

**SETTING THE TONE: STUDENTS' RECOLLECTIONS OF  
HERSKOVITS AND THE STUDY OF AFRICAN ARTS<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> NOTES:

This is an edited transcription of a roundtable discussion, "Retrospectives: M.J. Herskovits and the Study of African Arts", organized and chaired by Philip M. Peek, at the African Studies Association meeting, Oct. 28, 1988, Chicago. Participants were Justine Cordwell, Warren d'Azevedo, James Fernandez, John Messenger, and Roy Sieber and my sincere appreciation to Deborah Cahalen for the initial tape transcription.

**Philip M. Peek:**

(Panel Introduction)

How could so many students of one scholar, one who is not immediately remembered for his work on the arts, have produced so much major research on African and African-American arts and artists in virtually all media? This question became the genesis of this panel; but before turning to our illustrious participants, perhaps I could offer a few reminders of Melville Herskovits' involvement in the arts. In reviewing his bibliography, I was surprised to find that one of his first publications was a 1923 review of a Beethoven concert in New York City, and perhaps we'll have a chance to come back to music because I think that did play an important role in this whole picture. In 1926 Herskovits published his first article on African and African-American arts and virtually every subsequent year was marked by at least one publication on the arts.

These works reflect a constant interest in aesthetic creativity and a deep appreciation of the variety aesthetic expressions embedded in human cultures. Many topics, such as the importance of studying individual artists and performance contexts, are taken for granted today. Herskovits' definition of art is exceptionally broad: "Any embellishment of ordinary living that is achieved with competence and has describable form" (1955: 235). Reflective of the depth of his concern about the arts was his frequent emphasis on art as a cultural universal -- "the search for beauty is universal in human experience" (1955:234). As well there was his proposal of an "aesthetic drive" common to all peoples: "Why, then, does the aesthetic drive, if it be one, or tradition, or response -- however one may call it -- lodge so deeply in human need, and bring such manifest satisfactions to those who experience it?" (1959: 44).

The main suggestion I offered our panelists was for them to comment briefly on how they understood Herskovits' interest in the arts, what approach was recommended, and how then their own individual work developed from that, either in keeping with or opposition to Herskovits' ideas. I hope we will also recall some of those who contributed so much to this rich scholarly tradition, such as William Bascom, Alan Merriam, and Robert Plant Armstrong. In an attempt to be as democratic as possible with such a distinguished group, we will follow an alphabetical order which also gives us the opportunity to have our "participant observer," Roy Sieber, provide the final observations. So, we'll have brief comments from Justine Cordwell, Warren D'Azevedo, Jim Fernandez, John Messenger, and Roy Sieber. Then I hope there will be further responses from members of the audience.

**Justine Cordwell:**

I washed up in the office of Melville Herskovits one day in 1947 and I said, "Dr. Herskovits, I've been down to the University of Chicago, and they want me to throw away nine years of evening school. They want me to do it all over again, which means I've got another three years to get a Masters. I'm an artist from the Art Institute, and I want to study art, and more importantly, I want to study the creative process." Although I was a competent artist, I was much more fascinated by creative people and their means of expressing themselves, the psychological reasons, personal reasons, and emotional problems. And I said, "I went to Fred Eggan at the University of Chicago, and he said, "Well, you don't really expect the primitives to go out in the forest and suffer for their art, do you?" [audience laughter].

So I told Mel Herskovits this and incidentally, until the day he died, I never called him anything but Dr. Herskovits. There was something formidable about this little man who came up to here on me -- I was the only woman he let stand beside him. And I was the one who started the "Papa is all" -- because he had to be father to all of us and run our lives as well. So there I was, sitting in this chair, and he said, "Welcome." And I thought "I've found home!" He started talking about his interest in the arts and said, "I've been looking for an artist." Then a warning bell went off and I thought "If you're looking for an artist, just like you're looking for someone speaks Portuguese..." As my husband said later, "He's looking for a chapter in the great man's book." I didn't know then that this was the beginning of years and years of tussle, of getting my input in -- and his resenting very much when I won, much as he may have liked debate.

Nevertheless, between Herskovits' Boasian approach and my art approach, somehow, between these two, I thought, I'll fit in here. I didn't realize at the time that Mel Herskovits, though he had written on art and loved art, didn't really understand affective creativity. No one could have been more sensitive to art or done more to foster this interest in drama, folklore, and music. He couldn't have gotten anyone better than brilliant Dick Waterman in the department. Bill Bascom knew and loved art and formulated many ideas about art himself, only slightly breaking away from Herskovits but definitely being different from him.

