

# Smith: herskovits at the heart of blackness

[History](#)



Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness is a 2009 documentary film about the Jewish-American anthropologist Melville Jean Herskovits and his work on defining cultural relativism and the African American. An important part of Herskovits' work, and thus the film, covers how groundbreaking the anthropological, sociological and political aspects of this theory were in helping to define African Americans as cultural beings rather than pathologically inferior humans. The film also covers important aspects of allowing someone else (a white Jewish man, in this case) to define our identity, even if we fundamentally agree with their description.

1. Herskovits can be said to be a social and academic paradox because his interests conflicted with his own identity and the interests of the academic community at the time. Many other scholars of anthropology felt that there was nothing to be learnt from the African community, whereas Herskovits recognized it to be a unique and interesting set of cultural rules.
  2. Herskovits can be said to be a gatekeeper for African studies for several reasons. Firstly, he was one of the only white American scholars at the time to have any interest in the subject, and therefore maintained a crucial role of establishing and protecting the discipline. He also protected his Africanist position by refusing publication and research funding to those who did not share his views of anthropology and Africa.
  3. The social context of the Fraizer-Herskovits debate is complex. At a time when African Americans were integrating more into society and beginning to embrace their own cultural norms, Herskovits took the opinion that these Africanisms were present in the modern Americas and were evidence that African culture was complex. Fraizer, an African American himself, believed that American culture was so damaging that there was no African culture left
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in the African American. These ideas conflicted at a time when identity was key and the definition of the self was perhaps the most important newly afforded right to the African American, something which pollutes Herskovits' validity within that community.