

Questioning Who We Are While Reading *Ota Benga, The Pygmy in the Zoo* and
Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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The story of Ota Benga, the African Pygmy who was exhibited with the monkeys in the Bronx Zoo in 1906, has received much notice in recent years. The story of the clergymen who “rescued” Ota Benga from that plight and his subsequent travels to Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia, is less well known. This sadly true story comes in and out of American consciousness from time to time, the latest catalyst being the ninetieth anniversary of Ota Benga’s suicide in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1916. The story of his life is chronicled by Phillips Verner Bradford in the book, *Ota Benga, The Pygmy in the Zoo* (1992) and more recently by Mitch Keller in the *New York Times*, “The Pygmy in the Zoo” (August 6, 2006) and by a three-day conference in Lynchburg on October 25-27, 2007.

Bradford’s text tells the story of the travels of his grandfather, Samuel Phillips Verner, deep into the Congo and how he came to know Ota Benga and bring him to America. More recently with the Google Digitization Project, Verner’s 1903 book about his travels into the Congo, *Pioneering in Central Africa*, is now widely available online. In a long five-hundred-page volume, Verner chronicles his journeys and includes maps. Whether reading about Ota Benga as told by Bradford or the travels as described in Verner’s volume, I am reminded of Joseph Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*, the setting of which occurred around the same time as Verner’s travels. While this mainstay of the Western cannon is fiction, it could be true based

on Joseph Conrad's own experiences as a widely traveled seaman; nevertheless, Verner's experiences are true. All three writers tell their stories so well that the reader takes the journeys along with them.

The reader of these texts instantly sees many connections that can inform our understanding of the social, cultural, political, and scientific understandings of the times, thus making them good texts for classroom readings and discussions. A course, whether in literature, sociology, political science, or history of science that includes a discussion of empires and colonization, social Darwinism and its implications, or a history of Central Africa during the last part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, could find much to discuss not only of history but also of the current plight of the Congo and Central Africa today.

The story of Ota Benga's life from his "rescue" by Samuel Phillips Verner in the Congo is the place to start because it is compelling and the more poignant as it puts a face to the horror that is generally referred to in *Heart of Darkness*. As readers of *Heart of Darkness*, we see what the narrator sees, while the Ota Benga story gives us two specific individuals whose lives were directly affected by Leopold's Free Congo. Ota Benga's life story begs us to examine the worldwide acceptance of imperialism, with its associated paternalistic arrogance found in all facets of society including, and perhaps more explicitly, in science as well as in commerce. Racism is the pervasive result as it feeds on imperialism and arrogance. People, as well as natural resources and cultural artifacts, all become commodities, the loot of the empire.

In the Introduction to his text, Bradford asks the significant question:

Who was Ota Benga? Elf, dwarf, cannibal, wildman, savage loose in the metropolis, beyond ape but not quite human, stunted, retarded, incomplete,

someone to gawk at, tease, put in cages, ridicule—these are among the contemporary descriptions of him. Conspicuously absent is the possibility that he was just as evolved as President Roosevelt, say, or Thomas Edison. It was difficult to entertain the proposition that he and his people were as fully and authentically human as J. P Morgan or Andrew Carnegie. It was nearly inconceivable that Ota Benga might be just as curious about the anthropologists who bedeviled him as they were about him. (Bradford, p. xix)

Ota Benga was brought to the United States by Samuel Phillips Verner, along with four other Pygmies, most of whom were from the Batwa tribe in the Congo. Verner met Ota Benga during his second expedition to the Congo in 1903 when his mission was to secure Pygmies to be displayed at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. Needing a guide through the dense forests of the Congo, Verner found Ota Benga who was being kept as a slave by the Public Guard, who had captured him. Ota Benga was a hunter and had been out hunting for an elephant, the greatest prize for his community. Successful in his hunt, he ran back to the village. Instead of sharing his good news, he found his wife and children slaughtered.¹ In a misguided attempt to vent his rage upon the Public Guard, he was taken prisoner and then was sold to the slave market where Verner found him. Ota Benga was purchased with a bag of salt and a bolt of cloth; thus, Verner saved him from a life of slavery and slow death.

