Making Sense of The Black/White Middle Class Student Achievement Gap

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Introduction
Throughout American history this country has been forced to confront the impact of race and its social implications. Over time, people have began to recognize that the harsh realities of slavery and the subsequent disenfranchisement of blacks after emancipation have laid the foundation for a society built on the basis of racial inequality. This framework has yet to be destroyed, but instead further sustained and developed by the racial hierarchy and social order we experience today. America’s collective history cannot be forgotten, however undesirable it may be, because it helps us comprehend the way in which our society currently functions and the way we understand each other and our own realities. However, as more progressive policies and laws have been passed over latter half of the the twentieth century, into the twenty-first, we have witnessed a rather distinct shift in discourse about race in America. More specifically, this shift places more significance on socio-economic status markers as the primary determinant for the “success” people enjoy over their lifetimes.

When watching television or glancing at magazine covers it immediately becomes clear that American society has an obsession with chasing the ever-elusive “American dream”. This dream is usually articulated as the image of a married couple with a house in the suburbs, two children (preferably a boy and girl), a dog, and a picket fence. The American Dream as we have come to know it is exemplified by the middle class. It is this particular class status that we are all striving for in some capacity. In many cases people will pursue this dream their entire lives—often to no avail. This pursuit is a tireless one for those who have yet to attain this goal. This middle class American dream is both stimulated and cultivated by capitalism as the optimum mode of being. If one is working
class, one merely needs to pull one’s self up by one’s own “bootstraps” to be a part of the American dream.

According to popular American discourse, race does not affect a person’s opportunity to attain the level of monetary success and class distinction they desire.¹ Explicit in rags to riches stories is the idea that anyone can become anything if they just work hard and persevere. What is championed as an “American value” by many, is in actuality the epitome of what Max Weber called The Protestant Work Ethic exhibited by the Calvinists. This kind of thinking places little to no emphasis on race and places it on class and dedication. Since the election of Barack Obama there has been a deafening roar of post racial society claims. As far back as 1987, William Julian Wilson, a conservative social scientist, led this school of thought in his “groundbreaking” study The Declining Significance of Race.² The premise of these arguments is that we must “get over race” and understand that our nation is really stratified by class. If racism is acknowledged, it is characterized as personal scoffs and epithets between individuals—often failing to take into consideration the much more powerful institutional and systemic forces of racism. In short, we are now living in a society that believes it is colorblind and far beyond the uncomfortable histories of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. To this point, most believe that if black families work hard enough and focus, they too, can share middle class status and enjoy the American Dream.

If this is really the case, how could this “Dream” include black middle class children academically performing at levels comparable to working class white students?

Why then do black middle class children achieve at lower levels that their white middle class peers? Achievement can be measured in a multitude of ways, including standardized tests scores, grade point averages (GPA), honors class placement, high school graduation, college matriculation, and college graduation. However, for most of these categories black middle class students perform at lower levels than their white middle class peers. For the sake of this study, the culmination these categories will be considered when using the phrase “achievement gap.” Throughout this thesis we will discover, explore and expose the many ways being black and middle class does not translate into being apart of the American Dream and how this reality negatively affects educational achievement. For many, black middle class status is far from a dream.

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Chapter One: Origins of Research & Important Questions
Empirical Origins of Research Topic – Why This Study Was Pursued

Virtually all aspects of underperformance…persist among students who form the African-American middle class. This situation forces on us an uncomfortable recognition: that beyond class, something racial is depressing the academic performance of these students.⁴

The research conducted for this thesis was primarily motivated by a study completed for my Sociological Analysis course in the spring of 2009 with Dr. Daniel Long. The purpose of that particular study was to explore the reasons for the tenth grade math achievement gap, as demonstrated by significant differences in scores on national standardized tests between black and white middle-class tenth grade students. Data used for my study came from the National Education Longitudinal Study. (NELS:88) This particular data set provides responses from students collected in waves from 1988 to 2000, on issues relating to school achievement, student aspirations, expectations, behavior, and attitudes. The premise of this data collection was to investigate whether class status positively affected achievement for black students. In order to accomplish this, controlling for black parent’s education was most appropriate. Doing so would be the most accurate way to determine class since parent education and class are proven to be heavily correlated. At the end of this study it was determined that being black and middle class does not close the achievement gap much at all. These results held even when I controlled for length of hours spent on homework, and future aspirations. It is clear qualitative studies and analyses are needed to provide a deeper understanding for the pathways to these inequities.

What Questions Should We Ask?

The primary question for this study is why is there academic underperformance amongst black middle class students despite their membership in this highly coveted socio-economic group? Questions posed by scholars and everyday Americans rarely capture the complexity of this issue. Many ask: what “excuse” could black middle class students have since they have grown up and been raised with the same class status as their white classmates? What is going on with these black students that is inhibiting them from performing at the same level as their white middle class peers? Are these black children simply lazier and less motivated then their white peers? Are black students academically lackluster because of an innate cognitive inferiority? This kind of questioning ultimately distracts us from the relevant questions we should be asking concerning the black middle class. For too long, the black middle class has been relatively invisible and when acknowledged, it is too often misunderstood and misrepresented. As a country, we must attempt to change the discourse around race, class, and education and look at it more critically through a completely different and interdisciplinary lens. This lens must take our focus off of the inaccuracies of traditional class status and the idea of equal opportunity between black and white middle class students and families and place our focus on the institutional and structural factors that contribute to the fundamental differences between these two respective groups. By doing so we can begin to understand the achievement inequities between the black and white middle classes.

