



Peter Hulme

Africa Undraped: The Vandercooks and the Herskovitses in Suriname and Harlem

December 2023

©Peter Hulme

Not for citation

The history of travel writing is replete with unremembered figures, some justifiably so, others not.

John W. Vandercook has been almost completely forgotten despite an interestingly varied writing career. The book focused on here, *“Tom-Tom”*, was a critical and popular success in New York during what it is now usually referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, but has had no subsequent critical attention. A work of travel writing and popular anthropology, *“Tom-Tom”* spoke enthusiastically about the values of an African culture that had survived on the American continent with traces still to be found, albeit in remnant form, in the theatres and cabarets of Harlem. By contrast, Melville Herskovits is well-remembered, though as a distinguished and influential anthropologist rather than as a travel writer. But in the late 1920s Vandercook and Herskovits had much more in common than now meets the eye.

<>

John Womack Vandercook (1902-1963) was born in London to American parents who moved back and forth between New York and the British capital. At the time his father, John Filkins Vandercook Jr., was the European manager for the Scripps-McRae Publishers Press Association, headquartered in London, providing international news to the USA. Back in New York shortly after his son’s birth, he became the first President of the United Press Association but died soon afterwards in 1908, aged only 34. Vandercook’s mother, Margaret (née Womack), then became a very successful writer of books for children. Vandercook himself was educated in New York, Louisville (where his mother came from), and Delhi, in upstate New

With special thanks to Richard Price and Sally Price for providing valuable materials and for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to the following for the identification and provision of research materials: Kolter Campbell (McCormick Library, Northwestern University), Marianne Greenfield (Town Historian, Delhi NY), Ray LaFever (Delaware County Historical Association), Helena Rundkrantz (Världskulturmuseerna, Stockholm), Tammi Lawson (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York), David Bindman, and Margaret Rose Vendryes.

¹ *“Tom-Tom”*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925 (page references are included in the text with the abbreviation TT); *Black Majesty: The Life of Christophe, King of Haiti*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928: there were 44 editions of *Black Majesty* published between 1928 and 2006 in three languages. His later books include *Murder in Trinidad* (1933), *King Cane: The Story of Sugar in Hawaii* (1939), *Empress of the Dusk: A Life of Theodora of Byzantium* (1940), and *Murder in Haiti* (1956). *Murder in Trinidad*, dir. Louis King (1934) was a reasonably successful feature film.

York, where his paternal grandfather had built a house in the middle of the nineteenth century and where his mother and then he himself would live in later life. After one year at Yale, Vandercook dabbled in acting before following his father into journalism, working on newspapers in Columbus, Washington DC, Baltimore, and eventually New York, where he was assistant editor for McFadden Publications and feature editor of *The New York Graphic*. He briefly visited Jamaica in April and May 1922, probably his earliest experience of the tropics, but his extensive travels began in 1924, the year he married his first wife, the sculptor Margaret Metzger (1899-1936), who accompanied him. Suriname was their first major destination, followed by West Africa, then Haiti, and eventually the Pacific islands. Travel writing and popular anthropology remained constant interests, but he added historical biography and detective fiction to the mix before becoming a successful radio broadcaster. Vandercook's most lucrative book was *Black Majesty: The Life of Christophe, King of Haiti* (1928) for which he was widely applauded in the black community as a white writer who was approaching a Haitian hero with due seriousness – and it was indeed a well-researched biography that had few competitors at the time; but by 1928 he already had an established reputation in Harlem thanks to “*Tom-Tom*”.¹ Margaret died in 1936; Vandercook's second wife, Jane Perry, divorced him to marry the more flamboyant travel writer, John Gunter; and his third wife, Iris Flynn, died in a fall.

<>

Vandercook's interest in black culture had presumably been piqued when he moved to New York, probably in 1921. A note at the beginning of “*Tom-Tom*” thanks “Mr. Edward A. Engelhardt, an American gentleman, who first told me of the strange world of the farther jungles, whose generous hospitality made it possible for me to go there and see for myself” (*TT* vii). Edward August Engelhardt worked with Frank B. Cuff, a pioneer in bauxite mining with the Aluminum Company of America, which had established operations in Suriname in 1916 soon after the discovery of bauxite in its jungles. Alcoa eventually obtained mining concessions and built an entirely integrated aluminum industry in Suriname, mining bauxite, refining it into alumina, and smelting it into aluminum.

Alerted by Engelhardt to the Bush Negro presence in Suriname, and presumably sponsored by Alcoa, John and Margaret Vandercook travelled by boat to Paramaribo in late 1924 or early 1925.² The details of the Vandercooks' travels inside Suriname are not easy to reconstruct from “*Tom-Tom*”. They travelled by train from Paramaribo to the railhead at Kabel Station and then onwards up the Suriname River by canoe. The village of Biri-Pudu-Madu [Biudumatu] is most frequently mentioned,

¹ “*Tom-Tom*”, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925 (page references are included in the text with the abbreviation *TT*); *Black Majesty: The Life of Christophe, King of Haiti*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928: there were 44 editions of *Black Majesty* published between 1928 and 2006 in three languages. His later books include *Murder in Trinidad* (1933), *King Cane: The Story of Sugar in Hawaii* (1939), *Empress of the Dusk: A Life of Theodora of Byzantium* (1940), and *Murder in Haiti* (1956). *Murder in Trinidad*, dir. Louis King (1934) was a reasonably successful feature film.

² There are five main groups of what were called Bushnegroes or Bush Negroes: Saamaca, Okanisi (also called Ndyuka), Matawai, Pamaka, and Aluku (also called Bomi). Vandercook used the terms Bushnegro and Saramacca, Herskovits Bush Negro and Saramacca; I'll use Bush Negro and Saamaca.

on the Upper Suriname, with its *granman* Frobie, but “each village is much like the others” (TT 55) and so generalised accounts follow.³ Louis Junker, a government official from Paramaribo, described as “postholder of the Upper Suriname district”, and who is warmly thanked, acted as their guide and interpreter (TT 155, vii). The Vandercooks returned to New York on 30 April 1925.

Vandercook sees the supposed similarity between the tropical forests of west Africa and those of inland Suriname on roughly the same latitude as explaining the Bush Negroes’ success in adapting to life there after their successful escape from Dutch slavery. They are, of course, in the best-known trope of adventure travel writing, “an almost forgotten race of men” (TT 1), whose distance from the ways of white folk has allowed their timeless form of jungle life to survive relatively unchanged for two centuries. They are “an undiscovered people in an undiscovered place” (TT 2), and Vandercook claims that he is the first writer to venture into their country.⁴

With some skill Vandercook sketches the historical background of the Atlantic slave trade, the establishment of European colonies in north-east South America, and the extravagant wealth of the Dutch planters in Suriname. But, he writes, there had always been a gradual and secret exodus of slaves from the plantations, and eventually, as night fell and the planters drank and sang, the faint sound of the tom-tom would cause them to pause their pleasures while their slaves would hear the rhythm and remember their African homeland. The sound of the tom-tom terrified the planters but for the slaves it served to call back “forgotten gods”, “sounding the old rhythms that open for the negro just a crack, the heavy door of forest mysteries” (TT 8). The trope of the ‘green hell’ was commonplace in the 1920s but Vandercook firmly locates the fear of the tropics in the white man’s psyche rather than as intrinsic to the jungle itself: “This undefinable fear, I think, explains to a large extent why most colonization experiments in the tropics have failed. The forest enmity has made us furiously, impotently angry, and from anger has evolved the passionate cruelties that have dragged the banner of empire in all far domains” (TT 157-8).

