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An Analysis of a Traumatic Narrative in Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"*

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"One of the virtues of '*Barracoon*,' then, is that it may help teach us to live with uncomfortable truths, not only about the complicated and terrible story it records, but also about the complicated and tremendous author who recorded it". Alice Walker, May 14, 2018 in *Survivor's Bias*.

Abstract - This essay analyses the recurring debate around the trauma resulting from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade through the account of the last enslaved, Oluale Kossola, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon* (2018). It tracks the long itinerary taken by the evil caravans as revealed in Kossola's testimony and demonstrates the active participation of African peers and monarchs in the trade that took place for years and resulted in millions of deported. The Atlantic slave trade organized to that scale was particularly mischievous with long-standing consequences on the economy, demography and politics of the African states which organized or underwent it. Naturally and innately resilient, exiled like Kossola created and found ways to keep on surface culturally and emotionally, a resiliency that enabled all the enslaved population of Africatown to survive and create a new life, a new Africa out of their psychological and physical distress. Using Fanon's psychoanalysis and Caruth's new historicism to examine Kossola's mental suffering from loss, grief and loneliness in the New World, the essay unearths the wounds, horrors and the pain of his kidnapping and capture from Africa as is mapped in *Barracoon*, before suggesting some possibilities of compensation.

Key words: Trans-Atlantic, trade, slave, narrative, trauma, memory.

INTRODUCTION

The common policies of almost all African kingdoms by the 16th century were to expand their territorial limits and dominate their neighbors for more land, water resources and slaves. However, it is important to clarify that enslaving conquered neighbors was already internally practiced by all these communities. It had become a state-instituted practice where slaves were taken after tribal wars, raids and kidnappings. Besides providing labor in agriculture and

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industry, slaves were used for sacrifices, tributes and taxes. Farming, animal breeding, hunting, fishing, gold mining and warring were the basic economic activities of that period. Many hands were needed to feed the king, his soldiers, and other privileged members of society. This form of slavery was particular as it eventually led to the slaves' integration in the kinship either by adoption or marriage after many years of hard work, loyalty and honesty. Davidson (1961: 23) asserts that the "slaves could almost at once begin climbing the ladder of liberation from their rightless condition". People in bondage in many African societies enjoyed independence in many cases. For example, some strong and alert captives, among them, became the king's best warriors and knights. They quickly climbed the social ladder and became trustworthy. They could even take wives from the royal yard.

The following discussion demonstrates how Kossola's story points to African monarchs and other dignitaries' involvement in retailing their *brethren* and *sistren* as mere cattle in order to expand their kingdoms. Analyzing the past and long-standing traumas as essential means to the survival of historical accounts, the present essay unearths the wounds and horrors of separation originated from Kossola's capture from Africa as is mapped in Hurston's *Barracoon*. After examining the means of the deal as well as this captive's traumatic experience, this essay analyzes Kossola's testimony, explores the context and circumstances forcing this talented son of nineteen years to become a captive in Alabama, far from his forefathers' homeland. Deprived of the opportunity to grow old in his beloved village, he became a mere product to be purchased from the slave port of Hueda (Ouidah) into the New World.

1. Recalling the Scope of the Atlantic Slave Trade on the West African Coast

Before the beginning of the Atlantic trade in human flesh, many African kingdoms had already been trading with their neighbors and distant partners. African cities were organized into powerful territories. Due to the discovery of iron in ancient cities, armies became more skilled, fortified and prosperous. Trade in and between these cities were crucial. There were three forms of trade: local, regional and trans-Saharan. For example, on the west coast of the continent, Agbomey was the capital city of the kingdom of Danhomey from the seventeenth century up until the French conquest during the reign of one of the bravest kings, Gbehanzin (1890-1894).[2] Agbomey was a busy and renowned capital in the Bight of Benin whose regional notoriety and expansion was led by one of its smart kings, Gezo (1818-1858), who attacked small and neighboring

[2] Used interchangeably in this essay, Danhomey and Danxomey designate the same entity. Their variant, Dahomey, is found in some quotations.

villages and even distant kingdoms. Due to these permanent raids, villages broke their previous military alliances and turned hostile against one another. The hostility impeded the formation of larger communities against the intruders. Kusimba (2004: 21) writes that "insecurity confined people within ethnic boundaries constructing spheres of interaction."

During that period, the demand for African prized products changed as the voyages started to be funded, with captains and crews hired by wealthy plantation owners and well-known people. Sherwood (2007: 21) established that "Queen Elizabeth I was pleased and invested in Hawkins' subsequent voyages. It has been calculated that British vessels transported about two and a half million enslaved Africans between 1698 and 1807". The trade was strategically organized by African rulers and nobles for wealth and material possessions. Besides this idea, some misconceptions entail that black means lack and that lack stands for loss and blankness. Black people may imply a pack of savages, naked and unimportant beings, described in the negative language of disgust – ugliness and pollution. Such degradations purport to maintain what Mbembe (2001: 4) views as "the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the fact of 'absence', 'lack', and 'non-being', of negativeness – in short of nothingness". Fortunately, the African captives portrayed in *Barracoon* do not handle themselves as savages; otherwise they would rebel, kill and eat up their holders, the Meahers, and embroil in anthropophagy once in Plateau. The humanity shown by the slaves to their owners is later explained as the "Stockholm syndrome" whereby the enslaved person believes that his/her tormentor has the right to his/her body and feels a kind of sympathy for him/her. Being enslaved for a long time, the slaves are persuaded that the situation they are experiencing is right and that their masters are right to do all that. Kossola, in his own words, says that: "Cap'n Bill Foster a good man. He don't 'buse us and treat us mean on de ship"[3]. The compassion herein rarely happened on plantations and farms. Nevertheless, Captain Bill Foster may have understood that humanity links the enslaved and the enslaver: no matter how viciously owners seek to deny the connection through torture, that torture dehumanizes both slaves and slaveholders.

