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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 legitimization 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 Jalloff 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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> 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 Jalloff 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).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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 voodooed" (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 Granddissimes*, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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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<sup>3</sup> 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

arm in an attack upon his master, names himself Bras-Coupé, and escapes into the swamp. However, rather than paint Bras-Coupé as a public enemy, Hearn depicts him as a sentimental victim rather than monstrous perpetrator. In his version, when Bras-Coupé's body is brought the public square at the end of the tale, citizens, heretofore fearful of the dangerous and deadly "Bras-Coupé," are shocked to discover that "when the body was carried into New Orleans...the fearsome Bras-Coupé was 'only' poor old Squire, who had fled so long ago in order to save his own life" (45).

Hearn's sentimentalized alteration of the legend emphasizes the humanity of Bras-Coupé at the expense of presenting his subversive or rebellious potential. By re-writing the legend so that white New Orleans's supposed enemy was, as it turns out, "only" a harmless runaway slave, Hearn also emphasizes that the threat embodied by Bras-Coupé, the potential for slave insurrection and discursive disjuncture, was also, in a sense, imaginary. Thus, the critique of the stability of racial identities in Cable's legend is erased in Hearn's, replaced by a sentimentality which implicitly reinscribes a simplistic white/black dichotomy through the labels of victimizer/victimized. As we have noted, Cable does utilize the conversion narrative genre in his version of the legend, bending it to serve his purposes, but it should be clear that the various effects of Cable's version cannot be reduced to Hearn's simplistic symmetry and that his version signifies in far more intricate and substantive ways.

Indeed, from the outset of the novel, Cable sets out to make it clear to the reader that he attaches a deeper and more solemn significance to his "Story of Bras-Coupé" and works to forestall any attempt to sentimentalize or trivialize the significance of the

legend. After the *bal masque* which opens the novel, the reader is obliquely introduced to the legend of Bras-Coupé through a vague allusion that shows just how embedded the legend is in the New Orleans community. As young Joseph Frowenfeld and his family travel down the Mississippi toward the city, Joseph's father is amazed by the dense darkness and silence of the swamps that surround the river, wondering aloud if one could survive in such an unforgiving environment. As the narrator informs the reader:

But he was assured that to live in those swamps was not entirely impossible to man--"if one may call a negro a man." Runaway slaves were not so rare in them as one--a lost hunter, for example might wish. His informant was a new passenger taken aboard at the fort. He spoke English.

"Yes, sir! Didn' I had to run from Bras Coupé in de haidge of de swamp be'ine de 'abitation of my cousin Honoré, one time? You can hask 'oo you like!" (A Creole always provides against incredulity)...

"Who was Bras Coupé?" the good German asked, in French.

The stranger sat upon the capstan, and...was told the story of a man who chose rather to be hunted like a wild beast among those awful labyrinths, than to be yoked and beaten like a tame one. (10)

As the reader later learns, the "informant" is the bumptious Raoul Grandissime, a naive member of the Grandissime family, and his superficial treatment of Bras-Coupé, mirrored by many of the white characters throughout the novel, is firmly counteracted by the narrator's intimation of the more significant meaning of the legend that is obscured by such simple, anecdotal references. This is a strategy Cable utilizes throughout the novel when discussing Bras-Coupé. He often presents characters with simplistic understandings of the legend only to undermine them by pointing toward the more complex reality that the story has revealed.

More importantly, the passage above also suggests the malleability of the memory

of Bras-Coupé. Just as Bras-Coupé himself eluded the Grandissime drive for control, so too does his story become a fluid symbol which resists any attempts at stable interpretation. As a result, his significance to each of the characters is contingent on how they ground this presence in their respective subjectivities rather than an objective significance reached from clear calculation of the facts and events of the story. Indeed, even the facts of the story of Bras-Coupé themselves are contested by the characters. The narrator, before relating his version of the story to the reader, states that Honoré has also told the story that day and that, "not only Honoré, but Raoul also; and not only they, but another,--Honoré, the fmc" have all told their competing versions of the story. The narrator's version "shall not exactly follow the words of any one of these" and therefore his version constitutes a fourth version. Ladd writes that the effect of these competing versions of events is that:

The narrator's voice embodies no more authority than the voices it purports to override...its function seems not to be to present anything resembling an 'authorized' version of events but to signal to the astute reader the 'constructedness' of the story....the narrator seems as interested in satirizing the claims of truth telling in fiction as in uncovering any particular truth about Bras-Coupé" (64-5).

