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This paper is an assessment of George Washington Cable's 1880 novel *The Grandissimes*, its engagement with history and the logic of its racial poetics. Paying particular attention the text's black and mixed-blood characters, I argue that Cable's treatment of Southern racial conflict, specifically its relation to the legacy of slavery, is more complex and nuanced than previous criticism has allowed. In an era in which literature dealing with racial conflict and sectional reunion was becoming increasingly defined by its discarding of history in favor of the image of romantic reconciliation, Cable's *The Grandissimes* is a firm reminder that any legitimate attempt to understand postbellum racial conflict must first begin with a re-examination of the past.

My argument centers on the Bras-Coupe episode and its formal meaning as well as its significance to 19th century New Orleans. Often discussed simply as a black victim of white oppression, I argue that Bras-Coupe is better understood as a figure whose consistent denial of stable representation fractures any sense of a stable, essential "black" identity at all. As a result, this subversive Bras-Coupe becomes an historically-situated symbol of black insurrection while simultaneously standing as an ineradicable symbol to the white characters of the urgent (if not intractable) racial tensions produced by the legacy of slavery, Middle Passage, and institutional racism.

RECONSIDERING A REFORM NOVEL:
GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE
AND *THE GRANDISSIMES*

by

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RECONSIDERING A REFORM NOVEL: GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE AND *THE GRANDISSIMES*

Eight years before the 1880 publication of his *The Grandissimes*, while researching New Orleans and Creole history, George Washington Cable encountered the Code Noir, the royal French decree of 1685 which stipulated the sociopolitical status of slaves and freemen of color as well as the proper relationship between master and slave in the French colonies. It was this encounter with the writ which angered Cable and spurred him to write "Bibi," a fiercely violent short story about the rebellion, capture, and torture of a runaway slave. Denied publication due to what his editors called its "unmitigatedly distressful" effect on its readers, the story was retained by Cable and ultimately transformed into the story of the runaway slave Bras-Coupé, the story which functioned as the germ for the writing and structure of *The Grandissimes*. Cable himself testified to the centrality of the story to his novel, writing that "The Story of Bras-Coupé" is that "around which the whole larger work is built" (qtd. in Ladd 70).

While the "unmitigatedly distressful" effect of "Bibi" caused Cable's editors to deny it publication, it is precisely this aspect of *The Grandissimes*' candid, straightforward depiction and assessment of racial injustice that has led many later critics to celebrate Cable's novel. Louis D. Rubin, for example, writes that:

> In an important sense, *The Grandissimes* may be said to be the first "modern" Southern novel. For if the modern Southern novel has been characterized by its uncompromising attempt to deal honestly with the complexity of Southern racial experience, then *The Grandissimes* was the first important work of fiction written by a Southerner in which that intention is manifested...In unmistakable and uncompromising terms, he dealt with that most pervasive of all Southern social issues, the race question and the role of the Negro in society. (78)

Of course, positing Cable as a prefiguring of later Southern writers such as Faulkner risks a monolithic view of Southern literature with Cable and other white males as its authoritative voices. And recent criticism of *The Grandissimes* by Thomas Loebel and Karsten Piep has argued that the novel's portrayal of racial conflict and its calls for racial justice and equity were more self-interested and self-serving than "uncompromising." Piep, for instance, argues that Cable, writing within the Anglo-American humanist tradition, felt not only the need to reform Southern society but, more importantly, the desire to "restructure volatile race relations without endangering the hegemony of the white middle classes," the ultimate result of which would be to "reaffirm" the white humanist middle class as "both the source and the standard bearer of social progress" (166). Loebel, drawing from postcolonial and poststructural theory, argues that Cable's calls for racial equity are actually attempts to "render justice by translation" in that Cable's representations of black characters are derived from a "purely political interest in justice." The result is a reform novel which "[maintains] the 'default setting' of political homogeneity" without pushing the reader to "open the eye and ear to others' lives beyond a desire for political equality" (226).