At the probable close of the traffic in human flesh in 1808, when it was declared as illegal by an Act of the British Parliament, the king of Danhomey continued to ship away captives and some of his relatives to Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Argentina, etc. Today, many families in Hueda or Agbomey, claiming to be sons of the land, were, in fact, among those providentially held back because

[3] Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon*: *The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (New York: Amistad Press, 2008), 56. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, with page numbers parenthetically included in the essay and preceded by BRC.

of that Danhomean policy. Many other kingdoms such as Luanda and Zanzibar were involved in that trade, apart from Danhomey. Accounting for its current underdevelopment, the population loss from the trade has devastating effects on African civilization and economy.

2. Interpreting the Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa

To answer the question of how many people were deported from the African continent during the four hundred years of the Atlantic slave trade, several shades of doubt remain as the number varies from one scholar to the next. The controversy occurs mainly because of the difficulty of procuring archival data to cover the entire period. The interest was to deport the prisoners to fulfill their craving for exotic products such as beads, cloths, pipes, and sandals to exhibit their wealth in public. From the 16th to the mid-19th century, Eltis (2007: 32) theorized that "approximately 12 to 13 percent of the 12.5 million Africans embarked onto slave ships throughout the period of the slave trade perished through disease or malnutrition, or killed at the hands of their captors during efforts of resistance". Others say perhaps as many as 14 million people perished. Likewise, Lovejoy (1990: 30) assures that "In total, nearly 18 million slaves were shipped over this four-hundred-year period", whereas Diop-Maes (1996: 39) provides figures which prove that "the slave trade involved a loss on the order of 100,000,000 persons". All these disputed estimates are grounded, since capturing one person alive occasioned the deaths of many others.

The trade was too lucrative to drive western hungry slaveholders to monitor every aspect of black life, added to their great wall of secrecy built around this business. However, although many Africans were equally involved in the business, little has been documented about them. Some of those African monarchs professed their lip opposition to send slaves abroad, but were coerced to participate in it. Lovejoy (1990: 32) writes that Gelele, known as "the Lion of the bush," wanted to exonerate himself and declared in 1863 that "He did not send slaves away in his own ships, but 'white men' came to him for them… if they did not come, he would not sell". These awkward words cannot excuse his and previous kings' accountability in the horrors their trade brought to countless Danxomean and neighboring tribes. Its psychological scars are still perceptible in some descendants. Many tribes developed the sentiment of mistrust towards the progeny of those who led the trade. Thornton (2014: 1) confirms it that "Dahomey was defined as the classic example of either a pariah state dedicated to the capture and sale of people to European slavers, or of a state so addicted to violence that sale of its victims was an act of mercy". As a matter of fact, it was necessary to hide much information from inquisitive and spying eyes. Thus, little has also been heard of the slaves describing the horrors

of both the raid and the Middle Passage. Kossola unpacks this traumatizing experience of that risky passage:

> Cudjo suffer so in dat ship. Oh Lor'! I so skeered on the sea! De water, you unnerstand me, it makee so much noise! It growl lak de thousand beastes in de bush. De wind got so much voice on de water. Oh Lor'! Sometimes de ship way up in de sky. Sometimes it way down in de bottom of de sea. Dey say de sea was calm. Cudjo doan know, seem lak it move all de time. One day de color de water change and we see some islands, but we doan come to de shore for seventy days (BRC, 55).

The passage uncovers Kossola's astonishment when he met face to face with the strange, roaring and grumbling ocean which threatened to swallow all the slaves in its hungry belly. The sea was hungry enough to violently rock the cargo but ultimately failed to overturn it. Left hungry for many days, the young man was scared to the edge of his life. He was only able to drink a sour water. The fragmented body of the young man becomes a site of memory haunted by raw images of horror and brutality as he recalls in the following passage:

> Some never reachee de gate. De women soldier ketchee de young ones and tie dem by de wrist. No man kin be so strong lak de woman soldiers from de Dahomey. So dey cut off de head. Some dey snatch de jaw-bone while de people ain' dead… One woman-soldier step up wid de machete and chop off de head of de king and pick it off de ground and hand it to de king of Dahomey… my eyes dey stop cryin' but de tears runnee down inside me all de time. (BRC, 45-47, our emphasis).

Another symbol of terror is the ocean, a site where life, death, time, and eternity were interlaced as supernatural elements. The captives need to be pacified, need love and security, but none of these was available around. That might explain why the molested and buried memory of his people resurfaces slowly. Kossola is not ready for that awful experience and many did not survive the voyage. Some of them preferred the ocean to be their last resting place. Surely, a staggering number of scholarly studies have addressed the impacts of the Atlantic slave commerce on Africa. Rodney is right in his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) to argue this trade as the main event that brought down the African economic development, as it drained millions of brave hands out of the continent. He explained that Westerners, not taking into account that possibility, seem not to realize that this is the reason why Africa has an economic gap to fill, completely lagging behind technologically, despite receiving multiple external assistances. Echoing Rodney's finding, Mbaye (2006: 2) writes: "It arrested its development by exploiting its technological, agricultural, and cultural skills for the development of the West only. It hampered Africa's mercantilist economy by halting its capacity to be transformed into a capitalist economy".

To date, appeals to repair the prejudice of snatching millions of Africans from their homelands and to return the artifacts like those exposed in the Quay Branly Museum in France are still problematic. So, Africa is still jailed in

European and American museums. Indeed, the present is too crucial to let the past intrude; there can be no future if both past and present do not work together.

