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Church within a Church: Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* and the Middle Way within the National Baptist Convention

NEITHER BELTON PIEDMONT NOR BERNARD BELGRAVE, THE PROTAGONISTS in African American Texan minister Sutton E. Griggs's 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio*, represents the definitive African American equal rights movement in the South during and following Reconstruction. Rather, they symbolize tensions within that movement: the desire for cooperation with sympathetic white institutions (Belton) as opposed to the inclination to avoid collaboration in order to pursue African American interests independently (Bernard). Nevertheless, the poor, dark-skinned African American Belton shows the potential ability to translate an ethical ideal into a practical reality, whereas the militant Bernard achieves only dissent and destruction in his spurning of Belton. Belton's communitarian ideal is, translated theologically, the kingdom of God on Earth. To achieve this end, Belton puts his Christian university education to pragmatic use.

Imperium in Imperio is believed to have had a larger audience than did works by Paul Laurence Dunbar or Charles Chesnutt even though Griggs often published and sold his works himself (Verdelle xii). When considering this widespread appeal, one should understand that Griggs, without openly declaring Belton as such, presents his protagonist as a Southern (specifically Virginian) preacher working within the white Baptist denomination's African American offshoot, the National Baptist Convention (NBC), which had two million members by 1900 and 2.5 million by 1915 (Smith 549). A striking element of Griggs's life, his work as a pastor within the NBC as it relates to his fiction, has not yet been fully examined by American literature scholars. For instance, Larry Frazier's 2000 article "Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* as Evidence of Black Baptist Radicalism" introduces Bernard's radicalism as an anomaly in a work by an African American Baptist preacher. Thus, it does not fully admit the simmering tensions within the National

Baptist Convention related to separatism versus cooperatism during this period, especially as they contribute to splits within the NBC. Additionally, John Gruesser's essay "Empire at Home and Abroad in Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*" astutely notes "the tendency of critics to read [Griggs's works] in binary terms" (50). Gruesser productively uses the *tertium quid* to examine Griggs's interest in the Spanish-Cuban-American and Philippine-American Wars (49-62), while I will employ it to study the NBC's more propinquitous conflict. Finally, Robert S. Levine's chapter "Edward Everett Hale's and Sutton E. Griggs's Men without a Country" speaks to the notions of "traitor" and "patriot," considering Griggs's works as implying that "exile from one's country in the service of a deeper patriotism might not be such a 'terrible . . . mistake'" (85), an intriguing interpretation but one which does not consider the equally profound possibility for Griggs of ostracism from his religious denomination.

Griggs's ministerial work with the NBC serves as the basis for many of the novel's intra-group conflicts between the increasingly separatist Bernard, representative of the turn-of-the-century NBC, established in 1895, and the more conciliatory Belton, standing in for the more pacific NBC faction, the Lott Carey Baptist Home and Foreign Mission Convention (LCC), founded in 1897. The LCC split from the larger NBC because it "feared that the NBC was too separatist in its sentiments" and wanted to rely exclusively on northern white Baptists for forward-thinking Christian publications rather than to establish an African American publishing house, as championed by the NBC (Leonard, *Baptist Ways* 274). The employment of literature from the white American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) and overall support from white Baptists became of signal importance to the LCC while the National Baptist Convention looked to forge its own path for African American Christian instruction and Christian literature that specifically addressed African Americans' lives (Fitts 85). A list of demands delivered by the LCC president Calvin S. Brown to the NBC even included "the adoption of a cooperation policy" with the ABHMS and an "agreement to permit our Sunday Schools to use the literature of either publishing house without considering them loyal or disloyal" (Fitts 88-89).