Of course, the concept of a disinterested, ideologically neutral narrative has long been discredited by critics writing on all areas of literature, and *The Grandissimes* is certainly no exception to such criticism. In *The Grandissimes*, and throughout his many nonfiction writings on Southern race relations, Cable, a devout Protestant and committed member of the Reformed tradition, certainly had his *own* conception of how to best

resolve racial conflict, and it closely mirrored the brand of liberal reform subscribed to by many social and literary reformers writing in the postbellum era. For Nancy Cohen, the tenets of this nineteenth century liberal reform, spelled out by famous, affluent reformers such as George William Curtis and Thomas Cooley, were shaped by an insistent belief in the ability of *laissez-faire* capitalism and democracy to fully resolve the conflicts, racial, political, and social, presented by the end of slavery (62, 67, 71). The result of this firm belief in the free market was that liberal reformers "held that economic independence, gained through the ownership of real property or the possession of a skill to provide a solid competence and independence, was a precondition of true freedom...The promise of American society," Cohen concludes, "resided not in independence but in self-ownership and free contract" (29). Thus, for these liberal reformers, the institution of the free market in the South would necessarily precede and, more importantly, guarantee social and economic equality for the freedman while also upholding and redeeming the tenets of American democracy with its emphasis on self-determination and individual rights and freedoms. With the "invisible hand" of the free market established in the South, little else, it seemed, would or should be needed to right the wrongs of slavery and resolve the fractious race relations of the postbellum South.

An emphasis on contractual logic constituted an important aspect of Cable's own politics. Throughout his writings, Cable utilized the language of the free market and contract, of "debts" paid and unpaid, as a trope for assessments of racial conflict and the legacy of slavery. In "My Politics," for instance, Cable argues for the need for Southern educational reform and the culpability of both North and South for the legitimation and

perpetuation of the Southern slavocracy with a language permeated with the ideology of contractual obligation:

> I think we are confronted here with a distinctly national debt. The educational destitution in the South...is distinctly the result of gross defects in that social order inevitably accompanying the institutional establishment of African slavery. It was certainly the Nation's crime. It is not enough for the North to point to her bloody expiation in war...Expiations, however awful, are not restitutions. Expiations do not pay damages. (60)

Elsewhere, in *The Negro Question*, Cable argues that addressing racial conflict is better done when it is done in concert with economic improvement, writing that, "new material development of the South must go on....Thinking men in the South must rouse themselves to the economic and political necessity for a wider diffusion of wealth and more prosperous conditions of manual labor" (163). From these passages and others in both his nonfiction and fiction, it is clear that Cable subscribed to many of the same tenets of liberal reform popular in the North during the Reconstruction Era and that furthering those ideals constituted a fundamental part of his platform.

Yet, without dismissing Piep and Loebel's arguments, I want to challenge the critical notion that Cable conceived of *The Grandissimes* as little more than a monological exercise used to champion a "bourgeois humanist" ideology that he believed to be the cure for the social ills plaguing Southern society. I want to begin with the simple hypothesis that Cable understood that Southern racial experience, its history and its effects, were far more intricate and complex than could be addressed by a single novel. Cable himself testified to this point, writing that in *The Grandissimes* he was "still very slowly and painfully guessing out the riddle of our Southern question" (qtd. in

Rubin 78). And, with a re-examination of Cable's novel, paying particular attention to "The Story of Bras-Coupé," the story of the African Jaloff prince turned maimed, runaway slave, and its effects on the novel's characters, I argue that Cable demonstrates that any attempt to understand the "riddle" of Southern race relations necessarily entails discarding static notions of racial identity and acknowledging the more complex reality that is obscured by them. As Cable wrote later in his "My Politics," regardless of the "restitution" or debts paid to the freedman in the form of education or enfranchisement, there still exists "the just dues of a darker past still remaining, and that must ever remain, unpaid to him" (70). And to the extent that *The Grandissimes* points the reader to this "darker past," this more complex reality, I argue the text is far more dialogic and nuanced than many critics would allow.

In order to establish this valence in Cable's novel, I must first dispute the prevailing critical notion that *The Grandissimes* is organized as a *Kulturroman*, or " a novel in which the struggling forces of opposing civilizations crystalize [sic] and in which they find their enduring monument," a term first applied to Cable's text by H.H. Boyesen in 1877 (qtd. in Turner 90). Critics such as Thomas Richardson, Rubin, Piep, and others have subscribed to such a view, arguing that the primary conflict of the novel is the struggle between white American and white Creole societies over the sociopolitical future of Creole Louisiana with Cable undertaking a repetitive, monological justification of the tenets of bourgeois humanist reform. Piep gives what might be considered a general summary of this argument:

> In Cable's *The Grandissimes* the representatives of the old slavocracy are depicted as an ethically and spiritually bankrupted breed that must die out in order to allow for a renewal of America's democratic promise. Against the backdrop of the rapid transformation from a regionally defined agrarian society to a national culture characterized by industrial production and modern transportation, Frowenfeld...[comes] to personify scientific rationality and social progress. Local customs, superstitions, and prejudices...will inevitably be superseded by universal principles and enlightened rationality. (170)

