

The Mulatto in *The Grandissimes*: Category Crisis and Crisis of Category

In spite of its focus on race and the current interest in "political criticism," George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) has only recently begun to receive the critical attention it deserves.¹ Indeed, the political nature of Cable's novel may have been responsible for the relative paucity of criticism. Several years after writing *The Grandissimes* Cable declared in "My Politics" that he meant his novel "as plain a protest against the times in which it was written as against the earlier times in which its scenes were set" (14), and as a result in its own time, the novel – along with its author – was reviled or praised, depending on whether or not the reader shared Cable's liberal views on race. In our time the novel has also been viewed as a way of packaging Cable's message on race; Louis Rubin, for example, posits an author who is "on the one hand, an artist," and "on the other hand, a social critic." The two, he asserts, do not come together (207). For this reason much criticism on Cable pulls out "set pieces" on race or politics as evidence of the author's political views, an understandable practice given the sheer number of such passages. However, the focus on political set pieces does a disservice to *The Grandissimes* which, like the time and place of both its setting and its composition, is full of complexity and contradictions, full of precisely the "atmosphere of hints, allusions, faint unspoken admissions, ill-concealed antipathies, unfinished speeches, mistaken identities and whisperings of hidden strife" (95) that Cable attributes to New Orleans. It is this complex gumbo of implication and contradiction that makes the novel more than the sum of its political pronouncements. Cable's novel is pivotal in the literature of race relations because, like other great works such as Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, its explicit political courage is complicated by an ambivalence about the border cross-

ings it presents. These border crossings begin with the novel's opening scene of cross-dressing and are developed both in the figure of the mixed-race mulatto and through a series of doubles that cross both racial and gender boundaries.

To understand the significance of this complex "atmosphere" we must begin where the novel begins: at a Creole masked ball "in the city we now call New Orleans" and "in the year 1803" (1). By situating the action in the year Louisiana was ceded to the United States Cable signals that his theme is change, both voluntary and imposed: the revelers at the masked ball are dressed as their ancestors, which suggests at once pride in the past and, perhaps, the inability or unwillingness to go beyond it. What is most striking about this scene, however, is that many revelers are cross-dressed. Thus one character exhorts another: "get into the garb of your true sex, sir, h-and I will guess who you are!" And another, to the question of "why, then, does he not walk with her?" answers, "Why, because, Simplicity, both of them are men, while the little Monk on his arm is a lady, as you can see, and so is the masque that has the arm of the Indian Queen: look at their little hands" (2-3). *The Grandissimes* begins with a scene – and at a site – of what Marjorie Garber calls a "category crisis": "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16). This opening may appear out of place in a work that is not primarily concerned with gender issues.² But as Garber notes,

the apparently spontaneous or unexpected or supplemental presence of a transvestite figure in a text . . . that does not seem thematically to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender indicates a category crisis elsewhere, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity. (16-17)

In American literature the "category crisis elsewhere" is frequently that of race: thus Myra Jehlen boldly argues that Huck's cross-dressing in the Judith Loftus episode of *Huckleberry Finn* raises the unmentioned question of racial definition and prepares Huck emotionally to bridge the gap between white and black. In *The Grandissimes* the central figure and representative of the category crisis is not a runaway slave but the free mulat-

to, and as the titles of two books on the subject remind us, the mulatto is "neither white nor black" (Berzon, Sollors).³ The mulatto is, then, what Garber calls the "third term" that is "not a term . . . [but] a way of describing a place of possibility" that "offers a challenge to easy modes of binarity" (10-11). To replace Garber's terms of gender difference with the novel's terms of racial difference: "[the mulatto is] the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of [black] and [white], but the crisis of category itself" (17).

