

Allison Davis: Forgotten Black Scholar Studied – and Faced – Structural Racism in 1940s America

By David Varel
The Conversation

When Black historian Carter G. Woodson founded Negro History Week in 1926 (expanded to Black History Month in 1976), the prevailing sentiment was that Black people had no history. They were little more than the hewers of wood and the drawers of water who, in their insistence upon even basic political rights, comprised an alarming “Negro problem.”

To combat such ignorance and prejudice, Woodson worked relentlessly to compile the rich history of Black people. He especially liked to emphasize the role of exceptional African Americans who made major contributions to American life. At the time, that was a radical idea.

W. Allison Davis (1902-1983) came of age in the generation after Woodson, but he was precisely the type of exceptional Black person whom Woodson liked to uphold as evidence of Black intelligence, civility and achievement.

Davis was an accomplished anthropologist and a trailblazer who was the first African

American to earn tenure at a predominantly White university – the University of Chicago in 1947. But Davis has faded from popular memory. In my book “The Lost Black Scholar: Resurrecting Allison Davis in American Social Thought,” I make the case that he belongs within the pantheon of illustrious African-American – and simply, American – pioneers.

Allison Davis, forgotten pioneer

Allison Davis and his wife Elizabeth Stubbs Davis were among the first Black anthropologists in the country. Bringing their experiences on the wrong side of the color line to mainstream social science, they made landmark contributions to their field, including “Deep South” (1941) and “Children of Bondage” (1940). Those books sold tens of thousands of copies in the middle decades of the 20th century; they advanced social theory by explaining how race and class functioned as interlocking systems of oppression; and they broke methodological ground in combining ethnography with psychological assessments rarely applied in those days.

Allison Davis’ extensive body of research also had a real impact on social policy. It influenced the proceedings in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), undergirded the success of the federal Head Start program and prompted school districts all across the country to revise or reject intelligence tests, which Davis had proven to be culturally biased. His “Social-Class Influences Upon Learning” (1948) made the most compelling case of that era that intelligence tests discriminated against lower-class people.

Despite the very real advances that Davis helped to inspire within American education in the 20th century, today those same accomplishments are at risk. American schools remain as racially segregated as ever due to poverty and discriminatory public policies. The investment in public education, especially compensatory programs such as Head Start, looks to further diminish amid the growing support for privatization, charter schools, and school vouchers – or, the Betsy “DeVos playbook,” as critics describe it. To understand the nature of these issues today, one must understand their his-



Allison Davis, circa 1965. Courtesy of the Davis family.

tory, which Davis’ career helps to illuminate.

Davis’ scholarly contributions are unquestionable when considered now, many decades later. But as the problems above suggest, it is no longer enough to simply celebrate exceptional African-American pioneers like Davis, or just give lip service to their ideas. The next step is confronting the circumstances that constrained their lives. This means viewing their experiences in relation to the structural racism that has shaped American life since colonial times.

Bending – not breaking – academic color line

Consider Davis’ landmark appointment to the University of Chicago. Fitting the story into a master narrative of racial progress obscures more than it reveals. While the appointment did represent the crossing of a racial boundary and heralded the many more barriers that would be challenged in the ensuing decades, a closer look at the story gives little reason to celebrate.

Like all Black scholars of his time, Davis had to be twice

See DAVIS on page 6

Celebrate DIVERSITY

NW Natural is a proud supporter of diverse cultures, as they play a vital role in the unique and multicultural landscape of the communities we serve.

At NW Natural we support an environment for our employees that create opportunities, encourage respect and trust and values diversity. Such an environment contributes to the success of the organization and is essential to the service we provide to our customers.

Visit nwnatural.com to learn about current employment opportunities. NW Natural is an Equal Employment Opportunity employer and maintains a Drug-Free workplace.