Interpretations of *The Grandissimes* such as Piep's are hardly surprising. Indeed, the novel's repeated depictions of the contest between American and Creole ideals, most notably seen in the immigrant, liberal humanist Frowenfeld's myriad confrontations with the aristocratic, indolent Grandissimes, is what gives the text much of its structure and polemic content. However, viewing *The Grandissimes* as a *Kulturroman* relies on a view of the novel that sees its conflicts as unequivocally antagonistic and totalizing, a battle in which all of the text's content and characters are subsumed under the struggle between the two opposing societies, American and Creole. As a result, such assessments necessarily reduce much of the text's complexity by insisting that the text's characters and events find their significance or meaning only in relation to this fundamental antagonism. Perhaps most importantly, and to speak to the terms of this thesis, such evaluations mark an over-simplification of the text's depiction of racial conflict and its black and mixed-blood characters. For instance, Piep argues that the novel's black characters are simply "colorful supernumeraries" that are no more than "pitiable victims or passive onlookers" to the central conflict between white American and Creole societies (Piep 177-8). And Richardson conflates the violence done to the black and mixed-blood characters, finding that this collective violence, "demonstrates

that the [Grandissimes continue] not only to destroy the blacks who live among them, but themselves as well" (4). In such evaluations, the black and mixed-blood characters of the novel find their meaning solely through their victimization at the hands of the Grandissimes, that is, their significance in the text is to stand simply as the clearest evidence of Creole depravity. Although the repeated depictions of the black characters' victimization at the hands of the Grandissimes do function as one of the central indictments of Creole racist and corruptive attitudes, such evaluations are notably incomplete since they result in an elision of two distinct but related issues present in the text's racial poetics. First, as mentioned above, they result in a conflation of the black and mixed-blood characters, a move that, as we shall see, the text itself works against. Second, they do not account for why the black and mixed-blood characters and their actions precipitate such violent reactions from the Grandissimes and the text's other white characters. Both of these issues, I argue, are integral to an attempt to understand the intricate nature of the text's racial conflict, and neither can be effectively addressed if one applies a simplistic victimizer/victimized dichotomy to the text's racial poetics. But freed from the rigid and reductive lens of the *Kulturroman*, I argue the black and mixed-blood characters also clearly point to their entrapment within the racial logic of both Grandissime essentialism *and* the Northern humanist attitudes of Frowenfeld. More specifically, I argue the text repeatedly portrays the attempts of the novel's white characters to apply, through violent and persuasive means, an imagined, static racial identity onto their "black" counterparts, an undertaking the text's black and mixed-blood characters clearly see, understand, and reject. And in this disjunctive denial of stable

representation, these characters reveal the gaps and contradictions present in any ideology, humanist or otherwise, that would attempt to reduce their Otherness to its own terms. In so doing, I argue Cable rejects essentialist notions of blackness by transferring the site of racial difference from blood and ahistorical difference toward a complex of cultural origin, historical loss, and individual and collective memory which is irreducible to a transparent and totalizing "black" identity.

The Stor(ies) of Bras-Coupé

While this valence is present throughout the novel, it is "The Story of Bras-Coupé" (Bras-Coupé is French for "Arm Cut-Off"), the African Jaloff prince turned runaway slave, which epitomizes Cable's more nuanced approach to blackness. Robert O. Stephens writes that the Bras-Coupé episode "serves as the index of values central to the novel," and it is in this episode where Cable most effectively undermines essentialist and static notions of blackness and points toward a more dynamic and heterogeneous form of black identity (404). Briefly, the story, embedded in the center of the novel and set eight years prior to the events of the larger narrative, is of an African Jaloff prince taken prisoner of war by a rival African tribe and sold into slavery. After the Middle Passage, he arrives in New Orleans and is sold to Grandissime patriarch Agricola Fusilier who, in turn, sells him to Don Jose Martinez. Upon arriving at Martinez's plantation, the overseer finds that Bras-Coupé, based on his royal status, has an aversion to labor. Martinez forces Bras-Coupé to work and, in response, the slave hits the overseer with a hoe, kills a fellow slave, and injures others. Eventually, Bras-Coupé is persuaded to take

up a position as a driver if Palmyre de Philosophe, a free quadroon and member of the opposing de Grapion family, will marry him. Everyone agrees to the terms except Palmyre, who has "an entire absence of preference" for the slave, and she conspires, along with Senora Martinez, to prevent the wedding from taking place (175).