Education is often regarded as the most important tool in shaping, crafting, and sharpening the minds of the youth in hopes that one day they will be the future the
leaders of tomorrow. It is also widely regarded as the institution that can offer the greatest chance for social upward mobility needed in a capitalist society where meritocracy has served as its foundation. Performance in these schools often can predict and determine the futures of students because of the doors of opportunity that may open up as a result of high achievement. If black students are underachieving, specifically the ones who enjoy middle class status, what does this say about their experience as being members of this group and their career tracks after high school?
Chapter Two: Methodology, Literature Review & Shaker Heights
Methodology & Limitations

I have focused my analysis on highlighting and evaluating theories that have been utilized to explain the black and white middle class achievement gap, including stereotype threat, labeling, oppositional culture theory, the wealth gap, as well as other explanations. The importance of low teacher expectations, a school structure that adheres to white middle class values, the alienation of black students within this structure, racial identity development, black middle class neighborhood obstacles, and media representations all intersect and interconnect to negatively affect achievement in very similar, like ways for black middle class students. Secondary sources utilized included peer-reviewed articles, government reports, books, new journalism, music, and organizational websites. I have also enlisted ethnographic studies to contribute a human aspect to the data and theories under analysis. The use of this varied approach provides a comprehensive lens which captures the way in which the black middle class lives and offers explanations that link historic narratives to today’s realities.

This study, however, will be limited when taking into consideration the impact of gender in black middle class achievement patterns. Although we do know that black middle class females perform at a higher rate than their male counterparts, there is simply too little information pertaining gender in an already sparse field of study. Nevertheless, the methods employed in this paper will still interrogate some very difficult issues concerning the middle class achievement gap. Exploring each explanation separately as well as their connections, where feasible, will provide an interdisciplinary and nuanced analysis of the reasons for the black-white middle class achievement gap.

Literature Review

Many sociologists have discovered over time that there is a sizable gap in achievement between black and white students in American public and private schools. These same researchers found that this gap maintains itself even when the incomes of the students’ parents are “equal.” Since this discovery, sociologists have offered a variety of explanations and ideas that they believe contribute to this problem. This wide spectrum of theories, concepts, and ideas suggests there is no one explanation for this issue.

One of the most intriguing arguments is that of Ray C. Rist and his theory on the “contributions of labeling theory.” This theory brings forth the idea of labeling and how this process ultimately facilitates and encourages what he deems as “deviant behavior” inside the classroom. Once this person is labeled a deviant, they begin to behave in the way they have been labeled. His theory, in short, highlights the presence of a self-fulfilling prophecy that may negatively affect black middle class students.6 Steele, on the other hand, highlights stereotype threat as one of the primary contributors to the black and white middle class achievement gap. He describes it as the “threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype.”7 Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, the authors of The Black-White Test Score Gap (1998), raise a multitude of points, but highlight potential racial biases in how these standardized tests are written. Jencks also raises the point of labeling bias that occurs when tests are said to measure one thing, but

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actually measure something entirely different. He uses intelligence tests to show how even though these tests measure preparedness more than intelligence, people use their results as a way to prove student ability or lack thereof.  

Conversely, psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein in *The Bell Curve* uses “objective” scientific methods to prove that the overall achievement gap is the product of blacks’ “natural” cognitive inferiority. Among many others, Jencks and Phillips refute this claim by showing that black children adopted by white families perform at the same level as white classmates. Conservative education scholars Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom postulate that black cultural practices facilitate poor choices on behalf of black middle class students. They believe that these behaviors hurt their chances for success in the classroom. Similarly, John U. Ogbu forwards *oppositional culture theory* that argues that black students sabotage their own performance at school in an effort to separate themselves from the dominant, white cultural group at school. He claims that African-American students are more susceptible to practicing oppositional culture theory than blacks that immigrate to the United States. Douglas B. Downey, on the other hand, does not concur with these assertions and believes Ogbu’s methodology is inherently flawed.
Downey makes the claim that parents’ education and socioeconomic status controls do not actually make things equal between blacks and whites. Instead, he offers the variable of wealth as the appropriate alternative that measures important aspects of financial security such as assets. Downey says that when wealth is controlled for, these achievement gaps truly disappear. Wealth answers questions about the conditions of family history, social capital, amount of assets, and privilege amongst other things. Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, in their book *Black Wealth/White Wealth* strongly agree with Downey’s assertion as they expand on the concept of wealth and why it is an important factor in determining the trajectory of middle class black students and the inequality they face throughout their lives. Mary Patillo-McCoy and Karyn Lacy articulate and illustrate the ways these wealth disparities affect how the black middle class lives using ethnography as a means of data collection for their books *Black Pickett Fences* and *Blue-Chip Black*, respectively. These glimpses into the personal lives of black middle class families show the positive and negative influences of networks that are omnipresent in these communities. Ethnography closely details the difference in lifestyle between the black and white middle classes.