Reflecting this internecine disagreement, both Belton and Bernard aspire to publish, with and without cooperation from white Christians, respectively: Belton works with a white Christian publisher while

Bernard independently publishes a journal detailing the ineffable difficulties of the African American experience in white America (Griggs, *Imperium* 32-37, 137). Griggs thus uses his novel as an imaginative space to articulate the arguments of both groups and ultimately to illuminate his own complex social justice theology. This theology holds faith in imaginative groups that work inside of and alter institutions by opposing their wrongs. With *Imperium*, Griggs—who, at different times, was a member of each convention (the NBC, then the LCC, and finally the NBC again) and who campaigned for African American publishing houses even while working for the LCC—looks to heal the rift between African American Baptists. (Though Griggs, whose father once worked for the ABHMS, initially sided with the LCC, he worked for the NBC's National Publishing Board in 1899 [Gruesser, "Griggs Log"]). Griggs did so out of a firm belief that "consecration and co-operation" were "in keeping with the principles of Christianity in the intercessory prayer of our Lord" (VBSC 1897 *Annual Minutes* 52). Toward this end, he has Belton witness "the manner in which the preacher stirred up the people" and decide "that he, too, would like to become a preacher" (Griggs, *Imperium* 19).

As Laurie Maffly-Kipp points out, when considering the National Baptist Convention's intra-group conflicts in the late nineteenth century, it is hard to overstate the rivalry between African American Christian factions for the "souls" of ex-slaves and the descendants of slavery. Many, in fact, termed the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South a "battleground" for African American church members, as divisions within the NBC resulted from the contentious question of who lay claim to African Americans' "true religion." This contest was so profound that, as Maffly-Kipp writes, if the question before the American Civil War concerned the separation of African Americans from white churches, for decades after the war, anxiety swelled over divisions within African American church communities, including the NBC (84).

To address this apprehension, Griggs centers *Imperium in Imperio* on a fictional late nineteenth-century African American organization, the eponymous *Imperium*, which is located in Texas and secretly operates alongside the US Congress in considering legislation and of which Belton and Bernard are leaders. The novel's pellucid main concern is with the numerous approaches that African Americans can take against revived

and increasingly violent racist policies and laws against African Americans in the postbellum era. Hence, Griggs extensively features Belton's education at a Southern African American university and shows how his edification conflicts with Harvard-educated Bernard's reflexive militant stance against miscegenation and integration. Attitudes like Bernard's were adopted by many post-split NBC missionaries and local leaders following numerous early attempts to work alongside white Baptists (Whitted 27). Griggs further paints the dichotomy between Belton and Bernard, as Bernard is the wealthier and more privileged of the two yet operates largely from personal resentments. In one of the novel's most melodramatic moments, his beloved takes her life after reading literature about the dangers posed to African American culture by racial mixing; her act is the ultimate spurning of Bernard, who is mulatto. Similar to Bernard's operating from personal revenge, those who split from the NBC to join the Lott Carey Baptist Home and Foreign Mission Convention acknowledged, like their NBC counterparts, their intensely personal anger at being "a nonentity in politics while they [white Baptists] rule with iron" (Leonard, *Baptist Ways* 274). North Carolina preacher and LCC president Calvin S. Brown even bitterly lamented, "We are weak, they are strong. We are poor, they are rich. We are ignorant, they are educated. We have nowhere to lay our heads; they own cattle on a thousand hills. . . . Destiny has shaped the situation, and I must accept it" (Martin 153-54). Unlike the NBC, the LCC "maintained cooperation" (Leonard, *Baptist Ways* 274) with Northern white Baptist leaders to benefit from their political strength, and yet, as Bill Leonard writes, "Even the most basic attempts at cooperative endeavors between black and white denominations and societies were difficult to sustain" (274).

It is here where Griggs offers the objectives of his "middle way" between cooperatism and militancy: to attempt understanding and finally to confront the unjust system through nonviolent direct action, including the publication of white evils and African American responses to them. Where the novel is subtle, and thus perhaps most affecting, is in its effort to reconcile turn-of-the-twentieth-century African American Baptists through the articulation of these complex social justice strategies. As Griggs believed, "if blacks wanted equality, they must create racial organizations to harness the strength of the black race" (White 102). Here, in fiction, and primarily through Belton, Griggs

advocates a similar strategy, one that in reality saw the NBC and LCC agree to, if not a reunion, a strategic partnership for a period in the early twentieth century (Martin 164).