But it was painfully brought home to me when I came back from a year in Nigeria and Dahomey that Mel Herskovits didn't understand philosophy. He wanted to measure everything. He got this from Boas. He had not had enough exposure to philosophical analysis to realize what affective response was, what this aesthetic drive he was talking

about really was. He did not understand that a work of art is a non-verbal symbol and communicates, and that everything a carver or a dancer or someone who creates poetry says about his or her work is a secondary rationalization. But the affective response, the affective creation, he didn't grasp, anymore than he realized he had the tiger by the tail in his cultural relativism, which is why he could not argue with the British because he didn't understand Aristotelian logic, by which every British schoolchild is raised to challenge until you find out what you want to know.

I've watched Mel talk to the English and turn absolutely purple. I thought he was going to have a stroke at times, because he didn't understand. They were not being insulting; they were simply trying to get him to rise to something, to bite on the bait, to pour out what he believed. And this happened in the whole field of esthetics. Once I was trying to explain this to him and found that he didn't realize what was happening. I went over to the Philosophy Department and got the reinforcement I needed. Bob Armstrong and I were instrumental in getting Suzanne Langer to Northwestern. He still didn't get it. He didn't know why I was so interested in Suzanne Langer. I think this was the problem with us from then on.

But the axe fell on my neck the day he said, "You don't have enough field material to write a dissertation." I said, "Dr. Herskovits. I brought back 1200 black and white and color slides. For each one of these slides I can write 10 pages. Not only that, you've got the key words which I need in my field notes; I've got all the rest of it in my photographs." And it took a dissertation almost 500 pages long before he realized what I was talking about. He said, "You haven't used formalism. You haven't used textured form. Now Boas put this all down and you haven't used it." And I said a terrible thing

which clinched my future: "I don't think that Franz Boas knew that much about art" [audience laughter]. He turned purple but he didn't have a stroke. He managed to control himself, and then I explained to him. I have gone through Franz Boas's field notes on the Northwest Coast Indians, and I have not found one reference to Boas asking a Kwakiutl or a Haida, anyone up there, how he felt about his art, what decisions he was making when he was carving that box or weaving that basket or doing that painting. There is Franz Boas' analysis of it in Western terms, but not the individual's.

It is very hard to find a mentor, someone whom you adore and are so grateful to as I was to Herskovits. Believe me, he was so wonderful to me saying, while I was in the field, "You are not seeing what you are seeing." Oh? "That is not the word for this; you are not getting deep enough. The artist is not telling you why he is making this object." No artist can tell you why they are making something or express all the little subliminal cues through which he is working to make a decision on the form used.

So that was my introduction to breaking out myself. Thanks to Mel's approach to aesthetics, I was able to explore further and I hope I have learned a great deal from it. I do not begrudge one bit of our fight over aesthetics, because I learned so much more from him. I learned the ethno-historical approach; I learned the discipline of data gathering; I learned library research upside down and backwards. I learned discipline and thinking. The man was marvelous at this. It was only in his later years that certain grandiosity came about and he knew that. So now I am going to bow to Warren D'Azevedo and his observations.

**Warren d'Azevedo:**

Thank you, Justine. Justine has anticipated something that I had not worked out very clearly, and that is the indirect kind of impact that Herskovits had on some of us with regard to artistry and art. I want to go back anecdotally as Justine began with some apocrypha that are part of my earliest recollects of Herskovits. I had heard that he was an indefatigable concert goer which at the time didn't mean so much to me. Then some years later, when I was out working with the Washoe Indians and teaching at the University of California, he came out West and contacted me. He asked, "Do you know Al Kroeber well?" They had been, by the way, somewhat antagonistic towards each other for a while. Kroeber apparently looked down on Herskovits, or Herskovits thought he did, as being a junior member of the Boasian group. It wasn't true, but Herskovits looked upon Kroeber as somewhat uppity generally, and for some reason he expressed the desire to meet Kroeber. So I took him up to Kroeber's house in Berkeley, and introduced them, and the two of them immediately began to reminisce. One of the main things I recall them talking about was how they used to meet at Sapir's house where they had a little quartet -- I can't remember the other people who were in it -- and they used to play two or three times a week. I thought that was very interesting and it gave me something of the quality of his life and interests.

The last bit of apocrypha had to do with his death in 1963. He'd been in the hospital, and as the story goes he was listening to the Chicago Symphony and got more and more upset and his face got redder and redder and he said, "Something must be done about those horns!" He asked for a piece of paper and the story is that he died while he was writing a statement for the newspapers about the Chicago Symphony. I have no idea

if it's true, but it stuck in my mind, when I look back, as somehow typical of my view of Herskovits.

