

7-1-2016

## Book Review - Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs

Michael K. Law  
*University of Georgia*, lawm@uga.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Literature Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Law, Michael K. (2016) "Book Review - Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 3 , Article 15.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol53/iss3/15>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Library Quarterly by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## Off the SHELF

**Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs** edited by Tess Chakkalal and Kenneth W. Warren (University of Georgia Press, 2013: ISBN 978-0-8203-4032-6, \$32.95)

This welcome volume fully realizes the multi-varied complexity of Griggs's life and work. As the editors discuss in their introduction, Griggs's own contemporaries struggled to silo him within particular contexts, and that struggle persists today. The solution, say Chakkalal and Warren, is to stop trying and allow all of the facets of the man to create a fuller picture, one that allows Griggs the author, the minister, the political actor, and the social critic to exist together. As such, they amassed a collection of scholars who each reimagine Griggs from a different vantage and combine to form a more complete picture of him and a reassessment of the era and venue through which he worked.

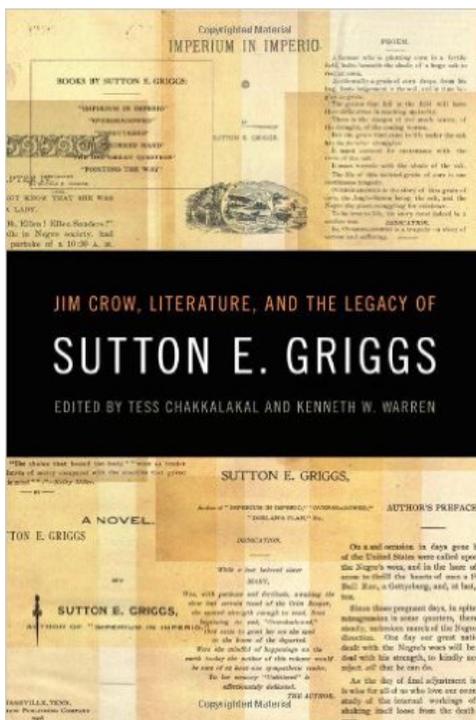
Rising to prominence in his father's (and later his own) churches and joining his father in affiliating with the National Baptist Convention, Griggs became a noted speaker, a follower of Du Bois, and a proponent of Black literary culture through ventures in newswriting and publishing. By the end of the 1890s, he began to look away from journalism and church polemics, and toward the novel as the vehicle for Black writing, which in turn would serve the political causes of Black independence and equality. After the failure of his publishing venture and his last novel, in 1909, Griggs

turned back to the church and nonfiction pamphlets. But his five novels, each dealt with here by different contributors, left a critical mark the authors hope to bring back to the fore.

Griggs was most prominently a writer, though the often disregarded era in which he worked, lack of commercial success, and relatively short career left him largely overlooked as an author. Rather, his contemporaries, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington,

dominated the discussion of Jim Crow's impact on Black education and literature. Griggs's own novel writing career lasted from 1899–1909, an era generally dismissed as undistinguished compared to the rise of the Harlem Renaissance a generation later. The contributors to this volume, however, look to acknowledge the zenith of Jim Crow as the foundational necessity clearing the path for the next wave of Black writers. They also look to reassess the traditional view of Griggs, allowing him a more prominent role in the culture of turn-of-the-century Black literature. Moreover, the authors attempt to distinguish Griggs and his era as part of a political and cultural outlook that still mingled together with the promise of transcending Jim Crow, as opposed to the more resigned anguished tones of the Harlem Renaissance.

Though his longest tenure as a minister was his nineteen years in Memphis, Griggs and his work



are forever tied with his home state of Texas. Caroline Levander begins the collection of essays by examining the role of Griggs's Texas roots and the precarious nature of Texas as a crossroads of racial identification. Strong Jim Crow elements are ever present, of course, but Texas's place in the hinterlands of the West and South intermingled with a rebellious Mexican struggle and a fiercely independent self-imposed isolation—even from its fellow former Confederate states—give Griggs a unique and varied set of voices with which to work. By juxtaposing Texas with its neighbors in various configurations of “empire,” Levander highlights the importance of setting on Griggs's understanding and portrayal of race.

John Gruesser furthers the exploration of Griggs's notion of empire by blurring the line between racism and imperialism. Noting the prominence of American global expansionism in Griggs's writing, especially his most famous work, *Imperium in Imperio*, Gruesser repositions Texas, as Griggs portrays it, as more than simply another American state enforcing Jim Crow. Rather, he sees it as also a colonized part of the African diaspora. By moving from mere subjugation to colonization, Griggs completely redefines the very purpose of Jim Crow. It becomes less a tool for social stratification and more an instrument for the feeding of an imperialist machine. This in turn, says Gruesser, creates a struggle between Griggs's characters over notions of equality versus independence. Balancing those notions elevates Griggs's work beyond polemics, and toward a nuanced striving for self-identity.

