



Cleveland State University
EngagedScholarship@CSU

History Faculty Publications

History Department

3-2015

"Town of God": Ota Benga, the Batetela Boys, and the Promise of Black America

Karen Sotiropoulos
k.sotiropoulos@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Publisher's Statement

This work remains under copyright © 2015 Journal of World History. It can be accessed here:
<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/611604>

Repository Citation

Sotiropoulos, Karen, ""Town of God": Ota Benga, the Batetela Boys, and the Promise of Black America" (2015). *History Faculty Publications*. 91.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub/91

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

“Town of God”: Ota Benga, the Batetela Boys, and the Promise of Black America

Karen Sotiropoulos

Journal of World History, Volume 26, Number 1, March 2015, pp. 41-76
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jwh/summary/v026/26.1.sotiropoulos.html>

“Town of God”: Ota Benga, the Batetela Boys, and the Promise of Black America¹

KAREN SOTIROPOULOS
Cleveland State University

“Even your dog knows the homes of your friends.”
—Batetela proverb²

WHEN some New Yorkers asked the central African man Ota Benga how he viewed their country during his 1906 travels, he replied “Me no like America: me like St. Louis.” Then on his second trip across the Atlantic, Benga had come back to the United States in search of Western alliances that he may have envisioned helping his people in the Congo survive the brutal colonial rule of Belgium’s King Leopold. Since his brief stay in New York City included being abandoned to the exhibit space at the Museum of Natural History and a stint caged in the Bronx Zoological Gardens as part of a display in the Primate House, it is no surprise that he despised the America he encountered there. At the zoo, white crowds numbering forty thousand gawked at and taunted the twenty-three-year-old Benga, who shared a cage with a monkey, and more than once a group of visitors chased him around the grounds jeering at him, tripping him, and

¹ I would like to thank the Cleveland State University Faculty Scholarship Initiative for funding that helped me complete the research for this project and the anonymous readers at the *Journal of World History* for their comments and suggestions.

² <http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/weekly-african-proverbs/246-2000-weekly-african-proverbs.html> (Accessed 19 September 2014).

poking him in the ribs. His release came at the behest of a group of black American ministers, but only after he had spent a month in the zoo and then found himself ferried by the ministers to New York's black orphan asylum, where he would be housed with children.³

The more surprising comment then is that he actually liked St. Louis—a city where he spent even more time on exhibit, to much larger crowds and where spectators laughed at him, sometimes prodding at him with their umbrellas.⁴ His initial transatlantic travel was made possible in 1904 by this city's World's Fair, one of several expositions in Europe and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century that mixed commerce with anthropology to exhibit the world's people and market colonial rule. Unlike at the New York zoo, where he was caged alone, in St. Louis, Benga spent time with other Africans and Native Americans who were housed together in what was called the Anthropology Village—a type of display with at least two decades of historical precedent. Antwerp had inaugurated its first Congolese village by bringing thirteen men from central Africa to Belgium for its 1885 exposition, the same year that the Berlin Conference solidified Leopold's acquisition of the Congo Free State. In 1893, Chicago's Columbian Exposition similarly sought to celebrate four hundred years of Western "progress"—or rather conquest and social Darwinist belief—by putting the world's people on display arranged in a "sliding scale of humanity" with "Darkest Africa" at the very bottom. Four years later, Belgium brought over 250 Congolese for exhibits in conjunction with its Exposition Internationale de Bruxelles, the increased number somewhat mirroring the escalation of Leopold's decade of murderous plunder in Africa. At this exhibit he separated his subjects into *villages nègres* and *village civilisé*, propagandizing his rule as a civilizing mission and in effect "selling the Congo" to Western Europe.⁵

³ *New York Times*, 18 September 1906 and 29 September 1906, reprinted in Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, *Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 269–271.

⁴ *St. Louis Republic*, 6 August 1904.

⁵ Quotations are from Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65; and Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 36–41. For more on U.S. fairs and racist ideologies, see, among others, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Nancy J. Parezo, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2007); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

In reality, Leopold's establishment of the Congo Free State was one of Europe's most deadly campaigns in the late nineteenth-century scramble for the continent—a wave of empire building that left only Liberia and Ethiopia free from Europe's formal colonial grip. While all of Africa felt the brunt of Western imperialism, few colonial wars matched the ferocity of Belgium's King Leopold and his Force Publique—a paramilitary police corps numbering around nineteen thousand and constituting the most powerful army in central Africa. Composed of white (mostly Belgian) officers, the Force Publique relied on black troops that included some mercenaries from Zanzibar and British West Africa, but was overwhelmingly made up of conscripts and captives indigenous to the Congo. In *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild shows in vivid detail how Leopold's Congo Free State relied on threats of death and dismemberment as well as widespread forced migration to coerce labor. In search of ivory and rubber, the European invasion brought with it the catastrophic spread of disease, famine, and destruction of local economies, decimating indigenous peoples. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately assess the numbers killed, Hochschild and several other historians estimate that Leopold's rule left roughly half of the Congo's 20 million inhabitants dead before World War I.⁶ Still, Leopold never set foot in the Congo, and Europeans mostly encountered the colony through expositions like the 1897 one in Belgium where more than 1.2 million visitors viewed the Congolese in an exhibit whose signs warned them, "Do not feed the blacks. They are already being fed."⁷

As Leopold had in Antwerp, the United States directly promoted its own racial beliefs and imperial interests in St. Louis in 1904 by including a large display of Filipinos alongside that of Africans and Native Americans. Two years after the U.S. war to annex the Philippine Islands ended, St. Louis's Philippine Village opened—a forty-seven-acre site home to more than one thousand Filipinos from at

⁶ Adam Hochschild lays out the problems and ways of measuring the death toll in *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 123–124, 225–234. Also see James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 137–138, 150, 174–176; Maryinez Lyons, *The Colonial Disease: A Social History of Sleeping Sickness in Northern Zaire, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 2; David Northrup, *Beyond the Bend of the River, African Labor in Eastern Zaire, 1865–1940* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), chap. 3.

⁷ Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo*, 36–41.

least ten different ethnic groups. Just as Leopold depicted the Congolese to be in need of a European civilizing influence, the United States displayed Philippine Igorrots as a backward people who ate dog and would benefit from U.S. control. The domestic color line was on display as well, with Native Americans joining Benga's cohort from the Congo in the Anthropology Village and with the fair's inclusion of an "Old Plantation" exhibit then popular at U.S. World's fairs in which African American actors depicted a fictional life of black complacency in the antebellum South.⁸ Thus, the St. Louis fair well represented dominant racial ideologies in the United States a few years after expansionist wars in Asia inaugurated U.S. empire abroad, a little more than a decade after the massacre at Wounded Knee Creek signaled the nation's final conquest over Native Americans, and at a time when the pervasive terror of the lynch mob annihilated the possibility that the emancipation won in the Civil War might guarantee African Americans even the barest of civil liberties. With *Plessy v. Ferguson* rendering segregation constitutional in 1896, the highest court in the land made clear that Jim Crow would reign supreme and helped ensure that at the turn of the twentieth century, the United States remained a white supremacist nation joining Western Europe to expand its reach in a white hegemonic world. From the Berlin Conference that marked Europe's scramble for Africa through the post-World War II *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the United States, Western empires continued to grow unabated at the expense of black and brown lives around the world.⁹

One of eight men from the Congo, Ota Benga came to the Missouri fair in 1904 on a journey not unlike so many others of the world's colonized peoples and on a markedly different trip than the one the following year that left him alone and caged in New York. To look through Benga's eyes is to catch a glimpse of how colonized peoples made sense of this turn-of-the-century world where Atlantic crossings exposed them to New World visions that held decidedly different markers for home and nation, for slavery and freedom, for black and white. In an attempt to tell world history from below, this article draws

⁸ David Nasaw, *Going Out*, 74, 77; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 194–196; Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 20–26.

⁹ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 1; Gerald Horne, "Race from Power: US Foreign Policy and the General Crisis of White Supremacy," in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 45–67.

on the rich scholarship of the black past, theorizing a black world that was in essence always global and one that connects black peoples not by origins, but by similarity in experience, and not by a singular African diaspora, but by multiple diasporas and connections that transcend national and geographic boundaries.¹⁰

This telling of Benga attempts to rescue a human story from the anonymity of untold numbers, from the millions of Africans who died as Europe and the United States developed, from what black American journalist Keith Richburg named "the anonymity of mass death." When reporting on the 1994 Rwanda genocide, Richburg watched "a body every minute or two" float down the Kagera River, lamenting that each individual's story would remain unknown because "this is Africa, and they don't count the bodies in Africa." In light of the enormous fatality associated with Atlantic slavery, historians have started exploring how the vast numbers of dead informed the consciousness of the living. Marcus Rediker, for example, begins *The Slave Ship: A Human History* by describing captivity through the eyes of an Igbo woman who witnessed fellow captives die; in *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, Michael Gomez argues that black American identity emerged, in part, out of the shared struggle of Middle Passage survival; and Stephanie Smallwood not only counts the bodies in *Saltwater Slavery*, but assesses how each death resonated with the living. She empha-

¹⁰ This article grew out of the past two decades of historiographical shifts in the fields of black, African diaspora, U.S., and world history, during which scholars of the African diaspora moved to consider questions of black transnationalism, Americanists began placing the United States in a global context, and world historians began to shift their focus away from writing the world's societies in isolation and toward analyzing world historical connections (as well as more fully including Africa). For the black transnational vision, see especially Lisa Brock, "Questioning the Diaspora: Hegemony, Black Intellectuals, and Doing International History from Below," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 24, no. 2 (1996): 9–12; Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883–1950," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1045–1077; Robin D. G. Kelley and Tiffany Ruby Patterson, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): 11–45; and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), which was pathbreaking in opening up new questions about race and Atlantic world histories. For U.S. and world history, see, for example, Michael Adas, "Out of Step with Time: United States Exceptionalism in an Age of Globalization" and Andreas Eckert, "Fitting Africa into World History: A Historiographical Exploration," in *Writing World History, 1800–2000*, ed. Benedikt Stuchey and Eckhardt Fuchs (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137–154, 255–270; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Jerry H. Bentley, "The Task of World History" in *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–13.

sizes, for instance, that fifty-one deaths aboard a ship holding 423 captives, meant “some-one died fifty-one times.” Uncovering the voices of African witnesses to what Adam Hochschild named “a death toll of Holocaust dimensions” is extraordinarily difficult, but the landscape of countless people killed provides a macabre background to the ways that Benga and other colonized people came together.¹¹ Toward the end of Africa’s long Atlantic age and before the rise of twentieth-century black nationalist and Pan-Africanist visions, Benga, like so many black and brown peoples around the world, encountered a color line marked by the murderous colonialism of the West. This interpretation of Benga and his cohort asks how they defined themselves as connected to an international black population, how they encountered racial designations, and how much they may have “imagined” themselves as a “community” as they found a common enemy in white Westerners and theorized what it meant to be black.¹² Above all, this story is about the making of race in the modern world.

