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Drums Over Harlem: The Vandercooks and the Herskovitses

I first met Rich and Sally in February 1988 when we were all helping plan a Columbus quincentenary conference that Stuart Schwartz was organizing at the University of Minnesota. The conference took place in 1990 under the title “Implicit Ethnographies,” which for the proceedings changed to *Implicit Understandings*, with Kris Lane helping with the editing. I’d just published my first book. I was a literary historian by training but I liked straying into history and ethnography, even though I knew very little about them. I think I’d first come across Rich’s name in Jim Clifford’s introduction to *Writing Culture*, where he holds up *First-Time* as a prime example of a new kind of ethnographic writing. I remember reading *First-Time* and thinking: this is more interesting than most of what passes as contemporary literature. It was only last year, when reading Rich’s memoir, *Inside/Outside*, where he talks about Cortázar and Vargas Llosa as influences on his mode of writing, that I understood why *First-Time* had resonated for me: those were the writers that had gotten me excited about literature in the first place in the 1960s.

Anyway, implicit ethnography, writing culture—that’s where I pitched my tent. I couldn’t *be* an anthropologist or a historian, but these people—Rich and Sally and Stuart, Jim Clifford, and others of that ilk: George Marcus, Renato Rosaldo, Pat Seed, Neil Whitehead—were people I could talk to and even work with, serious anthropologists and historians who were kind enough not to be dismissive of a literary scholar who found his own discipline either hidebound and inward-looking or veering off into the far latitudes of postmodernism. And, reciprocally, they were also people who took writing seriously.

One issue raised by the *Writing Culture* group, which was important for me because of the work I was doing at the time on Columbus’s journal, was the relationship between ethnographic texts and their prior manifestations in journals or informal travel writing. Malinowski’s diary provided the *cause célèbre* at the time. Rich and Sally’s particular contribution here in 2003 was *The Root of Roots, or, How Afro-American Anthropology Got its Start*, which analyzed Melville Herskovits’s field diaries from their trips to Suriname in the late 1920s; and this is the Prices’ book that I want to focus on here. I read it at the time as an exemplary analysis of a writer and area somewhat distant from my own research. But that would change.

A few years ago I started a project on the relationships between New York and the Caribbean in the 1920s. One key text is the issue of the journal *Survey Graphic* called “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” in which Melville Herskovits reports on life in Harlem—not very African, is his conclusion. That put Herskovits back onto my radar. Another key text, immensely popular in Harlem in the 1920s, though largely forgotten today, is “*Tom-Tom*,” a travel book about Suriname written by John Womack Vandercook. To cut a long story short, I became intrigued by the connections between Herskovits and Vandercook. This against the background not of the history of anthropology but of the cultural life of New York in the 1920s. One of the obvious *differences* that we can now see between the two of them is their trajectories: Herskovits became a renowned academic who carefully curated his papers and letters, now housed in The

Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections & University Archives, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL; Vandercook was a travel writer who later became a popular novelist, writer of historical biographies and detective fiction, and a successful radio broadcaster for NBC during the Second World War; his few surviving papers, mostly trivial, are housed in the rather more modest Delaware County Historical Association, Delhi, NY.

But the two writers *initially* had much in common. They got to New York about the same time, in the early 1920s, Herskovits as a graduate student, Vandercook as a journalist. Both got married, Vandercook in 1923 to Margaret Metzger, a sculptor, Herskovits in 1924 to Frances Shapiro, an aspiring poet. The couples lived just a mile apart: the Vandercooks in Gramercy Park, the Herskovitses in Chelsea. They occupied at least overlapping milieux: left-liberal, artistic. Both men were attracted to Harlem, Herskovits as part of his research, Vandercook by the cabarets and theatres.

The similarity of *interests* can then be seen in the research trips the two couples made, the Herskovitses seemingly following in the footsteps of the Vandercooks. The Vandercooks went to Suriname in early 1925, the Herskovitses in the summers of 1928, with Morton Kahn, and then 1929 on their own; the Vandercooks went to West Africa in the spring of 1926, the Herskovitses in the spring and summer of 1931; the Vandercooks went to Haiti in the winter of 1926, the Herskovitses in the summer of 1934.

Vandercook learned about what he calls the “farther jungles” of Suriname from somebody who worked for Alcoa, who seems to have sponsored the trip. A century later, *Tom-Tom* looks like a fairly unremarkable travel book, replete with many of the usual tropes of the genre. Unusual, though, was Vandercook’s appreciation of the African civilization he said he found in the jungles of Suriname, described with a total lack of condescension despite his limited comprehension of what he witnessed. But, from the perspective of cultural history, what is really notable is the book’s enthusiastic welcome in Harlem. “*Tom-Tom*” was warmly reviewed in the black press by the likes of Hubert Harrison and Alain Locke. Vandercook was even invited to speak at UNIA’s Liberty Hall in 1927, as announced by a piece in *Negro World*, probably written by Harrison, calling Vandercook a “fearless champion of Negro freedom” and *Tom-Tom* “the greatest book written on the black race since Volney’s *Ruins of Empires*”—135 years previously, a view that obviously needs understanding within the prevailing context of the denigration of all things African and the supremacy of the white race, a supremacy that Vandercook vehemently rejected.

