsory archival work of the *Imperium* described here suggests that the government legitimizes itself in print practices that

range from historiographical to journalistic. The Imperium eventually forms a collective newspaper:

. . .whose business it was to chronicle every fresh discrimination, every new act of oppression, every additional unlawful assault upon the property, the liberty or the lives of any of the members of the Imperium. This was an illustrated journal, and pictures of horrors, commented upon in burning words, spread fire-brands everywhere in the ranks of the Imperium. (223)

Griggs's lengthy descriptions of the Imperium's operations—its origins in Black publishing, its historiographical legacy of painstaking recordkeeping, and its recent network of journalists devoted (solely) to documenting discrimination—historicizes the formation of a nationwide Black counterpublic space that grows in relation to its footprint on paper. In this way, the Imperium can be read as a metaphor for the relationship between early Black print culture and social formation: both entailed “a withdrawal of blackness from public ownership and the establishment of black collective spaces.” (“Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” 73)

The Imperium's newspaper is a national one, suggesting a network of reporters across the United States devoted to the same cause. This aspect of the novel elucidates how Griggs imagines a Black print counterpublic might be mobilized to unite people across space and reclaim the image of Blackness in the media. Both Belton and Bernard rely on positive newspaper coverage as they rise through the ranks of leadership. Belton is unable to afford a college education on his own, and while giving a speech at the Winchester public school upon completing his early education Belton ends up impressing an unnamed congressman. A correspondent of the *Richmond Daily Temps* then reports on the congressman's praises after obtaining a written copy of Belton's speech and sends the editorial to the editor of *The Temps*:

This was printed in *The Temps* and created a great sensation in political and literary circles in every section of the country. Every newspaper of any consequence reproduced the oration in full. It was published and commented upon by the leading journals of England. The President of the United States wrote a letter of congratulation to Belton. Everywhere the piece was hailed as a classic.

(62)

The remainder of the chapter introduces readers to the editor of that newspaper, Mr. V.M. King, whom the narrator describes as “In short. . . an outspoken advocate of giving the negro every right accorded him by the Constitution of the United States.” (63) Mr. V.M. is a white sympathetic voice in the novel who is so moved by Belton’s oration that he writes him a check that will cover his college expenses. The stipulation is that Belton must promise to remember that there are “two widely separated classes” of white people, neither of which are “totally depraved.” (69) Belton, who suffered at the hands of his white teacher in grade school because of his darker complexion, finds his first friend in a white newspaper editor.

Mr. King is a powerful entity in Belton's politics and career. While his motives for publishing Belton are individualistic—he mostly seeks to position himself as a white savior by paying for Belton's education—there is no doubt that without this early press coverage Belton would have never attended Stowe University, which is where he would acquire "fame as an orator and a scholar." (86) Later in the novel, Belton is lynched for helping a white girl find a page in a hymnbook at church. A mob, led by a postmaster and the evil Dr. Zackland, who is obsessed with dissecting Belton's body, hangs and shoots Belton in the back of the head. Miraculously, Belton survives and stabs Dr. Zackland moments before he is cut open on the operating table. Belton is quickly arrested and awaits his execution, this time by the state.

Strangely, while incarcerated a newspaper reporter for a "liberal New Orleans paper" interviews Belton and is so impressed with his personality that he "promise[s] to publish any statement that Belton would write." As a result, Belton's story arouses "sympathetic interest everywhere." (181) Bernard, Belton's childhood classmate, reads the story and uses his influence as a lawyer to get Belton's case heard before the Supreme Court. After giving "the speech of his life," which "added to his fame as an orator," (181) Bernard convinces the judges to acquit Belton of all charges, thus forging the bonds of friendship between the two young men.

