

NEH Application Cover Sheet

Awards for Faculty

PROJECT DIRECTOR

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Field of Expertise: Literature - American

INSTITUTION

Prairie View A&M University
Prairie View, TX

APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism in Post-Reconstruction African American Literature*

Grant Period: From 1/2011 to 8/2011

Field of Project: Literature - American

Description of Project: With NEH funding, I will produce two studies--one on Frederick Douglass and the other on African American novelist, Sutton Griggs--to submit to peer-reviewed journals and include as chapters within an academic manuscript. The manuscript traces the emergence of black pragmatism through debates over emigration and nationalism as responses to Jim Crow-era racial oppression. As part of a current effort among literary critics, historians, and philosophers to rethink and reevaluate the history of black pragmatism, the manuscript demonstrates that black pragmatists theorized power and resistance in ways that have made classic philosophical pragmatism relevant within past and current efforts to think through the problems and possibilities of democracy. In doing so, the manuscript argues that black pragmatism is a central component of African American (and therefore all American) identities as they have been and continue to be negotiated within complex social, cultural, and political

REFERENCE LETTERS

James Palmer
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John Ernest
Eberly Family Distinguished Professor of
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West Virginia University
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Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism in Post-Reconstruction African American Literature
M. Clay Hooper, Assistant Professor of English
Prairie View A&M University

I am applying for an eight-month grant (half funding for four months and full funding for four months) that will allow me to produce two article-length studies that will be submitted to peer-reviewed journals for scholarship in American and African American literature (e.g., *African American Review* or *American Literature*) and appear as chapters within my current manuscript project, titled *Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism in Post-Reconstruction African American Literature*. This grant will allow me to obtain course release for two of four classes in the spring term of 2011 and spend the following summer researching and writing full-time. With this respite from my heavy teaching load, I will complete a substantial revision of a dissertation chapter on Frederick Douglass as well as research and write new material on Sutton E. Griggs, a turn-of-the-century African American novelist and activist. These articles will constitute the second and third chapters of *Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism* (hereafter *ENP*), which will contribute to a current effort among literary critics, historians, and philosophers to rethink and reconfigure the history of black pragmatism.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Since the publication of *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), in which Cornel West made a powerful case for including W. E. B. Du Bois within the canon of classic philosophical pragmatism, a good deal of scholarship has been devoted to recovering a history of black pragmatism. Until recently, however, these efforts revealed a more or less derivative tradition in which the ideas and attitudes of classic pragmatism have been applied to problems of race that the white forefathers of pragmatism famously avoided. Moving beyond this derivative genealogy, recent studies by Maurice Lee and Gregg Crane have begun to excavate a prehistory of philosophical pragmatism that is populated in part by nineteenth-century black intellectuals. Meanwhile, scholars like George Hutchinson, Michael Magee, and Eddie Glaude have begun to explore the degree to which black cultural practices reveal pragmatist insights that are more organically related (rather than retroactively applied) to black experience. I am currently involved in advancing these strands of analysis by co-editing with Jared Hickman (English, Johns Hopkins University) a special forum in the journal, *Modern Intellectual History*, in which leading historians, philosophers, and literary scholars will comment on the ways in which slavery and antislavery movements within the broader Atlantic world gave shape to philosophical pragmatism. My involvement in this project, of course, stems from my own research agenda regarding the history of black pragmatism.

In *ENP* I will explain how the Jim Crow experience informed a black intellectual tradition that shared with classic pragmatism its unique commitment to democracy yet recognized that achieving democracy always involves tactically undermining asymmetrical power structures from within. Positing what Hilary Putnam has termed an “epistemological justification of democracy,” classic pragmatists rejected the search for foundational truths and instead celebrated democratic inclusiveness and experimentalism as means of developing provisional truths and practices capable of enriching human experience within what William James called “a pluralistic universe.” They largely assumed, however, that the promise of democratic progress was itself sufficient to convince the powerful to abandon the undemocratic foundations of their power. For those facing the cruelties of the color line, of course, this assumption was obviously fantasy; and emigration and nationalism began to be vigorously debated as means of escaping from the inequalities of the American system. Through these debates, however, emerged a significant movement toward what Tommie Shelby has recently termed “pragmatic nationalism.” Unlike classic black nationalism, which was separatist in its aims and often militant in its measures, pragmatic nationalism advocated black solidarity as a provisional measure for developing the instruments of political, economic, and social power by which black America might create for itself (rather than simply demand) more equal and just modes of participation within the life and government of American national, regional, and local

communities. It was in the spirit of pragmatic nationalism, for instance, that Du Bois, in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), departed from his earlier emphasis on principled protest to advocate what he called a “segregation technique”—a program of racial solidarity grounded not on essentialist claims of racial identity but on provisional tactics for dismantling the color line from within.