3. Connecting the Past to the Present: A Slave's Traumatic Memory

Studying narratives by fugitives and former slaves is vital to understanding the trauma they experienced. Slaves' narratives document their experiences on board the slave ships, plantations and in their masters' houses. From a literary standpoint, former slaves or their descendants started sharing their traumatic voyages through the so-called free-states of the New World. Instances include Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). All these writings bear the stamp of slaves' narratives and their singular experiences. They have been joined later by offspring of former slave-owners like Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998). Some of these narratives were written to inspire the abolitionists' struggle during the second half of the 18th century. These works meant to change the mentality of slaveholders and help the enslaved to stand the ground against abuses. Yet, Kossola's account is completely different not only because there were no white abolitionists who could be seen as saviors but equally because his liberty was neither earned through literacy or religion, nor through a concerted revolt. The uniqueness of the book resides in its non-scholarly long vernacular passages that render its reading difficult for those unacquainted with the dialect.

The narrative lies in the desire to inform people of what happened to slaves like him on board the ship *Clotilda* and on sugar cane plantations. *Barracoon* both begins and ends in freedom; even though in the final years of his life, Kossola continues to be homesick and keeps his people's spirituality unchanged. Barracoon at Whydah, like a refugee camp, epitomizes a space of transition, a waiting room, a purgatory where the travelling bodies are left thinking, distressing and getting ready to leave for an unidentified place. Following a preface that offered some historical and contextual details of Kossola's life, the chapters consist mainly of Kossola's memories, often introduced and concluded by brief descriptions from Hurston, a real compilation of conversations. This is an attempt to gain access to a traumatic history which consists in listening beyond the suffering of the individual. Like a relic pulled up from the bottom of the ocean's belly, it speaks up to everyone (Black and White) about suffering, trauma and determination to survive.

In contrast, already prosperous British families of merchants, shipbuilders, insurers, bankers, manufacturers and investors, among others, profited from the trade, using slaves on their farms and mines. They became wealthier when

their slaves – considered to be their properties and repositories of wealth – were liberated in the West Indies and North America. A few documents mention that some French and British slave-owners received modern billions of payout after abolition. For the Caribbean slaves, Sherwood (2007: 13) highlights that some British enslavers "received £20 million for their loss of unpaid labour. That would be just under £1 billion in 2005". As a matter of fact, they used the money to invest in other profitable businesses. For example, the *Clotilda's* voyage was financed by a wealthy Alabama businessman, Timothy Meaher. His descendants currently possess extensive land holdings worth millions around Mobile and are Mobile society's upper deciders alongside intellectuals. Meanwhile, the enslaved and their descendants who still live in the area emerged from that hardship as destitute peasants with a pseudo freedom. Slaveholders' payout means that slavery – on an industrial scale – was a major source of the wealth for the British Empire, because it is the exploitation upon which the West Indian sugar, cotton and tobacco trade was based, in addition to the free agricultural labor provided by slaves under harsh and inhumane conditions. Masters gave half of the day to slaves just for Sunday worships, burials, marriages or hangings. To deter potential run-away candidates, death sentences were carried out by hanging, a ceremony attended by all slaves in the execution area.

Moreover, slaves like Kossola and Gumpa provided the labor for the construction of schools, churches and railways throughout the country. For example, national archives in Carnegie Library in 1890 revealed that "The Noble Brothers used slaves in their ordnance works producing supplies for the Confederate armies. A voucher written on September 25, 1863, by the Noble Brothers shows payment of $352.00 for the use of thirty-four Negroes in the making of guns for the Ordnance Department". Kossola also works as a sexton after his train accident. His new life becomes completely lethargic as is derived from his following statement: "De people see I ain' able to work no mo', so dey make me de sexton of de church" (BRC: 80).

Once the slaves were on the plantations, the holders recruited overseers to watch over them, whipping the slow, the lazy and the careless. Kossola confesses that "Dey doan put us to work right away' cause we doan unnerstand what dey say and how dey do… Dey got overseer wid de whip; You ain't got 'nough load! Hurry up! He cutee you wid de whip if you ain' run fast 'nough to please him" (BRC: 60). The overseers worked with well-trained dogs to follow the slaves on the farms. With their horns sounded for work, the overseers posted at the entrance of the slaves' cabin lashed the last ones. Slaves saw their mates being severely lashed, so they knew the price paid for being stubborn or slow. These conditions later motivated the Jamaican singer, Bob Marley (1973),

to sing in 1973: "Every time I hear the crack of the whip, my blood runs cold. I remember on the slave ship how they brutalized our very soul". Slaves quite frequently replaced animals, being used as carts in farm fields.

Black people have not been granted an inch of justice, as demands for reparations by descendants of former captives are denied. The disparity between Blacks and Whites is often trivialized as Whites are the pace setters in every facet of life, ranging from political, social, cultural, to economic aspects. For instance, after his train accident, Kossola received a biased treatment both from the court and his own lawyer:

> Dey broke three ribs…De lawyer sue de company. De nexy year (1903) in January, dey send for me to 'pear in court. De judge say, De first case dis mornin' is Cudjo Lewis against de L an' N for $5,000'. I lookee hard. I say to myself, 'Who tell him dat? I didn't tell him I want $5,000. De railroad lawyer say, 'We ain goin' to give him nothin'…
> Well I send and send and I send, but Cudjo doan gittee no money. De people see I ain' able to work no mo', so dey make me de sexton of de church (BRC: 80-81).