Our thesis, then, is that the presentation of race in *The Grandissimes*, and, in particular, the presentation of the mulatto characters who serve both to link and to separate black and white, provoke a category crisis. As a result the novel is pulled in two conflicting directions: on the one hand, Cable seems to want to challenge the racial attitudes of his day; on the other hand, he is also interested in an organized society, which includes maintaining clear categories, like black and white. The cross-dressing with which the novel opens is significant, therefore, because its very indirection – the substitution of one epistemological crux for another – suggests the intense ambivalence that undergirds the novel's attitude toward the category confusion embodied in the mulatto characters.

Cable's status as a politically liberal novelist has caused critics to neglect his ambivalence toward race. The assumption that Cable's liberal racial politics somehow infuse his literary practice can even be found in criticism taking sophisticated historical perspectives. For example, Gavin Jones has recently argued for "Cable's revolutionary manipulation of the black vernacular" in *The Grandissimes*. According to Jones, Cable undermines "white-Creole claims to cultural separateness and purity" by having these Creoles employ African-Creole language and lyrics (252). In short, Cable developed a "revolutionary literary style that employed 'mongrel dialects' . . . to frustrate the racial fictions upon which white society depended" (262). Although Jones hints at some level of ambivalence in Cable's attitudes toward race, in effect he sees Cable employing a white version of African-American "signifying" to undermine white supremacist notions in order to promote a program of racial tolerance. That African-Creole lyrics are an unsettling and subversive presence in the novel is

indisputable: what is less clear is how this subversion is contextualized. As Jones remarks, African-Creole dialect

is established as the language of cultural hybridity during the *bal masque* at the beginning of the novel, when Agricola Fusilier, the fierce defender of French-Creole superiority, is confronted by the masked representation of his ancestral mixed blood (namely, his great-grandmother, an "Indian Queen"), who appropriately addresses him in the "familiarity" of the "slave dialect." (249)

But recall that the *bal masque* is characterized most strikingly by transgressions of another kind: the cross-dressed revelers, as we have noted, indicate a destabilization of comfortable binarity in race relations, a sort of crisis of categories in general. In other words, cross-dressing mirrors the hybridity of culture/dialect and discomfits Cable for similar reasons.

Cable's ambivalence concerning the subversive potential of his novel – and of the mulatto figure in particular – has not gone entirely unremarked. In her recent study of nationalism and the color line, Barbara Ladd remarks "if [Cable, Twain, and Faulkner] sometimes embraced the improvisational or the expedient or the subversive as liberating, they sometimes feared it and sought the kind of wholeness and autonomy promised by nationalist ideology" (xviii). This subversion of the subversive is most immediately apparent in Cable's exploration of category violation in the many sets of doubles in *The Grandissimes*. Indeed, though Cable's use of doubles in *The Grandissimes* has been much commented on, the presence of these figures as indicators of an interest in binary systems has not been explored (Ringe, Egan, Bryan 27). At the center of various mysteries are the two Honoré Grandissimes, half-brothers: the elder, the quadroon son of Numa Grandissime and a woman of color (though it is not clear if she is a slave or a free person of color, probably the latter since there is no mention of the son being freed); the younger, the white son of Numa and his wife, the sister of Agricola. (To underscore the theme of doubling, the white Honoré has a twin sister.) This pair of Honorés is matched by another quadroon/white pair – Aurora de Grapion Nancanou and her childhood companion/almost sister/also slave Palmyre (who, we learn, "shares the blood of the de Gra-

pions" [176], though we don't know how; it is possible to assume that Palmyre is the half-sister of Aurora). But the doubling proliferates and becomes hard to keep track of, as every character finds multiple doubles. Aurora, for instance, is sometimes taken as the sister of her daughter Clotilde. The fiery racist Agricola Fusilier is both the opposite of the enslaved African prince Bras-Coupé and his double (in their stubbornness and refusal to change); Palmyre, the female quadroon, is matched by the male quadroon Honoré. And there are many other doubles besides.

