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The Trees of Knowledge: Anthropology, Art, and Politics

Melville J. Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston – Harlem ca. 1930

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Definitive changes in the history of the arts, sciences, and political relations can never be attributed to individual protagonists alone. This has seemed obvious ever since we began to treat the narratives of history's great characters, which many of us grew up with in our school and university studies, with the well-deserved dose of skepticism suggested to us by critical theories of the subject, discourse, and power and also by our own experiences with recent political and economic transformations. Nonetheless, for quite some time, I have again become increasingly interested in people as actors in history. In asking why this is, I arrive at two preliminary answers. The more precisely one looks from a postcolonial perspective at certain phases of radical upheaval in the history of art (the main discipline that I am involved in), the more often protagonists embodying such phases of upheaval step to the forefront; not alone, but in conjunction with others, in what are

often conflict-laden encounters. Pursuing these interest-based artistic and political encounters, involving two or more actors in the charged field of cooperation and confrontation at colonial borders, seems to harbor potential for overcoming the dichotomy of Western and non-European (art) histories. The other reason for my interest in looking more intensely at individuals has to do with the observation that often, alongside or behind figures initially accepted as historical actors, are others who despite their significance remain suppressed in the relevant history, which often must first be reconstructed. In my opinion, when the aim is a less schematic view of history that is currently frequently stretched between concepts of universal history and alternative histories of modernity, the two perspectives must be viewed together.

For this essay, I originally had planned to tell a dual narrative of art and science production from the historical context of the New Negro Movement, that is, the Harlem Renaissance, which would serve as an example of the thoughts introduced above.[1] For lack of space, I ultimately had to deal with the German painter Winold Reiss and his role in the formative phase of African American modernity in the interwar period elsewhere.[2] The main character of the present contemplation was active in the same regional, historical, and political space; American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, son of Jewish immigrants from what is now Slovakia. My interest in Herskovits, who is considered a pioneer of African American Studies, resulted from a question that I am pursuing in the context of a research project on transcultural modernity:[3] When does the idea of the transcultural surface? When do theories of transculturality emerge? Under which political conditions, and with what motives do they arise? Melville Herskovits is considered an early representative of such thinking and he plays a crucial role

in research on cultures in the transcontinental space that would later be called the "Black Atlantic."[4]

It may seem strange to take Herskovits and Reiss, two white protagonists, as the starting point for an examination situated in a space of black emancipation politics. There are two reasons for this. Art and science critiques devoted to the colonial past of their disciplines often tend toward a false alternative fixed between apologetic explanations of historical scientific and artistic transgressions, through reference to an overpowering Zeitgeist and condemnation of historical descriptions and representations. Such condemnations are offered with the wisdom of the later born and are greatly influenced by postcolonial and representation critique. [5] Bourdieu speaks of "what is unthinkable at a given time." However, this is never entirely clearly outlined. We can and must instead turn to the premises and motives that have allowed specific actors to think something quite specific at a specific point in time, and thereby transgress the space of thought and action assigned to their subject position. Reiss and Herskovits, who come from disciplines and areas of practice in anthropology and primitivist-exotist painting that were highly problematic in their day, present themselves for such a line of questioning.

I begin from an assumption of theoretical impossibility and ultimate political undesirability of a world cultural history. This is driven by a skepticism of great concepts, such as Global Art History or World Art Studies, which fail to counter the suspicion that they simultaneously promote a neo-imperialistic scientific project in their expansion of the discipline's subject area and claim to scientifically survey all cultures and epochs in reaction to a deeper insight into provincialism, as represented by ethnocentrism elevated to universalism.[6] On the contrary, I follow the perspective of postcolonial challenges to art history (of modernity)

that begin from paradigmatic historical transcultural confrontations of actors in the field of art. Such an interest focuses on exchanges and mutual influences among modernities and modernisms in various regions of the world, taking into consideration colonial and postcolonial power relations, and the relevant actors' diverging standpoints and policies in conflict-laden confrontations within contact zones.[7] Rather than attempting to gain a more comprehensive picture of modernity, the main aim of this type of approach is a closer investigation of those artistic and intellectual constellations in which something takes shape that one can identify, with reference to Homi K. Bhabha (contra-modernity), and Paul Gilroy (counter-cultures of modernity), as counter-modernism –aesthetic forms of oppositional movements and empowering politics under the conditions of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial modernities.

One of the fundamental questions thus posed relates to the ways that such a counter-modernism can be described and conceptually grasped in its relation to white modernism. If one takes a critical view of the popular myth of globalization as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon and thereby refers to "intertwined" (Edward W. Said) or "entangled histories" (Shalini Randeria) of cultures and economies in diverse regions of the world since the era of colonialism, then also the currently prominent rhetoric of an epistemological "delinking," that is, of a de-colonial unlinking from those concepts, norms, and values shaped by Western capitalism that exert global control, sometimes seems like a voluntaristic invocation of a re-creation of thinking and acting.[8] Western art of the modern era constantly refers to its (apparent) Other, while non-European avant-gardes formulate themselves in critical and also alliance-forming contacts with white Western actors and their artistic ambitions and political interests. Examining specific

examples more closely, it becomes apparent that alliances and collaborations are often formed across colonial borders, between black and white and north and south, while the ideological, strategic, and aesthetic lines of rupture frequently run within the apparently cohesive blocks.

