
‘The Last Black Cargo’: Intermediality, Gender, and Afterlife of Slavery in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘Barracoon’

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Abstract

In 1931 Zora Neale Hurston completed, "Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo," the nearly 120-page "story" of Cudjo Lewis "as told by himself." [1] Lewis, who was also known as Kossula, was believed to be the last survivor of the middle passage. In spite of Hurston's efforts, which included assembling over three months worth of transcripts, "Barracoon" was never published. Yet over the course of her expansive career, Hurston would repeatedly return to Lewis. In fact, "Barracoon" was Hurston's third attempt at relaying his life story; in 1927 she published an essay "Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver" and in 1928 Hurston produced "Kossula, Last of the Takkoi Slaves," a five-minute silent film she recorded on a 16-mm hand held camera. In this regard, "Barracoon" partakes in a transmedial network of texts that crisscrosses temporal, generic, and geographic boundaries. Hurston's propensity for boundary crossing has been widely charted by scholars in fields as diverse as performance studies, history, literature, and sociology. Not only do works like *Mules and Men* (1935) foment a critical methodology at the intersection of anthropology and literature, but Hurston also fused fiction, folklore, and ethnography, producing a mode of literary expression that could, as she imagined it, transmit the nuances of black folk life. Likewise, Hurston travelled extensively through the American South and the Caribbean and in the process challenged proscribed gender expectations. Yet within this robust account of Hurston's disciplinary and social fluidity, her persistent (re) turn to Lewis's incredible story of survival has been ignored. This paper reads "Barracoon" as a productive platform from which we can (re) theorize Hurston's trans-disciplinary and intermedial methodology, as well as the gender politics underpinning her aesthetic practice. Reading her relentless movement across genres, from ethnography to film to the slave narrative and back, I argue that Hurston's search for an appropriate form to convey Lewis's life anticipates the very kinds of formal and aesthetic challenges that animate twenty-first century discussions about slavery's afterlife and the precarious place of women therein. At the same time, I suggest that while largely commercially unsuccessful, the patterns of Hurston's formal experimentation reveal an ongoing effort to reveal the often-invisible labor of black women in visual and literary accounts of American enslavement.

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