Robert S. Levine then furthers the discussion by relating Griggs's work with Edward Hale's *A Man without a Country*. He notes that in both cases, the rise and the spoils of American imperialism become precisely what drives and even necessitates Jim Crow. The point of *Imperium in Imperio*, he remarks, is to break our understanding of Jim Crow and the struggle against it from their internal tether within turn-

of-the-century America, and to place them within their proper global context.

In a seemingly inward turn, Griggs's second and third novels deal more directly with the social structures defined by Jim Crow. Andrea N. Williams reconsiders the literary quality of Griggs's novels by directing readers to see the seemingly botched narrative conclusions of his works as, instead, intentional social commentary in themselves. The stunted conclusions and resolutions of characters in *Overshadowed* and *Unfettered* result from the inability of Black social momentum to transcend the limits established by Jim Crow. Each character's resolution is unsatisfying because Jim Crow depends upon tamping Black ambition and limiting not just Black success but the way in which Black success is defined.

Finnie Coleman then examines what he sees as Griggs's attempt to answer the questions his first novels raise. Exploring Griggs's *Science of Collective Efficiency*, Coleman highlights the seemingly contradictory elements of Griggs's social philosophy. Griggs does not fall easily into any one of the camps of the major social theorists within Black America at the time, namely Du Bois, Garvey, and Washington. Griggs appears often to be lost in the melee of Black self-determination. Coleman notes that Griggs attempted to find his way to a central and unique position among those varying theories and to answer larger questions posed by the Social Darwinism of his era. He seemingly embodied both the acceptance of uplift and of cooperation under the guidance of a “talented tenth.” Rather than seeing them as contradictory, Griggs saw them as joint elements in both the elevation and independence of his race.

Chakkalaka herself then weighs in, not on Griggs's writing, but on his role and influence upon Black readership, especially in the South. Griggs was unique among his contemporary authors in that he self-published, self-edited, and directed his work toward a Black, Southern

audience, highlighting his hope and belief that there was one. Regardless of the quality of his literary output, she writes, his attempt to create a self-sustaining role for a publishing industry, and a readership that could proffer it, was just as important. His focus on both novel writing and publishing also towed the line between self-uplift and “talented tenth” that set him apart in Black literary culture.

Griggs’s efforts failed to spark the interest of a substantial readership, says Hannah Wallinger, because his ambition went beyond it. Especially in his novel *The Hindered Hand*, he attempted to transcend his Black, middle-class audience and reach into White America by taking on Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots*. Dixon easily outgunned Griggs in popularity, especially after his novel became a popular film, and the attempt also alienated Griggs’s own readership, which looked for self-definition beyond White American perceptions. John Ernest furthers Wallinger’s interpretation, placing Griggs in the context of an African American intertextual tradition. Griggs’s hopes developed from one of building a Black literary culture to falling back upon the hopes of “reinterpreting” Black America to a White American audience.

The essays conclude with M. Giula Fabi and Kenneth Warren each reexamining Griggs’s last novel, *Pointing the Way*. In doing so, they seek to remind readers of Griggs as social critic and cultural interpreter. Overshadowed by his ambitions as a writer, and the subsequent failure of many of those ambitions, Griggs as a

critic and a foundation of Black readership is more of a success story. Comparing Griggs to Charles Chestnutt, Fabi makes clear that Griggs keenly understood literary quality and interpreted it for Black readers as well as anyone. Warren follows to highlight the forethought of Griggs’s last novel not only as an interpretation of Reconstruction past but as a pathway for equality, one that would come to fruition beyond the literary success of the Harlem Renaissance into the cultural coalescence of the broader Civil Rights era.

The authors clearly achieve their aim of resurrecting interest in Griggs and exploring his contributions and complexities in a fashion heretofore disregarded. While the contributors do an amiable job of providing a cross-disciplinary approach and historical context, the work may have benefited from a contribution from an historian of Jim Crow. The contributors do a fantastic job of relating Griggs as a foundation of pre-Harlem literature, but without a more fleshed-out vision of Jim Crow itself, Griggs remains isolated to a degree and never fully contextualized.

The omission, which is minor, does little to harm the value of this work in reassessing this elemental figure in Black literary culture. Librarians working in turn-of-the century and African American literature will find it useful and unique.

*Michael Law is Library Associate at the University of Georgia*