Anthropological research between a claim of objectivity and political engagement

The formation of African American modernism in the interwar period is, in many ways, exemplary of the complex fusion of alliances and collaborations for overcoming a society divided by the concept of "race" and the borders within the affected groups that move to the foreground or are newly grounded in the course of these policies. While political empowerment strategies of Blacks in the U.S. have been shaped by opposition between integrationists (W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP), accommodationists (Booker T. Washington), and separatists (Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, UNIA) since the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries, the diverging political positions, for example, on civil rights and educational issues, were supplemented by scientific differences on the "racial" and cultural identity of Afro-Americans, and opposing ideas of the role of art in the context of black self-presentation in U.S. society. Even among protagonists who are closely politically aligned, there are strong differences regarding methods, for example, with regard to the ideal of scientific objectivity as opposed to an engaged or partial research on "racial issues."

Melville J. Herskovits's historical significance can be attributed to his book *The Myth of the Negro Past* published in 1941. Highly

controversial at the time of its publication, both within anthropology as well as in a broader discourse on U.S. race relations, it is currently considered "the classic work on African heritage in the New World."[9] Based on several years of research in West Africa, Suriname, Brazil, and the Caribbean, Herskovits demonstrated the perpetuation of African elements in the linguistic, religious, social, and cultural practices of Blacks in the Americas. Herskovits's extensive data and examples thus refute the popular myth supported by racist sciences whereby African American population groups had lost their culture through uprooting and enslavement, or willingly given it up in the face of the "superiority" of their masters' white culture. The scientific mainstream around Herskovits's interpreted differences in black lifestyles and forms of expression as mere "degenerations" of white civilization resulting from African Americans' racially-based "inability." On the contrary, one of the central statements in Herskovits's book on the contemporary debate concerning race vs. culture, reads "[c]ulture is learned, not inborn ... the factor of race does not enter."[10]

Herskovits's empirical studies debunk distorted images presented by the myth of the "Negro past" as arguments for legitimizing racial suppression in the U.S. At the close of the first chapter, he defines the political meaning of a scientific examination of the history and presence of African cultural elements in the U.S.:

To give the Negro an appreciation of his past is to endow him with the confidence in his own position in this country and in the world which he must have, and which he can best attain when he has available a foundation of scientific fact concerning the ancestral cultures of Africa and the survivals of Africanisms in the New World.[11]

The spread of corresponding knowledge "over the population as a whole" would influence general opinion about African Americans and contribute to a lessening of "interracial tensions."[12]

Herskovits criticized ethnologic research's reigning approach of studying the most secluded and primitive societies and observing their systems and ways of working within a single time plane. It would not be possible to approach issues of cultural transformation in contact situations in this way. Cultural dynamics could be understood only with an ethno-historical approach, which examines various forms of cultural exchange and mutual influences across longer time periods. Herskovits, who among other things, based his work on the concept of syncretism, as used by Brazilian anthropologist Arthur Ramos in his study of the fusion of African deities and Catholic saints in Brazil's black culture,[13] developed a highly differentiated conceptual apparatus that enabled examination of the entire spectrum of the acculturation process. "Retention" and "reinterpretation" present the two processes whose respective relationships to one another allow for a description of the dynamics of transformation in cultural contact, whereby these relationships can take thoroughly different forms: from an insistence on old elements, to "borrowings" from new ones, as well as their reinterpretation in particular aspects (language, belief, art), depending on the conditions under which they occur.[14] Herskovits thereby also studied African American culture from the perspective of its origins and development as a "reaction to slave status."[15] Herskovits's studies were practically accepted euphorically by the majority of Black intellectuals at the time. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his review of the book: "Dr. Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past* is epoch-making in the sense that no one hereafter writing on the cultural accomplishments of the American

Negro can afford to be ignorant of its content and conclusions."[16]

In a recent documentary film about Herskovits,[17] African American historian Vincent Brown, one of the film's producers, speaks about the irony of history, that the modern understanding of the African diaspora in America owes its self-evidence to an outsider, that is, Herskovits, the son of Jewish immigrants, who thereby shaped the self-image of generations of African Americans. Even when one recalls that Herskovits's thinking arose from the political and cultural context of the New Negro Movement, Brown's statements may still seem surprising. Yet the emergence of African American cultural research would thus appear as a project that, while definitely controversial, was also collective, involving scientists, activists, and artists. In the following, I would like to express the assumption that Herskovits's achievements in terms of the recognition and exploration of African American culture would have hardly been imaginable without the influence of the new strength of African American high culture and popular culture in the context of a general Black Empowerment, and that his theory of transculturality was an outgrowth, to a certain extent, of the transdisciplinary milieu of the New Negro Movement.