As more and more slaves heard the call and slipped away, endangering the viability of the plantation economy, Vandercook explains, the planters increased the brutality of their regime. But the maroon communities grew in size and began to attack plantation houses, and a state of war soon existed. Eventually, unable to defeat the Saamaka rebels, the colonists sued for peace, which was concluded in 1762. Vandercook explains this Saamaka success through essential characteristics: they thrived in the jungle because of an innate skill (“call it magic, if you like”), honed through centuries of life in Africa, “remembered ... developed, renewed, and increased in the new country” (TT 28, 49). He calls it “a question of environment”, but it has clearly become a matter of race: “The negro, in his own country, is pre-eminently the superior race – just as the white race is pre-eminent in the temperate

³ Along with 40 other villages Ganzee and Biudumatu were submerged in 1965 by the construction of the Brokopondo reservoir.

⁴ A good deal had been written in Dutch about the Saamaka by the missionary Franciscus Petrus Morssink and by the colonial official who was Vandercook’s main source, Louis Junker. See Richard Price, *The Guiana Maroons: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

zones" (TT 91). Vandercook is undoubtedly naïve and credulous – he was only 23 when he travelled to Suriname – but he is willing to credit the Saamaka with a viable culture which he takes some pains to try to understand. The matrilineal system is respectfully explained, as are Saamaka agriculture, wood-carving, sexual practices, mortuary customs, crime and justice, and canoe construction: all the elements of a way of life also of interest to ethnography. Although Vandercook does use the term 'magic' – as Malinowski and other ethnographers were doing in the 1920s – he is at pains to explain its distinction from Western ideas of deception and conjuring, and is perfectly willing to speak of Saamaka 'philosophy' or 'science'. Vandercook is constantly respectful and always desires to understand matters as the Saamaka see them, however limited his eventual comprehension. He is also aware that contact with the big city was a fact of life for the Saamaka he meets, many of whom were involved in selling timber to merchants in Paramaribo, and buying pots and knives and nails, a contact that happens entirely on their terms: "They know outlanders are an unimportant lot who think they will die if they leave their hats off" (TT 62). Hats are a meaningful symbol to Vandercook. He concludes of the Saamaka: "Their history from the beginning has been a story of passionate integrity to the ideal of absolute independence, practical and intellectual. They will never take a top-hat seriously" (TT 116). His *attitude* might therefore properly be described as ethnographic, even if he lacked the training or experience to produce descriptions of lasting value to the developing scientific discipline.

But "*Tom-Tom*" begins and ends in Harlem. US blacks are, in Vandercook's view (though not his actual phrase) still suffering from 'mental slavery', tragically accepting the 'truth' of what he calls "the gigantic, cruel absurdity that the white race is, through some weird miracle of pigmentation and force the supreme, heaven-wrought master of the world" (TT xiii). On the spectrum of early twentieth-century views, the idea that 'race' simply had no validity at all as a scientific concept was held by very few, while the supremacy of the 'white race' was widely upheld in popular books such as Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). Vandercook's debunking immediately places him on what now would be regarded as the left-liberal wing of racial thinking at the time but, like most of his black contemporaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, and even avowedly anti-racist whites such as Franz Boas and his student Melville Herskovits, he still thought very much in terms of 'the white race' and 'the black race' and their essential qualities. Whereas, however, the black thinkers tended to seek recognition within US society for the 'gifts' that blacks could bring to the shared table of national culture, with black intellectuals leading the way, Vandercook urged a more radical approach in which black people should learn from the "fathers of the race" (TT xv) still living in the jungles of the world's tropical belt – although the practicalities involved in such 'learning' are never addressed. Du Bois and Locke were certainly keen to value aspects of African culture, and Marcus Garvey wanted to lead a return there – though not exactly to the jungle. Vandercook had no such political programme, but he did want that African world to be valued for what he calls "its curious loveliness and wise serenity" (TT xvi). Those words end the preface to "*Tom-Tom*", which is dated "*West Africa 1926*", even though the book itself gets no closer to Africa than the north-east coast of South America.

In the last chapter of *Tom-Tom*, called “The Jungle Rhythm”, Vandercook recalls an incident that he witnessed in Harlem a few years previously, so presumably in the early 1920s. This acts as an explanation for the interests that led him to Suriname. He recalls attending a “negro theatrical production” north of 125th Street, “a commonplace musical comedy”, the girls light-skinned, their hair ironed, lighter-skinned blacks seated centrally, darker-skinned in the balcony and in corners: “The scene was typical of the American negro – a vivid demonstration of the mighty strides that have been taken away from the true black heritage toward – nothing” (TT 246). Then something happened during the second act. The setting of the play was a social club meeting hall. A big black comedian spoke pre-arranged lines; the chorus of women on kitchen chairs occasionally broke into song. Everything fell flat; everyone on stage and in the audience was disengaged. Then the black comedian saved the day.

Suddenly, in the midst of a set speech, he reached under the table and seized a short length of broomstick that had been placed there for just such an emergency. He stopped his speech, lifted the stick high over his head, and brought it down with a terrific crash upon the table. Then he lifted it again and brought it down once more, then again, and again, and again, and again.

The chorus women ceased their smirking. The audience, astonished, stopped whispering and were immediately attentive. Faster and faster the big black pounded the table, in flawless time. In a moment a curious electric mood filled the auditorium. The comedian said nothing, but now his body was moving, slightly but truly, in time to the beating of the stick. Then the troupe around him took it up, began to sway and lurch, slowly, then faster and faster, utterly without consciousness, completely rapt [...]

The rhythm was irresistible. Even I, in the balcony, foreign to such things from birth and by every experience of life, could not fail to feel it. I felt half-choked. The walls of the building seemed to close in, softly, and the harsh electric lights gave way to let a mood of forest moonlight in. The seas were bridged, Harlem for the instant was far away and the strange beating of the black man’s stick seemed to sound the steady wash of wind among the ancient, long-forgotten trees. Mulattoes, blacks, rich and poor, for the moment were again one people with one destiny – harked back against their will to another place ages and a world away. The air was hushed. There was no sound except the steady, quick, quick beat of stick on table.

Then, as suddenly, the comedian threw down his rod, flung back his great head, and roared with laughter. The show went on as before. (TT 246-8)

Vandercook claims to have forgotten the incident until he heard the tom-tom of the Bush Negroes in the jungle night in Suriname, but such a striking event, capable of being recalled in such detail, suggests that something had stirred him to think at that moment of the African jungle to which the audience could trace their distant ancestry. Perhaps the brief visit to Jamaica was the immediate result. In any case – and we only have the opening acknowledgements to go on – when Edward Englehardt told him of that strange world of the farther jungles, Vandercook leapt at the opportunity.

