

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long (00:07):

Hello, I'm Karen Long. And you're listening to The Asterisk*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today, we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with historian Vincent Brown.

His book, "Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War," won a 2021 Anisfield-Wolf Award for non-fiction. It is a groundbreaking investigation into the roots, combatants, cartography, and reverberations of the largest slave revolt in the 18th century, British Atlantic world.

Anisfield-Wolf juror Steven Pinker wrote, "This is truly a remarkable and important event in the history of the world, largely unknown (I confess that I was ignorant of it). Not only did Brown do heroic work in his original scholarship, but he escaped the insular world of academese and presented it in an accessible and appealing form. It's a major accomplishment."

Professor Brown is the founding director of Harvard University's history design studio, set up for researchers who want to explore new modes of narrating and understanding history. Welcome, professor Brown, welcome.

Vincent Brown (01:41):

Thank you so much, Karen. It's great to be here.

Karen Long (01:44):

Thank you for making time for us. I like to get out of the way of the art. So let's start with you giving us an excerpt. And I think we're going to start in that logical place -- the beginning -- of "Tacky's Revolt," the text in your own voice.

Vincent Brown (02:04):

Let's begin at the beginning.

Vincent Brown (02:05):

"And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians and they shall fight everyone against his brother and everyone against his neighbor city against city and kingdom against kingdom." Isaiah 19:2.

Vincent Brown (02:21):

"Wager, also known by his African name, Apongo, was a leader of the largest slave rebellion in the 18th century British Empire. But long before taking his part in the great Jamaican insurrection of 1760– 1761, commonly called Tacky's Revolt, he had been on a remarkable odyssey."

Vincent Brown (02:41):

"Apongo had been a military leader in West Africa during a period of imperial expansion and intensive warfare there. During this time, he had even been a notable guest of John Cope, a chief agent of Cape

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Coast Castle, Britain's principal fort on the Gold Coast. Captured and sold at some point in the 1740s, Apongo became the property of Captain Arthur Forrest of HMS Wager, who renamed him for the Royal Navy warship. Wager came in bondage to Forrest's plantation in Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica, where he again encountered John Cope, who had retired to his own Jamaican estate. Occasionally, Cope would entertain his acquaintance from the Old World, laying a table for weekend visits, treating the slave as a man of honor, and insinuating that Apongo would one day be redeemed and sent home. Whatever understanding there was between the two men did not outlast John Cope's death in 1756. In the ensuing years Wager began plotting and organizing a war against the whites, and awaiting an opportune moment to strike."

Vincent Brown (03:51):

And that's how we begin "Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War."

Karen Long (03:59):

I feel like my eyebrows are permanently affixed near my hairline. There's so much to learn in the first paragraph. I had never heard of Apongo. Kind of in the Stephen Pinker tradition of not knowing what we don't know. How did you first come across him?

Vincent Brown (04:19):

Well, historians of slavery, particularly historians of Jamaican slavery, which was really the heart of the slave empire that the British set up in the Americas. It was the island from, you know, from probably the late 17th century through the 18th century, was always at the heart of the British empire in America. It was the most profitable colony, also the most militarily significant and because it had the wealthiest planters, it was the most politically connected colony of all those in the Americas. And so historians of that important colony have known a little bit about this story because it emerged in the diary of the plantation overseer Thomas Thistlewood. And he is famous among historians as someone who's left us a particularly rich, even though it's a repellent source. He kept a diary of his time as an overseer in Jamaica from 1750 to 1786. And in it, he records the punishments, the rapes of women, his life in Jamaica, the domination of the enslaved population. But he's very close to the ground. He's very close to those people. And so it winds up being one of the better sources we have to explore slavery in Jamaica. And he recorded the story of Apongo, who was renamed Wager by Arthur Forrest shortly after the revolt in 1760.

Karen Long (05:44):

It's so bizarre that we owe Thistlewood and his polluted diary, this information about this complex person dining with John Cope. You know, it's a complex life across continents, which is what my imagination doesn't typically assign to people in bondage, which is one of the meta points of your book.