When Alain Locke published his anthology, *The New Negro,* in 1925, a collection of poetic, narrative, scientific, and journalistic texts on the state of modern black culture in the U.S., which would later commonly be referred to as the "Bible of the Harlem Renaissance," he also included a contribution by the young Herskovits in the section on the theme of "The Negro and the American Tradition." The standpoint in this text entitled "The Negro's Americanism" practically opposes the position represented fifteen years later in *Myth of the Negro Past*. On the question of a distinct or simply American black culture, Herskovits inserted

several – quite impressionist –observations made in Harlem, of people's clothing, several social facilities, and political organizations, through to sexual relations; whereby he diagnoses "complete acculturation."[18] "What I was seeing was a community just like any other American community. The same pattern, only a different shade!"[19] In order to understand this extreme assimilationist answer, one must recall the questions as formulated by Herskovits himself at the beginning of his article: "Should I not find there [in Harlem, C.K.], if anywhere, the anomalous cultural position of the Negro, of which I had heard so much?"[20] When anomaly represented the (discriminative) alternative, then emphasizing the complete acculturation seems to be an act of defense. Every "racial" and social group, Herskovits cited the Jews as an example, which had lived in the country long enough, became acculturated and "Americanized" in the truest sense of the word. Herskovits does indeed mention the social discrimination that Blacks and Jews are subjected to, to different degrees, also "race pride" and "protest" as a reaction to that, however, he considered such oppositional articulations of identity as "obviously useless."[21]

In contrast to the clearly formulated division of "race" and culture in *Myth of the Negro Past*, in his contribution to *The New Negro*, Herskovits feared explaining any anomaly as genetic disposition. Although Franz Boas, founder of American cultural anthropology, had struggled for the scientific distinction of "race" and culture since the waning nineteenth century, scientific racism still maintained a strong presence. The only instance of difference Herskovits recognized, he endeavors to keep free of all ethnic elements. "What there is to-day in Harlem distinct from the white culture which surrounds it, is, as far as I am able to see, merely a remnant from the peasant days in the South. Of the African

culture, not a trace."[22] The reference to the "Great Migration" from the southern states to the center of the north during and after World War I, and the complete negation of African culture correspond with Herskovits's denial of Jewish culture in an era of significant American anti-Semitism. Herskovits, who as a child went to Jewish schools and synagogues and even began to study with a rabbi, writes in a text entitled "When Is a Jew a Jew?": "The Jew has ever taken on the color of the culture in which he lives, and far from identifying himself with his own typical culture (whatever there may be of it) he usually tries to become as completely acculturated as is possible to the culture in which he finds himself." [23] Two years after the contribution about Blacks ("complete acculturation") Herskovits offers exactly the same description of Jews ("completely acculturated").[24] Here, one senses the pressure under which also progressive scientists battled with the concept of "race" whose political consequences they criticized, in a thoroughly charged atmosphere (race relations, nationalism, restrictive immigration policies, world war).

Exactly what happened to cause Herskovits to change his standpoint so radically is not easy to determine, and there is certainly more than one reason for his doing so. Paradoxically, Herskovits first had to carry out a study operating with the methods of scientific racism to arrive, in its course, at new questions. Between 1924 and 1928, the same years in which the quoted assimilationist article appeared, he worked on an anthropometric study of the black population meant to scientifically undermine biological determinism in anthropology. The study was published in 1928 as *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing*. The data from anatomical measurements, which today seem absurd and were also criticized by several contemporaries,[25] which Herskovits combined with genealogical

surveys of the family history of the examined people, allowed for the conclusion that the majority of the American Blacks were of "mixed racial background," whereby as a total group nonetheless exhibit little variation of the physical characteristics. This resulted in a fundamental challenge to the concept of "race." "If race was defined as a group with similar physical traits and if a group that was proven to be of mixed racial origin demonstrated physical homogeneity, then racial categories (defined in biological terms) were rendered meaningless."[26]

In order to be able to carry out this study on a large number of Blacks, who for very good reason often rejected such methods, Herskovits had to rely on contact with influential personalities who could generate a sense of trust among the study participants (many of whom were students). Herskovits's teacher, Franz Boas, provided him with contact to important black newspapers, such as *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*, where he met important intellectuals, including W. E. B. Du Bois and the philosopher Alain Locke who continued to support his research as they generally welcomed the research results as scientific support of their emancipation politics. This continued the cooperation between anthropology and African American equal rights politics that had begun at the start of the century with Franz Boas's lecture to Du Bois's students in Atlanta. [27] Considering that scientific grounds for "racial" differences and hierarchies had immediate relevance in legal and judicial issues, the paradigm change in anthropology carried out by Boas and his students in rejecting Evolution Theory and explaining differences through social, historical, and political conditions was of great importance in the black rights struggle. On the other hand, Lee Baker pointed out that Boas's critique of social Darwinist thinking, which met with great opposition in the scientific establishment and general public for quite some time, was first able to fully

develop when it was taken up by activists involved in the struggle to overcome racism.[28]

Can the assistant speak?

