Sutton Griggs and the Borderlands of Empire

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1. “Equality and Independence” and “Equality or Death”

The first of these slogans graces a banner described in the “Plan de San Diego”—the fifteen-step revolutionary plan written in 1915 by an anonymous group of Mexican-American and Mexican revolutionaries in south Texas who purportedly had the backing of Germany and Japan in their plan to reclaim the lands taken by the US in 1846, establish an independent Negro and Native American republic, and put to death every “North American over 16 years of age” except women, children, and aged men. The banner was the emblem of the “Liberating Army for Races and Peoples,” an army that planned to “proclaim liberty of all individuals of the black race and its independence of Yankee tyranny” and to declare the independence of the States bordering on the Mexican nation, which Mexico was robbed of “in a most perfidious manner by North American imperialism” (148). Regardless of whether or not they finally would annex their new nation to Mexico, the revolutionaries state in Article 11 that they will ensure that the newly independent “negroes” will have plentiful land upon which to “form a republic and . . . be independent” (148).

The second slogan is also plastered on a banner of a fictional black revolutionary independence movement along the Texas border—a banner that each of the student members of a secret society simultaneously holds up to protest racial inequality in the
black Texas-born writer and minister Sutton E. Griggs’s novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899). Staged by the secret society that the novel’s protagonist Belton Piedmont forms at the fictional Stowe University, this open rebellion is meant to teach “the future leaders of their race” the power of what Griggs would subsequently term “collective efficiency” or combining forces for the common good. In this case, the common good ensures that the one black teacher at the university eats at the same table as the white teachers. But this is not an isolated win. When they see the white teachers “beat a hasty retreat and h[o]ld up a white flag” (46), the students join the leadership ranks of the parent secret society called the Imperium that is building an independent black empire in Texas. Indeed, the slogan “equality or death” accurately encapsulates the Imperium’s commitment to seize control of “that great state” of Texas or “every man (to) die in his shoes” trying—“to die in honor rather than live in disgrace” defending their right to liberty in a region “broad in domain, rich in soil and salubrious in climate” (163).

So how is it that Griggs’s 1899 novel could anticipate by a little over a decade so many aspects of the seditious “Plan de San Diego”? Uncanny resonances bind the two texts over the few years and few hundred miles that separate their writing. In addition to the two movements’ overlapping slogans, their multistep plans of revolutionary aggression against the US converge and echo one another in a myriad of ways, from their “secret negotiations with all of the foreign enemies of the United States” (Griggs 167) to their commitment to “the independence of the negroes” (“Plan,” Art. 15), to their choice of Texas as the site of revolution. The answer is, in short, that the “Plan de San Diego” was not an isolated document but a textual instance or trace of a longer, protracted set of political frictions over nation, race, and empire that played out over a few hundred miles of territory and that erupted in both fictional and nonfictional textual form episodically over the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, two years after the “Plan de San Diego” was uncovered, “The Zimmerman Telegram” revealed another possible plot, proposed by Germany to Mexico as part of an alliance, to reclaim from the US the territory lost during the Mexican-American War, should the US declare war on Germany. As such documents as “The Zimmerman Telegram,” “Plan de San Diego,” and Griggs’s novel remind us, the border has long been subject to geopolitical disputes and struggles not only among Mexican, Mexican-American, and Anglo-American groups but among multiple, at times overlapping, nations, races, and ethnicities. Such narratives of racial and territorial aggression collectively remind us of the
importance and prevalence of diverse racial constituencies to this long, knotty story and therefore suggest how the “Plan de San Diego” makes explicit provision for “the negroes,” regardless of the final outcome of the plot. In so doing, the “Plan” acknowledges the longstanding presence and importance of African Americans as a cultural, political, and military force along the border.

Literary studies of the US–Mexico borderlands have tended to emphasize a brown-white story with occasional reference to Native Americans, while studies of the US South have tended to emphasize a black-white story. However, attention to the particular southern border territory that Griggs takes as the site for his black empire shows us that when we assume the Mason-Dixon Line as the geographical boundary between North/South and the Rio Grande as a brown/white dividing line between Mexico and the US we oversimplify the racial contours of the nation and overemphasize the ease of its imperial reach. Both endpoint and access point, the territory comprising what is now the state of Texas functioned as a fluid, multidirectional, multiracial grid—a dynamic field through which Mexican-, Anglo-, and African-American groups crossed, recrossed, and blended with each other. It is a space that challenges us to rethink geo-racial migration from ante-bellum times to the present—to revisit our tendency, on the one hand, to assume that blacks only migrated, before and after the Civil War, to the northern border of the US and, on the other hand, to think of the Rio Grande as a significant border crossing for Mexicans only. At different times forming the outer rim of the former slaveholding galaxy, the threshold between the US and Mexico, and its own independent nation, the area that Waldo Frank would term “the frontier of the Rio Grande” is a region comprised of overlapping and often conflicting geopolitical affiliations (233). Documents like the “Plan” and Griggs’s novel therefore emphasize these vanishing points and overlaps between the US South and US–Mexico borderlands—the messy mélange where regions overlap and boundaries do not hold.

Scholars interested in reorienting the geospatial frames of American literature have recently turned critical attention to Griggs’s writing precisely because of the hemispheric context in which novels like Imperium in Imperio operate—because the novel’s critique of race relations in the US South refers to hemispheric history of US empire and the Spanish-American War.1 Once relatively understudied, Sutton Griggs’s work has recently been analyzed in prominent studies of race, empire, and American literature, such as Amy Kaplan’s The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture (2002) and Susan Gillman’s Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult (2003),
and his first novel has been recently republished by Modern Library with an introduction by Cornel West. Griggs’s life and writing have also recently become the subject of a separate book length study—Finnie Coleman’s *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy* (2007)—and articles on Griggs regularly appearing in important venues suggest that he is now widely recognized as an important writer and thinker in American and African-American literary culture. Whereas in 1987 historian William Loren Katz bemoaned being unable to find a review of *Imperium*—possibly because the novel was “too treasonous to evaluate” (322)—twenty years later *Imperium* has become a significant object of study, especially for its commentary on race relations in an imperializing late-nineteenth-century US.