Most accounts of Benga are based on Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume’s fascinating and imaginative (if undertheorized and largely unsourced) 1992 biography *Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo*.¹³ Co-authored by the grandson of Benga’s white benefactor, Samuel Philips Verner, the book was groundbreaking in uncovering Verner’s story of African exploration and for introducing Benga. The tale, however, is one told almost entirely from evidence produced by Verner, a failed missionary, makeshift anthropologist, and American opportunist descended from American slave owners and whose interest in Africa spawned from reading the adventures of famed missing Scottish missionary David Livingstone. Verner’s ultimate goal had been to earn a concession of land from Leopold with whom he had forged bonds

¹¹ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 365; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 4; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007); Keith B. Richburg, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 99–101; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 152.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹³ In *Ota Benga*, Bradford and Blume reprint selections of some published primary sources in the book’s appendix, but fail to cite any sources throughout the book’s narrative. There is no full scholarly treatment of Benga, but others who draw on Bradford and Blume’s book include Campbell, *Middle Passages*; Robert B. Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002); and Carrie Allen McCray, *Ota Benga under My Mother’s Roof: Poems* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012).

during his first trip to the Congo in 1894. The Belgian king had a long history of seeking ties with other whites across the Atlantic, the most prominent of whom was undoubtedly Henry Morton Stanley—best known for locating the man whose stories had inspired Verner and for uttering the phrase, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." Stanley and Livingstone's legend, along with the normalization of violence in the Congo Free State, may well have convinced Verner a decade later that his plans were more virtuous than exploitative, even as his later abandonment of Benga to the zoo suggested otherwise.

In concert with fair exhibits, Stanley's views of Africa dominated the lens through which Verner, and most Europeans, encountered the continent. His travel accounts make clear the white Atlantic bonds that helped Leopold secure his kingdom as well as foretold the merciless cruelty that came to define the Congo Free State. An impoverished Welsh national who had arrived in the United States in 1859 at the age of eighteen, Stanley had the rare distinction of having fought on both sides of the American Civil War before heading to Africa—for the first time in 1869, funded by the *New York Herald* to locate Livingstone and for the second, a decade later, to stake out territory for Leopold. Named Bula Matari (breaker of stones)—more for the way he treated laborers than for breaking the stones necessary for building the railway—Stanley's abuse of porters was notorious among Africans, a viciousness he documented himself. "They are faithless, lying, thievish, indolent knaves," he explained. "The best punishment is that of irons, because without wounding, disfiguring, or torturing the body, it inflicts shame and discomfort."¹⁴ Still, he regularly sentenced any who resisted to numerous lashings, and while there is no way to verify the numbers slaughtered, recent Stanley biographers estimate that his expedition killed at the very least "several hundred, if not several thousand" Africans while exploring what he referred to as the "unpeopled continent." The death toll may have been higher still since his artillery included at least "510 Remington rifles, 100,000 rounds of ammunition, two tons of gunpowder" along with "50 Winchester repeating rifles . . . 50,000 rounds of Winchester ammunition" and a Maxim machine gun capable of firing anywhere from three hundred to six hundred rounds per minute.¹⁵ When Stanley's work was complete, Belgian

¹⁴ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 138–140, 151; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 31, 49–50, 67–68; Lyons, *The Colonial Disease*, 13–20.

¹⁵ Daniel Liebowitz and Charles Pearson, *The Last Expedition: Stanley's Mad Journey through the Congo* (New York: Norton, 2005), 42, 312.

administrators became the new “Bula Matari”—a nomenclature that hauntingly became synonymous with government and administration in Congolese languages.¹⁶

Neither Verner nor the lot of American missionaries in Africa came anywhere near matching Stanley in his barbarity, but all relied on an already established colonial system of forced labor with varying degrees of acceptance as they navigated the land. Verner did not survive as a missionary, but he remained committed to return to the Congo for his business interests. His replacement, the white missionary William M. Morrison, actually played a significant role in alerting the West to Congo Free State carnage by sending reports from the region to Edmund Morel, the British journalist credited with exposing Leopold’s horrors. In part due to Morel’s publications, the Belgian king faced increasing international pressure for human rights abuses by 1904—a situation that Verner and St. Louis fair manager William McGee exploited by promising to boost Leopold’s image through their U.S.-sponsored exhibit. Since Verner had returned from his first trip to the Congo announcing that he had befriended a “pygmy” community, McGee commissioned him for \$5,500 to bring back “pygmies” for the fair. As Leopold had done in Antwerp and the Americans in Chicago, the two men cloaked their propagandistic and commercial goals by explaining that they were transporting “volunteers” to St. Louis for reasons of “scientific investigation.”¹⁷

Thus far, accounts of Ota Benga have followed Bradford and Blume’s approach in *The Pygmy and the Zoo* and focused their understanding of the African man on his white American relationships, his stays in the United States, and a rather static view of Africa with the reification of Benga’s identity as “pygmy” enshrined by the book title. No doubt, the narrative of Benga’s American experiences is compelling: An African man performed at the fair, was displayed at the zoo, and then, in 1916, after finding some respite in the environs of a black college in Lynchburg, Virginia, ended his life by putting a bullet in his heart—perhaps in some way making his own spiritual return home. This article turns away from how Benga’s experiences fit into white

¹⁶ George Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People’s History* (New York: Zed Books, 2002), 54 n. 11.

¹⁷ Correspondence, 6 February 1904, Box 1, Samuel Phillips Verner Papers, 1880–1943 and 1985, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC (SPV-SC); Correspondence, McGee to Verner, 21 October 1903, Reprinted in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 240–241; Correspondence, McGee to Verner, 1 April 1904, Box 1, SPV-SC.

spectatorship and Western narratives of race, however, and situates him among his fellow travelers as a man looking out from central Africa to show how St. Louis seemed to foretell for him the possibility of seeking new comrades, training, and knowledge with which to save his people by any means necessary from the throes of European colonialism.

Benga's encounters with the West began not in St. Louis, after all, but rather brutally on his home continent when the Force Publique killed his wife and annihilated his village while he had been away hunting elephant—the animal whose meat, hide, and tusks had long sustained many central African peoples. As far as the record shows, Leopold's soldiers then whipped Benga until he told them stories of ivory and marched him for many days before selling him to the Baschilele, an ethnic group known for both resistance to and complicity with the colonial regime, not unlike so many others during Africa's Atlantic age.¹⁸ Leopold's troops had seized all ivory that could be found and forbade indigenous Africans from selling or delivering their bounty to anyone other than Congo Free State agents. Since commissions for the Europeans rose exponentially depending on how little they paid and monetary transactions were not allowed, State agents forced Africans—most often at gunpoint—to accept cloth and beads as payment for the tusks while leaving elephant meat to rot in the sun. By the turn of the century, Leopold had depleted the accumulated stocks of dead ivory and had so dominated the market that Benga may well have been one of the last of his generation of specialized elephant hunters captured by the Force Publique.¹⁹ Although he eventually died on U.S. soil, Benga can just as easily be understood as one of the incalculable millions who perished under Leopold. Exiled from the Congo and caged in America, he was ultimately unable to marshal the resources he had discovered in St. Louis to make his way home—a place that in all truth no longer existed.

¹⁸ Bradford and Blume recount Benga's elephant hunting, the Force Publique slaughter of his village, and his captivity with plausible accuracy in *Ota Benga*, 104–106. See also Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 118; Kairn A. Klieman, "The Pygmies Were Our Compass": *Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003), 118–119.

¹⁹ Bradford and Blume's dream sequence has Benga asking why they would "leave the bees and take the honey"; *Ota Benga*, 56; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 101–102, 115–118, 124; Klieman, "The Pygmies Were Our Compass," 190–191; Northrup, *Beyond the Bend of the River*, 49–50.

KONDOLA AND NEW WORLD VISIONS

From the moment in 1904 when Benga encountered Verner in Africa he would have had reason to imagine that the United States might provide the resources necessary to resist Leopold's campaign of terror. For Benga did not meet Verner alone, but rather with John Kondola, a nineteen-year-old Batetela man Verner had brought to the United States from the Congo four years earlier, and Alonzo Edmiston, an African American missionary Verner hired to assist him on his quest in enticing Africans to St. Louis. Both of these men were connected to William Henry Sheppard, the most established African American missionary in the Congo, and to the Stillman Institute, the Presbyterian black college in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, that had sponsored Verner's first trip to Africa in 1895 as well as Sheppard's mission. Edmiston had been inspired to go to the Congo after having read Sheppard's account of his mission, and Verner's offer enabled him to travel there where he would remain for more than thirty years.²⁰ It is difficult to know what Benga thought of this diverse entourage—especially since his freedom from captivity with the Baschilele came through some sort of purchase.²¹ But, in the presence of the two black men, Verner probably appeared as but one representative of a decade-old mission sustained by black Americans, supportive of Africans, and tied to similar institutions across the Atlantic. This association apparently made sense for Benga to promote, since he left with the men from America and spent the next several months traveling in the Congo convincing seven more men to sail to St. Louis. The African cohort ultimately included a mix of Batwa, Bakuba, and Baluba men, along with Benga and Kondola, who served as interpreter and guide.²²

²⁰ "To Whom it may Concern: Boma, January 29, 1904," Correspondence attesting that Kondola and Edmiston were in Congo and traveling to Matadi in January 1904, Folder dated January 1904, Box 1, SPV-SC; Samuel P. Verner, "The Adventures of an Explorer in Africa: How the Batwa Pygmies Were Brought to the St. Louis Fair," *Harper's Weekly*, October 1904, 1618–1619; Julia Lake Kellersperberger, *A Life for the Congo: The Story of Althea Brown Edmiston* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1947), 74–75; Manuscript notes on Edmiston, Folder 240, Box 3, SPV-SC.

