Encounter

The Cultural Progressivism of James Earl Davis

An Interview by Leonard J. Waks

One of the most exciting progressive intellectuals to address issues of culture and education in the last decade is James Earl Davis. Davis’s work has focused on male identity formation in its cultural and educational contexts, with special emphasis on Black boys and young men.

Two words frequently found in Davis’s writings are “hegemony” and “complexity.”

The cultural resources available to young men as they come of age include hegemonic cultural definitions, those exerting a preponderant influence over their understanding of people, events and situations. Davis has been especially concerned about conceptions of “manhood,” or “manliness” that shape subsequent masculine behavioral patterns when they are internalized by young Black men as they work out their own individual identities. Davis has been interested in how these preponderant or hegemonic definitions are constructed in everyday social life. He has been even more interested in how they obscure or constrain the complex variety of ways of understanding oneself and responding to life situations. For Davis, there is simply more social and cultural complexity than any hegemonic definitions, or any set of definitions, can ever encompass.

Davis admits that hegemonic definitions of manhood or manliness may be useful to young men in some ways, during their period of individuation. These definitions, however, can also be very dangerous if they promote negative behavior patterns or obscure alternative understandings that might engender more positive, life-affirming patterns of living.
Therefore much of Davis’s work consists in “deconstructing” hegemonic definitions, uncovering alternative definitions, which, though obscured, are at work in the culture, and, finally, putting these alternatives into play in learning experiences of young men from their middle school years until young adulthood, in order to facilitate their growth. Like Richard Rorty, Davis believes that young men should have a variety of models of manhood and of male heroes to choose from, and should choose several, answering to different aspects of their natures to respond to challenges in different cultural circumstances.

Davis has used many tactics in uncovering these alternative definitions, including interview studies designed to tease out the diverse understandings of manhood, institutional studies of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to find alternative visions of Black males, and collective narrative projects in which Black scholars tell the stories of their mothers’ influence on their identity formation as Black men. Ultimately, Davis’s project seeks to use and to synthesize the scholarly resources of many social science and humanities disciplines, while transcending them by engendering new transdisciplinary discourses about manhood and masculinities.

Of special interest to readers of Education and Culture, Davis is a progressive pragmatist who seeks not a true, or best, cultural definition of manhood, but rather a plethora of culturally useful conceptions, those that might nurture young men and help them to grow. This is summed up in his provocative equation “culture workers = educators = mothers.”

I met with Davis on campus at Temple University, where we both serve as professors of educational leadership and policy studies.

Experience with Historically Black Colleges and Universities

LW: James, your experience as a student at an HBCU plays a large role in your work. So let’s start with your educational background. Where are you from, and where did you go to school?

JED: I grew up in rural Madison County, Alabama, near Huntsville. I went to a poor, segregated elementary school and a small, rural, desegregated high school.

LW: How did you get to Morehouse College?

JED: I knew even before high school that I could do good academic work. When I got to high school a teacher encouraged me to take the higher-level classes. The school had few resources—no foreign languages, very few advanced mathematics and science classes, for example. But we could take additional courses at the county voc-tech center, and I took French at night. My French teacher, Mrs. Griffith, was married to a Morehouse graduate. She spoke highly of Morehouse and said, “You have to talk to my husband!” After attend-
ing the local Black college in Huntsville for a year, I eventually made the contact. They wrote letters of reference and I was admitted.

*LW:* It must have been quite an adjustment moving from rural Alabama to Atlanta.

**JED:** In some ways it was. When Benjamin Elijah Mays was president in the 50s and 60s, some students were showing up with nothing but the clothes on their backs. My adjustment problems were not that severe, but it was as challenging culturally as it was economically.

Until shortly before I arrived, the Morehouse tradition had been cultivated by former presidents. One in particular, Benjamin Elijah Mays, a religion scholar who had earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, had been president for forty years. Mays was the teacher and mentor of Martin Luther King and a group of other distinguished Black leaders, who came to be known as “Bennie’s Boys.” When freshmen first appeared on campus, President Mays would greet them by name. “Welcome, Mr. Smith,” or whatever. And many of these young men were not accustomed to being treated with this kind of respect. Mays told them, in effect, that Morehouse held a crown high above their heads, and expected them to grow up to it! He also said, “There is an air of expectancy at Morehouse College. It is expected that the students who enter here will do well. It is also expected that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse graduate, he will do exceptionally well. We expect nothing less.”

