The Empire at Home and the Empire Abroad

John Gruesser

The movement away from US-centered approaches to America enables scholars to cross disciplinary boundaries and delineate the global forces operating in literary texts. Specifically, as Caroline Levander and Robert Levine put it in special issue of this journal, hemispheric considerations of American literature “excavat[e] the intricate and complex politics, histories, and discourses of spatial encounter that have been generally obscured in US nation-based inquiries” (399). The work of Ifeoma Nwankwo, Keith Cartwright, Martyn Bone, and others has recently demonstrated that such a critical methodology is especially appropriate for African-American literature. This is particularly the case in connection with those texts published in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century when the country aggressively pursued an imperialist agenda and acquired an overseas empire.

For US blacks, the Spanish-American War had significant implications. First, it served as a vehicle of reconciliation between the North and the South because it was the first conflict fought against a foreign nation since the Civil War. Although the southern-led campaign to rewrite the war between the states as a misguided conflict that had little or nothing to do with the abolition of slavery had been underway for some time, the Spanish-American War came to be seen as a defining moment of heroic cooperation between the two sections, and African Americans did not fit easily into this picture. Second, because the war appeared to present opportunities for African Americans to demonstrate their patriotism and bravery by directly participating in the conflict, blacks in the US took a keen interest in the actions of these “Smoked Yankees,” their portrayal in the mainstream

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media, and their treatment by the government. Theodore Roosevelt’s accusations of black cowardice in his account of the Battle of San Juan Hill, and in his assertion that black soldiers were dependent on white officers, in the April 1899 issue of *Scribner’s Magazine* generated considerable resentment and provoked rebuttals by black combatants (Holliday; Washington 54–62; Kaplan 121–45). Third, as Willard Gatewood has noted, having staunchly supported the party of Lincoln since the Civil War, African Americans who were allowed to vote had to decide in 1900 whether to cast their ballots for the pro-expansionist Republican incumbent William McKinley, no champion of the rights of blacks, or the anti-imperialist Democrat William Jennings Bryan, who unabashedly advocated white supremacy. Fourth, because the war involved the fate of nonwhite peoples in the Caribbean and Asia, several black leaders regarded it as having potentially major consequences for the status of their people within the US.

In the “Forethought” to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois famously declares, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (100). This statement originally appeared in “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind,” a speech he gave at the third annual meeting of the American Negro Academy in Washington, D.C., in March 1900, in which he uses these words specifically in the context of the “new imperial policy” the US was in the process of implementing in the wake of its victory over Spain and amidst the ongoing Filipino insurgency: “Indeed a survey of the civilized world at the end of the 19th century but confirms the proposition with which I started—the world problem of the 20th century is the Problem of the Color line—the question of the relation of the advanced races of men who happen to be white to the great majority of underdeveloped or half developed nations of mankind who happen to be yellow, brown, or black” (54). The Spanish-American War may have appeared to the vast majority of US whites to be, as John Hay declared it, “a splendid little war,” but, as Du Bois and other African Americans would argue, the conflict had wide-ranging domestic as well as foreign ramifications.

Two of the three books under consideration focus on African-American public intellectuals who in their writing directly engage the relationship between institutionalized racism in the US, the empire at home, and overseas expansionism, the empire abroad. *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins* (2007), edited by Ira Dworkin, and Finnie D. Coleman’s *Sutton E. Griggs and the
Struggle Against White Supremacy (2007) concern figures who link the liberation struggles of African Americans to those of people of color in other parts of the world. In contrast, the third book has an almost exclusively domestic focus. Barbara McCaskill and Carole Gebhard’s essay collection, Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919 (2006), proposes a new way of referring to and thinking about late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African-American literature and culture; however, in its overall conception and nearly all of its selections, the book does not engage US black transnationalism.

