

Derek Collins Western Kentucky University

- Informative

📅 Thu, 3/12 3:37PM ⌚ 9:32

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hurston, explains, alice walker, black, zora neale hurston, story, accent, hbcus, book, archives, howard university, slavery, howard, interview, ship, implications, call, publication, reminds, plagiarism

SPEAKERS

Derek Collins

 D Derek Collins 00:03

Zora Neale Hurston best known for her groundbreaking African American novels, like "Their Eyes Were Watching God" was not yet famous in 1928, the year she conducted the most important interview of her life. Before her sat 80 year old Oluale Kossola, widely believed to be the last living African shipped to America and forced into slavery. over a series of encounters, he revealed the horrors of his journey, as well as reflections on post Civil War America. Hurston hope to correct an egregious oversight of prevailing words on the slave trade. "All these words from the southern," she wrote, "but not one word from the soul." Unfortunately, the work was lost to time and didn't resurface for 90 years. In May of 2018 Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo was finally published. And equally as fascinating as Kossola's tale itself is what took so long. The New York Times of May 1st 2018 explains interestingly, Alice Walker, author of The Color Purple, found Hurston's original interviews hidden in a Howard University archive, and to work for decades to bring them to light. With this publication, Barracoon not only restores Kossola's voice, it also positions Hurston as an underappreciated anthropological scholar. Meanwhile, we are reminded of the monumental hurdles placed before black narratives and authors. So let's explore the story of Barracoon its journey to publication and implications of an account, we've waited nearly a century to hear. When Hurston first approached Kossola about writing the book he was a bit reluctant. Rehashing past trauma, even with good

intentions is never easy. Let's explore how Hurston gained his trust and then Kossola's story. Initially, Hurston began by totally immersing herself in Kossola's life. The Smithsonian of May 2nd 2018 explains she would help him clean the church where he was a sexton and even bring him summertime fruits like peaches and watermelon. But the main way she ingratiated herself to him was by accepting him fully. Starting with his name, Hurston was the only person he knew that didn't use his slave name Cudjoe, opting instead for Kossola. She writes, he would often tear up when she used it. "Nobody Don't call me my name from cross the water but you" he said in one interview, "you always call me Kossola. [Just like I in the Africa still](#)"



D Derek Collins 03:00
You'll notice

D Derek Collins 03:01
his accent is still preserved in her writings. Yet another way, Hurston attempted to gain Kossola's trust, recording him accurately. Next, once comfortable Kossola began describing his tumultuous past, which eventually became Hurston's 2018 book, *Barracoon*. In the spring of 1860, soldiers from Dahomey raided Kossola's town, kidnapping as many as they could, and beheading everyone else. He was sold to William Foster captain of the ship *Clotilda*, but after an arduous trek across the Atlantic, this ship was burned. Because at this point, slavery was legal. But the slave trade was not, Kossola endured forced slavery for over five years. After emancipation, he banded together with two dozen former slaves and founded Africatown in Plateau, Alabama. Kossola started a family but lost each member one by one through natural causes or violence. Sadly, this story doesn't have a happy ending. He once confided in Hurston, "Kossola feels so lonely. He can't help he cries sometimes." Hurston was able to fully chronicle Kossola's story. However, some of her decisions hindered the work from being well received, namely Kossola's accent and accusations of plagiarism. First, Hurston's fidelity to Kossola's voice rendered *Barracoon* unpopular from the start. The *Washington Post* of May 7, 2018 explains Viking Press wanted the story, but in plain language, arguing that Kossola's accent made him too hard to understand. But white publishers weren't the only ones who took issue with Hurston's decision. *History Magazine* of May 3rd 2018 explains black leaders of the time objected to this portrayal of a stereotypical uneducated black man. Placing this caricature into the minds of white America, they argue, would erode decades of progress. However, as the *Post* continues, Hurston vehemently refused to revise her manuscript. She promised to tell Kossola's story in his voice, unedited for any audience. After her death in 1960 *Barracoon* was just another unpublished work, collected and donated to the Howard University Library. Next, it collected dust until 1973. When Alice Walker stumbled across it, she

immediately recognized its value, would face new battles over its legitimacy. Time of May 10th 2018 explains. Accusations of plagiarism emerged when an early Hurston article about Kossola showed eerie similarities to a 1914 book by a woman who'd interviewed him a decade earlier. In his 1977 biography of Hurston, Robert E. Hemingway accused her of taking creative liberties, calling her an artist rather than a historian, unable to imagine that she was both. However, Walker's commitment to the project, and more recent examinations have vindicated the work and as Time concludes, "the book is both original and accurate." In life, Hurston never received the credit that she rightfully deserved. But thanks to Barracoon, her legacy persists through two implications regarding respectability politics and black history. First, resistance to an inconvenient black man was not limited to the 1930s. African Americans criticized Kossola as a caricature, worried about white reactions, but Kossola was a real person. Medium of June 19th 2017, explains this phenomenon continues today. Black people don't want our identity hijacked any more than it already has been. So we keep it on a short leash. We're chastised harshly by members of our own community for deviant behavior, and by proxy, white perceptions rule how we are allowed to dress how loud we can be, and whose story gets told. Calls to change Kossola's accent never went away. They morphed into a lie that still haunts us. Systemic oppression can be easily dismantled, if only we turn down our music and pickup our pails. In essence, in order to protect black identity, we often restrict it.



D

Derek Collins 07:52

Finally, what Alice Walker discovered was extraordinary, but equally as important is where she found it. Howard isn't the only historically black university with invaluable archives. HBCU Lifestyle of November 7th 2014 explains, This university holds the papers of Langston Hughes, Tuskegee University possesses the papers of George Washington Carver. However, amidst these famous collections, high unexplored forgotten pieces of African American History. Had it not been for Alice Walker scouring the Howard archives, Barracoon may have remained lost to the world. However, the Washington Post of June 7th 2018 reminds, "HBCUs across the country, including Howard, are facing financial struggles, threatening accreditation or even existence." The publication of Hurston's work serves as a necessary reminder that HBCUs are not merely educational institutions. They are repositories for black history. Zora Neale Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave, in what Alice Walker described as a field of weeds and snakes. After exploring the story of Barracoon it's journey to publication and implications, we understand why that's a tragedy. One that Alice Walker cannot accept. She commissioned a tombstone worthy of a great anthropologist it now reads "Zora Neale Hurston, genius of the South."