*LW:* So Mays was one of those “counter-hegemonic” cultural sources you discuss in your article on the HBCUs.

**JED:** Quite the opposite, in several ways. He represented an orthodox conception of manhood held by the Black middle class—6' 3", booming voice, autocratic, the quintessential male. He was a model, someone to emulate. Morehouse had a mission as a “builder of men” in just that mode. Mays felt that Morehouse men should be prepared to assume leadership roles in American society when the gates opened, and he didn’t tolerate anything that might interfere with this mission. This orthodox definition of manhood in this way played a tremendous role in the Morehouse mission. However, he saw also intellectual distinction to be absolutely central to the mission. He had graduated from Brown, Phi Beta Kappa, and earned his Ph.D. at Chicago, and these experiences shaped his view of what it would require to earn respect among American elites. He always wanted Morehouse to have a Phi Beta Kappa chapter. In fact, Black colleges had been generally shunned by Phi Beta Kappa, and Morehouse didn’t get a chapter until a year after he left—and it was the third Black college with a chapter—Fisk was the first—but only the fourth chapter to be recognized in the state of Georgia.

**Contemporary Roles for State-Funded**

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**Historically Black Colleges**

*LW*: What is the contemporary role of the HBCUs, especially those with state funding, which cannot “discriminate” against potential White applicants?

**JED**: The state HBCUs now are somewhat of a mixed mind about their contemporary missions. On the one hand, the state governments want to provide a “diversity” of offerings in higher education, and these schools advance that goal. The question is, How does that inform the schools’ own sense of identity and academic mission? The need to be open to White students means they will have to move somewhat from their traditional missions, without abandoning them. For many of these institutions that have enrolled significant number of White students, particularly in graduate programs, this hasn’t been a major problem.

*LW*: In what directions should they move?

**JED**: Well, they’ll have to provide academic options that are useful to Black students while also serving other students. The current discourse among HBCU leaders involves a false dualism—whether to maintain or abandon the historical identities and missions. But this way of thinking obscures the real question: What are the critical elements of these traditional identities today?

The central issue for most is about students—how far they should go in recruiting and catering to White students. Black students comprise the cultural community traditionally served by these institutions; the HBCUs were founded explicitly to serve that community. The traditionalists think that maintaining institutional identity means remaining exclusively Black.

*LW*: Can the state-funded schools get away with that?

**JED**: In some cases, the state legislators have been turning a blind eye. But there are some very interesting conversion stories. West Virginia has two HBCUs, Bluefield State and West Virginia State, that have experienced major demographic shifts. Bluefield today is only 8 percent Black. The Black population of the state has dwindled and is very dispersed, so there is no substantial single concentration of Black students for the schools to serve. But Bluefield and West Virginia State have been successful in maintaining their enrollment, academic quality, and budget, so in this sense they are a “success.” But from another angle, the presidents are Black, and the institutions continue their devotion to serving Black residential students. So these institutions remain, in a sense, successful historically Black colleges. There are other examples of HBCUs that are now more racially inclusive, but still have Black leadership and serve their traditional constituents well, including, among others, Delaware State University, Kentucky State University and Lincoln University in Missouri.
Historically Black Colleges as Models for Predominantly Black High Schools

LW: In your work on Black male identity formation and schooling, you range from middle school kids to young adults, so perhaps we could shift from post-secondary to K–12 education. You have written that HBCUs are important as conservators, transformers and conveyers of aspects of Black culture obscured by hegemonic cultural definitions. These aspects, moreover, can play important roles in the identity work of Black college students. Do you think that African or African-American-centered high schools can play similar roles for younger Black adolescents?

JED: It’s important to say right at the start that the HBCUs are not “African-centered.” Some critics complain that they are too Euro-centered! Their curricula have typically been the same as predominantly White colleges. But the context for that curriculum content has been different. While the curriculum content is not African, or African-American—African-centered per se—it is delivered as a way of fulfilling the aspirations of Black people as a community of culture.