Remaining in the South following his college education, Belton Piedmont realizes that, if he is to continue to agitate for change, he needs to do so through an African American institution; Belton works through several schools but eventually chooses to effect change from the Imperium in Imperio as its Speaker. In Griggs's words, the Imperium is "another government, complete in every detail," "exercising all the functions of a nation" (129, 132). In this way, it is not unlike the NBC and the LCC at the turn of the twentieth century as they engaged in complex legal battles over questions including freedom of speech (Fitts 88-89, 92). In time, Belton influences his childhood classmate, Bernard, to join the Imperium as its president, and Bernard keeps this position even after Belton learns that he and Bernard differ in their socio-political beliefs. Though scholar Wilson Jeremiah Moses is in part correct that Belton follows Booker T. Washington's directive, "Cast down your bucket where you are," Belton also wants to correct the New South, which still participates in the old Jim Crow system (Moses 174; Washington 219; Griggs 41).

Griggs thus has Belton and Bernard become parts of a social justice movement based on the National Baptist Convention, though not explicitly named as such. The African American branch of the Baptist tradition, the NBC later "grew to be the largest black religious formation in the country" (Harvey 391). A Baptist minister within the convention, Griggs also served as the corresponding secretary of its educational board beginning in 1906 (Coleman 21). Additionally, the NBC commissioned Griggs to respond to white supremacist Thomas F. Dixon, Jr.'s bestselling and hideously racist 1902 novel *The Leopard's Spots* (Coleman 22-23). The NBC began in late nineteenth-century African American religious circles in the North. After the Civil War, African American churches around the country became sources of leadership, providers of community support and social programs, and champions of education (Corrigan and Hudson 242-44). The NBC's first elected president, Elias C. Morris, declared in an address before the National Baptist Convention at the turn of the century:

This Society entertains no ill will toward any other Christian organization in the world. It seeks to be on friendly terms with all, and the charge that this organization

means to draw the color line, and thereby create prejudice in ‘Negro’ Christians against ‘white’ Christians, is without foundation. We admit, however, that practically, and not constitutionally, the color line has been drawn by the establishment of churches and schools. (Leonard, *Baptist Ways* 273)

Leonard concludes then that Morris (much like Belton) “did not hesitate to speak out in behalf of civil rights. He often warned the white majority that blacks would not wait forever to receive the rights to which they were entitled under American law” (273).

Like Morris at times, especially in his closing speech before the Imperium, Belton invests in Booker T. Washington’s concept of passive acceptance, alternately making excuses for whites’ hideous and violent past behaviors or urging African Americans to prove their worth to whites. At one point, Belton pleads for the leniency of his Imperium brethren toward whites’ actions:

If David were on earth alive to-day and the ruler of an enlightened kingdom, he would be impeached forthwith, fined for adultery, imprisoned for bigamy, and hanged for murder. . . . If Abraham were here to-day he would be expelled from any church that had any regard for decency. . . . When slavery was introduced into America, it was the universal practice of mankind to enslave. Knowing how quick we all are to heed the universal voice of mankind, we should be lenient toward others who are thus tempted and fall. (Griggs, *Imperium* 154)

Belton even proposes a resolution before the Imperium: “That we spend four years in endeavors to impress the Anglo-Saxon that he has a New Negro on his hands” (Griggs, *Imperium* 163). However, at other times, and again like Morris, Belton believes in agitation:

Resolved: That we earnestly strive to convince the Anglo-Saxon that we are now thoroughly wedded to the doctrine of Patrick Henry: “Give me liberty or give me death.” Let us teach the Anglo-Saxon that we have arrived at the stage of development as a people, where we prefer to die in honor rather than live in disgrace. (163)

In these ways, Griggs positions Belton as a connecting link between the theological traditions of slave preachers, whose focus was “the comforts to be found in religion,” and contemporary social justice movements, which looked to the church as “the center of social, economic, educational, and political activity” (Raboteau 251, 320). Ultimately, Belton, like Morris—a liminal figure in the NBC’s shift from cooperatism

to separatism not mired in either philosophy—works as an activist theologian, applying the Gospel and biblical revelation to public policy and looking to channel the variety of African Americans’ spiritual energies into what he sees as more practical directions.