In addition to "satirizing the claims of truth telling in fiction," the separation and sealing of Bras-Coupé within his own historical situation transforms him into a kind of cipher which, as the novel unfolds, the text's other characters cannot help but "read" and interpret through their own ideologies. This transformation has two distinct but related consequences that complicate the text's racial poetics. First, it allows Cable to use the Bras-Coupé episode as a kind of mirror which reflects, for the reader's advantage, the

characters' attempts to signify him within their various ideologies. The result is that he is able to expose the mechanisms necessary to subsume Otherness within a stable system of representation. Second, it clearly marks a separation between Bras-Coupé and the text's other black characters, an essential distinction that is elided if one focuses solely on their collective victimization. As is seen throughout the rest of the novel, far from being understood simply as another black victim, Bras-Coupé functions as a powerful symbol and an historical ground and from which these characters confront the racial and cultural supremacy of the white characters that attempt to entrap them. It is precisely around this memory of Bras-Coupé that the black and mixed-blood characters form a history of their own, one of defiance and insurrection rather than victimization. The first consequence ultimately serves to acknowledge the powerful effects that slavery and African culture have on American black identity. The second is important since it serves to reveal the gaps and contradictions inherent in Grandissime essentialism while also exposing the contradictions inherent in the liberal humanism that the text ostensibly poses as the solutions to its myriad conflicts. Both of these aspects point, in illuminating ways, toward the difficulty (if not impossibility) of resolving the complex and urgent racial tensions presented in the text and can be understood as Cable's (albeit qualified) recognition of the need for a more nuanced, dialogic understanding of race.

In the sinking Grandissime mansion, for the Grandissimes present for Raoul's version of the tale at the *fete de grandpere*, the Bras-Coupé episode is the story of a troubling yet legitimate application of racial privilege:

As we have said, the story of Bras-Coupé was told that day three times: to the Grandissime beauties once, to Frowenfeld twice. The fair Grandissimes all agreed, at the close, that it was pitiful. Specifically, that it was pitiful to have hamstrung Bras-Coupé, a man who even in his cursing had made an exception in favor of the ladies. True, they could suggest no alternative; it was undeniable that he had deserved his fate; still, it seemed a pity. (194)

Since there can be no "alternative" to the *Code Noir*, the Grandissimes must code Bras-Coupé as deservedly punished. The Grandissimes' self-congratulatory feelings of sympathy toward Bras-Coupé, much like the slave's own deathbed sympathy, reveal their fundamental humanity, an aspect of their character which is presented here as obscured by their allegiance to the family. In order to counteract these feelings, the bumptious Raoul, that "master of narrative and melody," sublates the story into a nonsensical and childish "*Chanson Creole! Une chanson des negres!*" in which he "hum[s] the objectionable phrases" (167), as well as a ghost story for the entertainment of the Grandissime children. Stripped of its violent content, Bras-Coupé's story becomes a bit of childish entertainment that is therefore able to operate within Grandissime discourse. For the Grandissimes, it is not a singular story, but, rather, its telling is grouped alongside "that song the negroes sing when they go out in the bayous at night, stealing pigs and chickens!" (168) and operates as a pedagogical tool with which to pull the family closer together.

Agricola's response is similar to the other Grandissimes, but his proximity to the Bras-Coupé story and his predilection for power make his reaction to the traumatic tale more complicated than a simple and childish sublation. In the story related by the narrator, Bras-Coupé consistently refuses Agricola's demands, revealing the contingent

nature of the authority that Agricola believes is rightfully his by virtue of his white Grandissime blood. Agricola reacts to this subversion by taking advantage of Bras-Coupé's attack of the Spanish master and subsequent escape to the swamp to code (via the *Code Noir*) Bras-Coupé's threat as a racial one in order to legitimate the removal of the *physical* threat that Bras-Coupé represents to the coherence and legitimacy of Grandissime ideology. However, the "indistinct threat" that Bras-Coupé poses, his signification of absence, of an *elsewhere* outside the authority of Grandissime ideology, remains and Agricola endlessly displaces the anxiety caused by this threat onto the mixed-blood and black characters around him. For Agricola, this displaced anxiety is focused most squarely on the quadroon Palmyre, of whom the de Grapion overseer says, "Why Palmyre has become the best *mon ture* (Plutonian medium) in the parish. Agricola Fusilier himself is afraid of her. Sir, I think sometimes Bras-Coupé is dead and his spirit has gone into Palmyre" (188). For Agricola and the other slave owning whites, Palmyre is the embodiment, the persistent, ineradicable presence, of the subversive power of Bras-Coupé. Thus, she herself becomes the personification of an absence that eludes the constant drive toward reifying and legitimating Grandissime notions of cultural and racial supremacy.