Kossola's lawyer has snatched the profit from him, acting the same way as colonizers did with Africa. Kossola receives no compensation after his accident, for the judicial system treats cases on a biased basis. It denies the black plaintiff the right to complain and to be treated the same way as his white fellows. Escaping this system seems impossible. Slaves were reduced to simple working bodies, empty shadows, mere properties identified through new names. So far, the accident bursts him into his new job, a sexton (BRC: 81). He is forever maimed, becoming a frail figure confined in his role of a gravedigger and bell-ringer at the churchyard. The church here silences the damaged black body and the train accident, his baptism. That the baptism does not happen in a church is symbolic. The public space of the church is replaced by the public space of the railway and those who view the accident, the witnesses. The initiation shows a transgressive revising of a classic sacramental scene, a baptism in pain. Kossola's attempt to become an independent and free person is crushed in violence. Anyway, though he refuses to become a Christian, he is serving the church in another way.

The above picture is in line with the ordeals that have befallen the black character Solomon in *12 Years A Slave* (1853) narrative. A free man is kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South for twelve years before being rescued by a Canadian abolitionist. While being enslaved, all his attempts to escape or to prove himself as a free black man failed. This illustrates that even though some Blacks were free, their life was not that idyllic in racist America, as the actions of Kossola's neighbors towards his children in Mobile testify to it. He regrets that his neighbors "Dey callee my chillun ig'nant savage and make out dey kin

to monkey" (BRC: 73). This sort of injustice lingers to present-days in many parts of the world. For example, the royal family of Buckingham Palace was unhappy to have a dark-skinned bride, Meghan Markle, as Prince Harry's wife. The presumption that their offspring could be of the mother's skin color and be rejected by the public has led to a hidden discrimination, as is noted in the disrespectful coverage of the spouses by British tabloids. This has obliged the couple to distance themselves from their relatives and move to a safer place, leaving England altogether.

Moreover, most free Blacks lived in poor quarters where disease and death are daily events. Additionally, they had to be extremely cautious to avoid being attacked, lynched, captured by slave catchers in search for hands to work on new farms, or to become victims of police brutality. In the narrative, one of Kossola's children was shot dead by a police man, an authority figure who must protect all citizens: "Nine year we hurtee inside 'bout our baby. Den we git hurtee again. Somebody call hisself a deputy sheriff kill de baby boy now. He say he de law…He shootee my boy in de throat… De big hole in de neck" (BRC: 75). As this scene shows, Blacks live in permanent insecurity. George Floyd's violent death is still vivid in the memory of worldwide people, including Minneapolis residents, in the first place. People have been shocked by the brutality associated with Floyd's assassination in May 2020, choked by a white police officer's knee on his neck: a barbarism which drew a worldwide outrage when the online video showcased this black man gasping for breath.

While Kossola's former life in his African village revolves around peaceful activities, his life in Alabama is frustrating and rife with trauma, to say the least. Narrating this trauma constitutes a very complex process marked by a paradoxical relationship between language, memory, and trauma. As is well known, memory is fallible while partaking in the resurfacing of what happened to the victim, a familiar feature inherent in traumatic situations, according to Ricoeur (2000: 576): "le trauma demeure même quand il est inaccessible, indisponible. Dans des circonstances particulières, des pans entiers du passé réputés oubliés et perdus peuvent revenir"[4]. The discussion of memory is linked here with geography and the distance between events. Known as duality of memory dislocation, the trauma he feels may sharpen his memory, but it may also contribute to its loss. Such a dilemma, in Caruth's theory (1995: 154), "underlies many survivors' reluctance to translate their experience into speech".

[4] "The trauma remains even when it is inaccessible, unavailable. In special circumstances, some parts of the past deemed forgotten and lost may come back". Our translation.

Narrating his life trials emerges out of Kossola's inner pedagogy, the need to share in detail his experiences and his determination to let them survive. Knowing by heart the story to report, he uses a non-methodological approach – based on his memory – to deliver it in a simplistic language. As a means of self-expression, control and power, Kossola knows that language heralds an individual struggle to stand against discrimination and black-bashing. He understands it too well, so he provides Hurston with more shocking facts, after detailing the raid of the Danxomean female troops. He retrospectively shares that "De heads of de men of Dahomey got 'gin to smell very bad. Oh, Lor', I wish dey bury dem! I doan lak see my people head in de soldier hands; and de smell make me so sick" (BRC: 46). Kossola's mind mirrors back almost all the atrocious images to demonstrate the extent to which they have affected his being. Hermann (1997: 32) sees this as the dialectics of trauma, which discloses the conflict between the desire to tell and the will to deny:

> People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom.

Alongside with the pain he feels, the integrity of Kossola's narrative equally relies on Hurston's keeping the draft linguistically undistorted, as Plant (2018: xxiii) points it out:

> Embedded in the narrative of Barracoon are those aspects of ethnography and folklore collecting that reveal Hurston's methodology and authenticate Kossola's imagination. The story, in the main, is told from Kossola's first-person point of view. Hurston transcribes Kossola's story, using his vernacular diction, spelling his words as she hears them pronounced. Sentences follow his syntactic rhythms and maintain his idiomatic expressions and repetitive phrases.

Research on trauma provides a new lens for assessing the impact of slavery and its legacy of structural and institutional racism on black mental health today. Though trivialized by political leaders, racism has devastating impacts on black mental health. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1961) provides ways to eradicate this suffering, a genuine panacea to alleviate this sickness. Slaves had to adapt themselves to the traumatic conditions that threatened their lives and dignity. Since Africans have been treated as mentally lesser than human beings, they have perceived themselves so. Thus, their current inferiority complex originates from their past experiences.