As institutions, the HBCUs were among the last to fully embrace Black studies programs. They said they were already doing Black studies, in their own, more organic and integrated way. In fact, faculty members were always incorporating Black studies, because their own scholarship was frequently on African-American topics and themes, and naturally they incorporated their own findings into their courses just as other scholars usually do.

But on the whole, they believed, with the young W. E. B. Dubois, that to earn respect from the White elites Blacks would have to do even better than Whites at meeting the academic and intellectual standards set for Whites.

That said, there is something to be learned from the HBCUs that can be applied to high schools with predominantly Black student populations.

First, the important thing is not “Black” curriculum content, but rather culture and context. The cultural capital available for high school students is similar to that available in the HBCUs. We can still “hold a crown high above their heads for them to grow up to.” Horace Mann Bond and Benjamin Elijah Mays had a firm grasp on what was necessary to cause a cultural shift in the students they were preparing: influences outside the classroom, in the dispositions of leaders, teachers and advanced students, in acknowledging the privileged opportunity of being a college student—especially before the modern civil rights era.

These same understandings could guide high schools with predominantly African-American students. Some folks think it can happen just by assuring an all-Black faculty and all-Black students. But these influences don’t take effect spontaneously. They have to be structured and focused.

Benjamin Elijah Mays exerted his influence through the Chapel. He was encouraging, inspiring, and he could also be threatening to those whom he saw as placing the mission at risk. He had a clear mission, and he kept his eyes on
the prize. He felt he couldn’t permit anyone to risk the mission. He was known, for example, to publicly humiliate those men he perceived as exhibiting off-mission behaviors in Chapel, in front of the entire student body.

*LW*: Public high schools, however, don’t have chapels. So what do they have by way of contexts for this cultural work?

JED: Well, in the Black segregated high schools of the 1950s they didn’t have Chapel, but they did have “Assembly.” And in places in the Deep South, that was a Chapel: entire schools became a refuge, a meetinghouse, a place for political and cultural gatherings.

Today’s urban high schools, on the other hand, are often too big and fragmented for such effective community meetings. Principals and teachers consciously avoid bringing large groups of students together, fearing negative behaviors.

But you still can do related kinds of cultural work, in smaller group settings or one-on-one. The real problem is that large urban high schools are simply not culture-based institutions. They are too often large, culturally sterile bureaucracies. Most of the African-centered schools, by contrast, are small private or charter schools.

*LW*: So are you saying that we should have culture-based high schools for young Black students, but in a charter school rather than public school model?

JED: In a word, yes. We should be building culture-based institutions for young Blacks as members of a community of culture. That is where the potential for educational development lies. Such schools have to be small enough to engender a sense of community.

If we concentrate on the curriculum, however, all roads now lead to “student achievement” as measured by standardized tests. We can move to culture-based schools, but not through curriculum change.

But we can move in this direction even within the constraints of the contemporary curriculum. We can even succeed in fulfilling curriculum objectives through culture-based context changes. But to do so, we must focus on four factors:

1. The teachers and leaders have to be “called” to the work. It has to be a true “vocation.” The faculties of the HBCUs had that vocation. They accepted their under-resourced conditions, because they were making an investment in the next generation, moving the people along toward freedom and equality. That is simply not how we recruit teachers for urban public high schools today!

2. There has to be professional development around the cultural mission of the school. And the professional development program must be on-going, explicit, transparent, participatory, and
cumulative. Culturally speaking, the school has to be a so-called “learning community” for the staff, a never-ending seminar.

3. We have to do the same thing for students. The cultural basis of the school has to be ritualized—in pledges, songs, cultural artifacts, stories, and school mythology. That’s what the segregated Black schools did—created a living experience of the school as “alma mater.” And then that context has to interact with and feed the academic mission of the schools and the curriculum.

Also, the academic program has to in some way mirror the “learning community” experience of the staff. Even if the curriculum has to be test-driven today, instruction must be more discursive, more like a seminar providing room for individual voices and for sharing cultural values. There cannot be a discontinuity between the developing experience of the staff and that of the students. There are organic ways to set the students on fire. And the test culture itself has to be publicly acknowledged, as part of a parallel discussion about what we are doing and why.