The white Honoré, the "finest flower" of Grandissime stock, who "inherited the hope" from his father that he would "right the wrongs he had not quite dared to uproot," views the story of Bras-Coupé as the primary evidence of his family's moral and ethical depravity and as a clear call to action (109). Honoré believes that Bras-Coupé's story has a correct objective interpretation and it is to see, like the narrator, that the enslaved



African, "made himself a type of all Slavery, turning into flesh and blood the truth that all Slavery is maiming" (171). For Honoré, Bras-Coupé's story teaches him that it is the Grandissime racial economy of "Black = Slave" which estranges blacks and is to blame for Creole political and social dysfunction. In this sense, Bras-Coupé's story registers in Honoré at the cognitive level rather than at the level of feeling or affect as it does for Agricola and, as we shall see, the black characters in the novel. In other words, Honoré is able to ostensibly detach himself from the trauma's affective dimension and stabilize the story in order to consciously learn from Bras-Coupé's story the depravity of the Grandissime family and Creole society at-large.

As Honoré's quotation above indicates, it is "the Neghro's death," Bras-Coupé's victimization at the hands of the white Grandissimes, rather than the chaotic objective reality revealed by Bras-Coupé's disjunctive presence, that signifies to Honoré the need for reform and transformation of Creole society. Thus, Honoré's (mis)reading of Bras-Coupé is to stipulate him simply as a black victim of white racism and to implicate Grandissime racist attitudes, rather than Bras-Coupé's destabilization of "black" identity, as the cause of the disjuncture and violence of the episode. Consequently, Honoré is able to re-inscribe a reductive black/white racial dichotomy, through the totalizing labels of victimizer/victimized, onto Creole race relations (more specifically his family's relation to his half brother, Honoré *fmc*) which allows him to conceive of restitution, payment of one party to another for past wrongs, as the correct resolution to racial conflict.

The contractual logic that governs Honoré's reforms imbues money and political

decisions with an ethical power that is able to right these familial wrongs. In some instances, Honoré's reforms do have a powerful democratizing effect that results in a more equitable society. It is his decisions to go into business with his quadroon half brother, Honoré fmc, and to give the Fausse Rivière plantation back to Aurora that ultimately end the de Grapion/Grandissime feud and point toward the contingency of peaceful relations. However, Honoré's anamorphic re-rendering of Bras-Coupé's subversiveness is such that it does not result in a destabilization of racial distinctions. He does not think outside of the conventions of a static, binary racial dichotomy, nor does he become "one of yo' new-fashioned Philadelphia '*negrophiles*'" (38). For Honoré, the Bras-Coupé story does not signal the need to question racial distinctions or to acknowledge cultural difference or black heritage within the public sphere and sociopolitical structures of Creole society.

From Honoré (and the other Grandissimes') point of view, this is certainly a profitable way to look at the resolution to the racial conflict, since it means that white actions and attitudes, and not the actions of their black and mixed-blood counterparts, is what will determine proper restitution and guarantee the future of Creole race relations as either fractious or peaceful. However, Honoré himself recognizes this inherent contradiction in his reforms. Upon going into business with his quadroon half-brother, Honoré fmc, Honoré notes the inequality of his "restitution":

He had forgotten the unchampioned rights of his passive half-brother...the oft-encountered apparition of the dark sharer of his name had become a slow-stepping, silent embodiment of reproach. The turn of events had brought him face to face with the problem of restitution, and he had solved it. But where had he come out? He had come out the beneficiary of this restitution, extricated

from bankruptcy by an agreement which gave the fmc only a public recognition of kinship which had always been his due. Bitter cup of humiliation!

Honoré is aware that the "restitution" he pays to Honoré fmc, essentially a "color-blind" public acknowledgement of their kinship by naming their new combined business *Grandissime Freres*, has actually profited him far more. In the context of settling the fractious relations with Honoré fmc, Honoré sees that his gesture is utterly meaningless since it merely acknowledges the kinship between the two without acknowledging or addressing the fact of his brother's race-based humiliation. In this sense, Honoré's contractual logic cannot effectively answer the call for justice presented by Honoré fmc, the "dark" "silent embodiment of reproach." Honoré only views Honoré fmc, like Bras-Coupé, as a victim of Grandissime racial transgression due "restitution" rather than a subject whose own identity was partially constituted by the institutional racism and inequalities of the past. It is notable that, with the "problem of restitution" "solved" through the public sphere, this still-unresolved aspect of racial conflict takes on an affective dimension for Honoré. Significantly, Honoré fmc, much like Bras-Coupé does to Agricola, is felt as a dark and silent specter present beyond the limits of Honoré's humanist ideology.