From this productive alliance of mainly white (Jewish) scientists and black activism, let's return to a change in position with regard to the existence of an African American culture, for example, with Herskovits, and thereby to several complications in the interplay of diverse genres and their protagonists. I would like to begin from a point that offers a very graphic image and is often presented as an explanation of Herskovits's change in position. In 1927, Herskovits wrote to the Austrian-German music scholar, Erich von Hornbostel, with whom he had recently begun to correspond about their respective research, that he had noticed "typically Negro" peculiarities in movement, speech, and singing in one of his black assistants to the "American Negro" study, although the assistant was "more White than Negro" in terms of heritage. He thereby raised doubts about Hornbostel's conviction of an "inborn" and genetically inherited disposition with regard to music and certain "motor behavior[s]" and asked whether "could...it ... not be a cultural remnant brought to America by the African slaves, which their descendants retained even after the songs themselves were fundamentally changed according to the European pattern?"[29] From this, Herskovits developed a systematic research program to pursue the issue of black Americans' African cultural inheritance based on comparative studies in West Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. The results were ultimately summarized in *Myth of the Negro Past*.

However, there was more harbored in this image of the observations made by a white scientist of a black employee; an

image which furthered knowledge and was elevated to become the key scene in a paradigm change in African American Studies. The woman, who had been turned into an object of study, was Zora Neale Hurston: like Herskovits, she had studied anthropology with Boas, and at the time, was carrying out skull measurements on African Americans for her colleague. Hurston was not only one of the seminal writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and one of the most important researchers on African American culture, she was also one of the strongest advocates of cultural differences between black and white Americans in a phase in which many black intellectuals supported an adaptation standpoint.[30] Hurston did, after all, work for Herskovits for two summers. It is thus disturbing to see her influence on her colleague's scientific development reduced to "typical Black" characteristics of her external appearance. Since Herskovits noticed his colleague's special way of speaking, singing, and moving, it is hard to imagine that the content of Hurston's verbal and performative articulations escaped him. In descriptions of Hurston by her biographer and numerous contemporaries, her presence in New York is marked by her solid appearance as a storyteller and (funny) actor of scenes (from stories) of the black South. "She was a perfect mimic," wrote Robert Hemenway, and "'Zora stories' circulated widely."[31] "She draped black folk culture about herself like a fabulous robe creating an inimitable and unforgettable personality," wrote Arnold Rampersad, "consistently she offered herself as a child of the black South."[32]

In the milieu of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston represented a segment of black life in America that although known, had not been personally experienced by most New York artists and intellectuals.[33] She brought in this difference in experience offensively in the discussion about the "New Negro." "In an

assimilationist era, when black intellectuals stressed the similarities between the races, Hurston proudly affirmed the cultural differences."[34] Already before she began her first field studies on African American folklore and religion in her home state of Florida in 1927, Hurston performed in different New York circles, the folklore repertoire of sayings, stories, and songs that she had acquired since her childhood.[35] Hurston came from Eatonville, an all black, self-governed city, where she apparently did not have the negative experiences with racism that her artist colleagues had had in white-dominated cities. Alice Walker, who contributed decisively to the rediscovery of Hurston in the 1970s, characterized Hurston's self-confident, independent, cultural-difference celebrating black habitus as "uncolonized" awareness:

"In her easy self-acceptance, Zora was more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them."[36]

In light of the performative character of Hurston's blackness, for which there were many witnesses, the reduction of her role in the Herskovits story to an object of anthropological observation comes as somewhat of a surprise. Wouldn't one assume, instead, that cultural pride in the traditions and communicative art of her original Southern society, which Hurston demonstrated in New York, and which her literary work made evident, would have a different informational quality for her colleague with regard to the existence of a special African American culture than the frequently repeated story suggests?

Herskovits was the more scientifically experienced of the two in 1927, but in terms of black culture, he was largely inexperienced in comparison to his assistant. While he was making initial

considerations for the revision of his theory of "complete acculturation" of African Americans based on observations of Hurston's habits, she was writing stories set in the hoodoo milieu, and plays in which blacks "who envy whites biologically or intellectually" [37] are criticized. She battled a widespread sense of inferiority, even among engaged artists and activists, through positive references to "the greatest cultural wealth of the continent"[38] – the cultural, religious, and communicative forms of expression of black communities in the South – which she was devoted to making an inventory of between 1927 and 1931.

I will not be able to produce any evidence here for my theory that the scientific turn in the research on African American culture, as exemplified by Herskovits's work, is largely due to the transdisciplinary contact between anthropology and art in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, or that the renowned white anthropologist was directly influenced by his black colleague. Although it seems quite plausible to me, in what follows I would like to shift focus to the problem of knowledge production within various institutional and economic framework conditions. The constellation Herskovits / Hurston suggests itself as the careers of both intersect at an early stage on the occasion of the *American Negro* study, yet continue on in extremely differently directions.