Yet in this recent critical attention to the novel’s strategic pairing of the contemporary, extra-national, imperial conflict epitomized by the “war between the US and Spain” (137) with the intra-national racial conflict epitomized by the brutal lynching of a postmaster in South Carolina (the actual mob murder of Postmaster Frazier Baker in 1898), scholars have consistently missed the nuances of Griggs’s South—the variability and specificity of the particular region that the Imperium calls home. Griggs’s observation that “in proportion as the Cubans drew near to their freedom, the fever of hope correspondingly rose in the veins of the Imperium” makes clear the direct, dynamic relation between the Cubans’ and the Imperium’s political projects in racial self-determinacy (137). Given such lines, Kaplan’s argument that Griggs projects US racial anxieties onto the battlefield of Cuba or Gillman’s suggestion that the Spanish-American War figures as a crisis point for US domestic racial conflict makes sense. Yet exclusive focus on the links between a uniform US and Cuba can tend to obscure the rich, overlapping contexts, regions, and locales from which Griggs’s text also derives its shape and meaning. Critical efforts to “world” American literature or to contextualize the US within a transnational geopolitical frame, as José Limón reminds us, can run the risk of flattening the shape and texture of the distinct regions within which this literature is produced and can lead to totalizing readings of texts’ complex regional engagements with global phenomena. In overlooking the importance of the Imperium’s particular location to the novel’s meaning, many recent analyses have rendered Griggs’s novel placeless all over again.

So, what happens if we locate Griggs’s novel within the context of the specific region that the Imperium calls home, rather than within the context of a generic US South or US nation? In other words, what happens if we take Texas not as metonym or
metaphor for the US South but rather as a distinct, interconnected
critical region, a sort of world apart as well as in relation, replete
with specific local cultures whose critical interactions with global
as well as national forces form the starting point for the novel’s
answer to a long US history of racial injustice? Historians, such as
Gerald Horne, William Loren Katz, Barry Couch, James Leiker,
Quintard Taylor, Neil Foley, Kevin Mulroy, Lawrence Rice, Philip
Durham, Everett Jones, and Sara Massey, have recently begun to
tell the story of the African-American slaves, freemen, fugitives,
cowboys, and soldiers who occupied the US–Mexico borderlands
during the late nineteenth century. By locating Griggs’s fictional
black empire within this regionally specific cultural context and,
more particularly, within the dynamic and distinctive print culture
that emerges in response to this multiracial populace, we can begin
to see how Griggs’s novel draws upon the area’s rich racial legacy
in order to imagine a new answer to a key question occupying
both black and white citizens of the US—where to place the
nation’s newly freed black citizens. As Trish Loughran has
observed, local rather than “cross-regional” print culture helped to
found the nation. However, this very same “proliferating variety of
local and regional reading publics” (Loughran xix), as the follow-
ning pages suggest, also posed key challenges to the nation as a
homologous entity. By locating Griggs’s writing within such a
regional print climate, we can begin to see how Griggs’s writing
engages with the borderland’s print culture and how this engage-
ment helps Griggs to reformulate the terms in which an urgent
national question is posed—the question of where free blacks
should call home.

2. A Borderlands South: Beneath the South a Mine Has
Been Dug

Locating Griggs’s writing as part of the borderland region’s
ongoing textual dialogue about race, rights, and region allows us
to make sense of key questions about black citizenship that his
novel poses and attempts to resolve. As early as the 1850s, Martin
Delany and Frederick Douglass had recognized that blacks in the
US constituted “a nation within a nation” (Delany 209), and both
had advocated emigration outside of the nation’s southernmost
borders to other countries in the western hemisphere as an answer
to US racism. While Delany was a long-time proponent of emigra-
tion to Central and South America, Douglass’s assertion that
blacks might have to emigrate to points within the hemisphere
where “we may still keep within hearing of the wails of our
enslaved people in the United States” was an anomaly in his career-long opposition to emigration and African colonization (252). Its title places Griggs’s novel squarely in this protracted debate on the relative merits of emigration or assimilation that had absorbed both the African-American press and political leaders throughout the century. But the novel suggests that the question of whether blacks should place themselves inside or outside the nation’s borders to ensure equal political representation and protection—in short, whether they should amalgamate or emigrate—assumes the stability and permanence, rather than contestedness of US borders, and, in so doing, overlooks another important option available to African Americans seeking equality.

Rather than advocating for the placement of this “nation within a nation” either inside or outside of firmly fixed US borders, Griggs’s text suggests that there are strategic locations on the nation’s edges from which to productively rethink some of the founding assumptions governing the geopolitics of African-American rights. Wilson Jeremiah Moses has placed Griggs’s novels in a black nationalist tradition that was, “like the nationalism of most colonial peoples, profoundly influenced by the culture of the dominant civilization” (189). It is true that Griggs’s vision of a black empire at the nation’s edge largely ignores the black empire’s potential impact on indigenous nonblack peoples. Yet even as Griggs’s novel may reproduce the strategic erasures of the “dominant civilization” it critiques, it also seeks alternatives to that civilization’s either/or logics of racial integration by drawing on a borderlands history of racially hybrid peoples. By undertaking to “unite all Negroes in a body to do that which the whimpering government” will not do (183), the Imperium seeks to combat the US Federal Government’s failure to protect its black populace from racist violence—to leave “the Negro [an] unprotected foreigner in his own home” (125). But, once formed, the Imperium quickly dismisses the options of either amalgamation or emigration to the African Congo Free State with “hisses and jeers” in favor of extended consideration of two plans to secure the entire territory of Texas for the black empire (151).

Indeed, when they convene in their Waco, Texas, headquarters, the first subject that the Assembly debates highlights the unilateral importance of the territory they occupy to the Imperium’s project. Two competing plans for the occupation of Texas are put forth by the novel’s two protagonists, both of whom have suffered the ills of amalgamation—one’s fiancé has killed herself rather than bear offspring that would further dilute the race and the other’s wife has birthed a baby that appears to be white—and both of whom agree that the answer to the problem of US racism is not
to be found within the confines of the US, but rather in the region the Imperium has designated for its headquarters. Conflict between the two male protagonists about how to establish the Imperium—Belton Piedmont advocates initial nonviolence while Bernard Belgrave is a proponent of armed resistance—on the one hand, threatens to split the Imperium but, on the other hand, reinforces a bipartisan agreement about where to establish it. Belton envisions blacks emigrating en masse to Texas, where they will secure lawful possession of the state majority vote and where they will work out their “destiny as a separate and distinct race in the United States of America” (164). Bernard, on the other hand, envisions an eight-step covert “Plan of Action” for taking over all “Texas land contiguous to states and territories of the Union” (167) that includes secret negotiations with foreign enemies of the US and violent seizure of Texas land. At issue is the Imperium’s capacity to accommodate dissent within its ranks and, in responding to Belton’s disagreement, the Imperium both enacts its most important sovereign right—the right to put a citizen to death—and oversteps its bounds. Complete consent, however, does occur over the location, if not the implementation, of the empire. If they disagree over the how, in short, they do not disagree over the where, and the where is Texas.