The four Pygmies were exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 along with many other indigenous people from around the world. In this "gathering of the tribes" as Bradford (p.1) dubbed the World's Fair, all were supposed to wear their native dress, live in the villages designed for them, and be on view to the visitors at the fair. The scientists tested and

¹ About the same time, Geronimo, with whom Ota Benga was to become friends in St. Louis, lost his mother, wife and three children to slaughter by the Mexicans. He dedicated his life to revenge, was eventually captured by the US cavalry and was also on display in St. Louis. As fate would have it, they met in St. Louis. Geronimo made and gave Ota Benga an arrowhead, which was later claimed to be one of his prized possessions, but after his death, it was never found in his possessions (Bradford, p.14-16).

measured them, all in the name of science.² When the fair ended and after some travels around the United States, all of the Pygmies were returned to the Congo, including Ota Benga, who then asked to come back to the States because he had nothing left to stay for in the Congo. He also wanted to remain with his friend, Verner, whom he called “Fwela,” which means leader. He returned to the States with Verner, who also amassed quite a number of African artifacts with the understanding that the Museum of Natural History in New York would purchase them. When the museum officials decided not to buy them, Verner was left penniless and abandoned Ota Benga in New York.³ He thought that Ota Benga could work as a caretaker at the Bronx Zoo. At first, Ota Benga had free run of the Museum of Natural History, where he was housed, but he was moved to an apartment at the zoo after he threw a chair in the direction of Mrs. Guggenheimer, a major patron of the museum. Ota Benga was dressed in a white suit and became a major draw at the zoo with the patrons often taunting and teasing him. At some point, it was decided that he should be put on exhibit in the monkey cages. Hundreds of people were said to come to the zoo for the exhibit. Newspapers carried the story and brought much attention to his plight.

Several Black clergymen were quite offended and secured his release into their custody. Ota Benga eventually was taken to the Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia, where he was to be a student. Although he was a reasonably good student, he did not like school and was given a job in a tobacco warehouse instead. Although he was a full-grown man, he was never perceived to be an adult, not even by the clergymen who claimed him nor the teachers who

² See. Bradford, Chapter 10, “Anthropology Days” pp.113-126 for a good discussion of these measures.

³ Verner could not take him to South Carolina because he was afraid that he would be accused of holding a slave, and he also thought that South Carolina was not ready for an African who stood 4’8’’ and weighed less than one hundred pounds (Bradford, p.137).

taught him. He spent his days working and playing with the children, teaching them to fish and hunt with spears. He was even placed in the home of poet Anne Spencer, with the goal of teaching him how to be civilized. Unhappy that he was unable to return to the Congo, and without his friend, Samuel Phillips Verner, who was never allowed to see him again as a condition of his release from the zoo and his stay in Lynchburg, Ota Benga grew despondent. During the spring Equinox of 1916, he built a bonfire, put on his native dress, danced around the fire and then shot himself with a stolen revolver. He is buried in Lynchburg although the location of his grave remains uncertain.

Phillips Verner Bradford⁴ is the grandson and namesake of Samuel Phillips Verner, the man who brought Ota Benga to the United States. Having inherited his grandfather's papers, Dr. Bradford wrote the story based on Verner's diaries, letters, and publications. Verner was a very smart but complex and conflicted man who at once could show great insight and then disintegrate into mental illness. Following his graduation from the University of South Carolina, where he was a brilliant student, Verner broke mentally, becoming somewhat delusional (Bradford, p.69). He recovered from his first breakdown, worked on the railroad (learning skills that would stand him in good stead later in Africa), and then his family secured a teaching position for him at Stillman Institute, where William Sheppard, the well respected missionary, had studied. Fascinated by the work of David Livingston, schooled in the newly evolving science of anthropology with its social Darwinian focus, Verner decided to become a missionary at the Congo Mission at Luebo.

According to Bradford,

⁴ Bradford is an adjunct professor at the Colorado School of Mines and owns Sunrise Ventures, a firm that specializes in helping people with innovative ideas in technology to further develop and market their ideas.

