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Jack Sargent Harris

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

A Radical Ethnographer at Work in the Columbia Anthropology Department, 1936-37

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Shortly after the stock market crashed in 1929, a young, out-of-work production manager for a Chicago publishing company turned up in New York City looking for work as a merchant sailor (Edelman 1997). Seven years later, this sailor, Jack Sargent Harris, was again in New York: this time, however, as a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. In the interim, between stints as a seaman, he had acquired a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and an interest in socialism, which he indulged by jumping ship once in Leningrad and touring the city for over a fortnight until Soviet authorities could find another American merchantman on which to "deport" him—much to his and the captain's chagrin. Thus Harris eventually would become one of a number of American anthropologists, including Archie Phinney, Leslie White, and Roy Barton (whom Harris met while in Leningrad), to visit the Soviet Union in this period. Indeed, Melville Herskovits himself, probably because of Harris's urging, wished to visit Leningrad in order to study dialectical materialism and Russian anthropology before writing his book *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples* (1939). He never did, however.

While Harris was at Northwestern, Herskovits, a Boasian who studied Africans and African-Americans (Jackson 1986), lured Harris into anthropology by appealing to the seaman's taste for the exotic and the socialist's desire for racial equality. The two first met when Harris took Herskovits' course in introductory anthropology. Thereafter, Harris took every course Herskovits offered, and the two men became good friends (see Edelman 1997). While at sea between semesters, Harris wrote his new friend a series of long letters—indeed reminiscent, in some respects, of old-style travel accounts—in which he narrated his adventures and in which appear all the sorts of colorful and sordid characters one would expect to inhabit the world of a sailor—flop-house men, Chinese emigrant stowaways, and of course, "natives" of every sort. Through these descriptions of the sailor's life, Herskovits must have seen in Harris the perspicuity essential to an aspiring writer and so helpful to the anthropologist who, in the emerging era of culture-and-personality studies, had to cut through dizzying arrays of detail in order to depict, with intended scientific verisimilitude, the way in which others have associated the elements of their culture and society. Upon graduating from Northwestern in early 1936, Harris put aside plans to write short stories and a novel about his life as a seaman and enrolled in the graduate program of anthropology at Columbia University.

While Harris attended Columbia, the two friends continued their correspondence. In the series of letters that follows, Harris portrays his new life as a first-year graduate student in anthropology at Columbia and the politically charged aura of Columbia anthropology in 1936-1937. He also describes the difficulty that he experienced in finding the time to work three jobs, do the necessary coursework, and pursue his interest in radical politics—which included his attempts to help the dockworkers of New York organize a labor union. In the final letter, we catch a glimpse of the romantic tenor of Harris's travel accounts as he describes for Herskovits (who was planning his trip to Leningrad) the ports in the Baltic. Over time, however, this

romance disappeared from Harris' correspondence as he and his prose increasingly mulled over more empirical and theoretical anthropological issues.

After graduating from Columbia in 1941, Harris went on to teach anthropology at The Ohio State University and the University of Chicago. Later, he worked for the United Nations in an effort to help colonial peoples establish self-government in their territories. Called before the McCarran Senate Subcommittee investigating communism, he refused to testify, was discharged from his position at the U. N., and could never again find employment in an American university again (see Melvern 1995 and Edelman 1997). For the past 46 years, Jack has lived in Costa Rica where he has helped to establish several successful businesses.

The following letters are reprinted here with the kind permission of Jack Sargent Harris and the Northwestern University Archives. For additional information on Columbia's graduate program during this era, the reader is advised to consult McMillan 1981.

* * * * *

September 28, 1936

Dear Dr. Herskovits:

My financial problems have been beautifully straightened out. Dr. [Ruth] Benedict straightway offered me a full tuition loan to be gotten from the fairy god-father [presumably Elsie Clews Parsons] of the department (whoever that is. Bless Him) which demands no interest and is quite sympathetic about repayment. ...

Next my lively correspondence and previous visit during the summer, enabled me to cut through a flock of collegiate adolescents to see the head gal at the employment bureau. She literally flung all manners of jobs at me. ... I took the NYA [National Youth Administration Program] at \$30 a month and another job as part-time secretary... which will average between \$8 and \$10 dollars a week.

And thus, with room, board and tuition beautifully taken care of and an income of about \$18 a week, I feel well satisfied for the moment. However, I must remember that I'm going to school, and from now on every moment must be accounted for. ...

The room is on the twelfth floor and I have a good view of the Hudson, the Washington Bridge, and an American flag waving to the left of the gilt Alma Mater. As I look out of the window, I see a row of pickets protesting that the university does not hire union painters, and for some time, I hesitated about patronizing this place.