As this uniform agreement over the empire’s site suggests, territory will be key to the Imperium’s project—not simply because the region’s location on the periphery of nations makes it a focal point for various efforts to reclaim lost rights, like that proposed by the “Plan de San Diego,” but because such efforts raise important questions about black governance and civic representation that cannot be fully worked through within other parts of the US. From the beginning, the protagonist attempts, with limited degrees of success, to create space within various parts of the US South from which to “secure rights denied because of color” (47). As a young student in Winchester, Virginia, Belton prepares to undermine racist favoritism by digging a large underground room beneath “the platform of the school-room” upon which he will compete against the light-skinned Bernard in an oratory contest. Despite the fact that the judges recognize that Belton’s speech on “The Contribution of the Anglo-Saxon to the Cause of Human Liberty” is better than Bernard’s, they “don’t like to see nigger blood triumph over any Anglo-Saxon blood” and so find a loophole that lets them award the prize to Bernard (29). Belton interrupts this reaffirmation of white supremacy, however, by literally pulling the ground out from under the master of ceremony and dropping the hated headmaster into the dunking pool hidden under the platform’s trapdoor. Temporarily short-circuiting
racial hierarchies, Belton’s orchestration of the racist schoolmaster’s fall “from the sublime to the ridiculous” (30) prepares him for his future leadership role in “adjusting positions between the negro and Anglo-Saxon races of the South” (49)—more particularly, in bringing about the evacuation of “the Anglo-Saxon race from some of its outposts” and in forwarding “the march of the negro to occupation of these areas” (49, 50).

His own geographic relocations within the US national borders from Virginia to Tennessee to Louisiana enable Belton to test the likelihood that these southern regions within the US could support the “forward march of the Negro” into “the beautiful land of the future” (50). In Richmond, Virginia, Belton starts a weekly journal, which is successful until it publishes an article that vigorously “attack[s] Southern Institutions” by critiquing voting fraud (88). Belton has fallen “into the well” of love for a Miss Nermal, and while the kissing game “in the well” allows the two to declare their love for each other, Belton cannot secure opportunities as an educated black man that would enable the two to pull themselves out of the well and thrive, despite his undercover explorations, impersonating a female nurse, of the labor opportunities available to blacks.

Frustrated blacks in Richmond think of rebelling against the US and become willing to aid the foreign power that would invade it, but it is in Belton’s next stop within US borders, Louisiana, where “the colored people of the region far outnumber the white people” (101) that Belton sees first-hand what he needs to do in order to “command” his people to move forward to claim their “glorious destiny” (50). Belton is told that long ago blacks in the region had “absolute control of everything,” because they organized their greater numbers into armed patrols and civic units. However, they did not have the “authority nor disposition to kill a traitor” when he appeared in their midst, and their inability to generate an “effective remedy against a betrayal” enables whites to strip them of their civil liberties. This political history of the region makes explicable to an initially confused Belton “what kind of a country he had entered” when he is arrested in Louisiana for being a “high-toned nigger” (99), but it also makes clear to him that a successful black society has to “exercise the sovereign right of life and death over its subjects” in order to protect its members from white resistance (129).

It is from the outermost periphery rather than the center of the US South—in a borderlands South—that the creation of an independent black society powerful and complex enough to defend African Americans against the racism that frustrates similar efforts in other parts of the South becomes imaginable. The physical
structure of its Waco headquarters highlights the Imperium’s ability to reorganize racial hierarchies and the space that blacks occupy relative to whites. Its main building has been constructed much as the platform that Belton initially built in Virginia—the top story is one large room that contains “an elevated platform” upon which stands what passes for “a gallows” (123). In this room, Belton initiates Bernard into the secrets of the Imperium but he does so with a test that highlights the Imperium’s power to do exactly what black social movements in places like Louisiana could not—the power to take life. After writing Bernard to “Come to Waco at once,” Belton tells Bernard of a “foul conspiracy” perpetrated by blacks that attempts to “unite all Negroes in a body to do that which the US government says it cannot do—to secure protection for their lives and the full enjoyment of all rights and privileges due American citizens,” and he asks Bernard to help him “expose the conspiracy before it is too late” (125). This test to see if Bernard is loyal to his race includes a pretend execution, and the blinded Bernard is led to the gallows platform, which he is told has “a trap door” that extends four floors and that, when sprung, will tear his arms from his body. Once the trap door opens, Bernard falls with terrific speed but he drops safely into the Imperium Assembly, a large room with 145 occupied desks arranged in a semi-circle around him, when he is hailed as the Chief and President of the Imperium for his courage and loyalty to his race. The headmaster’s precipitous fall through the platform trap door only temporarily challenges whites’ prerogative to “keep blacks down,” but Bernard’s drop into the Imperium initiates an important next step in the Imperium’s development, its ultimate goal of transforming “the Anglo Saxon who regards himself as a petty king and some community of negroes as his subjects” from sovereign into subject—and of transforming black subjects of petty kings who “have chosen our race as an empire” into citizens of “an empire of their own” (218).

As is now apparent, the particular location of the Imperium on the nation’s periphery optimizes the success of this project to reorganize racial hierarchies within the nation. As the narrator observes, it is within this particular region “beneath the South [that] a mine has been dug and filled with dynamite,” and this mine that is the Imperium has the capacity to generate a “terrific explosion” and to send “house, fences, trees, pavement stones, and all things on earth” hurling into the air (176). Lying within the nation—in it but not entirely of it—this particular, outlying region provides an important leverage point for Griggs to rethink the geospatial assumptions of racial equality and blacks’ placement inside or outside of the US. Its geographic location is not
incidental but is rather essential to the Imperium’s project. What is unsustainable in other parts of the South becomes imaginable in the Texas borderlands, both because of the region’s particular geopolitical and racial history and because of the rich and varied regional print culture that springs up to adjudicate this history.

3. Dreams of Freedom, Equality, and Empire

Popular newspapers and magazines were important print forms for many late-nineteenth-century American novelists, as Susan Mizruchi has observed, because they allowed authors interested in “shaping attitudes toward cultural others” to identify and engage the key concerns of public audiences and to market their novels to those audiences (6). Griggs was “a significant pioneer” among African-American novelists, in part, because he sought to harness the publishing industry’s powerful role in transforming how reading audiences understood race (Gloster 345). He undertook to control all aspects of publication and marketing by operating his own publishing company and promoting the sale of his novels among black communities during his travels as minister and orator. In The Story of My Struggles (1914), Griggs describes going “from door to door . . . where plain workmen toiled” and “to schools where poor Negro boys and girls were struggling for an education” in order to sell his books. “These humble people of the race,” he recalls, “came to me with their dimes” in order to buy the books that Griggs envisioned would help to further the race (14). And he was partially successful. Rayford Logan estimates that Griggs “probably had more Negro readers than did Chesnutt and Dunbar” (357). Griggs believed that literature was fundamental to the successful “progress of the African American people” (Wisdom’s Call frontispiece); Moses contends that Griggs was the “only black novelist of his period, with the possible exception of W. E. B. Du Bois, who deliberately undertook the writing of novels as part of a definite plan to create a national Negro literature” (171).