For both Belton and Bernard, their success as public figures and celebrity orators cannot be disentangled from the national network of newspapers which promptly promotes their achievements. In the case of the near execution of Belton, the relationship between Belton and the nameless reporter for the New Orleans paper empowers journalists who unselfishly serve their communities: they literally save lives. The initial reporting of an event in the novel routinely creates a ripple effect, not unlike an associative chain of seconding. Belton's school speech is featured in *The Temps*, which leads to its reproduction in every major newspaper in the country, which in turn results in international recognition, a direct response from the President of the United States, literary fame, and a fully-funded college education. Similarly, the story Belton gives from a jail cell travels across the country to Bernard, who elevates it to the chambers of the Supreme Court, saving Belton from an untimely death. What initially presents as an unrealistic plot device surreptitiously propelling the men to fame, even saving Belton from death in a pinch, comes to represent the invisible power of the Black press as a failsafe against many of the mechanisms of white supremacy, namely, inequity, disenfranchisement, and mob law.

*Imperium's* excessive narrative filters and blending of genres work to demonstrate the processes by which histories are recorded and repeated. The novel exhibits what some scholars

have identified as narrative deficiencies, including an implausible plot structure and a confusing narrative framework. As Finnie Coleman notes in *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy*, however, this assessment is often the product of applying only literary aesthetics to the novel. When we read across Griggs's corpus of work, the vast majority of which was nonfiction, Griggs's decision to incorporate elements of autobiography, nonfiction, and fiction into the novel becomes meaningful, particularly because of the way the novel's generic excesses burden the narrative with multiple perspectives. The story of the Imperium is filtered through two narrators simultaneously. The novel opens with a note from Griggs, in which he explains that the secretary of the Imperium, Berl Trout, has recorded the history of the Imperium's dissolution and personally delivered the manuscripts—and other unnamed documents—detailing that history to Griggs. The narrative presented to readers in the following pages is ostensibly edited by Griggs, who, in agreement with Trout, believes that the Imperium's official history belongs to the reading public. Overall, this layered narrative framework confuses our understanding of the narrator, especially because the story itself is formally presented like a novel and not a found manuscript. Griggs's opening note in the novel reads:

The papers which are herewith submitted to you for your perusal and consideration, were delivered into my hands by Mr. Berl Trout. . . . Having perfect faith in the truthfulness of his narrative I have not hesitated to fulfill his dying request by editing his Ms., and giving it to the public. There are other documents in my possession tending to confirm the assertions made in his narrative. These documents were given me by Mr. Trout, so that, in case an attempt is made to pronounce him a liar, I might defend his name by coming forward with indisputable proofs of every important statement (I)

Next, readers encounter the voice of Berl himself via his “Dying Declaration,” which inserts a second “I” perspective into the text. Trout writes “I am a traitor. . . I have trampled under my feet the sacred trust of a loving people, and have betrayed secrets which were dearer to them than life itself.” (1) Some critics have associated this double framing, which presents as a found manuscript novel, with the ways African American narratives of enslavement were authorized by white speakers who would vouch for the accuracy of the narrative. Thus, Griggs critiques this tradition by authorizing himself to tell the story. Others posit that by inserting the fictional Berl Trout into the narrative framework, Griggs can abdicate authorship, which distances him from the politics discussed within the novel. Eric Curry’s “‘The Power of Combinations’: Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* and the Science of Collective Efficiency,” writes that “The text is represented as a collection of documents, but is not presented as a collection of documents. This is done to dissociate the author from the preferential perspective of his narrator.” (29) By distancing himself from the narrative through the inclusion of Berl Trout, Griggs stresses that he is not choosing a side. Curry’s argument proves that Griggs emphasizes finding a middle way forward to racial uplift by refusing to endorse neither Belton nor Bernard because they are too polarizing in their beliefs.

I want to develop Curry’s interpretation that the multiple narrative frameworks allow Griggs to abdicate authorship by suggesting that Berl Trout can even be read as an authorial replacement of Griggs. Trout, we are told, is the original author of the manuscript; Griggs its editor. In a hierarchical sense, Trout is the authority on the material presented to readers. He was, after all, the *Imperium*’s secretary, or official recordkeeper. Thus, by making his authorial presence peripheral to Trout’s, Griggs can make transparent the processes by which historical records become both framed and reframed by historians, narrators, and their readership. By

reading this novel not as an author's novice attempts at generic conventions, but as an experiment in the evolution of historical records—how they are made in print, narrativized, and remade in cultural consciousness over generations—we can appreciate the complexity of its narrative framing.