However, the wedding night comes, and Bras-Coupé appears for the ceremony "towering above all heads, in ridiculous red and blue regimentals," drinking heavily, and demanding his bride (178). Soon, Bras-Coupé senses the conspiracy to keep Palmyre away from him and becomes incensed. He becomes violent and, before jumping out the window and escaping into the swamp, casts a voodoo curse on Martinez, the plantation, and everyone on it with the exception of the women.

Bras-Coupé takes up residence in the swamp, and, meanwhile, the plantation is ruined as Martinez becomes ill, the crop dies out from a plague of worms, and the slaves cannot work, feeling that they have been bewitched. One day, the fugitive appears in Congo Square, a gathering place for slaves, drunk and dancing with his fellow Africans. He is captured, and, in accordance with the *Code Noir*, is shorn of his ears, hamstrung, and branded with the fleur de luce. The injuries are mortal. On his deathbed, he is begged to lift the curse on the plantation by Senora Martinez and acquiesces. And, just as he is about to die, he answers a priest's question about his postmortem destination by "lifting his hand" and responding, "To--Africa" (193).

The story of Bras-Coupé was not created in Cable's mind nor was its appearance in *The Grandissimes* its first. The legend of a one-armed runaway slave known as Bras-Coupé existed, in various forms, in the literature and popular imagination of both

ante- and postbellum New Orleans, and Cable's usage of the legend would have reminded Creole readers of the various incarnations of the legend. As Bryan Wagner notes, the initial appearance of Bras-Coupé came in the 1830s in a desperate attempt by the New Orleans police force to retain power and their right to deadly force in the face of rising civilian anger over perceived abuses of power and ineptitude. As European immigration to New Orleans increased in the early 19th century due to Louisiana's incorporation into the U.S., the face of the police force was rapidly changing from Creole to a mixture of German and Irish. This pattern caused friction with the local populace, and a media war, pitched in the *New Orleans Picayune*, the bilingual *Bee*, and other local papers and digests, commenced between the city government and the city's inhabitants over whether or not the police should retain their right to firearms. Into this struggle, the city government brought Bras-Coupé, the supposed "commander" of a group of runaway slaves living in the swamps on the outskirts of New Orleans. The gist of the myth generated by the city government was that without proper police protection, the fugitive slave Bras-Coupé and his gang of runaway slaves would come forth from their hideout in the swamps surrounding New Orleans to terrorize the populace, wreaking a havoc preventable only if the police hadn't been stripped of their right to deadly force. Ultimately, the scare tactic worked, the police force retained its power, and, most importantly, Bras-Coupé entered 19th century New Orleans whites' collective imagination as "the indistinct threat of black criminality" (Wagner 117-9).

What is most notable about this scenario is that the antebellum legend of Bras-Coupé functioned as a powerful symbol that allowed the city government and police

to explicitly racialize the debate over police power. The government's deployment of the legend was able to galvanize support for the police force by imagining a wholly deviant, rebellious black identity embodied by Bras-Coupé and his gang of fellow runaways and opposing it to a homogenous white identity aligned with the image of an orderly, stable state. In effect, the threat of black insurrection and violence becomes the grounds for the subjugation of disparate cultural backgrounds (Creole, German, Irish, etc.) in the name of an imagined and supposedly threatened white homogeneity.

The local government's utilization of the Bras-Coupé legend in the interests of creating and consolidating a sense of homogeneity among the white New Orleans community was by no means idiosyncratic or odd.[1] Robert O. Stephens mentions another prominent version of the Bras-Coupé legend, popular during Cable's research and writing of *The Grandissimes*, which mirrors the government's episode both in its plot and utilization by the white community. The version concerns a fugitive slave named Squire living in New Orleans in the 1850s. In this version, Squire was owned by an auctioneer, Joseph Le Carpentier, an apparently benevolent slaveowner. Eventually, Le Carpentier's financial struggles forced him to sell the docile Squire to John Freret, an owner of a New Orleans cotton press. Freret was less kind than Squire's previous owner, and this new situation led to friction between slave and master. Eventually, the two started an

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[1] These versions of the legend by no means exhaust the various interpretations and understandings of Bras-Coupé circulating in nineteenth century Louisiana. The legend also was utilized within the black community as well, often as a locus for streams of black disaffection and insurrection (a move which, as we shall see, Cable's black characters also undertake). The versions discussed above are merely those most popular among whites at the time of Cable's writing and those to which his version of the legend most clearly responds. For a further discussion of the historical context of the Bras-Coupé legend, particularly its incarnations among and significances for nineteenth century blacks, see Wagner "Disarmed and Dangerous: The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé."

argument which spilled over into physical violence, and, as the slave was lifting his arm to strike the owner, Freret shattered the slave's arm with an iron bar which led to Squire becoming known as Bras-Coupé. Knowing his fate for attempting to strike Freret, Bras-Coupé, after the amputation of his arm, fled into the swamps where he survived with the help of a Spaniard who provided him with clothes and materials to ensure his survival.

