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For the program companion website, visit [pbs.org/independentlens/herskovits](http://pbs.org/independentlens/herskovits)

**HERSKOVITS AT THE HEART OF BLACKNESS TO AIR NATIONALLY  
ON THE PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2010 AT 10 PM**

(San Francisco, CA)—**HERSKOVITS AT THE HEART OF BLACKNESS** asks how a white American anthropologist of Jewish ancestry came to re-make the historical understanding of black people—changing racial perceptions, igniting controversy, and finally, challenging the way we think about racial identity. A film by Llewellyn Smith, Christine Herbes-Sommers, and Vincent Brown, **HERSKOVITS AT THE HEART OF BLACKNESS**—recent winner of the American Historical Association’s John E. O’Connor Film Award as well as the Best Documentary Award at the Hollywood Black Film Festival— will air on the Emmy® Award- winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Maggie Gyllenhaal, on Tuesday, February 2, 2010 at 10 PM (check local listings.)

How is knowledge produced and how will it be used? Is scholarship ever objective? Should we care? These questions are examined in this groundbreaking look at the life and career of Melville J. Herskovits (1895-1963), the controversial anthropologist who established the African Studies Center at Northwestern--the first at a major American university--and who wrote the groundbreaking book *The Myth of the Negro Past*, a book that which redefined black history, inspired black pride, and even became a “source” a resource for black militants in the 1960’s, including the Black Panthers.



*Scenes from HERSKOVITS AT THE HEART OF BLACKNESS, coming to Independent Lens February 2010.*

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Vincent Brown provocatively sums up Herskovits as “the Elvis of anthropology,” a man who seemed to appropriate African culture for his own use, but simultaneously mainstreamed its study into the American academe and popular consciousness. Breaking the mold of traditional historical documentaries by using animation, edgy humor, and innovative filmmaking, **HERSKOVITS** asks “Who has the authority to define a culture, especially when people from that culture are denied the opportunity to engage in the scholarly discourse of defining themselves?”

Early American anthropology was mostly concerned with supposed correlations between anatomical features and supposed behavioral traits of the various “races.” Herskovits joined anthropologist Franz Boaz in an effort to transform American anthropology from a pseudo-scientific enterprise that justified the racial subjugation of non-Western people into a modern field of scholarship. Herskovits became a vigorous advocate for “cultural relativism,” the idea that cultures should be understood from the inside, on their own terms, not the anthropologist’s. This concept provided much of the groundwork for today’s critical cultural theory.

Herskovits turned his attention to Africa in the late 1920’s, a time when other white scholars insisted there was nothing to learn there. Through his field work in Benin, Surinam, and Trinidad, he shot thousands of feet of film (some of which appeared in **HERSKOVITS**). His work showed obvious connections between African and African American planting techniques, dance, music, and even everyday gestures, at a time when popular wisdom insisted that all ties to Africa had been lost in the traumatic passage to the New World. But Herskovits clashed with black scholars like W.E.B. DuBois, who used their scholarship to attack American racism. Other black scholars worried that viewing black American culture as African (i.e. different) would only justify Jim Crow segregation.

The film also examines Herskovits’s development as a scholar in light of the shared African American and Jewish experiences of exile, exclusion, and political oppression. Faced with resurgent racism and persistent discrimination in the early 20th century, black and Jewish intellectuals grappled with a common question: Could they retain their distinct ethnic identities and still participate as equals in American life?

Johnnetta Cole, President Emerita of Spelman and Bennett College, current director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art, and an early student of Herskovits, well understands the power of Herskovits’ work. Even while noting that she was personally empowered by his discoveries, she also stated that she felt Herskovits parlayed that work for political ends and personal position. The film asks the real question: Who is entitled to create knowledge about a people, who will use it, and to what end?

To learn more about the film and its subjects, visit the companion website for **HERSKOVITS AT THE HEART OF BLACKNESS** at [pbs.org/Herskovits](http://pbs.org/Herskovits). Get detailed information on the film, watch preview clips, read an interview with the filmmaker and explore the subject in depth with links and resources. The site also features a Talkback section where viewers can share their ideas and opinions.