The singularity of Kossola's account lies in the undistorted language which, in addition to giving accurate portraits of what happened, equally reveals his private and inner identity. Hurston writes the story from the perspective of an enslaved person without the intrusion of interpretation and the slightest wish of

fictionalizing. Both Hurston and Kossola disclose the implication of African tribes in the Atlantic slave trade and the trauma that the raids, the march to the shore, the barracoons and the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean entailed. Having traded many captives with French guns, the Danhomey kingdom has become expert in invading next villages and has continued to provide, for years, its overseas business partners with thousands of captives from surrounding villages.

Surprisingly, Hurston and Kossola uncover that the king of Danhomey exported his own relatives to appease his traditional European partners, at times, or to please a new one visiting him. Thus, "He therefore desired Foster to look about him and select a person... Foster looked about him and chose a young man named Gumpa; Foster making this selection with the intention of flattering the Prince, to whom Gumpa was nearly related" (BRC: 8-9). Besides sending his own half-brothers away when he sensed rivalry, the monarch equally sold criminals, war prisoners and debtors, etc. A decider-in-chief, the king has the right of life and death over his subjects: he was the one to decide whose family member to deport. Additionally, some noblemen exported their own slaves with his blessings. Further, he used some outlaws to help him in the sordid mission.

Under those circumstances, African coasts became very dangerous as both lonely farmers and noblemen could be ambushed, captured and sold out to opportunistic slaveholders. Gumpa's case provides evidence that even noblemen are not spared; they can be sent away and treated as any common person: "My folks sell me and yo folks (Americans) buy me" (BRC: 68). Obviously, everyone is in the same bag at the endpoint. There, Gumpa is no longer a noble person: he is a common slave ready to work like anybody.

Thus, the more the king got rich from catching and selling his neighbors, the more local chiefs and noblemen acquired their wealth from that vast and lucrative activity, in light of Mabanckou's analysis (2012: 56):

> La traite des Noirs est une honte pour l'humanité. Un crime contre l'humanité. Qu'elle soit le fait des Européens, via l'Atlantique. Ou des Arabes, via le Sahara ou Zanzibar. Pourtant, il serait inexact d'affirmer que le Blanc capturait tout seul le Noir pour le réduire en esclavage. La part de responsabilité des Noirs dans la traite négrière reste un tabou parmi les Africains, qui refusent d'ordinaire de se regarder dans un miroir.[5]

[5] "The African enslavement is a shame to humanity. A crime against humanity. Being the fact of the Europeans via the Atlantic, or Arab via the Sahara or the Zanzibar. However, it is important to state that the White people did not take alone the Black into enslavement. The responsibility of the Blacks in the enslavement of their fellows remains a taboo among themselves, particularly those who refuse to see the reality". Our translation.

This notion of responsibility-complicity helps understand the participation of some African people as divulged in Kossola's narrative. Interestingly, these testimonies deconstruct the past image some people have of the trade, which mirrors that only Europeans came to fetch cargoes of human beings without the consent of the monarchs of that time. Searing (1993: 35) underscores their active involvement in this trade beneficial to them as well: "State violence served the interests of the monarchy in several ways. Slave sales paid for military expeditions by providing revenues to purchase guns and horses, which were needed to defend dynastic interests, to intimidate villagers enough to ensure tribute payments and to keep foreign military predators at bay".

Common discourses have sought to absolve African kings, local chiefs and influential people from their role in this trade. For the prominent Africans in question, only European slaveholders have intruded in their land to kidnap their fellows without any local abettors. Slaves were often snatched from their native lands by professional captors when they were away from their villages, but these professional human hunters were helped by some African partners whose mission was to load their ships with valuable human flesh. Slave sale prices in Africa were usually insignificant compared to their high prices in the New World. Once purchased, these slaves were shackled, put in the hole of the ship, and voyaged under horrible conditions to their final destination: the American coasts. As per their housing conditions, they did live in log cabins made with mud and clay. In sum, as Olmsted (1953: 141) once witnessed during his visit in Alabama and Mississippi, slaves often lived in precarious conditions:

> The Negro cabins were small, dilapidated and dingy; the walls were not chinked, and there were no windows--which, indeed, would have been a superfluous luxury, for there were spaces of several inches between the logs, through which there was unobstructed vision. The furniture in the cabins was of the simplest and rudest imaginable kind, two or three beds with dirty clothing upon them, a chest, a wooden stool or two, made with an ax, and some earthenware and cooking apparatus. Everything within the cabins was colored black by smoke.

The narrator in *Barracoon* tries to be comforted by his faith in Christianity, without wiping away his African spirituality: "I been a member of de church a long time now, and I know de words of de song wid my mouth, but my heart it doan know dat. Derefo' I sing inside me" (BRC: 73). Countless slaves had adopted Christianity in their desperate search for spiritual protection and sanctity during their captivity. They needed spirituality to explain their plight and find peace. Slavery was common among the ancient Israelites, as it was in almost all societies. Although Christ is not reported to have said anything specific about it, His teaching about God's unconditional love for every person had strong inferences. Resultantly, Christians were able to convince slaves to embrace Christianity by which God assured deliverance to His people.

Finally, Kossola's narrative ends with a desperate note, indicating that sadness and darkness have engulfed his ancestors' homeland and its dwellers. Selling one's fellows for glory, greed and fame remains the final act of the loss of humanity, as Kossola's "The Lion Woman" story in *Barracoon* seems to purport it. This story discloses that Africans share responsibility in the trade, an admission which enables the offended and deported souls to rest in peace. Also, the said story forecasts that racism will never rest until people stop profiting from it. The cloud/darkness referenced therein represents the difficulty to end racism, despite its devastating effects on people.

