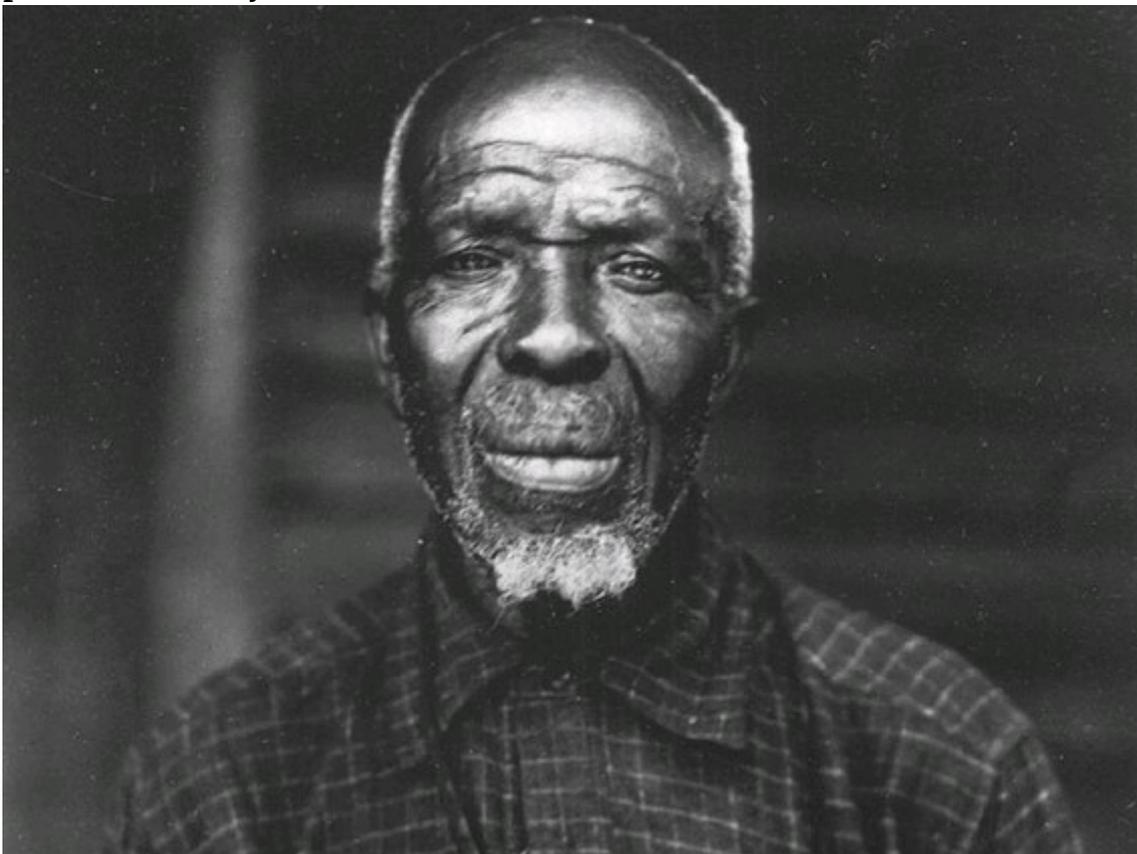


The slavery story that took 87 years to be told

Cudjo Lewis told his tale to the writer Zora Neale Hurston, but when she submitted her manuscript in 1931 no publisher wanted it. Now, it has finally been published

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A descendant of the last survivor of the final slave ship to take captives from Africa to America has spoken of his pride at seeing his great-great-grandfather's story finally being published – 87 years after it was written.



Garry Lumbers told The Independent he wouldn't just buy the book *Barracoon* for himself. He would buy copies for all his 22 grandchildren, and study it with them, to play his part in ensuring that never again would the world neglect the story of his great ancestor: born in Africa as Kossula, died in America in 1935 as Cudjo Lewis. "I am delighted," said Mr Lumbers. "I am so proud, so grateful that his story is going to be published and that it won't ever be forgotten."