And yet this “national Negro literature” foregrounds the importance of region to the “progress” of the black audience for whom Griggs wrote. For example, Griggs dedicated writing like Wisdom’s Call (1911) that addresses African Americans as a distinctive group “to Texas soil which fed me, to Texas air which fanned my cheeks, to Texas skies which smiled upon me” (frontispiece). In so doing, he suggests the region’s larger importance to the literary project of forming an equal people. As has been the case with writing like Martin Delany’s Blake, scholars have
historically viewed the literary value of Griggs’s writing as compromised by its awkward style, heavy didacticism, excessive polemics, and improbable plot twists. One of the most widely read black novelists in the black communities of his day, Griggs has subsequently tended to be pushed to the sidelines of literary history. However, what can appear nonsensical from a deterritorialized vantage point locks into focus once we recognize that Imperium’s narrative logic is embedded within the region’s rich print culture and commentary on black equality—on race and place.

Griggs wrote, published, marketed, and sold Imperium in Imperio as the region’s popular press was generating pro- and anti-black rights publications—as local periodicals were conducting an extended thought experiment on the place of blacks in the nation. These commentaries about blacks’ rights moved easily from page to borderlands’ public sphere and shaped politics, practice, and possibilities for African-American equality in the region. Highly politicized pro- and anti-black periodicals had long been a defining feature of the region, and by 1900 over two dozen black papers and periodicals were being published in Texas. One of the earliest to advocate equal rights for black men had been the Waco Spectator, published in 1868 by Confederate veteran and philosophical anarchist Albert Parsons. The journal’s goal of securing “the political rights of the colored people” generated “the hate and contumely” of many of its editor’s “former army comrades, neighbors, and the Ku Klux Klan,” and finally Parsons and the Spectator were run out of town (14).

On the other side of the debate was the editor of The Iconoclast, a Waco-published journal of opinion that had a circulation of more than 90,000 nationwide during its three-year life from 1895 to 1898. Self-dubbed the “Apostle,” William Brann propelled his journal to national fame with his vitriolic commentary on social, political, and racial issues of the day. Brann was well known for his outlandish attacks on a number of groups including blacks, Baptists, Episcopalians, the British, and northeastern elites, and fashioned himself the Mark Twain of Texas. He was an entrepreneurial publisher, as well as author, who sold The Iconoclast to and repurchased it from his literary friend and colleague, O. Henry. “Located in Texas,” according to Brann, because the region has more “narrow-brained bigots and intolerant fanatics” than “any other section of these United States” (“Texas and Intolerance” 165), The Iconoclast, nonetheless, foregrounded the importance of the region to answering the question confronting the nation—what to do with free blacks?

According to Brann, the “best possible national policy” is one that reinforced cohesive national boundaries—that refused to
let “the common people of this country” be divided into “two
hostile camps” but that rather allows “estrangement to be forgotten”
and “a reunited people” to emerge out of North and South
(“Blue and Grey” 55). Yet he is critical of “our northern neighbors
who do not understand the negro” and of “the northern press”
which had “reared up” and labeled his plan to forcibly expel
blacks from the South “a damnable crime conceived in the brain
of a Texas brute” (“The Rape Fiend Remedy” 38). Because “no
conceivable amount of training can transform the negro into a tol-
erable citizen,” blacks according to Brann are the “black cloud
hanging over every Southern home” and therefore should be “mer-
cifully banished to a foreign shore” or “instantly executed”
(“Beans and Blood” 329). Contending that the region “will
quickly become the most populous, prosperous and progressive
portion of the American Union” once “the negro is removed from
the South,” Brann challenged Massachusetts to take the black
“away from the wicked Texans and carry him in triumph to the
land of racial equality” or to let them be “roasted” in Texas (331).

Despite Brann’s commitment to a unified nation devoid of
racial conflict, the year before Griggs wrote Imperium, local news-
papers announced a “street duel to the death in Waco streets”
between outraged citizens and Brann over his vitriolic editorials
on local leaders’ racial politics (Davis). The region, according to
The Iconoclast, was being compromised by its southern as well as
its northern neighbors and by local leaders’ ongoing illicit involve-
ments with residents to their south. Tired of the dependence and
disregard of “Spanish cavaleros and the half-civilized Aborigines
to the south of us,” Brann contended that the only way to stop
their “flagrant insults to the American flag” was to sever ties with
all countries “between our southern boundary and the Antarctic
Circle” and to expel all South Americans from the region in order
to protect its racial superiority (“The Monroe Doctrine” 119). But
it was his coverage of a particular episode in the flow of people
between this region and Texas that got Brann kidnapped, assaulted,
and finally gunned down on the streets of Waco. Claiming that
local residents of Waco had transported Latin American minors
“to Texas to breed illegitimate Baptists,” Brann antagonized area
religious leaders with his justified allegation that Baptist adminis-
trators of Waco’s Baylor University were sex trafficking Brazilian
minors, under the auspices of providing training for their mission-
ary work in Latin America (“Antonia Teixeira” 191). When a
pregnant Brazilian exchange student accused a family member of
Baylor’s president of rape, Brann produced incendiary commen-
tary declaring that her “ill-begotten babe” was “her diploma from
Baylor” and that her “illegitimate childbirth constituted Baylor’s
graduation exercises” (“The Teixeira-Morris Case” 322). His declaration that he had “nothing against the Baptists—” he “just believed they weren’t held under long enough” did nothing to appease outraged locals, many of whom tried to kill him before he was finally assassinated in April 1898 (“Baptism by Immersion” 32). The enduring animosity that the articulate savagery of his writing provoked is suggested by his tombstone, or more particularly the bullet hole shot through the profile of his head, next to the word “TRUTH.” As Parsons’s Spectator or Brann’s Iconoclast suggest, the region’s popular publications propounded radically differing positions on the place of nonwhites in the nation and generated heated, at times violent, reactions in their readers.

