

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Llewellyn Smith, Vincent Brown, Christine Herbes-Sommers, producers. *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*. DVD. A Vital Pictures Production. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2009. 56 minutes.

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## Naturalizing Identity Politics

*Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness* examines the legacy of anthropologist Melville Herskovits, the founder of the first African Studies Center in the United States, at Northwestern University, as well as of the African Studies Association (ASA). Herskovits is portrayed not only as “the person who most demonstrates that African Americans are connected to Africans” in the pre-civil rights climate of the 1930s–50s, but also as the “Elvis of African American studies,” because he brought these ideas into mainstream discourse, even as he may have “appropriated” Africa for his own ends—just as Elvis launched commercial white rock and roll by tapping the energy of the Afro-American blues.

The film’s title riffs on Joseph Conrad’s novel, evoking either the colonization of Africa or the use of Africans as a backdrop to play out foreign philosophical and existential struggles. The script opens with the question of how a white male scholar managed “to know so much about black people.” Herskovits’s family history is reviewed: his father’s migration from eastern Europe and the struggle of second generation North Americans to find an identity—“Can we be both Mexican/Jewish/Irish and American?” Herskovits’s Jewish identity with a history of displacement is offered as a rationale for his eventual specialization in African American anthropology. At Columbia University, Franz Boas taught Herskovits the importance of cultural context, not biological inheritance, in determining the complex identities of individuals and groups in situations of mass migration and acculturation. This was in contrast to phrenology,

the reigning theory of biological determinism, illustrated in the film with historical photographs and dramatized reenactments of white scientists measuring human physical features. As restagings continue throughout the program, the distinctions between archival footage and theater become blurred to the point of trivialization. More effective, because more sparingly used, is Herskovits’s own film footage and photographs from fieldwork between 1928 and 1934, which included Dahomey (now the Benin Republic), the Georgia Sea Islands, the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Haiti, Nigeria, Suriname, and Trinidad.

Herskovits’s relationship with African and African American scholars is reviewed. A towering presence in this program is Johnnetta Cole, the director of the National Museum of African Art, who was Herskovits’s student at Northwestern. She articulates the influence of his cultural relativism: “Herskovits was clearly beyond where most folk were, [in teaching] that blacks were like any other humans”; and “I will always be grateful to Melville Herskovits for his contribution to my sense of self. He said that I had a culture, and it could be traced back to Africa.” Cole also recalled the perceptions gathered about her mentor while a student: “Professor Herskovits seemed to think at some time that he owned Africa.... What if there were more African and African American scholars at Northwestern?” The film explores his debates with University of Chicago sociologist Franklin Frazier about the extent of African cultural influence among African descendants, as well as his complicated relationship with W. E. B DuBois, whom

Herskovits portrayed as a propagandist for wishing to change society with his research. Katherine Dunham, who was helped by Herskovits during her research in Haiti in the 1930s, was lamentably absent from the discussion.

Throughout the film, appropriate attention is given to the issue of which powerful groups were funding what kinds of research in each period. In the 1930s, philanthropists wanted to fund studies of black Americans that would help diminish violent protests from these communities during the hard years of the Great Depression. Herskovits was able to publish his influential book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), while DuBois never received funding for his *Encyclopedia Africana*; the documentary as much as indicts Herskovits for colluding with foundations to block DuBois's funding opportunities, although his motives are not clarified.

The post-WWII agitation by Africans against colonial rule led foundations that were linked to U.S. governmental agencies to support the creation of African studies programs. As a leading authority on Africa in the United States, Herskovits had founded the first African studies program in 1948. Yet, because he had taken the position that what the Nazis did in Europe was comparable to what colonists did in Africa, as well as his earlier participation in groups considered "communist" by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the FBI blocked his appointment by President John F. Kennedy to lead the Bureau of African Affairs.

After his death in 1963, several groups pointed to *The Myth of the Negro Past* as foundational to their activities, including black militants during the civil rights era, and Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of Negritude. In 1969 in Montreal, black activists stormed the ASA to challenge the largely white male conveners to include African descendants as scholars. Cole again articulates the agenda: "We want to be, as scholars of color, not only the objects of study, we want to be full participants. No more will we be relegated to the periphery. The real questions is 'who

has access to understanding, to explaining a people, and to what use?'"

The heavy emphasis on the dramatizations of past events, like young Herskovits in his office, scientists measuring body parts, the African-descended students storming the ASA meeting in Montreal, suggest that the producers did not have enough archival material, explaining but not necessarily justifying their use of racial performance stereotypes. Also overdone is the discussion by African, African American, and Asian American professors about their own identities and their perceptions of how others perceive them. Harvard Professor Vincent Brown informs us that he is married to an Indian woman, and that when in India, some people thought he looked Japanese; and Princeton Professor Anthony Appiah informs us that East Indian taxi drivers in New York City want to position his "ethnic identity" in similar terms. But these digressions impose the standards of our day on Herskovits's time, long before the current vogue of identity politics in academia. More informative would have been a discussion of both race and class in the academy, since the perspectives of working-class people are as marginal to academic debates as those elites with controversial agendas for social justice, as the case of DuBois shows clearly. The video problematizes white access to knowledge about Africa, but seems to naturalize the identity politics model wherein only people of the same race or ethnicity have access to knowledge of, or the ability to speak for or about, an "ethnically" related group. Similarly, the film could have more forthrightly addressed the implication that Herskovits toned down his leftist politics as a strategy for winning acceptance in the academy.

Despite its flaws, the film's "stir-it-up" style will provoke lively discussions in the classroom about American intellectual and political history, twentieth-century anti-colonial and antiracist movements, the relationship between anthropological observer and subject, and the socioeconomic context of research in the humanities.

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