Step Right Up: Savagery on Display at the Bronx Zoo

Pauline Harder, Trent University

For two and a half weeks in 1906, a man from the Congo named Ota Benga was put on display in the monkey house of the Bronx zoo alongside an orangutan for the pleasure and supposed edification of the paying American public. This paper explores the historical context for this event, namely the display of humans in a carefully constructed racial hierarchy, and how Benga’s experience both typifies and subverts the turn-of-the-century practice of putting humans on display.

For two and a half weeks in 1906, a man from the Congo named Ota Benga was put on display in the monkey house of the Bronx zoo alongside an orangutan for the pleasure and supposed edification of the paying American public.¹ According to Samuel P. Verner, the man who brought him to America from the Congo, Benga was a member of the Bachichi or Chirichiri “tribe”, known more commonly to the American public as a “pygmy”.² While Benga’s exhibition in the zoo may seem shocking to contemporary readers, it was not without precedent; in fact, at the time there was an established and thriving entertainment business in the United States based on the display of humans in freak shows and sideshows, in circuses such as P. T. Barnum’s and in amusement parks like the ones on Coney Island. While by no means an invention of nineteenth century America, the displacement and display of the “other” - generally people of colour - for the benefit of the “more civilized” – generally white people (a common theme of the European voyages of discovery in the fifteenth and

sixteenth centuries and even earlier\textsuperscript{3}, was perfected there.\textsuperscript{4} More respectable institutions such as the Smithsonian, the world’s fairs, and the country’s zoological parks offered similar fare wrapped, however, in the legitimacy of culture and education.\textsuperscript{5} That Benga was on display was not new. The dominant American discourse of scientific racism which buttressed exploitation at home and imperial expansion abroad had been served up in many different forms in the latter half of the nineteenth and in the early part of the twentieth centuries, and largely swallowed whole by an American public suffering from cyclical industrial depressions and class wars, increased immigration and the struggles over segregation.\textsuperscript{6} The episode in the zoo, therefore, is not notable for being outrageous,\textsuperscript{7} rather, it is notable for being objected to at all, and once objected to, for the effectiveness of the protest it generated. When stripped of its thin veneer of respectability, and stated motive of educating the public, Benga’s stint at the Bronx zoo was revealed as nothing more than another freak show, and effectively (if only briefly) turned the tables on the imperialist agenda for putting humans on display. Whereas the display of humans in the world’s Fairs’ ethnological villages was to highlight progress and civilization, the display of Benga at the Bronx zoo did just the opposite – highlighting the savagery of those who mounted the display rather than that of the man in the cage.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{3} In 2500 B.C. an Egyptian pharaoh requested that pygmies be brought to dance for him. Bradford and Blume, 17 – 18.


\textsuperscript{5} Adams, 27 – 29.


\textsuperscript{7} In fact, a microcephalic (or “pinhead”) African-American named William Henry Johnson was displayed in P.T. Barnum’s American Museum as “What is it?” from about 1860 on. Johnson continued to perform in circuses and sideshows until his death in 1926 (Poignant, 84. Adams, 136 - 137). Perhaps more shocking the 2005 display of an African village in a zoo in Augsburg, Germany. The exhibit was protested not for its theme, but for its context within the zoo. The zoo’s director justified the display by remarking that one of the organizers was “born in Africa and has black skin.” In a later statement she added that the zoo is “exactly the right place to communicate an atmosphere of the exotic” (Hawley, 2005).

\textsuperscript{8} Adams, 41. Bradford and Blume,
In the preface to *Reading National Geographic*, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins maintain that:

the history, culture, and social reality of North-South relations is primarily written, of course, in corporation boardrooms, government agency offices, and encounters between tourists, bankers, military personnel, and State Department employees, on the one hand, and the people of Southern nations on the other.