Griggs’s novel took part in this protracted dialogue about race and region, place and politics, in large part by featuring print as key to these race debates. If the region’s publication culture was a fiery, combustible blend of racial free-thinking and reactionism throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Griggs generated text that featured the politically transformative power of print within its pages. Within such a milieu, it is therefore no surprise that the Imperium’s new president would start a “fiery” “illustrated journal” that featured “pictures of horrors, commented upon in burning words” and that “spread fire-brands everywhere in the ranks of the Imperium” (137). The novel foregrounds the importance of print texts—from the multipage “PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE,” a call to arms delivered to the Assembly to the multistep “Plan of Action” and the “secret newspaper” that Bernard starts that chronicles “every fresh discrimination, every new act of oppression, every additional unlawful assault upon property, the liberty or the lives of any of the members of the Imperium” (137). Within the novel, this proliferation of textual production summons community into being—in short, to constitute—the community the Assembly plans for and envisions. Belton’s commencement address, for example, is printed in the Richmond Daily Temps and creates such “a great sensation in political and literary circles in every section of the country,” that the oration is reprinted in “every newspaper of any consequence” and “commented upon by leading journals of England” (61) even inspiring the president of the US to write a letter of congratulation to Belton. It moves one reader—the editor of the Temps—to pay for Belton’s education because he recognizes the potential that the words on the page have to transform race relations and the potential of their author as a representative of his race’s future. The printed word is, later, powerful enough to create “a great stir in political circles” and to transform public opinion on questions of racial injustice (88).
Griggs not only features print as key to race debates in Imperium, but he also draws on popular print depicting the region as a separate nation, related to but distinct from the US national project. Popular narratives had long shown the region’s diverse independence experiments as both reenacting and refuting US nation formation. In its accounts of the founding of the independent Republic of Texas, for example, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* (1838), like many other publications, consistently figured the Texas Revolution of 1835–36 and the independent slaveholding Republic that followed as upholding and extending US narratives of nation formation and imperial ambition in order to legitimize the revolutionary effort. According to the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, those who fought for Texas independence understood “the present situation of Texas” to be “analogous to that in which American colonists were placed” (26 Oct. 1838 n. pag.). Writers modeled the Texas Declaration of Independence on the 1776 Declaration, the Republic’s initial capitol was named Washington on the Brazos, and men fighting at the Alamo mouthed the words of John Adams. Seeing their revolutionary struggle against Mexico as furthering the US colonies’ struggle against Great Britain, founders of the Republic of Texas identified the independent nation as fully realizing the incipient ideals of the nation to its north. William Allen summed up the situation thus in *Texas in 1840, or the Emigrant’s Guide to the New Republic*: its geopolitical genealogy enabled the new Republic of Texas to “establish a form of government upon the most perfect model the world has ever seen”—a superior “government of law, system of human rights, and security against the exercise of lawless power” (260). This new, independent Republic upheld, extended, and finally threatened the US empire as well as the nation, and many agreed with John Calhoun that the new slaveholding Republic was uniting “the ambition of Rome and the avarice of Carthage,” with the goal of becoming “the real Empire...of the country” (Calhoun 17: 381). Enjoying “an empire and a history of her own,” Texas, warns Edward Everett Hale, the anonymous author of *How to Conquer Texas, Before Texas Conquers Us* (1845), has the capacity to “become the real Empire” of the continent (4).

Like these popular print accounts of the region as a separate nation—even as a separate empire—Griggs uses US patriotic narratives in order to conceptualize an independent empire in the region. Like the Texas Republic, the Imperium’s “compact government” models its Constitution after that of the US, makes extensive use of Jefferson’s writings, seeks in Bernard their own “George Washington,” and debates the exact same laws and policy issues being considered by the Congress of the US. By paying...
“especial attention to the history of the United States during the revolutionary period” (131), Imperium leaders seek to improve on what its founders managed to produce—they seek to correct “what the General Government could not do, because of a defect in the Constitution” (132). These painstaking reenactments of US nation-formation at the nation’s edge both affirm the nation and underscore the nation’s failure to implement its liberal democratic principles of liberty and justice for all.

This doubled relation to the nation to its north is nowhere more apparent than in the Imperium’s Capitol building, the façade of which is decorated with American flags and red, white, and blue bunting. Masquerading on the outside as Thomas Jefferson College to the uninitiated, the Imperium’s Capitol building contains inside all the apparatus of a second national government that has been “organized and maintained within the United States for many years,” and that is comprised of a population of seven million two hundred and fifty thousand subjects (129). Underneath the patriotic cloak that attests to its national affiliation and protects it from the public eye, this building is covered in a second layer of black cloth that simultaneously represents the Imperium’s critique of the US, its mourning for the racial violence the US continues to condone within its borders, and its aspirations to create an independent empire that threatens US hegemony. As the multiple layers of fabric shrouding its Capitol building suggest, the Imperium, just like the Republic of Texas, fashions itself on a US constitutional model in order finally to pose a serious, covert challenge to this national government.


As we have seen thus far, Griggs’s text circulates in a vibrant array of local print debates about race, region, and national belonging that collectively highlight how the region’s location at the nation’s edge complicates the concept of a firmly delineated national boundary upon which the ideas of emigration or assimilation depend. Griggs’s novel engages with local print culture even as it addresses the alternative and experimental African-American communities that had long typified the region. These communities, as we will see, refute the idea that assimilation or emigration was the only answer available to those who wanted to challenge US racial injustice.

At the same time that Anglo-Americans were constituting a new nation based upon racial hierarchies, African Americans were contesting the white privilege of the US and of the Texas Republic. The region had long been home to experimental social
efforts to refute and reimagine US racial hierarchies. Even before Texas became an independent republic in 1836, blacks were living and working, in significant numbers, on the Texas plains. While a 1792 Spanish census indicated that 496 of Texas’s 1600 residents were black (Katz 63), it was the signing of Mexico’s Plan de Iguala (1821), which guaranteed social equality, abolition of slavery, and right of all races to hold office, that caused black settlement of Texas to skyrocket. Texas, the Mexican province most accessible to African Americans from the US, became a principal area of settlement for blacks like Virginian John Bird, who believed that he and his son Henry would be received as citizens under Mexico’s colonization laws and entitled as such to land. Their new rights inspired African Americans like Greenbury Logan to fight for Texas independence in 1836, because he felt himself “more a freeman [in Texas] than in the States” (qtd in Katz 64). By the time it was annexed in the 1840s, Texas was imagined by many northerners as the dumping ground for blacks—both free and slave—and as the natural portal through which blacks would emigrate to Mexico and the equator. Numerous postbellum experimental black colonies, such as William Ellis’s and Jack Johnson’s, continued to funnel blacks through Texas to northern Mexico. Johnson, for example, invited “colored people” who are “lynched, tortured, mobbed, persecuted and discriminated against in the boasted ‘Land of Liberty’” to emigrate to the land of no “race prejudice” (qtd in Vincent 260). For William H. Ellis, the laws of Mexico as late as 1895 continued to be more fair and impartial than in the US: “as long as the negro is suppressed as he is in the US, the better class will seek new fields, and Mexico, standing at the very doors of the US, offering inducements to all, will prove a welcome home to the negro” (qtd in Reynolds 35).