4. The parents and community members have to be involved. Many of them need the same sort of cultural work. There are many reasons why parents might want to involve their children in Black culture–based schools. On the mundane level, they may think these schools are “smaller and safer.” But such schools also provide us with an opportunity to bring parents along. The school also has an obligation to its locale, even if it is a charter school and many of the students don’t live right in the neighborhood. Fulfilling this obligation to local residents is part of gaining credibility in the community.

LW: What do the schools actually do with parents and community members? Does it offer classes and seminars? Or what?

JED: For one thing, the school invites them into the school space, it welcomes them, makes them feel “at home.” Much has been said about how low-income parents are already burdened with responsibilities. But many low-income parents may fail to participate in their kids’ educations simply out of fear. They avoid schools because schools challenge them—many of the parents have experienced school failure and schools highlight their failures and limitations.

Communities, however, come together in different ways—for example, around block parties. These are historical, cultural events, often with a long tradition. So thinking of schools as communities is one way of opening up new ideas and opportunities.

Of course this way of thinking may also tend to impose new burdens on teachers. So we have to be aware of the limits of this metaphor. But even school
architecture works against building community. The big urban public schools have no windows, limited access from the streets. They are fortresses—they send the community the signals “stay out” and “you are not welcome.” Some have entrances with metal detectors, and security guards that question the presence of neighborhood residents. So, on a simple level, even the security guards have to be included in the professional development program, have to be integrated in the cultural mission of the school, have to be members of the “welcome team” rather than gate-keepers.

**Intellectual Roots and Sources**

* LW: James, you identity yourself as working within the “progressive” tradition, and even differentiate yourself from Christopher Brown [your coeditor of Black Sons to Mothers], who works within the “social reconstructivist” tradition. What does it mean to you to be a “progressive”? What authors in that tradition have served as touchstones?  

JED: I use the term “progressive” for its resonance with “progressive education.” My inspiration in this work is John Dewey. I’ve been attracted by his views of democracy, the educative potential of diversity, and also the child as the “subject” of education, the center of experience and action, and hence Black boys as subjects, as centers of their educational experiences. Dewey has helped me think about school experiences in which learners have to move across identity categories, where identities get confused, where new and more expansive identities have to form. Dewey is helpful in my work of opening up concepts, moving beyond fixed conceptual definitions.

I have been criticized for positioning myself as a progressive, for embracing a progressive education agenda for Black children. Some critics have said that progressive education “victimized” Black children. That was Jonathan Kozol’s argument in the 1970s. But the social context for that criticism was very different from today’s context.

* LW: Some of your intellectual strategies are reminiscent of postmodernist authors, for example, your deconstruction of conceptual definitions and large cultural narratives. In addition, your recent book Black Sons into Mothers was published in the prominent postmodern education series Counterpoints, edited by Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg. How do you position yourself in relation to postmodernist educators?  

JED: I share many of the sensibilities of the postmodernists. But I have not identified myself as a postmodernist. If pushed, I might have to admit that I am one. Like them, I have been seriously engaged in issues of power, dominance and resistance.

But there is a certain irony about the educational postmodernists. They have studied the crucial role of language, text, intellectual discourses in power
and dominance, but then they use their own discourses and texts, their own lan-
guage, as means of inclusion and exclusion, of maintaining their own dominance. 
Or consider Foucault, who did so much to complexify issues of knowledge, 
power and control, but who in the process “complexified” his own language for 
considering these concepts to the extent that he made his knowledge formations 
opaque and exclusive.

I have heard people say that postmodernism is “sexy.” And it is, in a way. 
And the self-presentation of educational postmodernists like Peter McLaren and 
Bill Pinar is interesting and provocative. Now I’m not one to shy away from 
sexuality—it is one of the last bastions of liberation. But a highly sexualized 
presentation of postmodern sensibilities can mask or confuse the issues we need 
to be discussing. For example, the cultural definitions of Black males have also 
cast them as “sexy”—sexualized in ways that play into adolescent masculine 
behaviors, actions in the classroom that arouse fears.

So for me the question is, How does one express postmodern sensibilities 
in terms that are accessible and inclusive? The defining ideas of postmodernism 
and poststructuralism are clear, and can be expressed in accessible terms. So 
how can we do this in a useful way?