Pauline Hopkins uses a discussion of imperialism as the frame for her short story “Talma Gordon” (1900), in which the Beacon Hill home of the renowned Dr. Thornton serves as the gathering place for twenty-five members of the Canterbury Club to address the topic “Expansion: Its Effect upon the Future Development of the Anglo-Saxon throughout the World.” A politician approvingly cites the wealth an overseas empire will bring the US, and a noted theologian eagerly extols the missionary opportunities. Everyone seems convinced except for the host, who asserts that amalgamation will undoubtedly be a consequence of expansion, a possibility that no one else in the room has considered. To illustrate his point, the physician proceeds to narrate the history of the Gordons, a family tracing its lineage back to the Mayflower. In a sensational murder trial, Talma was unsuccessfully prosecuted for the apparently locked-room murders of her father, stepmother, and younger stepbrother. Thornton’s tale contains two shocking revelations: the father, Captain Gordon, had disinherited Talma because her mother was revealed to be one-sixteenth black, and a vengeful East Indian eventually confessed to using a secret passageway known only to the Captain’s sailors to commit the murders. Hopkins’s story concludes with one final twist when the doctor introduces the Canterbury Club to his wife, who proves to be none other than Talma Gordon. Widely regarded as the earliest known African American mystery story, Hopkins’s narrative has rightly been discussed by scholars in connection with her use of popular genres to explore racial themes. However, the implications of US imperialism for African Americans undoubtedly serve as a major dimension of this tale as well. Significantly, it appeared in the Colored American Magazine (CAM), a journal that between 1900 and 1904 (when Hopkins played a major editorial role) published several articles about Cuba and the Philippines, as well as fiction about the province of Laguna during the Filipino insurgency by the African-American Army Captain Frank R. Steward.
Unlike nearly all of her fiction, Hopkins’s copious nonfiction, attesting to her status as the dominant voice in the most widely read and influential black journal of the first decade of the twentieth century, has not been easily accessible. *Daughter of the Revolution*, meticulously edited by Dworkin, includes nearly all of Hopkins’s biographical, journalistic, and ethnographic writings published in CAM between 1900 and 1904, the *Voice of the Negro* in 1904 and 1905, and the *New Era Magazine* in 1916. It also includes juvenilia written in the 1870s, the self-published pamphlet *A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the Negro Race and the Possibility of Its Restoration by Its Descendants—with Epilogue* (1905), two oratories delivered in 1905 and 1911, and a remarkable 1905 letter to William Monroe Trotter, editor of the *Boston Guardian*, detailing the events leading up to her dismissal from CAM in 1904. The selections are framed by Dworkin’s biographical and historical introduction indentifying racial uplift, internationalism, and women’s issues as Hopkins’s most salient themes and by an index that will be an indispensable resource to researchers of Hopkins and her era. Scholars working in a range of disciplines will greet the appearance of the collection with approbation because of the breadth and variety of the critical responses it will make possible.

The 16 April 1905 letter to Trotter reveals that Hopkins lost her position at the magazine in part because of her commitment to linking discrimination at home with imperialism abroad. For researchers who have long sought to know the real story behind her departure from the magazine and learn specific details about her personal life, this letter, published for the first time in *Daughter of the Revolution*, makes riveting reading. In the *Voice of the Negro*, Du Bois had charged Booker T. Washington with paying off editors to get articles favorable to his policies published and to suppress criticism. Concerned that the Tuskegee Machine might take legal action, Du Bois sought to amass as much evidence as he could to back his claims, appealing to Trotter, who presumably contacted Hopkins, for any information he had (“Letter”). Her letter reveals that in 1903 Hopkins, who wrote a sizeable percentage of the fiction and nonfiction appearing in CAM, served as its de facto editor, and went on speaking tours to promote the journal, earned a mere $7 a week. Moreover, it was John C. Freund, a white man affiliated with a publication called *Musical Trades*, which had a smaller subscriber base than CAM, who undermined Hopkins’s position at the magazine and eventually brought about its evisceration. Passing himself off as someone whose sole interest was
helping the financially strapped publication, Freund began spending liberally. He paid for a dinner for twenty people associated with CAM and sent gifts of furs, money, and books to Hopkins. With the benefit of hindsight, Hopkins recognizes what Freund was really doing: “As I am not a woman who attracts the attention of the opposite sex in any way, Mr. Freund’s philanthropy with regard to myself puzzled me, but knowing that he was aware of my burdens at home [Hopkins’s mother was bedridden], I thought that he was trying to help me in his way. I was so dense that I did not for a moment suspect that I was being politely bribed to give up race work and principles and adopt the plans of the South for the domination of the Blacks” (“Letter” 241). Once the magazine was dependent upon him financially, Freund began making demands on Hopkins, mandating that she—a frequent if subtle critic of Washington (Knight; Wallinger 70–96; Brown 407–41)—write a letter of introduction to the President of Tuskegee for him and issuing the ultimatum that she de-emphasize literature, drop “anything which may create offense,” “stop talking about wrongs and a proscribed race,” and eliminate articles “ON THE FILIPINO” (243).