In his article about Howard University,[39] the renowned black university in Washington, Kelly Miller wrote in Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology: "An enslaved people had not been permitted to taste from the tree of knowledge, which is the tree of good and evil."[40] When Hurston began her anthropology studies with Boas in 1925, she was the only black woman studying at Barnard College, which is evidence of the marginal position of the once "enslaved fold" in the institutionalized scientific world. Yet relating Hurston's late academic start, which opposed Herskovits's

straightforward scientific career, to the research field of the two, Hurston's anthropological research is based on a wealth of experiential knowledge, which Herskovits lacks. What she undertakes in her anthropological research in her home territory, initially supervised by Boas, can be described as the application of a scientific method "that turns what she always knew into knowledge."[41] In the introduction to her book, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, which includes Hurston's research since 1927, she speaks of needing "to have the spy-glass of Anthropology," in order to observe from this methodological distance, cultural phenomena that have been familiar "from the earliest rocking of my cradle."[42] Nonetheless, this distance is entirely different than the scientific distance and concept of objectivity advocated by Herskovits. For Herskovits, the value and credibility of scientific statements are dubious when their producers are involved in political activities or could even arouse suspicions of pursuing anything other than "purely scientific" interests. As he wrote in 1928, "[t]he more detached I am in my work, the more effective my results will be and the more they will be trusted by all persons concerned."[43]

This position was most certainly held for political reasons in the interwar period. For one, it should render the results of anthropological research, which contradicted the racist scientific mainstream, as uncontestable as possible. For another, Franz Boas had already expressed his vehement critique of anthropology's appropriation by politics, concretely, U.S. foreign policy.[44] Nevertheless, in his research, Herskovits had to rely on the support of representatives of black lobby groups. Without Du Bois or Locke, the *American Negro* study would hardly have been possible. Du Bois additionally gave Herskovits important contacts for his field studies in West Africa; and Herskovits had already written a

large part of his dissertation in Du Bois's private library. No matter how greatly anthropology profited from these politically involved intellectuals, and regardless of the fact that the discussion of black American culture in the circles of the New Negro Movement added a new perspective to his research, Herskovits still went so far in honoring a "coldly analytical approach" that he blocked projects by black scientists whom he did not consider sufficiently objective. In the 1930s, Herskovits thus mounted a letter campaign aimed at influential personalities, thwarting the project of a multi-volume *Encyclopedia of the Negro,* which Du Bois was preparing. "Although he respected Du Bois as an intellectual and a political figure, he felt that Du Bois had been 'much too close to the firing-line to have the necessary detachment for the job.'"[45] Interventions such as these were directed not only against groups whose position Herskovits's research aimed at improving, but also against people who had supported him in his early days. Kevin Yelvington listed several acts of science-politics carried out by the already established anthropologists that were capable, in certain cases, of destroying an entire career. As he summarized: "what was really at stake in all of this was the creation and defense of a particular scholarly preserve, the closing of ranks, and the struggle over meaning. In short, the imposition of orthodoxy."[46]

This strongly emphasized "objectivity" lacked a form of "self-objectifying" of the subject position of the scientist and his position in the academic field and political landscape. The black writer-anthropologist opposed this faulty mediation of the dictate of objectivity and involvement on the part of the academic scholar with a remarkable reflection on the research process and self-positioning of the researching subject, albeit not formulated in a classical scientific form.

Institutionalized and situated research: Work at the border of science and art

Herskovits's research projects, each of which received several years of financing, show that an academically-based anthropologist employed as an assistant professor at Northwestern University since 1927, with the benefit of a network of contacts had different access to the material fruits of the "tree of knowledge" than a black writer from the South who enthusiastically saw the anthropological surveying of the cultural practices of her society of origin as a possibility to "change forever" the idea of black American culture. [47] Hemenway describes Hurston's recourse to anthropology as the attempt to solve a problem that was based in the clash of different concepts of culture. One of the guiding ideas of the aesthetic line of the New Negro Movement was that modern, urban, and educated artists should draw from the reservoir of black folk art, the "unconscious" creativity of black preachers and choir singers, interpret it and thereby elevate it to the "higher" level of a "conscious" art. This program expressed the general distance of the New Negro Concept from the everyday, popular culture of the South, which was assigned to a pre-modern era. Hurston, who had firsthand experience of this cultural life, and drew her power from it, was searching for possibilities to create recognition of these forms of expression and ideas generally classified as "low," without transforming them into "conscious" art in the sense of Locke and James Weldon Johnson. At this point in the artistic formulation of a problem, the scientific approach of an "exact" recording of folklore, collecting and thus preserving it, accommodated Hurston as an alternative practice.