The topics raised for this round table discussion caused some considerable disquiet as I was thinking about them. I hadn't really thought about Mel Herskovits' specific influence on myself or others, excepting insofar as I knew certain other students of his who had done work in the arts and many who had not. And I was trying to think why is it that he is connected so deeply with the emergence of a somewhat objective and new view of the arts in Africa and to some extent in Afro-American studies? I thought, well, it had to do with the fact that he just attracted a wide range of students because of the kind of person he was and the openness of his department. Some happened to be people on the margins who had no place else to go and who gravitated towards Herskovits. This isn't really unkind at all. It had to do with trying to figure what it was, because I didn't remember from Herskovits himself any particular construction or emphasis on the arts as such. In his work, yes, but not from him as a person. Yes, he played an instrument [a violin] and he loved concerts. He collected African art objects. He was interested in the arts in general, went to exhibits, and could easily be gotten into a conversation about this; but I was trying to think of what it was specifically that one gained from him.

Now some of his students weren't initially inclined to an interest in esthetics or artistry, but later in their fieldwork interestingly enough, they gave considerable attention to it. And I think I'd be one of those. For example, I developed my first field investigation among the Gola in a standard ethnographic and ethno-historical format, leading to an analysis of the role of secret associations in accommodating traditional



institutions to an emergent Liberian nationalization. I was working on that for a year, but finally I found myself being more and more preoccupied with the role of specifically creative persons, individuals who seemed to epitomize crucial values in Gola culture. They were sort of central figures, people talked about them, they were important to them. Even if they were scrofulous figures who were running around poorly dressed and being complained about by their wife or wives, or looked upon as failures, they were somehow important. They represented something. This grabbed me and I found myself more and more dealing with individuals of this kind. I wondered if this was due to my own personality, my own basic interest that suddenly surfaced during field work.

But I knew that it was certainly referable, at least in part, to that compelling orientation that Herskovits had himself, his constant emphasis on the need to observe the individual in culture, always stressing biography and autobiography. "Get these," he said. "This is a way to escape the trap of being overly involved in institutions, by seeing the variability of culture through individuals of various kinds." And also, what he expressed as individual action and behavior, the recognition of what I'm calling now, not in his words, the ubiquitous human creativity that runs through all cultures that comes up in the very amorphous concept of the esthetic drive which Justine just mentioned.

Also, William Bascom can't be forgotten in this, because he's the one who gave a kind of base, a foundation that prepared some of us more directly and aptly for the field than many other courses we took including Herskovits'. Here was a man with tremendous knowledge and background, who was able to organize for us a view of African social organization and culture and, at the same time, his deep interest in individuals. He was working on biographies of carvers and other artists at the time.

There was also his interest in folklore -- all this came through. While we were around Herskovits, there were other people around. Al Merriam, who was then a student writing his dissertation, was also such an individual who held that ethnography could achieve a kind of deep richness and depth through the understanding of artistry in society.

Herskovits constantly brought before us the notion that artistry was not entirely graphic arts, but was the whole range of creative enterprise within society. These interests I remember were dominant in his seminar on West Africa. That wasn't a general view at that time. Art was peripheral. Kroeber, Lowie, even Radin, to some degree, saw that as a specific aspect of study, art was rather marginal. Yes, important, but there are other more important things. Herskovits never said that -- art was always included in his general view. Now, I don't think that Herskovits' students at that time necessarily recognized the consistent and innovative thread and attention to the arts that Herskovits had: except perhaps those who had read chapters in some of his earlier works, like that marvelous chapter at the end of *Rebel Destiny* on the artist. It's a beautiful thing, an early recognition of individuals, not as artists alone, but as highly significant members of the culture producing things that are important to the culture. That was innovative, I must say. I don't think you can drag out any of the early thinkers, Himmelhaber perhaps, and others, who may have done it; but Herskovits did it. In fact, Justine picked up that thread in her early work, and I swear she must have gotten some of that from the old man. The character and role of the artist is what I became interested in. Not the artist as artist, but the artist as a member of culture, a functioning member of the society, who in a way told you something about the society as a whole by his or her existence in that society.

Now, the last thing -- I'm taking too long. There was a kind of factionalization among Herskovits' students. There were those interested in social organization and standard ethno-historical and ethnographic work and analysis. There were people in between. But on the other end, there were people interested almost entirely in the arts. Though we knew each other and got along well, there was a kind of distance created sometimes by that fact. Only later in life as we went out doing our work did we realize that we converged. I remember the work of Dan Crowley for example. I used to read it but it didn't grab me. It wasn't something that I felt. Not that I thought it wasn't good, but I didn't feel it had a real meaning to me and my work. Now I do. I have a file of Dan's work and I go through it all the time for ideas, for stimulation, for insights that don't come up in other ways that still haven't appeared in the literature.