Verner had a good grasp of rhetoric and classical languages; considerable amounts of Shakespeare committed to memory; a mind equally drawn to evangelism and evolutionism, Livingston and Darwin; ambition to be a leader (to “direct the industries, to guide the counsels”) of at least a part of the world; a ten-point manifesto for African development; first-hand knowledge of railroading; the arrogance of a lord; the racial attitudes of the day riddled deep within his soul; and a sympathy for the oppressed matched only by respect for their oppressors. (p.72)

With no training as a missionary or as a minister, Verner answered the call from the Reverend William Henry Sheppard for help in Africa. His first trip occurred in 1895, and he traveled with missionary papers, having secured them based on his family’s high status in the Presbyterian Church. After taking a required test in theology, he traveled as the Rev. S. P. Verner, African Missionary, securing the papers in one day. His traveling companion was Reverend Phipps, a Black missionary.

During this first expedition to the Congo, two life-changing events happened to the newly minted missionary. He contracted malaria, which was to make him miserable the rest of his life, and he met William Henry Sheppard, who inspired him for the rest of his life. After meeting Sheppard and listening to his inspired sermons, Verner never doubted the need for integration in the United States, and he no longer approved of the Jim Crow laws, at least while he was in Africa. He so admired Sheppard and relished his first-hand accounts of how he had been accepted by the natives, the Belgians, and the traders.

Ever the adventurer and always on the outlook for treasures, at the invitation of Ndombe, a major tribal chief, Verner traveled deep into the Congolese forests. Despite warnings that such a trip was far too dangerous for a white man, Verner not only made the journey, but he also stayed far longer than his mission wanted him to stay. Using his missionary zeal, he also managed at one point to interfere with the Public Guard, who came to steal ivory

from Ndombe's village, holding them up by preaching and making them repeat hymns, even caning one of them who was attempting to kidnap a woman and was dragging her away. The Guards left in an attempt to get away from the mad man, but this event empowered Verner forever in this village.

He saw a wizened small person and asked what was wrong with the child only to learn that the person was from a nearby tribe of small people. He immediately recognized that he had just found the famed pygmy tribe referred to in the scientific literature and even described by such ancient writers as Herodotus. From a scientific point of view, little was known about them, and the anthropologist in him came out. Verner studied and lived among the Batwa for nearly two years. He decided that they were humans and determined to educate the rest of the scientific world about them. He became, in the eyes of the scientific community, the most educated person regarding the Batwa tribe. In this way, he had a story to tell that put him in the right place to locate the human commodities for the World's Fair.

Students reading Conrad's Marlow in the *Heart of Darkness* can consider the cold detachment when the character describes seeing some natives in the Congo for the first time, detachedly recounting the horrible stories, such as the sight of the chain gang as he arrives at the company station (Conrad, p. 51).

Verner reported similarly when first describing the boat he traveled on with its top deck which housed the captain, first officer, and six white passengers, while the lower deck housed the workers and native passengers:

The black crew and native passengers are crowded on the lower deck, and sometimes as many as thirty or forty natives are massed together amidships. They lie, or squat down, squeezed in like sardines in a tin, with their bundles of clothing and food, and perhaps a goat, pig, monkey or dog, so that movement among them

when the vessel is in motion is with much difficulty. Meanwhile, they keep up an incessant jabbering, laughing, singing, drumming, and occasional quarreling. Some of them strike their heads upon the heated steam pipes and set up a squall, which they soon learn to repress under the lash of the stern Bangala overseer, a ferocious giant, who stands a grim sentinel over the rest, holding a fearful instrument of torture made of a piece of a hippopotamus hide, shaped like a whip, and called a chicot, like a policeman's club, ready for business.