Pierre Bordieu highlights the significance of economic and cultural capital and shows that economic capital, like wealth, leads to greater access to cultural capital. Cultural capital, Ann Ferguson (2000) argues in *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* suggests that this cultural capital is valued currency inside schools.
built on white middle class values. Inability to subscribe to these standards and values leads to classes being structured in a way that showcases white students as achievers in advanced placement classes and black students as underachievers in decelerated classes. Pedro Noguera in *The Problem With Black Boys* claims that black students will begin to internalize this classroom segregation and underachieve because they deem it their prescribed role. In light of this, Bell Hooks believes it is this school structure that really forces black students to abandon their identity in order to succeed. Beverly Tatum investigates this idea of identity and brings forth the school coping mechanism that is the “black table” in the cafeteria in *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in The Cafeteria?* Mica Pollack, on the other hand, posits that achievement problems have become naturalized within the discourse of teachers and students. This idea of discourse is then examined further by Michael Foucault (1977) and Stuart Hall (1994). This literature provides an illustration of the complexities involved in addressing the reasons for the black and white middle class achievement gap. Making the necessary connections between these concepts and theories will help provide a clearer answer to our question about achievement.

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Shaker Heights

To illustrate how the black and white middle class achievement gap plays out in reality, we turn to the quintessential example that is In Shaker Heights, Ohio.

People get here and say, ‘Whew, we got out of Cleveland. We have it made now,’ said Cheryl Johnson, a Shaker Heights resident who left the city nine years ago. ‘Once they're here, they assume everything is going to be all right.’

Shaker Heights is an inner-ring suburb on the east side of Cleveland and widely regarded as a model community. Residents have worked over several decades to maintain a relatively stable mix of whites and African-Americans as well as a school system that is reputedly among the best in the nation. Graduates go to college in large numbers, many to elite institutions.

Shaker Heights, Ohio essentially serves as the basis for the black middle class underachievement phenomenon. Over the last decade or so it has proven to be a well visited point of reference. Here, the average grade point average (GPA) for a white student is a B+ while the average for their black classmates is only a C+. This is quite a differential given the opportunity and privilege both groups enjoy in middle class suburb.

John H. Bishop, from Cornell University, gathered data, by presenting students of Shaker Heights high school with a series of surveys attempting to uncover what factors were contributing to the wide achievement gap between black and white students. For this study he used GPA as his indicator for achievement. Six conclusions were drawn from his study.

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First, the achievement gap was *not* a result of poor effort, but rather a difference in skill level. Second, black students were spending more time on their homework, but completing it less frequently than their white counterparts. Ferguson noted that teachers interpreted this behavior as a lack of effort on the part of the students, when this was clearly not the case. Third, measuring attitudes and behaviors are only effective when trying to understand achievement differentials within a given group—in this case within the black student group. Fourth, differences in resources, learning techniques, class room strategies, and “group-level characteristics” impact on a given students academic trajectory. Ferguson uses the example of a foot race to illustrate this point.

Consider, for example, hypothetical runners from two tribes, the Whites and the Blacks, who are competing as individuals in a single long-distance race to acquire academic knowledge. Each step in the race adds to the knowledge that each runner accumulates. Most runners from the White tribe are ahead of most runners in the Black tribe. Variations in efforts and natural ability are evident within each tribe, but no systematic differences between the tribes exist on these dimensions. Therefore, neither effort nor natural ability can account for why members of the White tribe tend to be ahead. Instead, the main reasons are that many in the White tribe had head starts at the

27 Ibid.348.
beginning of the race and many have also received extensive informal coaching from tribal elders on effective running techniques and racing strategies. Superior techniques allow a runner to maintain a given pace with less effort; and knowledge of racing strategies leads to better decisions. Hence, members of the White tribe tend to be ahead not only in terms of academic knowledge accumulated during the race, but they are also more knowledgeable about running techniques and racing strategies.

The fifth conclusion derived from the concept of “holding back”. This phenomenon involves students who have the ability to achieve at a high level, but hold back in an effort to remain with friends who may be struggling. According to the survey, those most affected by holding back were black and white students who were not enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. However, this practice of holding back affected black students disproportionately to white students at Shaker Heights High School. This behavior, and its affect on achievement amongst black middle class students, will be explored in great detail further along in this essay. The sixth finding highlighted the socially isolating nature of AP and honor programs for black students. It was found that Black students may resist being included in these classes in fear of being one of the few blacks in attendance. They also may fear retribution from their peers for enrolling in an accelerated class. Ferguson regards this resistance as potentially another form of “holding back”. In any event, this behavior, too, has negative consequences for the academic performance of black students as Shaker Heights.

While Ferguson’s study exposed some very important information about achievement, as well, and pursued uncharted territory, concerning black middle class underachievement, it seems to have left us with more questions than answers. What it

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28 Ibid. 350
29 Ibid.
does accomplish, however, is a specific example of the issue at hand, albeit one example. It gives us a context on which theories, concepts, and statistical information can be juxtaposed and contrasted. After Shaker Heights High School principal Jack Rumbaugh so boldly said, “I believe a lot of African American students choose to fail…That doesn't change our determination to help them succeed,” it is clear that there is much to highlight and address concerning the complex nature of the black and white middle class achievement gap. Using Shaker Heights as a point of departure and referring back to this study periodically will provide a context to reflect upon the numerous claims made throughout this essay on the middle-class achievement gap.

