



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at the appropriate resource page ([Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#), [Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#), or [Awards for Faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities](#)) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

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

**Institution: Prairie View A & M University**

**Project Director: Michael C. Hooper**

**Grant Program: Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

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.

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