In contrast, Bernard argues for a radical separatism, contending that African Americans must create a separate nation (specifically, he imagines, a violent overthrow of Texas, while others of his cohort envision leaving for Africa) because African Americans and whites can never live together. Bernard makes strong arguments for separatism. Reflective of NBC leaders’ feeling that certain states within the convention—namely, Virginia and North Carolina, which later led the charge to split off as the LCC—received more aid from the ABHMS because of gratuitous displays of gratitude (Fitts 86), Bernard says that, in order to be a citizen of America, one has to seek the recognition of white male society:

Like lean, hungry dogs, we must crouch beneath our master’s table and snap eagerly at the crumbs that fall. If in our scramble for these crumbs we make too much noise, we are violently kicked and driven out of doors, where, in the sleet and snow, we must whimper and whine until late the next morning when the cook opens the door and we can then crouch down in the corner of the kitchen. (148)

Like the NBC leadership at the turn of the century, Bernard does not believe in integration and does not want to be involved in the fight for it. In fact, he considers African Americans who try to integrate, like Belton, foolish. “I know the Anglo-Saxon race,” Bernard says to Belton. “He will never admit you to equality with him” (169). For Bernard, violent separatism is the best and only way to end white brutality against African Americans; cooperation will not work because whites are hypocritical:

When in 1619 our forefathers landed on the American shore, the music of welcome with which they were greeted, was the clanking of iron chains ready to fetter them; the crack of the whip to be used to plow furrows in their backs; and the yelp of the bloodhound who was to bury his fangs deep into their flesh, in case they sought for liberty. Such was the music with which the Anglo-Saxon came down to the shore to extend a hearty welcome to the forlorn children of night, brought from a benighted heathen land to a community of *Christians*! (141)

Specifically echoing NBC Georgia pastor Emmanuel K. Love, who declared that “There is not as bright and glorious a future before a Negro

in a white institution as there is for him in his own" (Gaustad 50), Bernard contends that whites do not accept Belton or any African Americans as fellow citizens; otherwise, they would treat them better. Whites do not want to protect African Americans, Bernard says, and this is evinced by "the passage of Jim Crow laws, the refusal of many trade unions to admit black members, the revision of state constitutions in the South to eliminate virtually all African American voting rights, and social practice in the North and South" (Karafilis 125). Bernard feels that whites certainly will never do anything for African Americans:

WHEREAS, the history of our treatment by the Anglo-Saxon race is but the history of oppression, and whereas, our patient endurance of evil has not served to decrease this cruelty, but seems rather to increase it; and whereas, the ballot box, the means of peaceful revolution is denied us, therefore;

Be it Resolved: That the hour for wreaking vengeance for our multiplied wrongs has come. (Griggs, *Imperium* 152)

But Bernard's strongest parallel to the turn-of-the-century NBC is his distrust of white liberals. As NBC historian J. A. Whitted writes, the convention believed that the ABHMS provided aid only to "the most grateful and loyal people with whom they were associated in Christian and educational work," those who "stood firm and unchangeable in their high esteem and loyal support for the Home Mission Society," and therefore for whom the ABHMS was "inclined to do more" (27). To NBC leaders, it was a loathsome and specious generosity, and the leaders' vitriol precipitated the anxieties of North Carolina's and Virginia's NBC delegates, resulting in the NBC-LCC split (27). Bernard is similarly skeptical about African Americans who depend on white liberals. White liberals, he feels, are not much different from white conservatives. Rather, they control "structured" African American society. As a result, Bernard is more apt to trust an African American who is hated by whites.

