

Kathryn Turnbull

Dr. Twagira

African Environmental History

Spring 2020

Imagining African Environments: Zoos, Circuses, Menageries, and the Colonial Impulse

For many Americans today, their first understanding of an African environment comes from a zoo. Cropping up in every corner of the country, zoos and animal parks are filled with all sorts of “exotic” and non-native animals. The animals’ enclosures are often decorated with artificial elements from their natural habitats, a diorama of sorts that attempts to show an authentic version of the environments the animals hail from. Because of this, zoos have tremendous power in continually forming the American conception of non-American landscapes. In particular, African animals and their enclosures have long been subject to colonial visions of landscapes of the “Dark Continent”.¹² The research presented in this paper reveals that zoos, circuses, and menageries have historically been and continue to be sites of imperialist thought designed for white American audiences, depicting an image of harsh and inferior environments that prescribe a self-serving neocolonial brand of conservationism.

¹ Stanley, Henry M. *In Darkest Africa: or, The Quest, Rescue, and Retreat of Emin, Governor of Equatoria*, 1890.

² Keim, Curtis. “Origins of ‘Darkest Africa’” in *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2014.

The first American circus landed in Philadelphia in 1793. Described as a “new species of amusement”, John Bill Rickett’s imported circus from London was essentially a glamorized equestrian show that showcased Rickett’s riding skills.³ Many traveling menageries and circuses followed Rickett’s example and began touring the country throughout the nineteenth century, introducing impressive exotic predators to a sample of the working American public.

One such menagerie owner was Isaac Van Amberg, a “clever showman and an astute business manager”, who had cleaned cages for another menagerie as a boy in the 1820s. By 1833, his shows were comprised of humiliating lions and tigers into submission through macho feats of strength.⁴ Furthermore, Van Amberg’s show included “scenes, incidents and accidents in the life of Dr. Livingstone, while hunting in the African deserts”.⁵ Livingstone’s glory was relived and only reinforced by the presence of a submissive lion in the act. On another tour, the menagerie presented a dramatized version of Mungo Park’s “Travels to the Interior of Africa”, including his “discovery” of the Niger River, where Van Amberg himself portrayed an accompanying slave on Park’s exploration. Toward the end of the drama, Park is saved from a ferocious lion by that slave.⁶ These performances showcase the African environments portrayed to the American public; a dark, virgin wilderness, waiting to be discovered and

³ Moy, James S. "Entertainments at John B. Ricketts's Circus, 1793-1800." *Educational Theatre Journal* 30, no. 2 (1978): 187-202. doi:10.2307/3206292.

⁴ Tait, Peta. *Fighting Nature: Travelling Menageries, Animal Acts and War Shows*, 13. Australia: Sydney University Press, 2016. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dt00vp.5.

⁵ Tait, 20-21.

⁶ Tait, 21.

conquered by Western explorers. Van Amberg's menagerie of African animals brought the imperialist impulse to everyday Americans at every show.

The circus boom in the latter half of the nineteenth century came with its own set of colonial tendencies. Military outfits became standard repertoire for lion tamers across all circuses, a casual reference to the colonial military occupation of the animal's native land.⁷ The act of lion and tamer was incredibly common and straightforward: the tamer dominates the wild predator through violence and deceitful tricks. Analyzed for its metaphor, where the tamer wears the costume of an invading army and the defenseless lion is beat into submission, the act is a startling reminder of the colonial impulse that crept into circuses. The circus entertainer Captain Jack Bonavita was celebrated for taming nearly thirty lions, wearing a rendition of a military uniform himself. Then vice-president Theodore Roosevelt called him a "hero" in 1901, solidifying the association between military strength and African submission.⁸

Going beyond standard African animals, some circuses included menageries of "exotic" people. As described by historian John Mackenzie in his book, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*:

"Colonial wars were swiftly represented [...] in the circus ring, and the sting of black opponents was drawn by their appearance at shows acting out the resistance which had so recently been bitterly fought out in reality."⁹

⁷ Tait, 197.