Phi Beta keys are a dime a dozen at this John Jay Hall. I sit at a meal table with a group of other graduate students and there is always high talk. The men speak after simulated meditation with ponderous words and precise intonations, their sentences slowly streaming forth and parading the table on stilts. Behind them one can see the professors whom they ape, and I am sure these same professors are gratified to know that they will pass the torch of learning to their prototypes, who will guard their scholastic aristocracy with well-known conservative zeal. I

know that it is an infantile form of protest, but I am often seized with the overpowering desire to belch or break wind in the middle of a well-formulated phrase. ...

I have discovered Shulte's and Dauber and Pine [local bookstores]. I have already purchased some bargains, Freeman's Social Psychology [1936] for a dollar, which I was enthusiastic about. [Ralph] Linton's book [The Study of Man, 1936] I received as a gift, and although I cannot help but agree with his justifiable pessimism, it seems so hopeless and weak to sit back and watch so drastic and fatal a change without doing something about it. That attitude must seem young to you and I know the question in your mind, "What can we do about it?" But is the objective attitude of the scientist so necessary that he must not attempt to halt the very forces that make for his own destruction? Otherwise, this is the best general book on anthropology that I have read. I refer to it constantly.

I have the feeling that because of what you have told them, the department over-rates me. They are all very kind to me, and, certainly, I owe that to you. At the moment, the other graduate students overwhelm me; most of them have had fieldwork and are hovering about their doctorates. I trust that time will iron out these differences, and I am thankful for the familiar faces of Mickey [Martha Lee Champion?] and Julie [Julien Hanks?]. I know I must study my fool head off to reach even the degree of knowledge the department thinks I have attained....

I doubt whether I will be able to take Dr. [Frans] Olbrecht's course. The department seems quite jealous of registrations in any other department, and so for the sake of peace and politics, I have tentatively registered for the following:

The graduate seminar which Dr. Benedict conducts.

Dr. [Otto] Klineberg's "Social Organization" which will emphasize kinship terms and relationships

Dr. [George] Herzog's "Primitive Languages"

And probably Dr. [Alexander] Lesser's course on the American Indian.

* * * * *

October 29, 1936

Dear Dr. Herskovits,

A few evenings ago Mickey and I went down to the Cameo Theatre in Times Sq. to see a Russian movie, and as ever we were sucked into the bargain book store there which deals in publishers' surplus stock. ...

The life here is exciting. It is most pleasant at last to feel that being a liberal or a radical automatically injects one into the "in" group, and I know you can understand the healthy release that I feel. There is no more necessity for vicious rationalizations, as I had to undergo in conversations... [at Northwestern]. Even Mickey must feel it for she is evincing an interest and an intellectual reaction to social phenomena that I never noticed before. The entire body of anthropology students here signed a Burke expulsion protest with no urging and with full

knowledge of administrative disapproval.* Although I could not help but notice that Julie signed merely because of subtle group compulsion, pouting with her pretty mouth "I don't see what difference that makes to me."

I am sitting in on Olbrechts "African Ethnology" and find his cautious procedure and verbal footnotes coolly stimulating. As a matter of fact, the entire department is sitting in, including Drs. Benedict and Lesser. It is too early to form a just opinion of these last two from their lectures. If you'll forgive the comparison, both you and Lesser seem sprung from the same mold, although he is bitter as you never were. In his lectures, every sentence is heavily freighted, and one gets the feeling that here is a capable man; but often his sharp shafts of personal disapproval with, for example, "a brilliant linguist at Yale" [Edward Sapir] are sometimes disturbing. Perhaps with greater anthropological sophistication such feeling on my part will vanish. Dr. Benedict has been most kind and gracious to me and I am thankful for many favors. I must say, however, that her easy classifications of cultures and her attempts to view a society as a configuration in terms of adjustment or non-adjustment gives me the feeling of a simplicity which can easily be deceiving. In our seminar where we are examining the border ground between psychology and ethnology, her constant comments along with the interpretation given [Henri] Junod's [South African] material by one of her disciples, forced the conclusion that the Thonga was a society where conflict rarely arose or was easily resolved, and we were given the picture of a beautifully-oiled mechanism with no friction or jagged edges. Lesser tried hard to show that this was not so (and was sometimes driven to off-color extremes) and that in fairness we should realize the complexities involved. On my own part, ignoring Junod's interpretations and reasoning from the facts he gives, aided by Dr. Lesser's analysis, a more complex picture arises, which I cannot square with that of Dr. Benedict's.

I must confess that I am somewhat sorry to be in Dr. Klineberg's course. His lectures, personally stimulating, deal with material that is old stuff for me and that I digested long ago. Unfortunately for us, he wrote a book. I am sure that his lecture notes, with few new additions, must be the notes he used in the actual writing of Race Differences [1935]. Deviations are few.