²¹ William H. Sheppard had qualms about participating in the slave trade through purchase, but abandoning captives was not an acceptable alternative. See Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 158.

²² It is hard to pinpoint the exact ethnic identities of the men, because at times all were referred to as "pygmies" in the press and there are conflicting report as to some of the ethnicities, especially in regard to Benga himself, who is most often referred to as Batwa, but is listed as "Badinga" and "Chiri Chiri." Parezo and Fowler name him "a member of the

Thus Benga first came to America as part of a diverse group of African men who had left the Congo for a time, but who were somewhat united by the murderous past they shared. Under Leopold's vicious regime, so many indigenous people faced a merciless predicament, in which "volunteering" to serve the Force Publique quite literally meant making a choice to be "with the hunters rather than the hunted."²³ Seen in isolation on American shores, Benga's encounters with the West seem to revolve around Verner, the World's Fair, the zoo, and white spectators, but his confrontation with Western imperialism had much more in common with Kondola's encounters as he too had come face-to-face with Leopold's horror when the Force Publique routed his region the previous decade. At just ten years old, Kondola had escaped conscription as a soldiers' porter to find sanctuary with nine other Batetela boys on the grounds of the Presbyterian mission where he would eventually meet Verner and embark on his first transatlantic trek.

Kondola's childhood predicament was a story told many times over in the Congo Free State. Since at least the time of Henry Morton Stanley's travels, a mix of some paid but mostly conscripted porters serviced European exploration and conquest, a type of enslavement quickly accelerated by the Western appetite for ivory and rubber. In his 1903 book, *Pioneering in Central Africa*, Verner had written that Kondola and his cohort voluntarily "left their homes to accompany the soldiers, to carry food and otherwise serve their elders," but Verner's desire to promote Leopold's regime to the United States and to demonstrate his own abilities to educate a people deemed primitive most likely tempered his interpretations. William Morrison proclaimed Verner's stories to be "Munchausen romances," and other missionaries stationed at Luebo better explain the alleged voluntarism by recalling how they rescued children from kidnapers by bartering

Baschilele" rather than enslaved by them and also refer to Kassongo and Kondola as Batwa; *Anthropology*, 74–76. More, Kondola was often included as one of the men brought for display, making the count nine Africans (or "pygmies"). Kondola's labor contract with Verner stipulated that he would be "taking care of the 8 Africans." Correspondence, Box 1, 7 November 1904, SPV-SC; David Rowland Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Louisiana Purchase Exposition Co., 1904) lists Bakuba, Baluba, and Batwa men and names Benga as Badinga, 526. The labor contracts that exist for the men include names that differ from those on Francis's list; Folder dated 25–29 April 1904, Box 1, SPV-SC.

²³ Roger Casement, "The Congo Report," as quoted in Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 127.

“foreign goods” such as “a pair of scissors . . . a bandanna, a string of common beads, a cake of soap, and a pound of salt.”²⁴

In reality, as multiple accounts demonstrate, so-called porters were a captive labor force—the horror of which had to have been familiar to Verner, who had traveled hundreds of miles with the assistance of African porters.²⁵ Many were children no older than Kondola, whose youth did not exempt them from the harshness of service. One eyewitness wrote in 1902 that he saw “seven- to nine-year-olds each carrying a load of twenty-two pounds,” while a Congo Free State official recorded in his memoirs “a file of poor devils, chained by the neck, carried my trunks and boxes toward the dock.” A Belgian senator’s 1896 account described porters as “black, miserable with only a horribly filthy loin-cloth clothing . . . most of them sickly . . . beasts of burden . . . heading off to die from overwork.”²⁶ Thousand-mile marches became the norm as the Belgians sought to solve the problem of desertion by forcing the young men far from home. Of the three hundred porters conscripted in 1891 by District Commissioner Paul Lemarinel—the man Verner credited with bringing Kondola to the mission—not one returned from a forced six-hundred-mile march.²⁷ Even though roughly three quarters of the volunteers in chains died before they could be delivered to the Force Publique, the Belgians did not change course, but rather discussed the possibility of using lighter chains. Shackling the men together led to additional complications however much the chains weighed. Using the term for freedmen (*libéré*), one Belgian officer wrote, when “*libérés* . . . chained by the neck cross a bridge, if one falls off, he pulls the whole file off and it disappears.”²⁸

In addition to plentiful testimony of such forced marches, widespread reports of the use of the *chicotte*—a whip made of raw, sun-dried hippopotamus hide—make all too clear the coerced state of labor under Leopold. Twenty-five strokes with the *chicotte* could mean

²⁴ Samuel Phillips Verner, *Pioneering in Central Africa* (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903), 124; William M. Morrison “To Whom it May Concern,” Luebo, 1 July 1907, Reprinted in Robert Benedetto (ed.), *Presbyterian Reformers in Central Africa: A Documentary Account of the American Presbyterian Congo Mission and the Human Rights Struggle in the Congo, 1890–1918* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 244–245; Althea Brown Edmiston, “Maria Fearing: A Mother to African Girls,” in *Glorious Living: Informal Sketches of Seven Women Missionaries of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.*, ed. Sarah Lee Vinson Timmons (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church, 1937), 303.

²⁵ Verner, *Pioneering*; Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 150–151.

²⁶ As quoted in Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 119–120.

²⁷ Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 120; Verner, *Pioneering*, 124.

²⁸ As quoted in Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 130.

unconsciousness, and it was not uncommon to receive over one hundred strokes in beatings that were often fatal—beatings that Verner witnessed firsthand.²⁹ The ubiquity of captive labor made it possible for state officials to use terms like “freedman” or “militiaman” for recruits and allowed Verner, long familiar with the racist violence of the Jim Crow American South, to describe Kondola’s service as “voluntary.” After all, Verner, the “son of slave owners,” came from a region where the convict lease system that replaced slavery meant many black people still labored under the lash, and where reports emerged of the lynching of at least two black Americans every week—some involving white mobs numbering ten thousand or more.³⁰ Across the Atlantic, European heads of state had gathered in Berlin in 1885, proclaiming their purpose as one of ending African slave trading, while they enforced their own brutal labor practices. While language may have blurred the lines between freedom and slavery, it was the *chicotte* and the chain that ruled the way Western markets forever changed the lives of this cohort of Batetela youth. Along with Ota Benga, they faced the possibility of what could only be understood as a type of bound labor akin to slavery.

Western desire for ivory helped propel the mid nineteenth-century European invasion of central Africa, but by the time of Kondola’s abduction, rubber had come to define the era. There was still a significant demand for ivory, but with the discovery of rubber in the Congo in the 1880s and the adaptation of a bendable rubber that could be used to produce inflatable rubber tires in the 1890s, Western demand for the resource rose exponentially and quickly made the Congo ground zero for the international rubber trade, with the area surrounding Sheppard’s mission particularly rich in the resource. The shift in product changed labor requirements as well, which probably had a direct impact on Kondola’s parents’ disappearance. Rather than relying on large numbers of porters forced into service to transport ivory, rubber extraction required workers to disperse widely through the rainforest, climbing

²⁹ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 120–123; Northrup, *Beyond the Bend in the River*, 73; Verner, *Pioneering*, 78.

³⁰ For an overview of the transition to Jim Crow, see Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008). For descriptions of the numbers of lynchings and nature of mob violence, see the biographies of Ida B. Wells by Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), and Paula Giddings, *A Sword among Lions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), as well as many of Wells’s own writings, like *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: Age Print, 1892); Verner, *Pioneering*, 5.

trees and slashing vines with knives to collect the sap in buckets. They then had to dry the syrupy substance, a task that often left them no choice but to spread it on their own skin. “The first few times it is not without pain that man pulls it off the hairy parts of his body” wrote one Force Publique officer, assessing that since “(t)he native doesn’t like making rubber . . . (h)e must be compelled to do it.” To force Africans to the rubber vines, Leopold’s forces added amputations and kidnapping to their arsenal of chains and the *chicotte*. “To gather rubber in the district, wrote commissioner Charles Lemaire in 1908 after his retirement, “one must cut off hands, noses and ears.” On the use of hostages, a “semiofficial instruction book” distributed at “each state post” informed Leopold’s agents to kidnap women, children, and elders to hold them for a ransom of rubber, as if it was just one more duty for State agents to perform: “When you feel you have enough captives, you should choose among them an old person, preferably an old woman . . . (t)he chief, wanting to see his people set free, will usually decide to send representatives.”³¹ Kondola’s voluntary service occurred in this context with his orphaned status likely connected to this rout for rubber laborers.³²

With his childhood memories of colonial brutality and after having spent five years in the United States, Kondola mediated Benga’s first encounter with Verner in 1904. While no record exists as to what transpired between the two men, it is difficult to believe that their shared histories of life under Leopold did not play a significant role. A refugee from a childhood of ongoing war who had found safety among African American missionaries, Kondola offered Benga a vision of New World survival. More, Kondola’s people, the Batetela, were known to have led one of the longest lasting sustained rebellions against the colonial regime—a war that William Morrison worried might disturb plans to set up another mission station. Verner too wrote of the revolt, “the Baschilee [sic], Bachoko and Baluba, along with the Batetela resisted State rule,” revolts that alarmed “the commander of the post at Wissmann Falls,” because “his soldiers were also Batetela” and so he “managed to get the guns from most of them before they heard the news

³¹ Quotes are in Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 158–165; Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 172–173; Lyons, *The Colonial Disease*, 21–22; Northrup, *Beyond the Bend in the River*, 50–52; Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 61–64.