When addressing the middle-class achievement gap in Shaker Heights and many other towns and cities in America, it is critical to consider the role of inequities in wealth and assets between black and white middle class families. As Anne Orr writes,

> The fact that blacks, on average, have substantially different levels of wealth than do whites also demonstrates the limits of the achievement ideology in this country and calls into question the idea that the United States has an open stratification system. The accumulation of wealth among the black population is limited by forces that are unrelated to achievement.  

In order to understand the significance of wealth, not only is a current perspective needed, but also an historic perspective. Going into considerable depth to provide the groundwork for understanding why economic and asset opportunities were denied for blacks is imperative. This denial of wealth created a black middle class that was substantially and distinctly different from their white middle-class counterparts. In this

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section of my essay I will first present the consequences of inequities in wealth for academic achievement and subsequently provide a background to understand these consequences. This will be accomplished by first outlining a chronological history of the denial of wealth and asset accumulation, secondly by presenting a discussion of current housing policy and mortgage lending practices, third by detailing the importance of home investment, and fourth by show the role of wealth inheritance and white privilege.
Chapter Three: Wealth/Assets, Homeownership & Inheritance
Wealth and Assets Inequities Between the Black/White Middle Class

...Whites view African Americans as individuals just like themselves, using the same set of rules to compete for success in the marketplace, rather than as members of a group who are forced to play by rigged rules used historically to ensure their disadvantage and white domination. Overt bigotry, Jim Crow laws and policies, government-mandated discrimination, and the belief in black inferiority have virtually disappeared. Laissez-faire racism, instead, involves persistent negative stereotyping of African Americans, a tendency to blame blacks for their own conditions, appeals to meritocracy, and resistance to meaningful policy efforts to ameliorate America’s racist social conditions and institutions. Government is formally race neutral and committed to antidiscrimination, and most white Americans prefer a more volitional and cultural, as opposed to inherent and biological, interpretation of blacks’ disadvantaged status.32

This excerpt accurately challenges the dominant discourse on race and class in America referred to in the introduction of this essay. It is important to understand this position in order to recognize, acknowledge, and work through our misunderstanding of race and class in today’s society. Doing so will more accurately portray the role this misunderstanding plays in reproducing the black and white middle class achievement gap. Oliver and Shapiro define middle class status by using occupation, income, and educational attainment indicators. The combined household income ranging anywhere from $25,000 to $50,000 is considered to be middle class under their widely accepted

Using this working definition of class, it is believed that at least 33% of black families are indeed middle class. Oliver and Shapiro caution us by emphasizing the fact that black families may be middle class, but only under the currently employed definition of class that is primarily income-driven. Gosa and Alexander believe that determining class status primarily by income indicators, “Is flawed, as no single measure of well-being can capture the essential wholeness of black family life.” Specifically, this present definition of class does not take into account the significance of wealth amongst other things.

White middle class families have a net worth of $44,069 and net financial assets of $6,988. Black middle class families have only $15,250 of new worth and $290 of net financial assets. This statistic undermines the idea that black middle class shares the same opportunities and experiences as their white middle class counterparts. Specifically, the former lacks liquid assets—this disparity is imperative to highlight. These liquid assets are often referred to as wealth reserves. Wealth reserves are liquid assets that can be used when families run into especially difficult times and need to find a way to sustain their middle class lifestyles. In most cases, these reserves become relevant and useful when people are laid off from their jobs, in between jobs, or become too ill to keep a job. However, when all is well, these assets can accrue interest and gain tremendous value as the years elapse. Some examples of specific wealth reserves include individual retirement

33 Ibid.
35 Ibid. 290.
accounts (IRA’s) and certificates of deposit accounts (CD’s). Oliver and Shapiro assert that if a white middle class family making the median monthly income of $2,750 a month lost its income, it would be able to sustain its “standard of living” for a little over four months. Black middle class families faced with this same predicament would not be able to sustain their middle class lifestyle for more than one month. The concept of wealth reserves is essential in understanding a fundamental difference between the black and white middle classes—its importance is paramount. Tying these wealth disparities into educational achievement patterns underscores and outlines the ways in which black middle class children enter the classroom under disadvantageous circumstances.

**What Does Homeownership & Wealth/Assets Mean For Achievement?**

While middle-income families provide more opportunities for their children than do low-income families, middle-income families with a greater amount of wealth can provide more opportunities for their children than can middle-income families with a less amount of wealth.

In addition to wealth reserves the intersectionality of homeownership and wealth determines where black middle class families live, the networks (positive and negative) available in these neighborhoods, the school district their children attend, the option to choose private school as an alternative, the ownership of a car for traveling and commuting, extracurricular activities for children, whether or not there are educational resources in the home (SAT prep). Wealth can also determine the quality of school a

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child may attend based on the premise that property taxes fund a large portion of public schooling. Dalton Conley echoes these points when he says

Wealth not only has the effect of freeing up money for private school attendance but also has very direct consequences for the quality of public schools attended by children in the community. Higher property values mean a bigger tax base and almost inevitably translate into greater per-pupil expenditures by the school district.40

In the early 1990’s it was said that private school tuition was approximately $4,000 per year—we can assume that this figure has increased by quite a large margin over the last fifteen to twenty years.41 Studies have shown attending a private school results in higher achievement for students, however, without the appropriate sources of wealth to finance private schooling, some black middle class youth will not be able to reap these benefits.42 This leaves many black middle class students to the mercies of the public school system. Bordieu, the celebrated French scholar, posits that the most resourceful kind of economic capital is the kind of capital that can be “cashed in” most easily—that of which is the most liquid of assets. These assets, which are regularly cashed in for the sake of educational opportunity and achievement prove to a relatively large component in black middle class underachievement.43 Dalton Conley, in his book Being Black, Living In the Red, statistically shows that when black middle class families have the same amount of wealth as their white counterparts, their children achieve on an equal level. Even further, black middle class students with wealth graduate at higher rates than their white

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid. 283-284.
counterparts.\textsuperscript{44} Given these key points we begin to accurately describe the way in which these harsh realities can translate into white middle class students performing at higher level than black middle class students in our nation’s schools.