One explanation for the emphasis on doubles is suggested by the political context of Cable's literary undertaking. In antislavery narratives and the post-bellum literature of race, doubling was most often designed to show the absurdity of racial classification since characters who look white are considered black. This was often the function of the "tragic mulatto," a staple in abolitionist literature; Cable found a similar use for the tragic mulatto in works such as "'Tite Poulette" and "Madame Delphine," which center on quadroon mothers who secure white husbands for their daughters only by repudiating their maternal connections. And indeed, one recent critic asserts that such questioning of racial categories is precisely Cable's message in *The Grandissimes* (Clemon 66). We will argue in contrast that in Cable's presentation of the mulatto and of mulatto/white doublings, there is not only a category crisis (whereby our habitual categories do not work), but a crisis of category (where the act of categorization itself is called into question). As much as *The Grandissimes* was meant to "protest against the times in which it was written," as much as it challenged prevailing systems of caste and race, the novel nevertheless moves to reestablish the validity of category – to recover from the crisis of category provoked by its mulatto characters. And the reestablishment of category is finally reinforced by the fate of the mulattoes in *The Grandissimes*.

As one might expect, *The Grandissimes* does suggest the absurdity of our racial categories, mostly through Agricola Fusilier (the uncle of the white Honoré Grandissime) and Honoré Grandissime f.m.c. (free man of color), enemies throughout the novel. They are linked because both are of mixed blood, though their culture classifies this admixture very differently. Agricola, who proudly dresses as his Indian ancestor at the masked ball that opens the novel, is classed as white: "And now, since this was his most

boasted ancestor – since it appears the darkness of her cheek had no effect to make him less white” (18), while the mulatto Honoré Grandissime is either categorized as black or – more troubling to his culture and Cable’s – fits no category. It is Agricola, in spite or because of his own mixed blood, who is most resistant to change, particularly change in racial classification and assumptions. (His dying words are tantalizingly incomplete: “Protect the race! Beware of the” [328].) Perhaps because of his own mixed blood, or perhaps because of the proximity of Honoré Grandissime f.m.c. to his own family, it is the mulatto Honoré Grandissime who in particular provokes the hostility of Agricola. Twice mentioned is the fact that Agricola Fusilier slapped the mulatto Honoré Grandissime for daring to attend a quadroon ball. Dr. Keene explains:

“At a grand mask ball about two months ago, where I had a bewilderingly fine time with those ladies, the proudest old turkey in the theater was an old fellow whose Indian blood shows in his very behavior, and yet – ha!ha! I saw the same old man, at a quadroon ball a few years ago, walk up to the handsomest, best dressed man in the house, a man with skin whiter than his own – a perfect gentleman as to looks and manners – and without a word slap him in the face. . . . The fellow had no business there. Those balls are not given to quadroon males, my friend.” (15)

And it is Agricola who articulates the logic of caste and race in New Orleans, revealing as he does so the importance (for those in power) of firmly fixed categories:

“When we say, ‘we people,’ we always mean we white people. The non-mention of color always implies pure white; and whatever is not pure white is to all intents and purposes pure black. When I say ‘the whole community,’ I mean the whole white portion; when I speak of the undivided public sentiment, I mean the sentiment of the white population. What else could I mean?” (59)

This passage shows the “absurdity of racial classification”: how can something be a part and yet defined as a whole? Why is someone who is of mixed Indian and white blood classed as “pure white” while someone of

mixed black and white blood is classed as "pure black"? The emphasis on purity – whether white or black – shows also the anxiety attendant upon admixture: one way to finesse the troubling presence of the mulatto is to classify him out of existence – into the realm of "pure black."⁴

