

Ota Benga Under My Mother's Roof

A review of *Ota Benga Under My Mother's Roof* by Carrie Allen McCray, an introduction by Kevin Simmonds (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012. 64 pp., ISBN 978-1611170856) by T. Anantha Vijayah (ananthavijayah@weebly.com), Assistant Professor, Gandhigram Rural Institute, Deemed University.

In this book, Carrie Allen McCray brings back to life Ota Benga, a Congolese *Mbuti* who was brought to America for display in 1904 for the St. Louis World Fair. In the process of depicting the life Ota lived, Carrie creates a counter discourse of the historical milieu that Ota either witnessed or experienced. Carrie collated information from various sources as well as inputs from her brother. She also simultaneously engages Ota Benga from a first person and a third person perspective.

This book of poems was published one hundred years after the historical incident of transporting people from Africa to be exhibits in the 1904 St. Louis World Fair and one of them later was incarcerated in the zoo that forces readers to revisit the pain and poignancy of the past from a different perspective. By opening the book with African lullabies, teaching in *Fathers*, Carrie provides instances depicting the culture and human nature of people in Congo. The exploitation of the people in Africa by the faraway exploiters is depicted in *Storm Warning* and *Dicotomy* while the inhuman nature is condensed in "Where are the Hands?" The poems provide more space for readers' imagination.

Bringing in African traditional songs and the songs of the African-American experience the book provides credence to the texts and the individuals who underwent such a poignant experience. The poems present a bird's eye view of the early contact days and exploitation of the African continent and its impact on the lives of the Forest People, in particular, slavery, loss of their peaceful life, culture, and exploitation for rubber that turns red from the blood of the people. It is after this portrayal, Carrie singles out Ota in the book.

Carrie is careful in representing Ota as a human and has taken pains to counter the narratives that were depicted in the newspapers of the time. She portrays him as a forest man, hence, the Ota who is unknown to the media is revealed in the poems. But the poems are not able to bring out the perspective of Ota Benga or why he chose to come back to America. Details about his wife, second marriage, children were not included. Lack of evidence and stories to this effect were not recorded even by Dr. Verner who knows Ota's language and implies how insignificant he was (*New York Times* 1906 Sep 18).

Carrie, with the help of her brother Hunter, portrays Ota and his love for children, storytelling, dance and exploring of forests around Virginia. The dramatically placed last dance of Ota is a premonition of a frustrated individual who commits suicide. In placing Ota in a different perspective, Carrie reveals the foundations of many stereotypes and its manifestations in real life.

The assertion of Darwinism that promotes racism and the birth of anthropology from this skewed perspective are foregrounded and countered in the poems. The depiction of the St. Louis World Fair in 1904 and the housing of Ota in the Museum and later in Bronx zoo is the zenith of racism.

The poems also help in grounding the facts that were the foundational structures of racism. The attempt to counter racism and the basics of Darwinism is presented by the poet from a Christian and human perspective.

By intermingling first person and third person narrative, Carrie provides an authentic description of events from simultaneously different perspectives. Also the author contrasts events and peoples' perception of the same. For instance, the Jim Crow Car was seen as dirty filthy train cars for the transport of African Americans, but Ota sees them as life where there are "*warm voices and laughter*" unlike the "*people who pass without a word*" in the streets of Bronx.

The use of quote from Bible in Lamentations is a stunning manner, and thus the quote is used to portray the death of Ota. Culminating the book with a personal note reinforces that there is a personal touch to the observation, and none else could have written such a personal elegy for Ota.

The poems are inter-textual constructs that largely works on history that stirs the pan human sensibilities Ota Benga undergoes. Carrie counter posits events and ideas for foregrounding Ota. For instance: hunting elephant and antelope for food and hunting men for an exhibit in the St. Louis World Fair was antithetical, while Ota was bought as a slave, he believes in the *Fewla* (leader); and the absurdity of measuring the small species of humans is contrasted by following it up with the poem: the real measure of a man; the preconception that Africans cannot see the colour blue with the poem that follows "*Blues Man Answers*"

Carrie is successful in bringing back the memory of Ota, who is only a representative of thousands of others, after nearly a century to the America's and world's centre stage. She is forcing the present generation to take a second look at all that are being cherished as "correct" by the society. What was deemed to be 'correct' or appropriate then looks abominable now. This demands a critical look at the present day world.

It is thoughtful of the publisher to have included the introduction which relates to the real time incidents in history. More poems could have been included on how Ota fared in Carrie's mother's roof, as not many details are presented about Ota in Carrie's home.

Post Script (on page 52 the date should be March, 20, 1916).