In a sense, what one sees in the passage above is a textual reiteration of Cable's quote noted earlier, that there exists in American race relations "the just dues of a darker past still remaining, and that must ever remain, unpaid" to blacks. The failure of Honoré's contractual logic and humanist ideology lies precisely in its inability to acknowledge this "darker past." More specifically, its attempt to resolve race's historical

and contemporary significance through socioeconomic "restitution" does not allow for a dialogic approach to racial identity that acknowledges the centrality of racial experience to Honoré fmc and the other black characters. Thus, while his interpretation of the Bras-Coupé episode has changed his approach to race relations, his attempt to negotiate racial tensions by effacing racial identity as a category of difference utterly fails since it does not collapse the distance between his conception of the effects of slavery and racial conflict and those of his black and mixed-blood counterparts.

Honoré fmc presents a similar stumbling block to Frowenfeld, the outspoken apothecary advocate. While the scope of Honoré's reforms is limited by his focus on familial obligation, Frowenfeld is not fettered by such restrictions. His political sphere of action takes up all of Creole society, and his emphasis is on the need for social change and reform on a larger scale than Honoré's emphasis on familial reconciliations. As with Honoré, the story of Bras-Coupé is fundamental to Frowenfeld's understanding of Creole society, and, like Honoré, the Bras-Coupé episode reveals to the apothecary the extent of Grandissime immorality more than it stands as a call for a more nuanced approach to racial and cultural difference. Thus, when Frowenfeld approaches Honoré fmc, exhorting him to "why do you not give yourself--your time--wealth--attainments--energies--everything--to the cause of the down-trodden race with which this community's scorn unjustly compels you to rank yourself" he is, in effect, not just advocating sociopolitical action, but also attempting to persuade the quadroon to submit to the stable racial terms of his ideology (195). In this sense, Frowenfeld makes explicit a connection between the Creole society's typology and his own and shows that his exhorting of the

Honoré fmc to racial advocacy is just as "unjust" as the Grandissimes' imposition of their own conception of black identity. Honoré fmc responds to the overture, "Ah cannot be one Toussaint l'Ouverture. Ah cannot trah to be. Hiv I trah, I h-only s'all soogceed to be one Bras-Coupé" (196). Piep reads Honoré fmc's response as evidence of Cable deploying a "stereotypical rendition" of the quadroon which "forestalls from the outset any hope for black self-emancipation" (180).<sup>4</sup> However, if one sees Frowenfeld's call to advocacy as an attempt to subsume Honoré fmc within his stable system of representation, to force Honoré fmc under a transparent category of "black," then Honoré fmc's reference to Bras-Coupé is more accurately seen as an identification with the enslaved prince. In other words, in referencing Bras-Coupé in his rejection, the quadroon recognizes the connection between the apothecary's abstracted conception of race and the Grandissime essentialist ideology that resulted in the rebellion and death of Bras-Coupé. In Honoré fmc's logic, they are related insofar as submission to the terms of either ideology necessarily results in a loss of identity, if not life. Honoré fmc's rejection of his overture frustrates Frowenfeld, striking him as little more than an "unmanly" playing of the victim card, a result of Honoré fmc's view that "He 'ave no Cause. Dad peop' 'ave no Cause" since, as the narrator purports, "their cause--was in

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<sup>4</sup> As a textual matter, Piep's criticism is incorrect as Honoré fmc certainly proves himself capable of "self-emancipation." We should note that it is Honoré fmc who approaches the white Honoré about the *Grandissimes Freres* business venture, a proposition which, in the logic of the text, is presented as an effective means for moving toward racial reconciliation:

And then the darker Honoré made a proposition to the other, which, it is little to say, was startling. They discussed it for hours...What could the proposition be which involved so grave an issue, and to which M. Grandissime's final answer was "I will do it"?

It was that Honoré fmc should become a member of the mercantile house of H. Grandissime, enlisting in its capital all his wealth. And the one condition was that the new style should be *Grandissime Brothers*. (Cable 268)

Africa. They upheld it there--they lost it there--and to those that are here the struggle was over; they were, one and all, prisoners of war" (195).

It is notable that, whatever the claims that the narrator makes here to "understand" the black mind, the text presents Honoré fmc's attachment to African cultural origins, the "Cause," as *not* the sole factor explaining Honoré fmc's refusal of Frowenfeld's brand of advocacy. It is also the historical *loss* of those origins through the institution of the slave trade that, according to the narrator, also motivates the fmc's refusal. Thus, black attachment to Africa cannot be isolated from the *fact* of their historical loss of the "Cause." In other words, it is not on culturally essentialist or scientific racist grounds that Cable grounds the rationale for blacks' attachment to Africa (a popular interpretation for many reformers at the time), but on the grounds of history that Cable finds his explanation. Once again, Cable insists that any attempt to understand black attachment to African cultural origins, indeed, American black identity at all, is necessarily mitigated by the historical fact of slavery and the Middle Passage.