Alternatively, of course, the incident has been re-imagined or elaborated.⁵ It certainly embodies the popular trope in the 1920s in Harlem whereby the rhythmic power of jazz – manifest in the beat of the tom-tom – is taken to provide a blood

⁵ Or possibly just fabricated, although Vandercook, on the evidence of his writing as a whole, would be less likely than his contemporaries Paul Morand and William Seabrook to make up such stories.

connection back to Africa.⁶ “Africa undraped!”, as Eric Walrond put it in when entering Sonny Decents (the Sugar Cane Club) and hearing the rhythm of the tom-tom – the instrument that Langston Hughes chose for his dramatic statement about black artistic freedom the following year, that confirmed Zora Neale Hurston’s racial identity, and that Shirley Graham used to anchor her path-breaking play and opera.⁷

“Tom-Tom” ends with a lyrical paean to African drumming and to the instrument that he uses as his title, an account illustrated by a photograph of a fine sculpture, called “Tom-tom”, made by his wife⁸:

The tom-tom is never loud. Its tone is so low one must listen intently for its sound scarce two hundred yards away. But, curiously, the notes are just as clear two miles farther through the trees, so exquisite is the perfection of the witch-man’s pitch.

The tom-tom is a purposeful thing. It is the supremely important possession of the forest people. The rhythm which it sounds is the key to the vast, incommunicable soul of the jungle. [...]

Sound, because it, too, is intangible, fills a precious place in the black man’s world. From sunfall to dawn the black throat of the woods emits a bellowing call – a call that would overwhelm the jungle men had they no tune to answer with. But they have. The tom-tom, made of a rotted hollow log and the soft skin of a forest beast, both part of the woods, can, under long-trained fingers, produce a rhythm that answers in very kind the great indistinguishable song that rises when the woods are dark [...]

The tom-tom is the negro’s master skill. While they have their drums they will never be afraid – for they can, in a flash, create a new emotion that quells in an instant all transient fears.

Nor do they ever forget the jungle rhythm, no matter how much time and circumstance may alter the old memories. [...]

Music is the great artistic genius of the black race – as witnessed by the instance of their development in the United States of the only truly significant and characteristic music we have produced, the negro spirituals. (TT 248-55)

⁶ Despite the fact that the origin of the word ‘tom-tom’ is the Hindi तम-तम [tam-tam]. It passed into French as pronounced in Hindi, with a change to the vowel in English. All the early uses in English relate to India, the earliest in the *Oxford English Dictionary* being from 1693. The tom-tom became part of the jazz combo’s trap set around 1918.

⁷ Eric D. Walrond, “The Adventures of Kit Skyhead and Mistah Beauty: An All-Negro Evening in the Coloured Cabarets of New York”, illustrated by Miguel Covarrubias, *Vanity Fair*, 24, no. 1 (March 1925), pp. 52, 100, at 100; Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, *The Nation*, 23 June 1926, pp. 692-694, at 694; Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me”, *World Tomorrow* 11 (May 1928), pp. 215-16; Shirley Graham, “Tom-Tom”, in *The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938*, ed. Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 238-286. Annotated versions of the libretto and scores of the opera, *Tom-Tom*, are in the Papers of Shirley Graham Dubois, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, MC 476, IV.A. Musical Scores.

⁸ Reproduced at the beginning of this essay. Although based on drawings made in Suriname, “Tom-tom” was modelled by the Harlem-based (but Suriname-born) Maurice Hunter: see “Maurice Hunter – Creative Model”, *Inter-State Tattler*, 1 March 1929, p. 3; and, though she doesn’t mention “Tom-tom”, Clare Corbould, “Race, Photography, Labor, and Entrepreneurship in the Life of Maurice Hunter, Harlem’s ‘Man of 1,000 Faces’”, *Radical History Review*, 132 (October 2018), pp. 144-71. The sculpture is now part of the collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York.

"Tom-Tom" was, in many respects, a book for which Harlem had been waiting. In the special West Indian issue of the National Urban League's magazine, *Opportunity*, the Guyanese Arthur E. King offered the book a warm welcome, and it also gained appreciative mentions from columnists Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Bennett.⁹ During 1927 *Tom-Tom* was repeatedly reported in *Opportunity* as being one of the most-borrowed non-fiction books from the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library [NYPL]. Perhaps less expectedly, Vandercook's views also found enthusiastic support in the ranks of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association so, soon after returning from a visit to Haiti, he was invited to speak at Liberty Hall in late February 1927, as a piece in *Negro World* announced, calling him a "fearless champion of Negro freedom" and "*Tom-Tom*" "the greatest book written on the black race since Volney's 'Ruins of Empires'".¹⁰ Carl Van Vechten, whose reports on his reading are usually drily factual, called "*Tom-Tom*": "a remarkable book".¹¹ Alain Locke welcomed its "revolutionary significance".¹²

<>

Herskovits' route to Suriname was more conventional than Vandercook's, if not exactly straightforward. Seven years older than Vandercook, Melville Jean Herskovits (1895-1963) took a BA at Chicago before his graduate work first at the New School for Social Research and then under Franz Boas at Columbia between 1920 and 1923. His doctoral dissertation, *The Cattle Complex in East Africa* (1923) didn't involve fieldwork.

In April 1923, as he was finishing his Ph.D., Herskovits submitted a successful fellowship application to the National Research Council on the problem of physical and psychological variability within a racially mixed population, an anthropometrical study calculated to win financial support but framed in such a Boasian way as to undermine the racial claims of biological anthropology.¹³ He would study Harlem blacks by obtaining genealogies and physical measurements. He would work under the joint supervision of Boas and Edward L. Thorndike, a committed eugenicist. He would teach at Columbia as an unpaid lecturer between 1924 and 1927. It was now, in the summer of 1924 that he married Frances Shapiro (1897-1972), who would later travel with him as co-researcher and co-author.

⁹ Arthur E. King, review of John W. Vandercook's "*Tom-Tom*", *Opportunity*, 4 (November 1926), pp. 358-9; Countee Cullen, "The Dark Tower", *Opportunity*, 5 (January 1927), p. 24; Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Ebony Flute", *Opportunity*, 6 (May 1928), p. 153.

¹⁰ "John W. Vandercook To Speak At Liberty Hall on Sunday Feb. 27", *Negro World*, 26 February 1927, p. 3. This piece may have been written by Hubert Harrison, who was the *Negro World* writer most likely to refer to Volney. Harrison recommended "*Tom-Tom*" in *The Voice of the Negro*, 1, no. 1 (February 1927), p. 3.

¹¹ Carl Van Vechten, "Daybooks, 18 October 1926, Carl Van Vechten Papers, MssCol 3142, Box 208 (Bruce Kellner's transcripts of the daybooks), New York Public Library.

¹² Alain Locke, "The Gift of the Jungle", *The Survey*, 57 (January 1927), p. 463. In an earlier draft of the review Locke calls the book "a *Gulliver's Travels* of the anti-Nordic reaction" (Alain Locke Papers, Coll. 164, Box 137, folder 32, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC).

¹³ See Jerry Gershenhorn, "The Attack of Pseudoscientific Racism" in his *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 27-57.

