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Review: “Barracoon: The Story of the Last ‘Black Cargo’” by Zora Neal Hurston

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Barracoon: The Story of the Last ‘Black Cargo’

By Zora Neal Hurston, New York: HarperCollins Publishers,
2018. Pp. 208, Paperback \$25, ISBN: 978-0062748201

REVIEWED BY ANNE-MARIE HARRISON

Barracoon embodies the power of oral history. It lives and it breathes beyond the last moments of its author and its protagonist. It is human testimony to the unending horrors of American empire. With *Barracoon*, novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston sought to give voice to the enslaved. “All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold,” (location 303)¹ she wrote. Fifty-eight years after Hurston’s death, the world can finally honor her work and the life of Oluale Kossola, named Cudjo Lewis by his enslavers. Over the course of three months in late 1927, the then 86-year old Kossola shared his past with Hurston at his home in Plateau, Alabama, where he had lived since emancipation. He was the last known living African brought over on the last American slave ship, the *Clotilda*. It is a devastating story, not because it is a slave story, but rather because, mostly, it isn’t. “Barracoon” is the word for the temporary barracks used to confine enslaved people; *Barracoon* is the story of how American slavery forged an enduring system of institutionalized inequality and violence. It is the story of how imperial power permeates across time and space, down to the most remote actor. The barracoons didn’t go away, they just got bigger.

By 1931 Hurston had completed the book, but faced numerous barriers to publication. According to a recent *New York Times* article, Hurston’s piece in the *Journal of Negro History* titled “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver” drew criticism from her contemporaries. She had “borrowed” from Emma Langdon Roche’s “Historic Sketches of the South,” without proper attribution, they accused.² African American literature and Africana Studies scholar Deborah Plant and novelist Alice Walker wrote in the 2018 book’s introduction how publishers also took issue with *Barracoon*’s tone, although they omit the plagiarism charge. At the time, Plant explains, publishers refused the book’s unique monologic style. Kossola’s vernacular had to go; readers would never be unable to understand his language, it simply wasn’t marketable. Hurston would not publish without Kossola’s voice. Now it exists as an accessible, powerful artifact of history, just as Hurston intended.

In *Barracoon*, Kossola speaks for himself. The man is front and center in a narrative that could have been picked apart and restructured for prosaic ease, flat-

¹ All references to *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Slave* refer to Amazon Kindle locations. location.

² Alexandra Alter, “A Work by Zora Neale Hurston Will Finally Be Published,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/books/zora-neale-hurston-new-book.html>.

tened and refashioned for an arguably mostly-white audience. In addition to using her spellings of his vernacular, Hurston bookends Kossola's retellings with her own: on one of the days Hurston comes to Kossola's door, he's is not in the mood to talk to her, he'd rather garden. On another, he's tickled when she brings a watermelon for them to share. An outsider description of a slave experience, or one by a historian far removed, can feel woefully overdone, insufficient, or both. Hurston trusted Kossola to tell his truth—besides the reflexive interstitial scenes, Hurston is entirely absent—to be the bearer of knowledge and history. Kossola trusted Hurston to speak in his voice. This is Hurston's remarkable accomplishment with *Barracoon*: she did not allow for his humanity to be erased, not with the publishers who sought to whiten his words, nor with her choice of narrative style. Kossola survived enslavement, but he is not just a static number of the slave trade. He is Cudjo Lewis, he is Oluale Kossola. He is an agent of history and his life is now immortal.

Yet, for a story about a survivor of the slave trade, *Barracoon* is markedly thin on details of Kossola's enslavement. Be it because Kossola was enslaved for a comparatively short time (five and a half years) or that the horrors of his life outside of enslavement dominated his memory, his rendering of slavery comes off as almost mild—he even describes one slaver Cap'n Jim as “a good man” (1.929) despite acknowledging that he was no longer free. Kossola most vividly elaborates on life before the plantation and life after. When Kossola was violently kidnapped in 1860 from Bantè, his home in modern-day Benin (1.142), he was on the precipice of manhood. It was a trauma he never overcame: “My eyes dey stop cryin' but de tears runnee down inside me all de time” (1.807). After being freed, Kossola helped found Africatown (now Plateau), married, and fathered six children. But his path was strewn with sorrow. Five sons and one daughter, all dead long before Kossola met Hurston. After their last son died, Kossola's wife left. What began as a hopeful new life as a free man devolved into a life of tragedy: disease, racist murders, train accidents, and mystery.

To read Kossola's testimony is to feel emotionally eviscerated. But is it surprising? Kossola and his family were ostracized, brutalized, and at the most benign level, discriminated against for being African—even in a town of black Americans whose parents had done the same transatlantic journey. To them, the new neighbors with their strange language and manners were “savage” (1.1052). Whether in 1927 or 2018, the institutionalized effects of slavery are inescapable. Murder by police officers, mass incarceration, latent and blatant racism, lack of accessible healthcare, education, legal defense—the list goes on. When Kossola was kidnapped in 1860, the importation of new enslaved people had been illegal for more than half a century. His story was never supposed to end in the death of his six children; Kossola was supposed to marry a pretty girl from his village, one of the ones with gold bracelets on their arms (1.751). *Barracoon* is not a hopeful story,

it is not a story of redemption or one with a neat and tidy ending. *Barracoon* is a testament to the enduring legacy of a horrific, bloodthirsty system, and one which serves as the foundation of American empire.