The rhetoric of failure that Honoré fmc invokes when referencing Bras-Coupé shows that he is aware of the punitive consequences that would result from such an advocacy: namely, the breakdown of the social structures that afford him his wealth and power and the necessity of confronting the impossibility of recovering the "Cause" left in Africa. However, despite this connotation, Bras-Coupé still stands a powerful symbol which the Honoré fmc invokes as a response to his white counterparts' attempts to impose a stable racial dichotomy that seeks control and assimilation. Bras-Coupé is such a powerful symbol precisely because he points to the possibility of an existence, of an

identity, that is irreducible to any framework of stable representation that would limit Otherness through the imposition of totalizing racial categories. In the case of Honoré fmc, Bras-Coupé functions as a symbol of the lost "Cause," and the Honoré fmc's identification with him is his fantasy at the possibility of recovering the cultural identity to which Bras-Coupé, with his final words, "To--Africa," imaginately returns.

The quadroon Palmyre is attracted to Bras-Coupé for similar reasons. After he repeatedly refuses to accept the position as slave driver, she "[glories] in him," not just because he rejects the Grandissimes repeated attempts to code him as slave but because, through his steadfast adherence to "African international law," he retains an identity that is outside of any racial classification. Later, she fantasizes about being him as she "rejoiced in his stature; she revelled in the contemplation of his untamable spirit; he seemed to her the gigantic embodiment of her own dark, fierce will, the expanded realization of her lifetime longing for terrible strength" (175). Again, it is the side of Bras-Coupé that cannot be stably contained, his "terrible strength" and "untamable spirit," and not just his victimization, in which Palmyre "revels" in and imagines possessing.

Clemence makes the most explicit identification with Bras-Coupé. Many critics have celebrated Cable's *marchande de calas* for her subtlety and wit, and her characterization is as complex as any in the novel. Throughout the novel, she engages with the white characters around her, speaking with them in a satirical manner that plays on white expectations only to ultimately flout them. To Dr. Charlie Keene, a Creolized American who tells her that slaves are "the happiest people under the sun," she responds that "Dey wants us to b'lieb we happy--dey *wants to b'lieb* we is. W'y, you know, dey

'bleeged to b'lieb it--fo' dey own cyumfut" (Cable 250-1). It is Clemence who makes the most explicit connection to Bras-Coupé. After his death, she molds a severed arm out of myrtle-wax, literally a Bras-Coupé, and carries it with her in a small wooden coffin to the Grandissime mansion after she is sent there by Palmyre to kill Agricola. She is captured, caught in a steel trap, by Jean-Baptiste, a Grandissime of the traditional "Agricolan variety," and other Grandissimes who see her bras-coupé, which ultimately spurs them to torture her, release her, and then shoot and kill her as she tries to run away. As with the other characters, Clemence's bras-coupé, a miniaturized Bras-Coupé, is the embodiment of an Other existence that cannot be expressed within a simple black/white taxonomy. African culture, voodoo religion, and slave insurrection are all contained and hidden within the molded bras-coupé. Upon finding it, Jean-Baptiste immediately begins to torture and lynch Clemence, and she bursts out in a variety of languages and dialects, struggling to express her desperation through any language at all, "*Mo te pas fe cette bras*, Mawse Chillie--I didn't mek dat ahm...I ain't wuth hangin' gen'lemen; you'd oughteth jis' gimme fawty an' lemme go...I'm a po' ole *marchande des calas*; mo courri 'mong de sojer boys to sell my cakes..." (321-2). No longer contained in her bras-coupé, Clemence's Otherness is revealed and she wildly flips from language to language, code to code, trying to "non-Other" herself by assuming a series of poses that she hopes Jean-Baptiste will recognize. She moves from Creole French ("*Mo te pas fe cette bras*") to obsequious slave ("jis' gimme fawty an' lemme go") to stable cog in Creole society ("I'm a po' ole *marchande des calas*; mo courri 'mong de sojer boys to sell my cakes"). It is worth noting that Cable depicts Clemence as *assuming* these different identities



(322-3). Despite the violent nature of the scene, she is still playing with Grandissime discourse, calling all of these different identities into being in order to hide an Otherness that, once ripped from its containment in the bras-coupé, cannot be safely displayed in front of the Grandissimes. After failing to secure recognition, the Grandissimes tell her to run and lie to her, telling her they will not shoot her. The description of her death is telling:

"Run, Clemence! ha, ha, ha!" It was so funny to see her scuttling and tripping and stumbling. "*Courri! courri, Clemence! c'est pou' to vie!* ha, ha, ha-"

A pistol-shot rang out close behind Raoul's ear; it was never told who fired it. The negress leaped into the air and fell at full length to the ground, stone dead. (323)

The cacophonous admixture of French, laughter, and narrative voice are all condensed in the passage and brought to an end with the words, "stone dead," a description which subtly mirrors the description of Bras-Coupé's own stone-like pose upon his death. And like Bras-Coupé, Clemence's death transforms her into a silent monument, a symbol of an *elsewhere* that eludes the white characters' drive for control.