In my reading of this narrative framework, Griggs abdicates authorship while retaining his right to shape the manuscript Trout left behind. A third narrative voice eventually inserts itself into the novel—one that is ostensibly a combination of Griggs's edits and Trout's original written record. We know the speaker is distinct from both Griggs and Trout because it appears from within Trout's narrative but is not Berl Trout. When this third-person narrator speaks directly to readers, invoking at times the second-person perspective, we can no longer identify who is speaking. In these moments the narrator tells readers to remember what they've read, to earmark specific events recounted in Belton and Bernard's adolescence because they were particularly formative. Before closing a chapter called "Belton Finds a Friend," wherein Belton receives the financial endorsement of the newspaper editor, Mr. King, the narrator switches from the third to the second-person perspective, saying "Belton very feelingly thanked Mr. King, and assured him that he would treasure his words. He was true to his promise, and decided from that moment to never class all white men together, whatever might be the provocation, and to never regard any class as totally depraved. This is one of the keys to his future life. *Remember it.* (italics mine)" (69) This address to readers interrupts the narrative by slipping into a proleptic point of view: readers are made explicitly aware that Belton will likely remain a white sympathizer for the rest of the novel (which he does), but more importantly, the interruption instructs readers on how to interpret the text by indicating the importance of certain information. In this way, Griggs conditions his readers to view Belton's conservatism as a product of his

support from white benefactors, to “Remember” that his political views are informed by his lived experience. This allows Griggs to shape Trout’s historical record in an effort to portray and emphasize Belton’s complexity, therefore making him sympathetic to readers.

Imperium presents a historical record in Trout’s manuscript that has been shaped by a narrator for the purpose of instruction. If we interpret these moments as explicit commands to remember, the heavy-handed didacticism of the text becomes a dramatization of the making of historical knowledge. Not only does this implicate readers directly into the cultural work of historiography, but it illustrates the multiple voices and perspectives that layer historical records as they are repeatedly reproduced in print. “African American historical writing,” writes John Ernest, “begins [sic] with the recognition that history is not limited to the argument or effect of any single work.” Historical records like Trout’s manuscript “have a life of their own,” (*Liberation Historiography*, 47) and can be shaped and interpreted in contradictory ways once circulated in print. Consider how the characterization of Bernard, the radical, contradicts Trout’s descriptions of Bernard in his note to readers once the narrative is over. When Belton refuses to support Bernard’s plan to rebel against the U.S. government Bernard is required, as president of the Imperium, to execute his friend:

Bernard gazed on Belton with eyes of love and admiration. He loved his friend but he loved his people more. He could not sacrifice his race for his dearest friend. Viola had taught him that lesson. Bernard's eyes swam with tears as he said to Belton in a hoarse whisper: "Belton Piedmont, your last hour has come. Have you anything to say?" (279)

One line later the novel ends with Belton's execution, and readers are left with a personal note from Berl Trout on the following page. The note curiously picks up exactly where the manuscript itself leaves off:

As Bernard stood by the side of Belton's grave and saw the stiffened form of his dearest friend lowered 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, 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." (281)

Bernard is portrayed in the edited manuscript as tearful; hesitant; only fulfilling his presidential duty after he "gazed on Belton with eyes of love and admiration." An omniscient narrative voice reveals that Bernard "could not sacrifice his race for his dearest friend," creating the possibility that Bernard's actions are not only justifiable but honorable. In a starkly different characterization of Bernard in the same scene, Trout writes that Bernard's grief was "too galling for tears," that he "laughed a fearful, wicked laugh like unto that of a maniac" before shouting a series of graphic threats to all of white America. These different portrayals of Bernard—sympathetic versus maniacal—represent a legible instance of Griggs's rhetorical edits to Trout's manuscript. While inconsistent descriptions of Bernard might be understood as evidence of the novel's underdeveloped characters, the difference in these portrayals is underscored when the

novel abruptly switches from one historical record (Trout's edited manuscript) to another (Trout's unedited note). This shift ensures that the history of the Imperium is concluded with Trout's original words while the scene presented to readers on the previous page is re-narrativizing. Belton's execution represents, then, a singular historical event framed within the manuscript by Griggs and reframed in Trout's note to readers immediately afterward. That Griggs (the novelist) is, in fact, the only real author of the work suggests that the history of the Imperium is meant to be viewed as multiple iterations of a historical record whose framing undergoes notable change until the last page of the novel.