Via Boas, Herskovits began making contacts in the black community: with Sadie Marie Peterson, a librarian at the 135th Street branch of the NYPL; with Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]; with W. E. B. Du Bois himself; and eventually with Charles S. Johnson and Alain Locke.¹⁴ He gave talks at the library and at the NAACP, establishing his credentials as a bearer of the Boasian flame. He hired four black assistants for his study, including Zora Neale Hurston, who famously stood on Harlem street corners with a pair of callipers asking passers-by if she could measure their skulls.¹⁵

With this study underway and with Herskovits quickly becoming a well-known figure around Harlem, he would have been an obvious choice as one of the white scholars asked to contribute to the *Survey Graphic* special issue called “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” that Alain Locke was compiling in the summer and autumn of 1924. Asked to respond to the question “Has the Negro a Unique Social Pattern?” Herskovits adopted the narrative position of a visitor to Harlem (hardly a major expedition from Columbia University) and found its inhabitants much like other Americans but with slightly darker skin – a viewpoint distinctly out of keeping with Locke’s views, and indeed with the rationale of the issue as a whole.¹⁶ As a left-liberal, Herskovits was inclined to diminish cultural differences in favour of a common mainstream American identity, a view espoused by the then pre-eminent US sociologist of race, Robert Park of the University of Chicago. Park saw African Americans as unique as immigrants in bringing no external culture with them. Assimilation would therefore mean their full adoption of the dominant white culture.

Given his ongoing Harlem study and his personal contacts with Harlem intellectuals, Herskovits’s self-presentation as a wide-eyed and objective visitor was decidedly disingenuous: “Should I not find there,” in Harlem, he asked, “if anywhere, the distinctiveness of the Negro, of which I had heard so much?” (DSP 676). With his conclusions known in advance, he carefully framed his own questions:

¹⁴ Gershenhorn, “The Attack”, p. 32. Johnson introduced Herskovits to Locke in January 1924. Herskovits had written Locke an appreciative letter in September 1923 after reading Locke’s demolition of Roland Dixon’s *The Racial History of Man: “The Problem of Race Classification”*, *Opportunity*, 1 (1923), pp. 261-64.

¹⁵ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977, p. 63.

¹⁶ Melville J. Herskovits, “The Dilemma of Social Pattern”, *Survey Graphic: “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro”*, 53, no. 11 (March 1925), pp. 676-77 (subsequent page references are included in the text with the abbreviation DSP). One of the magazine’s editors, Geddes Smith, wrote to Locke that he “had quite a talk with Herskovits” and that Herskovits “flatly” refused to “eliminate his attempt to explain his own theory of culture pattern.” Smith asked Locke if the essay should be omitted but in his own opinion thought that “when all is said and done, it does give a sharply different and therefore piquant turn to the sociological section of the number” (Letter from Geddes Smith to Alain Locke, 28 January 1925, Alain Locke Papers, Coll. 164, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC., Box 88, Folder 21). In the event, Locke wrote a headnote, contextualising and softening Herskovits’s findings. Nonetheless, Herskovits’s essay was reprinted unchanged in Locke’s expansion of the issue into a book, although under the less forbiddingly sociological title, “The Negro’s Americanism”, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925, pp. 353-60.

“Should I not be able to discover there his ability, of which we are so often told, to produce unique cultural traits, which might be added to the prevailing white culture, and, as well, to note his equally well-advertised inability to grasp the complex civilization of which he constitutes a part?” The passive voice helpfully provided no actual antagonists, just a vague common sense with which any respectable social scientist might take issue – as Herskovits proceeded to do, writing as if it had been the first time in his life that he’d clambered down the steps through Morningside Park and made his way to 135th Street. By the end of his second paragraph he was reporting seeing “a community just like any other American community. The same pattern, only a different shade!” (DSP 676). In terms of dress, deportment, religion, sexual morality, community organisation, and business practice, Herskovits saw white customs and mores copied to the letter. He even noted that at the famous *Opportunity* dinner that had given rise to the special issue of *Survey Graphic*, writer after writer had stressed their desire to be seen as a writer *tout court*, not a *Negro* writer. (Langston Hughes was in Europe at the time, otherwise Herskovits might have had to deal with at least one significant counter-example.) Anything different from the dominant white culture Herskovits wrote off as “a remnant from the peasant days of the South” (DSP 678). He found no trace of Africa – nor, it might be added, of the Caribbean: none of those distinctive West Indian facets that the Jamaican W. A. Domingo, without a Ph.D. in anthropology but with better eyes and ears, was able to analyse so acutely in the same issue.¹⁷ Acculturation was apparently, according to Herskovits, complete, Harlem offering a prime example of “a body of people accepting *in toto* the culture of an alien group.”¹⁸

It’s sometimes suggested that Herskovits reversed his views about African retentions among African Americans in the New World, but that is an oversimplification, perpetrated by, for example, Walter Jackson:

Herskovits is best known to students of Afro-American culture for his book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), in which he argued that blacks in the United States had retained African cultural elements in their music and art, social structure and family life, religion and speech patterns... Ironically, Herskovits, too, had begun his study of Afro-American culture with the view that black culture was much like white culture.¹⁹

In fact, *The Myth of the Negro Past* is more concerned with demolishing the myth that the Negro has no past than with constructing a body of African retentions. And the early study to which Jackson refers was only of Harlem – which was all Herskovits knew of African American culture at the time. His view of Harlem never changed significantly. He certainly became open to the idea of African retentions in black American cultures, but found the most compelling evidence in Brazil and Suriname.

¹⁷ W. A. Domingo, “The Tropics in New York”, *Survey Graphic: “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro”*, 53, no. 11 (March 1925), pp. 648-650.

¹⁸ Melville J. Herskovits, “Acculturation and the American Negro”, *Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly*, 8 (1927), pp. 211-24, at 215. Similar views were expressed by Herskovits’ teacher at the New School, Alexander A. Goldenweiser: “Racial Theory and the Negro”, *Opportunity*, 1 (August 1923), pp. 229-231.

¹⁹ Jackson, “Melville Herskovits”, p. 97.

Jackson also misrepresents Herskovits's views by suggesting that he was publicly maintaining that African Americans had been fully assimilated while privately expressing doubts about his own published views. But the public view – as in the chapter “White Values for Colored Americans” – referred specifically to Harlem, while his private willingness to entertain the possibility of African retentions referred to areas of the US South, the West Indies, and northern South America.²⁰ With respect to Harlem the furthest Herskovits ever went was to ask the question: “What do the Africans do that the inhabitants of the Negro quarter of New York City also do? May we find perhaps, on close examination that there are some subtle elements left of what was ancestrally possessed? May not the remnant, if present, consist of some slight intonation, some quirk of pronunciation, some temperamental predisposition?” But these open questions – never actually answered – followed the statement: “Finally, we should come to a group where, for all intents and purposes, there is nothing of the African tradition left, and which consists of people of varying degrees of Negroid physical type, who only differ from their white neighbors in the fact that they have more pigmentation in their skins.”²¹ The private views come in a much-quoted remark about how Zora Neale Hurston's way of moving perhaps indicated learned behaviour of African origin, and in a 1926 grant application where he wrote: “Although I have felt that the behavior of the American Negro is, in the main, quite like that of the Whites in this country, I must confess that there is a possibility of there being something of a different temperamental base which has not been studied”.²² Artistic products may carry African “vestiges”, he suggested, noting the significance of wood-carving and the possible importance of Negro spirituals as a site of “innate connection with the African temperament”.²³ But neither wood-carving nor Negro spirituals flourished in Harlem and, even if the comment is taken seriously, Hurston's way of moving would have been learned in Florida.²⁴ With respect to Harlem, there was no reversal of views.