What I want to emphasize here is that each of these characters identify with Bras-Coupé not just as a result of their collective victimization but, more importantly, they identify with him, each in his or her own distinct way, on cultural terms. For these characters, the memory of Bras-Coupé always contains a rhetoric of possibility. That is, they imagine him as a release or conduit through which they can express the various aspects of their identity that cannot be articulated through the essentialist Grandissime or abstracted Honoré/Frowenfeld racialized ideologies. The memory of Bras-Coupé

always arises for these characters when there are attempts to subordinate them racially. In a sense then, Cable, quite radically, historicizes and narrates black insurrection and resistance and attributes to the black and mixed-blood characters a specifically *black* subjectivity that informs their actions and is constituted by a collective traumatic experience rather than the result of essentialist racial distinctions whose origins lie outside of history. Just as the names "Bras-Coupé" and "Honoré fmc" display the foundational aspect that institutional racism and slavery played in the formation of those characters' identities, Cable insists on exhibiting to the reader the centrality of the legacy of slavery and racism both to black identity and racial conflict in America.

This is the fundamentally radical aspect of *The Grandissimes*. Cable transfers the site of racial difference from blood to a complex matrix of social behavior, cultural origins, and historical loss. In the process, he negates essentialist notions of black identity as a static category while simultaneously reinscribing it as a dynamic, moving target of irreducible difference that was *brought into being* by the Middle Passage and slavery. As such, for Cable, black identity is the result of a narratable, historical loss, the loss of the "Cause" in Africa, an understanding that works to legitimate a far more intricate and heterogeneous conception of what constitutes "blackness" and black resistance to the liberal humanism which the text ostensibly poses as the solution to its racial conflict while explicitly blaming Creole notions of white supremacy and the institution of slavery for the "shadow of the Ethiopian" that they feel "plagues" their society (197).

### **The Romance and Reviews of *The Grandissimes***

Cable's understanding of racial identity flows from his acknowledgement of the profound effects that the legacy of slavery and institutional racism had on blacks as well as whites. Indeed, in *The Grandissimes*, how characters define and understand questions of racial identity, conflict, and black resistance often turn on precisely the issue of how they read and interpret the past and its effects on the present. Yet, despite this more nuanced approach, Cable ultimately erases this historicized model of racial identity and black resistance through the removal of the black and mixed-blood characters from the novel. The novel's movement toward its romanticized ending, with its marrying of the white Honoré and Frowenfeld to the white heroines Aurore and Clotilde, contains the murder of Clemence which indirectly results in the exile of Palmyre and Honoré fmc to France as well. By the close of the novel, the white characters are literally the only ones left, and New Orleans has moved from fractious, violent metropolitan center "plagued" by its history to a lily-white, idyllic city rejoicing in the brightness of its future.

The ending of the novel displaces the polysemous image of "black" identity that the text has presented to the reader, yet, it is also worth noting that Cable embedded the erasures of the black and mixed-blood characters in such a way that casts a shadow over their removals. As we have seen, the erasure of Clemence, and the removal of the symbol of insurrection and disjuncture that is her carved bras-Coupé, comes in the form of a hanging and shooting. Cable casts a shadow over the exile of Honoré fmc and Palmyre as well. Upon his arrival in France, Honoré fmc fails to win Palmyre's affection. Hopelessly depressed, he drowns himself. Palmyre takes up residence and

lives off the remittances due her through Honoré's will which the narrator ironically tabulates for the reader:

The rents of No. 19 rue Bienville and of numerous other places, including the new drug-store in the rue Royale, were collected regularly by H. Grandissime, successor to Grandissime Freres. Rumor said, and tradition repeats, that neither for the advancement of a friendless people, nor even for the repair of the properties' wear and tear, did one dollar of it ever remain in New Orleans; but that once a year Honoré, "as instructed," remitted to Madame--say Madame Inconnue--of Bordeaux, the equivalent, in francs, of fifty thousand dollars. It is averred he did this without interruption for twenty years. "Let us see: fifty times twenty--one million dollars. But that is only a *part* of the *pecuniary* loss which this sort of thing costs Louisiana."