ENP will argue that this pragmatist approach to racial solidarity, though often overshadowed by the optics of rights-based protest, has played a central and necessary role within the ongoing development of African American cultural and political identities. By reconciling the often competing impulses of resistance and participation, the black pragmatist tradition has provided the intellectual framework for organizing efforts within, between, and beyond black communities since the end of Reconstruction. *ENP* will tell the story of the emergence of this tradition, in part so that it may be more fully appreciated and explored as a central component of African American (and therefore all American) identities as they have been and continue to be negotiated within complex social, cultural, and political contexts. But *ENP* will also contribute to the ongoing reevaluation of the black pragmatist tradition as something more than a mere derivative of classic pragmatism. It will argue that advocates of pragmatic nationalism advanced ideas about democracy that were distinctly pragmatist (i.e., antifoundationalist and experimentalist) but that also contained original insights about power and participation that have helped to make philosophical pragmatism relevant for current efforts—within, for instance, feminist theory, critical race theory, and radical democratic theory—to think through the problems and possibilities of democracy. Like the special forum that I am co-editing for *Modern Intellectual History*, then, *ENP* will have a cross-disciplinary appeal, encouraging scholars in literature, history, and philosophy to rethink the intersections of pragmatism, race, and democratic citizenship.

MANUSCRIPT STRUCTURE AND PROGRESS

ENP builds upon insights first explored within my dissertation, but while the dissertation comments upon black pragmatism while analyzing early black autobiography, *ENP* focuses exclusively on the emergence of black pragmatism as evidenced within a broader range of literary, philosophical, and political texts. The following outline identifies briefly the topic and status of each chapter.

Chapter One is a revision of a dissertation chapter explaining **William Wells Brown’s** defense of the Exodus of 1879. It has been completed and published in *Modern Language Studies* (Winter 2009).

Chapter Two is a revision of a dissertation chapter explaining **Frederick Douglass’s** opposition to the Exodus of 1879. It will be completed and submitted to a peer-reviewed journal before the Summer of 2011.

Chapter Three consists of new material regarding **Sutton Griggs’** pragmatic nationalism. It will be completed and submitted to a peer-reviewed journal before the Fall of 2011.

Chapter Four is a revision of a dissertation chapter arguing that **Booker T. Washington’s** conciliatory rhetoric masked a pragmatic nationalist effort to cultivate autonomous black communities capable of wielding economic, political, and social force in negotiating their changing relationships with surrounding white communities. The process of revision has not begun.

Chapter Five consists of new material regarding **Paul Laurence Dunbar’s** and **James Weldon Johnson’s** efforts to foster a black literary tradition drawn from the rich history of African American cultural practice. This chapter will argue that both Dunbar and Johnson understood their own literary efforts as extensions of a pragmatic nationalist project embodied, for both, by Booker T. Washington. Preliminary research has been completed.

Chapter Six consists of new material on **Alain Locke** and **W. E. B. Du Bois**. It argues that pragmatic nationalism gave rise to a coherent black pragmatist tradition that has had a significant impact on current theoretical trends. Preliminary research has been completed.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION (DOUGLASS AND GRIGGS)