It was just a matter of time before Hopkins’s tenure as editor and thus CAM’s engagement with international issues would come to an end. In May of 1904, Fred Moore, one of Washington’s subordinates, bought the journal, moved it to New York from its strong base of support in Boston, and in September of that year fired Hopkins. The following year, Hopkins made a public address at the ceremony commemorating the centennial of the birth of the pioneering abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In it she affiliates herself with preceding generations of freedom fighters, particularly the founders of the nation: “I am a daughter of the Revolution, you do not acknowledge black daughters of the Revolution but we are going to take that right” (“Address” 355). The opening paragraph containing this memorable statement was deleted from the version of the speech published in 1905. Dworkin’s collection restores it and documents Hopkins’s commitment to agitating against racial and patriarchal oppression, producing and promoting race literature, and publishing articles by, for, and about nonwhite people throughout the world.

 Critics have characterized the minister, novelist, and polemicist Sutton Griggs as a militant, black nationalist, sensationalistic, near-futurist, and black utopian writer in connection with Imperium in Imperio (1899). One of the first novels to use the phrase the “New Negro,” the book accuses US whites of ruling over African Americans as an “empire” and depicts a secret black organization that plans a mass immigration of African Americans
to Texas for the purpose of seceding from the union and creating a separate nation (157, 147). Given its transnational history as a colonial possession of Spain, a territory of Mexico, a self-declared republic, and a part of the US, Griggs’s choice of Texas as the site for the Imperium has implications beyond the “Negro Question” that he sought to resolve throughout his career. One of several African-American texts that respond directly to the Spanish-American War, Imperium, as well as two of Griggs’s subsequent novels, needs to be considered in the light of turn-of-the-century domestic and foreign politics. As George Marks III documents, the majority of the black press, with notable exceptions, supported the conflict against Spain. There was considerable opposition to the annexation of the Philippines, however, and the election of 1900 became a referendum on the ongoing effort to suppress the Filipino uprising, with some leading blacks, including Griggs (Gatewood 249–50), urging African Americans to abandon the Grand Old Party because of its imperialist agenda.

This was a period, furthermore, during which politicians and journalists advocated the relocation of US blacks. Because of his political clout, the federal government was forced to take seriously, even if it did not implement, Alabama US Senator John Tyler Morgan’s proposals that African Americans be shipped to Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines so as to remove them from the South but keep them under the country’s control. In February 1903, the mainstream northern publication Harper’s Weekly, responding to (and misrepresenting) a speech by Secretary of War Elihu Root to the Union League in New York, floated a relocation plan of its own. Harper’s recommended that the US Government pay Mexico $200,000,000 for Chihuahua and two or three other sparsely populated northern states to be used for the voluntary resettlement—“Compulsory deportation is, of course, impracticable” (not unconstitutional or immoral)—of African Americans: “If the northern section of the Mexican Republic could be bought and erected into a Territory for the exclusive benefit of our colored people, and if it were distinctly understood that they not only would receive grants of land and cattle, but would enjoy educational facilities and a monopoly of political privileges, it is by no means incredible that a large body of negroes might be inclined to migrate thither” (307). Harper’s cites as a precedent the relocation of Native Americans to lands acquired as a result of the Louisiana Purchase, an act which, the magazine asserts, “neither the Indians nor we have had cause to regret” (307). This Mexican relocation scheme dovetailed perfectly with the expansionist furor of the era, because it would have, with the subjugation of
the Western frontier completed, extended American territory further south. Seen within the context of the era’s chaotic and deadly serious combination of black disenfranchisement, mob violence, rigidly enforced segregation, and aggressive imperialism, Griggs’s Texas takeover scenario in *Imperium* becomes far less fantastic than it originally appears.