The blacks on board are either the crew or passengers. The passengers are usually soldiers being carried from one post to another, or the employees of trading companies, and rarely a native traveling on his own account. Sometimes these colored passengers number as many as a hundred or more, when the crowding and confusion are indescribable. They live by day on the open deck, and when night comes must go ashore and camp. . . .(Verner, p.74)

A common theme running through the texts is the acceptance, even the respect for imperialism. The white man's perspective is obvious at first in Bradford's account of his grandfather, but as time goes on Verner comes to understand both sides better. In contrast, Conrad's Marlow never sees the evils of his imperialistic journey. He talks about collecting ivory as a "trade," while the character, Kurtz, makes no pretense that he has to beat and destroy the natives to get his riches. Only Kurtz and Charlie Marlow have names; otherwise, we meet the lawyer, the agent, the traders, the pilgrims, and the references to the native Africans are included in the most aloof and impersonal terms. The natives are described as machines, beasts of burden⁵, treated impersonally as they are mere conveyors of white man's wealth –

⁵ Verner gives us a similar glimpse of the commoditization of humans upon his arrival in Central Africa, although he appears to be more sympathetic:

The average settler needs about three thousand pounds of imported goods per year, for the first three years, and at least one thousand annually thereafter for personal use, until agriculture and manufactures are well established. The trader needs about ten tons, sometimes disposing of as much as thirty tons. Until the steamboat and railway came, all this transportation was done on the heads of the native Africans. It was a heavy burden for them, and was a potent factor in causing the slave trade, besides leading to the physical decline and premature death of the poor porters. Doubtless mules can be used for this purpose when an adequate effort is made to raise them, but as long as an African cost ten dollars and carried sixty pounds of goods two hundred miles in a fortnight, with a ration of fifty cents a week, no one saw fit to try the mule. (Verner, p.45-46)

rubber, ivory, and slaves, all traded for rum, if payment occurred at all. Said one traveler to Samuel Verner:

“You see, Mr. Verner, I am a trader with native Africans. I have to sell them immense quantities of rum of the vilest quality in exchange for their goods, although I know the stuff ruins whole tribes of them. But suppose I stop selling rum; then my rivals keep it up, the company I serve calls me a fool for my conscience, I lose my position, and am thrown back on England without work, and drift into poverty. There are millions of cases like mine all over the world. What am I to do? As a missionary, you are not tried that way.” (Verner, p. 23)

Imperialism objectifies and thus makes it acceptable to disregard the humanity of individuals. Ota Benga’s story, Verner’s adventures, the excitement generated by Ota Benga’s life at the Museum of National History and at the Bronx Zoo were all chronicled and fed by the newspapers⁶ in the most bombastic terms, all within an environment that Mitch Keller, a *New York Times* reporter calls, an “orgy of racism” of the worst kind.⁷ The lesson we learn from both texts is the depth to which we can fall when we fail to see the humanity of all people and when we believe that the collection of wealth is justified by any means.

No area of life is exempt. Interestingly, from the perspective of the science of the day, all indigent persons, or foreigners for that matter, were considered to be specimens for social and scientific study. In his visit to the doctor, Marlow is asked to agree to have his head measured, in the name of science. He is even told that the doctor likes to measure the “crania of those going out there” before and after, although he admits that he does not see them on their return. (Conrad, pp. 46-47). Taking measurements was part of the physical examinations of the time; head shape, size, distances between eyes, nose bridge, and jaw sets, were all

⁶ Bradford’s text includes accounts from the *New York Times* and other leading newspapers that chronicled some of Verner’s trips and described the exhibits at the World’s Fair, and Ota Benga’s antics in the Zoo in an Appendix that shows the unabashed racism of the day.

⁷ Discussion, October 25, 2007 during “Lynchburg, Ota Benga and the Empowerment of the Pygmies: An International Conference.”

important to know. These measurements were also taken on the Pygmies at the World's Fair, and included tests of color vision as well. Any differences from the white man were seen by the scientists as evidence of their inferiority.

Throughout all three texts, life in Africa is filled with illness, death, and misery. Ironically, since there were few if any doctors in Central Africa, treatment fell to the missionaries, their wives, or to the natives. During the journeys, references are made to the deaths of natives, savages, slaves, white men, and adventurers. Faceless, nameless people die, and others simply take their place; they, in turn, live in misery and suffering. Marlow gets his ship because the previous captain died. The manager gets his job because he has served 3 three-year terms without getting sick.