⁸ Tait, 198.

⁹ MacKenzie, John. "Introduction" in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, 11. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

While African colonial subjects were made to reenact bloody conflicts, the circus animals became the surrounding environment, “provid[ing] an atmospheric effect”.¹⁰ African animals were essential to the imperialist storytelling done by American circuses, and American audiences were happily entertained.

American fascination with African animals reached its heyday less than a century later. After having construction delayed by the Civil War, the long-awaited Philadelphia Zoo opened its doors to the public in 1874.¹¹ A status symbol of modernity and posh society, zoos were incredibly attractive developments to urban centers. The once-popular animal menageries and traveling circuses lost popularity as zoos began appearing in American cities. Zoos were often situated in the middle of grand public parks in cities like Philadelphia, New York, and San Diego. The increased prevalence of zoos in populous urban settings marked a cultural shift as African animals became accessible to average Americans and not just the wealthy few who could afford to participate in an expensive hunting safari across the ocean.

Lasting, physical zoos built upon the existing fascination with exotic animals, expanding the American appetite for African animal imports. According to Harriet Ritvo, an American historian of Environmental History, American trade in animals “developed within the pattern of Britain’s extension of imperialist control of the colonies in Africa and Asia and followed the trade routes.”¹² Carl Hagenbeck of Germany became a prolific animal trader in the late nineteenth century, capturing animals from all over the African

¹⁰ Tait, 181.

¹¹ Hanson, Elizabeth. *Animal Attractions: Nature on Display in American Zoos*, 11. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. doi:10.2307/j.ctv39x66f.10.

¹² Tait, 4.

continent. In his 1912 memoir, *Beasts and Men*, Hagenbeck describes his journeys to “the uttermost parts of the Earth” in search of exotic animals to capture and trade:

“In the primeval forests of Africa, [...] the localities where wild animals are to be caught are very remote from all the more civilised parts of the world. [...] Uncivilised people, no less wild than the beasts, have to be secured and made friends with — a matter of no small difficulty. [...] The Egyptian Sudan is one of the richest and most inexhaustible sources of animal life. [...] For many years this animal paradise was closed, [...] On the banks of the rivers, in the almost impenetrable forests, and on the plains, which in the rainy season are covered by grass ten to fifteen feet high.”¹³

Looking past the racist language of “civility”, what is so striking about Hagenbeck’s writing is his lusting over the natural landscape. He mythologizes Africa as Eden, describing the “paradise” of Eastern Africa in the bounty of animals and environments. His account fits perfectly into Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane’s discussion of hunters and traders in *The Myth of Wild Africa*, who argue that writers like Hagenbeck “inevitably attracted more Europeans and Americans who craved sporting adventures, and fed the Western idealization of Africa” by publishing their work.¹⁴

Frank Buck became the premier celebrity in animal trading after Hagenbeck’s death in 1913. His legacy was hardly more pleasant, according to historian Elizabeth Hanson:

¹³ Hagenbeck, Carl. *Beasts and Men*. 46-48. London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1912. <https://archive.org/details/beastsmenbeingca00hage/page/46/mode/2up>.

¹⁴ Adams, Jonathan, and Thomas McShane. *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation Without Illusion*. 27-28. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.

“In the way he dressed, and in his treatment of local people during collecting expeditions, Buck modeled himself on the least sympathetic sort of European colonial official. By so doing, he explicitly associated the display of zoo animals with Western imperialism.”¹⁵

Obsessed with the impenetrable, remote, and uncivilized wilderness of the continent, animal traders of Buck’s status were the men who shaped the American zoo of the twentieth century. To name a few: Carl Hagenbeck, Benjamin Wallace (his business partner for the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus), the four Ringling Brothers, Phineas Taylor Barnum, and William Camac were and remain some of the biggest influences in zoo design and animal training.