Then, last of all, I can remember, in '58 I think it was. I wrote a paper on what I called something like an approach to art in anthropology. I showed the initial draft of it to Mel Herskovits; he read it rather quickly and said: "This is absolute balderdash! Absolute balderdash!" I had developed what I thought was a very refined distinction between esthetics, the esthetic attitude, esthetic activity in a culture, and artistic creative activity. He said, "I don't understand this. I don't understand why you have to make such a big point of this." Well, of course, nobody else had done it. One other person, George Mills, had been doing it and I really felt I was on the cutting edge. Herskovits did not like that I was using structural and functional language. I was thoroughly involved in Talcott Parsons at the time. Although I have since extricated myself, I still give credit to the guy. A few of my mentors were totally entrapped and were using this kind of language. This infuriated him. I was really betraying the trust of the anthropological

mission which was to be simple and clear, straightforward and report the data, not play with it this way. Those are things which estranged some of the students from Herskovits, but later, looking back, it was the impulse that came from him. It was this constant stress on going out and looking, getting the data, dealing with the persons, not with the problems and ideas first but persons first. This has stuck with me and I know it has with many of his students. It gives us our commonality today despite our divergent interests.

**James Fernandez:**

It's an interesting challenge to participate in what Foucault calls the archaeology of knowledge – and your own archaeology as well – trying to get back to those original impulses of graduate student days, intimations of immortality, recollections of graduate student days and think about what it was in the program at Northwestern with Mel Herskovits and also with those associated with him that may have oriented one like myself who was really interested I recall in culture dynamics, in culture contact and culture change. That focus on culture dynamics was one of the things that attracted me to the Herskovits program. Perhaps we're all interested in that. We're all brought up in dynamic situations by parents negotiating distinctly different lifestyles, different family cultures, and many of us try to bring those into compatibility. An interest in that dynamic is an energizing impulse and that's what brought me to Herskovits.

But very early on I became aware of how important the art part of culture was in the atmosphere at Northwestern. Most everybody had gone to the field and come back with their collections. They talked a lot about their collections; they wrote about their collections. Bill and Berta Bascom made a very important collection. That collection

impulse was all part of our experience there. Roy Sieber was important in this. Roy was there the year before I left for the field, and I remember sitting down not over an actual collection but sitting down over about 250 slides and photographs of Fang art, talking about Fang art. As I was going out to the Fang that was appropriate and that was something that one would do at Northwestern at the time. I think that was unique in programs in anthropology. That experience of having a living, first hand relationship with African art and talking about it extensively does orient one subsequently so that when one goes into the field one, if possible, does make collections. One does talk, as Warren points out, to artists themselves, one does try to gather data on their own lives. I don't think I did that as extensively as some others, as Warren himself has done or Justine. But I think first of all we have to recall an atmosphere and, of course, Herskovits was the one that really established it. But there were other important people. Bill Bascom, Dick Waterman, and, most importantly, Roy himself was a part of that art oriented atmosphere in which I was steeped the year before I left for the field.

Now, I thought I'd quote briefly from the good book, *Man and His Works*, chapter 23, on the "Aesthetic Drive, Graphic and Plastic Arts." This was a late 40's production. In his courses Mel kept talking to this book and reworking it. There he makes some basic statements and if we had more time, one would like to talk about what was argued in chapter 23. Herskovits makes a point which I don't mean to suggest is anything new now, but it could have been in the mid-50's for someone like myself, inspirational. He makes the point that the arts and the conventions of Euro-American culture have been dissociated from the principle stream of life. Artistic creation is the function of the specialist, while the appreciation of what these specialists create is the

privilege of those who at least command the leisure to pursue their avocation. The painting hangs on the wall in the museum; the sculpture is on its pedestal. The symphonic theme is somehow deemed vulgarized, violated when it is transmuted into a popular dance tune, we speak of significant form, etc, etc. This point which is thematic in this chapter is the separation of art from ongoing social cultural life in the West and its integration in the other parts of the world, particularly Africa where we were going out to study. And that was inspirational to me. I would say as I read through this particular chapter from *Man and His Works* which has many other problems of the time -- problems of the evolution from symbolic to conventional form, from symbolic to realistic form, the problem of convention, the problem of persistence of style – but just the same it's a rich chapter, and it raises issues which we are still debating.

Let me just point out one particularly obvious issue raised by Mel: the aesthetics of social life. This is an exercise in the archaeology of knowledge by the way and I don't pretend that it wouldn't be obvious at this point. But in some sense that was inspirational to me because the first two papers I did on African art really are on that issue. One is called "The Principles of Opposition and Vitality in Fang Aesthetics" in which I try to examine what artists say about their work and then I try to relate it to the dynamic of social cultural life. I try to take art itself and show how it's part of a whole of Fang life and how by understanding art we understand some principles of opposition and vitality that are operative in Fang life itself. That is, we do not separate out art from society, we see that integration. The second article I did is called "The Exposition and Imposition of Order: Artistic Expression in Fang Culture," in which I tried to compare the way that an artist orders his subject (and in some sense imparts an order to those who observe the

object). I try to compare that ordering principle with the ordering principle that is given by sermonizers and orators within the society. I tried to see art as a principle of order, to see oratory as a principle of order, and to see the relationship. I sought not to study art simply in isolation but to see it as part of the ordering operation of society itself.

