

Colfax, Kate Grant, and the Domestication of Reconstruction's Violence

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Feature Essay

Civil War Treasures

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Colfax, Kate Grant, and the Domestication of Reconstruction's Violence

Since the 1980s and Eric Foner's landmark works on Reconstruction, scholars of the Civil War have looked past Appomattox Courthouse to consider the advent and demise of Reconstruction as integral to the War's legacy.¹ Much recent scholarship has focused on the extra-legal violence of the era, in the form of riots, lynchings, and paramilitary actions, as whites pushed back in deadly ways against both African Americans in power and the guiding hand of the federal government. Louisiana played a central role in this drama, as spectacular violence was used regularly and lethally to curb what whites saw as the excesses of Republicans' Reconstruction efforts and the newly enfranchised freedmen. Traces of these conflicts permeate LSU's collections, and the archives tell an unrelenting story of white violence in the face of African American power, often related in the victors' righteous tones. One event, known either as the Colfax Riot or the Colfax Massacre, is captured in a unique and dramatic way in an unpublished novel written by an eyewitness to the events in this small central Louisiana town on the banks of the Red River. Found in the Layssard family papers, Kate Grant's novel "From Blue to Gray, or the Battle of Colfax" offers a snapshot of a community in the first throes of representing its trauma to posterity.² Within the manuscript's hastily written pages is an example how the tools of fiction can be deployed domesticate and contextualize horror to the benefit of its story's heroes and history's victors.

Grant's novel deals head-on with erstwhile riot/massacre and assumes a level of familiarity with the events in Colfax, Louisiana in the spring of 1873 that reflects the incident's widespread coverage in local, regional, and national publications of the time: even *Harper's Weekly* ran a story and an accompanying illustration of what it deemed "The Louisiana Murders"

¹ Foner's central tome is *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), but he has also published shorter versions of this encyclopedic text, as well as other monographs on the subject.

² Layssard Family Papers, Mss. 2875, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Grant was heir to Harriet Layssard through both her husband's family and her own. The Layssard family traced its presence in the region back to the eighteenth century.

on May 10th of 1873.³ While the details of that spring are subtle and sometimes challenging to recreate, the broad strokes are relatively straightforward.⁴ Following a contentious gubernatorial election in 1872, the courts declared the Republican candidate for governor William Kellogg the winner and Judge Edward Durrell ruled that the Republican-dominated legislature be seated. Throughout the state Democrats rebelled at what they saw as an illegitimate seizure of power by a Republican party that was made up primarily of African American freedmen and whites from out of state. In Colfax, the seat of Grant Parish in central Louisiana, a loosely organized group of Republicans took control of the courthouse in order to forestall the expected Democratic move against it. While it might be too much to call the group a militia, the force was organized by men with experience in the recent war, and they immediately began building breastworks, drilling, and constructing crude cannons.⁵ White Democrats organized under Sheriff Christopher Columbus Nash, and after weeks of a tense standoff Nash and his posse stormed the courthouse on Easter Morning, April 13th, 1873.

Better armed than their African American counterparts, the whites quickly subdued the Republicans after a short battle. What happened next is disputed – the Republicans may have violated a truce, or weapons may have been discharged accidentally – but the result was the wanton killing of the Republican forces in the courthouse by Nash’s Democratic allies. The total casualties of this encounter is unclear, as later that night many of the remaining Republican survivors were executed by their guards, seemingly in drunken retaliation for the three white men who had died in the conflict. The total number dead on the Republican side is much in doubt, with estimates ranging from fifty to two hundred, some of whose bodies were unceremoniously dumped into the nearby Red River. Whatever the final tally, the events in Colfax that spring were among the deadliest of Reconstruction, and as whites moved to further

³ “The Louisiana Murders,” *Harper’s Weekly* (May 10th, 1873).

⁴ In addition to Foner’s book, the two best monographs about Colfax’s troubles are LeeAnna Keith’s *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008); and Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008). Nicolas Lemann also spends considerable time on Colfax in *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). For an account of legal aftermath, in addition to Foner see Robert Michael Goldman, *Reconstruction and Black Suffrage: Losing the Vote in Reese and Cruikshank* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2001).

⁵ For a deeper and insightful investigation into the military ties of both groups, see James K. Hogue’s unpublished paper “The 1873 Battle of Colfax: Paramilitarism and Counterrevolution in Louisiana,” available at: www.libertychapelcemetery.org/files/hogue-colfax.pdf. Hogue is also the author of *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battle and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), about some of the contemporaneous events in New Orleans.

consolidate their power, their reverberations signaled the beginning of the end of Reconstruction in Louisiana.