Though animal circuses have largely faded into American history after facing animal rights advocates and declining ticket sales, modern zoos are possibly more popular than ever. Since the Philadelphia Zoo’s opening in 1874, the US is now home to over 2,400 zoos and wildlife parks. Zoos have almost universally adopted wildlife conservation and education in efforts to stay within the public’s favor, but their very existence remains problematic. Replacing cages with synthetic landscapes and attempting to preserve species has, in some ways, only idealized and romanticized African environments more. Conservation’s greatest flaw is uncomfortably clear at zoos: lions raised in captivity and plaques with basic facts about their family structures hardly offer the comprehensive education about the natural world that zoos claim to provide.¹⁶

The historic racialization of African animals in zoos ensures that the animals can be

¹⁵ Hanson, 95.

¹⁶ Rabb, George B. "Education and Zoos." *The American Biology Teacher* 30, no. 4 (1968): 291-96. Accessed May 10, 2020. doi:10.2307/4442049.

understood as symbols of their native environments and their submission to Western conquest. By placing African habitats and animals in confinement, zoos continue to push a colonial narrative of the white man's domination over African environments, and by extension, African people.

Works Cited:

- Adams, Jonathan, and Thomas McShane. *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation Without Illusion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.
- Grazian, David. "Where the Wild Things Aren't: Exhibiting Nature in American Zoos." In *American Zoo: A Sociological Safari*, 16-42. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. doi:10.2307/j.ctvc77m4k.4.
- Hagenbeck, Carl. *Beasts and Men*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1912. <https://archive.org/details/beastmenbeingca00hage/page/46/mode/2up>.
- Hanson, Elizabeth. *Animal Attractions: Nature on Display in American Zoos*, 11. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. doi:10.2307/j.ctv39x66f.10.
- Jamieson, Dale. "Zoos Revisited." In *The Philosophy of the Environment*, edited by Chappell T. D. J., 180-92. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. doi:10.3366/j.ctvxcr90v.14.
- Keim, Curtis. "Origins of 'Darkest Africa'" in *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2014.
- MacKenzie, John. "Introduction" in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Magosvongwe, R. (2018). A Contrastive (Re)mapping of Blacks, Land and Nature in Colonial Rhodesian and Contemporary Postcolonial Zimbabwean Fiction. In Nhemachena A., Kangira J., & Mlambo N. (Eds.), *Decolonisation of Materialities or Materialisation of (Re-)Colonisation: Symbolisms, Languages, Ecocriticism and (Non)Representationalism in 21st Century Africa*(pp. 257-282). Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh9vtwg.13.
- Moy, James S. "Entertainments at John B. Ricketts's Circus, 1793-1800." *Educational Theatre Journal* 30, no. 2 (1978). doi:10.2307/3206292.
- Osayimwese, Itohan I. "Armchair Safaris: Representations of African Cultures in Zoos." *Architectural Theory Review*. 20:3 (2015), 296-311, DOI: 10.1080/13264826.2016.1195853
- Rabb, George B. "Education and Zoos." *The American Biology Teacher* 30, no. 4 (1968): 291-96. doi:10.2307/4442049.
- Stanley, Henry M. *In Darkest Africa: or, The Quest, Rescue, and Retreat of Emin, Governor of Equatoria*, 1890.

Tait, Peta. *Fighting Nature: Travelling Menageries, Animal Acts and War Shows*. Australia: Sydney University Press, 2016. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dt00vp.5.

Uadiale, M., & Awala-Ale, A. (2018). Gendered Experiences: Land Grabs and the De-Feminization of Africa's Agrarian Futures. In Nhemachena A., Kangira J., & Mlambo N. (Eds.), *Decolonisation of Materialities or Materialisation of (Re-)Colonisation: Symbolisms, Languages, Ecocriticism and (Non)Representationalism in 21st Century Africa* (pp. 195-218). Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh9vtwg.10.

Wainaina, Binyavanga. 'How to Write About Africa.' *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* 92, "The View From Africa". Independent Alliance, 2005.