The paths of Herskovits and Vandercook came closest to crossing at the Fourth Pan-African Congress in New York in August 1927, where they were two of only a very small handful of white speakers. At this stage, in terms of personal experience, having spent time in Suriname, West Africa, and Haiti, and with *Tom-Tom* so positively reviewed in the black press, Vandercook was held in higher regard by the black community than Herskovits with his text-based Ph.D. and his fieldwork so far restricted to the streets of Harlem. All this to make the point that if the topic was the roots of Afro-American *Studies* then Vandercook would in the 1920s actually be at least as significant a figure as Herskovits.

Just why *Herskovits* then chose Suriname as a destination for his first overseas fieldwork has never been satisfactorily explained. Herskovits himself said that the initial indication came from Elsie Clews Parsons, who financed his two trips, but the timing of their correspondence makes this unlikely. The seed of the idea may have been planted by the Swedish ethnographer

Gerhard Lindblom, whom Herskovits visited in Stockholm in 1924. However, in October 1925, shortly before Herskovits put together his major research proposal for a study of the physical make-up and culture of Negroes in Africa and the Southern USA, the first of Vandercook's accounts of his travels appeared in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, probably the first first-hand account of the Saamaka that Herskovits had encountered. He was then asked, or perhaps volunteered, to review *Tom-Tom* for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, where he first identifies the Saamaka as "perhaps the most important link in the chain of clues which are to tell us of the relationship of the Negroes of this country and the Caribbean littoral to the existing tribes of Africa" and points out that Vandercook has "done excellently," given his lack of ethnological training—but with it "his work would have been of the greatest significance"—perhaps suggesting Herskovits's identification of the person with ethnological training who *should* undertake such a study. That person being, of course, the reviewer himself.

One might have thought that Herskovits would have sought out Vandercook after reading *Tom-Tom* and contemplating a visit to Suriname, but there's no evidence that he did so: perhaps Vandercook's lack of professional qualifications made Herskovits uneasy about seeking advice or contacts from a younger and yet much more widely-travelled man, although, as we know from Rich and Sally's book, Herskovits travelled to Suriname with a copy of *Tom-Tom* in his steamer trunk. Indeed, when he wrote on his return to his friend Ralph Linton that "the civilization of the Bush Negroes is much more African than anyone has dreamed," Herskovits was deliberately blanking Vandercook, who had written a whole book—which Herskovits had read and admired—dedicated to that very proposition. Not only does Herskovits never refer to his predecessor in his writings after that review, but the review itself is missing from the seemingly comprehensive collection of Herskovits's writings at Northwestern University. It's almost as if any traces of Vandercook and his book were being purged from the Herskovitsian archive.

Apart from denying a predecessor, there was perhaps some anxiety at this stage that the approaches of anthropologist and travel writer were not that different. On their return from Suriname in September 1928, the *New York Times* interviewed Herskovits and Kahn and quoted them at length as they reveled in the pose of intrepid adventurers witnessing what white men had never before witnessed, tom-toms and all. Not very different from Vandercook's magazine articles. The Herskovitses (like the discipline of anthropology itself) did of course *eventually* take their distance properly from travel writing through the depth and extent of their engagement with the Saamaka over a number of years.

What didn't change, and what the Herskovitses continued to share with Vandercook was the thrall to racialized ways of thinking. This was the implicit ethnography they had in common and *The Root of Roots* does convey its authors' uneasiness about the Herskovitses' eagerness to identify "Africa" in the jungles of Suriname. Vandercook had suggested that the Suriname jungle was the world of Africa "two hundred years away." The Herskovitses upped him a further hundred: "The bush is Africa of the seventeenth century," turning the Saamaka of the 1920s into a seventeenth-century African tribe who can act as the baseline for Herskovits's American league table of African retentions, a "foundational fiction," as Andrew Apter calls it, that has continued to blight Afro-American anthropology.

Two final points. In *The Root of Roots*, Sally and Rich emphasize the important role that Frances Shapiro Herskovits played in the couple's travels to Suriname, even though her activities are not that evident in the field diaries. Margaret Metzger Vandercook didn't help with her

husband's research or writing, but she made figure drawings that formed the basis for the striking sculpture she made when they got back to New York, using the Surinamese, Harlem-based Maurice Hunter as her model. This fine piece, also called "Tom-Tom," although rarely displayed, is now housed in the Schomburg's Art and Artifacts Division, stored therefore within a hundred feet or so of the Herskovits's field diaries.

For nearly forty years now, whenever I've broached an anthropological issue, I've always asked myself "what would Rich and Sally say?" Fortunately, the question doesn't have to be rhetorical. And this is the last thing I want to say. In the early stages of the still ongoing effort to clarify the relationship between Herskovits and Vandercook, I sent a draft to Rich and Sally. I got detailed and helpful responses from both of them within 24 hours, and a follow-up the next day from Rich. It's one thing to learn from reading great scholars. It's quite something else to benefit directly from their wisdom and generosity. And none are, in my experience, more generous with their time and their wisdom than Rich and Sally.