Historicizing a current problem also proves to be quite instrumental in wrapping our minds around the complex nature of the black and white middle class achievement gap and the role wealth disparities plays in exacerbating it. Conley posits, “Wealth is both the pot at the end of the rainbow and the means for getting there.”\textsuperscript{45}

**History and Chronology of Denial of Wealth/Asset Accumulation**

In order to thoroughly understand just how black and white middle class families have arrived at such different places both physically in the case of homeownership, and financially in terms of wealth and asset accumulation, we must acknowledge the many ways in which blacks of have been denied opportunities to become wealthy over the course of American history. Starting at the emancipation of slaves and working our way forward proves to be most effective method in chronicling the systematic denial of wealth for blacks.

Even prior to the writing of the Constitution there has been a sustained effort to protect and cultivate the concept of property in the United States. The seizure of Native American land by European colonists illustrates some of the earliest usages of property rights in the United States. During these moments it became clear property would symbolize and represent power, authority, and control for those who possess it. From the dawn in American history forward the federal government made a concerted effort to


protect the rights of those who owned property. In most cases, this property came in the form of black bodies of African descent that were forced into servitude as slaves.\(^\text{46}\) After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, blacks were granted apparent “freedom” and thus liberated from the reality of being labeled mere property. However, these individuals were freed without money or property or access to either. The promise of “40 acres and a mule” after emancipation was the opportunity for the United States to promote equality and give recently freed blacks the material assets needed to create a new life post slavery. Kai Wright, an author who writes about wealth in America, cites a freeman who says, “Give us our land and we can take care of ourselves, but without land the old masters can hire us or starve us, as they please.”\(^\text{47}\) This assertion poignantly articulates what these newly freed blacks were facing post-Emancipation. The fulfillment of this promise would have been an attempt to place blacks in a position to accumulate wealth. The premise behind this promise was to redistribute land from the plantations evenly amongst the former slaves giving each 40 acres and a mule. However, this redistribution never took place and the promise was effectively broken. This moment marks a turning point in American history because it points to the nation’s intention to continue racial inequality—even in the face of emancipation.

In his piece *Black Reconstruction in America*, W.E.B. Dubois claims it was during this time after emancipation that “modern democracy” could have actually come


http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_assault_on_the_black_middle_class.
to fruition. Furthermore, Conley illustrates that blacks that could afford to buy land in the South were often denied the right to do so merely because of their skin color. It was well known that blacks were invited to work the land for a wage, but ownership of this land was not acceptable, nor was it a reality. Simply put, whites were not willing to forfeit their position of superiority above blacks. This understanding was essential in maintaining the way of life that was the norm before the Civil War. Under these policies and practices governing society, many blacks developed debts and struggled to survive in a system quite similar to slavery. Excluding blacks from land ownership and wealth accumulation in such an overt fashion sent a message that there were certain elements of society that freedmen were not “free” enough to participate in—usually those elements of society that were most important. The harsh reality of this history laid the foundation for wealth and asset inequality that would be carried on from generation to generation in the form of government policy, covenants, and de facto racism.

Midway through the 20th century, the government played an especially pivotal role in maintaining wealth and assets disparities through the process of suburbanization.

As the number of black-owned farms dropped over the course of the first half of the century, the numbers of African Americans who migrated to the northern industrial centers grew, between 1910 and 1970, 6.5 million black Americans moved from the South to the North, 5 million of this group made the transition after 1940.

49 Ibid. 15.
After the migration of blacks from the South to the North took place primarily during the first half of the 20th century, blacks began to move into cities and take jobs in factories that had previously been occupied by white men who had been summoned to go off to war. Blacks believed that there was more opportunity in the North with these factory jobs, as well as more racial equality away from Jim Crow and the de facto segregation of the South. However, moving to Northern cities meant that blacks would eventually be discriminated against when trying to secure loans from the government instituted Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC). This organization was a product of a bill that President Theodore Roosevelt passed in hopes of curtailing foreclosures and defaults on homes and mortgage payments. The process of redlining began to take place during the Great Depression when HOLC refused to give home loans to specific, predominately black areas in the inner city. This was the beginning of a practice that would be carried on for many years to come. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA), which was formed in 1934, was an integral part of creating wealth for many white families after World War II.

The Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944 was key in providing loans for long periods of time for low interest. This was an effort by the FHA, and government in general, to encourage recently returned white veterans to reintegrate themselves back into society and own homes for the first time. In retrospect, this initiative enacted by the FHA was essentially a handout to white families that allowed them to accumulate wealth and assets almost for free. This opportunity was almost entirely available for white families only post World War II. The exclusion of blacks from this new government program

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54 Ibid.
further disadvantaged black families. It can be inferred that if blacks and whites shared equal wealth at this point in history, this Serviceman Readjustment Act of 1944 would have created a substantial gap in wealth for years to come. Furthermore, it was precisely this housing policy that led to the phenomenon known as suburbanization.