Michael Eric Dyson is one interesting case. He uses the language of post-
modernism, but he builds his themes around items in familiar popular culture. 
And as a Baptist preacher, he knows how to be accessible.

Black Power and Black Culture

LW: James, you see yourself as a “culture worker” and the notions of a Black 
culture, and of Black people as constituting a community of culture, are central 
to your work. The idea of a distinct Black culture and community, however, 
gained momentum through the publication of Stokely Carmichael and Charles 
Hamilton’s Black Power in the mid-1960s. In one place you say that the con-
ceptions of Black manhood in the “Black Power” era played out in a self-
destructive manner, or even “self-imploded.” So, which conceptions from the 
“Black Power” era do you accept, and which do you reject or qualify?

JED: Well, it’s all a matter of timing, isn’t it? In approaching a question like this 
you have to consider the timing. The answer I can give in 2004 might be very 
different from what I might have said thirty years ago. In scholarship there is 
always development. In this sense we can look back at Carmichael and Hamil-
ton as “kids.” Their work served important functions given the social realities of 
their time. Their words resonated with those social realities. Today’s social re-
alities are not the same. Carmichael and Hamilton helped the movement for so-
cial equality to get in touch with its “fiery core.” In today’s situation, some are 
still carrying that fiery torch, but they are on the margins. They are no longer at 
the center of the discourse on Black youth. Why this is so is not at all clear.
Maybe it is a cyclical thing, a shifting and recurring tone in social movement rhetoric.

*LW:* What about the concept of a “distinct Black culture”?

**JED:** There is a direct lineage of conceptions of Black culture. In a sense my ideas come out of those of Carmichael and Hamilton, and I give them credit for that. But one could say that I have more work to do than they did, that it is a taller order to convince the populace of the urgency for, and the potential in, Black cultural community today. Carmichael and Hamilton had an easier path in discussing cultural community. There has just been so much work done, so much to take into account, so many distinctions you have to make. You could say that their work was, in a way, “crude.” They could just mark out some gross distinctions.

*LW:* Well, what about the idea of a distinct Black community doing its own cultural work, independent of White culture or White liberal culture workers?

**JED:** The sort of cultural work I want to encourage is as inclusive as possible, with everyone cooperating in improving the lives of young Black men. The question of whether this work is done “with or without Whites” is false and misleading. It is not a question of “either/or,” but of “both/and,” of singularity and cooperation. There is the need to assure cultural continuity, and that is, first and foremost, a task for the Black community. But there are many ways for White people to cooperate in and support this educational work.

**Nurturing, Caring, and “Mothering”**

*LW:* In *Black Sons into Mothers* you advanced the equation “culture work = education = mothering.” Let me try to explicate this equation: (a) cultural scholarship is, at least in part, searching for, and making accessible, aspects of culture useful in assisting young people in their identity work, many of which aspects have been obscured by hegemonic cultural definitions. In this way cultural work = education. As education is helping young people to grow, it is primarily a matter of nurturing. In this way educating = caring, or mothering if you will. If you conceive of education primarily as caring, as helping others grow, have you made use of the work of Nel Noddings or feminist philosophers who have also emphasized “caring”?

**JED:** I have certainly taken some of their work on board. But not explicitly. I have taken it as part of the “understood” background of my own work, without having to get into the obvious. I like a lot of that work. It was very important for it to come to the front and center of the educational discourse, and that happened. Now the question is: What are the next steps? What is caring in the context of “No Child Left Behind”? Is caring today “drilling and killing”? My point is: caring is always historically and culturally specific. If you care, you do some-
thing. You are not just engaged with an idea, a philosophy, but in a context-specific program of action.

So my questions are: What are our cultural resources in helping young Black men to grow? and How can we effectively put these into play in their educational experiences?

**LW:** There are some aspects of your work that echo themes of discrimination against boys, as developed, for example, in Christina Sommers’s *The War Against Boys.* How do you react to that work?

**JED:** Well, she has some legitimate positions. If you read her work and then my work, you could say “Oh, that stuff again!” But we are positioned very differently. She is making a political point, an attack on feminism. By contrast, I am pro-feminist. I think a lot of insight about the situation of boys came directly out of the feminist discourses. Now, Black boys have consistently been victimized. If you took Black boys out of her population, her thesis would crumble in many respects! But she does not acknowledge the specificity of the war against boys, the racism that frequently drives that war. And this neglect is probably intentional, because if she did acknowledge the centrality of racism in this war, her political statement would be primarily anti-racist, not anti-feminist.

