

# Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America

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## Review

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**Diouf, Sylviane A.** *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America.* Oxford University Press, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195311044

### The Illicit Slave Trade

The last Africans brought to the United States as slaves, Sylviane Diouf tells us, arrived in July 1860, on the eve of the Civil War and fifty-two years after the United States Congress prohibited their legal importation. This mission was the brainchild of Timothy Meaher, a northerner who had gone south as a young man and made his fortune in planting, the lumber industry, ship building, and slavery. He and others believed that the federal prohibition against the slave trade was unjust, a violation of their constitutional rights, a mortal threat to their principles and ultimately to their way of life. Meaher, to put it simply, was a supremely brazen man. Betting that he could defy the law, he had his schooner *Clotilda* refitted to carry human cargo, sent it to the African port of Ouidah, and traded with the Dahomey for 110 captives. This part of the story serves mainly as a dramatic preface to the author's principal interest: the story of the one-hundred and ten Africans; their capture in Africa and transport to Alabama; their transition from freedom to slavery and from Africa to the United States; the strategies and improvisations they used in order to preserve both themselves and their culture; their experiences during the Civil War and emancipation; their founding of a separate and distinct community, called Africa Town; the contours of their everyday lives and struggles down to the final days of Cudjo Lewis, the last survivor of the 110.

Diouf, a curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City and author of previous books on the African diaspora, casts her book as both a revelation and a corrective: revelation in that the story of these Africans, until now, had been forgotten by history (overlooked even by W.E.B. DuBois in his foundational study *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*),

and a corrective in that historians of the Atlantic slave trade like Warren S. Howard and Hugh Thomas dismissed it as a hoax (2). But Diouf draws greater significance from the last-ness of these Africans. They were, she tells us, the very last of that very small piece of humanity that was born in Africa, and then lived through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and well into the last century. Their late arrival in this country combined with their longevity, the arrival of a culture ready to receive and record their stories, and the long memory of their direct descendants, Diouf tells us, has left us with a truly unique optic with which to view the African, African American, and American past.

The story is told in a direct and largely chronological fashion. The opening chapter gives us Meaher's background and motives, with just enough of the larger social, political, economic, and cultural backdrop to establish context. The second and third chapters, in which the *Clotilda* arrives in Africa, at Ouidah, to seize its precious human cargo, are perhaps the most successful of the book. Diouf immerses the reader in the diversity and complexity of Africa; especially of those nations from which the one-hundred and ten were taken. The narrative is patient, disciplined, compelling, and brave, never shying away from the central role that Africans, in this case the Dahomey, played in the enslavement of other Africans. Every significant phase of the middle passage is captured and each detail, however subtle, is portrayed vividly. Diouf is remarkably successful at making the African captives real human beings. This is especially true with regard to the man who became Cudjo Lewis, whose life, among all of the Africans taken on the *Clotilda*, was the most thoroughly documented. These chapters deserve, if not absolutely demand, the attention of all writers interested in the Atlantic slave trade.

The chapters which focus on the Africans from their arrival in Mobile in July 1860, through the Civil War and emancipation contain few new contributions to the extant literature. Whatever new contributions to Civil War and Reconstruction history Diouf makes come from minor differences that distinguished the experiences of African Americans and the Africans. The story of Africa Town's creation, led by a second exceptional figure named Gumpa, is a finely detailed study of community formation. This narrative of self-determination, birthed by sad reconciliation of the fact that the Africans would not be able to return home, shows us the harrowing, the inspiring, and the everyday. Diouf addresses the subject of cultural survivals within this portion of her narrative. The book's final chapter is the least compelling. In it, the story of the Africans' last years becomes little more than a catalogue of heartbreak,

calamity, and gore. Bodies are shredded by gunfire, a man is decapitated by a train, other men vanish without explanation, a woman and her son, a woman and her son are swept away but some unknown disease, and Cudjo Lewis lives his last days in poverty and near-bject grief.

Diouf's effort and accomplishments are admirable but the book is not without its flaws, several of them considerable. The author writes that in 1808 the United States abolished the international slave trade (1, 13) when, in fact, the Congress only prohibited the further importation of slaves into the United States, which is profoundly different. Furthermore, where Diouf refers to a three-fifths human rule (17), she makes a second critical and conspicuous historical error. The fragment of Article 1, section 2 of the Constitution referred to here represents a political compromise, not a biological or anthropological ruling. This clause was put in place in order to apportion taxes and Congressional representation based on, among other things, three-fifths of a state's entire slave population. It was not set down to fix a consensus on the relative humanity of people of African descent in America. There is also, throughout, a clear tendency toward overstatement. Saying, for example, that black towns were safe havens from racism (157) ignores history, as anyone familiar with the story of Rosewood, Florida, will recognize immediately.

Diouf's writing is often quite good and, in places, exceptionally nuanced and moving. The research is impressive and formidable. Notes and bibliography fill 77 pages, more than one-third of the book. With so much research at hand, and given Diouf's dedication to both her subject and the extraordinary people who populate it, the author may have felt an obligation to use as much as possible, to let nothing go to waste. Certainly, in places, the book reads like this was the case. The narrative strays into distracting speculations regarding, among other things, years in which Timothy Meaher's whereabouts were unknown. Repeatedly, the author lays down long and repetitious lists of names of people, things, and places which do more to clutter the page than enlighten the reader. A more judicious, even ruthless, use of the sources would have proved beneficial. Finally, despite the extensive bibliography there are some very surprising no-shows: foundational studies by David Brion Davis, Nathan Huggins, Wilson Moses, Barbara Fields, Nell Irvin Painter, George Fredrickson, and James Oakes are nowhere to be found. I mention these historians, specifically, for two reasons. First, it is hard to imagine a book on a topic like this not citing these historians and their ground-breaking work on slavery, racism and race, gender, Reconstruction, the emancipation era, and the transition to freedom. The second

reason they deserve mention is that they may have provided Diouf with the broader theoretical framework that the book demonstrates. In a book where Africa is, early on, such a large presence, half-way through local events has devoured the global elements of the story and a continent has shriveled, except for a few passing references, into insignificance. At the end, one puts down this mostly fine and compelling book convinced both of the significance of the Africans at the center of it, and that Diouf has given us a superb history. But this feeling is accompanied, inevitably, by a grinding sense of incompleteness: as if in the theoretical and historical letting-go of Africa somewhere along the way, something vital was sadly overlooked.

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