

Civil War Obscura: Barracocon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”

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Feature Essay: Civil War Obscura

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Hurston, Zora Neale. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."* Edited by Deborah G. Plant. Amistad, 2018 \$45.00 ISBN 9780062748201

Author and historian/folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, who died in obscurity in 1960, is back on the bookshelves in a significant way. Her first book, *Barracoon*, has finally been published. She completed the work in 1931 but could never interest publishers in the true saga of Cudjo Lewis, thought to be the last living person enslaved in Africa and transported to the United States by the slave ship *Clotilda*. Part of the reason the book encountered obstacles was the inclusion of dialect in Hurston's interviews with Kossula, Lewis's African name. Another part was the topic itself. Not only is the slave trade discussed in great detail, but the responsibility of initial captures of Africans by the Dahomey is clearly outlined: black Africans captured and sold other black Africans to European slave traders for profit.

This book is included in "Civil War Obscura" because it was initially written in the late 1920s and prepared for publication immediately after. At the time it was written, author Zora Neale Hurston was struggling to make her way in the world of writing and anthropology. Eventually, Hurston became well-known. *Color Purple* author Alice Walker helped bring Hurston to a new generation of readers, remembering her with a tombstone reading "A Genius of the South."

Barracoon is a fantastic read, lighting formerly dark corners such as the racism suffered by the Africans at the hands of enslaved people who had been in America for several generations. Kossula spoke of the fate of his American-born children during Reconstruction. His daughter died at fifteen from inadequate medical care, and his youngest son was shot rather than arrested by a local deputy sheriff. Kossula never found out of what crime his son was accused. Another son, David, had to be identified by his father because he had been beheaded.

Look lak we ain' cry enough. We ain' through cryin'. In de November our Jimmy come home and set round lak he doan feel good.

Within two days, Jimmy was dead as well. The reader cannot feel anything but heartbroken for Kossula and his wife, Seely.

Kossula remembered happier times in Afrika as well. He spoke of the beautiful land, and of his training to grow into manhood. He shared the unwritten rules of tribal power with Hurston, explaining how to act in front of a prince. He showed little anger at his fate at the hands of the Dahomey people. He described the Middle Passage with sorrow, but not with anger or resentment. The Civil War did not seem to touch the African man, but after it ended, he and the other men and women who had been together on the last passage of the *Clotilda* had decisions to make. They soon realized that they would not be able to purchase passage to their homeland, and no one told them that the government could help them. They spoke to their owner, Captain Tim Meaher. Meaher was unwilling to give the group land, but he did sell them enough property to create "Affican Town" near Plateau-Magazine, Alabama.

The Africans built their town, created a government, started churches, and made the most of freedom. Kossula told the story of his experiences and his family to author Hurston in a series of interviews. Hurston came from New York City to talk to "Cudjo Lewis," and then to write her interviews up as an anthropologist collects artifacts. The Great Depression put an end to her hopes for publication of *Barracoon*, but she went on to publish *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Tell My Horse*, among other books.

We often lose track of men and women who were once important in our lives. Luckily for us, both Zora Neale Hurston and Kossula have been found again. *Barracoon* is a small piece in the picture that is the American Civil War, but without their words, the picture remains incomplete. This book is highly recommended.

Meg Groeling received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie will publish her second book, First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, in 2020. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.