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Vincent Brown (06:12):

We typically don't think of the enslaved as, as full persons, with complex lives and histories of their own. And that's in part because of the ideology of slavery itself, right? The idea of enslavement is that the enslaved becomes essentially an extension of the slave holders will. They're essentially ciphers non persons, and often they're non persons in law, but that doesn't make them non persons in facts. And so I think we often get confused when we think of the enslaved as the slave holders would have them be — people devoid of their own personhood. But when we assume the opposite, when we say look well, these are people from somewhere, from some communities. And in order to enslave them, people had to tear them away from communities of belonging and networks of care and care. That meant very much to them. If we just assumed that, right, then we ask all kinds of questions about their personhood, about their experience, about their history, that the ideology of slavery would never have us ask.

Karen Long (07:17):

Right. And I love the word that Anisfield-Wolf chair, Henry Lewis Gates used as the core of Tacky's Revolt is the agency of the revolters, the agency of the military diaspora created by this foment of war and war's relationship to slavery. So that we have as one of your key tools, the landscape. And I think part of the miracle of "Tacky's Revolt" is it defies another category we default into, which is nationalistic history. You're asking us to think across these categories instead of within one.

Vincent Brown (08:05):

Yeah. Well, I use a different category instead of the category of the nation. I use the category of diaspora. And some of you'll be familiar with the word diaspora, you know, from the Greek "dia speiro" and meant "the scattering of seeds." And it has referred to the scattering of like things across great distances and over time. First applied to the diaspora of Jews after the destruction of the second temple. And their scattering across the Hellenic world. And then their scattering across the world. It has been applied to other people since then, and applies also to the scattering of Africans across the Americas and even further afield to the Indian Ocean and across the Pacific even. So we think about how it is that Africans move across the world, into these places where they find themselves. And as we would do with the scattering of seeds, we also want to think about not only how they move, but what happens when they find themselves in new places, how do they set down roots in these new places?

Vincent Brown (09:10):

How do they grow? And sometimes even thrive in these disparate environments, even under conditions of most extreme brutality and domination. So that concept of diaspora actually helps me think beyond those national borders that we usually use to contain history. And I'll say it makes a lot more sense when we talk about a subject like slavery. When we talk about, say the slave trade and the forced migration of some 12 million people over several hundred years from Africa to the Americas, right. That's not just kind of one national history. It has to be seen in light of this transnational phenomenon, which did shape, in fact, the history of the entire Atlantic world. It reshaped the history of Africa. It certainly shaped the history of the Americas and it reshaped the history of Europe as well. And we can't really

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understand any of the particular countries, nation states within Europe, or the Americas, or in Africa, without understanding this transnational process out of which they emerged. And that is the process of the slave trade colonization in the Americas, the establishment of slave societies and their growth through the 18th century. And even through the age of revolution.

Karen Long (10:27):

It's one of the reasons that your tool of physically looking where the mountains were, where the ports were, what did it feel like in these topographies? What would it mean to think strategically? How can that be mapped and remapped? It feels so potent. And I noticed with great interest that at the end of the talk you gave in Philadelphia, your host asked you about the time you spent on the ground and you spent more than a decade, but you also spent time in Ghana and you spent time, of course, in Jamaica. And you describe a fort, Fort Anomabo?

Vincent Brown (11:15):

Anomabo. Yes. One of the busiest forts of the mid-18th century slave trade. Far busier in fact, than Cape Coast Castle.

Karen Long (11:24):

And that it's not sort of sanctified with a world status and that you were able to be there at sunrise and felt something in your imagination because you put yourself.

Vincent Brown (11:39):

Yeah, that's right. I mean, so Anomabo, as I just said was kind of one of the busiest forts for slave trading on the Gold Coast, roughly the area that's, that's now Ghana in the mid-18th century. So around the time that a lot of these people would've been coming to the Americas and coming to Jamaica just before Tacky's Revolt. And as you said, it's not one of these UNESCO World Heritage Sites, like Cape Coast Castle, or like Elmina, so it's not been kind of repainted. There's not really a tourist economy that goes there. It's run down. And so in its run down condition in some ways it's much easier to imagine its history because it does look aged. It does look like something from the past. And when I went there one morning in 2007, kind of very early, we drove out before dawn. And we were there at sunrise. And for those of you who know the Ghanaian coast, there's a kind of heavy mist that often hangs on the coast. And so that heavy mist was there that feeling of being kind of almost transported back into the past was there. And I can't tell you how that shaped my history particularly, but I can tell you that it gave an emotional quality to my understanding of the slave trade, a very personal understanding of the slave trade that doesn't emerge from the records of slave trading forts. It doesn't emerge from the quantitative records of slave ships. It doesn't emerge from the ship's journals. It emerges from that kind of personal connection and the fort itself in its dilapidated condition was a kind of conduit between my own imagination and the past that I could document through those other kinds of records.