The role of cultural institutions, such as National Geographic, and in Benga’s time of the world’s fairs, was not only to educate the America public, but to “provide support for American state policies and for voting and consumer behaviour.” ⁹ In 1898, debates over American imperialism were muzzled as Americans rallied around the cry of “remember the Maine”. The call to nationalism in the name of supporting their soldiers in the Spanish-American war offered an increasingly divided American public the chance to unite around a common threat, and to distract themselves from conflict at home.¹⁰ It also helped to establish the United States as an emerging world power, rivaling European nations which were jostling for status and power in the scramble for colonial acquisitions. A symbol of this rivalry, the giant Ferris wheel, first mounted for the Chicago Exposition of 1893 - with 36 cars capable of holding 60 people each - was built in response to the wonder of the Paris International Exposition of 1889: the Eiffel Tower.¹¹ At home, an increasing consolidation of capital in the hands of a privileged few, and recurring industrial depressions led to mounting class tensions which culminated in the railroad strikes of 1877. These class tensions were exacerbated by competition with recently freed African-Americans in the south and waves of immigrants in the north. The restrictions on Chinese immigrants and residents imposed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (further entrenched with the Geary Act of 1892) and the institution of Jim Crow in the south following the failure of the Reconstruction

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¹¹ Rydell, 43, 56. Bradford and Blume, 8.
in 1877 served as means for white Americans to assert their hegemony. The world’s fairs gave them a place to celebrate it.\textsuperscript{12}

The overarching theme of the fairs was “the story of progress”\textsuperscript{13} as shown by the evolution of man. The fairs were seen as a means of introducing the American public to the scientific study of anthropology in the form of “ethnological villages”, and by these displays to show the heights to which civilized man (as embodied by white Americans) had risen. As one of the assistants for the Chicago Exposition declared, “From the first to the last, the exhibits of this department will be arranged and grouped to teach a lesson; to show the advancement of evolution of man.”\textsuperscript{14} Lutz and Collins maintain that this display of non-western peoples plays a “self-contrastive role in the fundamental process of identity formation;”\textsuperscript{15} essentially we define ourselves by showing what we are not. Moreover, this act of self-definition served to unify white Americans and blur the class lines that threatened to divide them by showing them that regardless of class, as white Americans they were a part of the great achievements of the “White”, or “Ivory” Cities of the main expositions, clearly set apart from (and above) the savage and barbaric nations exhibited in the midway.\textsuperscript{16} According to Lutz and Collins the creation of ethnic hierarchies have resulted at the least in “small humiliations and rejections, and have lessened opportunities. At the worst, they have abetted wars of extermination, lynchings, and rape.” In this context, the world’s fairs were not so much a reflection of humanity, but a construction of it, by careful manipulation of what was shown, how it was shown, and in what context.\textsuperscript{17}

The most obvious way in which this racial hierarchy was created was in the very layout of the fairs in which the ethnological displays inhabited the fringes of the fairgrounds, relegated to the outer edges, whereas the “White” or “Ivory” city, representing civilized man and his achievements, sat at the center. The White City, dazzling in the sun’s reflection by day, and illuminated

\textsuperscript{12} Rydell, 49, 236.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 180.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 57.
\textsuperscript{15} Lutz and Collins, 2.
\textsuperscript{17} Lutz and Collins, 3. 26. Rydell, 237.
by Edison’s incandescent lights by night led a correspondent for Harper’s Weekly to comment that that the exposition buildings “are a blinding, dazzling mass of white” which would leave the “hard-working people” who visited the fair with “memories that will make all the rest of their lives brighter and more hopeful.”18 In the midway, ethnic groups were organized in a progression of perceived stages of civilization with the most “evolved” groups occupying the space closest to the main exposition. As Lutz and Collins observe, this ordering of civilizations has become so entrenched in the American psyche, that more recently, in the National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington, photos displayed in the main lobby show a series of portraits, starting with a picture of a Phillipino Tasaday native on the left, and ending in the picture of an American astronaut on the right.19 Within the hierarchically ordered ethnological villages, organizers struggled to maintain the “authenticity” they believed these displays represented, to the extent of denying clothes to the shivering pygmies at the onset of fall. When they were finally permitted western clothing, one observer complained that this had “bereft the pygmies of the Congo...of their principal charm.”20 In the more contemporary case of the National Geographic, Lutz and Collins found evidence of photographs being altered to darken skin when deemed necessary, especially when nudity made the need to distance the photo’s subject from its audience more pressing.21 In the Bronx zoo, where Benga wound up after the close of the St. Louis World’s Fair, bones were about the floor of the monkey house to make him appear more fearsome, and his keepers encouraged him to bare his pointed teeth and charge the bars of his cage to excite the viewers. A sign posted on the cage giving his height, weight and origins played up the parallels between Benga and the “other animals”.22