While, as we have shown, Cable hints at – and at times even articulates – a belief that racial categories do not make sense, much in the novel suggests that racial categories are necessary and that boundaries must be preserved: that if the categories of race are to be blurred, so might those necessary to an ordered society. The dangers implicit in the abrogation of racial categories, and the necessity of maintaining rather than interrogating the validity of difference, are especially evident in the presentation of the two Honoré Grandissimes, who differ in significant ways from racial doubles in other nineteenth-century texts. In *The Romance of the Republic* (1867), for example, the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child had the two sons of Gerald Fitzgerald – one white and the other black – switched in childhood to challenge the idea of absolute difference between the races (Samuels 168). And of course in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* the white Valet de Chamber and the black Tom Driscoll are switched at birth, their fingerprints the only indication of their true origins. In these representative texts the message depends upon the confusion of doubles, both physically and socially: they cannot be told apart. The instability of racial borders is the works' fundamental premise.

This is not the case, however, in *The Grandissimes*, where the replication of names points to difference rather than likeness: the two Honorés are confused in name only – never in person or social position. Thus the impoverished lady Aurora de Grapion Nancanou goes to the white Honoré because she is faced with eviction and it turns out that the mulatto Honoré is her landlord; Joseph Frowenfeld, a German-American immigrant to New Orleans, meets a white man he correctly assumes to be Honoré Grandissime; then is surprised to have his mulatto landlord sign his name as Honoré Grandissime. Frowenfeld's friend Dr. Keene does not explain the doubling to him: he wants him to discover it for himself. Although confusion over their identity is one of the central "mysteries" of the novel, the characterization of Honoré Grandissime f.m.c. marks *difference* from his white

half brother, and the terms in which Cable delineates their differences follow the racial assumptions of Cable's times. Thus of the white Honoré, Cable asserts: "His whole appearance was a dazzling contradiction of the notion that a Creole is a person of mixed blood" (38). In contrast, Honoré f.m.c. is presented in terms of contemporary assumptions about persons of mixed blood: "this man of strong feeling and feeble will (the trait of his caste)" (197). As Violet Harrington Bryan notes, the mulatto Honoré

is defined by narrow limited environments throughout the novel, in contrast to the light, open, unencumbered natural settings which surround the white Honoré. The sumptuous furnishings of his home have qualities of "immoveable largeness and heaviness, lofty sobriety, abundance of finely wrought brass mounting, motionless richness of upholstery" (434).... Cut off from the mainstream of society despite his wealth and education, the man, like his home, is characterized by a certain nobility, which is, however, qualified by heaviness, sobriety, and paralysis. (27)

The novel does not, it is true, make clear whether Honoré f.m.c.'s flaws – such as his enervated air – are a function of his culture or his nature, although even environmental explanations for his enervation are not incompatible with certain racist ideologies with which Cable would have been familiar. John Backhman and J. L. Cabell, for example, argued that inferiority was the result of environmental factors, while at the same time (and paradoxically) asserting that this inferiority was not reversible by changes in the environment (Fredrickson 83). What is indisputable is the racist origin of the terms in which the mulatto Honoré is presented. He is, like his white half-brother, described in terms of physical beauty, but note Cable's qualifying comment: "A strong, clear olive complexion; features that were faultless (unless a woman-like delicacy, that was yet not effeminate, was a fault) . . . manners Castilian, with a gravity almost oriental" (41). His features are woman-like, yet not effeminate; he strikes Joseph Frowenfeld as "almost unmanly" (195). The emphasis on unmanliness picks up on basic racist assumptions about the mulatto, especially concerning the supposed sterility that is implied in the term's derivation (via Spanish) from the Latin for "mule." In this characterization Cable also

returns to the opening site of category crisis: the *bal masque* at which racial and gender categories intersect. Just as the mulatto occupies the site of contradiction in Louisiana culture, so too even his physical appearance provokes contradictory comments from his creator.