Using south Texas as their point of ingress and egress, Ellis’s colonists became the subject of a heated print debate—on both sides of the border—on questions of racial and national progress. Mexican presses like El Tiempo praised Ellis’s effort as a “way of stopping the lynchings and helping the U.S. get rid of a race which the Yankee detest,” and El Heraldo predicted “good results for the colony...but not for the country because the negro element is not an acceptable colonization” (Reynolds 260), but some papers on the US side of the border like The San Antonio Express were more critical of the experiment and complained that migrating blacks were destroying local communities.

In his novel Griggs represents the complex civic position of blacks along the US–Mexico borderlands with a key question that organizes and seems to confuse the narrative from the start—whether key figures like the narrator and Belton are patriots or
traitors. Although contemporaries like Brann may have argued for blacks’ expulsion from the nation’s borders, Griggs’s novel points out that, from the vantage point of the region’s fluid, multilayered racial makeup, the question of a citizen’s unilateral, unequivocal national affiliation becomes impossible to determine. The text registers this impossibility in the founding tension that it creates between the opposing concepts of patriotism and treason—endpoints on a continuum of national affiliation. Griggs describes the writing of *Imperium* as a direct response to his dawning recognition that “men have a right to a voice in the government that exercises authority over them,” but that the founding US principle that “governments derive their powers from the consent of the governed” was being “violated with reference to the American Negro” (*Story* 7). He therefore “wrote the book entitled Imperium in Imperio” because he believed “that a statement of our case in book form would accomplish good for our cause” (7).

The Imperium reflects the vexed relation of African Americans to their national government. The Imperium’s reliance on and rejection of US foundational narratives shape the narrative as well as the plot. It begins and ends with executions that reinforce the Imperium’s legitimacy and its right to put a traitor to death. Yet the narrative insists that Belton Piedmont and Imperium Secretary of State Berl Trout are patriots as well as traitors, subject to competing, conflicting territorial affiliations that refuse national logics of resolution. The novel formulates the choice between patriotism and treason as an overarching narrative problem with its preface—the Dying Declaration from Trout—beginning with the words “I am a traitor” (5). Trout has been identified as a traitor because he gives the story that we are about to read to Sutton E. Griggs to publish, and thereby destroys the secrecy upon which the Imperium depends for success. For this the Imperium assassinates him and buries his body face-downward, coffin-less, in an “old forsaken well,” in accordance with Imperium law.

But if the narrative—or more particularly Griggs’s publishing and our reading of it—is an act of traitorous betrayal of the Imperium, it is also the act of “a patriot” who defends the interests of the “whole human family” (6) against “a serious menace to the peace of the world” (176). Trout’s decision to “prove traitor” to the Imperium rather than condone “internecine war” generates the text we read and is reproduced within the text when Belton decides to break with the Imperium rather than to support Bernard’s violent and, in Belton’s estimation, “treasonous” plan to take over Texas. Reminding Bernard that the Imperium was organized to secure our rights “within the United States” (168), Belton declares that he is “no traitor” to the US and that he will “never fight to restrict [its]
territory” (169), because he loves not only the Imperium and the Union but also, more particularly, “the South” on whose “soil” he “was born” and on whose “bosom [he] was reared” (154). The final, and fatal, conflict between Belton and Bernard is not about the geographic location of the Imperium—as we have seen, everyone agrees that it should be in the southern borderlands—but is rather endemic to this particular region. An inevitable outcome of the Imperium’s location, the question of whether Belton is “patriot” or “traitor” or both represents the competing, overlaying affiliations that the region’s racially diverse populace have to the various constituencies competing for control of the region.

Griggs’s novel registers this enduring tension between affiliation with and resistance to the national corpus (between patriotism and treason), thus engaging the region’s popular print commentaries on race and nation, but it also engages African-American communities’ lived experience in the region. The US–Mexico borderlands region did not immunize African Americans against the domestic racism of which Griggs is so critical in Imperium, but it did offer some strategic opportunities for African Americans to reconfigure the political, social, economic, and legal contours of postwar racism in America—to, as Griggs’s narrator puts it, generate a “race that dreams of freedom, equality, and empire, far more than is imagined” (44). These regionally specific opportunities, as we will see, provide an explanatory logic for the seemingly fantastic elements of Griggs’s text—from the armed march on the Texas Capitol, to the establishment of a government replete with physical plant, to the start-up funds for the venture, to the accelerated purchase of all Texas land. The experiences of African Americans in the region are integral to Griggs’s vision of how to solve the national question of racial justice. But more fundamentally they collectively point out how “either/or” logics meant to resolve racial inequality either inside or outside the nation’s borders fail to acknowledge the full range and complexity of citizens’ “dreams of freedom, equality, and empire.”; this approach foreshortens far more ambitious, complex imaginings of racial equality.

The complex web of competing and, at times, conflicting loyalties and split affinities at the core of the region’s African-American civic participation is evident from their military service along the nation’s blurry edge. From the time that Griggs was born in 1872 in the north-central Texas town of Chatfield to the time that he wrote his first novel imagining a black empire in 1898, the region that he lived in and wrote about was transformed from a frontier into a national border. The territorial occupation of African Americans played an essential role in this process. Black soldiers were key to the establishment of a US national border,
and in 1873 more than 1,600 African-American soldiers were stationed along the border, helping to solidify the US’s southernmost national boundary. Buffalo soldiers had long fought for all sides during the multi-front conflicts characterizing the region in the first half of the century, but the need of the US after 1848 to rely on black troopers was heightened by the fact that US authorities were not confident that they could count on Latino residents to confront Mexico, should open conflict between the two nations arise. Depicted by the US government as genuine Americans who could be trusted to defend national interests in contradistinction to these groups, black soldiers saw a unique opportunity to align their interests with the interests of the US military in order to advance their own rights—to affiliate with the national corpus. Yet, at the same time, conflicts with residents, as Horne and others have documented, placed black soldiers at odds with the citizens they protected; motivated them to mobilize when their civil rights were violated; and finally equipped blacks with the skills and experience necessary to reimage their place within the nation.