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Karen Long (13:27):

I love that your instrument enters into the story this way. On page four, so very early on you quote a man who bought his own freedom, I think in 1776?

Vincent Brown (13:43):

Oh yes. Gustavus Vassa, Olaudah Equiano.

Karen Long (13:47):

Yes. Yes. Thank you.

Vincent Brown (13:47):

So he often went by Gustavus Vassa in the 18th century. We know him better as Olaudah Equiano. He was one of the most famous, formerly enslaved black people in Britain during the 18th century. He was enslaved then served on a Royal Navy ship for a time. Both bought his freedom ultimately, and became an abolitionist. and wrote an autobiography that was published in the 1780s that became one of the most widely read and celebrated books in 18th century England. And he also did tours around the world campaigning for, around the country, campaigning for abolitionism. And Equiano said something in his narrative that always stuck with me and really framed the way that I wrote this story. He said that when you make people slaves, you compel them to live with you in a state of war. He cast slavery itself as a state of war. Right?

Karen Long (14:47):

And, and not only a state of war, but you compel them to live with you. It's a dynamic.

Vincent Brown (14:53):

That's right.

Karen Long (14:53):

In the state of war.

Vincent Brown (14:55):

Yeah. That's right.

Karen Long (14:56):

Profound.

Vincent Brown (14:57):

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And so that quality of a violent relationship underpinning the fundamental, like nature of slavery was a kind of theory of slavery and enslavement that I used to guide my writing. So it wasn't just that this revolt was an aberration in the course of some normal activities that one could call slavery. But in fact, it was just a response within what was already a fundamentally violent relationship. That organized violence was fundamental to maintaining slavery and fundamental to overthrowing it as well.

Karen Long (15:32):

Right. And so that continuity is reframed. And you wrote in the book, "Viewed on the map, the insurrection appears to have been the product of genuine strategic intelligence, one that utilized Jamaica's distinctive geography and aimed toward the creation of alternative societies." And this is sourced in part on the Gold Coast.

Vincent Brown (15:59):

Yeah, that's right. I mean, so, you know, one of the common ways of thinking about slave revolt in the 17th, 18th, 19th centuries was dismissive. Was to say that this is merely a reaction to some very particular condition. And it was a reaction to slavery or some bad master or another, it wasn't an indictment of the system.

Karen Long (16:24):

Right. Bad apple argument.

Vincent Brown (16:25):

Yeah, exactly. It was the kind of bad apple argument. Right? And what that never really took account of is the initiatives of the enslaved. And that, you know, their initiatives might have been drawn from things broader than their particular local conditions on one plantation or even in one colony. That when one looks as I did through the diaspora of Africans coming to the Americas, one has to draw upon their histories before they got to America. And one of the fundamental ways in which the slave trade worked, was through the stimulation of warfare on the west African coast and in its hinterlands Europeans traded firearms, massive quantities of firearms among other goods for slaves. And what that did was that increased the scale and the lethality of warfare, and also the production of more slaves.

Karen Long (17:21):

Number of people who could be sold. Absolutely.

Vincent Brown (17:24):

So again, violence was at the root slave trade itself, but what that meant was that many of the people captured and sold to the Europeans themselves had military experience. Or had experience fleeing from, from raiders and armies. And so the world of warfare was very much part of their experience when they arrived in Jamaica. And some of those who had been soldiers then used that skill in soldiering to revolt against plantation society. And that's not something that slaveholders like to admit.

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Karen Long (17:57):

Another fact that blew my mind and lifted my eyebrows occurs here on page 147, where you're talking about this boat called The Lively, the ship. And they took on some of the early revolters from Jamaica and 40% of them were women.

Vincent Brown (18:22):

That's right.

Karen Long (18:22):

Talk about the categories we have.

Vincent Brown (18:24):

Well, I mean, we have this assumption, right? That warfare is fundamentally a masculine, a male activity. And perhaps it largely is. But what that means is that we're continually surprised when we see women engaged in that masculine activity. What I found on this ship is that among the first 25 rebels captured and put aboard of Royal Navy worship to be brought around the island for interrogation, torture and trial in Kingston and Spanish Town. Among those first 25 rebels, as you said, 40% of them had identifiably women's names. Now we don't know exactly what they were doing in the course of that revolt at the beginning there, but we do know that they were involved, heavily involved. And it compels us to question, right, our basic assumption that somehow this was a male affair. Now, what I can't tell you is if those women didn't see themselves as performing masculine activities, right?