In "*Imperium in Imperio: Sutton Griggs's Imagined War of 1898*," David Kramer analyzes Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* by reading it alongside white-authored descriptions of soldiers who served in the Spanish-American war, most famously, *The Rough Riders*. Kramer argues that Griggs rewrites the Spanish-American war by reclaiming Black masculinity within the history of Black nationalism. This allows Griggs to repudiate racializing descriptions of soldiers in the Spanish-American war that emasculated Black soldiers by portraying them as weak links in the American crusade. Kramer's reading suggests that *Imperium* acts as a counter-narrative of single-authored accounts of the war, and can be deepened when we consider the novel's relationship to realism.

Griggs writes a version of the Spanish War soldier that portrays Black masculinity as potentially superior to white masculinity, but he can also deny the existence of authentically conveyed narratives altogether. By utilizing two narrative frames, one of which speaks to readers directly, Griggs calls the ostensible objectivity of his revisionist history into question. This experimentation in narration reflects elements of African American literary realism which frequently sought to demystify realism's objective to "treat life as it is." Andréa N. Williams

writes that “Representations offered as ‘authentic’” in realist texts “could convey the embedded racial and class prejudices of a supposedly objective mediator.” (*African American Literary Realism*, 188). African American novelists in the 1880s and 90s frequently combined elements of romanticism and realism with the understanding that truthfully portrayed narratives, what William Dean Howells described as “nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material,” tended to essentialize racial differences. *Imperium*’s intrusive narrator, who interrupts the story to speak directly to readers, embodies the didactic imperatives associated with the romance genre. Further, it subverts the authenticity of the narrative by layering Griggs’s voice over Berl’s, repeatedly reminding us that the narrative is a romanticized iteration of Trout’s manuscript. The effect, ultimately, is the *representation* of a historical narrative, not necessarily the relaying of any specific one. In this way, the novel is made up of multiple voices; a “collection of documents presented like a collection of voices,” Eric Curry writes (“The Power of Combinations”). In addition to the ways this narrative framing makes the continuous processes of historical narration and interpretation legible, we can also read it as a timely critique of realism’s commitment to “true” material.

Griggs questions the role of narrators in his re-presentation of the *Imperium*’s history, drawing on elements of nonfiction and realism to present a narrative that intervenes in the making of nationalist historiographies of the war. By offering multiple, often indistinguishable narrators—whose portrayals occasionally contradict one another—Griggs can also dispel the notion of any single historical authority. In doing so, *Imperium* grapples with the slippery differences between reporting and narration at a time when the border between literature and journalism was particularly blurry. “New Journalism was much more closely tied to American fiction than scholars have traditionally recognized,” writes Karen Roggenkamp in *Narrating the News: New*

*Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction.*

“A story,” was “a product that was marketed and sold,” with a central plot “around which drama was woven.” Journalists even competed with literature for sales, marketing their work as better than fiction because it read like fiction but was, in fact, “real.” (15) In borrowing from literary genres, news articles could frame historical events into familiar narratives, thereby shaping readers’ responses to the news by writing familiar tropes into their stories. For example, newspaper stories of the Spanish-American war frequently romanticized Cuban women as captives compatible with white soldiers, implying that “Cuba and its citizens. . . were already practically American and therefore ready for the taking—or redeeming back into the nation.” (112) Roggenkamp’s assessment of New Journalism as decidedly literary emphasizes the close relationship between literature and journalism in the late nineteenth century and points to the ways historical narratives could guide the nation’s attitude toward international affairs.

