

Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness



Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness. Producers: Llewellyn Smith, Vincent Brown and Christine Herbes-Sommers. Vital Pictures, California Newsreel (educational distributor), Independent Television Service (Sally Jo Fifer, executive producer). DVD video (closed captioned), 57 minutes, 2009.

A review by Professor Gershom Williams (Africanman49@yahoo.com), Department of Social Science, Mesa Community College (Mesa, Arizona 85202).

*What is Africa to me?
Copper Sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black,
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved.
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?*

Circa 150 years after Phillis Wheatley penned her famous poem about her “pagan” father land in “*On Being brought from Africa to America*,” the renowned Harlem renaissance poet Countee Cullen expressed a very different positive attitude regarding Africa in his classic poem “*Heritage*” written in 1925. The difference in the poetic voices and attitudes of Wheatley and Cullen are clearly representative of the ambivalence toward Africa and African cultural heritage which has been characteristic of the Black American psyche for several centuries. The two polar extremes exemplified by Wheatley and Cullen expose periods of shame and contempt about the ancestral homeland as well as times of race pride and positive identification with the mother continent.

The root causes and persistence of this ambivalence among African Americans regarding the continent of their origin becomes quite clear when one understands the insidious and dehumanizing aspects of the “Maafa, i.e. The Great Enslavement” and its aftermath, where there were concerted and deliberate attempts through cultural racism and systematic mis-education to convince Blacks that they were biologically and intellectually inferior creatures compared to their Caucasian counterparts.

According to Brown University’s James T. Campbell in his ground breaking text “*Middle Passages; African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*, when an African American asks – what is Africa to me?, he or she is also asking what is America to me? He writes “...most of African American history – and much of the history of the United States as a whole is encompassed by these two intertwined questions.”

Any serious investigation exploring the depths and profundity of the latter two questions would eventually lead us straight to the pioneering cultural work and extraordinary intellectual life of Melville Jean Herskovits (1895-1963). The phenomenal life, legacy and scholarly career of Professor Herskovits is uniquely explored in the new documentary film release from Vital Pictures. They have teamed up to produce a probing and powerful look into the influential legacy of Herskovits and his over 40 years of rigorous scholarly work and field research to document African cultural survivals/retentions in the Western Hemisphere. Entitled “*Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*”, the film has already been awarded best new documentary at the Hollywood Black Film Festival.

Forty six years after the passing of Professor Herskovits in 1963, he has been rescued and resurrected from obscurity for both present and future generations of students and non-students alike. As a classroom teacher for many years at the college level, I personally recognize and understand the enormous impact a film like this one can potentially have on beginning and advanced students engaged in the fields of Sociology, Anthropology, History and African American Studies. We should also mention the intellectual benefits that this film offers to those individuals who are not presently involved in academia, but are genuinely seeking a greater knowledge base with regard to continental Africa and the Diaspora.

Today we have witnessed the far reaching impact and influence of movies and films on a popular audience. Even those who may not be privileged or have direct access to the early literary works of Frantz Boas and Melville J. Herskovits, can now enter and navigate their worlds of African culture and intellectual heritage, thanks to this new film project.

Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness will be seen and discussed by thousands of students and non-students alike and will most likely forever change the way Africans and non-Africans view the mother continent's history and its social/cultural relevance to global civilizations. Since the publication of Professor Herskovits' most popular text-*The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) which his main thesis attempted to dispel the 'myth' of the ancestral cultures of Blacks were primitive and uncivilized, with Africans making no worthwhile contributions to the history of the world, and that under the slave regime of the American South, virtually all traces of African culture – except perhaps certain survivals in music and dance and had been destroyed. This also became an integral chapter in Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma: The Negro and Modern Democracy* (1944), and thus I am aware of only a few other texts which have revisited the monumental cultural contributions of Herskovits, with the exception of *Africanism in American Culture* (1990) edited by Joseph Holloway dedicated to the memory of Melville J. Herskovits, and a second text, *The African Heritage of American English* (1993) with co-editor Winifred K. Vass published by Indiana University Press.

Honorable mention should also go to Professors John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr. who in the classic history text, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947) discussed the question of how much African culture was transplanted and preserved in the New World. Individuals or groups who view this illuminating and comprehensive film documentary will like myself experience new revelations regarding Professor Herskovits' influence on the likes of the Black Panthers and other Black Power activists; the founder of the "Negritude" movement, Aime Cesaire. And presently, Johnetta B. Cole, president emeritus of Spelman College and other prominent scholars, including Kwame Anthony Appiah of Princeton University and co-producer Vincent Brown of Harvard University, discuss the questions of cultural identity and who controls how African (Black) culture is studied and represented before and since the revolutionary work of Frantz Boas and Melville Herskovits, both Jewish-American anthropologists who became thoroughly interested in all things African. Perhaps because of their experience of Jewish ancestry and heritage, they were prompted to investigate the idea of whether or not so-called Negroes could be both Black (African) and American.

In closing, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the now famous "Herskovits/Frazier debate" which is well known in most social and cultural science circles. In all honesty, I expected the film to explore this ongoing debate in greater detail for contemporary audiences, but the producers obviously did not share my sentiments, for they merely scratched the surface of what has now become a much heated point of contention within the American academy.

To summarize E. Franklin Frazier a Black sociologist trained at the University of Chicago who was chiefly influenced by Robert E. Park and other White sociologists, contended that American enslavement was so damaging and traumatizing to Africans that all vestiges and cultural memory of African heritage were destroyed.

However, scholars like Carter G. Woodson, Lorenzo Turner, John Blassingame and Melville J. Herskovits argued for African cultural survivals (Africanisms) in North, South and Central America. Hence, Herskovits conducted extensive field work in Dahomey, Gold Coast (Ghana), Haiti, Suriname and Trinidad to marshal empirical evidence which he felt conclusively proved African cultural heritage survived the Middle Passage and the Great Enslavement. He took hundreds of still photographs and shot extensive film footage to document the cultural connections and Pan African unity of people located in the New World.

This was/is the primary ideological differences in the conclusions reached by these two intellectual giants. Although in my humble opinion, the film falls a bit short in discussing the Herskovits/Frazier debate, the remaining contents exceeded my expectations in so many other ways. For example, the film reveals that in 1948 Herskovits founded the first major interdisciplinary American program in African Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois and also established the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern in 1954 which nor represents the largest separate collection of African literature in the world.

Indeed, *Herskovits At the Heart of Blackness* is a must see film for all those interested in the Diopian thesis regarding the cultural unity of Africa and New World Africanisms that are still alive and flourishing.