Here and elsewhere in the novel, Bernard represents the growing rift in the late nineteenth-century NBC. The convention eventually leaned more toward separatism while the newly formed Lott Carey Baptist Home and Foreign Mission Convention believed in the practicality of more conciliatory approaches (Leonard, *Baptist Ways* 274). Emmanuel K. Love added at a National Baptist Convention meeting:

I am a loyal Baptist and a loyal Negro. I will stand or fall, live or die, with my race and denomination. . . . It is just as reasonable and fair for Negroes to want [their own agencies] to themselves. . . . It never was true anywhere, and perhaps never will be, that a Negro can enjoy every right in an institution controlled by white men that white men can enjoy. . . . We can more thoroughly fill our people with race pride, denominational enthusiasm and activity, by presenting to them for their support enterprises that are wholly ours. (Gaustad 50)

Bernard echoes these very sentiments in his speeches before the Imperium, and, it should be noted, Griggs was not diametrically opposed to these ideas, either (Higginbotham 65), specifically when it came to African American publishing. Griggs believed in and fought for African American publishing houses in order to make known, as Elias C. Morris declared, “a host of intelligent, self-reliant, practical leaders among us” (Gaustad 50).

While Robert Bone asserts that Griggs is torn between militancy and conciliation (Fleming 73), Robert E. Fleming notes that “even in the first and most militant of his works [*Imperium in Imperio*] Griggs expresses an aversion to violence” (74), resulting in Belton’s rejection of Bernard’s and other separatists’ ideas as “treason” and his insistence that “Our Imperium was organized to secure our rights *within* the United States” because African Americans would “give their lives for the land in which they had known nothing save cruelty and oppression” rather than leave it, whether physically or psychologically (Griggs, *Imperium* 168; emphasis added). (This is evident in Belton’s vague and thus seemingly hollow willingness to concede to Bernard’s separatist proposal if Belton’s strategies fail [163]). Though, like others in the Imperium, Belton has an interest in Africa, his vision, and likely Griggs’s, would be to “civilize” the continent by bringing American culture to it (155). Ironically, Belton does not see the connection between his referring to the African American as “an unprotected foreigner in his own home” (124) and many Africans’ dire plight, for which American “civilizing” influences would not act as a balm. Foreign missions are thus mercifully not the focus of Griggs’s novel. As with the Imperium, within the NBC-LCC split, mission work “played a role,” but cooperation with whites played “an equal, if not a more important role” in the division and consequently is the focus of Griggs’s endeavor to bridge the divide between African American Baptists (Martin 149).

Like those nascent LCC members in North Carolina and Virginia who were reluctant to relinquish the “substantial aid” afforded them by the

ABHMS and thus routinely referenced the mutual support between white and African American Baptists, Belton finds such radical separatism dangerous (Whitted 27). He agrees with the need for African Americans to claim racial pride, and he agrees with African American separatists' rejection of an endless "patient endurance of evil" (Griggs, *Imperium* 152). Nevertheless, Belton argues that African Americans need to live alongside Anglo-Saxons for economic assistance; therefore, he rejects the notions of violent separatism posited by Bernard. Ultimately, in the spirit of reconciliation for which Griggs was known (always with an eye toward consensus, "if the delegates to the National Convention so recommend" [VBS 1896 *Annual Minutes* 53]), Belton contends that, if white Americans could embrace a Christian social justice movement, they could give up their racism.

Belton's focus on God reflects Griggs's own reliance on God for strength in the "battle for the good opinion of the American people" (Griggs, *Story* 4); however, Griggs, via Belton, also recognizes a great need to interpret and clarify God. Belton understands God as an infinite personality, extending far beyond the finite personalities of humankind, but also as personal, and a co-sufferer in the cause for freedom, equality, and justice. Belton points to the Exodus event (Griggs, *Imperium* 77, 150) as a time when God actively entered history, evidence that God is not apathetic to human affairs (Maffly-Kipp 75): "there were those at the North whom the love of God and the eye of faith taught to leap over the scene of strife to prepare the trembling negro for the day of freedom, which, refusing to have a dawn, had burst in meridian splendor upon his dazzled gaze" (Griggs, *Imperium* 31). Evil arises from the misuse of human freedom, Belton argues, yet he strongly believes in God's immanence:

It has appeared strange to some that the Americans could fight for their own freedom from England and yet not think of those whom they then held in slavery. . . .