The grant that I am applying for will cover my remaining work on the second and third chapters of *ENP*. The second chapter will fill a significant gap in Douglass criticism by explaining his famous opposition—grounded in the absolutist claims of classic abolitionism—to the Exodus of 1879, the largest of the post-Reconstruction emigration movements. Though Maurice Lee and Gregg Crane note the ways in which Douglass’s abolitionism anticipates elements of philosophical pragmatism, I argue that this same abolitionism prevented him from pursuing insights unique to the black pragmatist tradition that *ENP* identifies. Situated as a companion piece to the first chapter, this second chapter demonstrates that Douglass, like his close contemporary, William Wells Brown, experienced slavery and fugitivity in ways that gave him a unique awareness of the contingency of identity—the degree to which personal, political, cultural, and racial identities are shaped and reshaped in response to historical circumstances—and therefore a critical perspective on his own abolitionist performances. But I argue that by 1879 the black public had become so heavily invested in the representative value of Douglass’s abolitionist identity that he could neither abandon nor significantly revise a performance that he had come to regard as tragically inhibitive. On the strength of this performance, Douglass rose high within the ranks of the Republican party, but this very ascendance distanced him from the ground-level realities of black experience and, therefore, from the experiential knowledge necessary to formulate effective and adaptive responses to post-Reconstruction racial oppression. It is for this reason that Douglass, in *Life and Times* (1881), subtly invokes his own slave past in describing himself as a “field hand” within the Republican party even while urging his Southern brethren to have faith in the party rather than resort to emigration. This contrasts sharply with Brown’s defense of the Exodus as a tactical effort to exploit Southern fears of losing cheap labor and, at the same time, develop organizational infrastructures within and between black communities. In formulating this pragmatist defense of the Exodus, I argue, Brown embraced the contingency of identity as the basis for collective tactics of resistance that were experimental, provisional, and therefore adaptable to the rapidly changing landscape of American race relations. In *Life and Times*, however, Douglass reveals himself as trapped within a performance that prevented him from endorsing the type of pragmatist resistance that Brown advocated.

The chapters on Brown and Douglass establish the conceptual framework for examining how the next generation of black leaders and thinkers, who had little or no experience of slavery, addressed emigration and nationalism as responses to post-Reconstruction racial oppression. Among these was Sutton Griggs, whose most famous novel, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), tells the story of two friends and rivals—Belton, a pragmatic experimentalist, and Bernard, an advocate of direct, vocal, and even militant dissent—who lock horns in a power struggle concerning leadership of a massive emigrationist/nationalist scheme that would transport the entire black South to Texas and establish it as an autonomous black state or nation (depending on the response of white America) devoted to advancing the interests of African Americans. The novel has often been read as a militant nationalist text but is better understood as a defense of pragmatic nationalism, one that anticipates Griggs’ later formulation of a “science of collective efficiency.” Like Alain Locke and Du Bois (in his later years), Griggs believed that opposition to the color line must be mobilized through the systematic and scientific implementation of nonessentialist modes of racial solidarity. I will be presenting a conference paper based on this thesis at the 2010 RMMLA Convention (Oct. 14-16), but to extend it into a fully researched article/chapter I will need the funding that will allow me to take time away from teaching as well as travel to the Auburn Avenue Research Library in Atlanta and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. Visits to these research libraries will allow me to examine rare copies of Griggs’ lesser known literary and political writings like *The Race Question in a New Light* (1909), *Needs of the South* (1909), *Co-operative Natures and Social Education* (1919), *Guide to Racial Greatness* (1923), *Kingdom Builder’s Manual* (1924), and *Paths of Progress* (1925). This research will be essential for me to fully analyze Griggs’ “science of collective efficiency” and determine how it relates to the attitudes and ideas of other black activists of the period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Crane, Gregg. *Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Library of America, 1994.
- — —. *Selected Speeches and Writings*. Ed. Philip S. Foner. Abr. Yuval Taylor. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999.
- Ernest, John. *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009.
- Glaude, Eddie S. *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Griggs, Sutton E. *Co-operative Natures and Social Education; a Philosophy of Civic Life*. Memphis: National Public Welfare League, 1929.
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- — —. *The Hindered Hand; or, The Reign of the Repressionist*. Nashville: Orion Publishing Co., 1905.
- — —. *Imperium in Imperio; a Study of the Negro Race Problem, a Novel*. 1899. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.
- — —. *Paths of Progress; or, Co-operation Between the Races, a Series of Addresses, Articles, and Essays*. Memphis: National Public Welfare League, 1925.
- — —. *Unfettered, a Novel. Dorlan's Plan, a Dissertation on the Race Problem*. Nashville: Orion Publishing Co., 1902.
- Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997.
- Lee, Maurice. *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Magee, Michael. *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*. U of Alabama P, 2004.
- Martin, Waldo E. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977.
- Posnock, Ross. *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Putnam, Hilary. *Renewing Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Shelby, Tommie. *The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007.
- West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989.
- Westbrook, Robert. *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005.
- Winter, Molly Crumpton. *American Narratives: Multiethnic Writing in the Age of Realism*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2007.