Soon, rumors began circulating of a thief robbing and raping women going to and from the market in the Gentilly Road area of the city. Reports stated that the bandit was the infamous Bras-Coupé, and a two-year manhunt commenced which finally ended after the Spaniard turned on Bras-Coupé, killing him with a blow from an iron bar and handing the body over to authorities for a $2000 bounty. The authorities took the body and put it on display on the gallows as a warning to other slaves who were encouraged by their owners to view the corpse (Stephens 392-3). The *Picayune*'s 1837 account of Squire's last days and death speaks to the gravity the fugitive's death held for New Orleans's white community:

> This demi-devil has for a long time ruled as the "Brigand of the Swamp." A supposition has always found believers that there was an encampment of outlaw negroes near the city and that Squire was their leader. He was a fiend in human shape and has done much mischief in the way of decoying slaves to his camp, and committing depredations upon the premises of those who live on the outskirts of the city. His destruction is hailed, by old and young, as a benefit to society....It is to be hoped that the death of this leader of the outlaw negroes supposed to be in the swamp will lead to the scouring of the swamp round about the city. This nest of desperadoes should be broken up. While they can support a gang and have a camp, we may expect our slaves to run away and harrowing depredations to be committed upon society.

Just as Bras-Coupé's marginalized position on the swamps outside the city allowed the local government to represent him as the ever-present specter of the black threat to the New Orleans white community, so has Bras-Coupé's death, his absence, allowed the *Picayune* reporter to re-circulate this representation and expand it, channeling the threat onto the remaining runaways believed to have been affiliated with him. While the physical threat posed by Bras-Coupé might have been erased by his death, the "indistinct threat" of black violence he epitomized lives on, and, consequently, so too does the cohesiveness of the previously fragmented white community.

This racialization in the interests of white solidarity and control is a valence which Cable attacks in "The Story of Bras-Coupé" by exposing the historical contingencies on which racial identity is based. He undertakes this critique by substantially altering the legend in a number of fundamental ways. First, he attributes Bras-Coupé with an African origin prior to his introduction and circulation within the racial dichotomy of the Grandissimes. This alteration allows Cable to present to the reader the historical fact of the violence done to Bras-Coupé upon his arrival in New Orleans as well as signify to the reader the existence of forms of identity outside of and prior to the totalizing racial logic of Creole society. An effect of this can be seen early in the episode when Bras-Coupé, after being purchased by Grandissime patriarch Agricola Fusilier, is brought to the La Renaissance plantation and asked his name:

> His name, he replied to an inquiry touching the subject, was ____ ____, something in the Jaloff tongues, which he by and by condescended to render into Congo: Mioko-Koanga, in French Bras-Coupé, the Arm Cut Off. Truly it would have been easy to admit, had this been his meaning, that his tribe, in losing him, had lost its strong right arm close off at the shoulder; not so easy for his

> high-paying purchaser to allow, if this other was his intent; that the arm which might no longer shake the spear or swing the wooden sword, was no better than a useless stump never to be lifted for aught else. But whether easy to allow or not, that was his meaning. He made himself a type of all Slavery, turning into flesh and blood the truth that all Slavery is maiming. (Cable 170-1)

"_____ ______" is the representation of Bras-Coupé's cultural origin, his African identity, which cannot be understood in the context in which Bras-Coupé finds himself. Thus, Bras-Coupé's identity undergoes a transformation as his name is translated from Jaloff to Congo to French to English, and, through the metaphor of physical dismemberment, Bras-Coupé makes explicit to the reader and the characters around him the violence done in order to effect this stable representation. However, while this metaphorical dismemberment stands as a permanent marker of historical violence, of "the truth that Slavery is maiming," it also signifies an identity that is beyond full comprehension, an identity which will always elude stability and fixity.