³² Verner wrote that after a Batetela rebellion there were more boys and women abandoned and distributed to missionaries in return for their labor. “An Educational Experiment with Cannibals,” *World’s Work* 4 (July 1902): 2289–2295.

and sent them into the bush on some pretext."³³ Rebellions like these were possible even in the face of the military might of Leopold's Force Publique, because troops were often divided into small garrisons—typically, several dozen black soldiers under one or two white officers. In the 1895 raid that began this decade of Batetela resistance, the rebels killed Mathieu Pelzer—a white commander notorious for a brutality that included doling out 125 lashes with the *chicotte*—and whose fatality provoked other officers to flee for their lives. Batetela forces led by a sergeant named Kandolo numbered as high as four hundred to five hundred, and the Force Publique lost hundreds of soldiers and porters, as well as fifteen white officers, in their efforts to suppress this revolt. While the state could claim victory in 1897 when they killed Kandolo, Batetela forces continued fighting at least until the end of Leopold's reign in 1908.³⁴ The shared memories of constant warfare, a dogged resistance to Belgian colonialism, and the peculiar mediating position of American missionaries quite likely shaped Kondola's and Benga's consciousness throughout the entirety of their Atlantic travels.

TOWN OF GOD

Around the time of the first recorded Batetela rebellion in 1895, Kondola had already escaped his service for the soldiers and was safe, along with nine other Batetela boys, at William Sheppard's Presbyterian mission. At ten years of age, Kondola was the youngest of the group. Closest to him in age was fourteen-year-old Kassongo Lutela, the young man who would eventually leave the mission with Kondola and Verner as they later made their way to New York.³⁵ Having been founded in 1891, the Luebo mission was well established by the time Kondola and his cohort of Batetela boys arrived, and at that time, only black missionaries worked there. Since the Presbyterians initially

³³ Correspondence, "The Situation of the African Expedition, April 30, 1904," to McGee, Box 1, SPV-SC; William M. Morrison to *The Missionary*, Luebo, 5 June 1897, reprinted in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers*, 110.

³⁴ Hochschild's account of the uprising is drawn largely from Guy De Boeck, *Baoni: Les revoltes de la Force Publique sous Leopold II, Congo 1895-1908* (Brussels: Editions EPO, 1987); *King Leopold's Ghost*, 127-128; Verner, *Pioneering*, 125, 339-340.

³⁵ Verner names the boys Kassongo Lusuna and Kondola Mukusa in "An Educational Experiment with Cannibals," although in *Pioneering* he refers to Kassongo as Kassongo Lutela. In the United States, they were called James Kassongo and John Kondola, and for clarity, I use these names. Verner states that the boys were already at the mission when Pelzer was killed, which was in 1895. Verner, *Pioneering*, 121-125.

refused to send a black missionary abroad without a white representative, Sheppard had first traveled to the continent in 1890 accompanied by a white American colleague, Samuel Lapsley.³⁶ But just two years later, Lapsley died after a bout with malaria, and Sheppard entered the nearby Bakuba kingdom alone, where his color enabled him to become somewhat of a legend. By the time the Batetela boys arrived, the Bakuba had nicknamed Sheppard the *mundele ndom* (“black man in white man’s clothing”) and had accepted him as the reincarnation of a lost king—*muana mi* (one of the family).³⁷

Kondola and Kassongo had escaped from King Leopold’s killing fields to enter a mission led by the *mundele ndom* and staffed by the four other African Americans Sheppard had recruited during his 1893 U.S. lecture tour, three of whom were women: Lillian Thomas, Maria Fearing, and Lucy Gantt (who quickly became Lucy Gantt Sheppard). Since the Presbyterians had found it difficult to secure a white replacement after Lapsley’s death, they approved these appointments along with that of a black man, Harry Hawkins. The three women had all been in residence at Talladega College in Alabama when Sheppard’s speech had inspired them; Thomas had been a student at the school, and Gantt, who had arrived at the College as a young child, was essentially raised by school matron Maria Fearing. At fifty-six, Fearing was the eldest of the group of missionaries. She had lived the first twenty-seven years of her life enslaved in an Alabama Presbyterian household, where she had heard missionary stories that “prompted her to predict, ‘I will go to Africa some day if I can.’”³⁸ After the war, she studied at Talladega while supervising young women in the boarding department. Immediately upon hearing Shep-

³⁶ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 148, 157; Pagan Kennedy, *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo* (New York: Viking Press, 2002), 29.

³⁷ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 149, 160–61; Samuel Lapsley, *Life and Letters of Samuel Norvell Lapsley: Missionary to the Congo Valley, 1866–1892* (Richmond, Va.: Whittett and Shepperson Printers, 1893), 108. Hochschild quotes the historian Jan Vansina as assessing that the Kuba may have been simply trying to flatter Sheppard into revealing the plans of other Europeans who wanted to enter the kingdom. *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 157. Hochschild cites Jan Vansina as the definitive historian of the Kuba, but does not specify where he made this statement about Sheppard. Vansina does credit both Sheppard and Althea Brown Edmiston for contributing significantly to knowledge about the Kuba in his *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 79, 197.

³⁸ Sylvia M. Jacobs, “Their ‘Special Mission’: Afro-American Women as Missionaries to the Congo, 1894–1937,” in *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 156–157; Edmiston, “Maria Fearing,” 292.

pard speak, she signed up to go with him to Luebo.³⁹ Within her first year there, Fearing learned enough Baluba to converse easily with the mission residents, and together with the other women, she established a mission school, where they instructed youth in math and scripture, as well as in how to read and write the Baluba language. Luebo became a place where young and old alike could talk, sing, play, and tell stories, and mission residents affectionately came to refer to Fearing as their *mama wa Mputu* (foreign mother.)⁴⁰

The world that the orphaned Kondola and Kassongo discovered on the grounds of Sheppard's mission was really someplace quite extraordinary—somewhere black New World ideas of salvation and freedom mixed with those of a diversity of indigenous Africans facing one of the most brutal colonial campaigns of Europe's scramble for control over the continent. The stories Fearing had heard as a child in captivity resonated with a long history of a developing Afro-Christian faith that Africa's redemption was critical to black freedom in the new world—a theology built around what the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) secretary of missions named as the "sympathy of blood."⁴¹ While both the British colony of Sierra Leone and the American Colonization Society–founded Liberia were driven by white desire to rid the West of free blacks, these early nineteenth-century posts in West Africa opened up new visions of black nationalist formation among New World Afro-Christians like one of William Sheppard's early inspirations, the West Indian Edward Wilmot Blyden. Liberia had inspired Blyden, Alexander Crummell, Henry MacNeal Turner, and others to link their cause with Africans, even though the nation's history was clouded by the specter of forced colonization and its own founding at the barrel of a gun.⁴² Sheppard had heard Blyden speak as a student at Hampton University in the 1880s and was moved by the ways he connected black peoples globally with proclamations like those that claimed the "Almighty" had selected black Americans as the "chosen instrument" for "Africa's redemption." Blyden credited black New World emigrants with transforming Liberia and the Colonization Society into a work of "Repatriation"—a project that "lies

³⁹ Indispensable to this study and all subsequent scholarship on black missionaries are Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 143, 159–165; Verner, *Pioneering*, 125.

⁴⁰ Edmiston, "Maria Fearing," 301–302.

⁴¹ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 142, 146–147.

⁴² Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 53.

deeper than color” but rather “is a question of race, which is the outcome . . . of generations subjected to environments which have formed the mental and moral constitution.”⁴³ Black congregations were the most obvious proponent of African missions, and AME Bishop Henry MacNeal Turner is perhaps the most well known of post-Reconstruction era black missionaries, in part because of his zealous advocacy of emigration to Liberia and position in a powerful black church. Lesser known, but no less significant, were the black missionaries from white denominations like Sheppard and the others stationed at Luebo. While they worked from within a white-dominated church, it was Sheppard, Blyden, and a particular kind of Afro-Christian mission that inspired many of them. During the time that Fearing and the others worked with Sheppard in the Congo, African American missionaries reached throughout the continent from Liberia and Sierra Leone to German Togo, Portuguese Angola, Rhodesia, and South Africa, many dedicated to the idea that black America’s salvation depended on the redemption of Africa.⁴⁴

However Sheppard and his cohort viewed their role, Africans likely interpreted the missionaries’ New World Afro-Christianity as entwined with aspects of black American life that resonated with their experience of colonialism. Fearing had her own personal history of enslavement, and Sheppard brought the post-Reconstruction era hope of black higher education through his experiences at Hampton and Stillman. Once in the Congo, Sheppard witnessed horrors that shaped his views of Leopold’s rule and likely confirmed for him that here lay the ground for building on the New World visions of salvation and Afro-Christian redemptive theology that had inspired his trek to the continent. During their first year in Africa, Sheppard and Lapsley also met with the black American entrepreneur, attorney, and historian George Washington Williams, who had been traveling in the Congo for the better part of that year. Williams had initially traveled to Africa with the misguided faith that Leopold was doing his Christian duty in the Congo and hoped that he could promote the idea of black Americans working there. Instead, he recoiled at the horror he encountered and wrote an open letter of protest to the Belgian king, more than a

⁴³ Blyden, “The African Problem and the Method of Its Solution,” *The Annual Discourse Delivered at the Seventy-third Anniversary of the American Colonization Society* (Washington, D.C.: Gibson Bros. Printers and Bookbinders, 1890), 17, 20–22.