<>

Just why Herskovits then chose Suriname as a destination for his first overseas fieldwork has never been satisfactorily explained. Walter Jackson only states that

²⁰ Melville J. Herskovits, “White Values for Colored Americans”, in his *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1928, pp. 51-66.

²¹ Melville J. Herskovits, “The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem”, *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 32, no. 1 (January-March 1930), pp. 145-155, at 150.

²² Melville J. Herskovits, Letter to Edith Elliott, Board of Fellowships in the Biological Sciences, National Research Council, 27 January 1926, MJHP, 14/12, p. 2. [MJHP = Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University, box/folder].

²³ Herskovits, Letter to Board of Fellowships in the Biological Sciences, in Letter to Edith Elliott, p. 2. Reviewing James Weldon Johnson's work on Negro spirituals, Herskovits didn't reject his claim about the presence of African remnants in the music out of hand, merely saying that “pioneer labor” was needed (Herskovits, “Negro Art”, 297).

²⁴ Jackson, “Melville Herskovits”, p. 107; Richard Price and Sally Price, *The Root of Roots, or, How Afro-American Anthropology Got its Start*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003, p. 16. Herskovits's references to Hurston come in a letter to Erich von Hornbostel (10 June 1927), MJHP, 9/28.

Herskovits “was offered an opportunity” to travel to Suriname.²⁵ Herskovits himself said that the “initial indication of Suriname as a fruitful area for research into African survivals in the New World” came from Elsie Clews Parsons, who financed his two trips to the country.²⁶ This is possible but unlikely: the first extant correspondence between them dates from 1927, by which time Herskovits had done plenty of reading about the Suriname Bush Negroes.²⁷ In fact it seems likely that the Suriname idea was first suggested to Herskovits by the Swedish ethnographer Gerhard Lindblom, curator and acting director of the Statens Etnografiska Museum in Stockholm. Based on 14 months of fieldwork in what is now Kenya during 1911 and 1912, *The Akamba in British East Africa* had placed Lindblom among the leading Africanist scholars of the day: he must have seemed an impressive figure to Herskovits when he visited Stockholm in the autumn of 1924 as part of an extensive tour of European museums.²⁸ Lindblom’s second major book, *Afrikanische Relikte und indianische entlehnungen in der Kultur der Buschneger Surinams*, had been published earlier that year: Herskovits may have been given a copy during his visit or have been sent it by Lindblom.²⁹ However, despite its subtitle containing the word “ethnographische”, Lindblom’s work was based on his study of the artefacts in his museum collected in the late nineteenth century by Axel Klinckowström. In fact, Lindblom ends his book by noting the desirability of first-hand fieldwork, had one the resources to undertake the journey to Suriname: “Es dürfte eine lockende Aufgabe für den sein, der Zeit und Mittel dazu hat, die Buschneger Guayanas in ihrer Heimat selbst zum Gegenstand einer systematischen Untersuchung zu machen”.³⁰ One might speculate that this sentence planted the first seed in Herskovits’ mind.

Other influences were probably also important in turning his interest southwards. Although impossible to quantify, Herskovits’s contact with a string of leading African American intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and A. A. Schomburg must at least have impressed upon him the significance of Africa to contemporary black

²⁵ Walter Jackson, “Melville Herskovits and the Search for Afro-American Culture”, in George W. Stocking, ed., *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essay on Culture and Personality*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988, pp. 95-126, at 107.

²⁶ Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Suriname Folk-lore*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1936, p. vii.

²⁷ MJHP 18/3.

²⁸ Gerhard Lindblom, *The Akamba in British East Africa: An Ethnological Monograph*, Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1920.

²⁹ Gerhard Lindblom, *Afrikanische Relikte und indianische entlehnungen in der Kultur der Buschneger Surinams: eine vergleichende ethnographische Studie*, Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1924. A letter from Herskovits thanks Lindblom for a parcel of books he had sent to him in New York: Melville J. Herskovits, Letter to Gerhard Lindblom, 8 January 1925, MJHP 12/9. On Lindblom, see the obituary essays in “In Memory of Gerhard Lindblom”, *Ethnos*, 34 (1969), supplement.

³⁰ Lindblom, *Afrikanische Relikte*, p. 105.

culture in the USA.³¹ Without necessitating a change in his views about the absence of African traits in his nearest black neighbourhood, a tide of new journalistic and fictional work on 'Africanisms' in less sophisticated American places (some even within the USA) must have alerted him to a growing body of evidence in need of proper investigation.³² This tide included the work of Martha Beckwith (another Boas student) on Jamaica; of Elsie Clews Parsons on other Caribbean islands; of Ambrose Gonzales, Julia Peterkin, Marcellus Whalley, and DuBose Heyward on the Gullah of South Carolina; of Dorothy Scarborough, Guy Johnson and Howard Odum on the US South; and of James Weldon Johnson on Negro spirituals.³³

Of their US predecessors in the Surinamese field, Morton Kahn is most frequently mentioned in discussions of the Herskovitses' travels, unsurprisingly since he accompanied them on their 1928 trip and made some of the initial introductions. However, Kahn's own visit to the country in July and August 1927 had come after the Vandercooks', indeed after the publication of *"Tom-Tom"*, a book Herskovits reviewed on its appearance and took with him on that first trip to Suriname, and which must therefore have a claim to be the most significant of the influences on Herskovits' turn to the Saamaka.³⁴ In the review Herskovits identified the group 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". His one significant criticism of *"Tom-Tom"* concerned its mystical

³¹ David Scott has Herskovits "deeply influenced by the vocal and assertive wave of black consciousness" ("That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1, no. 3 [Winter 1991], pp. 261-284, at 275).

³² On the notion of 'Africanism', see Stephan Palmié's two essays, "Keywords in African Diaspora: Africanisms", *African Diaspora*, 11 (2018), pp. 17-34, and "Introduction: On Predications of Africanity", in *Africas of the Americas: Beyond the Search for Origins in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religions*, ed. Stephan Palmié, Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 1-37.

³³ Martha Warren Beckwith and Helen H. Roberts, *Jamaica Folk-lore*, New York: The American Folk-lore Society, 1928; Elsie Clews Parsons, *Folk-tales of Andros Island, Bahamas*, New York: G.E. Stechert, 1918; "Bermuda Folklore", *The Journal of American Folklore*, 38 (1925), pp. 239-66; "Barbados Folklore", *The Journal of American Folklore*, 38 (1925), pp. 267-292; Ambrose Elliott Gonzales, *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast*, Columbia: The State Company, 1922, and *With Aesop Along the Black Border*, Columbia: The State Company, 1924; Julia Peterkin, *Green Thursday*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1924; Marcellus Seabrook Whalley, *The Old Types Pass; Gullah Sketches of the Carolina Sea Islands*, Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1925; DuBose Heyward, *Porgy*, New York: G. H. Doran, 1925; Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926; Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs: A Study of Typical Negro Songs in the South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1925; and James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, New York: Viking Press, 1925. The last four were reviewed by Herskovits in "Negro Art: African and American", *Social Forces*, 5 (December 1926), 291-98.