NYA finally assigned me to Dr. Boas. I am to work with one of his students, Dr. [David] Efron, on the conditioning of gestures [Efron 1941]. We have already met twice; his movies of "assimilated" Jews at Saratoga and their restricted arm and elbow movements in contrast to those of the Jew in the ghetto are intensely interesting. Similarly he is contrasting two groups of Italians—"traditional" and "orthodox." We are projecting the film on graph paper and actually charting the movement frame by frame. My part in all this, of course, is merely mechanical and clerical, but Efron is kind enough to fully explain his problem and procedure so that I am becoming a fully interested observer. Some questions have arisen in my mind as to method, choice of subjects, etc., but these will either vanish or become intensified as I become more familiar with the material. After about five weeks of this, Dr. Benedict has promised to allow me to devote all my NYA time to independent research on any phase of anthropology in which I am

* Robert Burke was a popular Columbia undergraduate and head of the local chapter of the American Student Union. He led a demonstration on the lawn and in the foyer of the home of Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler in the summer of 1936. The students were protesting that the university had agreed to send a delegate to Nazi Germany to celebrate the 550th anniversary of the founding of Heidelberg University. Burke was later expelled. See *New York Times*, June 29, 1936, p. 17.

interested. It comes as no surprise to you that I am going to work in some phase of economics, perhaps the mechanisms of exchange. This paper to be applied to my master's if I so desire.

... The betting here is 3 ½ to one in favor of Roosevelt with few Landon takers. Upper Broadway is peppered with stump speakers. The other night a Landonite was booed and yelled into angry submission. A far cry from Evanston.

I miss the lake, but I go down to South Street every Sunday morning. The strike seems inevitable and the waterfront is in for a dirty time. ... I brought one of my old shipmates up here. "You mean all these grown-up guys are studying?" he demanded. "Maybe it's all right, but I dunno. It ain't right just to sit down and read all the time." And on going up the John Jay elevator, "Jesus Christ, this smells like a Y. M. C. A. This is a helluva life. Don't you ever wanna go back to sea?" I do, but--.

I still think anthropology from the viewpoint of dialectical materialism would be a fruitful thing.

A new publication "Science and Society," a quarterly, has appeared. Its subtitle is "A Marxian Quarterly," and the first issue contains articles by Bernard Stern, Kenneth Burke, Theodore Brameld, Margaret Schlauch and Broadus Mitchell. Conservative make-up and beautiful typography. Nothing exciting in this issue but holds promise of greater things to come.

...

* * * * *

December 6, 1936

Dear Dr. Herskovits;

... Of course, you knew that I couldn't keep clear of the waterfront. I've been down there practically every night. Sure, I've picketed. But most of my work has been on the finance committee. I've spoken before a number of labor organizations to get funds. I even tapped the department here. Dr. Boas was splendid; he came through with \$5 and asked penetrating questions, which I liked better than the money. The rest of the department responded nobly.

In a few days, the entire department will participate in an auction of reprints, each member contributing all the duplicates he has, and the entire proceeds are to go to the defense of the loyalist forces in Spain. Do you wonder that I feel remarkably alive here?

I admit that the students here are a pretty bedraggled lot. Practically all of us work and feel economic pressure in one form or another, but there are always times for beer and grand bull sessions.

* * * * *

February 6, 1937

Dear Dr. H.,

... Benedict thought it would be a good idea for me to work with Dr. Boas while it was still possible to come into active contact with him, so now I confer with him twice a week on some Tsimshian material that he has turned over to me. He has an informant up there (a chief of the

Wolf Clan) who sends him texts which I am to work up under his supervision, with an especial eye cocked to the economic factors involved in the potlatch. This is the finest kind of experience for me, but I must confess to still feeling a bit curious in his presence, so heavy a cloak of reverence has been woven about him.

I hope to get into the field this summer, and I will go, I am told, if enough money can be gotten to send an expedition among the Canadian Blackfeet under the guidance of either Benedict or Lesser. The possibility seems good, and if that fails, there may be enough money for a solo. ...

One of the men here says he met Carl Butts at the Washington meeting and Carl had stated that he had returned from his trip to Germany a confirmed intellectual Nazi. Goddammit, I don't think I have to comment.

* * * * *

March 22, 1937

Dear Boss,

... Money, as you know, is scarce at Columbia for fieldwork for one in my category. Plenty for post-doctorates and those who have passed their preliminaries, but field money for first year students can come only through private gifts. And I'm mad to go out into the field. I'm not a first year student, really. Christ, I've had over three years of book-learning now, and the words are beginning to lose significance for me. I need fieldwork to point up the lectures and books. Rockefeller is cut off, but Benedict thinks other sources might open up. The only offer I've had so far is one from Linton to go on his archeological dig but that sounds dry as dust.