Wagner writes that the passage quoted above "stirs a series of improvisations on injury, value, and violence" which is ultimately "shut down by the passage's conclusion, when the phrase is deemed unambiguous: it signals Bras-Coupé's representative status as a 'type of all Slavery" (129). However, it is notable that the narrator's insistence on deeming Bras-Coupé a "figure of all Slavery" is set at the beginning of the episode and is not followed, as one might expect, by a cataloguing of Grandissime victimizations. Instead, it is followed by a narration of disjuncture and Bras-Coupéan subversion, as if Cable was not content to simply show the violence and depravity of slavery but also bent on showing the profound consequences an examination of the past would have for the stability of racial identities, both black and white. This is quite clearly shown in the

confrontation between Bras-Coupé and his owner, Don José, after Bras-Coupé attacks the black slave driver and the other slaves after being demanded to work among them. The narrator describes the scene:

> The dauntless captive and fearless master stood looking into each other's eyes until each recognized in the other his peer in physical courage, and each was struck with an admiration for the other which no after difference was sufficient entirely to destroy. Had Bras-Coupé's eye quailed but once--just for one little instant--he would have got the lash; but, as it was--
> "Get an interpreter," said Don Jose; then, more privately, "and come to an understanding. I shall require it of you." (172-3)

Here, Don José's identification with Bras-Coupé at the level of feeling, of affect, reveals the subversive power that Bras-Coupé's presence holds for the cohesiveness of white society. In Bras-Coupé's refusal to act in a recognizable manner, in not letting his "eye quail," he reveals that the Grandissime notion of racial distinctions is predicated not upon skin color but upon a set of predictable actions accorded black identity. It is precisely by not acting, by being present yet "absent" from this scene of representation, that Bras-Coupé exposes the contradictions inherent in Grandissime racial logic. By revealing this gap to the overseer, what was once a foregone conclusion of racial supremacy becomes a crisis of identity for Don José. He loses all agency in the face of Bras-Coupé's defiant, subversive presence. In effect, Bras-Coupé reduces Don José not by defining himself to any antagonistic racial identity or essence but by undermining the legitimacy of a true, racial identity or essence at all.

Seeing that Bras-Coupé retains a strong identification with his cultural origins, the Grandissimes try to stably represent him on cultural terms as well, but Bras-Coupé

subverts these attempts as well. Following the above scene, Don José approaches Agricola, asking him to translate for Bras-Coupé in order to negotiate with the "African buffalo" so that some acceptable form of slave labor can be arranged. After Bras-Coupé rejects several proposals, the overseer, "amaz[ed] to learn at length that his Highness declined the proffer honor...recalled a fact in his early experience. An African of this stripe had been found to answer admirably as a 'driver' to make others work" (174). However, Bras-Coupé rejects this attempt, repeatedly refusing the position of driver, thereby refuting the notion that he is simply an African of *any* stripe. In this rejection, Bras-Coupé reveals the contingency of Grandissime notions of cultural distinctions as well. As in the consequences that would have resulted from letting his eye "quail" in the face of Don José's glare, had Bras-Coupé made an unqualified acceptance of the position of slave driver, he would have acted in accordance with the conventions of Africanness as conceived by the Grandissimes.

These rejections set off a series of negotiations between Bras-Coupé and his white counterparts as they attempt to effect a peaceable resolution to the impasse. Martinez sends Palmyre, dressed in African garb, to speak with Bras-Coupé in his Jaloff language. The slave immediately falls in love, "the matter of strife vanished from his mind," and, after Agricola unilaterally decides to offer Bras-Coupé Palmyre's hand in marriage, and, as the narrator informs the reader, Bras-Coupé agrees to take up the position as slave driver (174). With this agreement in place, the plantation returns to a relatively peaceful state, and Bras-Coupé becomes "the most valuable man ever bought for gourde dollars" (175). However, the threat embodied in Bras-Coupé remains as "there were but three

persons within as many square miles who were not most vividly afraid of him" (175). These three are, the narrator informs us, Palmyre, Senora Martinez, and the Spaniard (i.e. the overseer), "a man whose capability to fear anything in nature or beyond had never been discovered" (177).

The marriage agreement and the fact that the women are not afraid of Bras-Coupé registers generically for Ladd, signaling that Cable "envisioned the development of the Bras-Coupé story within *The Grandissimes* in terms of the progress of his domestication" from African wild man to obedient, supercilious fiancée through the utilization of "civilizing emotion" and "moral progress," devices typical of sentimentalizing reform fiction (73). As Ladd and others have pointed out, this sentimentalizing undercuts the power of the Bras-Coupé legend to some extent. However, I argue that this generic move from insurrectionary tale to sentimentalized conversion narrative can be seen as redeemable since it critiques Grandissime (and, by extension, Creole) attempts to mark disruptive slaves, to borrow the *Picayune*'s language, as "demi-devils," lacking interiority and "feeling," eternally precipitating violence if left unchecked by white society. It also allows Cable to hold out the contingency of racial reconciliation, or at least less contentious relations, if whites acknowledged the humanity of their black and mixed-blood counterparts.