³⁴ Melville Herskovits, "Negroes of the South American Jungles" [review of *"Tom-Tom"* by J. W. Vandercook], *New York Herald-Tribune*, 28 November 1926, VII, p. 10. For whatever reason, the review is missing from the seemingly comprehensive collection of Herskovits's writings at Northwestern University, and is not mentioned in Gershenhorn's extensive bibliography. For him taking the book with him to Suriname, see the Herskovitses' diaries: "Surinam Field Trips", MJFHP, 6/16-18, entry for Sunday June 24 1928. MJFHP = Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits Papers, MssCol 21226, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

attitude towards 'the jungle', a determinism partly geographical, partly racial, that saw black Africans as uniquely capable of adaptation to jungle life in the tropics. However, the way he 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 suggests his identification of the person with ethnological training who *should* undertake such a study because the Bush Negroes "need studying badly", as Lindblom had already suggested.³⁵ That person was, of course, the reviewer himself.

Despite the warmth of his review, Herskovits appears ultimately to have been keen to take his distance from a mere travel writer such as Vandercook. He never refers to his predecessor in his writings after that review and, indeed, when he wrote on his return to 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 dedicated to that proposition.³⁶ Kevin Yelvington is properly sceptical of Herskovits's retrospective representation, noting how his experience was in fact framed "by Parsons and her influences, by the work of the Latin American and Caribbean ethnologists he was starting to read, and even by Vandercook", that "even" suggesting the kind of deprecation now usually afforded "*Tom-Tom*" on the rare occasions on which it is afforded any attention at all. But Yelvington is the one critic who recognises the importance of "*Tom-Tom*" for Herskovits, who was "obviously taken by the book".³⁷

<>

In January 1926, his Harlem project almost complete, Herskovits wrote a five-year grant application for research on the physical make-up and culture of Negroes in Africa and the Southern USA. Never lacking in self-confidence, he defined his topic as "the fundamental problem of the American Negro".³⁸ According to Herskovits's plan, eighteen months' fieldwork in Liberia would be followed by the Carolina Sea Islands (the only US site involved), the West Indies, Brazil, and Suriname. It was an immensely ambitious plan and in the end it failed to win funding, although the project as outlined would basically occupy him for the rest of his career, which finally took a settled character with his 1927 appointment as an anthropologist at Northwestern University. But even that early mention of Suriname in the plan may have owed something to Vandercook since in October 1925, shortly before Herskovits put together his research proposal, the first of Vandercook's accounts of his travels appeared in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* as "White Magic and Black: The

³⁵ Herskovits offered a review of anthropological writing during the year in which he repeated his assessment of Vandercook's *Tom-Tom* as "well worth reading" on account of his being an "excellent observer" ("*Anthropology and Ethnology During 1926*", *Opportunity*, 5 [January 1927], pp. 12-13, at 12).

³⁶ Melville J. Herskovits, Letter to Ralph Linton, 1 October 1928, MJHP, 12/31.

³⁷ Kevin A. Yelvington, "The Invention of Africa in Latin America and the Caribbean: Political Discourse and Anthropological Praxis, 1920-1940", in *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora*, ed. Kevin A. Yelvington, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006, pp. 35-82, at 55 and 50. Gershenhorn, Jackson, and Scott don't even mention Vandercook.

³⁸ Herskovits, Letter to Edith Elliott.

Jungle Science of Dutch Guiana".³⁹ This may well have been the first first-hand account of the Saamaka that Herskovits had encountered.

<>

With Lindblom read and digested, Vandercook read and in his backpack, and Kahn in his ear, Herskovits was, on arrival in the Suriname jungle, well primed to recognise 'Africa', a continent he had never visited. Herskovits's academic status, modest as it yet was, meant that his trip to Suriname was initially given more publicity than Vandercook's had been. An Associated Press release in the early summer of 1928 with the headline "Scientists to Study Old African Culture in South America" was picked up by many local newspapers. The release called the Bush Negroes "an interesting people whose descent from virtually pure African stock has implanted in the South American jungles a culture strikingly similar to that of the primitive tribes of the Dark Continent".⁴⁰ The Herskovitses weren't going to study Bush Negro culture or to search for mere remnants of African culture, they were going to study *the African culture* they just knew was there in the Suriname jungle. As a result Herskovits was from the start constantly "seeing Africa": many things 'look African'.⁴¹ "The village as a whole certainly looks like pictures from Africa – Congo and West", he wrote.⁴² There was, say Price and Price, a good deal of "wishful thinking" on Herskovits's part about Africanisms and therefore an "excessive zeal in seeking African connections".⁴³ But Herskovits was also "inducing Africa" by showing the Saamaka images of Africa so that they might 'recognise' the origins of their own lifeways and cultural practices.⁴⁴

When the Herskovitses and Kahn returned from Suriname in September 1928, the *New York Times* interviewed them (or at least two of them: Frances gets no mention) and quoted them at length as they revelled in the pose of intrepid adventurers witnessing what white men had never before witnessed, tom-toms and all:

An experience which we will never forget was the witnessing of an Obeah dance which was accompanied by chanting, beating of tom-toms and frenzied excitement... The scantily clad natives, seized by the spirit of the drums and the god of the place, with their faces painted with the sacred red and white clay, dashed about in the frenzy of their religious fervor. With razor-edged cutlasses they slashed out at random, foaming at the mouth, and destroying what came to hand, while others swam the dangerous rapids upstream, aided by their unnatural strength.

³⁹ John W. Vandercook, "White Magic and Black: The Jungle Science of Dutch Guiana", *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 151 (October 1925), pp. 548-54. This was followed by "Eternal Life in the Jungle", *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 152 (January 1926), pp. 510-16; "We Find an African Tribe in the South American Jungle", *The Mentor*, 14 no. 3 (April 1926), pp. 9-22; "Jungle Commonwealth and Jungle Marriage", *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (May 1926), pp. 771-79; and "Surinam: South America's Melting Pot", *World Traveler* (February 1927), pp. 44-45.

⁴⁰ "Scientists to Study Old African Culture in South America", *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 5 June 1928, p. 8.

⁴¹ Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, pp. 8-10.

⁴² Herskovits, "Surinam Field Trips" (1928).

⁴³ Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, pp. 20-22. This observation relates to their second trip, in 1929.