The way in which the tendency toward scientific discipline as a way out of an artistic dilemma is connected with the writer's non-

conformist "lack of discipline" is remarkable, and momentous. Already in the mid-1920s, Hurston maneuvered between fiction and folklore, as well as the aesthetic, political, and moral claims of the Negro Renaissance. She turned against both a bourgeois "valorization" of popular culture through high art, as well as against the obligation of black writers to place their work at the service of race politics. When she founded the magazine *Fire!!* together with Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and other colleagues in 1926, it was meant to be "purely artistic in intent and conception, unconcerned with sociological problems or propaganda."[48] In their contributions to *Fire!!* the young "Niggerati," as the circle called itself, in distinction to the older black "Litterati," concentrated on the transgression of the self-imposed constraint of only describing presentable sides of the "New Negro" to avoid providing any fuel for the negative stereotypes of Blacks in mainstream society. With stories about prostitution and homosexuality, among others, *Fire!!* offered a provocative response to the new borders with regard to sexuality, gender roles, and middle class morals, which in the course of the project for overcoming "racial barriers" had been raised by several leading representatives of the movement. "Hurston, Thurman, and the *Fire!!* Group became esthetic freedom fighters," wrote Hemenway. [49]

The propagated artistic freedom and moral autonomy contrasted limitations that Hurston was forced to accept when she signed a contract at the end of 1927, mediated by Alain Locke, with the white patroness Mrs. R. Osgood Mason for the private financing of her folklore research. The contract guaranteed her "godmother" property and publication rights to the research material. Mason did indeed support the work quite generously, in stages, but prohibited Hurston from talking about the progress of her research. Whereas

Herskovits, from a distanced perspective, had the opportunity to publish the results of his field studies on the African remnants in the Americas on a regular basis, and could discuss his work internationally with colleagues, Hurston, who mutated from object of study of "typical black" characteristics to an involved and pioneering researcher in the area of African American popular culture, religion, and magic practices, was contractually prohibited from announcing her discoveries and sharing her enthusiasm with others. Mason first authorized publication of *Mules and Men* in 1935, after making editorial interventions in the material. As greatly as Hurston suffered from the constraints of this knowledge production, in particular, because her scientific collaboration with Franz Boas, whom she revered (for Hurston, the "King of Kings") was reduced to a minimum, which put her in "a terrible nervous state," she nonetheless, in the end, cleverly transformed these constraints in her characteristic transdisciplinary form of depiction of transcultural practices and additionally managed to retain the presence of several of the difficult conditions of her own practice in the text.

Hurston found herself in a complex conflict of loyalties involving the romantic-primitivist expectations of her patroness, who understood authentic Black / African as an ideal opposite pole to modern Western civilization; the expectation of her scientific authority Franz Boas, that due to her membership in the social and cultural milieu she was investigating, she had access to knowledge denied white researchers; and her own idea, shared with her colleague Langston Hughes of the creation of a revolutionary form of authentic black theater. The solution to these conflicts was a tactic of, in part, satisfying expectations; and, in part, evading agreements. Hurston made use of anthropology's discipline in regard to methods without subjecting herself to its restrictions.

She was precise in taking stock of the stories, songs, recipes, and rituals, but refrained, for the most part, from their systematic organization. As she wrote to Boas, she tried to be "as exact as possible," to let the stories be told word for word and to record them in authentic dialect. She acted as a "participant observer," but furnished her "informants" with personalities more extensive than was customary in ethnological texts. Hurston drafted the narration of her return and reception in her hometown to position herself as a researcher for whom the "field" is simultaneously "home" and yet to also show the distance that resulted from her urban experiences and her appropriation of a scientific perspective. She fictionalized the activity of the field researcher.[50] Leigh Ann Duck pointed out that Hurston was successful in bridging the difference in time, problematized in so many contemporary journals, between the modern, educated New Negro and the "premodern" rural South. Hurston proved that this world and its temporality was accessible for a modern person based on her own example when she integrated herself in the peoples' stories and jokes, and even more so when she underwent the ritual of hoodoo initiation. "In *Mules and Men*, both the region and 'folk' consciousness are shown to be accessible to modern subjects."[51] In this way, Hurston bypassed the "ethnographic present" [52] of anthropological writing style in which the author and object of research are situated in different time planes, effectively withdrawing her picture of the social community under study from the grasp of her patroness' and readers' expectations of primitiveness.

When one considers that Melville Herskovits dropped Katherine Dunham, whom he initially supported, upon her initiation into voodoo, it is possible to measure the distance between Herskovits's dogma of objectivity and Hurston's reconcilability of cultural participation and instrumentally-applied scientific methods. "The

native-anthropologist, instead of adopting a professional subject-position, chooses a community-based role."[53] The requirement for that is affiliation; the necessity for it is found in the difficulty of accessing a group's common knowledge. "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds,"[54] wrote Hurston in the introduction to *Mules and Men*, thematizing people's dread of, and resistance to being interviewed. Already in the description of her very first encounter with people, the methodological reflection subtly slides into a challenging of the process of an ethnological / anthropological knowledge production under the conditions of racially-based power relations. In this, Hurston switched frequently between "they" ("under-privileged people"), "we" ("Negro"), and "I" and personally addressed the readers: "You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, 'Get out of here!' We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing."[55] From this point, she thematizes a wily resistance – "the Negro offers a feather-bed resistance" – that she passionately and skillfully locates ambiguously between the planes:

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle: He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."[56]