But we have wandered. (Cable 331)

In this passage as well as with Clemence's murder, the legitimacy of the removal of the black and mixed-blood characters from the novel is called into question. Also, Charles Swann has noted that Honoré's suicide actually occurs after the double marriage. "In other words, the last experiences are those of two people of color. Honoré's suicide comes historically after Aurora and Honoré have healed the [Grandissime/de Grapion] feud and denied the authority of the past...by appealing to romantic love. So we read the white Honoré's and Aurore's embrace, knowing that the future contains the other Honoré's suicide" (273). Thus, while the romanticized ending provides closure, the fates of Honoré and Palmyre are embedded in such a way as to cast a shadow over the sense of wholeness the ending is ostensibly supposed to provide.

Objections to *The Grandissimes's* romanticism might be further answered by simply noting the constraints placed on Cable by the postbellum literary marketplace. Indeed, Cable's decision to counterbalance the political message of *The Grandissimes*

with elements of romance shows what type of stories, especially those dealing with issues of Reconstruction and reconciliation, were popular during the postbellum period. In *Race and Reunion*, David W. Blight writes that white postbellum audiences from both North and South, exhausted by the social upheaval and domestic turmoil of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, were ready for an escape into an idealized past and to subscribe to the idea of an easy postbellum reunion (211-220). As a result, a "literary calculus was at work" in much postbellum literature that attempted to satisfy these tastes by discarding the legacies of slavery and Reconstruction and holding out the promise of white sectional reunion (221). A product of this literature of reunion was the image of an Old South full of the plantation mythos and peaceful and orderly race relations, a South worthy of honor and remembrance in the collective heart and mind of the nation as it worked toward sectional reunion. Works such as Thomas Nelson Page's 1887 *In Ole Virginia* and Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* tales became touchstones for this project of romantic reconciliation, and the popularity of works such as Page's positioned the genre of romance at the center of postbellum reunion literature (222). Thus, for many authors writing in the late 19th century, to be successful in the literary marketplace, to be read and heard, meant being successful at the romance genre.

This is by no means to say that Cable subscribed to the plantation myth or condoned the white-washed Old South history that characterized the works of Page, Harris, and, later, Thomas Dixon. However, he was very similar to these writers in recognizing the value of romance and other popular genres in facilitating the proliferation of his own ideological stance into public discourse. And a desire to stir up public debate

was one of Cable's fundamental, lifelong goals. From his early days as a fledgling columnist writing for the *Picayune* and other New Orleans newspapers and journals, Cable always felt a desire to be heard and understood. In 1884-1885, he created and headlined the "Twins of Genius" tour with his good friend Mark Twain. Besides his fiction, he also frequently wrote essays and made speeches on the race issue, speaking to both Northern and Southern audiences on what he viewed as the "distinctly national debt" owed to the freedman, culminating in his 1884 "The Freedman's Case in Equity." After leaving New Orleans for Massachusetts in 1885, a move partially brought about by Southern controversy over his views on race, he became an expatriate Southern critic, writing pamphlets and speeches commenting on Southern dilemmas from afar. Born out of his reformist bent, this lifelong desire for an audience might help in explaining why, in *The Grandissimes*, Cable's political statements are often counteracted by the aesthetic of romanticism which governed a great deal of its writing and editing.<sup>5</sup>

This romantic aspect of the novel, its creation of an exotic, fantastic New Orleans and deployment of a sentimentalized marriage plot, certainly played a large part in the novel's popularity and guaranteed it a wide readership. For instance, *The New York Times's* review of the novel called it a "simply wonderful romance--the work of an undoubted genius," "one of the notable romances of 1880," and that the "artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Cable's battles with his editors, Richard Watson Gilder and Robert Underwood Johnson, over what would be left in and out of the final draft of *The Grandissimes* have been widely discussed. In the majority of cases, Gilder and Johnson criticized Cable for his propensity to "leave the novel and go pamphleteering" and fill his novels with politically charged asides and passages that detracted from the main romantic plot (Turner 98). In some cases, Cable relented and allowed the erasure of several passages dealing with the legacies of slavery and institutional racism; while in others, such as Clemence's statements on slavery and race, Cable demanded they remain in the novel. For a fuller discussion, see Ladd *Nationalism* (37-85) and Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable: A Biography*.

temperament that Mr. Cable possesses, which makes him present the most luxurious landscapes of Louisiana, seems to be combined with a dramatic form which has great intensity." Lafcadio Hearn also testified to the success of the novel's romanticism, writing that Cable has "dressed up local scenes and incidents in the attractive garb of imaginative fiction...and weaving strange stories as charmingly real as they are romantically ideal" (qtd. in Turner 104). From such laudatory reviews, it is clear that Cable's utilization of romance ensured *The Grandissimes's* critical and popular success, guaranteeing the struggling writer a more secure living and the reformer an audience to hear his views on the South and race.