This particular manifestation of religious ecstasy of the Bush negroes has never before been recorded as having been witnessed by white men.⁴⁵

One of the article's sub-heads was "Think Tribes Were African". The science writer H. Gordon Garbedian then wrote a long piece about them for the same newspaper under the headline "Dutch Guiana Negroes Keep African Culture", with that implicit contrast with the New York Negroes who had carelessly misplaced theirs.⁴⁶ At the same time Herskovits wrote to Du Bois that the Bush Negro culture is "almost completely African".⁴⁷ The same note was struck in the title of Herskovits' report on this first trip: "A Trip to 'Africa' in the New World", although the text of the piece was more cautious: "a civilization essentially African – a curiously twisted African one, to be sure, compounded as it is, of African, European and Indian elements".⁴⁸ This mixture was the theme of the talk that Herskovits gave very soon after his return at the Twenty-third International Congress of Americanists in New York. "Their civilization", he stated, "is a fascinating combination of the aboriginal West African cultures, aspects of European civilization which they assumed during the period of their contact with the whites, and portions of the civilization of the Carib and Arawak Indians of the Guianas whom they drove out of the region they settled".⁴⁹ Boas's account of Herskovits' paper also spoke of "the culture of the modern Bush Negroes in Surinam, who present a peculiar, well-integrated mixture of African, European and Indian elements".⁵⁰ All of this is quite a distance from "essentially African", let alone "almost completely African".

⁴⁵ "Explorers Return from Dutch Guiana", *New York Times*, 6 September 1928, p. 52. For his university newspaper Herskovits wrote a more detailed account of the dance (though he calls it obia). The possession and the cutlass and the ecstasy all feature. "Yet," for Herskovits, "the point that is to be emphasized is not the abandon of these dancers, an obvious element in the dance that is stressed by romantic travellers. The remarkable aspect is the discipline of these men." Nobody gets hurt, and when the head man sings about the dawn coming, everyone recognises that it's time to go home. Discipline, and its recognition, is the mark of the professional anthropologist as opposed to the romantic traveller" (Melville J. Herskovits, "A Trip to 'Africa' in the New World," *Northwestern University Alumni News*, 8 [April 1929], pp. 10–12, at 12). The longest account of the dance comes in the final chapter of *Rebel Destiny* (see n. 52 below) Newspaper reports showed great interest in drum telegraphy (the "tom-tom code") (H. Gordon Garbedian, "Dutch Guiana Negroes Keep African Culture", *New York Times*, 23 September, 1928, p. XX9).

⁴⁶ Garbedian, "Dutch Guiana Negroes", p. XX9).

⁴⁷ Letter from Melville J. Herskovits to W. E. B. Du Bois, 29 October 1928, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Series 1A. General Correspondence.

⁴⁸ Melville J. Herskovits: "'A Trip to 'Africa' in the New World", *Northwestern University Alumni News*, 8 (April 1929), pp. 10–12, at 11.

⁴⁹ Melville J. Herskovits, "The Social Organization of the Bush-Negroes of Suriname", *Proceedings of the Twenty-Third International Congress of Americanists*, New York, 1930, pp. 713-727, at 713.. His other early reports were similarly cautious: Melville J. Herskovits, "Preliminary Report on an Ethnological Expedition to Suriname, 1928", *New West Indian Guide*, 10, no. 1 (January 1929), pp. 385-90; and "The Second Northwestern University Expedition for the Study of the Suriname Bush-Negroes, 1929", *New West Indian Guide*, XI, no. 9 (January 1930), pp. 393-402.

⁵⁰ Franz Boas, "The Twenty-Third International Congress of Americanists", *Science*, n.s. 68, no. 1764 (10 October, 1928), pp. 361-364, at 363;

In the grand Herskovitian scheme of things slowly being pieced together, there was no place for the complexity of mixed elements, well-integrated or not. The farther removed the Herskovitses became from their fieldwork experience, the more clearly the Saamaka assumed the crucial part they were being assigned to play, not as themselves but rather as historic 'Africa': "The bush is Africa of the seventeenth century", as the couple unequivocally put it in the opening pages of *Rebel Destiny*.⁵¹ Now, in the definitive book account of their trips, the Saamaka became, for the Herskovitses, the "spatial and temporal substitutes for Africans of the past".⁵²

The importance of the Bush Negroes for the student of Negro cultures, then, is that they live and think today as did their ancestors who established themselves in this bush, which is to say that they live and think much as did the Negroes who were brought to other parts of the New World, and who became the ancestors of the New World Negroes of the present day.⁵³

The deep interior of Suriname always retained that pre-eminence as the 'African' end of a continuum whose other pole lay where Herskovits, like Vandercook, had started: in Harlem.⁵⁴ In 1945, in the first issue of the short-lived Mexican journal, *Afroamérica*, Herskovits provided a table for the "intensity of New World Africanisms". Seventeen locations were listed, marked from (a) "very African", through "quite African", "somewhat African", and "a little African", to (e) "trace of African custom, or absent" in ten categories: technology, economic life, social organisation, non-kinship institutions, religion, magic, art, folklore, music, language.⁵⁵ Absent Cuba and the Virgin Islands, where there were several "no report"s, Guiana (bush) comes out well ahead, with Bahia in second place and Haiti (peasant) just pipping Jamaica (maroons) for third. United States (north) trails in last, just behind United States (rural). The only other US location, Gulla, comes in eighth, just behind Haiti (urban).⁵⁶ Leaving aside the ludicrousness of the whole enterprise, its interest lies in the determination to quantify the finding of Africa in America, with the value of authenticity attached to the highest scorer. This chart does not differ in its essentials from the prose version that Herskovits offered in his 1930 essay, "The Negro in the New World: A Statement of the Problem", except that by 1945, there is one sign of an African retention among urban US Negroes: they are allowed to score a (b) in music - "quite African".⁵⁷

⁵¹ Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana*, New York: Whittlesey House, 1934, p. x; thereby advancing by a century Vandercook's estimate that it was the world of the African forest "two hundred years away" (TT 1), that is, 1725.

⁵² David F. García, *Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 24.

⁵³ Herskovits and Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny*, p. xii.

⁵⁴ Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, p. 15.

⁵⁵ That this system is identical to the letter grading used in US academia is in no way accidental.

⁵⁶ Melville J. Herskovits, "Scale of Intensity of New World Africanisms", in his "Problem, Method and Theory in Afroamerican Studies", *Afroamérica*, 1, no. 1 (1945), pp. 5-24, at 14.

⁵⁷ Melville J. Herskovits, "The Negro in the New World: A Statement of the Problem", *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 32, no. 1 (1930), pp. 145-155, at 149-50.

<>

There were clearly differences in practice between Vandercook and Herskovits. One was the latter's emphasis (shared with Kahn, who was working for the American Museum of Natural History) on collecting objects, many seemingly acquired by an unthinking and even brutal assertion of financial superiority.⁵⁸ Another was Herskovits's insistence on 'professional' interrogation, often undertaken with what Gershenhorn describes as cultural insensitivity and arrogance, attributes that even led to the couple fearing for their lives.⁵⁹ By contrast, Vandercook, the amateur, with no professional credentials to protect and no academic career to develop, was often happy – naively so, undoubtedly – to accept what he was told, usually by third-party interpreters such as Louis Junker, the government official from Paramaribo, "from whose tremendous knowledge of the ways of the forest men I borrowed most of the information set down here" (*TT* vii).⁶⁰ That might make the Herskovitses' accounts more reliably ethnographic, offering an ultimately more accurate – or at least convincing – picture than either Vandercook or Kahn could offer.⁶¹ Even here, though, the differences can be misleading since the Herskovitses' encounters were, as Price and Price, note, "heavily mediated by outsiders". The difference was that Vandercook acknowledged his intermediaries, the Herskovitses occluded theirs in their publications.⁶² And whereas, in line with developing ethnographic protocols, the Herskovitses artificially isolated the Saamaka from the world outside their jungle, stressing the self-sufficiency of the culture, Vandercook had no such investment and has more to say about the ways in which the Saamaka did on occasion interact with the Dutch colonial world in Paramaribo.⁶³