Bradford and Blume contend that it was, in fact, this sign that did the most to incense African-American religious and community leaders. Within a day of Benga being displayed in the monkey house, a significant protest was

18 Rydell, 106, 158.
20 Bradford and Blume, 5-6, 252.
21 Lutz and Collins, 82.
22 Adams, 32. Bradford and Blume, 181.
mounted by these leaders in an attempt to have Benga freed. While Benga’s lot at the St. Louis World’s Fair was substantively not very different than his lot at the zoo, his presentation at the zoo caused a reaction which, while not leading to a larger change in cultural norms, at very least resulted in a change to Benga’s status. At the fair, there were concerned and sympathetic newspaper accounts of the condition of the shivering pygmies, but there are no records of any protest being mounted.23 What then, can account for the different results at the Bronx zoo? According to Lutz and Collins, one of the most damaging effects of these devices for objectification of others, is to render them into anonymous “types” or representatives of their race, as opposed to named individuals.24 For Benga at the zoo, it is possible that in spite of the attempts of his keepers to objectify him, the intimacy of the setting could not support his anonymity, or that without the blinding juxtaposition of the White City, people were able to see more clearly the inhumanity of the display. More probably, Benga himself asserted his desires and his character to the point where his individuality, and hence his humanity, could no longer plausibly be denied.

After the initial weekend locked in the monkey house, protest caused William Hornaday, the zoo’s director to permit Benga to roam freely around the zoo. Ironically, prior to being displayed in the monkey house, Benga had spent several weeks at the zoo, wandering freely and unobserved, dressed in Western attire. Unfortunately, once he had been made into a spectacle, he would no longer be left in peace. Crowds pursued him around the grounds, teasing and laughing, even poking and tripping him until in one incident he retaliated, shooting an observer with his bow and arrow. While at times docile and accepting of his condition, and clearly enjoying the company of Dohong, the orangutan, Benga at other times mounted a fierce resistance, charging his keepers with a knife, threatening to bite them with his chiseled teeth if they tried to take him back to the monkey house, and in general making life difficult for zoo director Hornaday. Benga managed to establish himself as much more than a “type” or a representative of his race. He clearly established his objections and his character and in so doing, established his individuality.

23 Bradford and Blume, 181, 252.
24 Lutz, 275.
By the end of September, barely two and a half weeks after first being displayed in the monkey house, Hornaday wrote Verner saying Benga was “unmanageable” and “dangerous”, and begged Verner to take Benga off his hands. Benga was then transferred to the care of Reverend James H. Gordon, head of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, ending his life as a spectacle.\(^{25}\)

It is ironic that for those who have heard of Ota Benga, it is with this sensational episode of his life (lasting no more than a few weeks) that they are familiar, and not with what came before or after. Once settled into the orphan home, the media quickly lost interest in him until his death by suicide almost 10 years later. His death, while tragic, provides a sad testament to the successful reclamation of his life and status as a human being: unlike the Phillipino performers who succumbed to disease en route to the St. Louis Fair, and for whom death was simply an interruption in their performance (their bodies were given to science, their brains ending up at the Smithsonian)\(^{26}\) Benga was no longer on display. He was buried in an unmarked grave in Lynchburg, Pennsylvania.\(^{27}\) In his death, however, Benga continues to provide us with means to reflect on our own condition, one would hope with more insight and accuracy and with less blatant exploitation than was given him in life. The title of Bradford’s book, however, reveals that in some ways we are unchanged, still drawn to the spectacle of the exoticized “other”. Bradford, the grandson of Samuel Phillips Verner, could have chosen any number of titles for his book which after all, gives equal treatment to Benga and Verner, as well as giving a fairly detailed and balanced account of Benga’s life as a whole, placing the zoo incident within the larger context of a very human life. Nonetheless, the same need to cater to the crowds which inspired Hornaday to exhibit Benga in the monkey house appears to motivate Bradford in the naming of his book, so that almost a century after his death, Benga remains “Ota: The Pygmy in the Zoo”.

\(^{26}\) Rydell, 165.
\(^{27}\) Bradford and Blume, 231.
Bibliography