4. The Limitations of Slave Narratives: Problems of Memory

Kossola's narrative is orally reported to Hurston decades after he survived the Danxomean female warriors' massacre, the Middle Passage fright and the U.S. Civil War. On the one hand, Kossola, the last survivor of the *Clotilda*, was used to oral traditions in his village and was able to remarkably handle it far away from home. Oral traditions, however, have their own pitfalls as they rely on human memory and can be adulterated. Friedman (in Finnegan, 1977: 53) reminds us that "memorization is the basic vehicle of oral tradition, but that memory is not a simple phenomenon. It is not a reduplicative process, for instance, but a procedure of creative reconstruction". As a matter of fact, Kossola, after all these years away, could forget many events that took place both before and after his capture and enslavement; or he can deliberately hide aspects of his lifestory to lessen the long-standing pain. People may not always be able to recall a traumatic experience via explicit memory of it, but they do retain the physical and emotional sensations accompanying the memory. Or the incident may be clearly evoked but its implied memories are detached from it. This viewpoint is underlined in Caruth's *Trauma*: *Explorations in Memory* (1995: 5), where she argues this way: "If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconsciousness, as it is a symptom for history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess". Clearly, people do have an array of feelings about any given event, based on their individual psyche. While some may find it catastrophic, others may see it normal. Hence, according to Caruth (1995: 5), to be in shock is "precisely to be possessed by an image or event," the traumatic symptom of which cannot be interpreted.

A segment of – or the entire – human memory can be swayed by emotion, as one can wake up one morning without remembering anything that happened the previous day. Experiencing traumatic events can change the trajectory of one's life, causing emotional and psychological pain. This comforts Erickson's

definition of trauma as "something alien that breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defence" (1995: 190). Thus, a traumatic event survivor can partly or totally lose his/her memory and the precise images of the past events experienced.

Clearly, trauma evokes blankness and the impossibility of faithfully telling the story as it alters the capacity to remember and/or distorts the image remembered. As the following extract entails, Kossola's captivity narrative is subjective because some of its details originate from his stained imagination: "De king of Dahomey, you know, he got very rich ketchin slaves. He keep his army all de time making raids to grabee people to sell so de people of Dahomey doan have to time to raise gardens an' make food for deyselves" (BRC: 44). The exaggeration in this account is glaring: the said raids did not prevent the population from growing their gardens for food.

The narrator is oblivious that Danhomeans who waged wars were different from farmers and breeders whose role was to grow farms/gardens and raise animals. Kings had a selected squad of elitist warriors – called *Amazons*[6] – who vowed their lifelong service to them. Indeed, those *Amazons* had no time to grow gardens for their own: they fed on what the king gave them, trading the slaves they brought home with food and money. Of course, all those years in exile have blurred Kossola's remembrances about the king and his fierce (female) warriors.

Likewise, nightmares may represent the brain's futile efforts to consolidate the dissociated memory and the traumatized black body. Plantation slaves enjoyed no freedom. Besides facing regular racial problems, they had housing, feeding and clothing difficulties. Kossola becomes Cudjo Lewis with the Meahers, his owners, though he refuses to be branded a new name: "My name, is not Cudjo Lewis. It Kossula" (BRC: 19). His opposition seems justified, since accepting a new name is tantamount to welcoming the culture, the spirituality and the "new language" that go with it (Fanon, 2008: 61). Under normal circumstances, bearing a white man's new name may drive adherence to whiteness, though it may be difficult for a black man to pass for white. So, ultimately excluded from humanity, Kossola starts his own resistance against the imposed white standards, refusing to be called Lewis, slipping off his shoes, proudly

[6] The Danhomey Amazons were frontline soldiers in the army of the Kingdom of Danhomey, a West African empire that existed from 1625 to 1894. Its remnants lie in modern-day Benin, which occupies a sliver of the coast between Nigeria and Togo. They were known for their fearlessness. King Gezo, who ruled over Danhomey from 1818 to 1858, officially integrated the Amazons into the army. This was a practical decision, as manpower was increasingly scarce due to the European slave trade. A giant statute built in present-day Republic of Benin in honor of these frontline soldiers was inaugurated on July 30, 2022.

announcing that "I want to look lak I in Affica, cause dat where I want to be" (BRC: 19). These actions signal his resistance to any "form of mimicry" and submission (Bhabha, 1994: 85). Though forcefully exiled from his cultural location, Kossola is rooted in his African identity. His resistance art is a strategic choice to remain authentic and gain more central place.

Kossola's separation from his village and family was still fresh in his mind as he was dumped into a hostile environment to survive arbitrary torture. This shock can render it difficult to narrate exactly what happened as "it offers a glimpse into the past and a critical reflection upon the representation of the past" (Schweiger, 2015: 350). Too throbbing to think about, that past resurrects the pain in that exiled body. In "Reflections of Exile", Said (2000: 173) writes: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted".

Added to the pain, Kossola's age can equally damage the unwritten story and the stratification of events in his mind. The man is too old (having been in America for sixty-nine years) to successfully detail all that happened decades ago. He is marked repeatedly by loss of his homeland, his humanity, his African given name as well as his wife and children in Mobile. Even Hurston has noted the pain that permanently tortures her informant:

> Kossula was no longer on the porch with me. He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain. It was a horror mask... He was thinking aloud and gazing into the dead faces in the smoke. His agony was so acute that he became inarticulate. He never noticed my preparation to leave him (BRC: 49).