It was certainly not long before the trajectories of the two couples began to diverge, and the first signs are Surinamese ones in that whereas Vandercook quickly wrote "*Tom-Tom*" and was then onto his next project, the Herskovitses returned to Suriname the following year (1929) for a lengthier visit of six weeks and then spent several years completing *Rebel Destiny* and *Suriname Folk-lore*. A decade later, Professor Herskovits was attending international conferences and publishing *The Myth of the Negro Past* while J. W. Vandercook was writing detective novels and

⁵⁸ The Herskovitses collected 134 objects on their first visit, Kahn 900 objects for the American Museum of Natural History, many of them obtained "only by offering special inducements" (Jerry Gershenhorn, "Transforming Debate on Black Culture", in his *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 59-92, at 74; Garbedian, "Dutch Guiana Negroes", XX9).

⁵⁹ Gershenhorn, "The Attack", p. 74; Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, pp. 60-70.

⁶⁰ Louis Junker "whose authoritarian and paternalistic attitude toward the Saramakas caused serious confrontations with them on numerous occasions" (Price, *The Guiana Maroons*, p. 55).

⁶¹ "Though their field work was brief and by modern standards superficial, and was informed both by some romanticism and by what appears to be a sturdy (if not always conscious) desire to uncover African retentions among the Saamaka, their book succeeds where Kahn's fails in conveying a convincing portrait of village life, insofar as a traveler could observe it" (Price, *The Guiana Maroons*, pp. 56-57).

⁶² Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, pp. 26, 42.

⁶³ "Like much anthropological writing of the day, the Herskovitses' published depictions artificially isolate their people's territory from the outside world" (Price and Price, *The Root of Roots*, 46).

anchoring NBC's evening news round-up. However, the very different career trajectories that Vandercook and Herskovits followed should not obscure their early similarities. In 1924 both were recently married, writing journalism, and part of the young, left-liberal set in lower Manhattan – the Vandercooks in Gramercy Square, the Herskovitses in Chelsea.⁶⁴ Frances had literary aspirations; Margaret was an accomplished sculptor. Both men were attracted – if for different reasons – to life in Harlem to which they had made expeditions prior to any foreign travel. They seem, however, not to have known each other. 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. Their paths came closest to crossing at the Fourth Pan-African Congress in New York in August 1927. Vandercook and Herskovits were two of only a handful of white speakers: on the afternoon of Monday 22 August, Herskovits spoke on the history of Africa alongside Charles H. Wesley of Howard University; on the afternoon of Wednesday 24 August Vandercook gave an address on Art and Literature, alongside A. A. Schomburg, followed by W. E. B. Du Bois's closing remarks.⁶⁵ At this point, in terms of personal experience, Vandercook – having spent time in Suriname, West Africa, and Haiti, and with “*Tom-Tom*” so positively reviewed in the black press – was probably held in higher regard by the black community than Herskovits with his text-based Ph.D. and his fieldwork restricted to the streets of Harlem.

The similarity of interests can be seen in the research trips the two couples made. The Vandercooks went to Suriname in early 1925, the Herskovitses in the summers of 1928 and 1929; 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 1934.⁶⁶ The Herskovitses went twice to Suriname and stayed much longer than the Vandercooks in Africa and in Haiti – as one would expect from a career anthropologist; but their visits to the Saamaka were still brief.⁶⁷ Richard and Sally Price make a distinction, against the general background of a “1920s' sensibility”, between “*Tom-Tom*” and “[t]he more ethnographic accounts of the Herskovitses... and their friend the physician Morton Kahn” but, as they note, these latter tend to veer between “science, romance, and

⁶⁴ They lived a mile apart: the Vandercooks at 13 Gramercy Park, the Herskovitses at 465 West 23rd Street. In the 1920s Herskovits published articles in newspapers and magazines such as *The Nation*, *American Mercury*, *The Freeman*, *New York Evening Post*, and the *New York Call*.

⁶⁵ *Official Program of the Fourth Pan-African Congress, New York City, August 1927*, in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Series 1A. General Correspondence.

⁶⁶ On the Herskovitses in West Africa, see Suzanne Preston Blier's two essays, “Field Days: Melville J. Herskovits in Dahomey”, *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), pp. 1-22 and “Melville J. Herskovits and the Arts of Ancient Dahomey”, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 16 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 125-142.

⁶⁷ “[R]ushed and shoddy” is Price and Price's assessment (*The Root of Roots*, p. 81).

sensationalism”, therefore belonging, one might argue, to the same broad travel writing genre as “Tom-Tom”.⁶⁸

<>

Ultimately both writers were in thrall to raciological ways of thinking, although their thralldoms took slightly different forms. Vandercook adhered to the blood fantasy of an inherited memory of the African past that can be awakened by the rhythm of a drum – even in those Harlem blacks so evidently distant from the African jungles. But Herskovits was as guilty as Vandercook of magical thinking in his proposition that the Saamaka of the 1920s are, in effect, a seventeenth-century African tribe who can act as the baseline for his American league table of African retentions.⁶⁹ The contention that the Saamaka live and think like seventeenth-century Africans is no more susceptible of proof than Vandercook’s wildest assertions. Herskovits may have been (properly) demolishing various myths about the “negro past”, but he was just as rapidly constructing new ones.

As residents of New York, both men were intrigued by the relationship between the Saamaka and the blacks of Harlem. For Herskovits there was a framework in which both could be placed, although, seen as a league table, the Saamaka occupied top spot for their wealth of African retentions while Harlemites were stuck at the bottom with no points to their name, all traces of their African origins obliterated except for that one small recognition in 1945 of music, presumably jazz, which is allowed to be “quite African”. Vandercook’s view of Harlem was very similar, his tone even more damning; and his recognition equally limited to music – though much more dramatically expressed via his story of the comedian and the chair leg, an essential Africanity welling to the surface, embodied in the rhythm of the tom-tom, that pre-eminent symbol of Africa for Harlem in these years.

⁶⁸ Richard Price and Sally Price, “Suriname Literary Geography”, in *Surveying the American Tropics: A Literary Geography from New York to Rio*, ed. Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Peter Hulme, Owen Robinson, and Lesley Wylie, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2103, pp. 285-312, at 290. Herskovits himself described *Rebel Destiny* as “literary rather than... scientific” (Letter from Melville J. Herskovits to L. C. van Panhuys, 5 January 1934, MJHP 17/21). The book’s opening paragraph reads like the beginning of a detective story.

⁶⁹ “The ethnohistorical baseline remains a myth of African origins, not a documented or even documentable point of empirical departure. This myth is significant not only as a foundational fiction, but because it was elaborated by Herskovits in substantive claims that have continued to misguide much New World research” (Andrew Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora”, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1, no. 3 (Winter 1991), pp. 235-260, at 245.