However, it is notable that the devices used to bring about this domestication, most notably marriage, are precisely what sow the seeds of the discontent and fractiousness that the rest of the novel attempts to resolve. Palmyre, enraged at being reduced to an item of exchange by the forced marriage, solemnly swears revenge upon

Agricola: "She was silent; and so, sometimes, is fire in the wall" (175). Another result is the de Grapions, incensed that one of their blood would be forced to marry a black man, spark a feud with Agricola and the Grandissimes, the resolution of which constitutes a great deal of the novel's plot. Indeed, Cable's utilization of literary domestication, and the reconciliatory agreement and marriage which are its effects, do function to show Bras-Coupé's "humanity." However, as if to present to the reader the limitations in applying such sentimentalizing literary devices to racial conflict, Cable insists on depicting how such sentimentalizing can ostensibly point the way toward racial reconciliation and equality but actually exacerbate racial conflict by producing and reinforcing the very tensions it purports to resolve.

The uneasy peace that was brought about through the marriage agreement is shattered on the wedding night. The overseer's wife refuses to bring Palmyre out for the ceremony, and Bras-Coupé, who had heretofore only "felt [the entanglements of bondage] as one feels a spider's web across the face," realizes that the arranged marriage was only an attempt to rein in the previously threatening slave. In response, he drunkenly demands his wife from the "*cotchians*" (i.e. white trash). The demand is denied, and, as a lightning storm dramatically opens upon the proceedings, the tenuously domesticated Bras-Coupé strikes Don Jose, casts a curse upon the plantation, and jumps out a window, avoiding punishment by escaping into the swamps on the outskirts of the city wherein he "declar[es] his independence" and, "taking the affair as a matter of course, casts about him for a better future" (181).[2]

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[2] Writing on place within the South, Anthony Wilson argues that the swamp operates as both a tangible

The curse works, making Bras-Coupé seem all the more of an intangible threat, and the fragile conversion narrative turns into a tale of economic and social disaster as the plantation's crops fail season after season. This new configuration of the episode, with Bras-Coupé a fugitive living in the swamps, mirrors the positioning of the maroon in both the Squire and police myths. However, Cable's Bras-Coupé cannot be reduced to such symmetry and, despite his marginalized position, the language of the plantation is permeated with the divisive influence of the fugitive slave. Despite his failed crop, Don Jose takes heart for the new planting season, arguing that "last year's disasters were but fortune's freaks," but these crops fail as well. Responding to his repeated failures, his fellow planters state "he does not understand planting, neither does his overseer. Maybe, too, it is true as [the overseer] says, that [Don Jose] is voudoued" (186). The overseer, speculating on the reasons why Don Jose's wife did not "use her power" over Bras-Coupé to tell him to lift the curse, conjectures, "I can only suppose she thought Bras-Coupé had half a right to do it" (188). In each of these instances, Don Jose becomes vulnerable, a sign to be read and interpreted by others rather than the authoritative master of a serene plantation. This newfound vulnerability extends to Agricola as well as the overseer responds to the issue of why Agricola did not get Palmyre to rein in Bras-Coupé, speculating, "Agricola Fusilier himself is afraid of her," a

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space which has resisted agriculture, ownership, and development as well as a discursive space which has "proved profoundly inimical to the project of constructing Southern identity" (xviii). In response to this subversive presence, the swamp has been a place of danger and mystery existing in the margins of the white Southern literary imagination. In *The Grandissimes*, Cable's relationship to the swamp is somewhat ambivalent, and his approach to the swamp is always mediated by the particular rhetorical strategy of a given passage. For instance, he repeatedly depicts the swamp as the dangerous, twisted counterpart to the charming, idyllic streets of New Orleans (12, 348, 355). However, he also presents living in the swamp as preferable to living within the degenerate Creole society under its pretensions toward racial and ethnic purity (181, 255, 343). For more on the place of the swamp in Reconstruction literature and Southern

judgment Agricola denies elsewhere (188).