But in concluding, let me emphasize that my aim, my hope, my labors, my fervent prayer to God is for a peaceable adjustment of all our differences upon the high plane of the equality of man. (155, 164)

Consequently, Belton contends that people need to believe that God is alive in their lives and not live as if God does not exist because otherwise they will succumb to their existential weariness to follow old laws, old rules of behavior. For Belton, as for Griggs, God represents the highest

form of love, through which one actively loves one's enemies unselfishly, disinterestedly, and unconditionally. Belton says, "I loved the race to which I belonged and the flag that floated over me; and, being unable to see these objects of my love engage in mortal combat, I went to my God" (Griggs, *Imperium* 173). This active, unconditional love has the potential to lead to forgiveness, reconciliation, and sustaining community; indeed, love can positively change anyone, if one prioritizes God and others above self, Belton claims. Therefore, Belton focuses on unconditional love, which minimizes the focus on self-love, even though Bernard criticizes him for this very conviction, implicitly wondering how African Americans can love others if they do not first love themselves. Belton's attention, though, is on the dignity and worth of the whole human person. From the Bible, he learns the value of imago Dei, all people created in the image of God (Leonard, *Baptist Questions* 36). The *Imperium* member who tells Belton's tale asks at the novel's end, "When will all races and classes of men learn that men made in the image of God will not be the slaves of another image?" (177). Ultimately, through Belton's story Griggs posits that to oppress any person is to oppress God.

In his depiction of Belton's resistance to white oppression, Griggs emphasizes that Belton actively looks to make enemies into cooperants, an approach which Griggs championed in his work with white Baptists (Coleman 25). Part and parcel of Griggs's philosophy, Belton's attacks are directed against forces of evil rather than the person committing the evil: hate the sin, love the sinner; attack the system that produced the person, not the person. As a social justice Christian, Belton enacts this approach through his noncooperation with unjust laws, showing a willingness to break segregation laws and court injunctions as well as a readiness to go to jail, which he does when refusing to pay a bill at a de facto "whites only" restaurant (98-99). This nonviolent resistance shows an active willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, an approach stemming from a belief that, by taking the moral high ground, one causes one's enemy to lose moral force (Ansbro 143; Griggs, *Imperium* 161).

Like Belton, Griggs holds faith in imaginative groups—for instance, those who worked alongside white Baptists to establish the American Baptist Theological Seminary, which developed burgeoning ministerial talent within the African American Baptist community and of which Griggs served as president from 1925 to 1926 (Coleman 25). For Griggs,

this imaginative community works inside and alters the institution by believing in the unshakeable moral power of the minority. In the novel, Belton does not approve of violent separatism as a means of achieving social justice. Instead, Griggs's proposed alternatives for interacting with whites, which he makes through Belton, are founded on the moral obligation of resisting unjust systems, the morality and practicality of nonviolent resistance, and the value of unearned suffering:

Be it *Resolved*: That we no longer conceal from the Anglo-Saxon the fact that the Imperium exists, so that he may see that the love of liberty in our bosoms is strong enough to draw us together into this compact government. He will also see that each individual Negro does not stand by himself, but is a link in a great chain that must not be broken with impunity. (Griggs, *Imperium* 163)

Also, Griggs has Belton express that growth comes through struggle, that life is a balance of forces struggling with each other for dominance; all things are dynamic or in a state of constant change. Gruesser trenchantly analyzes how this is seen in Belton's wrestling between his patriotism for America and his loyalty to his race (62), a contest which ultimately leads Belton to turn to God for a path to justice:

the white man is still holding on to the stolen ballot box and he must surrender it. If we can secure possession of that right again, we shall use it to correct the many grievous wrongs under which we suffer. That is the one point on which all of our efforts are focused. Here is the storm center. Let us carry this point and our flag will soon have all of our rights inscribed thereon. The struggle is on, and my beloved Congress, let me urge one thing upon you. Leave out revenge as one of the things at which to aim. (Griggs, *Imperium* 161)