M. CLAY HOOPER

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ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Assistant Professor, Prairie View A&M University, 2008-Present

EDUCATION

Ph.D. English, University at Buffalo, SUNY, 2008

Dissertation: "Serviceable Selves: Antislavery, Autobiography, and the Postidealist Critique of Moral Reform, 1841-1901." Kenneth Dauber, advisor.

M.A. English, Texas A&M University, 2000

B.A. English, Texas A&M University, 1998

PUBLICATION

"'It Is Good to Be Shifty': William Wells Brown's Trickster Critique of Black Autobiography." *Modern Language Studies* 38.2 (2009): 28-45.

WORKS IN PROGRESS

Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism in Post-Reconstruction African American Literature. Book manuscript in progress.

"'Othello's Occupation': Fredrick Douglass's Tragic Abolitionist Performance." Manuscript being prepared for submission to peer-reviewed journal.

"Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism in the Works of Sutton Griggs." Manuscript being prepared for submission to peer-reviewed journal.

Coeditor with Jared Hickman (Johns Hopkins University). "Atlantic Slavery and the Emergence of Philosophical Pragmatism." Special Forum. Forthcoming in *Modern Intellectual History*.

RECENT CONFERENCES

"Emigration, Nationalism, and Pragmatism in the Works of Sutton Griggs." RMMLA Convention. Albuquerque, NM. October 14-16, 2010.

"Transcending Emerson: Social Morality in Lydia Maria Child's 'Letters From New-York.'" NeMLA Convention. Boston, MA. February 26 – March 1, 2009.

Chair. "New Approaches to William Wells Brown." Board-sponsored panel. NeMLA Convention. Buffalo, NY. April 10-13, 2008.

"'Becoming Autobiography?': Black Experience and the Discourse of Reform in Douglass and Brown." NEMLA Convention. Baltimore, MD. March 1-4, 2007.

"The Liberal Self in Print: Frederick Douglass as Editor and Autobiographer." SAMLA Convention. Charlotte, NC. November 10-12, 2006.

TEACHING INTERESTS

African American Literature; Nineteenth-Century American Literature; American Women Writers; Transatlantic Gothic Fiction; American Intellectual History; Short Fiction

RECENT COURSES TAUGHT

Prairie View A&M University, 2008 to Present.

- ENGL 5533: Seminar in American Literature: Fiction and the Philosophy of Moral Reform, 1850-1900
- ENGL 4433: Special Topics: Gothic Fiction
- ENGL 3243: American Literature: 1865 to Present
- ENGL 3233: American Literature: Colonial to Civil War (2 sections)
- ENGL 3053: Survey of African American Literature
- ENGL 2153: Introduction to Literature
- ENGL 1133 Freshman Composition II (7 sections)
- ENGL 1123 Freshman Composition I (3 sections)

RECENT SERVICE

Composition Syllabus Committee, Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, 2009-2010. Revising standard syllabi for ENGL 1123 and ENGL 1133.

Core Curriculum Assessment Committee, College of Arts and Sciences, Prairie View A&M University, 2009-2010. Developed and applied TrueOutcomes assessment metrics for ENGL 1133 as a core curriculum course.

Grade Appeal Committee, Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, 2008-2010.

Master's Curriculum Committee, English Program, Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, 2008-2009. Defended curriculum revision before the Graduate Council.

ABET Course Binder, Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, 2008-2009. Compiled course binder of ENGL 1123: Composition I materials for the Department of Computer Science for accreditation of BS in Computer Science.

Composition Committee, English Program, Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, 2008-2009.

