



February 2022

Descendant

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Recommended Citation

Nayar, Sheila J. (2022) "Descendant," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.013>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/13>

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Descendant

Abstract

This is a film review of *Descendant* (2022), directed by Margaret Brown.

Keywords

Slavery, Clotilda

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



Descendant (2022), dir. Margaret Brown

While the USA abolished the international slave trade in 1808, legend had it that a slave ship, the *Clotilda*, had arrived on American shores more than fifty years later. On a bet to prove that such ships could still reach the USA, Timothy Meaher had more than a hundred Africans brought to Mobile, Alabama, had them disembark, then burned and buried the nautical evidence. From thereon in, oral history was all that remained of the *Clotilda*, though even that was suppressed due to Meaher's threats of lynching. Five years later, those slaves would gain their freedom, though, eventually buying land outside the city, where they settled in what became known as "Africatown."

Margaret Brown's eye-opening documentary *Descendant* catalogues the contemporary hunt for the *Clotilda*'s remains, in the hopes of framing and reclaiming a slice of American history that was for so long intentionally suppressed. But she also purposefully positions the search for that slave ship within a contemporary socioeconomic battle: how to acknowledge an African past without severing it from an

Africatown present. We learn, for instance, of the modern encroachment on Africatown of polluting industries such as chemical refineries, buried pipelines, and paper mills—and by the same white family that had chartered the *Clotilda*, no less. We spend time with the *Clotilda*’s “direct descendants,” as they refer to themselves, as they attempt to keep the physical legacies of their ancestors in the face of destructive re-zoning: the graveyard where some of *Clotilda*’s original passengers are buried, for example; the residence of one of them now considered “holy ground.” And we listen to poignant readings from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”*—by those directly descended from that “cargo.”

No less an anthropologist than a novelist, Hurston had traveled the Deep South in the 1920s, collecting African American tales, dances, and traditions. When in Africatown, she encountered Cudjo Lewis, presumably the last survivor of that last slave ship ever brought to America. Because Hurston insisted on retaining his dialect in the transcription of his story, *Barracoon* remained unpublished until 2018. Particularly resonant in the film is a descendant reading from Hurston’s book while sitting in the parlor room of the plantation house where his own ancestors had worked as slaves (and, so, would never have been permitted to sit). Why is this a historic house, he subsequently wonders, when all he feels emanating from its walls is evil?

For many of the descendants interviewed, finding tangible remains of the *Clotilda* would bequeath them an emotionally and psychologically healing conduit to their past. It would make them feel whole again—no longer like “an adopted child searching for its birth mother,” as one woman expresses it. It is through the eventual hunt for the ship that we meet Kamau, a gently affable African American scuba diver who works for the Slaves

Wrecks Project and who has devoted his life to returning those wrecks' lost voices to the realm of history. Often, those voices come by way of meager finds—a string of trade beads, a woven basket—but, for Kamau, these are meaningful proof that America's African history is “not just shackles.” Later, he will be joined by affiliates from National Geographic—though Kumau's ambitions will remain much more about leveling the imbalances of justice than about dredging a ship.

Woven in with these on-the-ground realities are clips from VHS tapes of Africatown residents who were interviewed about the *Clotilda* more than 25 years ago. By their own admission, their reminiscences are often haphazard and folkloric; but they are also entirely worthy of placing next to whatever bits and pieces of this past the historians possess—something *Descendant* does with even-keeled grace. And then there is Hurston's own remarkable film footage of Cudjo. Who knew one could witness in moving-picture form an actual survivor of a slave ship?

But if the *Clotilda* has a past and a present, it also needs a future. Perhaps most touching is the Africatown resident and cancer survivor, Jocelyn, who is an initially harsh critic of how much attention the ship receives. That is, until the ship *is* eventually found—and off the coast of the Meaher's own property at the time, no less. With the aid of the head of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, Jocelyn comes to realize that, if the community were to maintain control of the *Clotilda*'s memorialization, space might exist for improving the lot of Africatown's contemporary residents. The direct descendants could write their own destiny instead of letting the municipal state control the project—the latter being an especial worry given that a number of those state-affiliated individuals are owners of the toxic industries

looming around Africatown. As Jocelyn rightly observes, placing the slave ship in the context of all that has historically and politically emerged from it *since* is as much a part of the story as are rafters and slave decks. So, “We have to think big.”

As for the family responsible for everything from that slave ship of yore to the environmental injustices now besetting Africatown, they are nowhere to be seen. The Meahers refused to participate in the making of *Descendant*. Consequently, they haunt the film to its very end. Perhaps it’s to be expected (and historically telling) that the direct descendants of the man who originally bet he could bootleg black bodies to American shores are now the ones who are silent. But, of course, their silence has come by choice.