In addition to this, his loneliness can increase his torment, complicating his recollection of the whole and true story decades after. As Hurston (BRC: 15) has explained in her introduction with assurance, Kossola is "the only man on earth who has in his heart the memory of his African home; the horrors of the slave raid; the barracoons; the Lenten tones of slavery; and who has sixty-seven years of freedom in a foreign land behind him". Hurston's viewpoint must be discarded, should the story remain authentic. Kossola may not be the last survivor of the *Clotilda* and certainly not the only one to keep his memory afresh and unclenched. The pressing need to uncover the hidden role of Africans in the trade might have obliged Hurston to find a black fascinator who can provide her with an invented slave cargo story from one of the busiest coasts and slaves' ordeals from the barracoons to plantations.

Besides, Hurston's informant gives no information about the frequent mistreatments of women during the shipment. Surely, many women were

raped by captains and crews. Moreover, plantation overseers sexually exploited them. The disposal of the black women's body by the master differentiated slave men and women. Buyers purchased these women, based on their intimate parts when they were stripped naked on the auction blocks. Perceiving the dark-skinned women as lustful beings, masters frequently engaged in non-consented sexual relationship with them and deployed rape to silence the black female's fragmented body. Intrinsic to this narrative is its androcentric blindness to feminist and gender issues. By solely center-staging male slaves' plights, it discards the memories and the ordeals of those women captives. In the same register of abuses, Harriet Jacobs' shocking *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) deals with her running away from her sexually abusive owner to Philadelphia, where she lived in a hole for nearly seven years.

The reminiscence of the past demands a concentration, both a trying exercise and a highly subjective activity for the victims. Such an activity is likely to undergo alteration after decades. Hurston spends four years turning Kossola's story into a long non-fictional work which no publisher was eager to print out. In all, it has taken eighty-seven years for *Barracoon* to see daylight. This lengthy period without contact with the primary informant, combined with the printing process, might have altered the document.

Despite its consistency, a language problem is inherent to Kossola's testimony, for Hurston does not always understand his usual speech, crediting Rushdie's assertion (2008: 75) that "language upon a silvered tongue affords enchantment enough". This reveals the storyteller's mastery to weave the plot so as to draw the maximum attention and credit from the audience. But narrativizing one's own lifestory and remaining its centrepiece render it difficult to prove the accuracy of the account. To influence the readership's appreciation of his story, he manipulates its presentation by bringing in his personal cognitive, psychological and ideological trends. Thus, the transcription may be altered or subjected to the listener's partiality. The suspected fickleness of interviews with aged former slaves has been a regular and not inconsequential doubt to their use in historical research.

Some key mistakes threaten the realism of the unwritten message and the readers can fail to cope with the dislocation in his discourse. Overemphasis may often be the consequence of the interview itself, which gave the informant an occasion to be the center of all attention. Both the informant and the interviewer fail to identify the real name of Kossola's hometown, a place where he has lived for about nineteen years. Instead, the two cities mentioned – Takon and Bante – are geographically situated in opposite directions. The reported names are relevant in present-day Republic of Benin. Yet, the strange name Takkoi or Takar has never existed as a nearby or distant village to Danhomey.

In contrast, there is a village named Takon not too far from Ajahshay (Porto-Novo), the destruction of which may not have been a problem for the king of Danhomey. The village's destruction may have been justified by king Gelele on the ground that its king disrespected his dead father's memory, the late Gezo, an insolence he could not tolerate. In all likelihood, the old survivor's iterative references to Takon may have been a name his father, his kinsfolk or some initiators revealed during his age group initiation rites. Moreover, that small rural community, Takon, could not have been that great attraction to earn king Gelele's outrage, obliging him to risk the life of his elitist unit of warriors. Thus, this seems to come from the old informant's imagination. The raids of the Danxomean kings did not result from a distant townsman's discontentment, as the old informant trusts (BRC: 45). Gelele launched his raids because he needed dominions for more lands and captives for his allies; occasionally, his elitist soldiers asked for wars to exhibit their military skills, yet the king would conceal "from his army the name or the place against which he has brought them, until within a day's march of the goal" (BRC: 10). A raid of that extent could not be launched by any king of Danhomey just because someone offended him or his deceased father. Thus, the idea that it was a traitor who informed the enemies does not match with the reality of the time, although those kinds of traitors existed and could desire to do so.

Next, the experience of the insecure Middle Passage served as the second central artery, elaborated networks of roads, and paths in bushes where enslaved people were transported. Besides, it is proven that some slave hunters and the kings' armies that followed them would never want the slaves bound together by ropes, chains, or wooden yokes to know the conventional slaves' circuits. So, they could resolve to trick them by letting them walk the wrong ways for days and nights before rallying the correct ones.
Finally, Kossola's description of the slave trade route leading to the barracoons is quite confusing and contradictory to the official slave route depicted by historians of the Atlantic slave trade in Danhomey. His description seems a mistaken itinerary:

> Dey march us in de Dahomey and I see de house of de king. I cain tell all de towns we passee to git to de place where de king got his house, but I' member we passee de place call Eko (Meko) and Ahjahshay. We go in de city where de king got his house and dey call it Lomey. (Either Abomey or Cannah.) De house de king live in hisself, you unnerstand me, it made out of skull bones….Dey place us in de barracoon (stockade) and we restee ourself….
>
> We stay dere not many days, den dey march us to esoku (the sea). We passee a place call Budigree (Badigri) den we come in de place call Dwhydah. (It is called Whydah by the whites, but Dwhydah is the Nigerian pronunciation of the place (BRC: 52). Our emphasis.

The aforementioned excerpt suggests one of these alternatives: either the informant has intentionally amplified the number of the cities they went through or the interviewer has mistaken them. The gaps and erasures in his discourse render its historicization imperfect. The probable mistake may aim at lengthening the distance of the slave route; to underscore slaves' treks and tiring walks.