The difference between Belton and Bernard—and, as Griggs suggests, between the Lott Carey Baptist Home and Foreign Mission Convention and the NBC—is that Belton still believes that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution belong to all Americans, while Bernard believes that they belong only to whites. Belton believes in the power of human beings, but, like Bernard, he believes that they are limited. Sin is committed when humans attempt to go beyond their finitude, beyond the image of God, and try to become God; this is the arrogance of human beings:

In His Holy Word our most high God has said: "Vengeance is mine." Great as is this Imperium, let it not mount God's throne and attempt by violence to rob Him of his

prerogatives. In this battle, we want Him on our side and let us war as cometh men who fear and reverence Him. (161)

As a result, Belton comes to believe that individual morality is worse than group morality because it is harder to check. Individuals, dominant and oppressed, operate from egotism, self-interest, and insecurity, Belton claims; therefore, God's love is possible on some levels but impossible on others. Human beings can change with the grace of God, but, as Griggs acknowledges through the novel's narrator, who repents of his betrayal of Belton via Bernard (175), that process is slow and painful.

Toward the end of the novel, Belton realizes the difficulty of achieving shared power and the reluctance of those in power to relinquish it. When Belton talks of shared power, many of his contemporaries abandon him. And, in fact, after meeting with Bernard on this point, Belton resigns from the Imperium, knowing that his decision will result in the order for his death, as per Imperium law (170). Bernard's execution order results in the Imperium's dissolution. The novel's narrator, the Imperium's Secretary of State, characterizes the causes of this dissolution as Bernard's increasing militancy and fanaticism, the emergence of alternative approaches to the American dilemma, post-Reconstruction politics, and the growing rift between African Americans (175-77).

But notable too about these divisions is the repeated mention of Belton's being dark skinned and Bernard's being a mulatto, a point especially relevant as the LCC president and "most LCC leaders were mulattoes" and "adopted an attitude of superiority toward the masses of black Baptists" (Martin 155). The mulatto Bernard adopts a contrasting stance from the LCC, seemingly in order to divorce some of the organization's philosophies from its posture of advantage. A large number of LCC Baptists "were products of schools founded and supported in the South by the white Home Mission Society." Sandy Dwayne Martin notes that the LCC chose to align itself so inextricably with white Baptist societies because of a spurious but common belief that they were better trained and more informed than their NBC foils (155-56). For this reason too, Griggs characterizes the figure opposing the LCC's positions, Bernard, as bearing a Harvard education, likely another means of distancing the LCC's worldviews from accusations of entitlement. Finally, according to Martin, the biblical language employed by the LCC to explain their working with white Baptists often

subversively communicated the mulatto leaders' assumption of superiority over the NBC, even going so far as to suggest that their counterparts necessitated the helping hand of white Baptists for social, educational, and spiritual elevation (156). Griggs thus takes great pains to delineate Belton, his LCC stand-in, as unassuming and deferential to Bernard, providing Bernard ample space in which to argue his position—to such an extent that scholar Hugh Gloster even reads Griggs as “militant” (337).

Though a product of the white American Baptist Home Mission Society's Richmond Theological Seminary and an advocate for print culture in African American society—according to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “thus implicitly devaluing the interpretive authority of illiterate leaders” (44)—Griggs at the very least wants to guard against being interpreted as an elitist. As Calvin White, Jr., writes, Griggs “worked to elevate the entire race,” as shown by his own church work to combat African American poverty and class segregation (102). Griggs even writes in *Imperium* that “Words can portray the form of a speech, but the spirit, the life, are missing and we turn away disappointed” (139). In these ways, Griggs evinces his wish to include multifarious African American voices in black Baptist life.