⁴⁴ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 142–143; Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa*, 85–103.

decade before journalist Edmund Morel woke the world up with his 1903 accounts. The Congo Free State "buys and sells and steals slaves," wrote Williams in 1890, explaining the violence of chain gangs and the *chicotte*, and essentially including all the human rights criticisms that would drive the anti-Leopold movement a decade later.⁴⁵

Not until 1908 and Leopold's demise would Sheppard put his own name to a public denunciation when he penned a letter published in William Morrison's *Kasai Herald* decrying abuses of the rubber trade, but he had clearly witnessed the atrocities as early as he set foot on the continent.⁴⁶ Lapsley had described the use of the *chicotte* in his diary: "It makes a terrible mark where it strikes, at first a white streak, then a long welt . . . the culprit, if he happens to deserve the name, seldom shrieks, but writhes and gasps piteously after the tenth or fifteenth blow." On one occasion Lapsley directly criticized a whip-wielding ship captain, stepping between him and "one of the bleeding Africans lying on the deck," and claimed that his protest led this one captain to stop the agonizing practice.⁴⁷ While George Washington Williams was perhaps alone among those critics who wrote publicly about the horrors at the time he witnessed them, Sheppard and Lapsley likely shared their stories with him, and it is hard to imagine that discussions with Williams did not shape their approach to their early mission work.⁴⁸

While it is not clear how many converts the Presbyterians in Luebo made, it is clear that Sheppard and his cohort had transformed the mission into a home and school for war refugees, one that offered a stark contrast to the Catholic missions under Leopold's control. "Usually ruled by the *chicotte* and the chain," these Catholic missions "were the only state-funded schools for Africans in Leopold's Congo" and acted more often as "children's colonies" set up to nurture the next generation of the Force Publique. "The aim of these colonies is above all to furnish us with soldiers" Leopold stated explicitly in an 1890

⁴⁵ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 151–152, 178; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 102–114; George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II," reprinted in John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 243–254.

⁴⁶ William H. Sheppard, "From the Bakuba Country," *Kasai Herald*, 8 January 1908, reprinted in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers*, 281–282; Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 182–183.

⁴⁷ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 153–154; Kennedy, *Black Livingstone*, 57; Lapsley, *Life and Letters*, 143–144.

⁴⁸ As one Sheppard biographer points out, even the most well known of accounts, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, was published nine years after Conrad's travels. Kennedy, *Black Livingstone*, 38.

letter, explaining that he hoped to build barracks capable of housing thousands of children and administrative personnel. One such mission near Luebo had as many as 1,700 children gathered by the soldiers' raids. "The children taken in by these missionaries were, theoretically, 'orphans,'" but their orphaned status was probably due to the Force Publique's murder of their parents. If the children "survived their kidnapping, transport and schooling, most of the male graduates of the state colonies became soldiers, just as Leopold had ordered."⁴⁹

The Batetela, Bakuba, Baluba, and other Africans likely understood which god might best suit their interests. While in the first three years after Sheppard's arrival not a single villager came forward for baptism, the mission began to attract adherents nevertheless: "widows and children, fugitive slaves, refugees, and others who, having no standing in traditional society, had little to lose by converting." Even the Presbyterian faithful admitted that settlers "were less interested in Christianity than in finding some place where they could live in peace, free from the exactions of a violent colonial state." At the very least they would be "far better fed" and perhaps receive a palliative for sleeping sickness.⁵⁰

Sheppard's work paid off well, and, although his mission took five years to attract its first hundred converts, it grew to be one of the largest in Africa, with "more than twenty thousand adherents" by 1909, an estimated two thirds of whom had been enslaved.⁵¹ "Natives began to flock to Luebo by the thousands," reported Samuel Verner, who arrived five years after Sheppard had already set up shop. Many of those arriving, he recalled, found their way to "the Town of God, as the Africans

⁴⁹ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 133–135; William Morrison, "Meeting at Whitehall on the Congo Question," reprinted in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers*, 159.

⁵⁰ While there was no cure for sleeping sickness until 1907 and no mission dedicated to the disease until 1919, Verner recounts that Kondola and Kassongo cared for a comrade dying from the disease, and from his perspective in 1935 claimed that part of his intent in returning to the Congo in 1904 was "to have the natives adequately treated for the sleeping sickness." Verner was alternately diagnosed with sleeping sickness and malaria, and Sheppard suffered from fevers several times during his mission. Verner, Letter to D. James Winn, Esquire, 20 November 1908, Folder No. 21; Letter to Anita Newcombe McGee, 19 August 1936, Folder No. 123, SPV-SC; G. W. Amadon, "Educating Young African Cannibals," *Youth's Inspector*, 11 September 1902; Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 157, 167; Edmiston, "Maria Fearing," 305; Lyons, *The Colonial Disease*, 141, 183; William H. Sheppard, *Presbyterian Pioneers in the Congo* (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1917), 21.

⁵¹ Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 181; Rev. Robert Dabney Bedinger, *Triumphs of the Gospel in the Belgian Congo* (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1920), 47.

called it."⁵² "God's Town" became fairly widely known, although it is not clear how Africans may have interpreted the spiritual dimension of the word "God." Bena Lulua, a chief from a village about a three-mile trek away, sent six of his people to "God's Town" to learn about "the white man's ways." Members of a nearby Baluba community eagerly queried as to the "Business of God," the Bakete wanted a "Town of God" built in their territory, the Bakuba were willing to have a "City of God" established near them, and one young man was freed from captivity when his captor discovered that he was one of "God's people." Often times Africans referred to mission leaders as the "Chiefs of God" since it was customary to name a village after its chief, but they made clear that God was a town run by black people when they pointedly referred to Verner as the "white man of God."⁵³

Belgian officials did not miss the challenge presented by Sheppard's growing town, and Leopold began to clamp down on Presbyterian missions, regarding them as an affront to constituted authority. Congo State officials were known to harass people in the vicinity of the missions, causing thousands to flee into the forests with those unable to escape conscripted into service for Leopold.⁵⁴ "All Catholic adherents have been told to offend our teachers," Kondola would later report, adding that rumors were spread saying "we are bad people, adulterers, that we tie the hands of our candidates for baptism and throw them in the water in order to drown them."⁵⁵

The Presbyterians stepped up efforts to find a white missionary to join Sheppard in large part in response to Leopold's harassment, and so placed a priority on someone able to negotiate with Leopold for more land. Verner met their needs even though he had no interest in proselytizing, made repeated claims about black Americans' inferiority, and would come to criticize black missionaries for paying exaggerated attention to the "social consequences" of their work.⁵⁶ A poem he wrote upon his first sight of the continent well reflects his early

⁵² Samuel Philips Verner, "The Influence of Christianity on the Heathen Africans," unpublished manuscript, written 23 May 1902, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Box 3, Folder 270, SPV-SC; Verner, *Pioneering*, 105, 118.

⁵³ Verner, *Pioneering*, 118, 158, 199, 234, 337, 352.

⁵⁴ William Morrison, "Treatment of the Native People by the Government of the Congo Independent State," reprinted in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers*, 209.

⁵⁵ Correspondence to William Morrison, July 1913, reprinted in Benedetto, *Presbyterian Reformers*, 445.

⁵⁶ "Extracts from a letter of Rev. S. Phillips Verner, dated Matadi, Congo Free State, May 1, 1896," Box 4, Folder 284, SPV-SC.

interests—an approach that prevailed during his work with Benga, the St. Louis fair, and his later projects both in the Congo and Central America. “O Africa, mysterious, sublime / What wondrous life’s in thee— / Thou latest gift of Father time / Man’s opportunity!”⁵⁷ When he had presented himself as eager to go to the continent, the Presbyterians quickly sent him to Sheppard’s mission, approving his ordination “in a record-breaking time of a single day” rather than requiring the usual three years of study. “I had no particular desire to associate myself finally with any mission undertaking, one of the features of this enterprise being a missionary organization” he wrote, “but I said that I would not object to assuming the business managership of the enterprise if it were distinctly understood that my term of service was restricted to three years and my hands were free at the end of that time.”⁵⁸

While there is little doubt that Verner stayed largely true to his colonialist mindset through his treatment and abandonment of Ota Benga in the twentieth century, in some ways his lack of religious devotion may have ironically made him more perceptive in identifying how Africans viewed the Town of God. His own distance from missionary zeal and Afro-Christian theology, along with the inevitable vulnerability that came with traveling for the first time to the Congo, led him to describe the strength of Sheppard’s town as the Africans may have imagined it—as a powerful village with chiefs tied to the West who could resist the Bula Matari. For a brief moment, it seemed Verner too saw in the Town of God connections in the black world and the possibilities of black Atlantic emancipation. “These Luebo people had become as civilized and more Christianized than the colored people of my own Columbia in five years’ time,” wrote Verner. “Surely if the white people in America took as much interest in the welfare of the negro at their doors, a revolution in that race would ensue more profound than that caused by emancipation and enfranchisement.” After witnessing the care that Kassongo provided to the funerary rites of a murdered boy Verner had employed, this son of slave owners “made a vow which god will help me to fulfill, that as long as I breathed the breath of life I would labor for that poor dead boy’s people at home and abroad; and that when at last I must go to meet my murdered friends, I should die with the salvation of Africa on

⁵⁷ Verner, “First Sight of Africa,” *Christian Observer*, 1895; Clipping in “Auntie Stillman Scrapbook,” Box 4, SPV-SC.

