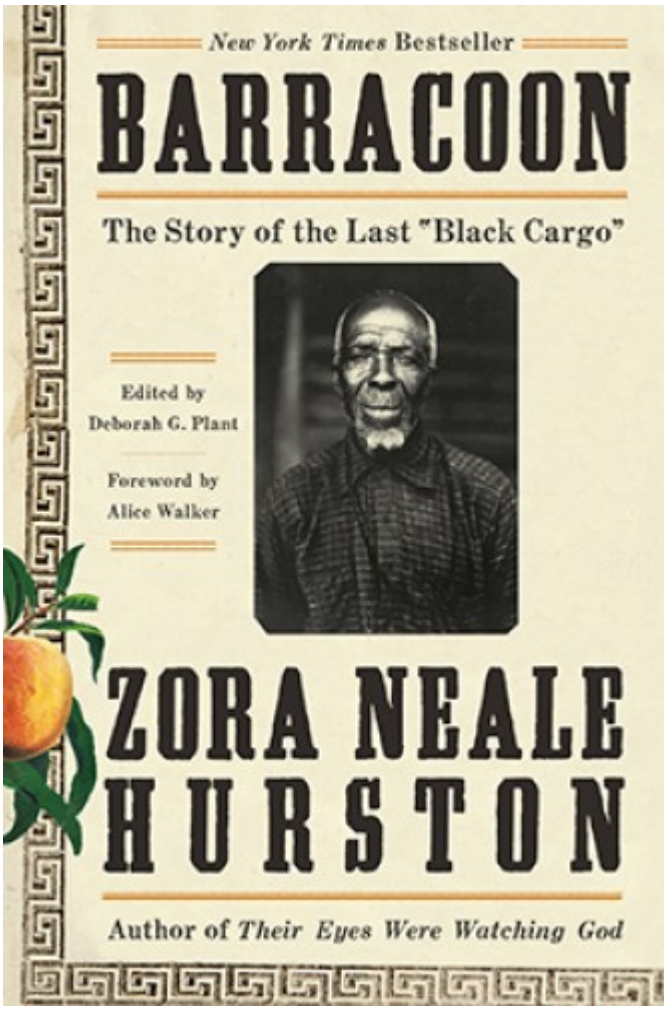
Zora Neale Hurston brings us the voice of a former slave

Hurston's singular ear for the beauty of speech and memory brings Cudjo Lewis's story to life.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the October 24, 2018 issue

In Review



Barracoon

The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”

By Zora Neale Hurston; edited by Deborah G. Plant
Amistad
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About the African slave trade, “the most dramatic chapter in the story of human existence,” Zora Neale Hurston writes, the justifiers of slavery have had much to say. But the Africans themselves have not been heard from. “All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold,” she writes in her introduction to *Barracoon*. The book, written by Hurston in 1931 and unpublished until this year, is her attempt to save some words from the sold. It recounts the story of Oluale Kossola, also known as Cudjo Lewis, the last survivor of the last slave ship.

The ship’s legend is so crass and shocking that it could easily be mistaken for satire: “In April of 1858, while traveling about the *Roger B. Taney*”—named for the infamous chief justice of the Supreme Court who’d authored the Dred Scott decision a year earlier—a man named Tim Meaher made a bet “that he could bring Africans into the country in spite of the ban against trans-Atlantic trafficking,” with no one being hanged for the crime. Bet or no bet, Meaher imported slaves from the Dahoman port of Ouidah the following year. He and his partners were charged with piracy but not convicted, and the last “black cargo” of the antebellum era was never returned home.

Hurston met Kossola in 1927 when she was a student of anthropologist Franz Boas and working for the “father of black history,” Carter G. Woodson. A brief journal article was the only outcome of their initial meeting. With funding from Charlotte Osgood Mason, a major patron of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was able to return and spend an extended period recording Kossola’s recollections.

To Hurston—who would shortly make revolutionary contributions to the American literary tradition with her novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and her folklore collections *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*—Kossola was much more than an anthropological curiosity. Standing alone at the intersection of Africa, from which he was sold at age 19, and the American experience of slavery and its aftermath, he was a man with a story of his own to tell. In the course of several meetings, over crabs and his own tree’s peaches, through gardening and visits to the church where he served as sexton, through silence and conviviality, he tells it. “Thankee Jesus!” he tells her. “Somebody come ast about Cudjo!” Maybe, he says, someone will repeat his story “in de Afficky soil” and someone there will

recognize his name.

It is a harrowing story. He starts with his grandfather, who was prominent in their village in what is now Nigeria. (”Where is de house where de mouse is de leader?” he says, waving away Hurston’s objection that he begin with his own life.) The customs of marriage, family life, and the initiation of boys into manhood end abruptly when the village is destroyed by the king of Dahomey and his warriors. They carry Kossola and the few other survivors off to the barracoon, the barracks for slaves awaiting sale. From there, he is smuggled aboard an American ship and taken covertly to Alabama, where the ship is scuttled and the contraband Africans are moved to a plantation shortly before the secession crisis and the Civil War.

But slavery takes up only one slender chapter of Kossola’s story. After emancipation, the Africans discover that they can’t afford to go home and can’t gain acceptance among black Americans. Kossola is tasked with advocating for the former slaves with their former master. “Cap’n Tim, you brought us from our country where we had lan’,” he recalls his appeal. “You made us slave. Now dey make us free but we ain’ got no lan’! Why doan you give us piece dis land so we kin buildee ourself a home?”

The answer, an unsurprising one in the cruelty of the post-emancipation South, is an indignant refusal. The Africans set about renting the land they had worked until they can buy a parcel for themselves. This they do, forming the community of Africatown (now part of Plateau, Alabama), building homes, and founding the Old Landmark Baptist Church.

Along the way, Kossola becomes a Christian, marries, and fathers five children. He is disabled in a train accident for which he is awarded a $650 judgment by a court (the train did not signal or slow down as it passed through the city and struck him) that the railroad never pays. One of his sons is killed by a sheriff’s deputy, another in a similar train accident. He outlives his wife and children and, bereft of everyone that made his strange land a home, is “full of trembling awe before the altar of the past.”

Hurston’s singular ear for the beauty and particularity of speech and memory brings the story to life. Cudjo Lewis is a person between worlds. Randomly snatched up in a great historic wave, he is yet distinct from it, neither drowning resignedly nor swimming pointlessly against it but surviving. In this way he foreshadows Hurston’s fictional protagonists, whose enduring, distinctive humanity is both protest and proof

against the forces arrayed against them.

Barracoon is a minor work compared to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But as a piece of Hurston's greater project of preserving black vernacular history and literature it is valuable, and as a document of a singular life it is essential. An appendix includes Kossola's telling of animal tales and his paraphrase of the stories of Abraham and Jonah. ("Jonah, dere's seven thousand women and chillun in dat city don't know right from wrong. If you think I go 'stroy them, youse crazy.") As with Hurston's later works, *Barracoon* invites both gratitude at its preservation and melancholy at the Alexandrian libraries full of lore, paraphrase, theme, and variation that have been lost, in no small part because so few in a position to preserve them thought they were worth keeping.