Assessment Committee (Faculty Advisement Group), Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, 2008-2009. Composed report on faculty advisement SACS accreditation.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Modern Language Association (MLA)

Northeastern Modern Language Association (NeMLA)

Rock Mountain Modern Language Association (RMMLA)

South Central Modern Language Association (SCMLA)



PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY

A Member of The Texas A&M University System

4 June 2010

Letter of Reference for Dr. Michael Clay Hooper:

I am pleased to write this letter for my colleague, Dr Michael C. Hooper. I was on the hiring committee that selected him for our tenure-track position in American Literature/African-American Studies two years ago. I have had the opportunity to get to know him quite well, and his teaching, research, and tireless service to our department and university make him a perfect candidate for an NEH grant.

In the past two years, I have been struck by Dr. Hooper's dedication to teaching, in spite of his heavy four-four teaching load and our consistently large class sizes (all faculty members teach at least two composition courses, and typically three sections, with over thirty students in each). I know much about him as a teacher because we are a small department of just over thirty faculty members who interact frequently on committees and in assessment activities for NCATE and SACS accreditation. As the Department Head, I know that both his peer and student teaching evaluations attest to the fact that he is a fine teacher. Indeed, he was the only faculty member to score a 5 (Excellent) rating on every teaching-related criteria on this year's Faculty Performance Evaluation instrument. Students and peers make comments about his organizational skills, his ability to foster critical thinking, and about his commitment to the subjects he teaches. Indeed, I have frequently seen students lined up for individual conferences over their writing well after his twelve weekly office hours are officially over.

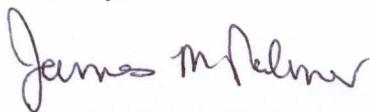
Teaching graduate seminars in early American literature, and undergraduate courses in composition, introduction to literature, African American literature, American literature surveys, literary theory, and special topics courses on race, Dr. Hooper has taught in many areas of our program and has influenced a large number of our English education students in particular during his short two years with us. Students are drawn to his courses because of his ability to connect current and previous literary readings with both contemporary and historical cultural contexts. He possesses a fine ability to mix both lecture and discussion to create a student-centered environment where participants want to pursue in-depth research projects of their own to impress him. Indeed, the 80-page portfolios he led students to complete in his senior capstone course on race, pragmatism, and the Harlem Renaissance and beyond last semester were some of the best the department has seen and evaluated. Two students writing their Master's theses with me indicate their eagerness to have him in the near future, especially the one beginning her project on race and writing centers. His knowledge of pragmatism and theory make him an ideal candidate for membership on her thesis review committee.

Students at Prairie View A&M are generally tuned into issues regarding race, so they tend to get excited about projects that prompt them to explore the historical complexity of those issues in ways they never have before. Several of his assignment prompts speak to this issue, and as a co-chair of our Composition Committee with Professor Glenn Shaheen, Dr. Hooper has shared many of his essay prompts with me and the rest of our faculty. His exploratory prewriting assignment for a literary analysis paper for a composition course asks students to analyze a Zora Neale Hurston story using readings by Langston Hughes, Alaine Locke, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois for context. The "Response Essay" prompt in his Survey of African American Literature is an assignment for a reading unit which asks students to construct original arguments examining how writers of the Harlem Renaissance and post-Harlem Renaissance periods conceived of the project of building black community. These units cover many of the issues and themes that are central to his research. In this regard, his teaching and research inform one another.

Despite a heavy teaching load, he manages to sustain as much as is possible an active research agenda, and I have little doubt that the course release time afforded him through a research grant will pay off in great dividends. He has published (or has forthcoming) several articles such as that on William Wells Brown in *Modern Language Studies*, and his work with his colleague at Johns Hopkins University for *Modern Intellectual History* on "Atlantic Slavery and the Emergence of Philosophical Slavery" is worthy of note and is an important avenue for sharing his research and findings from this project. His work on William Wells Brown, Sutton E. Griggs, and Frederick Douglass is important for what it will tell us about nationalism and pragmatism in African American literature between Reconstruction and the Harlem Renaissance, and much of this project can contribute to both our English major as well as the growing interdisciplinary minor in African American Studies jointly offered through coursework in our department and that which houses history, political science, and sociology.