So as I went back to read the “good book” here, I could see that pondering these ideas led immediately to some of my early interests in sitting down with the artist themselves, talking about the objects, and then deriving their principles in their minds about their objects and then relating them to principles in operation in other aspects of Fang life.

Also, the whole notion of culture style is touched on in this particular chapter; it’s a point that is touched on much more in Kroeber’s work. As a matter of fact, one might say that as long as Warren has brought up the work of Kroeber, that all the things that Kroeber did in his life, the final truths that he sought to expose throughout the 50’s, when we were graduate students, had to do with the notion of cultural style. And somehow, in understanding style and understanding aesthetics, we were getting a profounder understanding not just of objects, but of the nature of culture itself. It seems to me that this particular late 40’s chapter effectively raises that issue as well.

To see art as an integral part of life in culture I think is the Herskovitsian message, but one that I learned not only from Herskovits but also from others associated with him and part of the general atmosphere of Northwestern. Alan and Barbara Merriam were very interested in art and they collected art as well. We talked a lot about that. So there were those atmospherics on these particular intellectual issues that were driving me in my first years in the field and eventually produced the articles I mention.

But we went on from there, as we've already seen in these African Studies Association papers and there's been splendid progress. This commentary is only archaeology. It led to the present which is before us – not that it is irrelevant to reconsider the past.

[There was a brief interlude in which all commented on the artifact before us, Fernandez's field-worn (and cockroach-eaten) copy of *Man and His Works*, with d'Azevedo deciding it had been through Noah's Flood.]

**John Messenger:**

Well, I'm going to focus my remarks on a rather remarkable event that happened in the field, after I'd been doing research with my wife for eight months among the Anang Ibibio in Nigeria. During the course of our research, as a result of the influence of Herskovits, Bascom, and Waterman, we had collected a lot of folklore, and had done research into woodcarving, especially ancestral-type masks. And we kept sending home our field notes every two weeks as ordered -- no one's brought that up, incidentally. We had to send our field notes home and Herskovits commented on them; I still have a great pile of papers. He was doing it to about six of us at the same time. He must have burned the midnight oil.

Anyway, after we had been in the field eight months, the dry season was upon us and lo and behold we discovered the Anang have a drama association which very closely resembles drama in the western tradition. That is, there is an arena stage, a company that practices for six years and performs on the seventh to memorized lines. It's a male secret society and the men mimic women's roles. They're better women than the women in some



respects; at least they did things openly that women did secretly. As soon as the field notes were sent home of the first of these ceremonies, we got an immediate letter from Mel saying "I give you permission at this point, eight months into your research, to stop studying religious acculturation and study this" [audience laughter]. Although we had only a few months left in the field, he felt this was so important that we should get all the information we could on this rare phenomenon. Well, we pondered this for a several days and decided that we would not pursue the drama association, although we collected a good bit of information and I published it in several journals. But he felt so strongly that he was willing to let us do this which came as a great surprise.

Of course, at Northwestern, we had been exposed not only to the chapter that Jim referred to and the last chapter that Warren referred to, but also Herskovits' "Dramatic Expression among Primitive Peoples." I asked that a copy of that be sent to me, and on reading it I could understand his excitement, because there he had said that drama exists only in relation to religious ritual and storytelling. In fact, I have some quotations here. He says "Theater in the sense that we understand it does not exist. The primitive stage has no need of a proscenium," and so on.

Well, I'll go on just a bit further. Once I was ensconced in Michigan State, later in Indiana University and finally at Ohio State, I developed a course on the anthropology of the arts, which I still teach every year. It covers all of the arts in one quarter, which is a rather formidable task. Al Merriam's *Anthropology of Music* and other works serve me well. There is also Anthony Grahman Whyte's *Drama in Black Africa*, in which he is very critical of Mel for not realizing that there was drama in the western sense in Africa, and he has a wonderful chapter on traditional drama of Africa, with references to

ethnographic works from all over Africa of what Mel called secular drama, but he identified in his writings with folklore. So I still have my chapter on *Man and His Works* -- it lives on.