Still, though ineffably more violent, the *Imperium*'s frustration reflects that of the National Baptist Convention. Martin writes that the differences between black Baptists as to whether to cooperate with the white American Baptist Publication Society served as a microcosm for questions about working with whites in wider religious contexts:

For some time the “independents” had pointed out the discriminatory treatment that black Baptists had received at the hands of many Northern white Baptists and the need for blacks to minister to their own needs rather than rely upon others. Black Baptists, [the “independents”] insisted, should publish their own literature and avoid any cooperative arrangements whereby they were relegated to subordinate positions.

The cooperationists, on the other hand, had called attention to the great amount of humanitarian and religious work that Northern white Baptists had performed on behalf of Southern blacks in the post-Civil War South It would be an act of hostility, they argued, for Black Baptists to pursue their own course in religious publications. (148)

Throughout *Imperium in Imperio*, a variety of characters work to unify the African American community through a multiplicity of philosophies and strategies (Griggs, *Imperium* 118). Belton's university president

directs his students, though perhaps toward a self-serving purpose as a white man, to “Carry fresh, warm, invigorating blood in your veins to inject into the veins of the world. This is far safer and nobler than sticking the lance into the swollen veins of the world, to draw forth its putrid blood for your own use” (49). The novel suggests that a Christian social justice movement based on the original National Baptist Convention’s teachings—a “Christian organization” which “seeks to be on friendly terms with all” but admits that “practically, and not constitutionally, the color line has been drawn by the establishment of churches and schools” (Leonard 273)—is the solution to politicizing social principles and the struggle for a moral- or virtue-based society. Not one to entrench himself in polarities, Griggs’s more cooperationist philosophy is also not fully in line with the LCC, which, for “many Baptists in the NBC,” “often separated too sharply the secular struggle of blacks and the cause of Christianity” (Martin 155). Instead, the novel contends that one must confront civil rights violations directly, not practice passive acquiescence or benign neglect, and do so by rejecting the “patient endurance of evil,” publishing African American voices, and participating in redemptive suffering, not defensive or aggressive violence (Griggs, *Imperium* 152). In *Imperium in Imperio*, Griggs offers a regulative ideal in the form of the early Imperium, a representation of the early National Baptist Convention under Elias C. Morris.

Griggs reached toward this ideal, advocating for a literature produced exclusively by African Americans while nevertheless working as the statistical secretary for the eagerly white-publication-dependent LCC (Martin 151). Again for Griggs, the object was not to defeat an opponent; rather, it was to have the freedom to express the truth of his minority opinions and beliefs. For this reason, his primary concern lay with developing a publication house that would print African American literature, a goal ultimately shared by the NBC. The NBC and Griggs’s shared dedication led, in 1896, to an NBC publishing house, which became independent in 1898 (Leonard, *Baptist Ways* 274). Leonard writes that religious leaders “believed that segregationist statutes demanded a forthright response from the African American community” (274). Belton echoes this claim: “let us pull the veil from before the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon that he may see the New Negro standing before him humbly, but firmly demanding every right granted him by his maker and wrested from him by man” (163). Bernard too seizes upon an

opportunity to print an illustrated journal that “chronicles[s] 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” (137). Griggs shows that all African American voices—whether affiliated with the NBC, the LCC, or other organizations—should have access to publication, even if they create “fire-brands” (137). Belton reflects Griggs’s ethos in that he collects facts to determine if injustice exists, attempts negotiation, but finally confronts the unjust system through nonviolent direct action, including publication.

Toward the end of the novel, as Belton gathers information about the evil system with which he is faced, he is astonished by what he finds: “He found out that the white man was utterly ignorant of the nature of the Negro of to-day with whom he has to deal. And more than that, he was not bothering his brain thinking about the Negro” (Griggs, *Imperium* 92). Finnie D. Coleman concludes, “Griggs understood that dissemblance could not maintain such a system. Tremendous psychic energy is expended in a moral economy where one imagines that the only purpose that Blacks have is to serve and, more important, that this is a natural and just state of affairs” (51). Whether willfully naïve or ardently optimistic, Griggs offered his early African American church community’s social justice movement as a practical means to dismantle that color line. He offered his fiction as a way to revitalize imaginatively worn-down African American Baptists.

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