⁵⁸ “Sketch of Mr. Verner’s experience in African Affairs,” manuscript, 18 October 1906, Box 1, SPV-SC; Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 70–72.

my soul."⁵⁹ Verner's benevolence was paternalist at best, but not insignificantly, the Town of God influenced even his thought in linking the plight of Africans and African Americans. When he left the Congo and headed first to Antwerp to request a concession from Leopold and then back home to the United States, Verner brought Kondola and Kassongo with him. As the Batetela boys headed out from Sheppard's mission led by this white man of God, they carried with them "chickens, goats, peanuts, palm wine," and the multilayered meanings of a black New World vision of salvation.⁶⁰

GOING HOME

The Batetela boys may have hoped they would soon earn the education they could one day use to evangelize back home among their own people, as was the missionary plan prevalent at schools like Stillman and encouraged at the mission in Luebo. However, if they believed that the entire United States would be a comfortable extension of Sheppard's mission, they had to have been sorely disappointed as early as their first night in New York. Verner had left them alone in a rooming house while he visited with an old university chum he had run into in the city. When the hotel's manager found two black teenagers in his establishment, he evicted them, leaving the boys to wander the city streets shivering in the February chill. When Verner returned from his visit to find them hungrily gazing in a nearby storefront, he quickly secured them better lodging, but his initial disregard for them foreshadowed the ways his commitment to saving Africans withered as he focused on his own entrepreneurial and exploitative ventures once he arrived back home. He later tried unsuccessfully to rent the young men as models to the Smithsonian Institution, where he had deposited some artifacts, and while he made sure they eventually arrived at Stillman, he did not provide sufficient funds for their education. Rather he argued that they preferred to support themselves, even though Kondola wrote to him as late as 1939 asking for a small sum to buy shoes.⁶¹ Not unlike Benga, who wandered the exhibit space of the Natural History Museum and

⁵⁹ Verner, *Pioneering*, 218–219, 350.

⁶⁰ Bradford and Blume named the quoted provisions that Verner's entourage carried in *Ota Benga*, 78.

⁶¹ Correspondence, Kondola to Verner, Kansas City, MO, 11 March 1939, Folder 132, Box 2, SPV-SC; Verner, "Condola Gets an Education," Box 2, Folder 123, SPV-SC; Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 92, 95, 153.

endured being caged in the zoo, the Batetela boys' initial entry into the United States landed them alone, left to battle Jim Crow politics and entrenched social Darwinist ideologies—a dynamic not foreign to them as they had spent the better part of their lives dodging Leopold's atrocities across the Atlantic.

In the first months after their arrival, however, the young men also encountered a lively black American world that perhaps signaled for them the presence of Gods' Towns in the United States. After leaving New York, but before enrolling the boys at Stillman, Verner left them for a time in the care of the Thornwell Orphanage and then at the house of his family's butler in Columbia, South Carolina. For the month of their stay in the southern city, Kondola and Kassongo met local African Americans who had turned the butler's home into a sort of Mecca as black South Carolinians sought an audience with the young Africans, who, in turn, demonstrated a keen interest in America's ideas about their homeland. For a time, the boys also labored on a Verner family plantation, and when Kassongo fell ill, he received care at a black hospital in Charleston from Dr. Alonzo McClennan, an African American physician well known in both black and white communities.⁶²

Once enrolled at Stillman, Kondola and Kassongo studied alongside their African American student colleagues, and in September of 1902, Kassongo, along with "several thousand" black Alabamians, headed off to the Shiloh Negro Baptist Church in Birmingham to hear Booker T. Washington speak. Washington may even have been discussing his various exploits in Africa since he was a few years into a project in Togo where German officials had invited him to bring his methods of cotton farming to the colony. Additionally, just the year before, Zulu educator John Langalibalele Dube, who had been inspired by his time at Washington's Tuskegee Institute, had founded a similar industrial school in Durban, South Africa.⁶³ Quite possibly Washington was even going to share his views on the Batetela homeland, since he would soon join the Congo Reform Association and become rather

⁶² Verner, "An Educational Experiment with Cannibals," 2292–2293; Verner, *Pioneering*, 450–452. Dr. McClennan's story is told by Kim Carey in "Straddling the Color Line: Social and Political Power of African American Elites in Charleston, New Orleans, and Cleveland, 1880–1920," PhD dissertation, Kent State University, 2013, 92–96.

⁶³ Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 134–137; Manning Marable, "Booker T. Washington and African Nationalism," *Phylon* 4 (1974): 398–406.

vocal in his opposition to Leopold, even though he had worked alongside German colonialists in Togo. Kassongo left no clues as to what had prompted his interest in Washington, and Kondola later reported that he had misgivings about the event so did not join his friend in Birmingham that night. Tragically, the only evidence that Kassongo attended this speech exists because he lost his life there in a stampede that occurred after a fight broke out between two men over a vacant seat on the stage. A woman in the choir had yelled "fight," which the crowd heard as "fire," and the rush for exits left Kassongo and more than one hundred others dead.⁶⁴

Still, during his relatively brief time in the United States, Kassongo became outspoken in critiquing the multiple contradictions in Western ideas about race and civilization. He once asked for special permission to make an impromptu speech at Stillman's morning service, and "arose from his seat among the colored students with great gravity of manner" to berate them along with the Presbyterian leaders. "You stop talking about civilized man and savage before you be civilized." He pointed out that many of those present did not "sweep their rooms clean," did not "wash their face" before coming down to breakfast, and made "plenty noise in their room"—behaviors he claimed his people would run them out of town for in Africa. It was Verner who quoted Kassongo's speech in an issue of the *Christian Observer*, and he did not mention what prompted the attack or how his audience responded, but, along with the interest in Booker T. Washington's politics, the denunciation hints that these young men from Africa actively engaged a diverse black American population as they grappled with the complicated bonds of Africans in the New World.⁶⁵

Despite Kassongo's death and Verner's ambivalence, Kondola still had enough hope in America to venture back to the Congo to entice more of his countrymen across the Atlantic—perhaps determined to rescue others from Leopold's horrors, as well as to once again breathe African air and earn some money. Just one year after the stampede that killed Kassongo, Kondola headed out with Verner and black American missionary Alonzo Edmiston to procure "pygmies" for the St. Louis fair—the journey that would lead them to Ota Benga. While Kondola had a sense of what awaited central Africans who traveled to

⁶⁴ Letter from Birmingham mayor, Correspondence, 25 September 1902, Box 1, SPV-SC; Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 95–96.

⁶⁵ Rev. S. P. Verner, "What Is a Civilized Man? Kassongo's Speech at Stillman Institute," *Christian Observer*, Box 2, Folder 145, Newspaper Clippings, SPV-SC.

the United States as well as the possibilities and limits of what Verner would do for them, it is less clear what he may have thought about locating men referred to as “pygmies.” There is no definitive answer as to Benga’s line of descent, but Verner initially identified him by telling McGee that “this pygmy belongs to the same ethnic group as the Batwa, but probably his people are characterized by some local differentiations.”⁶⁶ Four of the men eventually traveling to St. Louis were specifically identified as Batwa—a group described by various sources (including sometimes themselves) as a pygmy people, but fair promoters often marketed all the Africans who eventually traveled to St. Louis—including Kondola—as “pygmy,” making it exceedingly difficult to determine ethnicity.⁶⁷ Since Verner had promised McGee that he would bring “pygmies,” Benga has been remembered as such. But Benga and the Batwa, were not “pygmy” in the sense in which Verner, McGee, and most Europeans of that era used the term. Western thinkers had initiated the notion of a primordial pygmy—a fictive category first named in Homeric verse and later understood as the missing link on the evolutionary chain. At the time of Verner’s travels and the first European encounters with the “short statured forest dwellers of Central Africa,” the mythical pygmy had reached new heights of importance, concomitant with the rise of anthropology as a field of study, rampant social Darwinist belief, and the murderous colonial rule of Africa. This belief in a separate global race of “pygmies” continued to hold sway until the 1960s, when immunologist William C. Boyd used blood groups to show that the pygmies from various regions more closely resembled their neighbors than they did each other.⁶⁸

Verner’s identification of Benga as having a probable relation to the Batwa actually reflects historian Kairn Kleiman’s findings that this group—who she names “forest specialists”—had a long history of mixing with Bantu agriculturalists like the Batetela, Bakuba, and Baluba well before European arrival on the continent. She argues that much

⁶⁶ Correspondence, Verner to McGee, 21 February 1904, Box I, SPV-SC; Verner article reprinted in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 255–256, 261, 267.

⁶⁷ Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 76, 200, 205, 358. For example, one image from the fair depicts six men dancing with the caption “Batwa Pygmies from the Belgian Congo,” but lists the names as “Lumbango, Shamba, Limo, Prince Latuna, Malengu, and Ota Benga.” The *New York Globe*, 12 September 1906, says that English and Boer officials at St. Louis claimed that there were no pygmies and that Verner could not have located one. Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 264. Verner’s last words about Benga was that he was Badi and that his tribe lived far away from the Batwa pygmies. *New York Times*, 16 July 1916, cited in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 275–276.

⁶⁸ Klieman, “*The Pygmies Were Our Compass*,” xv–xxxi, 15.

scholarship from the 1960s tended to romanticize forest peoples' isolation as an implicit critique of the West when it exposed the myth of a pygmy race. Rather, she shows that changes during Africa's Atlantic age—the disruption of Arab and European invasions from 1500 to 1900—had fostered the separation and widespread Bantu discrimination toward the Batwa. In essence then, when Verner arrived in Leopold's Congo, he witnessed a relatively new dynamic between Batwa and Bantu, since "the full effects of the slave trade did not reach these regions until the second half of the nineteenth century—precisely the period when the first Europeans began to arrive" and when Bantu subjugation of the Batwa was further "exacerbated during the era of colonial rule." With the Western demand for ivory and rubber, Bantu societies sometimes used violence and intimidation to force the Batwa to collect forest products—a condition that may help contextualize Benga's captivity with the Baschilele. Even though this relationship was a relatively recent development, Verner, like most European observers, "tended to view the subjugation of Batwa communities as natural or inevitable." In a vicious cycle, this interaction, in turn, encouraged Bantu communities to adopt Western notions to help further "justify their exploitation of the Batwa."⁶⁹

Bantu domination was never total, however, and Kleiman's work helps better situate how Kondola and Benga, as well as the other Africans traveling to St. Louis, may have seen each other. Some Bantu peoples relied on Batwa forest expertise and mutual trade rather than violence as they battled for survival, and on occasion they even formalized a united opposition. One Yassau (Bantu) chief entered "into a blood-brother relationship with the Batwa chief" to help seal such an alliance between the Batwa and neighboring Bantu, with whom they traded ivory and meat. Partnerships like these had precolonial roots, as Bantu domination of the land had allowed the Batwa peoples to specialize in a forest economy. Batwa knowledge of the forest actually led many Bantu peoples to regard them as spirit guides who were the "original owners of the land." Even as late as the 1960s, a Punu man from Gabon remembered that his ancestors owed their survival to Batwa knowledge, proclaiming that the "Pygmies served as a compass."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Klieman, "The Pygmies Were Our Compass," xxiii, 176–77; Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 76–77.