The move from the inner city to the suburbs was a moment in time that forever changed the landscape of American residential life. Suburbanization both contributed to wealth inequality and segregation simultaneously. Oliver and Shapiro identify three things that provided the framework necessary for suburbanization during this time period. These three government supported initiatives were “taxation, transportation, and housing policy.” Taxation was important because companies were given tax breaks if they relocated their buildings to the suburbs outside of the city. Transportation was also essential to the formation of the suburbs because the development of multiple highways leading in and out of each city made these cities more accessible from the suburbs. Lastly, housing policy, which I will go into detail about later, gave white families a chance to buy homes with low interest loans and no down payments. All three of these efforts, when combined, moved whites out of the inner city into spacious suburban homes, and kept blacks in the inner city amongst divestment, dilapidation, and ghettos. Levittown and the multiple developments that the Levitt brothers constructed represented the epitome of suburbanization in America that was almost exclusively accessible to white families.

55 Ibid. 16.
The first of many of these Levittowns was built in Long Island, New York in the year 1947. This development contained approximately 17,400 homes and served as the blueprint on how to construct large communities of suburban developments. Many of the homes were constructed with “pre-fad” materials that made the process of putting the home together rather simple and easy. According to Lacy, “with a down payment of only a hundred dollars on a house that could be obtained for a mere seven thousand dollars (the equivalent of $63,282 today), young families persuaded themselves that it was more economical to buy a Levitt home than continue renting.” Here, it is clear that white families were offered a deal they simply could not refuse. Unfortunately black families were never offered this deal so they were forced to continue renting housing in the city.

The Levitt brothers had a specific vision they instituted and maintained in all of their developments. This vision ensured that the tenets of middle class living were being sustained in their neighborhoods by any means necessary. This meant many different things, but among others, it meant that these communities were to remain white communities and resist the infiltration of black families from the inner city. This vision was enforced by secret covenants signed that said nobody would sell their home to a black family. Lacy cites a person who worked for the Levitt brothers to show the reluctance to integrate these residential spaces. He says,

> Our firm is liberal and progressive, but we don’t want to be singled out or used as the firm, which should start the other builders off. If there is no other builder who can keep Negroes out, we will not do so either, we will go with the group if the state makes us, but we don’t want to lose

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57 Ibid. 54.
millions by being the first... We could not afford to take such losses. 58

Later in this essay the fear of declining property value causing segregated neighborhoods will be explored in greater detail.

According to Wright, by 1965 98% of homes funded by the FHA were owned by white families. 59 This is a staggering statistic. The inability to secure homeownership during this time in the 20th century greatly contributed to the wealth differential between blacks and whites that we witness today. In short, most families had little to nothing to hand down to their children from generation to generation. This lack of inheritance plays an imperative role in determining opportunity for black families and their children’s academic achievement. This movement of suburbanization, not only affected access to wealth through homeownership, but also began to create an educational “underclass” regardless of black social status, as many students were forced into inferior schools, which fueled distinct educational opportunities and quality that persisted throughout generations. In addition, this generational gap to access to a quality education also impacts for generations on the amount of cultural capital that middle-class blacks, have which possibility influences academic achievement. However, first it is important to delineate how the aforementioned practices of the FHA have carried themselves into current housing policy and bank lending practices we see today.

Current Housing Policy and Mortgage Lending Practices

Nationally, 52 percent of blacks earning between $30,000 and $49,999 own their own homes, compared with 70

58 Ibid. 55-56
http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_assault_on_the_black_middle_class.
percent of their white counterparts in the same income category.\textsuperscript{60} Blacks are not disadvantaged in the educational system, rather, they are disadvantaged in the resources they bring to the system.\textsuperscript{61}

The issue of housing is one that is quite important and paramount in uncovering and exposing the fundamental wealth disparities between the black and white middle classes. It is also an important component of assets and wealth accumulation that cannot be overlooked. Among other things, owning a home provides families “tax deductions, exclusions, and deferrals.”\textsuperscript{62} Even though the history of housing discrimination in this nation’s history has become clearer overtime, it is still an issue that is perpetuated and reproduced by a host of policies that inhibit black middle class families from effectively securing mortgages and subsequent homeownership. When confronting this issue head-on, Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro highlight three ways housing discrimination severely hurts the middle class. The first is large banks’ refusal to grant mortgage loans in specific areas where large black populations reside. Secondly, blacks are offered higher interest rates than whites if granted a mortgage loan. Lastly, there is a difference in property value appreciation between black and white middle class neighborhoods. All three factors negatively affect blacks and their ability to accumulate wealth and assets.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63} Oliver, Melvin and Shapiro, Thomas. Black Wealth/White Wealth (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006. Print.).
Large banks often reject black families that apply for loans on the basis that these applicants are not “creditworthy.” This concept of *creditworthiness* is a banking policy and practice that helps facilitate rejections of mortgage loans from individuals who are deemed too “risky” or unlikely to pay the bank back on a given schedule. Simply put, banks have the authority to review an application and ultimately accept or deny the person in need. Black and white applicants are denied and accepted for mortgages at disproportionate rates. Specifically, this data suggests black families are turned away at a two to three times more often than white families.64

The concept of wealth reserves is important to understand because without this financial support system it can become difficult to pay bills on time; thus negatively affecting credit. Poor credit histories for black middle-class families are often the result of trying to survive without wealth reserves—a luxury most white middle class families have at their fingertips. This unfortunate reality provides white middle class families more freedom, autonomy, and discretion in the decisions they make about where they want to live, where they want their children to attend school, how much they want to spend, and what kind of loan they want to apply for.