Vincent Brown (19:27):

Even as they were revolting alongside those men, what I can tell you is that we should stop being surprised. When we see in the 18th century women involved in these military campaigns, we should stop being surprised when we hear about Amazons, right? In other parts of the world. We should stop being surprised when we hear about people like Queen Njinga of west central Africa, who was a warrior queen in the 17th century, who fought the Portuguese alongside other of her enemies, right. We keep finding out about these women and keep being surprised because we're blocked from seeing how continuous that history is. And it may be the case that women are generally in the minority in these military campaigns, but it's also definitely the case that they're rarely excluded from them.

Karen Long (20:16):

I love knowing that. I feel the lens though very foggy, when I try to imagine my way back centuries with no electricity, with no plumbing, with no penicillin. How do you do that?

Vincent Brown (20:33):

How do you do without electricity, plumbing and penicillin?

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Karen Long (20:37):

How do you conjure the world that is so exotically different from the one you and I are sitting in today?

Vincent Brown (20:45):

That's where historians are dependent on their sources. And again, the act of imagination that allows you to listen as carefully as you can, to the world the sources are describing for you. And then try to imagine even beyond those voices. And so kind of, as you said, you have to kind of leave our modern sensibilities in some ways behind. And when people talk a lot about the weather and how much the weather means to them, when they talk about the lighting and how much the lighting means to know that, like they don't have artificial, you know, temperature control and they don't have artificial lighting. And so, like, that's a fundamental awareness that they have that we have in some ways lost. We might check our weather app now, right?

Vincent Brown (21:38):

But people in the 18th century had to look to the wind. They had to use their sense of smell. They had to understand what was happening in the earth. They had to watch the foliage, in order to understand what their climate was doing. And what it draws us back to is a kind of ecological sense of our presence in the world. But I think that we're, you know, we're largely detached from because of our many of our modern conveniences. And that ecological perspective, I think, was fundamental to them. If we imagine like some of us as children who used to play outside more often. And when I was a child, I used to play in the hills behind my house. And I had a pretty intimate awareness of where different kinds of animals were and where you might be able to find different kinds of animals like frogs. I just knew where frogs would hide. I knew what was going on. I've lost all of that. And it's because I'm no longer practiced at paying attention to my surroundings in the same way. I knew how to navigate the apps on my computer screen. But if I take a walk in the forest, I don't know what plants are, are edible and what plants are poisonous anymore. Although I did, when I was a kid, and that's kind of interesting to me.

Karen Long (22:49):

It is interesting. And your own childhood interests me greatly. I know you're going back to San Francisco, or San Diego soon...

Vincent Brown (22:57):

San Diego. Yes. Yeah.

Karen Long (22:59):

...where you grew up. You were born there in 1967. How would you say it's transformed?

Vincent Brown (23:08):

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San Diego itself has transformed a lot. When I grew up, you could say it was a town that was pretty much run by the Navy, the Marines, and the developers. It was growing a lot, but it was fairly small, again kind of a very strong military town. And I think you could say, like, you know, over the course of my lifetime it grew into one of the largest military garrisons, really in the history of the world, between the Navy and the Marines there. And so I had a lot of friends who joined the Navy and the Marines, you know, straight out of high school. And so in some ways I kind of felt the Cold War, you know from the Vietnam War all the way through the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, I kind of felt the Cold War as a constant presence because the military was so prominent in San Diego, whereas maybe in other parts of the country, unless there was a particular war going on, that was in the news all the time, people didn't really think about it. But when I think of my life, I think of essentially a half century of constant war. In part having grown up in a military town. Frankly, I can't name a five year period from 1967 to the present, when the United States hasn't been engaged in some kind of military conflict, somewhere in the world.

Karen Long (24:29):

And because you were in San Diego, the atmospheric pressure of your environment included the military pressure on the country.

Vincent Brown (24:38):

Oh yeah.

Karen Long (24:39):

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. We'll now return to the conversation.

Karen Long (25:05):

Your acknowledgements at the end of "Tacky's Revolt" also took my breath away. So I'm going to ask for your indulgence to read that opening paragraph.