These events were the inspiration for a manuscript novel by a Grant Parish resident and eye witness to the troubles in Colfax, Kate Kingston Boyd Grant. Grant's narrative drew from her having lived through the events, including having harbored refugees fleeing the battle on her plantation, as well as interviews after the fact with other participants and witnesses. The novel, titled "From Blue to Gray," resides alongside Grant's other unpublished writings, both complete and fragmentary. Grant may have published stories and articles in local newspapers and magazines, but none of those are extant and they were seemingly without attribution, though she was in negotiation to publish another novel when she died in 1893.⁶ The body of Grant's work is an intriguing example of local color fiction in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, one that offers unique insight into the daily life of post-bellum central Louisiana, but it is "From Blue to Gray" that will most interest historians of the Reconstruction era.

Kate Grant was born in New Orleans in 1852, the daughter of hotel owner Major Edward Kingston Boyd.⁷ She was raised in New York, seemingly by another family, before returning to Louisiana, marrying Richard Henry Grant, and settling down at a plantation just across the Red River from the town of Colfax. A contemporary of Kate Chopin, Grant never enjoyed that author's success, though she seems to have enjoyed some local fame and respect for her literary talents.⁸ LSU's holdings include three novels (one unfinished), a short story, and a play, all unpublished, along with correspondence with Hubbard Publishing Company of Philadelphia regarding the planned publication of her last novel, "Old Eternal Vigilance," abandoned upon her death due to complications in childbirth. Grant's work largely depicts small town life in Louisiana during the mid- to late-nineteenth century, though she also places action in New York City, upstate New York, and New Orleans, reflecting her upbringing. Her manuscripts show her to be a conscientious writer, one aware of both her work's reception and the need for careful revision: a single chapter of the unfinished novel "Liz" exists in four different versions. While not always highly polished, her work is remarkably free of the kinds of careless errors that one

⁶ Finding aid for the Layssard Family Papers, Mss. 2875, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

⁷ Accession file, Layssard Family Papers, Mss. 2875, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

⁸ Grant's obituary in the *Colfax Chronicle* mentions that Grant, "was highly accomplished and had some repute in literary circles." *Colfax Chronicle*. 23 September 1893. p. 1. *Library of Congress: Chronicling America*.

might expect in an unpublished and unedited manuscript. From both the volume and the quality of Grant's writing it is clear that she took her literary efforts seriously and worked with an eye toward both the constrictions of genre and the accurate depiction of her subjects.

In "From Blue to Gray" Grant joins the political events in Colfax to a fairly conventional marriage plot, complete with reformed womanizer, a death from a broken heart, and a vengeful mother. The story begins in New York with a rather protracted tale of love lost and won that comprises the first quarter of the novel's two hundred-plus pages. The protagonists only arrives in Louisiana when the novel's heroine and her husband relocate first to New Orleans and then outside of Colfax in pursuit of post-war economic opportunity. Once the couple ascends the Red River the novel wastes little time moving into the events leading up to the town's violence, which is described in great and sometimes thrilling detail. Emily Hastings and her husband Herbert are first seemingly apolitical – indeed the Civil War is hardly mentioned at all, though the novel opens only a few years after its close – but are swayed to the Sheriff's side seemingly primarily in reaction to a class repugnance for African Americans that is reinforced by rumors of Republican violence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most dramatic such rumor involves sexual threats to white women, when African American men supporting the Republicans are overheard planning to "rais[e] a new race of people" by forcing themselves on captive white women.⁹ At least partially in response to such dangers Herbert eventually joins Sheriff Nash, and while the posse is first suspicious of the Yankee, his eloquence in the name of racial allegiance convinces the men to accept him.

Grant's descriptions of the skirmishes that preceded Nash's taking of the Colfax courthouse are some of the novel's best scenes, and seem to reflect an intimacy with both the events and their participants. The storming of the courthouse itself is more conventionally told, and is most remarkable for laying the blame for the bloodshed entirely at the feet of the Republicans, who are seen firing under a flag of truce before being dispatched in a righteous defense of white men's lives and the honor of battle. Herbert dies in the conflict, an event that hastens the novel away from Louisiana and eventually finds the heroine Emily back home in New York for a reunion with her first love. This union is the culmination of an elaborate subplot that also moved her eventual second husband to witness the events in Colfax, but one that is less concerned with the politics of Reconstruction than forgiveness and a cautionary tale about a

⁹ "From Blue to Gray," 136.

mother's vengeance. The couple is presumably fated to live out their lives back in the North, though their happiness first requires the conversion of their sympathies from blue to gray, the natural result of their time in the South.