All this should come as no surprise to readers of Cable's later more directly political work on race. As many historians have noted, though counted a liberal in his own day, Cable is not what we would now class as a liberal on race. George Frederickson, for instance, notes that while George Washington Cable was a "lonely spokesman" (216) in his argument for public equality between the races, at the same time he believed in "private inequality" (225). Indeed, arguing for "public uplift" via his "home Culture Clubs," Cable sought a way to "elevate the masses" without "any disturbance of necessary social distinctions" (226). We must remember these views when assessing Cable's literary art: when Jones argues for the disruptive nature of black-creole dialect in the novel, for example, he assumes an essential congruence between literary technique and social views, an assumption that makes it difficult to account for and properly value the "significant hints, allusions, [and] faint unspoken admissions" (95) that permeate the novel.

These unspoken admissions can be further clarified by looking at the contradictory comments that Honoré Grandissime's female counterpart, the mulatta Palmyre Philosophe, provokes from the narrator. Some represent a desire to make a protest against the unfair treatment of mulatto women, but others reveal the anxiety that Cable shared with his culture concerning the blurring of racial boundaries in the mulatto and the larger category crises which racial admixture represented. The many descriptions of Palmyre in the novel suggest the fascination with the mulatto, a fascination that is an uneasy mix of admiration, respect, anxiety, and fear: "a woman of the quadroon caste, of superb stature and poise, severely handsome features, clear tawny skin and large, passionate black eyes" (57). She is portrayed both in highly sexual terms and as sexually chaste:

the fullness of the red voluptuous lips and the roundness of her perfect neck, gave her, even at fourteen, a barbaric and magnetic beauty, that startled the beholder like an unexpected drawing out of a jewelled sword. Such a type could have only

sprung from high Latin ancestry on one side and – we might venture – Jaloff African on the other. To these charms of person, she added mental acuteness, conversational adroitness, concealed cunning and noiseless but visible strength of will; and to these, the rarest of gifts in one of her tincture, the purity of true womanhood. (58-59)

Cable evokes the conflict that African American writers like Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* addressed much more directly: as Hazel Carby has shown in her discussion of this and other works, a single gender ideology does not accommodate black and white “woman” alike, and the view of black womanhood as dangerously charged with sexuality coexists uneasily with Victorian conceptions of white womanhood.

It is revealing that, like Honoré f.m.c., who is associated with the “oriental,” Palmyre is linked with the foreign, the strange, the outlandish. And just as the male mulatto Honoré is associated with the female, so the female mulatto Palmyre is linked with the animal: “The barbaric beauty which had begun to bud 20 years before was now in perfect bloom. The united grace and pride of her movement was inspiring – but what shall we say? – feline? It was femininity without humanity, – something that made her with all her superbness, a creature that one would want to find chained” (71). The contradictions presented as inherent in the mulatto suggest boundary crises that are not confined to the categories of black and white but come to include male and female, human and animal, even stability and revolution.⁵

An especially significant instance of such boundary confusion comes in a conversation between Joseph Frowenfeld and Honoré f.m.c. and suggests many of the category crises associated with the mulatto. In a chapter appropriately titled “Paralysis,” Frowenfeld asks Honoré f.m.c. why he does not take up the cause of his race: “Mr. Grandissime, you are a man of intelligence, accomplishments, leisure, and wealth; 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.” Honoré’s response, “[r]educed to the meanings which he vainly tried to convey in words,” is: “Their cause – was in Africa. They upheld it there – they lost it there – and to those that are here the struggle was over.” In spite of his comment about the “unjust”

ranking of the mulatto with the "down-trodden race," Frowenfeld nevertheless is surprised: "You speak of them in the third-person." To this, Honoré replies: "Ah hem nod a slev" (195).