In 1878, for example, the African-American soldiers of Co D, 10th US Cavalry, road into San Angelo, Texas, and opened fire in a white saloon, after locals attacked a black sergeant. Immortalized by Frederic Remington’s 4 May 1901 illustrated short story for Collier’s, “How the Worm Turned,” this conflict between Fort Concho troopers and local whites was, in Remington’s words, “one of the wild notes that must sound when the great epic of the West is written” (115). Remington’s story creates a clear line of influence between the 1878 “Texas fight” and the Spanish-American War. His first-person narrator was a bystander and most likely a participant in the saloon shootout and tells the story to his comrade to pass the time while his company waits to fight the “Span-yards.” The narrator disingenuously predicts that the Fort Concho fight will be forgotten, but “that Texas fight” at Fort Concho had a long-lived, as well as literary, legacy (117). Individuals like Waco-born John B. Hayes or “The Texas Kid” confronted “For Whites Only” saloon signs by asking for a drink and, upon being refused, backing his horse through the swinging doors and shooting out the lights. As late as 1917, one hundred and fifty members of the 24th Infantry’s third battalion marched on whites in Houston in retaliation for racial injustices, killing sixteen whites and suffering four of their own casualties. Organized in 1869, the 24th had served in the West before being deployed to Cuba in 1898 and then to Mexico through El Paso to fight Pancho Villa’s forces in 1916. Seasoned on the US imperial stage, these black soldiers had little patience for domestic racism. They put their military skills to work within the nation’s border, in
a two-hour march on the city, which came to be known as the Houston Riot of 1917 and precipitated a court-martial of sixty-four soldiers. As these narratives suggest, African Americans actively and violently reclaimed their right to occupy space in the border region that they helped to stabilize for the US. Through these aggressive self-defensive actions along the border, as Remington’s story and the history of the 24th Infantry reminds us, African Americans were able to aggressively seek their own rights as they became more visible members of an imperial army—to dream and, increasingly, to act on their dreams of freedom, equality, and empire.

African-American military service along the border reflected African-American inhabitants’ overlapping and at times competing drives to be assimilated within and autonomous from the US—made them at once “patriots” and “traitors,” much like Griggs’s characters. Their acquisition of real property, as well as military service, in the region also reflects the essentially fissured nature of black citizenship along the borderlands. On the one hand, African-American land ownership rose more precipitously in Texas than in any other southern state, partly because Texas offered large tracts of abandoned land with liberal squatting laws. Many black Texas landowners resided in freedmen’s settlements, informal communities of black farmers, and stockmen that sprang up across the eastern half of Texas. Some became landowners through land speculation and ranching opportunities. For example, William Goyens, a North Carolinian, settled near Nacogdoches in 1820, became a land speculator, and amassed nearly thirteen thousand acres in four east Texas counties before his death in 1856. The Ashworth brothers migrated to southeast Texas between 1831 and 1835 and soon became the largest and, arguably wealthiest, free black family in antebellum Texas, acquiring two thousand acres in southeast Texas, and two thousand and five hundred cattle, the largest herd in Jefferson County. Two of the Ashworths were wealthy enough to avoid military service in the Texas Revolution, sending substitutes instead. As Thad Sitton and James Conrad point out, historians as well as scholars of American studies and border studies have commonly overlooked this phenomenon—partly because of the difficulty in finding information on the settlements and their consequent erasure from official historical narratives and partly because we tend to think about this region in terms of land struggles between Anglo and Mexican residents, punctuated by such events as the Garza and Cortina rebellions, and the Mexican Revolution. Yet the percentage of black Texas landowners increased fourteen times between 1870 and 1890, going from 1.8 to 26% and peaking at 31% in 1900 (Sitton and Conrad
2). By 1924 Clifton Richardson’s article describing the region to readers of *The Messenger*, the national magazine of the Harlem Renaissance, observed that the state had a disproportionately large number of black property and landowners, and these residents, according to Richardson, were, like the leaders of Griggs’s Imperium, determined to stay and “fight it out… in the Lone Star State,” regardless of trouble (261).

And yet blacks, more often than not, still worked land they did not or could not own. From the 1870s to the 1890s, over five thousand black cowboys (about 25% of all cowboys) worked the Texas cattle drives. The largest number of African Americans herding cattle worked in Texas—one-third of all black cowboys in 1890 and two-thirds by 1910—and black cowboys like Britton Johnson became legendary.14 It was the locally developed skills of the black Seminoles in south Texas and ranch-working slaves, coupled with the challenging terrain, that made black cowboys so important to the development of late-nineteenth-century Texas cattle empires like the King Ranch and the XIT Ranch. XIT (short for the number of initial investors, “Ten in Texas”) was formed when the 1875 Texas legislature authorized the sale of over three million acres of land in the north central part of the state to underwrite the building of a new Capitol house. A syndicate of private investors purchased the land, issued bonds to build the Capitol building (still in use in Austin), and then amassed a herd of over one million ten thousand cattle by 1886.15 Covering an area of land larger than some eastern states, the XIT Ranch was an empire in which black cowboys had a significant part, but just as importantly, it offered a tangible example of the massive land purchases and acts of empire building ongoing within the state during Griggs’s early life. Suddenly, the plan of Griggs’s Imperium to “quietly purchase all Texas land contiguous to states and territories of the Union” through “money raised by the issuance of bonds by the Imperium” seems achievable rather than far-fetched, both because of massive land transfers ongoing in the area and because of the region’s blacks’ dual roles as laborer and landowner (167).

Griggs could imagine the Imperium purchasing large tracts of Texas land not only because significant portions of the state were for sale but because by the 1890s African Americans had a track record of property acquisition in the state.

Griggs’s novel represents the dual position of the region’s black inhabitants as both owners and occupants, both patriots and traitors, but in the Imperium itself, he also represents the powerful political societies that the region’s African-American communities formed to further their interests. As Griggs’s narrator observes, “the negro has been a marvelous success since the war, as a
builder of secret societies” (132). Once in the state, black residents quickly formed and joined organizations that gave them social, political, and economic leverage. As early as 1868 a freedmen’s settlement eighty miles outside of Houston formed an association, armed themselves, and drilled daily, after Klansmen began threatening them. Local whites filed a complaint with the local freedmen’s bureau about the freedmen’s “military organization” and requested that the local bureau agent forbid the community from bearing arms. The bureau issued a formal order that any “armed band, organization or secret society” was banned, but brokered a successful compromise by securing the Klan’s agreement to stop harassing the freedman community if it ceased engaging in “any warlike preparations” (Couch 231). The same year ten blacks were elected delegates to Texas’s Constitutional Convention. During the 1870s freedmen and Republicans joined forces, with political success for both groups. Twelve African Americans served as legislators during the 1880s and four were elected to the senate in the nineteenth century. Many had originally been brought to Texas as slaves. Black Texans also formed fraternities, lodges, and societies, and the wealth of black organizations in Texas was nothing less than “staggering,” according to Richardson (255). Associations such as The Colored Knights of Pythias and Court of Calanthe; the Masons, Knights, and Daughters of Tabor; and United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten held accumulated wealth of multiple millions of dollars (258). In addition, these groups bought or constructed enormous temples, meeting structures, and buildings—the $250,000 temple that the Odd Fellows were building was not atypical (258). Indeed, such a building serves as a model for the Imperium headquarters, but, just as importantly, it indicates the extent to which African Americans in the region achieved social and economic self-determinacy.