Since there is a clear, palpable inability to secure housing mortgage loans from large banks, many black middle class families are forced to engage with smaller, less legitimate banks willing to grant loans with much higher interest rates. Even when black families are granted a loan from a larger, more legitimate bank, they still encounter higher interest rates. These higher interests rates carry with them a myriad of destructive, negative implications that greatly hurt black families long term.

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According to Oliver and Shapiro, “blacks pay a 0.54 percent higher rate on home mortgages than whites.” This half of a percentage point may seem small and insignificant, but in actuality it translates into large losses in the future for black families who are victims to this—including the middle class. They use the example of a family taking out a $35,000 mortgage loan and losing about $4,000 over 25 years at a 9.614% interest rate. That figure is rather significant when one takes into account that most black families, both middle class and working class, do not have much in wealth reserves that are so vital to every household’s quality of life. Higher interest rates ultimately slow down the accumulation of wealth for black families because of the extra money they are forced to pay as a result of higher interest rates. In the end, it takes longer to pay off the principle of the mortgage because most of the early payments go towards paying off large amounts of interest. This, in turn, slows down the amount of home equity black families have at their disposal at the time. In 1996 black families collectively paid banks $10.5 billion more than white families because of higher interest rates on mortgages. This is the cost of being black while trying to own a home in America. The lack of inheritance and passing down of wealth exacerbates this problem.

Inheritance, Passing Down Wealth, & White Privilege

If nothing else, the wealth perspective on economic progress challenges America's creation myth of hardworking pilgrims, self-made frontiersmen, and brass-balled industrialists. In reality, our middle class looks an awful lot like an aristocracy built on inherited middle-class advantage.

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65 Ibid. 144.
66 Ibid. 149
As history has shown us, the ability to pass down wealth is fundamental in securing wealth and opportunity for future generations. There are a couple ways in which this can be accomplished. Young white middle class families often have the luxury of parents who are capable of assisting their first home purchase. This assistance often comes in the form of an “interest-free” loan or a monetary gift from parents to put towards the down payment of a home. Parental assistance helps alleviate some of the stresses of loan payments because their children can take out a smaller loan and receive a smaller interest rate from the bank. This also allows children who receive assistance to pay off the principal of their mortgage in less time. Much of these practices are cyclical as it is often home equity that allows parents to help their children buy their first homes. More than 80% of the black middle class is comprised of first generation middle class families. If young middle class couples do not have parents who possess home equity, they cannot receive assistance on a down payment for a home of their own. This forces these couples to spend more money of their own towards a down payment or put less money down on a house. In turn, this lengthens the amount of time one spends paying off the principal of the mortgage. This creates yet another disadvantage for black middle class families looking to acquire wealth. Taking note of these dynamics is essential because of the way it clarifies how wealth disparities passed on from one generation of black middle class families to the next. Tim Wise, a scholar who studies the impacts of racism and white privilege speaks about the way in which his own narrative illustrates the imperative nature of wealth and its inheritance.

Two things are important to consider, one regarding the consequences of lacking wealth inheritance and the other regarding how white middle class families gain access to wealth inheritance. Beverly Tatum in her book *Assimilation Blues: Black Families in White Communities: Who Succeeds and Why* speaks to the consequences of lacking wealth inheritance for black middle class families. She highlights over emphasis on education for parents of families who understand that academic achievement is the only path to success for their children. One parent says, “Like most kids whose parents own businesses, like at the university, they don’t need to worry about it too much, they know that they’re going to be taken care of, but I don’t have that insurance at all. So definitely they got to be educated. Definitely. Definitely.”

Ironically, families who are almost wholly dependent on educational opportunities to progress in society are least likely to have the wealth reserves needed to finance a college education. Without a four-year college education, one’s career aspirations become quite limited. Those parents who choose for their children to attend a four year college may be forced to apply for a school loan to finance their child’s education, which may or may not be approved, depending on their creditworthiness. In this way we can see that wealth disparities make college an uncertain thing for pockets of the black middle class. Here, inheritance plays a pivotal and crucial role in black middle class academic opportunity. Perhaps this moves us closer to answering questions about underachievement for this group.