In this introduction in the style of a trickster, Hurston operates against the white readership, against the authority of science, and against her possessive patroness.[57] This is similar to several of the hero figures in the stories that she collects—the devil, "who always outsmarted God," and John, who outsmarted the "Ole Massa" and even the devil.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Herskovits was carrying out his field studies in Western Africa, Suriname, and Haiti, in the course of which, he found the first formulations of the translation of African cultural elements in South America and the Caribbean (not yet in the U.S.), Hurston wrote several theoretical essays, in addition to literary texts and folklore collections. These essays compensated for the analytical "dearth" of publications such as *Mules and Men*. In the monumental anthology, *Negro,* edited by Nancy Cunard in 1934, Hurston published, among others, the text "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in which she combined linguistic, aesthetic, sociological, and cultural studies observations into a theory of black expression. A central aspect of these considerations, which rested on the material from her anthropological studies, is the complex relationship between originality and imitation, authenticity and interpretation. In this, Hurston goes far beyond the assumptions of mainstream science and popular opinion that African American language and cultural forms of expression reveal an incomplete adaptation to Euro-American ones. At the same time, she distances herself from the efforts of many black intellectuals and artists of her day to elevate popular black culture of the South through high culture interpretation to a level worthy of approval. She defended the social power of popular language (dialect) and the creativity of the authentic artistic and popular culture practices, against their malapropism in both white and black genre art as well as against their elevation to high art.

The definitive move she made was to use the concept of mimicry to overcome the hierarchical opposition of authenticity and imitation. "The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself."[58] Hurston first referred to a traditional platitude:

“It has been said so often,” she wrote, “that the Negro is lacking originality that it has almost become a gospel.”[59] Hurston then established that upon closer inspection it immediately becomes clear that this is a mistake, and presented her understanding of originality, which brings to mind postcolonial concepts: “What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas. … So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.”[60] With the concept of re-interpretation, Hurston reinforces an explanatory model of transculturality that Herskovits would first work out in the course of his research in Trinidad in 1939.[61] While Herskovits had to empirically support his heuristic concept with a wealth of material within the discipline of anthropology, Hurston, on the basis of her own studies, and even without citing these extensively, took the liberty of making the cultural-theory generalization: “Thus has arisen a new art in the civilized world, and thus has our so-called civilization come. The exchange and re-exchange of ideas between groups.”[62]

It would be nearly impossible to definitively clarify the ways in which (white) scientific research and (black) artistic-scientific research, personified here by Herskovits und Hurston in the era of the Harlem Renaissance, mutually influenced one another. What I consider important is to locate the contact and conflict of the respective methods and interests, their epistemological and, in part, political proximity with the given differences in their conclusions, within the institutional conditions and social power constellations of the era and highlight the transdisciplinary elements in the early phase of transcultural thought.

[1] The New Negro Movement, later identified as the Harlem Renaissance, was the first widespread manifestation of African American culture and emancipation politics in the U.S., during the interwar period.

[2] Christian Kravagna, "Der Migrant als Katalysator: Winold Reiss und die Harlem Renaissance," in: *Kritische Berichte.* Themenheft "Migration," ed. Burcu Dogramaci, no. 4, 2011.

[3] "Model House: Mapping Transcultural Modernism" is a research project at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna led by Marion von Osten, which is being supported from 2010 to 2012 by the Wiener Wissenschafts- Forschungs- und Technologiefonds (WWTF). http://www.transculturalmodernism.org

[4] Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, London / New York: Verso 1993.

[5] Pierre Bourdieu already referred to the problem thirty years ago: "Those who nowadays set themselves up as judges and distribute praise and blame among the sociologists and ethnologists of the colonial past would be better occupied in trying to understand what it was that prevented the most lucid and the best intentioned of those they condemn from understanding things which are now self-evident for even the least lucid and sometimes the least well-intentioned observers." Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice,* Stanford, CA 1990, p. 5.

[6] See, for example, the World Art Studies Programme at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK, where almost exclusively white Western scientists teach the art history of all eras

and regions. “Today, *a* world history or *a* universal history is an impossible task,” writes Walter Mignolo and continues: “[o]r perhaps it is possible but hardly credible. Universal histories in the past five hundred years have been embedded in global designs.” Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000, p. 21.

[7] A convincing example of this type of approach is that of Kobena Mercer’s publication series *Annotating Art’s Histories* published by MIT Press since 2005.

[8] See Walter Mignolo’s contribution to the current issue of *transversal*: Walter Mignolo, Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing. On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience, in: *transversal* 01 2012, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en.

[9] According to the cover of the new edition of the book, 2005.

[10] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston, MA 2005, p. xxi.

[11] Ibid., p. 32.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Arthur Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil*, Washington, D. C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc. 1939.

[14] Herskovits developed the concept of “cultural focus,” according to which, in difficult situations, those aspects of a group’s culture that are most important to them are most strongly preserved.

[15] Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, chapter IV.

[16] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Review of *The Myth of the Negro Past*, by Melville J. Herskovits," in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 222, 1942, pp. 226–27. quoted from Sidney W. Mintz, "Introduction," in Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, p. xviii.