⁷⁰ Although this Punu man used the term "pygmy," Klieman remains ambivalent about using the term herself since it is not an African-originated word, even though in some instances it has been embraced by the Batwa themselves. Klieman, "The Pygmies Were Our Compass," xxxi, (n) 9, 111, 120–21, 188–190.

Kondola, Benga, and the other Africans who went to St. Louis may well have seen themselves related—not as the “pygmies” of the Western imagination—but as continental Africans with a complex history of interaction facing the many manifestations of the West. Western categorization sets Benga apart from Kondola and the other Africans who traveled to St. Louis, but given their mutual experiences of horror under Leopold—and the fact that some amount of Bantu respect for Batwa continued into the 1960s—Kondola and Benga most likely regarded each other more as potential comrades than as different peoples. “Benga” is the Batetela word for hunter, so it may well be Kondola’s ethnic identifier that gave Ota his name.⁷¹ Verner actually capitalized on just such a relationship to entice the Batwa to St. Louis in the first place. Along with offering the Batwa plentiful salt and a few guns, he highlighted Kondola’s presence as a way to entice them, explaining, “but here is Kondola who went home with me before.”⁷² Kondola served as interpreter both in Africa and the United States, and so he presumably spoke a variety of African languages and dialects, enabling him to communicate with Baluba, Bakuba, and Batwa alike. World’s Fair observers in St. Louis noted that the nine central African men “spoke five distinct tongues,” with Kondola knowing enough of the Bakuba and Batwa speech and the Batwa knowing enough of these Bantu languages to permit some conversation. Benga, they noted, seemed more isolated linguistically until he and the others developed a lingua franca.⁷³ In any case, even upon their first meeting in Africa, Benga witnessed Kondola speaking English to navigate his way with both Verner and Edmiston and promising possibilities in a distant land.

Still, it was not easy to convince any of the Africans to go West. Some ran into the bush, hiding from the men from America, and only seven men eventually signed on to travel in addition to Benga: four Batwa, two Bakuba, and one Baluba, although there are many discrepancies in reported names and ethnic affiliations.⁷⁴ With “Johnnie Kondola” witnessing, Bondongo, Madinga, Chinoo, and Mbakië signed contracts with an “X” on 25 April 1904, stating that they agreed to

⁷¹ Many thanks to the *Journal of World History* reader who brought this translation to my attention.

⁷² Verner, “The Adventures of an Explorer in Africa,” 1618–1620.

⁷³ Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904*, 527; Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 204.

⁷⁴ One of the most detailed rosters identifies the following men and includes Kondola as one of the group: John Kondola (Batetela); Lumbango and Latuna (Bakuba); Kalamma (Baluba); Shamba, Malengo, Lumo, and Bomushubba (Batwa); Benga (Badinga). See Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904*, 526.

work for Verner for twelve months and would receive pay "at the rate of 1 lb salt and two brasses cloth per month."⁷⁵ These four contracts are the only ones that exist, and, curiously, none of these four names appear anywhere else, but most accounts seem to agree that the group of eight men included Batwa, Bakuba, and Baluba—ethnic groups that Kondola had interacted with as a young boy in the environs of Sheppard's mission. Coincidentally, when they departed the Congo, this entourage embarked on the same ship as did William Sheppard, who happened to be heading home for another lecture tour. According to Verner, Sheppard claimed to have even known some of the Batwa aboard the ship.⁷⁶ Perhaps Verner meant that Sheppard knew Kondola, since he would certainly recall him as the boy who had spent time on his mission. In any case, the cohort of Africans probably felt some sense of support on board with Sheppard and his deep familiarity with their people. Once in the United States, Sheppard left for his tour, and the rest of the group disembarked in the port of New Orleans, where Verner, ill with either malaria or sleeping sickness, was transported unconscious to a sanitarium, leaving Kondola, "their countryman and interpreter," in charge. Kondola then led this African entourage on to the Missouri fair, along with the assistance of Dr. Dorsey of the U.S. Geological Survey, who fair management had sent to assist them and who was meeting the group of Africans for the first time.⁷⁷

Once in St. Louis, the African men settled on fairgrounds in the exhibit space, where they would interact with Native Americans and other continental Africans. Perhaps nowhere else in the United States at the time was nonwhite solidarity more evident than in this village, where a diversity of populations sometimes performed together in venues that included athletic competitions, plays, dances, and oratory.⁷⁸ Fair manager McGee sometimes unintentionally fostered social interaction, as in the case where he sold space to a former cattle rancher who wanted to set up a general store to market souvenirs to fairgoers. Anthropology Village participants quickly turned the store into "a gathering place for Indians, Mbutis (the Batwa), Tehuelches, and Euro-American visitors who wanted to see and interact with them or buy fine art."⁷⁹ In some ways, this transformation may have resembled the

⁷⁵ Correspondence, 25–29 April 1904, Box 1, SPV-SC.

⁷⁶ Verner, "The Adventures of an Explorer in Africa," 1620.

⁷⁷ Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 251–52.

⁷⁸ Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 334–335; *St. Louis Dispatch*, 13 August 1904, reprinted in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 253–254.

⁷⁹ Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 64–65, 280.

ways black Americans turned the Haitian exhibit at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair into a black world of socializing and organizing. Having been denied official space to exhibit African American achievement, black Americans gathered at the space designated for Haiti, where Frederick Douglass had been invited to represent the black republic, providing activists like Ida B. Wells a stage to protest black American exclusion from the fair.⁸⁰ There is enough documentation attesting to friendly relations among different nationals in St. Louis to imagine that Benga, assisted by Kondola, felt he had arrived at his own Town of God—a space of safety and camaraderie at the 1904 fair. For example, the Batwa “went over to the Sioux camp and gave a farewell concert and dance. Some of the Sioux braves were greatly pleased with the exhibition of friendship, and joined in the dance.” With the Dakota “friendships were formed, often based on mutual humor. The Mbutis were said to keep the Dakotas regularly doubled up with laughter by parodying visitors and McGee.”⁸¹

Humor apparently helped as well in forging bonds between the men from the Congo and dozens of Zulu men who had been brought from South Africa to “authenticate” an exhibit named the Boer War Camp in which hundreds of British and European-descended veterans reenacted battles from the colonial war that gave the British their 1902 victory. “It was difficult to distinguish the Kaffirs from the Batwas,” reported one journalist—a description that defied the category of a separate “pygmy” race. “Resemblances, physically, were striking,” he emphasized, and “a relationship was evidently anticipated on both sides. Conversation began at once without introduction; but after several minutes’ effort it ceased. The Kaffirs were not able to understand one word said by the Batwa; the Batwa, quick witted as he is, could not comprehend anything the Kaffir tried to communicate.” Since the reporter also seemed to be unable to understand the languages spoken, he determined that the laughter uniting the Africans resulted from their lack of comprehension and concluded “both Kaffirs and Batwa laughed heartily at the confusion, esteeming the fruitless attempt to be sociable, a good joke.”⁸² Given the similarities in their colonized experiences, the Africans may have actually agreed on more than the

⁸⁰ Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 26–35.

⁸¹ Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 279–282; Parezo and Fowler refer to the Batwa alternately as the Mbuti and Klieman speaks of the Mbuti as related to the Batwa, “*The Pygmies Were Our Compass*,” 16–18.

⁸² Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 260.

reporter himself could comprehend, and may well have been mocking him, just as the Batwa and Dakota had reveled in their parody of McGee.

The bonds among the world's people on exhibit ran more deeply than critiquing the treatment they received as spectacle, however, and may likely have been forged with the ways they witnessed and survived colonial violence. After all, the Filipinos had left home after a torturous war in which U.S. troops had decimated their population, killing an estimated eighteen thousand and imprisoning at least one hundred thousand others in concentration camps. Native Americans were only a little more than a decade removed from the final chapter in America's Indian Wars—the 1890 massacre in which the U.S. Cavalry killed approximately three hundred Sioux in South Dakota. Black South Africans suffered tremendous numbers of casualties as well, with more than one hundred thousand interred in concentration camps that resulted in more than ten thousand deaths during the Boer War.⁸³ Some Zulu stories of coming to St. Louis even closely resembled those of Benga and the others from the Congo Free State. One participant, Um Kilali, had spent three years confined by the British in a war concentration camp with conditions so poor that the Africans held captive there resorted to picking through garbage heaps, exhuming buried animals, and even cannibalism to survive. The British had identified Um Kilali as a rebel in the camps and exiled him to Rhodesia, where he signed on with a fair recruiter looking for natives for the St. Louis exhibit.⁸⁴ Like Benga, the South Africans journeyed to the fair to escape from the colonial wars that ravaged their land, while many Filipinos and Native Americans came to St. Louis with promises that their exhibits would educate Americans about their people.

Once at the fairgrounds, the state of captivity of all village participants became clear when roughly two weeks before the Boer War exhibit opened on 17 June, a dozen native South Africans fled the space they had been living on for the better part of six months. The color line surfaced starkly when local black Americans assessed "their South African relations" to be forcibly held and, according to the black

⁸³ Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4; Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Holt, Rinhart and Winston, 1970), 444; John Gates, "War-Related Deaths in the Philippines, 1898–1902," *Pacific Historical Review* 53 (August 1984): 367–378.