His proposed NEH project will expand our understanding of black intellectual history, and it has already helped him generate interest and intellectual activity in both his composition and literature courses. Although he has been quite active given the limited support we offer our assistant professors working hard toward tenure, release time will help him pursue research that our current university structure and teaching requirements do not afford him. Professor Hooper is a first-rate colleague, and I know that he will complete the project he has proposed with research support. If I can answer any questions you might have about him, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



James M. Palmer, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English
Department Head, Languages & Communication

May 19, 2010

I am writing to express my strong support for Michael Clay Hooper's application for an NEH Faculty Award. I first met Clay when we presented papers together for a NEMLA panel in March, 2007. Clay's paper-- "'Becoming Autobiography'?: Black Experience and the Discourse of Reform in Douglass and Brown"--struck me as one of the more informed, promising, and original treatments of Douglass and Brown that I had heard at any conference in recent years, so I expressed interest in hearing more about the dissertation project, and I have since become a deeply-interested reader of Clay's work. I participated as well in the unprecedented two-session reconsideration of the work of William Wells Brown held at NEMLA in 2008, sessions which Clay was instrumental in organizing. The first of the NEMLA panels was so successful that essays developed from the papers will form a special issue of *Modern Language Studies*, including Clay's forthcoming essay on William Wells Brown; and the sessions for the following year featured solid work by younger scholars that promises to establish William Wells Brown as the most challenging and revealing African American writer of the nineteenth century. I was asked to serve as commentator for the essays gathered for the *Modern Language Studies* special issue, which included Clay's essay on William Wells Brown--easily the strongest essay in the group. It is an essay that will introduce Clay as a compelling voice in a new generation of scholars extending and reconfiguring our approach to nineteenth-century African American autobiography, and it is an essay that will be required reading for anyone interested in Brown's work.

Since Clay's is proposing the revision and publication of chapters from his dissertation, I will first address his achievement there, so as to provide background for the work that remains. Clay's dissertation--"'Serviceable Selves: Antislavery, Autobiography, and the Postidealist Critique of Moral Reform, 1842-1901"--is an impressive study that promises to be a significant scholarly accomplishment, not only one that will challenge established approaches to familiar authors and texts but also one that will explore the activist concerns central to those texts. Indeed, Clay demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the highly-contingent and shifting contexts within which black activists necessarily worked--and his emphasis on "performative adaptability," especially in relation to William Wells Brown's work, seems to me exactly right. Throughout, Clay demonstrates an informed and nuanced understanding of the cultural politics of race as well as a rich examination a broad range of publications.

In this project, Clay draws from William M. Morgan's concept of postidealist humanitarianism to complicate the usual frameworks for understanding the

methods and philosophical ideals of the antislavery movement (and beyond). His approach goes far towards explaining how nineteenth-century currents of white and African American literary activism eventually developed into the literary and conceptual frameworks that helped define early twentieth-century literary and social movements. This reconsideration of nineteenth-century writers, Clay suggests, will “expand the ways in which we think about the intersections of social experience, cultural production, and democratic modes of relation,” and I agree completely, making this project an important contribution to the developing scholarship on citizenship.

I was especially interested in Clay’s chapters on Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown. In these chapters, Clay’s argument is rare in that he seems to find a more complex achievement in Brown’s writing than in Douglass’s. This is not to say that Clay does simple work in his second chapter--“‘Othello’s Occupation’: Performance and Reform in Frederick Douglass’s Autobiographies”--in which he approaches Douglass’s work through Common Sense philosophy. There have been various attempts to locate Douglass philosophically--and, as Maurice S. Lee has observed, many of Douglass’s published antislavery speeches and other texts “tell the story of a crisis of philosophical faith.” Accordingly, Clay doesn’t offer just one more take on Douglass’s philosophical allegiances. Rather, he explores a more dynamic model of cultural process to examine the ways in which Douglass’s philosophical leanings were influenced by identifiable philosophical positions filtered through various cultural mediators. As a result, Clay is positioned to both identify and analyze the terms and limits of Douglass’s political strategies and, one might say, his philosophical gambles--indeed, his occasional “tactical complicity,” as Clay puts it. In other words, Clay identifies a problem, a basic dynamic, in Douglass’s career that becomes especially acute in his later years, and especially evident in his last autobiographical accounts. “The autobiographer of 1881,” Clay argues, “situates his ‘life’ as representative in a purely symbolic mode that is several steps removed from the situational particularities of political struggle.” The result of this analysis is a portrait of an acknowledged leader working both with and against the shifting contexts resulting from his often singular and unprecedented achievements, an analysis that I find both provocative and persuasive.