Mr Lumbers grew up in the house that Cudjo built, on the two acres of land that he bought with the \$100 that somehow he scraped together from hard but paid labour after being freed as a result of the American Civil War. Throughout his childhood, Mr Lumbers heard tales told by his grandma, of a warrior in chains, shipped to America, it was said, so a rich white man could win a bet that he could smuggle a consignment of captives 51 years after

America had supposedly banned the importation of slaves. He learned too of how after they were freed, Cudjo and his fellow former slaves worked together to build a new community: Africatown, now known as Plateau, in Mobile, Alabama.

Hurston's 'Barracoon' manuscript – its title taken from the name for the African holding pens for captives awaiting sale and shipment into slavery – languished in an archive at her alma mater Howard University

Cudjo himself had told snippets of his story to various newspapers and researchers. But it was only the black writer Zora Neale Hurston who took the time and trouble to let him tell the full, book-length story of his life. She did so when Cudjo was in his 90s, by then the last person alive out of the 116 humans who had formed the "cargo" of the slave ship Clotilda in 1859. But when Hurston submitted the story to publishers in 1931, no one wanted it.

Cudjo died four years later, aged about 94, with his story still not properly told.

Though celebrated today, Hurston died in poverty in 1960, buried aged 69 in a pink dress-gown and fuzzy slippers in an unmarked grave in a segregated Florida cemetery. Her Barracoon manuscript – its title taken from the name for the African holding pens for captives awaiting sale and shipment into slavery – languished in an archive at her alma mater Howard University. It would probably have stayed there too, but for the fact that quite recently her literary trust acquired new agents. Were there, the new agents asked, any unpublished works?

Now the publisher Harper-Collins is saying that when Barracoon finally hits bookshops on both sides of the Atlantic tomorrow, it will be "a major literary event".

Some see it as a political event too. Valerie Boyd, the author of the acclaimed Hurston biography *Wrapped*

in *Rainbows*, has been quoted as saying, "We've got an open bigot in the White House. A book like Barracoon says, 'Yeah, black lives matter. They've always mattered.'"

Mr Lumbers simply says: "Let's finally publish the book and let the world know what happened."

For him Barracoon is a testament to his forefather, to all those who travelled in the hold of the Clotilda and who used their freedom – once they got it – to forge a new life for themselves. "It is time," he says, "For America to know who these people were."

Hurston knew who Cudjo was: 'The only man on Earth who has in his heart the memory of his African home; the horrors of a slave raid; the barracoon; the Lenten tones of slavery; and who has 67 years of freedom in a foreign land behind him'

That certainly seems to have been what Cudjo wanted. When Hurston hailed him by his African name, it brought tears of joy to his eyes. When she told him she wanted to hear his life story, she wrote, "His head was bowed for a time. Then he lifted his wet face: "Thankee Jesus! Somebody come ast about Cudjo! I want tellee somebody who I is, so maybe dey go in de Afficky soil some day and callee my name and somebody dere say, 'Yeah, I know Kos-sula.'"

At the time, Hurston was becoming part of the "Harlem Renaissance", an artistic and political movement that took pride, rather than shame, in black America's African origins. She knew who Cudjo was: "The only man on Earth who has in his heart the memory of his

African home; the horrors of a slave raid; the barracoon; the Lenten tones of slavery; and who has 67 years of freedom in a foreign land behind him.”

Hurston knew how rarely the voice of the African-born slave had been heard. “All these words from the seller,” she wrote, “But not one word from the sold. The kings and captains whose words moved ships. But not one word from the cargo. The thoughts of the “black ivory”, the “coin of Africa”, had no market value. “Africa’s ambassadors to the New World have come and worked and died, and left their spoor, but no recorded thought.” And so she came from New York to a Southern home with a garden gate that was locked using “an ingenious wooden peg of African invention”, to talk to an old man eating his breakfast “with his hands, in the fashion of his fatherland”.

When the old man talked over the peaches and Virginia ham she brought him, she listened. And when he

refused to talk, she helped him clean the church where he was sexton, or drove him into Mobile to buy some turnip seed. When she couldn’t find an Alabama hotel that would rent her a room, Hurston slept in the Chevrolet coupe she called “Sassy Susie”, with a pistol for protection.

And finally, she wrote Cudjo’s story, in his words, in his dialect. It was a story of epic proportions, told by an old man in a foreign land, infused with his longing for Africa.