Griggs harnesses this complex, regionally specific African-American legacy to imagine, within the pages of popular print, a powerful all-black governing body at the nation’s edge. His novel operates in dynamic relation to a geopolitical landscape where black as well as white and brown residents had long been engaging in ambitious and vital experiments in self-determination that make “patriot” and “traitor” overlapping, rather than mutually exclusive, terms. Even as the Imperium upholds and extends US national genealogies, this “other government” has the political ambition to reconstitute the US government and the economic, political, and military means by which to do so. It has already used its influence secretly to have teachers appointed in southern schools who will teach black students to aspire for equality. It has
“army drills” after “lodge sessions” adjourn, branch legislatures in multiple states, and a congress and constitution. It has purchased “good land” that was offered “after the war for twenty-five cents an acre” (133), and boasts a treasury of $500,000,000 dollars. Its leaders are compared with “Julius Caesar, on entering Rome in triumph” or “Napoleon” or “General Grant, on his triumphal tour around the globe,” at the head of “an immense army of young men and women” who have been trained to determine “the future of the race” and who are “ready to march” for their rights (39, 40, 50). A natural expression and logical endpoint of African Americans’ complex regional footprint, the Imperium utilizes the deep contexts of the local African-American community in order to conceptualize a place not inside or outside but at the interstices of the nation’s borders from which blacks can most effectively reconfigure the political, economic, legal, and social contours of their built environment.

5. Conclusion

From Brann to Parson to Remington, writers of short stories and editors of periodicals sought to determine as well as document—to write as well as to report—the chapter that the region contributes to “the great epic” of the nation, a chapter that is, as Remington observed, too easily forgotten. Like his contemporaries, Griggs published to make as well as record history—to contribute to a debate regarding the place of blacks within the nation’s borders. Griggs uses local print culture to begin to answer a national question regarding black citizenship, but the race and print communities in which he works collectively generate a new frame of reference for these national debates on race.

As we have seen, Griggs’s text illustrates how civic affiliation is comprised of a grid of multidirectional links and connections that mutually enforce even as they finally undo each other. In so doing, the novel offers a strategic geopolitical location from which to rethink the binary logics that tended to govern African-American rights during Griggs’s literary career. As Griggs suggests, framing the question of African-American rights as a choice between assimilation within the nation or emigration from it overlooks the complex logics and opportunities inhering in the nation’s blurry edges. Adjacent to and embedded within the US, the region featured in Imperium offers Griggs a new territorial coordinate from which to rethink US racism during the age of empire.

When scholars approach Imperium in Imperio with the geographic coordinates of Cuba and a generic US South in mind, they
miss the complexity and geographic specificity of Griggs’s conceptual engagement with territoriality, race, and nation building. From the vantage point of the borderlands South in which Griggs’s text circulates, we can begin to see that 1898 was not only the culmination of protracted racial conflict between US North and South—the last battle of the Civil War, as scholars have importantly observed—but that it was also a tipping point in the long history of black militarism and civil rights struggles typifying the geographic area stretching from the north central Texas area of Waco all the way to the nation’s blurry edge. The novel asks us to draw new lines between US sites of conquest outside the nation’s borders to specific regions within its boundaries that remain liminal. Doing so complicates two-dimensional narratives of displacement, domination, and national building—be they directed across or framed within firmly fixed national borders—that can all too easily stand in for the myriad unfinished processes, multidirectional movements, and ongoing relocations giving local communities and the texts produced within them their distinctive shape and texture. Such analysis of the fluid movement of blacks in the border region over long historical time brings to the fore a rich, multidimensional, cultural field defined less as a single great migration and more as an ongoing oscillation of people.

Griggs’s imagined answer to US racism is not to be found within frames of reference located inside the nation’s bisected regional North–South frame nor outside the nation’s borders on its imperial playing field, but rather within the unwieldy racial mixture, movement, and mélange defining the region apart but integrally connected to US struggles for dominance. Griggs’s novel asks us to read from the vantage point of the regional logics in which it is embedded—to read within a dynamic language of text and territory, race and region produced by African Americans along the US–Mexico borderlands. In so doing, it asks us to rethink what we think we know about the past, place, and prose.

Notes

1. James Robert Payne’s “Afro-American Literature of the Spanish-American War” provides an important account of African-American writing on the Spanish-American War. Payne’s analysis of Griggs’s novel as part of this tradition constitutes an important context for subsequent Griggs scholarship.


3. Griggs’s novel is not unusual in this regard, but rather reflects contemporary tensions between races. As Neil Foley observes, in Texas, unlike any other part of the South, white meant not only not black but also not Mexican. Therefore, Mexicans and blacks found themselves unexpected partners as well as opponents in a myriad of power struggles along the border.

4. See Gloster as an example of this trend in Griggs scholarship. For critical commentary on this trend, see Andy Doolen, “Be Cautious of the Word ’Rebel’”: Race, Revolution, and Transnational History in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, the Huts of America,* *American Literature* 81.1: 153–79.

5. As Wilson Moses notes, “Griggs is conspicuous by his absence from standard anthologies of black literature published since the late 1960s,” and “few readers treat Griggs with any serious appreciation” (203–4).

6. Seeing parallels between the abuse that the capitalists heaped on Chicago’s working poor and the “actions of the late southern slave holders in Texas toward the newly enfranchised slave” (16), Parsons continued to defend the weak and was finally executed in 1887 for his role as one of the Haymarket Riot ringleaders.

7. These words are featured in a 1919 advertisement from *The Messenger* that is reprinted in Theodore Vincent’s *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance*.

8. This July 1895 correspondence from Ellis is cited in Reynolds (1953).


10. At various times, projections of the number of US residents of Mexican heritage who would raise arms against the US ranged from ten thousands in Brownsville to eight thousands in San Antonio and twenty thousands in El Paso. As Gerald Horne details, African-American soldiers occupied a complicated position in relation to resident Mexican Americans—on the one hand, sharing a history of disenfranchisement and racial prejudice, on the other hand, finding themselves in a position to leverage their own race’s relative position in US public opinion by protecting the nation’s border. See Horne for more information.

11. For commentary on the Texas Kid and on the 1917 Houston Riot, see Katz.

12. For commentary on these trends, see Sitton and Conrad and Richardson.

13. For commentary on African-American land ownership, see Massey.

14. For commentary on Johnson and others, see Katz, 144.

15. For accounts of the XIT ranch and the role of black cowboys in the region, see Philip Durham and Everett Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (1965).

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