More impressive still is Clay’s third chapter, “Making Equality: William Wells Brown and the Experiment of Autobiographical Pastiche,” one of the best pieces I have read on Brown for quite some time. Whereas Douglass operated with a certain degree of confidence in the stability of the philosophical frameworks or leading ideals guiding American cultural life, Brown operated always with a highly acute sense of the instabilities of those frameworks, and of the instabilities

of any position he could craft for himself through his public life and writings. “In juxtaposing Brown to Douglass,” Clay notes, his intention “is not to suggest an alternate founder of African American literature but rather to highlight the ways in which a similarly situated writer operated quite differently within the antebellum culture of reform, exploring, exposing, and exploiting the necessarily fictive nature of literary self-fashioning, shaping and reshaping his many literary selves as pliable instruments within a provisionalist politics that continually disrupts the totalizing projections of ideological certitude.” Although scholarship on the work of William Wells Brown is on the rise, few come to that work with such confidence in Brown as a political strategist. Clay, though, recontextualizes Brown significantly, and raises questions about much of the work on abolitionist activism and literature, in part by observing that Brown “understood the extant discourses against slavery as performative gestures that were provisionally useful for antislavery work but, despite their totalizing claims, incapable of providing a stable ideological ground for humanitarian reform.” This is a sound observation based on a comprehensive and careful study of Brown’s career, and it leads Clay to a complex portrait of a writer and activist who remains both understudied and underestimated in most of the existing scholarship.

In the work that this award will make possible, Clay will bring additional research to this study, refine his argument, and link this study to the developing interest in African American approaches to philosophical pragmatism. As Clay explains in his proposal, recent years have seen a significant rise in studies of American philosophical pragmatism--including attention to the ways in which the system of slavery and the antislavery movement affected concepts of pragmatism in the U.S. and, through scholars like Eddie Glaude, attention to the ways in which an embrace of the American pragmatist tradition could help African Americans address the problems specific to their communities without resort to racial essentialism or other forms of identity politics that rely on simplifications of U.S. racial history. For those of us who work in African American studies, this developing body of scholarship is exciting, offering genuinely new approaches to all-too-familiar problems and dilemmas.

Clay’s planned articles on Frederick Douglass and Sutton Griggs will come at a good time--a time when Douglass studies are taking a significant turn (away from considerations of him as the representative African American of the nineteenth century, and into considerations of the political difficulties engendered by his apparent, and sometimes assumed, representative role), and a time when Griggs studies are rather dramatically on the rise (with one group of scholars working to bring all of Griggs’s work back into print and at the center of African American literary, cultural, and political scholarship). In both cases, Clay’s arguments about

Reference Letter for HB50032
John Ernest

these important figures are both provocative and persuasive, and his research plans are both essential and manageable. These articles, I predict, will help turn scholarly attention to the broader philosophical implications of the lives and work of these two men, and I think they will influence significantly future readings of Douglass's and Griggs's work. I've already seen this happen with Clay's article on William Wells Brown in *Modern Language Studies*. Moreover, Clay's forthcoming Special Forum for *Modern Intellectual History* will help define this important and interdisciplinary moment in African American and American philosophical, literary, and cultural studies.

This is, in short, an eminently worthy project, and Clay has prepared himself well to realize the possibilities of his work. He approaches his work with a deep understanding of existing scholarship, a very strong understanding of nineteenth-century history, and a deeply ethical appreciation for the work of various nineteenth-century writers. His theoretical sophistication, his deep background, and the broad range of his interests and concerns indicate that he is at the beginning of a truly significant career. I am glad that we ended up on a panel together, for our brief encounter has led to some of the most engaging conversations I've had recently on African American literary history. All he needs is time for his research and writing, something hard to come by with his teaching load. I hope you will be able to support his research. I recommend it to you with great enthusiasm.

Sincerely,

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