Vincent Brown (25:17):

Oh, sure.

Vincent Brown (25:18):

"Looking back, I guess that my upbringing in San Diego, California, pointed me toward the study of imperial war. Even though San Diego has never been a place as central to the popular imagination as New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, or even Atlanta, its role as one of the most potent military garrisons in the history of the world made it pivotal to the US geopolitics of the latter half of the twentieth century. From my hometown, soldiers, sailors, and pilots sallied forth to secure our freedom—or our right to consume tropical commodities, Middle East oil, or what-ever. Born at the height of the Vietnam War and raised during the Cold War, I witnessed the flowering of American

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militarism close to the heart of its power but far from its battlefields. Friends joined the Navy or the Marines, returning from their tours of duty with descriptions of brothels in the Pacific or with snapshots of dead enemy soldiers in the Persian Gulf. Although they had been there, their stories always seemed displaced to me; their experiences remained far away and had little bearing on the shelter of home. It wasn't until September 11, 2001, that the barrier between there and here seemed to collapse for many Americans, who suddenly confronted a long interwoven history of unbecoming conduct, clandestine collaborations, and surreptitious homicides across the globe, and who have been furiously trying to recover their distance ever since. Maybe this book represents my yearning to keep that distance small and to keep that hidden history in mind, in order to dispel the myths of geographical disconnection—and the class, racial, cultural, and gender differences mapped onto them—that allow people to devour each other with so little hesitation."

Karen Long (27:10):

Wow. That's just a masterclass in writing. Thank you.

Vincent Brown (27:14):

Oh, well, thank you for saying that. I appreciate it.

Karen Long (27:16):

It makes me, since we're speaking in May 2022, want to turn your attention to the war in Ukraine? Here, it feels on a turn of a dime, though you have the perspective to say it's always been there. We have a President going out for a photo op with Javelins. Didn't expect that.

Vincent Brown (27:38):

Right.

Karen Long (27:38):

How are you thinking about this dime that we've turned on?

Vincent Brown (27:43):

Yeah, well, again, I mean, it's in our imaginations, we've turned on a dime, but it, but again, these conflicts are continuous. And I have very mixed feelings about the conflict now. I mean, as I think, as I think we all should. On the one hand, it's incredibly inspiring to see how brave the Ukrainians have been under assault from a far larger and far more potent and nuclear-armed Russian military. I probably wasn't alone in thinking in February when this first began that the Ukrainians didn't stand a chance and that it would all be over very soon with Ukrainian defeat and that hasn't happened. And that's a testament to the bravery, first of all, those Ukrainians and their skill. As well as perhaps, you know, the overestimation of Russian military capabilities that I think many of us had. At the same time, I don't think anybody should be comfortable with the idea that here the United States is again engaged. At what seems to be a closing distance with the Russian military and again, a nuclear armed military. So this is an

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incredibly dangerous situation for the world. It reminds me in a way of the Cold War period in the 1980s, when, you know, we all had to imagine nuclear war. It was this kind of idea that, you know, we were six minutes away from the destruction of human civilization. And those feelings have, have come back with this conflict. I guess we thought that environmental catastrophe was the global catastrophic horizon we were facing. It turns out there's that, and now there's nuclear war as well. So I think that nobody can be, nobody can be comfortable or sanguine about the situation as it's unfolding, even as we admire the courage of those Ukrainians standing up to the aggression of a far larger frankly imperial power. Those are the mixed feelings I have about it. But I do think that kind of reading about these other kinds of lopsided conflicts in the past, as Tacky's Revolt, where they took the British Navy, the British army, the militia, and their, their allies to suppress this scrappy band of enslaved gorilla fighters, you could call them, shows us that that's a kind of conflict that, you know, has been with us for a very long time. And those conflicts generally don't end, as we predict.

Karen Long (30:19):

And they create a story, as you point out in your epilogue, to tell so that in 1807, the people in slavery in Jamaica were telling the new arrivals from Africa, about Tacky's Revolt.

Vincent Brown (30:34):

Yeah.

Karen Long (30:35):

One of the reasons we haven't today, and I've been thinking about the Ukrainians absolutely masterful use of social media.