[17] *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness* by Llewellyn Smith (producer, director), Christine Herbes-Sommers (producer) und Vincent Brown (producer, director of research), 2009.

[18] Melville J. Herskovits, "The Negro's Americanism," in ed. Alain Locke, *The New Negro*: *Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Touchstone 1997, p. 360.

[19] Ibid., p. 353.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. pp. 359–360.

[22] Ibid. p. 359.

[23] Melville J. Herskovits, "When Is a Jew a Jew?," in *Modern Quarterly*, 4, June - September 1927, pp. 114–15, quoted by Jerry Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 2004, p. 11.

[24] Whereas acculturation was later grasped as a complex and far from one-sided process (Gershenhorn, pp. 82–92), in Herskovits's early writings the term is still meant in the sense of an adaptation of a minority to the majority culture.

[25] For that reason, Historian Carter Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, does not explicitly reject the results, but most certainly the method of "measuring" black people. Gershenhorn, p. 44.

[26] Gershenhorn, p. 39.

[27] On invitation from Du Bois, Franz Boas held a lecture before African American students about the cultural achievements of the "Black race," in its "own, natural surroundings," that is, in Africa, at Atlanta University in 1906. Du Bois was extremely impressed and the two began a lifelong friendship. Cf. Bernhard Tilg, "Gegen den Strom der Zeit: Franz Boas, ein Anti-Rassist und politischer Aktivist," in eds. Friedrich Pöhl, Bernhard Tilg, *Franz Boas: Kultur, Sprache, Rasse. Wege einer antirassistischen Anthropologie*, Vienna, Berlin: LIT Verlag 2009, p. 100.

[28] Lee D. Baker, "The Location of Franz Boas within the African-American Struggle," in eds. Friedrich Pöhl, Bernhard Tilg, *Franz Boas – Kultur, Sprache, Rasse: Wege einer antirassistischen Anthropologie*, Vienna, Berlin: LIT Verlag 2009, pp. 111–129.

[29] Gershenhorn, p. 69.

[30] Edward M. Pavlik, *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 2002, p. 180.

[31] Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1977, p. 23.

[32] Arnold Rampersad, “Preface,” in Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial 2008, p. xvii.

[33] Hemenway, p. 61.

[34] Hemenway, p. 162.

[35] “She must have been a folklore collector even before coming to NY,” the writer Arna Bontemps recalls, according to Hemenway, see Hemenway, p. 64.

[36] Alice Walker, “Foreword: Zora Neale Hurston – A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View,” in Hemenway, p. xiii.

[37] Hemenway, p. 47.

[38] Hurston in a letter to Langston Hughes on 12 April 1928, quoted from Hemenway, p. 113.

[39]Howard University was founded in 1867 shortly after the American Civil War by General O. O. Howard as a private institution of higher education for Afro-American students in Washington, D. C. and together with Fisk University in Nashville, and Atlanta University, both founded at roughly the same time, was among the most important Black universities in the U.S. “The fundamental aim of the founders was to build up an enlightened leadership within the race,” wrote Kelly Miller in his text in *The New Negro* (see footnote 40) from 1925.

[40] Kelly Miller, “Howard: The National Negro University,” in Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 314.

[41] Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, "Telling Anthropology: Zora Neale Hurston and Gilberto Freyre Disciplined in Their Field-Home-Work," in *American Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1992, p. 472.

[42] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial 2008, p. 1.

[43] Letter to Herbert Seligmann from 10 August 1928, quoted from Walter Jackson, "Melville Herskovits and the Search for Afro-American Culture," in ed. George W. Stocking, Jr., *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality* (History of Anthropology, vol. 4), Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 1986, p. 105.

[44] On Boas's critique and the FBI acts on him, see Tilg, pp. 105–108.

[45] Jackson, p. 116.

[46] Kevin A. Yelvington, "Melville J. Herskovits and the Institutionalization of Afro-American Studies," http://www.ceao.ufba.br/unesco/11paper-Yelvington.htm#_edn11

[47] Hemenway, p. 114.

[48] Hemenway, p. 44.

[49] Hemenway, p. 49.

[50] Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, p. 484.

[51] Leigh Ann Duck, "'Go there tuh *know* there': Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk," in *American Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2001, p. 277.

[52] Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press 1983, pp. 80-87.

[53] Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, p. 477.

[54] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 2.

[55] Ibid.

[56]Ibid., p. 3.

[57] "Mason demanded that her protégés resemble the image she had of them – that is to say, she wanted them to be like 'real' primitive people," Hurston "once called Mason the guard-mother who sits in the twelfth heaven and shapes the destinies of the primitives." Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 130.

[58]Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in ed. Nancy Cunard, *Negro. An Anthology*, New York and London: Continuum 2002, p. 28.

[59] Ibid., p. 27.

[60] Ibid., p. 28.

[61] "To explain the development of Trinidadian culture, Herskovits offered two new concepts: reinterpretation and cultural focus. Over hundreds of years, Trinidadians had created a culture by reinterpreting or adapting European and African traditions according to their needs at the time." Gershenhorn, p. 85.

[62] Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," p. 28.