An anthropologist’s conversations with a black man reveal uncomfortable truths about race, culture and an African past

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In 1927, Zora Neale Hurston conducted a series of conversations with an elderly African American man named Cudjo Lewis in Alabama – or to use his original African birth name, Oluaule Kossula – the last slave brought on the last slaving ship from Africa to America.

While innumerable accounts of the slave trade exist from the perspective of slave traders and owners, Hurston wanted to hear the voice of the enslaved. “All these words from the seller; but not one word from the sold,” she notes. Over three months, Hurston brings Cudjo gifts of clingstone peaches, Virginia ham and ripe watermelon ‘fresh off the ice’. Sometimes they just sit together companionably, eating the watermelon ‘from heart to rind’; another time she helps him clean the church where he works as sexton. On other days, he talks, and she records his story.

The back story
Kossula, along with other members of his Yoruba tribespeople, had been captured in an attack led by the king of Dahomey – thereafter to be held in ‘barracoons’ or holding sheds by the sea, before being sold to slave traders and brought across the Atlantic on the Clotilda, the last slave transporter. Unable to return to Africa, the freed slaves pool their resources to buy land and build a settlement, Africatown. Cudjo marries Seely (Aibile), a woman who had come over from Africa on the ship like him; they see their children struggling under racist barbs from other African Americans – “Dey callee my chillun ignant savage and make out dey kin to monkey... It hurtee dey feelings;” they grieve the early deaths of their children, one of whom is shot dead by a police officer.

Throughout his narrative, especially in his account of the little daily intricacies of his culture, family, and childhood, we sense Kossula’s deep grief at the loss of his homeland. Hurston wants to take his picture, he takes off his shoes. “I want to look lak I in Affrica, ‘cause dat where I want to be.” But he also wants to be photographed along with the rest of his family in the graveyard. He describes his divided sense of identity as “Edem etie ukum edem etie upar”: one part mahogany, one part ebony.

87 years later
In 1931, when Hurston completed the manuscript and sent it to the publishers, they wanted the vernacular dialect of Cudjo’s speech edited. Hurston refused to dilute the language, and the manuscript remained unpublished. 87 years later, when it has been taken out of the Howard University archives for publication, Barracoon is a difficult, heart-breaking and deeply important book. The slave trade flourished for close to four centuries. Just in the period from 1801 to 1866, in the 19th century, nearly four million African human lives were exchanged for gold, guns and other merchandise. And yet, it has taken until the 21st century for us to be able to read this account, recorded in the 20th century and in his voice and in his words, of a man from Africa who was captured, displayed, traded, and enslaved, then freed.

The voice of the enslaved