Whether this long itinerary is accurate will bring one to consider the distance separating the cities mentioned in Kossola's account. Yet, examining the historical evidence shows that some embarkation points do not really correspond to the home region of the victims, since vast webs of slave paths regularly funnelled them to the coasts from hinterlands.

Despite these flaws, Hurston and Kossola succeed in seizing the readers' compassion with *Barracoon.* The realist storytelling initiated by Hurston is an essential method for memory preserving. In writing *Barracoon*, she forever guarantees that Kossola's prized words are not swallowed by earth, as the old man knows it too well: "when de earth eats, it doan give back" (BRC: 89). The reading of *Barracoon* shares the slaves' multiple travails and their deadly walks from the barracoons to their shipping points. It obliges a basic and conscious remapping of events that solicit the historicity of the African past in traumatic situations as Kossola reported so vividly.

Through their interventions, both Kossola and Hurston illuminate African participation in the trade in human flesh, with its savage treatments of the kidnapped. The presence of Gumpa amidst the enslaved in Mobile discloses two facts, at least: first, Danhomean monarchs sold their own kins; and second, both noblemen and slaves share the same painful conditions when sold. Hurston's introduction reveals that much was heard and read from the captors, "but not one word from the cargo and from the sold". She unearths then the dark hidden corner of the African history which many Africans do not want to hear or recognize, for like Miano (2013), Hurston keenly trusts that "si l'on évite d'affronter les vérités dérangeantes de notre Histoire, les ombres du passé se réactivent dans le présent"[7]. More significantly for *Barracoon* than for her other works surely, Hurston succeeds in demonstrating her expertise as a full anthropologist, a black folklorist during the Harlem Renaissance and a black culture keeper. Definitely, she is a seasoned pioneer of African American literature in a period when African American women were not expected to be.

CONCLUSION

[7] "If we avoid confronting disturbing truths of our History, the fears of the past become true in the present". Our translation.

Overall, while this essay has uncovered evidence showing slavery as a social practice in the Danxomey kingdom, it has equally established how the Atlantic slave trade has dehumanized the enslaved, allowing racism and discrimination. Slaves are denied most basic rights, corroborating Ismard's assertion (in Mitatre, 2020: 236) that "toute société esclavagiste est fondée sur un paradoxe consistant à refuser l'existence, au titre de personnes, à des hommes et des femmes, tout en aménageant une position depuis laquelle leur participation à la vie sociale puisse s'exprimer légalement"[8]. Intricacies of slavery were meant to mentally destroy the slave and his family. As Kossola's testimony has revealed, humans are innately resilient creatures built to adapt and find ways to keep on surface culturally and emotionally. This resiliency enabled the deportees to survive and create a new life, a new Africa out of their psychological and physical sufferings. This form of therapy eventually fed the victims from fear of speaking about their pain, a phase marking the beginning of their healing process, consistent with Hermann's theory (1997: 32) that "the resolution of a trauma is never final; recovery is never complete". Kossola's traumatic experiences beseech readers' complicity, tear and empathy as they embody the emotional costs of enslavement in a powerful and authentic language. Directed to Africans on the continent, diasporan Africans and Africa's lovers, Kossola's voice implores Africans to acknowledge their responsibility in the enslavement of their folks for a healing process. Holding similar view, Mabanckou (2012) admonishes Africans and diasporan Africans about victimizing themselves, while Miano exhorts them in his *Les Aubes écarlates* (2009: 14): "Qu'il soit fait clair pour tous que le passé ignoré confisque les lendemains"[9]. This unforgettable past shapes the vivid account of Kossola.

Recognition of the prejudices of the trade remains the final recovery act, the moral reparation of which should not be empty rhetoric spoken out but must redress injustice and rehabilitate Africans. Works by Soyinka (1999), Thompson (2002) and Torpey (2006) have offered valuable critical reflections on the subject. Thus, the reparation can be a direct financing for African and diasporan African projects. A Marshall plan to educate worldwide people about the Atlantic slave trade is in order, in sum.

References

[8] "Every slaving society is based on the paradox consisting in refusing humanity to some men and women, but reversely positioning them to partake in social life". Our translation.

[9] "Let it be clear that a forgotten past results surely in uncertain future". Our translation.

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NOTES

✍ DAN XO MEY is the original name in Fongbé (a branch of Gbe language). While "Dan" is the victim's name, "xo" is the "stomach" and "mey" is "inside". Literarily, this name means "The kingdom palace was built inside Dan's belly." This seems to be a metaphor of power change. The Plateau of Agbomey was populated by the Guédévi before the Fon came from Allada and Huéda. Dakodonu was among them. At their arrival, they were given land to farm. Years later, Dakodonu requested additional territory not far from the dominion of a local chef named Dan. He sarcastically responded to Dakodonu. The angry Fon chief killed Dan by skewering *kpatin* pole and built a royal palace in his exposed entrails.

✍ GEZO, before his being enthroned, was Prince Gakpé. By that time, the Danxomean King Adandozan (r. 1797–1818) and de Souza, a native of Rio de Janeiro, had a disagreement related to the Atlantic slave trade. Adandozan sent the slave merchant to prison, where he had contact with Prince Gakpé, who was Adandozan's half-brother. De Souza contracted a blood pact with the Prince and helped him to organize a coup. In 1818, Adandozan was deposed, and Prince Gakpé was enthroned and became King Gezo. To reward de Souza, the new king conferred upon him the position of his commercial intermediary in Hueda, Ouidah. From there was born the new "chacha", a former intermediary named Yovogan, chief of the white people.