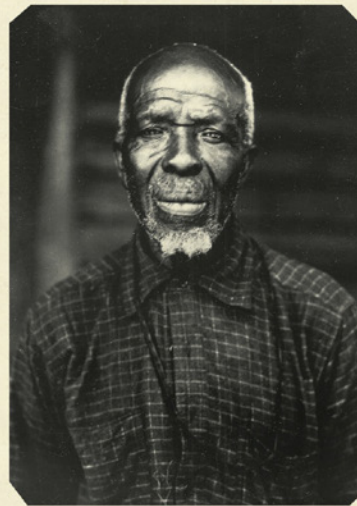


TEACHING GUIDE

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*



HarperAcademic.com

About the Book

In 1927, Zora Neale Hurston went to Plateau, Alabama, just outside Mobile, to interview eighty-six-year-old Cudjo Lewis. Of the millions of men, women, and children transported from Africa to America, Cudjo was then the only known person alive to tell the story of this integral part of the nation's history. Hurston was there to record Cudjo's firsthand account of the raid that led to his capture and bondage fifty years after the trans-Atlantic slave trade was outlawed in the United States. In December 1927, Hurston returned to Plateau, the African-centric community founded by Cudjo and his compatriots from the *Clotilda*, the last ship to transport captured Africans into the United States. Over a period of about three months, Hurston talked in depth with Cudjo about the details of his life.

Based on those interviews, featuring Cudjo's unique vernacular, and written with the compassion and singular style that have made Hurston one of the preeminent American authors of the twentieth-century, *Barracoon* brilliantly illuminates the tragedy of slavery and of one life forever defined by it. Offering insight into the pernicious legacy, this poignant and powerful work is an invaluable contribution to history and culture.

About the Author

Zora Neale Hurston was a novelist, ethnographer, folklorist, and cultural anthropologist. She is the author of four novels (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 1934; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937; *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, 1939; and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, 1948); two books of folklore (*Mules and Men*, 1935, and *Tell My Horse*, 1938); an autobiography (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942); and over fifty [short stories](#), essays, and plays. Hurston attended Howard University, Barnard College, and Columbia University. She earned an Associate degree from Howard University in 1920 and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Barnard College in 1928. She died in Fort Pierce, Florida in 1960.

About the Editor & Foreword

Deborah G. Plant is an independent scholar and writer based in Florida. She is the author of *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (1995) and *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (2007), and editor of *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston* (2010).

The foreword is written by Alice Walker, the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award-winning author of *The Color Purple*.

About this Guide

This teaching guide for *Barracoon* is divided into two parts. The first contains three sets of discussion questions that are based on specific chapters from the *Barracoon* narrative. The chapters and questions reflect distinct periods in Cudjo Lewis' life: reflections of his early years in Bantè, West Africa, destruction of his village, and retention in the barracoon; the Middle Passage and enslavement in America; and his experiences as a freedman in Africatown, Alabama. The second part contains a series of writing prompts (that can also be used for discussion). These questions require students to think about both Cudjo's narrative throughout *Barracoon*, as well as information contained in the introductions by Deborah G. Plant and Zora Neale Hurston.

Discussion Questions

CHAPTERS I-V

- Cudjo says to Zora Neale Hurston, “My name, is not Cudjo Lewis. It Kossula.” Why does it mean so much to Kossula to make sure that Hurston knew his true name?
- Cudjo Lewis expressed an affinity for his cultural traditions. What are three African traditions or customs that Cudjo continues in America? Cudjo was considered a poet and griot. What are the attributes of a griot and do we see these elements in Cudjo’s narrative? In describing life in his African village, Cudjo talks about the king. What describes the political and societal structures of Cudjo’s village? What matters are overseen by the king, and how does that affect the community? How does the political and social structure in Africatown compare with that of Cudjo’s village?
- What initiations did Cudjo undergo in Africa?
- Describe the Dahomian attack on Cudjo’s village, Bantè. How did the violence affect Cudjo? What was the outcome for Cudjo and his village?

CHAPTERS VI-VII

- What is Cudjo’s experience in the barracoon? How were people selected for transport?
- What was Cudjo’s experience aboard the *Clotilda*? How did his experience differ from that of the Americans aboard the ship?
- What was the nature of the relationship between Captain William “Bill” Foster and Cudjo and between Timothy Meaher and Cudjo? How would you describe the nature of the relationship between Foster and Meaher?
- How do the enslaved Africans learn about their freedom? How do they react to the news?
- What characterizes the relationship between Africatown residents and Africans?

CHAPTERS VIII-XII

- One of the first things Cudjo Lewis and his fellow compatriots do after emancipation is make homes for themselves. How do they go about acquiring land and building houses? What about their process allows them to create their own neighborhood and community?
- Cudjo talks about his marriage to Seely. How do they get married? What is Cudjo’s attitude about marriage and marriage license?
- What hardships does Cudjo’s family face? How does Cudjo handle these situations?
- There are two distinct moments Cudjo describes where he learns about the law: when one of his sons is shot and killed by a sheriff’s deputy and when his wagon is hit by a train. What lessons about the law does he learn from these experiences?

Writing Prompts

- In her introduction, Deborah G. Plant acknowledges an academic debate on plagiarism that has followed Hurston's *Barracoon* throughout the years. What arguments are presented in the debate? What is your assessment of the issue? In what ways does your assessment affect your reading of *Barracoon*?
- In Plant's introduction, Hurston is quoted as saying, "The white people had held my people in slavery in America. They had bought us, it is true and exploited us. But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw was: my people had *sold* me and the white people had bought me. That did away with the folklore I had been brought up on—that the white people had gone to Africa, waved a red handkerchief at the Africans and lured them aboard a ship and sailed away." Those Africans who collaborated in trans-Atlantic trafficking enterprises profited from the enslavement of other African peoples. In what specific ways were the Africans of Dahomey participants in the capture and trafficking of Africans from other ethnic groups? What is your response to this dynamic of the "trans-Atlantic slave trade"?
- Zora Neale Hurston chose to present Cudjo's voice in the vernacular dialect of the linguistic tradition of the black folk. She even refused a publisher's request to revise the narrative in accordance with established language stylistics for publication. What do you think of the linguistic choices that Hurston made? What can we learn about Cudjo Lewis from his manner of speech? In relation to the use of vernacular dialect, what was your experience of reading the *Barracoon* narrative? What differences in language usage or patterns of speech do you perceive between African Americans and Africatown residents?
- How does what you have learned from Cudjo's story compare with what you have learned from other sources that deal with the trans-Atlantic slave trade? What new insights have you gained about slavery from Cudjo's narrative? And what specific new knowledge have you acquired about the trans-Atlantic slave trade?

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