Honoré f.m.c.'s response evokes the two systems within which a free person of color can situate himself. First, there is black and white, the system with which Frowenfeld is working. Second, there is slave and free, the system Honoré f.m.c. evokes. That the two were not necessarily congruent was a source of cultural anxiety before the Civil War. Earlier, Honoré f.m.c. tells Joseph "I am not white"; he has no way to define his identity positively (what I am, rather than what I am not) within the prevailing system of categories (107). Note that while Joseph Frowenfeld classes the mulatto as black, Honoré f.m.c. does not self-identify as such. ("I am not a slave"; "I am not white.") The free person of color violates the congruence of black/white and slave/free: mulattoes are described in terms of categories that prove inappropriate or inadequate.⁶

One way that categories are reestablished is through yet another set of doubles not yet noted by critics: Joseph Frowenfeld and the calas (or cake) seller Clemence, a character who at first might seem marginal. As Barbara Babcock observes, however, "What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central" (qtd in Roberts 2). In this case, the socially peripheral character is central to Cable's attempt to present and to protect the categories of reason/unreason (or order/disorder). Although Frowenfeld and Clemence are in many ways opposites – he is white, she is black; he is male, she is female; he is free, she is a slave (owned, in fact, by Honoré Grandissime f.m.c.) – these characters serve as doubles because they are both presented as commentators and critics of their culture: people who observe others and record their observations.

Joseph Frowenfeld consciously embarks on a study of Louisiana, keeping meticulous records of, for instance, the temperature. Along with his methodical attention to external phenomena, Joseph is also interested in the more difficult project of understanding New Orleans: "Resolved, in other words, without ceasing to be Frowenfeld the studious, to begin at once the perusal of this newly found book, the Community of New Orleans. True, he knew he should find it a difficult task – not only that much of it was in a strange tongue, but that it was a volume whose displaced leaves would

have to be lifted tenderly, blown free of much dust, rearranged, some torn fragments laid together" (103). It is a critical commonplace that Joseph is a stand-in for his author, who was likewise a meticulous observer and researcher (Ladd 44-45n14).

Clemence is also an observer and social commentator; but unlike Frowenfeld and Cable she does not use writing to record her observations; rather she uses songs that come out of the slave experience.⁷ While linguistically, as Jenny Franchot points out, Frowenfeld's "pure" American language marks his devotion to order and enlightenment, Clemence is associated with the discordant racial, religious, and linguistic *mélange* of colonial New Orleans (512). She is in particular associated with the nighttime calinda dances in Congo Square:

came from a neighboring slave yard the monotonous chant and machine-like tune beat of an African dance. There our lately met *marchande* (albeit she was but a guest, fortified against the streetwatch with her master's written pass) led the ancient calinda dance and that well-known song of derision, in whose ever multiplying stanzas the helpless satire of a feeble race still continues to celebrate the personal failings of each newly prominent figure among the dominant caste. There was a new distich in the song tonight. (95)

These songs are the social commentary of the powerless, for the satirical meaning of the songs remains ambiguous – thereby protecting the singers from those who are satirized.

Cable does not, however, present the dances as a necessary "safety valve" for the powerless but rather as frightening and chaotic instances of unreason. These dances are a "reminder of old barbaric pasttimes," full of "hideous discords," whose participants move in the "wildest contortions," "foaming at the mouth" (189). This last is the scene of Bras-Coupé's capture at Congo Square; significantly, moments before his capture, Bras-Coupé is dancing with Clemence (190). The linkage of Bras-Coupé and Clemence is important. Bras-Coupé is connected with insurrection, and with what Cable called "the frightful triumph of body over mind" ("Creole Slave Songs" 810). Palmyre (forced to wed Bras-Coupé) sees Bras-Coupé as a potential fomentor of slave rebellions, which she pictures as "leaping

and shouting and seeing visions of fire and blood" (184). This image is very like the description of the nighttime slave dances at Congo Square. Through all this linking of character and image, Clemence is linked to insurrection, which, for Cable, represents a dark (in all senses) world of unreason:

To Clemence, the order of society was nothing. No upheaval could reach to the depth to which she was sunk . . . As for us, our feelings, our sentiments, affections, etc. are fine and keen, delicate and many; what we call refined . . . Refined they are – after centuries of refining. But the feelings handed down to Clemence had come through ages of African savagery; through fires that do not refine, but that blunt and blast and blacken and char; starvation, gluttony, drunkenness, thirst, drowning, nakedness, dirt, fetichism, slaughter, pestilence, and the rest – she was their heiress. (251)

