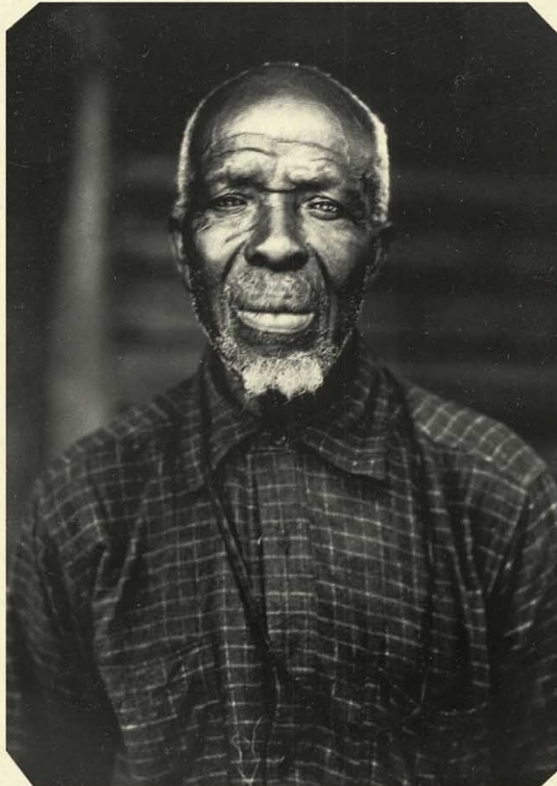


BARRACOOON

The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"

Edited by
Deborah G. Plant

Foreword by
Alice Walker



ZORA NEALE
HURSTON

Author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

BARRACOOON

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LAST "BLACK CARGO"

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Dedication

To

Charlotte Mason

*My Godmother, and the one Mother of all
the primitives, who with the Gods in Space is
concerned about the hearts of the untaught*

Epigraph

But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw, was: my people had *sold* me and the white people had bought me... . It impressed upon me the universal nature of greed and glory.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Definition

Barracoon: The Spanish word *barracoon* translates as “barracks” and is derived from *barraca*, which means “hut.” The term “barracoon” describes the structures used to detain Africans who would be sold and exported to Europe or the Americas. These structures, sometimes also referred to as factories, stockades, corrals, and holding pens, were built near the coast. They could be as insubstantial as a “slave shed” or as fortified as a “slave house” or “slave castle,” wherein Africans were forced into the cells of dungeons beneath the upper quarters of European administrators. Africans held in these structures had been kidnapped, captured in local wars and raids, or were trekked in from the hinterlands or interior regions across the continent. Many died in the barracoons as a consequence of their physical condition upon arrival at the coast or the length of time it took for the arrival of a ship. Some died while waiting for a ship to fill, which could take three to six months. This phase of the traffic was called the “coasting” period. During the years of suppression of the traffic, captives could be confined for several months.

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Foreword

Those Who Love Us Never Leave Us Alone with Our Grief Reading *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”*

Those who love us never leave us alone with our grief. At the moment they show us our wound, they reveal they have the medicine. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”* is a perfect example of this.

I’m not sure there was ever a harder read than this, for those of us duty bound to carry the ancestors, to work for them, as we engage in daily life in different parts of the world where they were brought in chains. And where they, as slaves to cruel, or curious, or indifferent, white persons (with few exceptions) existed in precarious suspension disconnected from their real life, and where we also have had to struggle to protect our humanity, to experience joy of life, in spite of everything evil we have witnessed or to which we have been subjected.

Reading *Barracoon*, one understands immediately the problem many black people, years ago, especially black intellectuals and political leaders, had with it. It resolutely records the atrocities African peoples inflicted on each other, long before shackled Africans, traumatized, ill, disoriented, starved, arrived on ships as “black cargo” in the hellish West. Who could face this vision of the violently cruel behavior of the “brethren” and the “sistren” who first captured our ancestors? Who would want to know, via a blow-by-blow account, how African chiefs deliberately set out to capture Africans from neighboring tribes, to provoke wars of conquest in order to capture for the slave trade people—men, women, children—who belonged to Africa? And to do this in so hideous a fashion that reading about it two hundred years later brings waves of horror and distress. This is, make no mistake, a harrowing read.

We are being shown the wound.

However, Zora Hurston’s genius has once again produced a Maestrapiece. What is a Maestrapiece? It is the feminine perspective or part of the structure, whether in stone or fancy, without which the entire edifice is a lie. And we have suffered so much from this one: that Africans were only victims of the slave trade, not participants. Poor Zora. An anthropologist, no less! A daughter of Eatonville, Florida, where truth, what was real, what actually happened to somebody, mattered. And so, she sits with Cudjo Lewis. She shares peaches and watermelon. (Imagine how many generations of black people would never admit to eating watermelon!) She gets the grisly story from one of the last people able to tell it. How black people came to America, how we were treated by black and white. How black Americans, enslaved themselves, ridiculed the Africans; making their lives so much harder. How the whites simply treated their “slaves” like pieces of machinery. But machinery that could be whipped if it didn’t produce enough. Fast enough. Machinery that could be mutilated, raped, killed, if the desire arose. Machinery that could be cheated, cheerfully, without a trace of guilt.

And then, the story of Cudjo Lewis’s life after Emancipation. His happiness with “freedom,”