However, such reviews hardly tell the whole story. They are firmly counteracted by other reviews which acknowledged the novel's more problematic and complex racial poetics, making it clear that while the novel's ending erased the disjunctive black and mixed-blood characters from its narrative, it did not erase them from the minds of its readers. For instance, E.C. Stedman wrote that the Bras-Coupé episode was "the biggest thing of its kind in American literature" (99). In a review in the *Nation*, W.C. Brownell, mirroring the distress of Cable's editors after reading the draft of "Bibi," wrote that the Bras-Coupé episode was too violent to be considered acceptable and that it argued "in behalf of a cause already won" (100). A review published in the *Atlantic* thought the Bras-Coupé episode to be integral to the novel, championed Cable for his "profound sense of the larger laws of history," and commented on Cable's ability to locate the postbellum debate over race within the context of the history of slavery and institutional racism (Turner 100). It is clear from such assessments that, while for many readers *The*

*Grandissimes* was a "simply wonderful romance," the novel contained within it more complex, disturbing valences that challenged readers' attempts at an easy generic categorization.

Ultimately, we might say that *The Grandissimes* is caught in its own investment as a political statement, entrapped within the limits of its approach to bringing about a change in the perspective of whites toward racial conflict. The entrapment flows from Cable's insistence on the historical record. Throughout *The Grandissimes* and his nonfiction writing, Cable always emphasized the debt that the white Southerner owed to history. In his famous tract on racial conflict and political equality, "The Freedman's Case in Equity," Cable, in response to the pervasive "conservative" and "unyielding attitude" of many Southerners toward the recognition of black rights and citizenship, called for the need to:

Go back to the roots of things and study closely, analytically, the origin, the present foundation, the rationality, the rightness, of those sentiments surviving in us which prompt an attitude qualifying in any way peculiarly the black man's liberty among us. Such a treatment will be less abundant in incident, less picturesque; but it will be more thorough. (Cable 6)

Here, as throughout much of *The Grandissimes*, Cable figures history as a locus of value, and a re-examination of it can both explain and, as both the novel and the above passage intimate, resolve present and future conflicts. This conception of history-as-corrective is certainly one aspect of Cable's Bras-Coupé legend. With its blunt and straightforward depiction of Creole depravity and violence, the tale certainly serves to correct the white Honoré's belief in the righteousness of his family and Creole society's beliefs. Yet, as I



have demonstrated, *The Grandissimes* also presents to the reader, through its nuanced approach to racial identity, an understanding that this historicizing will necessarily reveal a fundamental disjuncture, created by the slave trade and institutional racism, which forms a foundation of American racial identity and conflict. Cable, like Frowenfeld in his confrontation with Honoré fmc, seems at once to insist on the recognition of the historical record and legacy of slavery and racism while also being inevitably frustrated by the intractable issues that this recognition necessarily entails. In the final analysis, the romanticized ending and the removal of the disjunctive black characters might not be so much *solutions* to the text's conflicts but simply as much as means to *avoid* resolution of the issues, issues of racial and cultural difference, that the text has depicted and traced to the historical events of slavery and institutional racism. In a sense, then, we might ultimately say that *The Grandissimes* is an exercise in self-exposure: it is a record of its own limitations.

The interpretations of *The Grandissimes* quoted at the beginning of this essay read the novel's racial poetics through the terms of stable dichotomies: black/white and victimizer/victimized. We hope it should be clear now that such readings are often inadequate because they suppress precisely what Cable attempted to expose: the need for more complex, nuanced understandings of racial identity and conflict. In conclusion, I want to return to Richardson's quote that the significance of the traumatic story of Bras-Coupé and the violence done to him "demonstrates that the [Grandissimes continue] not only to destroy the blacks who live among them, but themselves as well". Bras-Coupé is not mutilated and killed by the Grandissimes because he is black but rather

because he reveals to them the contingent nature of the white cultural supremacy in which they so strongly believe. In this sense, Bras-Coupé should not be understood as a black character. Rather, he is a *presence* which entails an absence which forces not only the Grandissimes but the reader himself to question the integrity of the category “black” as it is conceived by the Grandissimes, Honoré, and Frowenfeld in the novel and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Creole society at whom Cable’s novel directs its critique. But while destabilizing Grandissime essentialist conceptions of “blackness,” Bras-Coupé and his story, seemingly paradoxically, produce a new and far more dynamic and heterogeneous form of “blackness,” one based on a collective, historical experience and memory that is organized around Bras-Coupé, his Middle Passage, African origins, and his steadfast refusal to submit to the terms designated for him by any white ideology, humanist or otherwise. In this sense, the novel can be justly celebrated for its dialogic, nuanced approach toward race that persistently denies its reader a simplistic understanding of race and history while also denying them the idea or image of an easy racial reconciliation.

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