While Clemence is consistently linked with insurrection and racial heterogeneity, Joseph Frowenfeld, by contrast, evokes the specter of insurrection only to reject it, offering instead a vision of change brought about by reason and order which, in conformity with contemporary racial theories, is the possession of whites. In conversation with Honoré Grandissime f.m.c., Joseph urges that he help his people. Honoré replies: "Ah cannod be one Toussaint l'Ouverture. Ah cannod trah to be. Hiv I trah, I h-only s'all soogceed to be one Bras-Coupé" (196). That is, the mulatto Honoré cannot be like the leader of a successful insurrection in Haiti; instead he would be like Bras-Coupé, the enslaved African prince whose torture and death in the name of the "Code Noir" haunts the novel. Frowenfeld predictably recoils at the mention of insurrection:

"I have no stronger disbelief than my disbelief in insurrection. I believe that to every desirable end there are two roads, the way of strife and the way of peace. I can imagine a man in your place, going about among his people, stirring up their minds to a noble discontent . . . for enlightenment and moral elevation." (195)

Note that Frowenfeld both asserts that the way of peace is preferable and frames his argument in terms of binary opposition: there are two roads and only two: no other way can even be imagined.

The Grandissimes anticipates the views on order and race that Cable was later to articulate more fully and directly in his writings and public presentations. While the immigrant Joseph Frowenfeld becomes a valued part of New Orleans society (and by the end is romantically linked with Clotilde Nancanou), Clemence, associated with disorder, voodoo, darkness, Africa, is shot in the back by the Grandissime men (though not the white Honoré) for her part in Palmyre's voodoo spells against Agricola. Her affiliation with voodoo is especially important: as Jenny Franchot writes, voodoo as it appears in the novel

anticipates . . . recent appreciations of voodoo as a beguiling instance of racial and religious heterogeneity, a multicultural practice that therapeutically mixes not only the races, but theologically speaking, the flesh and the spirit. Mulattoes, Creoles, full Africans – virtually everyone in *The Grandissimes* except for the Anglo- and German-Americans – practices voodoo and often together. (510)

It is this admixture, this heterogeneity, this crossing of boundaries that in effect leads to Clemence's murder.

This scene is as chilling as the much-written-on mutilation of Bras-Coupé: Clemence is caught in an animal trap, begs for her life as she is about to be hanged, then is told to run – only to be shot in the back. With her murder comes the death of the category crises represented by voodoo (Franchot 509). Palmyre's voodoo has been effective: Honoré f.m.c. stabs Agricola, who later dies of the wounds; Agricola, though classed as "pure white" is also associated with violence and with unreason. With the deaths of the characters in the novel associated with unreason – Clemence, Agricola, even Bras-Coupé whose voodoo spells are remarkably effective in destroying Grandissime men – Cable both asserts the validity of the categories reason/unreason and presents a triumph of the forces of reason within the novel.

One character associated with unreason and insurrection does not die: Palmyre. But in her fate – and the fate of her male counterpart the mulatto

Honoré Grandissime – we see Cable's inability or unwillingness even to imagine a place for the mulatto within the categories of his culture. The novel moves towards reconciliations of all types: the feud between the De Grapion family and the Grandissimes is resolved when the white Honoré Grandissime marries Aurora; the Grandissime brothers unite as Grandissime Frères, when Honoré f.m.c. agrees to add his wealth to the white Honoré's business. The name of the business becomes a public acknowledgment of relationship. Yet Grandissime Frères can exist only on the economic plane. There is evidently no place in Louisiana for the mulattoes Honoré and Palmyre. Hence they go to France, where they pose as brother and sister. Eventually, Honoré kills himself (for the unrequited love of Palmyre, who loves the white Honoré); Palmyre meanwhile gets a regular check from the business. Earlier, we noted that both Honoré Grandissime f.m.c. and Palmyre Philosophe were associated with the oriental, the foreign, the outlandish; in the end, this becomes literally so as they are relegated to a foreign country, and one associated not only with liberal racial attitudes, but with the support of insurrection (France was one of the few countries to recognize the mulatto government of Haiti after the revolution of 1792, or shortly before the events recounted in *The Grandissimes*). Honoré and Palmyre's exile to France renders Cable's desire for wholeness, for a nationalism free from the category crisis exemplified by the racially ambiguous and potentially subversive mulatto.