It begins in a modest but proud home in Benin, with a young man training to be a warrior: “I grow tall and big. I kin run in de bush all day and not be tired”. He never thinks about what might be happening across an ocean he has never even seen.

According to some accounts, Captain Tim Meaher, of Mobile, Alabama, has bet a northern businessman \$100,000 he can smuggle a “cargo”, despite America having enforced a ban on slave importation (as opposed to ownership) since 1808. Meaher commissions the fast schooner Clotilda. Skipper Bill Foster sets sail with instructions to buy slaves at a rate of \$50-\$60 each.

And Kossula’s village is raided by warriors loyal to the Dahomey king, the head of a dynasty that has grown rich by fulfilling the white man’s insatiable demand for slaves. For Kossula, now in his late teens, there is no escape. “I call my mama name. I beg de men to let me go findee my folks. De soldiers say dey got no ears for cryin’.”

As he is led away, he sees in the hands of the Dahomey warriors the severed heads of his fellow villagers. He watches them smoke the heads so they don’t spoil in the heat: “We got to set dere and see de heads of our people smokin’ on de stick.”

Meaher never paid for his slave smuggling. No one insisted on payment of the court fines imposed on him, his brother and Captain Foster

After three weeks in the barracoon, the buyer arrives: “De white man lookee and lookee. He lookee hard at de skin and de feet and de legs and in de mouth. Den he choose.” The slaves are stripped of their clothing, possibly to improve hygiene in the stifling conditions of the Clotilda’s hold, although none of that is explained to Kossula: “I so shame! We come in de ’Merica soil naked and de people say we naked savage.”

Then comes 70 days of thirst and sour water, on a terrifying sea that “growl lak de thousand beastes in de bush”. But since none of the slaves dies or falls sick, Cudjo considers

Captain Bill Foster “a good man”. He counts himself lucky to be bought by Jim Meaher, who was less keen on seeing his slaves beaten than his brother Tim.

But there were beatings. “De overseer, de whip stickee in his belt. He cutee you wid de whip if you ain’ run fast ’nough to please him. If you doan git a big load, he hitee you too.”

And then on 12 April 1865, “De Yankee soldiers dey come down and eatee de mulberries off de trees. Dey say, ‘You free, you doan b’long to nobody no mo’. We so glad we makee de drum and beat it lak in de Affica soil.”

Cudjo even asks Tim Meaher to give the ex-slaves land, since he had taken them away from their land in Africa: “Cap’n jump on his feet and say, ‘Fool do you think I goin’ give you property on top of property? I doan owe dem nothin.’”

Meaher never paid for his slave smuggling. No one insisted on payment of the court fines imposed on him, his brother and Captain Foster.

And when by working in the saw and powder mills, and on the railroad, and by selling vegetables, the former slaves earned enough money between them to buy land from the Meahers, “Dey doan take off one five cent from de price”. They bought the land from their former masters and built Africatown.

Cudjoe married Abila. They gave each of their six children an African name “because we not furgit our home”, and an American name that wouldn’t “be too crooked to call”. Yah-Jimmy, Aleck, was Mr Lumbers’ great-grandfather.

They faced prejudice, from black as well as white Americans. Cudjo’s sons were called “ignorant savages” and “kin to monkey”. They faced tragedy, too: the loss of all Cudjo’s children but Aleck through illness or accident. His youngest son, also called Cudjo, was shot dead by a police officer. The officer himself was black, but the story might sound wearily familiar to the modern Black Lives Matter movement: “He make out he skeered my boy goin’ shoot him and shootee my boy ... My po’ Affican boy dat doan never see Afficky soil.” And yet Cudjo became a respected leader in his community, the sexton of the church they built, the “Uncle Cudjo”, to whom people came seeking wisdom, asking for “a parable”.

Once Hurston had written up his story, it resonated with humanity as well as drama. “At last,” she wrote in a letter of 18 April 1931, “Barracoon is ready.”

And no publisher wanted it. Did the “thoughts of the ‘black ivory’, the ‘coin of Africa’”, still have no market value?

Various reasons have been suggested for the rejection, one of them being Hurston’s insistence on telling Cudjo’s story in Cudjo’s dialect. The Viking Press did contact her, but only to ask for a rewrite “in language rather than dialect”. She refused. Perhaps because of her anthropological training, perhaps because she was ahead of her time, Hurston saw Cudjo’s dialect as a vital and authenticating feature of his story.

