

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 2 No. 2, August 2018

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-2-issue-2-august-2018/>

Zora Neal Hurston. *BARRACOOON: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*. Publisher: Amistad. 208 pp. Year: 2018. ISBN: 0062748203.

Reviewed by: Wendy Wilson-Fall, Africana Studies Program, Lafayette College.

What is the role of the intellectual? Zora Neal Hurston was one intellectual in a long tradition of black Atlantic thinkers, already numerous in her generation, to confront the difficult questions surrounding the African diaspora in the United States and its relation to its past. She was preceded by Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), David Walker, Anna Julia Cooper, Alexander Crummel, Edward Wilmott Blyden, and W.E.B. DuBois to name a few.

This book, which was written sometime between 1927 and 1928, is not so complex in and of itself, as it is complex as a historical phenomenon. To review this book, it seemed to me that it needed to be written about in several contexts.

First, we can read this book, *Barracoon*, as a record of ethnographic field study. Second, the book can be read as an archive, a record of the words, memories and impressions of an African who was brought as a captive to the United States when a young man. Most importantly, the book is the story of Oluwale, a young Yoruba man who was brought to the U.S. as a captive and then re-named “Cudjoe Lewis.” Third, the book is also an example of the divides and commonalities between a firstgeneration involuntary immigrant, arrived as a West African youth from a Yoruba community in what would become western Benin republic, and a young African American woman who grew up in the 1920s in an all black American community. It most certainly affords a window into how a young black intellectual in the early twentieth century learned about Africa and the experience of enslavement first-hand. Hurston generously and respectfully assures that Oluwale/Cudjoe’s narrative and voice are the core of the book. The book’s production also makes us think about the terms of philanthropy of the period; and how very personal relationships between donors and beneficiaries allowed for a subtle stewardship of particular ideas or points of view in the first half of the twentieth century.

The emergence of this work also points to the very critical work that historians have before them and the great work that has been done – the historian Sylviane Diouf, for example, ventured into this historical terrain without the benefit of Hurston’s book. She thus created, in many ways, the context through which scholars can see the testimony of Oluwale/Cudjoe, and the pioneering work of Zora Neal Hurston. Both of these women scholars exhibited an uncanny historical sense of the possibilities of the black American past. Likewise, we recognize the felicity of Howard University’s stewardship of her manuscript.

Zora started her fieldwork in July, 1927. It is important to remember that the re-generation of Africa, as seen through the lens of people who had been the victims of degeneration that led to their enslavement, and seen through the lens of correspondence from Liberia, was real for black people at the turn of the 20th century. The Africa

remembered in singular and individual household stories was one of conflict and disinheritance, of chaos and loss. It perhaps seemed to be an Africa one could not return to, not just because of cultural practices and identity lost, but because the vehicle of that loss was the political fracturing that led to the production of captives in the minds of their descendants. One can add to this the never-tiring work of the Christian missionaries, who exhorted one and all to work to 'save Africa' and African souls. This was the discourse in the black American community when Zora Neal Hurston was born, and the discourse that she inherited. In her time, young black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans were engaged in a project of psychological and artistic reconstruction of the image of Africa. Their Africa, for the most part, was a romantic construction of lush landscapes and innocent natives. Thus, many of Hurston's projects were going against the grain, her work argued against the utopic view of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, whether of the Negro American or of Africa. Zora wanted to record what was. She had little regard for worries that Negroes prove to whites that they were 'civilized.' She wanted to explore the day to day life of the people called Negroes. In that, she was courageous and inventive.

The book *Barracoon* brings us directly in contact with the melancholy elderly gentleman who was enslaved as a young man and brought to the U.S. by American slavers. Hurston's careful rendition of his speech and his stories are spectacular in that she considered that there was something at stake by recording rather than interpreting his stories and manner of speaking. This is extraordinary because historically in the United States, we have failed to accord the same respect to this dialect as we might to Jamaican, pidgin English, or any other cousins of that expression. It is a strange sort of North American exceptionalism that will not even countenance that American blacks have much in common with other blacks, even in the Atlantic, trans-American world. More on this below, but first, the content of Oluwale/Cudjoe's utterances must be noted here.

Oluwale/Cudjoe comes across as the faithful son of his father, a young man eager to learn his community's traditions and to profit from his knowledge and loyalty. In retrospect many of his society's customs seem strange and distant, but he nonetheless regrets the loss of his patrimony. He seems to understand very well what he has lost. He has no confusion about his ethnicity or the position of his family in the local society. Neither does he forget the future that was stolen from him because of capture. He appears to us humbled, but not beaten. He has not forgot all of his native language. This evidence goes against American folklore and stereotypes that would have Africans lose all memory and sense of self within a few years of their arrival as captives. Fortunately for him, he only spent five and one-half years as a slave, as he arrived in 1860.

If one takes this narrative and considers it against the word of Alexander Crummel, who was born in the mid-nineteenth century (1819) and lived so long as to spend time in Liberia and then return to start an institute, the American Negro Academy, in 1895, then one realizes that there is still much we do not understand about African Americans and the nineteenth century. Crummel, as well, remembered his father's ethnicity, and though he had no knowledge of cultural practice, he considered himself of Temne descent.⁽¹⁾ This then provides food for thought regarding the overlapping of generations of African descendants in the black American community, especially in the context of the caregiving role of grandparents. Perhaps someone like Oluwale/Cudjoe was not so strange to Zora as we might imagine.

Oluwale/Cudjoe led a hard life, but a life of dignity. He was able to marry one of his shipmates, and they had several children. I will not spoil the reader's pleasure by giving more details, except to say that his narrative is breathtaking in its accessible nature and frank humanity. In addition, he shared several stories and proverbs with Hurston which are provided by the editor in an appendix. They are very much worth reading.

One might lament the distance evident in Zora's Neal Hurston's approach, she does not much share her view of Africa or Africans. She shows great empathy and respect for Oluwale/Cudjoe, but little sense of connection to his story as an African American person with a similar ancestral history. Perhaps it is an error to make much of this, as it demonstrates her dedication to the craft of the anthropologist who, especially in these early days of the discipline, should remain removed from the text and remain 'objective' at all costs. Hurston wanted the reader to hear Oluwale/Cudjoe's voice, and in this she was successful. Hurston has provided us with a great gift – the first-person account that Oluwale agreed to share with her of his experiences.

Finally, it seems appropriate to note Hurston's use of the 'Negro Vernacular' of the times and what it signified, and the problematic standing of the black vernacular of the first half of the twentieth century in scholarly history, in American political life, and its descendant vernacular today. Apparently, Hurston's book was turned down by several contemporary publishers, including Viking Press, expressly because she insisted on keeping the vernacular speech Oluwale/Cudjoe used. Whether this rejection by publishers resulted from a fear that including such texts would affect the market for the book or offend readers, or a disdain for the 'broken English' blacks spoke at the time, it reminds us of the contested grounds of cultural monitoring that characterize the black experience. But Oluwale/Cudjoe did not waste his opportunity to tell his tale by focusing on whites or what they did or did not do; his focus is his own experience, his family, and the historical forces that led him to co-found Africa Town in Alabama.

Zora Neal Hurston is quoted as saying, "I have the nerve to walk my own way, however hard, in my search for reality, rather than climb upon the rattling wagon of wishful illusions."² She was true to this spirit, and we are the better for it.

References

¹ Kathleen O'Mara Wahle, Atlanta; 1968

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/163127-i-have-the-nerve-to-walk-my-own-way-however>

Research Africa

Copyright © 2018 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.