Coleman states up front that *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy* is neither a biography nor a literary critical analysis; instead, it is an attempt to explain and, up to a point, justify the often glaring contradictions in Griggs’s life and oeuvre by arguing that his thirty-four years as a published author were devoted to an effort to combat white supremacy by changing white perceptions of blacks and by altering black behavior so that African Americans would be perceived in a more positive manner by whites. Given the paucity of recent scholarship on Griggs, any new information about him is welcome. The book provides details about his family (including his father who rose to national prominence as a Baptist minister and is credited with founding over five hundred churches), surveys his extensive nonfiction, and offers interesting tidbits, such as confirmation of Griggs’s arrest on fraud charges stemming from his publishing ventures—he founded two presses to disseminate his writings, reportedly going from door to door to sell his books to members of the black community.

Griggs’s novels have depths his nonfiction cannot match, enabling him to manipulate character types and genres, incorporate historical material (such as the Spanish-American War and the lynching of a federal appointee) in powerful ways, and imagine solutions to the problems of race in the South that he sought to remedy in his many—and increasingly out-of-touch—political writings. Thus, literary scholars will no doubt be disappointed by Coleman’s decision not to treat Griggs’s fiction as his greatest accomplishment. Using what Wilson Moses calls a “splendidly primitive” style (226), the author creates his own brand of dialogic fiction, often pitting radical and conciliatory characters (and their points of view) against each other, mixing narrative with argumentative prose, and, as the titles themselves suggest, conceiving each of his last three novels as a response or alternative to the book that preceded it: *Unfettered* (1902) offers a more optimistic perspective on the future of US race relations than *Overshadowed* (1901); although the vision is bleak again in *The Hindered Hand* (1905), *Pointing the Way* (1908) suggests that a resolution may be possible.

The era during which Griggs’s novels and Hopkins’s fiction and nonfiction were published remains largely undefined: there is
little consensus among African-Americanists as to what its significance was, how it should be regarded, the specific dates that define it, and what it should be called. McCaskill and Gebhard’s *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem* seeks to address this situation by renaming the era and establishing its significance and diversity. For Charles Chesnutt, who lived long enough to observe and comment upon—but did not participate in—the Harlem Renaissance, his writings appeared “a generation too soon” (“Remarks” 514), during a period he dubbed “Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem.” Historical eras and literary periods are typically bracketed by events, such as wars, not by locations. By using simply “Harlem” rather than “Harlem Renaissance,” as we would today, Chesnutt’s coinage entails a slippage between time and space that raises questions about periodization generally. Choosing Chesnutt’s phrase as the title of their collection, McCaskill and Gebhard reject the often pejorative names applied to the era heretofore, some of which have emphasized the temporal (e.g., the Age of Lynching, the Age of Jim Crow, the Age of Accommodation) and others the spatial (e.g., the Nadir, the Vale of Tears).