**Bill Cosby and the Cultural Values of the Black Community**

**LW:** James, our university’s famous alumnus and trustee Bill Cosby has recently launched a highly publicized attack on negative cultural values that he finds prevalent in the Black community.

**JED:** Yes. And he’s on campus here at Temple this week teaching “Cosby 101” during freshman orientation. He’s making the same general arguments and points on campus that he’s been making in the last few months, but for a different audience. His formula for success and getting ahead is pretty consistent. He understands that Black people have farther to catch up, therefore the appeal and urgency is more intense.

**LW:** One might say that in a less scholarly way, he is addressing the same cultural problematic that you are. He is saying, in effect, that there are hegemonic cultural definitions of Black masculinity that are wrecking the development of young Blacks. How do you differentiate your work from his?

**JED:** First, let me make an important distinction between “masculinity,” or rather, “masculinities,” and “manhood.” I see “masculinity” as a pattern of behavior. “Manhood” stands for a cultural ideal of manliness. Images of manhood may generate masculine behaviors, but the fit between any cultural definition and any individual’s behaviors will never be perfect.
Now Cosby probably thinks there should be an orthodox cultural definition of manhood, one that everyone in the Black community should support and value. But he thinks that other masculinities, other behaviors, are valued instead, and shouldn’t be. These valuations are leading to poor school performance, anti-intellectualism, absent fathers, drug trafficking, and community self-destruction.

What I’ve tried to do is to move away from orthodoxy toward a heterodoxy that opens up the discussion, particularly about manhood. Having said that, I also acknowledge how certain masculinities have played out in certain social contexts, with schools being an important case. Cosby is right! In schools where certain masculinities are valued, the situation becomes very problematic. But these very same masculinities could be self-protective outside of school. These young men have to learn to “masculine code switch,” to adopt a more nuanced sense of “who they are” in the context of “where they are.” Cosby himself is a master of the “masculine code switch.” He moves fluently between various cultural settings, presenting himself effectively in ways appropriate to those specific settings.

In the Black cultural context there have been restrictions on notions of “manhood” and median constructions of masculinity. Historically, there have been various edicts, various orthodoxies, about who men are and what they do. These definitions have informed the cultural context within which male identities have formed. Think again of Benjamin Elijah Mays, of the Black Power era and Eldridge Cleaver. There has been something good and something bad in all of these definitions. I am looking for ways of expanding the cultural context of identity formation, by interrogating and deconstructing all orthodoxies about manliness, discovering additional cultural resources especially within Black culture, opening a space for more positive and individual constructions of self.

**Education for Complexity**

LW: That brings us to your overriding project, education for complexity.

JED: Yes, and it’s a difficult project. Students can get there by understanding their positioning in various social categories, and, based on that understanding, developing a kind of “social intelligence” informed by race, gender, class, religion, etc. But then, by learning to think of themselves in ways that go beyond, that transcend, all of these positions.

This re-positioning, however, requires fortitude, the “salmon effect”—swimming against the current, transgressing borders. Most individuals simply cannot muster the will to do this. The power to swim against the current must come from cultural resources and institutions within the broader community.

Thinking about your positioning as “inside” a given category implies an awareness of a boundary between “inside” and “outside,” and hence a space beyond the category. Thinking about that space expands your own sense of self. A boy thinking about what girls are like is expanding his self-understanding as a boy. In thinking whether he can be a boy that encompasses within himself some
feminine dispositions, attitudes and ideas, he is moving beyond any orthodox definition of manhood toward “humanness.” And that is a larger idea of manhood.

*LW: Thank you, James.*

**Publications by James Earl Davis**


2003. Boys to men: Masculine diversity and schooling. In F. C. Worrell (Ed.), *Boys to men: The challenges of engaging boys academically and emotionally in the primary and school system* (pp. 1–14). Port of Spain, Trinidad: The School Leadership Center of Trinidad and Tobago.


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Photo of James Earl Davis courtesy of Betsy Manning, Temple University