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Christopher Benfey. *Degas in New Orleans: Encounters in the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. xii + 294 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-43562-4.

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As one might surmise from the main title, Christopher Benfey's ostensible subject in *Degas in New Orleans* is the painter Edgard Degas and the time he spent visiting the city and his relatives during his only American sojourn. From October of 1872 through March of 1873 Degas lived with and began paintings of many of his Louisiana relations. But one needs carefully to consider Benfey's subtitle, *Encounters in the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable* in order to have even an inkling of what Benfey, who teaches American literature at Mount Holyoke, is up to in this engaging, thought-provoking, but sometimes frustrating book.

Benfey contends that the period of Degas' visit was also a "key moment in the cultural history of this most exotic of American cities "and notes that New Orleans subjects inspired Degas at the very same time Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable "were beginning to mine the resources of New Orleans" for their literary creations. One of Benfey's central research questions is "[w]hat was it about this war-torn, diverse, and conflicted city that elicited from Degas some his finest works (p. 5)? " While a considerable portion of the book is spent answering this question, Benfey explores a great many other topics as well. In addition to analyzing some of the New Orleans-inspired works of Cable and Chopin, Benfey addresses the subjects of sex across the color line, particularly in Degas' own family, the racial tensions of Reconstruction, and the role Degas' relations played in bringing them to a violent head. If all of that were not a large enough agenda, along the way the reader is introduced to a great many New Orleanians with whom Degas crossed paths or shared interests. While Benfey professes fascination with New Orleans as a place of extraordinary artistic inspiration, more often than not the city plays the role of setting rather than subject. If this is an urban history, it is an unusual one.

The author's method is unconventional, and his writing style is loose, rhythmic, even conversational. Like Degas' paintings, Benfey's book vacillates between crisp realism and vague, impressionistic gesturing. The book has an organizational scheme that at first seems puzzling. For instance, in the first chapter the subjects are Duncan Kenner and Norbert Soulie, both from New Orleans, the first a well-heeled planter, the second a free man of color and architect who met Kenner serendipitously in Europe in 1834, and traveled with him for a time. The second chapter is connected to the first by the thin tissue of Soulie's cousin and business partner, Edmond Rillieux who had helped in the construction of a monumental house in the French Quarter for Madame Delphine Macarty, "a prominent hostess in the very highest Creole circles," and the subject of Benfey's second chapter (p. 34). Madame Lalaurie's house caught fire in 1834, and, as neighbors arrived to help, a terrible discovery was made. Lalaurie's slaves had been systematically tortured, and she was the alleged perpetrator. This story, gory in its details, was later used by George Washington Cable as one of his *Strange True Stories of Louisiana.* The reader is then transported nearly thirty years into the future as the opening subject of the third chapter is Benjamin's Butler's notorious General Order Number 28, and the impetus it created for many women to leave the city, including three of Degas' female relatives, all of whom he met and painted while they were in exile in France. And so the book goes, sometimes meandering, other times making long leaps into the future, moving fluidly through time and space, bouncing erratically among the worlds of art, history, fact, fiction, and speculation. Benfey's readers may not make the leaps as easily as the author, but, if one is patient and indulgent, Benfey does forge all of these disparate parts into an uneven but surprisingly coherent whole.

One of the reasons for the book's strange organizational scheme is Benfey's thematic portrayal of New Orleans as a "hybrid city." Benfey, who borrowed the term

from Cable, contends that this characteristic helps to explain some of the city's "most distinctive creations," including jazz, "the complex rituals of Mardi Gras," the stories of Cable and Chopin, and "the New Orleans paintings of Edgar Degas (p. 18)." If hybridity is an artistic impetus, it is also a hard historical fact, both in the background of the city and in the lineage of a great many of her inhabitants past and present. But hybridity in New Orleans does not necessarily equate into equal parts black and white, a mistake Benfey sometimes seems to make.

Edgar Degas' family had [at least] one long-term interracial romance in its background. Degas' maternal grandmother, Maria Desiree Rillieux, had a brother named Vincent who established a long-term relationship with a free woman of color named Constance Vivant. One of his son's with Constance, Norbert, would distinguish himself as one of the most important inventors in the nineteenth-century South. Norbert Rillieux, who would have been the first cousin of Degas' mother, invented the triple-pan apparatus for refining sugar. According to Benfey, Rillieux's innovation was "comparable in its impact on the sugar industry to Eli Whitney's cotton gin and [was] the basis for all modern industrial evaporation (p. 127).