Don Jose and Agricola respond to this vulnerability by racializing the situation through an appeal to the *Code Noir*. Just as the fugitive's absence allowed the *Picayune* and local government to racialize the scenario in the interests of producing and maintaining white control, so too does the *candio*'s absence allow Agricola and the other white characters to represent Bras-Coupé, previously an irreducible presence in their eyes, as "black" fugitive, allowing them to utilize the police force and granting a legal legitimacy to their attempts to capture and punish him. What is perhaps most revealing about this representation is that it shifts the blame from the individual Bras-Coupé, with whom Don Jose had so strongly identified in the passage above, to the wholly deviant "black demi-devil," the physically menacing runaway. Thus, Bras-Coupé is subsumed into an archetype of a destructive black fugitive, an image that has less to do with him or his actions than with white imaginations. In other words, this discursive transformation reveals nothing about Bras-Coupé but a great deal about Agricola and the white New Orleans community.

Eventually, Bras-Coupé appears at the Congo Square, partaking in the African music and dancing there. He is captured by the police and turned over to the Grandissimes who whip, hamstring, and brand him with the fleur-de-lis. However, for all of the bodily mutilations and marks that would code him as runaway slave, Bras-Coupé still rejects this racialized representation. In exchange for "lifting the Voudou curse," Bras-Coupé demands forgiveness from his master for mutilating his body

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culture, see Wilson, *Shadow and Sheeler: The Swamp in Southern Culture*, (Jackson: Up of Miss., 2006).

in accordance with the racial logic of the *Code Noir*. The master ultimately apologizes, Bras-Coupé lifts the curse, and, in a final testament to his irreducibility, he flouts the obvious Christian rhetoric of the priest's repeated question, "Do you know where you are going?" by dying with the words "To Africa" on his lips. His last words point to an *elsewhere* that is beyond the reach of Grandissime drive for complete control and subordination. In his final position, a statuesque pose with hand dramatically lifted to the sky, Bras-Coupé transforms and fixes himself as a kind of monument. By making himself monumental, Bras-Coupé memorializes, setting into "stone," the absence he represents, marking permanently his irreducibility to the minds of those who would remember him.[3]

As the words "To Africa" close "The Story of Bras-Coupé" and the narrative returns to its original timeline, the consequences of the disjunctive episode manifest themselves multiple, competing versions, memories, and understandings of Bras-Coupé, his actions, and his story. Bras-Coupé becomes, by turns, a victim, an insurrectionist, a tragic figure, a symbol of African culture, and each interpretation is informed by a particular character's perspective. As the rest of the novel unfolds, this legibility, or lack thereof, of Bras-Coupé and his story becomes the central issue upon which the novel's racial poetics turns as the novel's characters anxiously attempt to resolve present racial tension by organizing and understanding this disjunctive past.

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[3] Reading Bras-Coupé's final days and deathbed scene this way begs the question of whether or not he essentializes himself through his imaginative return to "Africa." It is difficult to definitively answer such a question given the mediated access the reader has to Bras-Coupé and the opacity of his motivations. However, it should be noted that in the episode Bras-Coupé is willing to temper his allegiance to his cultural origins through negotiation as he does when he agrees to the Christian marriage ceremony and to be subservient to Palmyre's mistress in exchange for the quadroon's hand in marriage. This process of working through and negotiating cultural differences is, of course, brought to an abrupt end by Bras-Coupé's betrayal, escape, and subsequent death.

Mixing Memories of Bras-Coupé

In each of these scenes, it is crucial to note that Cable's Bras-Coupé does not operate as a victim, simply as evidence of Creole moral and ethical depravity. Such an assessment necessarily obscures the disjuncture and destabilization that is entailed in Cable's version of the legend. In other words, the episode should not be reduced to or understood as a simple example of white-on-black violence. As we have seen, the pervasive disruption and the resultant violence done to him in "The Story of Bras-Coupé" is not a result of Bras-Coupé aligning himself with an antagonistic position within the Grandissime typology. Rather, it is the destabilization of those very racial categories formulated and applied by his white Creole counterparts which results in the chaos and violence of the episode. Understood in such a way, the story is no longer merely anecdotal racism, an instance of a virulent system of racial classification whose beginnings lie elsewhere. Instead, it becomes a traumatic historical event in which Bras-Coupé's refusal of stable representation ruptures any sense of a stable, ahistorical "black" identity.

To prove the point further, we should compare Cable's version of the Bras-Coupé legend to another more sentimentalized version, popular during Cable's research and writing of *The Grandissimes*, which configured the fugitive slave simply as victim: the famous journalist Lafcadio Hearn's Squire legend. Stephens notes that Hearn, hearing the Squire legend discussed above from local bookkeeper Alexander Dimitry, took the legend as the authoritative version of the myth and included the story in his *Essays on American Literature*. In Hearn's version, same as the earlier tale, Squire breaks his own