The editors’ choice to limit the selections to an average of thirteen pages of text makes it possible for the book to cover a wide array of topics. Moreover, the relative brevity of the fifteen essays makes the collection manageable, enabling readers to tackle one of the four sections—“Reimagining the Past,” “Meeting Freedom: Self-Invention, Artistic Innovation, and Race Progress (1870s-1880s),” “Encountering Jim Crow: African American Literature and the Mainstream (1890s),” and “Turning the Century: New Political, Cultural, and Personal Aesthetics (1900-1917)” —in a single sitting. The opening essay, Frances Smith Foster’s “Creative Collaboration: As African American as Sweet Potato Pie,” provides some helpful glue for *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem*. It stresses cooperative efforts between 1880 and the Harlem Renaissance, placing them within a larger tradition of black artistic and political collaboration dating back to the eighteenth century, including texts in Arabic by Muslims of African descent, the francophone writings of Louisiana Creoles, Phillis Wheatley and her circle, and the publication of *Freedom Journal* in the 1820s. Carla Peterson’s fine essay, “Commemorative Ceremonies and Invented Traditions: History, Memory, and Modernity in the ‘New Negro’ Novel of the Nadir,” immediately follows Foster’s. The selection argues convincingly that at the turn of the twentieth century African-American novelists, responding to the social crises facing US blacks, appropriated and subverted the historical romance from writers such as Walter Scott, seizing upon the old versus new conflict in the subgenre but, as the often open
endings of these novels indicate, remaining skeptical about the prospects for resolution.

Focusing on seven texts published between 1892 and 1903, Peterson by no means fully accounts for the surprisingly large number of African-American novels published between 1865 and 1920. Research being undertaken by Maryemma Graham and the Project on the History of Black Writing at the University of Kansas and Alisha Knight of Washington College suggests that over sixty-five of such works were published during this period. As authors of multiple titles, Hopkins and Griggs, along with Chesnutt, Frances Harper, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Oscar Micheaux, were the exceptions. Some of the little-known novelists express considerable confidence in the transformative potential of fiction and the need for African-American writers to tell their people’s stories or risk having their history lost or willfully distorted, echoing Hopkins’s oft-quoted Preface to Contending Forces. John Wesley Grant, for instance, asserts in his introduction to Out of the Darkness (1909), “If the Negro wishes the truths of the history of his thralldom, persecution, degradation, ostracism, and his successes and triumphs over his enemies and calumniators told, he himself must tell it!” (17). Otis Shackelford amplifies these sentiments in his preface to Lillian Simmons (1915): “We as a race want a place in Literature. We want to be heroes in song and story. We want to play leading roles on the stage and in book. We want to stir the emotions of men. We want to provoke laughter, tears, and applause. We are tired of playing the foolish, silly, insignificant part as given to us by the literature of other races. And we think the time has come for us to take this line of work in hand. The soil of the Negro literary field is indeed rich and abounds in vast tracts, from which material for history, song, and story may be gathered” (8). Unlike Chesnutt’s and Dunbar’s novels, which were brought out by mainstream, eastern publishing houses, Grant’s novel was printed by the National Baptist Publishing Board in Nashville and Shackelford’s by the R. M. Rigby Printing Company of Kansas City, Missouri. All of which suggests that the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century period still looms as virtually an undiscovered country for African-Americanists. Not only do individual novels—more of which will no doubt be rediscovered—require analysis, but investigation needs to be undertaken into the publishers and, building upon the work of Elizabeth McHenry, the readers of these books.

Whether McCaskill and Gebhard succeed in changing the way people refer to and think about the era in which Hopkins and Griggs wrote remains to be seen. Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem
provides no treatment of the dawn of US overseas imperialism and its ramifications, particularly the Spanish-American War and its aftermath; the relationship between African Americans and people in Latin America, Haiti, Asia, and Africa; or the transnational forces at work in various locations within the borders of the US, such as Louisiana, Florida, and the Southwest. In light of contemporary scholarship’s move in these directions, the editors’ decision to limit their focus to the situation at home and not grapple with the empire abroad and its domestic implications can be questioned, especially given the fact that selections in the collection address such figures as Du Bois, Hopkins, Canadian-born landscapist Edward Mitchell Bannister, painter Henry Ossawa Turner, who spent many years in Europe, New Orleans-born author and activist Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and writer, Latin American diplomat, NAACP-leader, and Jacksonville native James Weldon Johnson.

Works Cited