⁸⁴ Susan Curtis, *Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 233–243.

American journalist Lester Walton, not only helped them escape, but harbored them in a black neighborhood, offering them food, shelter, and employment. Blurring the lines between American law enforcement and African colonial forces, fair managers contacted the St. Louis police department, who, with the help of one of the Boer officers there for the exhibit, arrested ten of the twelve men who had escaped and jailed them “on suspicion of being runaways.” Some African American supporters were also arrested, and when one of the fair’s Boer officers punched the black American woman Willietha Smith in the face, dozens more black residents gathered at the scene. Ultimately, five Africans succeeded in their escape, but the St. Louis police with the help of Boer officers returned the rest “to the Fair grounds under heavy guard.” The incident may have become more widely known in St. Louis’s black community, as well as among those housed at the exhibit, with the help of Walton who termed the Zulu his “brethren,” framing their captivity as reminiscent of American chattel slavery.⁸⁵

The Zulu escape happened nearly a month before the arrival of the entourage from the Congo Free State, but it is hard to imagine that this story did not travel widely enough to help foster the solidarity expressed by Anthropology Village residents. The camaraderie shared at the general store and the laughter noted by reporters set the stage for more formal protests, perhaps not as dramatic as the Zulu escape, but in actions that portray nonwhite solidarity and a culture of resistance among this rather unique group of colonized peoples. The group, led by the Bakuba man Latuna, attacked a photographer who would not compensate them for having their pictures taken. Later, Latuna decried that they had inadequate clothing and were sleeping in tents in temperatures that left them cold. Forced to rely on the kindness of Native Americans for blankets, he lambasted “when a white man comes to our country we give them presents . . . and divide our elephant meat with them . . . the Americans treat us as they do our pet monkey . . . they laugh at us and poke their umbrellas into our faces.”⁸⁶ Sometimes this opposition turned into a refusal to perform, as was the case with one play that the Batwa were asked to do that included a ritual killing. The Batwa man to be killed would be replaced onstage by a “dead” dummy that was made out of mutton and contained a “blood bladder” inside.

⁸⁵ Curtis, *Colored Memories*, 237–238.

⁸⁶ The men from the Congo arrived in St. Louis between 27 June and 1 July 1904. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 19 July 1904, and *St. Louis Republic*, 6 August 1904, reprinted in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 250–552. This article names Latuna both as Baluba and as one of the “pygmies.”

When the "mutton Pygmy" was killed and blood squirted, the Africans were so upset they refused to perform their dance set.⁸⁷ Even more dramatically, with "Capt. Latuna commanding," the central African cohort organized a military unit modeled on one that Native Americans had begun. According to the *St. Louis Dispatch*, "After watching the marching and evening drills at the Indian school, the Pygmies have appeared as a military organization . . . armed with sticks varying from two to four feet in length with Capt. Latuna wearing a lath in his belt for a sword which he waves in the air at every command."⁸⁸ While not much information exists on this military exercise, it does not seem to have been an exhibit, but rather an activity initiated by the men themselves. With the image of a white Atlantic armed guard returning runaway Zulus to fairgrounds and the presence of a supportive African American community in St. Louis, this military unit gives a powerful image of the ways colonized peoples encountered the color line and the transatlantic world that kept them captive.

Memories of St. Louis likely influenced Benga's decision to return to the United States the following year, and hopefully encouraged him as he sat caged in the Bronx Zoo in September 1906—hope that had not been unfounded as it was a cadre of African Americans who had facilitated his release in New York. Among the group of black New York ministers who freed Benga was Gregory Willis Hayes, president of the Virginia Theological Seminary and College, Oberlin graduate, and advocate of black American–African partnerships. Hayes's interest in Africa had surfaced at least seven years earlier when he had chartered the African Development Society in partnership with British colonial Nyasaland's John Chilembwe, a Yao man who had attended the Virginia college for two years. While there is no evidence that this organization took off, the group's founding document states their desire to partner with Africans to facilitate black American settlement and development in Chilembwe's homeland. That overthrowing the British underlay the organization's intent was made clear fifteen years later when Chilembwe led an armed uprising—a suicide mission he had modeled on John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, thinking that it would inspire other Africans to fight for independence.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology*, 227–228, 457–458 n. 3.

⁸⁸ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 16 August 1904, reprinted in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 254.

⁸⁹ George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting, and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Uprising of 1915* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1958), 117, 543–545.

Hayes's decision to invite Benga to come to his Virginia home fit well with the political vision he shared with Chilembwe—a belief that black Americans could best benefit the plight of colonized Africans as people who partnered in self-determination rather than as missionaries. He envisioned himself as working for an Africa for Africans like the antebellum black nationalist Martin Delaney, who had espoused an “Africa for the African race, and black men to rule them.” Chilembwe's white benefactor, the Scottish missionary John Booth, had appropriated the phrase “Africa for the Africans” as he and Chilembwe worked together in Nyasaland in the 1890s. Thus, Hayes's approach to education and development veered from that of Booker T. Washington, whose accommodationist agricultural pedagogy appealed to German colonialists. Rather, Hayes echoed early black nationalist sentiment and remained committed to providing black students at his institution a liberal arts education similar to the one he had earned at Oberlin. Often at odds with the white Baptist financiers who wanted to make the seminary a Tuskegee-like industrial school, he went so far as to have students cover their Latin, Greek, and literature books and pull out sewing machines when Baptist funders visited. He maintained throughout his life that “the Negro will never be free until he can control his own destiny and not look to the white man for everything.”⁹⁰

Unfortunately, Gregory Hayes died just a few months after bringing Benga to Virginia, resulting in Benga's return to the Brooklyn orphanage where he had stayed briefly after his release from the zoo. He remained there for four years, but was eager to return to the black college in Virginia, where he affirmed he “had friends.” Finally, in 1910, with the help of Hayes's widow, Mary, who had assumed the college presidency, he went back to live with her family. While evidence as to his time in Virginia is slim and often contradictory, it does seem clear that he entered a black world of friendship and support, one in which the Hayes clan treated him as a family member. Hunter Hayes was only four years old when Benga arrived at his house, and he recalled that Benga was like “like a father to me, my friend, my teacher, my hero, who knew more about the meaning of humanity than the missionary

⁹⁰ Joseph Booth, *Africa for the African* (1897), reprint edited by Laura Perry (Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2007), 9; Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 90; Carrie Allen McCray, *Freedom's Child: The Life of a Confederate General's Black Daughter* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1998), 65–66, 77, 101–102, 112–116; Ralph Reavis, *Virginia Seminary: A Journey of Black Independence* (Bedford, Va.: Print Shop, 1989), 91, 100, 111, 129.

who brought him over here."⁹¹ Benga visited as well with Hayes's close friend Anne Spencer—a noted poet, Lynchburg alumna, and Chil-embwe classmate, and at whose house he was introduced to luminaries like W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. However slim the evidence, it does seem that the Hayes and Spencer homes were where Benga felt most at peace in the United States. As he concluded upon release from the zoo, he "was pleased, to be with black people and free from the witchcraft of the white man."⁹² Yet, in March 1916, a decade after his peculiar captivity in New York, Benga took his own life. All accounts of his suicide suggest that he killed himself having realized he would never have the resources to travel back to Africa. The Hayes children recall watching him one evening as he built a giant fire and danced around it chanting, only to awake the next morning to discover that their hero had shot himself later that night.⁹³

Benga had faced the trials of a zoo cage as well as Verner's abandonment of him that left him little chance of returning to Africa. But he witnessed as well a particular vision of freedom while in St. Louis among numbers of the world's people and in the environs of a black college in Virginia. He discovered a black New World solidarity and the mindset of John Kondola, who had first encountered black New World visions in Sheppard's Town of God. Had Benga lived a few more years, he may have heard about yet another son of the diaspora who docked in New York City expecting to acquire knowledge from black Americans in order to throw off European colonialism in his homeland. The same month that Benga killed himself, Marcus Garvey arrived from the West Indies hoping to meet Booker T. Washington, whose Tuskegee model of education he thought might pave the road to Jamaica's independence from the British. Garvey arrived too late to meet Washington, who had died the year before, but he came to the United States just in time to witness the massive shift of the Great Migration when more than half a million black Americans left the horrors of the Jim Crow South. With the vision of a burgeoning black population in America's northern cities—the richest population in the world most broadly defined as black—Garvey planned to erect a global black empire centered in Africa: finally, an Africa for Africans, a black

⁹¹ McCray, *Freedom's Child*, 109; McCray, *Ota Benga under My Mother's Roof*, xiii. Mary Hayes was acting president from her husband's death until 1908. Reavis, *Virginia Seminary*, 123.

⁹² *New York Times*, 29 September 1906, reprinted in Bradford and Blume, *Ota Benga*, 271–272.

⁹³ McCray, *Freedom's Child*, 116.

world with “One God, One Aim, One Destiny.” As the undeniable father of twentieth-century black nationalism, Garvey influenced leaders like America’s Malcolm X, as well as Nigeria’s Nnamdi Azikiwe and Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah—who both came to the United States for higher education before returning to lead their countries to independence from the British. In turn, Patrice Lumumba, himself a young Batetela man, took the reins in the Congo to unseat Belgian rule; his U.S.-ordered assassination sparked a new moment of global nonwhite anticolonial solidarity. Benga had hinted at his developing understanding of a color-based nation when he expressed his joy in being among black people and free from whites—a concept powerfully articulated several decades later by Amiri Baraka, who declared “‘black’ is a country.”⁹⁴ Traversing the Atlantic, Benga and the Batetela boys had found the homes of their friends as decidedly color-coded—homes free from the witchcraft of the white man and supportive of global unity in the struggle against Western hegemony.

⁹⁴ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Home: Social Essays by LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1966), 82.