*Imperium in Imperio* ultimately asserts that historical narratives should employ narrators who have positioned themselves in relation to the historical material they relay with transparency. In other words, we should read *Imperium*’s many narrative frameworks as signposts that interrupt readers, reminding us to remain critical of the processes by which histories circulate. It also imagines the extent to which histories can leave their mark in material ways in its dramatic portrayal of Berl Trout’s death. Trout has committed the ultimate act of treason in allowing the publication of his manuscript. He states:

I am a traitor. I have violated an oath that was as solemn and binding as any ever taken by man on earth. I have trampled under my feet the sacred trust of a loving people, and have betrayed secrets which were dearer to them than life itself. For

this offence, regarded the world over as the most detestable of horrors, I shall be slain. (1)

Trout also calls for his grave to be marked with a red flag, to "warn all generations of men to come not near the air polluted by the rotting carcass of a vile traitor." (1) Yet he also calls himself a patriot, writing, "It is true that I have betrayed the immediate plans of the race to which I belong; but I have done this in the interest of the whole human family—of which my race is but a part." (1-2) For Trout, who sides with Belton's middle-way politics, Bernard's rebellion against the U.S. government would jeopardize the entire project of racial uplift by resorting to violence. The only way to prevent it is to reveal the Imperium's intended rebellion by turning over its historical record to Griggs. Thus, Griggs highlights the potential reverberations of Black historiography by tying the publication of Trout's manuscript to the demise of the Imperium, which allegedly becomes antagonistic under Bernard's radical leadership. Historiography itself becomes a rebellious act; in fact, it's the only rebellion to be actualized in the novel. Trout's contradictory language around loyalty, that he is both a traitor and a patriot, implies that by revealing the Imperium's secrets he preserves its sanctity, saving it from itself; by publicly disagreeing with Bernard he, in turn, emphasizes his commitment to the cause, making room for the implied social reconstitution of Black America.

Trout's emphatic opposition to insurgency speaks to Griggs's middle-way politics, which largely rejected the idea of separatism and advocated instead for upliftment through education. The novel's utopian undertones—its economically and politically independent depiction of African American society—believe a narrative that suggests that the work of insurgency lies in the instructional potential of the historical record left behind. David Kramer writes that "the novel cannot resolve the tension between Belton, the racial accommodationist, and Bernard, the

militant mulatto” and the story’s lack of a resolution leaves readers in a “no-man’s zone,” unable to reconcile the friction between militant and moderate ideologies. (“Imagined War,” 18) Eric Curry reads the novel’s conclusion as a plea for collective re-organization, writing “Griggs shows his readers that revolutionary politics need not work towards revolt as traditionally understood but may also be seen in the development of new and innovative forms of community organization. (“The Power of Combinations,” 38 ). In light of Curry’s call for new ways of thinking through revolt, I read Trout as a radical character in the novel. By circulating his manuscript, Trout both registers and condemns the Imperium in African American history; and by including Trout’s first-person act of betrayal alongside the Imperium’s history, Griggs illustrates the spectrum of possibilities that come from historiography.

In *Sutton E. Griggs and The Struggle Against White Supremacy*, Finnie D. Coleman writes that Griggs’s oeuvre represents a collection of intertextual intellectual strategies used to battle white supremacy. Cultural myth-making, enacted by novels like Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and the yellow journalism of the Spanish-American War, pushed a public image of Blackness based on a combination of pseudoscientific “studies” of Black intelligence, eugenics, and fear. As such, Griggs and his contemporaries make up an “especially fecund period of growth and development of ideas and philosophies concerning Blackness.” (Coleman, x-xi) Studying this tradition, then, requires us to seek out ways the late nineteenth-century print public vied for the images of Blackness that would contribute to dominant historical narratives. By not limiting our assessment of Griggs to literary parameters, we can read across his place in what Coleman calls the “quilt” of African American cultural history, noticing the “pieces of cultural fabric that are delicately stitched together with subtle and then not-so-subtle strands of intertextuality” which correspond to his ideas. (xvi) I argue that *Imperium in*

*Imperio*, a novel Griggs scholars frequently use to underscore Griggs's nascent political identity, demonstrates an impressive awareness of the momentum and trajectory of historical interpretation. It incorporates elements of nonfiction and fiction to create narratological problems that scar the history it portrays, producing an excess of narrative frameworks, a multivocal historiography that tells what happened in an effort to produce something more.

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