The discovery of a family connection between Rillieux and Degas is an important one and is the centerpiece of the book, but some of Benfey's speculations surrounding this discovery are less than convincing. For instance, Benfey claims that it "hardly seems likely" that Degas would not have known about his connection to Rillieux (p. 133). Yet only a few pages earlier he wrote that this information had been "a closely guarded secret of the Rillieux family" for a very long time (p. 124). Further, Degas' mother left New Orleans as a child following her own mother's death at the age of twenty-five. She was educated, married, and raised her own children in France. Even if, as Benfey writes, "Rillieux was the most famous New Orleanian in nineteenth-century France (p. 133)", it also seems entirely likely that the affair between Degas' great uncle and a free woman of color might not have been commonly spoken of by Degas' family. They don't call them family secrets for nothing.

Undeterred by the flimsiness of his case, Benfey goes on to argue that Degas' knowledge of his connection to a man of color might help to explain why so few of his New Orleans' paintings contain black figures. According to the author, "[w]ith illustrious black cousins in Paris and Louisiana, he could not have painted black faces in New Orleans as mere local scenery, aspects of an exotic landscape quite foreign to himself (p. 137)." I have to disagree with Benfey on this point. Even if Degas knew about his connection to Norbert Rillieux, a very light-skinned, well-educated, and distinguished free man of color, that knowledge would not necessarily have translated into any sense of connection with or ambivalence about blacks in general, particularly lower-class blacks who had been slaves before the Civil War. In fact, one of the biggest issues in the city's post-war political milieu, a complex subject which Benfey examines closely, is what role men like Norbert Rillieux were going to play in the city's emerging social order. Benfey sometimes seems to be imposing a strict black and white racial order on the city, long before such notions were historical fact.

Yet, in the three chapters that follow, Benfey hits his stride, both as historian and literary analyst. In chapter eight, Benfey gives a great deal of attention to Cable's political writings and suggests how his beliefs informed and shaped his fiction, particularly as it related to questions of racial identity. Benfey does make one factual error regarding Cable's story, "Tite Poulette." He writes that the story's main character, a quadroon named Zalli, "raised" her daughter in a house known today as "Madame John's Legacy (p. 117)." Yet, if one reads even the first few pages of Cable's story, it is clear that as soon as Zalli was bequeathed the house by her dying lover John, she sold it and put the funds in a bank which promptly failed. Thus, she foolishly squandered her legacy and was forced to raise her daughter in poverty. Her mistake sets up the action for the rest of the story. The error raises questions about the depth of Benfey's research in primary versus secondary sources.

In contrast, chapters nine and ten do a superb job of forging primary sources into a compelling narrative as Benfey explains the roles Degas' relatives played in the attempted Unification movement of 1873. Once this attempt failed, he unravels the puzzle of how these same people were so easily drawn into the White League and its violence. Benfey's work here is commendable, particularly because it grafts human faces and a specific story on to the complexities of Reconstruction politics in New Orleans.

Benfey is a writer who gravitates toward lyricism, but this quality, which often lends an atmospheric feel to the book, can sometimes get the better of historical fact. For instance, in his analysis of Degas' 1879 painting *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, Benfey describes the central figure's journey upwards as "part triumphant ascension, part violent wrenching (or lynching), her abrupt and pre-

carious upward journey, viewed from below, possesses an unnerving ambivalence (p. 139)." While Benfey's description of the painting is evocative, his use of the term lynching is historically inaccurate. Such stylistic flourishes may be cute, but they are not particularly acute.

Having said all that, I recommend the book. For Degas scholars it is de rigueur. For those interested in the intricacies of Reconstruction in New Orleans, it is a useful, delightfully aesthetic, though not entirely convincing account of this complex city's struggle through those troubled (and still troubling to contemplate) times. Benfey also does a fine, if sometimes overly speculative, job of placing Degas, Cable, Chopin and their artistic and literary creations at the center of his story. Perhaps, in the end, it is Benfey's unorthodox method, his mixing of forms, and his willingness to try to tie all of these disparate parts together, that make the book valuable. It is by no means the last word, but it brings an interesting voice and some much needed vivacity and verve to scholarship on post-bellum New Orleans society, culture, and politics.

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