Barbara Ladd remarks that southern writers like Twain and Cable "were deeply aware of the divisions and crossings and fragmentations of identity in the United States, and if they sometimes embraced the improvisational or the expedient or the subversive as liberating, they sometimes feared it and sought the kind of wholeness and autonomy promised by nationalist ideology" (xviii). The end of *The Grandissimes* illustrates both the fear of subversion and the desire for a nationalist ideology predicated on categories no longer in crisis. Thus in the last few chapters we see Southern culture has been transformed to correspond more closely to the newly Americanized business and economic ethos. The white Honoré's business is, thanks to the infusion of his mulatto brother's money, renamed Grandissime Frères and promises to flourish on the new grounds of American commerce. But while economic union is possible and even desirable,

social union (much less sexual union) is not. With the elimination of the mulattoes of his narrative from New Orleans, Cable also eliminates those who occupy that ambiguous space between black and white, "offer[ing] a challenge to easy notions of binarity" (Garber 10). With this ending, then, New Orleans as Cable has constructed it recovers both from the category crisis and from the crisis of category with which the novel began.

Notes

1. Gavin Jones discusses the lack of sophisticated criticism of the novel and offers his own study of black dialect in Cable as a corrective (245).
2. In *Women on the Color Line* Anna Elfenbein includes the most extensive discussion of gender issues (46-65), developing the argument that "The novel's central thematic concern with oppression is sustained by Cable's characterizations of three representative, dispossessed women characters" (46).
3. Sollors's more recent book, *Neither Black Nor White*, reverses the terms of Berzon's title. Cable himself used this phrase in "Creole Slave Songs": the "quadroon caste" is "neither slave nor enlightened, neither black nor white, neither slave nor truly free" (811). The language of binary categories permeates conceptions of race. Indeed, historian Anne Norton argues that binarism shapes American political culture: "white and black, East and West, North and South, man and woman." "Meaning" is created through the "articulation of difference" (3). Interestingly, New Orleans geography and culture have been described in these same terms of category, boundary, and violation: Gwendolyn Midlo Hall writes, "Both biology and ecology led to the creation of a permeable society and culture" (63). Hall speaks in particular of swamps and race mixture, both of which loom large in *The Grandissimes*, as sites of permeability.
4. Joel Williamson documents how the mulatto provoked a category crisis when he cites an antebellum writer: "We should have but two classes... the Master and the Slave, and no intermediate class can be other than immensely mischievous to our peculiar institution" (66). Boundaries between classes are both supported and threatened by an "intermediate class."
5. As Alfred Bendixen points out, under the aegis of Queen Zenobia, the Syrian city of Palmyre led an unsuccessful revolt against Aurelian and the Roman Empire. This makes Palmyre "an appropriate name for a woman engaged in futile rebellion against more powerful forces" (30).
6. Indeed, the antebellum South saw slavery growing whiter, as Joel Williamson

observes; because of this, various laws were enacted to define those of mixed race as black; these laws were responses to category crisis (63).

7. Interestingly, several years after the publication of *The Grandissimes*, Cable published two articles – “Creole Slave Songs” and “The Dance in Place Congo” – in *Century Magazine*, the culmination of research he had been involved in for over a decade. On these essays, see Jones.

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