The department may come through with a few \$500 checks [from Parsons] as they have in the past for those who wish to study the Indians. But I have no burning desire to go among the Indians. For that same amount (if I get it) I could live for four months down in the West Indies—your hand still lies heavily upon me, you see. I think that I am alive enough to realize the significance of what is to be seen and to follow up cues that might be lost on some who have not had similar training. I mentioned the suggestion to Benedict, and she thought it would be splendid, especially since I've studied under you. I'm eager to tackle Barbados, St. Vincent's, Grenada, or Tobago. What do you suggest? As far as I know, and from your courses, little work has been done on any of these. I'd be glad to work on any problem you might suggest—and your course notes are still my constant references. These cultures wouldn't be too strange for me. ...

* * * * *

April 6, 1937

Dear Boss,

... The department seems in terrible confusion at the moment with disturbing rumors as to teaching appointments cancelled and new appointments made. Money is still uncertain, and my hopes for a field trip continue unabated. I should know shortly and will let you know immediately.

In going through some of the general West Indies material, I ran across some interesting references to the island of Barbuda, some 30 miles north of Antigua. Sir Harry Johnston in his

Negro in the New World [1910] comments that the island is private property, belonging to the English family of Codrington, whose rights descend from the 17th century. The island is approximately 140 square miles in area and at his writing (1910) had a population of 770 Negroes and a "handful of whites." Most significant: the concessionaires do not favor immigration. F. A. Ober, an ornithologist who wrote a guide-book in 1908 which he revised in 1920, adds that the Negroes are direct descendants of the slaves introduced there by Colonel Codrington, and that the Negroes "are almost as close to nature (or, in other words, uncivilised) as in Africa." And "more thoroughly African than any other village in the New World." One must receive permission to visit the island from the agent who resides part of the year at Antigua.

It sounds interesting—from many points of view. Do you know the island? One probably could not hope for as African a culture as the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana, but from the few indications, white influence has been considerably less than elsewhere in the West Indies. And it may be only a matter of looking up records to get the African base for this culture. If conditions really are as indicated, it might throw considerable light on your own problem. ...

If you mean to go to Leningrad, you refer to the four passenger boats, which are a far cry from the freighters of the line. The grub on a ship like the Scanmail or Scanpenn is really excellent; the cooking is predominantly Scandinavian, which is not something to be sniffed at. But the food on the freighters is something else again that depends on a lot of factors: the cook's disposition, the steward's inclination, the crew's accessibility to the stores, etc. The crossings are usually smooth in the summer with the exception of a rough day or two around Pentland Firth. It takes twelve days for the ship to get from Jersey City to Gothenburg or Copenhagen, the first port of call. However, a warning is pertinent as to restfulness. One summer I made two successive trips on the Scanpenn. One crossing was a balm to everyone's nerves. The next was a madhouse with drunks sprawling all over the rigging and making sleep awfully hard, even back in the fo'c'sle. But you take your chances on any ship.

The ports are grand. Copenhagen is a sophisticated little Paris with a Danish twist. The Poland I saw through Gdynia was intensely dull; Helsingfors and Stockholm you know. But outside of Leningrad, by far the most interesting ports were the small ports in Southern Finland where the ships usually load paper for a week or more. Old, old towns like Kotka and Viipuri with narrow, cobbled streets centuries old and wide market places and fresh young girls with the bloom of the farm on their cheeks and hoary castles with moats and akavit and smorgasbord and the funny pompous band playing in the park. I tell you; it's hell to write this and know that there's always a ship in Jersey City, twenty minutes away, with a job on it for me only for the asking. ...

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS:

David Mills (Department of Anthropology, University of Manchester, U.K.) is doing research on "The political history of postwar British Social Anthropology, drawing on his work cataloguing, indexing, conservation and general preparation of the archives of the Association of Social Anthropologists.

Brenda G. Plummer (Departments of History and Afro-American Studies, University of Washington) is pursuing research on "African Studies in American perspective: A history of separate development."

Susan Sperling (San Francisco, CA) is at work on a biography of Ashley Montagu, who died at the age of 94 on November 26 (see obituary, New York Times 11/29/99)

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I. The History of Portuguese Anthropology

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The development of Portuguese anthropology (1870-1960)

Two distinct research orientations are generally accepted in the history of the Western anthropological tradition. One of them, corresponding to the German concept of "volkerkunde" (the study of [other] peoples) prevailed in some "central" European countries, such as Great Britain and France, and in the United States. Here, anthropology developed as a discipline focused on the study of non-western societies and cultures. The other, corresponding to the German concept of "volkskunde" (the study of [one's own] people), was adopted in the "peripheral" countries of Europe. According to "volkskunde," anthropology should be concerned with the study of local folk traditions. The choice between "volkerkunde" and "volkskunde" has been frequently explained as a choice related to the political and ideological circumstances of nineteenth century Europe. "Volkerkunde" developed in countries that ruled over a colonial empire, while "volkskunde" developed in countries that had a "classical national problem," i.e. countries in which a process of national autonomy and/or independence had started. Following