Vincent Brown (30:43):

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. So I mean, the stories people tell themselves about these conflicts are fundamental to the conflicts themselves, and certainly the way we remember them and how they play out and how they might reemerge in the future. So we have evidence that the enslaved were telling themselves, telling each other, the story Tacky's Revolt for at least half a century after the conflict. I'm reminded. When we see the kind of evidence of these atrocities being committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, those are going to be stories that will be told and retold for a very long time. And it seems that the Russians have bought themselves intergenerational hatred through the activities in their invasion. That won't end even when this particular phase of the conflict ends.

Karen Long (31:37):

Intergenerational trauma on both sides for the Russian people..

Vincent Brown (31:41):

Absolutely.

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Karen Long (31:41):

...Ukrainian people. One of the things I learned as an undergraduate is feminists better pay attention to war, because women are turned into sex slaves in war, and you see it right now in Ukraine.

Vincent Brown (31:55):

Oh, yes.

Karen Long (31:56):

It's horrifying.

Vincent Brown (31:57):

Well, you see it in every campaign. Again, it's one of those reasons why, you know, I want to integrate military history with these other kinds of histories: with the history of women in gender, with the history of race and, and, and economics. It's not separate from those things. We tend to separate, say the history of sexual violence from the history of warfare. When everywhere we look in military history, sexual violence is a fundamental part of what soldiers commit. And so I don't think it should be separate at all.

Karen Long (32:30):

In fact, the theory is that men are dominating other men through the women.

Vincent Brown (32:37):

If you look at a lot of sexist discourse it's as often aimed at men to try and kind of distinguish superior from lesser men, as it is aimed at women. You know, men will call each other, you know gender epithets, you know, as much, or probably more, then they will apply those gendered epithets to women.

Karen Long (33:03):

It's so interesting, how, I don't know, fragile, we are with all our powerful toys.

Vincent Brown (33:11):

Yeah. Right. Yeah. I think that's right.

Karen Long (33:16):

One, one thing that's a bit off topic, but feels pertinent is something that happened 12 years ago when PBS aired your documentary, "Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness."

Vincent Brown (33:29):

Oh, yes. "Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness." Yeah.

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Karen Long (33:32):

I love it because it's a story of another complex, absolutely complicated human, that you document and make visual, since your storytelling has such a strong visual element. Will you let our listeners know about that documentary?

Vincent Brown (33:51):

It seems I have a habit of trying to tell complicated stories. And in fact, if "Tacky's Revolt" has been criticized, it's been criticized for being too dense and perhaps too complicated. So I apologize to your listeners if anybody finds it too complicated. But I think that life is complicated and I think people are complicated and, you know, we have seen how much trouble we can get into when we believe stereotypes and simple stories and simplistic narratives. And so I think training ourselves to see complicated, ironic, ambivalent stories is really urgent.

So Herskovits was a man, a Jewish man who you know, grew up in the Midwest. He was born in Bellefontaine, Ohio, in fact and went to graduate school at Columbia University and studied anthropology with the great Franz Boas, who's one of the pioneers of modern anthropology. Also working alongside people like Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. And Herskovits, when he began his career, he was thinking about the African diaspora, although we didn't call it that at the time, because at the time say around the mid-1920s, most people assume, and certainly almost every scholar assumed, that the slave trade and slavery had just denuded black people of any ancestral heritage they might have from Africa.

Any difference you saw between them and the kind of dominant norms and values and customs among white, people was simply a matter of their racial inability to fully assimilate white norms and values. What Herskovits did is he went back and forth between different parts of west Africa, the Caribbean, South America, collected material from the southern United States to try and document formal cultural connections between Africans and African Americans, so that he could write about this cultural history, a history of transformation of African cultures that people had brought with them to the Americas in the course of the slave trade and in many ways maintain and sustain as they survived slavery. And this was kind of a revelation within anthropology. And he helped to establish kind of many of the first African studies schools in the United States and up to establish this study, but we now call the African diaspora in U.S. Universities....

Karen Long (36:21):

But you also call him the Elvis of African American studies.