A twenty-first century reader hoping for a subtle or transgressive depiction of racial or regional politics will be disappointed by the novel's unwavering devotion to the purpose set forth in its dedication: "A woman's tribute of admiration to the heroes of Grant and her sister Parrishes, who fought so valiantly side by side with Sheriff C. C. Nash."¹⁰ Even so, Grant's tale is interesting for how it rationalizes the actions of the Democrats, suggesting the conversion of the main characters to the white men's cause that will be mirrored by "my Northern readers."¹¹ The novel's language is one measure of this, as in the first half of the novel African Americans are referred to as Africans, Negros, and freedman, but by the second half they garner only racial epithets and are shown "scratch[ing] as other monkeys do," and like "the savage with his fringe of scalps and crimsoned tomahawk."¹² Perhaps even more telling is the novel's elision of the execution of the African American prisoners following Nash's storming of the courthouse, an event which is wholly omitted from the narrative despite an otherwise careful attention to the details of that day. Instead, in Grant's novel the almost assuredly inflated "several hundred" dead lost their lives at the hands of the rightful sheriff acting boldly to assert order and defend the timeless honor of the battlefield.¹³ Rather than minimizing the casualties, the higher number is wielded both as evidence of white's superiority in battle and their willingness to go to great lengths to defend honor, and the possibility of war crimes are simply not mentioned.

Grant's novel goes to great lengths to both argue for violence's righteousness and its orderly deployment in the name of racial solidarity, while folding this spectacle within the niceties of an otherwise trivial marriage plot. The effect is to imply that the horrors of Colfax are at the center of the reproduction of the family in the late-nineteenth century, and that the domestic concerns of the romance novel are bound up inextricably with the use of racial violence. Despite the fact that this novel was unpublished, it is accompanied by an affirmation of sorts of its truth and power for those it endeavors to depict, for included with the manuscript is a

¹⁰ "From Blue to Gray," title page. It is worth noting that Grant Parrish is named not for Kate Grant's family, but was instead after Ulysses S. Grant following its creation after the Civil War. The town of Colfax was similarly named after Schuyler Colfax, Grant's vice president.

¹¹ "From Blue to Gray," 88.

¹² "From Blue to Gray," 123, 166.

¹³ "From Blue to Gray," 181. Nowhere else is such a large number suggested.

document signed by thirty-one local residents attesting to the novel's veracity and the author's skills in her recitation of their town's most notorious event. The odd document, addressed "To whom it may concern" and likely written in Grant's hand, is part of her attempt to find a publisher for her work, but it also functions as evidence that others in the community affirmed her text's racial and political argument and found her portrayal of one of the most violent episodes of Reconstruction as plot device in a domestic romance entirely just.¹⁴

This is not to say that the novel doesn't offer useful historical insight, for despite the fact that it simply ignores how most of the African Americans in Colfax were killed, the depiction of the martial events is otherwise largely accurate, particularly in its emphasis in the conscious preparations that each side took, as well as their having drawn on their knowledge of military order and tactics garnered during the Civil War. Moreover, the choice to cast these events as a military actions – the "Battle" of the subtitle – is more apt than other more popular appellations, namely a "riot" or "massacre," as the former implies a lawlessness that the Republicans were in fact defending, not subverting, while the latter suggests a helplessness on the part of the African Americans, rather than their active assertion of their legal rights and political force. There was a massacre – the bloodbath that Grant simply omits – but that horror came in response to an organized and conscious defense of African American suffrage and political identity, an assertion of civil rights and personhood that was less passive victimhood and more active martyrdom.

"From Blue to Gray" may never have been published and Kate Grant may never have found the literary fame that she so clearly wanted, but her novel is still useful as a resource for historians simply on the basis of her having witnessed the events in question: as she points out in her introduction, her "ideal characters" are inventions, but "the scenes in which they figured, are drawn from life."¹⁵ Just as importantly though, the form of novel and its desire to link the concerns of familial reproduction with the assertion of racial superiority bespeaks not simply of the facts of the battle, but of the participants' heartfelt – if horrifying – fears. Contemporary newspaper accounts certainly offer insight into these rationales, but Grant's generic choices and

¹⁴ In this document the title of the novel is given as "Avenged! Or The Battle of Colfax." It is doubtless the same novel, as no further records exist of her writing two such works on the incident.

¹⁵ "From Blue to Gray," n.p.

the form of her novel intertwine the personal and the political in a way that makes clear the perceived stakes for white Southerners during and following Reconstruction.

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