**Roy Sieber:**

As you probably all know I'm the only member of this panel who was not a student of Mel Herskovits and I didn't have to send my field notes to him [audience laughter]. I first met the master when I was graduate student working on my PhD at the University of Iowa. At the time, 1956, I was working on an exhibition of African art for a summer show, and somewhat in a panic came to Chicago and Evanston where I was warmly welcomed by Mel and his colleague Bill Bascom and they both lent objects to that exhibition. But more importantly than their quick acceptance of me was the fact that Mel began immediately to put me into touch with people like Bill Fagg of the British Museum and others. In other words, it was he who put me in contact with some of the right people at a critical point in my career. He knew everybody. At the same time, I had begun my campaign for a Ford Grant. Herskovits met with me a year or so later, encouraged my interests and gave me various bits of advice and recommended that a term of background studies at Northwestern might be useful, which I signed up for as part of the grant. I completed the PhD, got a Ford Grant and came to Northwestern all in the rather breathless fall of 1958. Parenthetically, that was just the time when Bill had left, and so I missed actually studying with Bill Bascom. I discovered much later that he had been a member of the selection committee for the Ford Grant that year and had argued strenuously to give an art historian, of all people, a grant to go to Africa.

At Northwestern, I was accepted as a visiting scholar, which as a young PhD made me feel very important indeed. And I sat in on a number of courses, most particularly Mel's theory course, along with Thomas Hodgekin. That course was something of a revelation to me. I found out that anthropologists didn't do one thing, they did lots of things, and they argued about it frequently. And it was in that course that Mel was quite scathing about the absence in British anthropology of the study of either material culture or the arts. Indeed, if memory serves, he felt that most anthropologists everywhere were slighting the arts, and I think that that came as much of an encouragement to me. And it was at that time that I first met Alan Merriam (Al, Justin, and I were all waifs in a way), who told me that Mel had encouraged his study of ethnomusicology. He'd walked into Mel's office as a young musician with a Master's degree in music and Mel welcomed him openly and as we've seen, Al made major contributions in ethnomusicology. As Merriam told me, Mel accepted him even though he was woefully unprepared for graduate work in anthropology. Typical of Mel's influence on some of his students at least, on the balance of academic interests and interests in the discipline, Merriam always argued that he was first of all an anthropologist, next he was an ethnomusicologist, and only finally was he an Africanist. Which I think tells something of Mel's attitude toward anthropology and toward the arts in that. This I believe was crucial to Mel's acceptance and encouragement of me, because he accepted me first as an art historian and next with an interest generally in non-Western art, and only finally, as it were, with a focus on African art.

I think the moment Mel fully accepted me as someone worth his time and energy, took place during his annual party. Do you remember those fall parties he used to give?

Well, I went to one in the fall of '58, and I fear I ignored all the other guests and went from room to room and later, with both Mel and Francis's encouragement, from closet to closet looking at their collection which is now, incidentally, on loan to the Schomberg collection in New York. It became a game. Mel would pull out an unusual piece, say one collected by Gerbauer or Messenger or himself, and I would with youthful confidence identify it. Fortunately, I got most of them right, so I impressed him apparently. But then he gave me leave to study and photograph the pieces in storage at Northwestern, including pieces collected as we've already heard by many, most, in fact, of his students.

During that time, I also met Dan Crowley, Jim Fernandez, and I recall that long afternoon discussing Fang sculpture. Also d'Azevedo became a slight divinity in my view because he was just back from the field. These others who had come back were gone, but here was somebody who had actually been there and I could talk to. I also remember, and this has nothing to do with Mel, d'Azevedo giving a lecture, on, I think secret societies, with constant interruptions and corrections from his then twelve year old son [audience laughter] .

After the term at Northwestern, I went out to the British Museum and Nigeria. I saw Mel and Francis frequently. My home had been up in Wisconsin and we used to drive up there almost annually to visit my parents with the children, and we would stop by and talk about the state of the field and he would make encouraging noises at me, pat me on the head, and send me on in whichever direction we were going. But the fondest memory of Mel that I have was in 1960, I think it was, African Studies Association panel on African Art and Human Behavior, which you will remember. One that was co-chaired

by Merriam and me; John Messenger contributed along with others. The point is that a number of Herskovits' students and others, hangers-on like myself, met to explore the roles of music, oral literature, the arts in general in Africa. And it was an extremely effective meeting. It was one that had a large audience, came off extremely well, and as we left, Mel was on an absolute high. At that moment I think his encouragement of the study of art and his own interest in it was somehow justified.

For me personally, he reinforced my move away from art history's emphasis on art for art's sake, and my developing concern with the object in its cultural context. Some of the things he developed in the chapter we've heard, but basically there was in Mel an acknowledgement that someone from an alien discipline, be it music, or the arts, could come and indeed find in his definition of anthropology and of the world, a place to study the arts. And I appreciate that.