Vincent Brown (36:24):

That's right. And this is part of the complexity, which is that, you know, he did some of that work, but he wasn't the only person doing it. People like W.E.B. Du Bois, people like Carter G. Woodson who gave us Negro History Week, which has become Black History Month, were also doing this work and thinking along similar lines, but because they weren't at the elite universities and they didn't have access to the research funds, they couldn't supply as much of the data as Herskovits was able to mobilize. And so he

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got the credit for these ideas. I think about him as maybe the Elvis of African American studies, because like rock and roll, it's not as if Elvis was the first or the originator of rock and roll. He just became the most famous, right? Because he was positioned to be the most famous. He was the most widely acknowledged. And Herskovits became acknowledged in a way that was far in excess of his, of his originality. And so that is a complex part of that story. The second piece of that though, is that people then appropriated, used Herskovits' work to vindicate and validate those ideas, that Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Du Bois had been trying to espouse without as much success as Herskovits had. So you find Herskovits being taken up by black power activists in the late 1960s. Despite the fact that he's a white scholar, because he's saying something with the authority and credibility that they want to, that they want to use for that idea, he's saying something that they want to say, an idea that they want to promote in a similar way to the way that Elvis actually helps to mainstream rock and roll, right. And that process, of you know, mainstreaming and/or appropriation is something that's still with us today.

Karen Long (38:05):

That is, as you say, complicated, and I think the detail and the density honors the individuals in your book.

Vincent Brown (38:15):

I can't do it any other way, but I, but I do understand that if you're used to simpler stories, my stories aren't the simplest.

Karen Long (38:23):

So what are you reading now? That's how we like to round out these conversations. So people have a thread to follow.

Vincent Brown (38:31):

Oh, well, you know, I've just been reading a fantastic book by a Haitian scholar named Jean Casimir. It's called, "The Haitians: A Decolonial History." And Casimir was the Haitian Ambassador to the United States previously, but he's also an amazing scholar. And there's a fantastic translation of the Haitians by one of my favorite historians of the Haitian revolution, Laurent Dubois. And in this book, you know, Casimir takes the kind of radical proposition that we ought to think about the history of the Americas, the history of these plantation colonies, from the perspective of the enslaved, in which case, what we're doing is not looking at the history of slavery as an institution, not looking at the history of empires and their conflicts, so much as we're looking at the history of people's encounters with slavery and these empires and what they do to try and survive those encounters. And, you know, it may seem like a subtle shift in perspective, but once you do it, a radical kind of, you know, new world of possibilities opens up, we can see how it is that the counter-plantation Casimir calls it, actually helps us sustain these enslaved communities and the descendant communities after the end of slavery, in ways that fundamentally shape politics and the nature of the state, but that haven't been understood well, because we haven't taken these people seriously as political actors in their own right. And so that, well, I have it here

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actually. It's not very far from me. Jean Casimir's "The Haitians: A Decolonial History" is something that I think everybody ought to have a look at, even though it itself is a tough book, too. It's a dense and and difficult book, but worth a read.

Karen Long (40:22):

Does he mention Apongo?

Vincent Brown (40:25):

He does not, he does not. Apongo is something that kind of emerges from these plantation records, the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, that a lot of historians of Jamaica know about, but beyond Jamaica, I think they'll have to learn about through my book.

Karen Long (40:38):

That sounds like a nice pairing. Are you reading anything off brand? Are you reading anything that isn't related to your work?

Vincent Brown (40:47):

Oh, well, you know, we're just finishing the semester at Harvard right now. So it's been work, work, work. I'm not sure what I'm going to read this summer to try and kind of take myself out of work mode. I'm probably gonna watch some television series. I've been watching the series of My Brilliant Friend, the Elena Ferrante novels. And HBO has done a kind of great rendition of that in miniseries. And season three is on now, and I've been diving back into that.

Karen Long (41:14):

That sounds luxurious and palate cleansing.

Vincent Brown (41:18):

Absolutely. Although I will say true to form, those are dense and complicated characters. With very complicated motivations, and those are the stories I like.

Karen Long (41:31):

I so appreciate you taking some time with us Professor Brown. Your scholarship has lit us up and we look forward to reading more. If we wait a decade, we wait a decade.

Vincent Brown (41:45):

Thank you. Well, thank, thank you so much. I appreciate you and your questions, which were excellent. And I thank all your listeners.

Karen Long (41:52):

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Talk soon. How soon I hope. And actually one day we will meet.

Vincent Brown (41:57):

Yes, I hope so. I hope so. I'll try to, I mean, now that things are opening up again hopefully I'll be able to come out to Cleveland.

Karen Long (42:06):

Yes. Thank you. Be well.

Vincent Brown (42:07):

All right. Be well.

Karen Long (42:10):

The Asterisk* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland Public School students, working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, wrote and performed our original score. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Visit anisfield-wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award, about previous winners and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.