**Featured participants, in alphabetical order:**

**K. ANTHONY APPIAH (professor of philosophy, Princeton University)**

Appiah is a philosopher, cultural theorist, and novelist whose interests include political and moral theory, the philosophy of language and mind, and African intellectual history.

**LEE D. BAKER (associate professor of cultural anthropology/ dean of academic affairs, Duke University)**

Baker specializes in the history of U.S. anthropology and is author of *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*.

**VINCENT BROWN (Dunwalke Associate Professor of American History, Harvard University)**

Brown is a multimedia historian with a keen interest in the political implications of cultural practice. He specializes in American history, African diaspora studies, and the history of slavery.

**JOHNETTA COLE (President Emerita of Spelman and Bennett Colleges)**

Cole is a well-known author, scholar, and activist for social and economic justice and is founder/chair of the Johnnetta B. Cole Global Diversity & Inclusion Institute at Bennett College. She is also a former student of Melville J. Herskovits.

**GELYA FRANK (professor of anthropology and occupational therapy, University of Southern California)**

Frank is past president of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology and has served on the Board of Directors of the American Anthropological Association. She is author of the numerous publications, including the article "Melville J. Herskovits and the African and Jewish Diasporas: Race, Culture and Modern Anthropology," published in the journal *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*.

**JERRY GERSHENHORN (associate professor of history, North Carolina Central University)**

Gershenhorn is the author of the biography *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*.

**JEAN HERSKOVITS CORRY (professor of history, State University of New York)**

Corry is an expert in African history and politics and the only child of Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits.

**MAE NGAI (professor Asian American studies and history, Columbia University)**

Ngai specializes in questions of immigration, citizenship, and nationalism in United States history and is author of *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*.

**About the Filmmakers**

**LLEWELYN SMITH (director/producer)**

Smith is President and founder of Vital Pictures, inc. ([www.vitalpix.com](http://www.vitalpix.com)), a Boston-based documentary company dedicated to exploring social justice issues. He is co-executive producer for the PBS series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* (2008), winner of the Council on Foundations Henry Hampton Award, the 2009 Alfred I. duPont Columbia University Award, and the National Academy of Sciences award for excellence in broadcasting. He has contributed to many award-winning PBS series, including *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* and *American Experience*, where he played a key role in origination, development, and acquisition of more than 70 programs on American history as series editor. His director/producer credits include the Emmy® and Peabody award-winning series *Africans In America: America's Journey Through Slavery* (1997); *Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory* (2001); the three-hour PBS series *RACE: The Power Of An Illusion* (2003); the three-hour special *Reconstruction: The Second Civil War* (2004), winner of the Eric Barnouw Award; and *Forgotten Genius* (2007), a two-hour NOVA biography of Dr. Percy Julian, the pioneering industrial chemist and civil rights activist, honored for broadcast excellence by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the National Science Writers Award.

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**Christine Herbes-Sommers (executive producer)**

Herbes-Sommers is vice president of Vital Pictures, Inc. She was senior series producer for *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* In recent years, she served as executive director of communications and media for the Big Picture Schools, an innovative public school network where she designed a comprehensive system of programming and produced a serial, long-form documentary called *The Advisory*. From 2001 to 2003, she produced the first hour of the acclaimed PBS series *RACE: The Power of An Illusion*. After living in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania with her family in the early 1990s, Herbes-Sommers joined the educational programming department at WGBH in 1993 as senior producer, bringing six multipart series and more than 50 hours of multiplatform programming to completion. In more than 25 years, Herbes-Sommers has produced a wide range of PBS documentaries and dramas, earning her an Emmy nomination, a duPont Columbia Award for her groundbreaking documentary *Joan Robinson-One Woman's Story*, several Cine Golden Eagles, and many other awards.

**Vincent Brown (producer and director of research)**

Brown is the Dunwalke Associate Professor of American History at Harvard University. He is an award-winning author and media maker, with a keen interest in the political implications of cultural practice. Professor Brown teaches courses in Atlantic history, African diaspora studies, and the history of slavery, and is the author of *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2008), which received the Merle Curti Award, the James A. Rawley Prize, and the Louis Gottschalk Prize in 2009.

**About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 PM on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community, or moment in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites, national publicity, and community engagement campaigns. Further information about the series is available at [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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