In some publishers’ minds there may have been concerns similar to those later expressed in 1937 when Hurston’s most celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, came out. Some black critics eviscerated it for its use of dialect.

Hurston’s fellow Harlem writer Richard Wright wrote, witheringly: “Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro ... the minstrel

technique that makes the “white folks” laugh ... [which] evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race.”

There have also been suggestions that Cudjo’s story was problematic because of the way it highlighted

African involvement in slave taking. It in no way altered the fact that voracious European and American demand for slaves had created incentives for captive taking beyond anything ever seen before in Africa. Nor did it change the fact that the new market for slaves turned them from the prized human possessions they had historically been into mere beasts of burden, whose mistreatment was justified by a racist literature demeaning them as incapable of a white person’s “feelings”. But it potentially sat uneasily with anyone seeking to promote a Harlem renaissance that took pride in black America’s roots.

Hurston herself later wrote that what Cudjo told her “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 ship and sailed away.”

Whatever the reason, she never saw *Barracoon* published. “There is no agony,” Hurston once wrote, “like bearing an untold story inside you.”

Cudjo arrived in America without even the shirt on his back. Yet he and his fellow former slaves worked together to buy land, to build themselves a church, a school, a community. Despite becoming briefly famous due to her other work, the largest royalty she ever received was \$943.75. By the time she died all her works that had been published were out of print. She had suffered the humiliation of being spotted, in 1950, working as a low-wage servant in a Miami suburb, with the resulting, vicious headline: “Famous author working as maid for white folks down in Dixie”.

After she died in a Florida welfare home, her neighbours had to club together to pay for a cheap funeral. Her name was misspelt on her birth certificate. It was only after her death that her true worth was recognised. Alice Walker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Color Purple*, who has written the foreword for the newly published *Barracoon*, found her grave and marked it properly. The headstone reads: “Zora Neale Hurston, a Genius of the South.”

Cudjo too has a physical monument, to go with his soon-to-be published literary one. It is his towering tombstone in the graveyard of the church where he was sexton, in the heart of Africatown, the place he helped build.

On every return visit to Plateau, the first thing Mr Lumbers does is pay his respects there. For him, Cudjo and those who formed the “cargo” of the *Clotilda* have a place in the history of a struggle that included famous figures like Martin Luther King, and other, less famous people, like his aunt Martha, the great-granddaughter of a slave: “She went to a predominantly white college and got herself a Masters, became a teacher. Can you imagine how hard that was for her?”

But, says Mr Lumbers, Cudjo and his companions also deserve their place in the story of the American dream.

When asked the moral of his great-great-grandfather’s story, he answers without hesitation: “You never give up. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Cudjo arrived in America without even the shirt on his back. Yet he and his fellow former slaves worked together to buy land, to build themselves a church, a school, a community. “Cudjo was a great man,” says Mr Lumbers. “He started from nothing, from dirt. He rolled his sleeves up, pulled his pants up and got his hands dirty.”

Mr Lumbers is 61 now, living in Pennsylvania and still working – somewhat ironically, this descendant of the last survivor of the last American slave ship specialises in the logistics of shipping cargo. But he is

looking forward to retirement. And, like Cudjo did, he yearns to return home – although, of course, for Mr Lumbers “home” is Plateau, Africatown, the substitute community his forbear created when he realised that return to the real Africa was impossible.

Plateau, says Mr Lumbers, has fallen on hard times of late. The jobs have dried up. “They forgot about this place,” says Mr Lumbers. “Plateau became somewhere that trucks pass through, on their way to the Interstate 65.”

He longs to be able to help restore Plateau to what it should be – a thriving community, one that attracts tour buses that stay, not trucks that leave, a proud embodiment of his family, and America’s heritage. He hopes the publication of *Barracoon* will be a spur in that direction.

And he knows that his great-great-grandfather would be proud to see his words published at last. “He can rest easier now,” says Mr Lumbers. “I imagine Cudjo Lewis would be grinning on that old cane pipe of his and saying ‘So, they’re finally going to do the right thing...’ It is a story that needs to be told.”