**Lowell Holmes:**

I'd like to add a little something about music. Northwestern was one of the few departments of anthropology in the country where every time we had a departmental party we would have a jam session. I had been a professional jazz musician in Chicago and I found very soon that Herskovits was very much interested in this because his influence extended very broadly. I was hired to work in the ethnomusicology lab and he had influenced a lot of other people like Al Merriam, Waterman, Bascom, all these people who were interested in jazz. Waterman and I used to play around in clubs and had many discussions about the African origins of jazz. Over the years I found that the Herskovits volume, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, played a very great part in formulating

jazz history and almost all of the jazz historians will mention that. For example, Leroy Jones' *Blues People* had about three chapters that just quote Herskovits and Waterman and Bascom. I think that a lot of people are not quite aware of this, that the basic ideas there of the origins of jazz came largely from Herskovits in dealing with the African origins idea. I remember that we were always encouraged to go to the Harvest Baptist Church on the South side and hear a really great shouting church. And that's where we went and observed musicians, right in their own town, and observed a lot of great music; but the longer I was there and the more courses I took, I began to develop an interest in anthropological theory. While I still played, and still hold a union card, I'm more involved in anthropological theory than music. I owe a lot to Herskovits. And I'm one of the few people not to go to Africa.

**d'Azevedo:** Lowell, were you the perpetrator of the "Academic Cats"?

**Holmes:** The "Academic Cats." I don't know where they got all the musicians. Those of us who were not graduate students in the anthropology department were graduate students from some other departments. I think the academic vice president was the drummer, and the piano player was from the English Department....

**Fernandez:** Alfred Schutz, a phenomenologist, wrote a wonderful article called "Making Music Together," and I think what we're hearing here is that we did make music together in many senses of the word. A phrase that Margaret Mead loved to use was "intercommunicating cluster." I think probably what Roy was seeing and which I felt

was a pretty intense intercommunicating cluster in which esthetics had a very important role. We may have been interested in culture change and transformation, that was my interest, and other diverse interests, but there was always that aesthetic component and we couldn't ignore it when we got to the field. Maybe it was planted in us by the "Academic Cats" – maybe in their presence was where we finally were convinced.

**Chris Waterman:**

I also wanted to say that the Afro-Americanist component of my father's and Herskovits' analyses of retentions in music (psychomotor behavior, metronome sense, and interlocking rhythms) was really influenced by my father's bass playing. In fact, a bass player's gig, his professional reputation, is aimed at holding down a steady pulse against which other people place their rhythms. That scene affected his theoretical work.

[There followed a general discussion concerning Herskovits' death. He was at home in an easy chair listening to Beethoven's Sixth Symphony when he died.]

**Messenger:**

I wanted to make a point based on something Warren said that I forgot to put into my comments. In thinking about my work on sculpture, which appeared in your book on *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*. I remember trying to get at such things as canons of beauty and aesthetic creativity and so on. This goes back more to Bill Bascom in his work with the storyteller's role in the community, his interaction with the audience,

how he views his own stories and so on, and so I simply moved this into the arena of woodcarving. Of course, much of this comes from Mel too.

[There was a broad discussion concerning the importance of depositing one's field notes, photographs, and so on for future scholarly use.]

Unknown speaker:

I'd like to change the subject and go back to the archaeology of knowledge. Someone mentioned Gebauer, and I wondered if there were other missionaries that Herskovits dealt with and other people he tried to educate.

**Cordwell:**

There were at least at one time, from 1947-1950, an ex-rabbi, an ex-Methodist minister, a Catholic priest and a Bengali priest, a Buddhist priest, all ex's, on whom he put the aesthetic imprint, and it did pay off, besides Gebauer.

[more general discussion on this].

Herskovits himself had a rabbinical training, which is something that isn't brought out in his writing. Writing was his esthetic, his means of expression, and he loved it. In fact, he was too verbose. *Man and His Works* was cut down by a good third by Bob Armstrong when he was editor of the press; he was the only person who Mel would let do this. It needed it badly. I had to read the whole thing in carbon copies in order to illustrate it...my eyes were out like....But, I began to realize that because I'd had a lot of German I could understand that it was something in his background. Although it was a



Hungarian background, they must have spoken Yiddish at home. Also, they were isolated in their small town. There were maybe a few families, Jewish families, in Ohio and in Texas. Yiddish played a large part of this but the parenthetical clauses are the same Germanic expression. One time I walked into his office, and I said “Dr. Herskovits, do you realize that long paragraph is one sentence?” So after reading his material, I had no trouble passing the German exam.

**Messenger:**

Mel Spiro once told me that when Mel was revising his *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples*, he brought him a one sentence page and Mel read it. Herskovits said, “I don’t know what I was trying to say. I’d better revise that.”

**d’Azevedo:**

There’s one thing that I think might be of interest. Few people today read a very early work of Herskovits called *Backgrounds of African Art* and the last selection of that is called “Patterns of African Art.” In a capsule that presents Herskovits’ major view on what we’ve been talking about, about the relationship of art to society. It’s an extremely exciting short piece and for those of you who are interested, that’s the place to go.

**Peek:**

We often hear about the comparison of British and French anthropologists – that French anthropologists go to Africa and find symbol systems, while the British can not find those and only find kinship systems. It strikes me in hearing this discussion that where each of you did your field work was not intentionally among people who have

produced art, but that clearly your eyes were prepared to find these things, and it seems your hearts as well.