Once when various tropical diseases had laid low almost every 'agent' in the station, he was heard to say, 'Men who come out here should have no entrails.' He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping. (Conrad, p. 59)

Similarly, Verner was able to become a missionary so quickly because so many missionaries had already died, and more help was needed in Leubo. On his first trip, Verner contracted malaria and frequently suffered serious and prolonged relapses. According to his grandson, his frequent ravings were attributed to either malaria or his mental illness. Once he fell into an animal trap, slit his leg on a spear dipped in poison to kill the fallen game, and was near death until one of guides sucked out the poison and applied local potions that cured him. His life was often saved by the natives.

Of note in the texts is the constant fear of the unknown, such that even the managers and white leaders become mentally deranged as they are physically incapacitated. Madness is linked in both texts; Conrad's Kurtz is reported deranged although he is seen somehow as a

genius; Verner was a genius by all accounts, but he was prone to delusions. Ironically, his saving grace was the authorities whom he had to answer to, while Kurtz had no such authority and therefore, no social context to monitor his thinking.

All the sources contain constant references to religion, belief, and superstition. The missionaries believe that their role is to save the heathens, a role that could be argued as an example of White paternalistic and imperialistic arrogance. Similarly, Verner agrees that the missionaries should be teaching religion, taking the “truth” to the natives who are seen as superstitious and ignorant. Nevertheless, Verner rails against the inefficiency and incompetence of the missionaries. He finds them ignorant and imparting as much superstition as religion in some cases. For example, one missionary refuses to give quinine on the Sabbath because “work” is forbidden on the Sabbath, the suffering of those afflicted with malaria notwithstanding. While living among the Batwa, Verner comes to respect their customs and them as people, but he never questions his fundamental calling in being in Africa. He is clear in his thinking that “Christianity and civilization go hand in hand” and that colonization is the only way to develop Africa, which he is certain, could become a leader of world commerce one day. So no matter his conflicting experiences, he still wants to Christianize, civilize, and colonize Central Africa (Verner, p. 481).

In his novella, Conrad also criticizes religion. In the beginning his sentiments are not really clear, but his juxtapositions of the “pilgrims” versus the “natives” and of “those on a mission” versus those who will be “missioned to” suggest that Conrad disapproves of Whites foisting their own religious views on Africans. In the end, Conrad presents the pilgrims as somewhat bloodthirsty with as much capacity for evil as the “heathens” because the pilgrims

are carrying guns and shooting the natives with no scruples. The narrator, Marlow, tells us about how the character Kurtz, whose mother was half-English and father half-French but who is nonetheless a European full-blood, has been sent by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to the Congo to make a report. This high-brow assignment leads to his undoing in the end, but he does manage to write seventeen pages before his

“nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, . . . But it was a beautiful piece of writing. The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings -- we approach them with the might of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc., etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. (Conrad, p.92)

Marlow tingles with the awareness of the power of the elevated position that Kurtz has established for himself among the Africans when Kurtz is able to proclaim that he now fears neither any deity nor Satan. The character, Kurtz, the white chronicler of evils in the darkness, sets himself up to be worshipped by the natives. At the end of his life, Kurtz could only lament the horror of it all. What is the horror of it all to Kurtz? Is it human sacrifices? Or could it be that because Kurtz lacks any controlling opposition or moral authority, he has descended into madness? Conrad leaves us to wonder.

What can students take away from these readings? Have we learned anything about ourselves and the “Others”? Unfortunately, the continuing situation in the Congo today, as well as in other countries in Central Africa, makes us wonder what has changed. Despite many attempts to establish a free and independent country, several constitutions, significant foreign aid, and the presence of United Nations peace keepers, for many, particularly members of the

Batwa Tribe, there is no citizenship status. According to the International Rescue Committee, an estimated 45,000 people die each month in the Congo, all from disease, starvation, factional wars, and atrocities committed particularly against women and children.⁸ And so the narrative of *Heart of Darkness*, written more than a century ago, the sad story of Ota Benga, and the travels of a well intentioned missionary/anthropologist should make us question who we really are, even if we are only doing so from the security of our homes and classrooms!

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⁸ <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0198161.html>. Information Please® Database, © 2008 Pearson Education, Inc. All rights reserved.