**Fernandez:**

I don't say that I ever chose the Fang because they have famous art tradition. Roy Sieber convinced me that afternoon and that was long after I got my grant. I would certainly say that I could not be among the Fang and do the study I was intending to do without also being aware of what was happening in the arts.

**Peek:**

I don't mean to pick on anybody, but is Dan Crowley still here? Dan, do you have any thoughts on this topic?

**Daniel Crowley:**

I just want to support the idea that Francis Herskovits had a lot to do with everything. She had some of the best perceptions in the field and she was as good a fieldworker as he.

**Cordwell:**

Could I just add one last thing. When you went into the field, what Dr. Herskovits wanted you to look for was art. Art to him was sculpture and painting. One of the quarrels I with him was that this was not art to the Yoruba that I worked with. It was clothing: the person is living sculpture, and textiles were the means of expression. I

was thoroughly sat on for this, for looking at leather workers and calabash carvers, anyone who was creating beautiful forms. I kept saying, “But they did not want to talk about the sculpture.”

**Fernandez:**

I hear some generational differences here. It is true we tend to focus in on sculpture, but Herskovits’ theory of esthetics certainly comprised all aspects, including all crafts as evidence of the esthetic drive.

Unknown Speaker: Was there a bias towards West Africa?

**d’Azevedo:**

No. Al Wolf went to French West Africa. Harold Schneider went to East Africa and did important work on esthetics. Let me describe it. I don’t think there was any bias about it all except the opportunities to work in Africa were essentially in West Africa and only a few people got into other areas. But I don’t think that he had a bias about it. I think that he would have been happy to have anyone go anywhere, if they were interested.

**Crowley:**

Actually I was encouraged not to go to West Africa, everyone was going there. Herskovits thought it was a great idea for me to go to the Congo but I was turned down twice because I was an established Caribbeanist. Someone recommended that I go to the Cameroons because they have no connections anywhere! By that time Herskovits was

interested in every aspect of the arts. He wanted me to do all their arts and their relationships. I never got around to it. I was only there for five months.

**d'Azevedo:**

Two of his closest friends were Raymond Firth and Meyer Fortes, who used to visit the campus when I was there and they were very close. The one thing that I remember was them not exactly arguing, but Herskovits sort of bugging them about was that you guys know nothing about art and esthetics -- you're completely institutionalized, etc. That was a factor I think in Herskovits' view. He was not sympathetic with British social theory on the one hand, and he did see this as a great hiatus in their work.

**Fernandez:**

And that gave an identity to the Northwestern department in terms of the identity of American anthropologists versus English anthropologists. It was a kind of structural opposition at play and esthetics was an idiom that could give identity to American or at least Herskovitsian anthropology in particular.

**Messenger:**

Incidentally, this puts in my mind the fact that I taught a year in a British university, and I didn't know what my teaching chores would be until I got there. The main chore was to teach the social anthropologists cultural anthropology -- all the things that they don't get in England, like the arts and psychological anthropology.

Unknown Speaker:

I want to know to what degree did the opposition of British social anthropology, structural-functional anthropology versus Boasian anthropology affect you? Was that perceived as Chicago versus Northwestern – was there a turf war going on?

**d’Azevedo:**

Yeah. There was, that’s why some of us took courses down there.

**Fernandez:**

These academic tribalisms are always a little exaggerated. In my time at Northwestern, we had regular courses with Chicago students at the Field Museum, for example. I attended a course at the University of Chicago with Redfield and their students came to Northwestern.

**d’Azevedo:**

On the other hand, Herskovits hired Edward Doser, who was a Southwestern anthropologist, trained by Fred Eggan, who was a structuralist, and who said so. Ed was a quiet sort of guy, but he was going to argue and take Mel on, and Mel’s idea was, we had to have one in the department. I think to placate some of his students. We were getting too parochial.

**Peek:**

Perhaps I can attempt a conclusion here. Although I never met Melville Herskovits, I had a good fortune to study with Bill Bascom at Berkeley, and with Alan Merriam, John Messenger, Roy Sieber, Jim Vaughan, and Dan Crowley at Indiana, and over time the years I have gotten to know others of you who studied with Herskovits. I have always been curious about the interests, insights, vitality, and humor all of you shared – qualities we've seen amply demonstrated today. Maybe the "Academic Cats" is the apt metaphor. These are folks who clearly didn't just study together, who didn't just have a formal relationship of the master and the pupil, but who had a very vigorous interactive exchange where perhaps Herskovits set the tone if not the tune, but everybody was involved in a wonderfully vital exchange of ideas. And certainly the fruits of those days are still with us. Anyway, I for one thoroughly enjoyed this bit of reminiscing. Many thanks.

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