Taking into consideration the second of these points, we turn our attention to a speech given by Wise, he chronicles his rise to prominence and the social factors that that

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were instrumental to his ascension.\textsuperscript{71} He starts by explaining how he was able to attend Tulane University in the late 1980’s to fight against David Duke’s campaign for political office. He asserts that it would not have been possible for him to go to this school without his mother’s ability to take out a loan to put towards tuition. His mother was only able to take out a loan by using her home equity as collateral. Without this home, Wise would not have been able to attend Tulane University and “earn” his name as a staunch opponent to racism in New Orleans at the time. Without this home, and subsequent home equity, he would not have had the opportunities to become the renowned individual he is regarded as today. He also historicizes wealth’s crucial role by outlining how his relatives in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century were given hundreds of acres of land to compensate for his great, great, great, great grandfather’s work as a land surveyor. He juxtaposes the blood, sweat, and tears blacks shed toiling in the fields as slaves and the massive amounts of land his kin was given to show how this historical imbalance of land distribution is largely responsible for where he is today. Making these connections underscores how imperative wealth, and the \textit{passing down} of wealth, is to the opportunities and circumstances we face today. It explicitly indicts the notion that individuals are “pulling themselves up from their bootstraps” themselves. He argues that his family was provided with bootstraps that were \textit{stronger} than those belonging to many black families. By being willing to call into question his own life by chronicling his narrative, he is taking a bold step in deconstructing the narratives of whites and blacks in America by showing how the former has been handed wealth and the latter denied it throughout American history. Implicit in his story is the lack of opportunities blacks can take advantage of because of

the historical nature of the wealth gap. Seeing these differences personified by a white male and then retold in a didactic fashion by the same white male really highlights how wealth disparities are currently living, breathing, and reproducing inequality in America.

**The Investment That Is a Home**

Oliver and Shapiro cite Raymond Franklin from *Shadows of Race and Class* when he notes that middle class blacks live in lower valued homes than their white middle class peers because of lack of “better housing in black neighborhoods.”\(^72\) If a black middle class family owns a house in one of these neighborhoods where their property is not increasing in value, how can they refinance or use a home equity loan to finance private school, extracurricular activities, or college for their children? White middle class families make a concerted effort to live in areas where their property will appreciate at a desirable rate. They can do so because they have the luxury of choice that most black middle class families do not have. Often this means that white families will move to an area that is exclusively white and middle class in an effort to avoid “outsiders” who may drive the value of the property down. Homeownership in the United States is heavily regarded as an investment for each family, so this behavior is consistent with this belief.

Historically, we have seen this phenomenon of “white flight” where white families will immediately sell their homes when a black family moves in out of fear that this black family will drive the value of the property far down. The premise of this behavior is that one black family can begin *tipping* any given neighborhood in the “wrong” direction. Logically, it is the flight of white families and the discourse that these spaces are suddenly undesirable that are actually the driving forces behind decreased

property value—not black families. Often black middle class families will live in black neighborhoods in hopes of one day moving to a white suburb, but will not have the opportunity to do so because of the aforementioned barriers inhibiting them from moving into homes for the first time, or moving into a new home in a specific area. Compounding this problem, blacks families whose homes appreciate at slower rates realistically do not have the funds necessary to relocate because of the low value of their homes. The culmination of all of these obstacles creates a very difficult equation for middle class black families to negotiate and solve.

It is believed that the cost of being black in the current housing market is $82 billion collectively. This figure is derived from the $10.5 billion in increased interest rates black families incur added to the $58 billion in “lost home equity” added to the $13.5 billion that black families lose when they are denied homeownership because they cannot secure a loan. This inordinate amount of costs for this already historically disadvantaged group is especially crippling. Furthermore, this issue of housing and denial of loans and fair interest rates is part and parcel in recreating and reproducing the wealth gap between the black and white middle classes. While the policies and practices of the housing market are not identical to those of the past, they are equally as affective in shutting the doors of opportunity on middle class blacks seeking to better their lives and secure the most important aspect of wealth—homeownership. As Massey and Denton say about the black middle class in *American Apartheid*, “high incomes do not buy entre to residential circumstances that can serve as springboards for future socioeconomic

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mobility.” This, unfortunately, becomes increasingly clear when examining the way in which the black middle class lives and the obstacles these families and their children face on a daily basis.

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Chapter Four: Ethnography, Economic & Cultural Capital
**Neighborhoods, Proximity, & Influences**

A social structural analysis also dictates that we situate the challenges faced by black middle-class families and their children within the context of neighborhoods, not only schools and classrooms. Therefore neighborhoods are a critical component of analysis. Specifically, neighborhood characteristics, proximity to other neighborhoods, influences, opportunities, networks, trajectories, and outcomes are all points of interest in addressing the black white achievement in regard to neighborhoods. As noted above, remembering that *where* students live is heavily influenced by assets and wealth accumulation illustrates the interconnected nature of all the facets of life that contribute to the black and white middle class achievement gap. Highlighting the different living conditions for the black middle class will show, once again, the obstacles they must overcome despite their apparent middle class status. Showing the multiplicities of black middle class lifestyles supports this assertion.

Pattillo-McCoy’s ethnography of Groveland depicts both the advantages and disadvantages black middle class families encounter on a daily basis. Groveland, a lower middle class community in close proximity to the inner city working-class section of Chicago’s south side, has become susceptible to many of the problems and obstacles that face most lower-middle class neighborhoods studied and researched in the past. The presence of gangs, drugs, and other elements of the underground economy has become an everyday reality in this community. The relationship between drug dealers, gangs, and Groveland is unique in nature because it represents a specific *network* that is both a positive and negative influence in the community.

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Pattillo-McCoy recalls how the Black Mob, a prominent gang in Groveland, helped remove a couple of liquor stores in the community. This is an example of something positive that a gang has accomplished here. There are many extended family networks in Groveland that are integral to a certain checks and balances system that the residents heavily rely on. Concerning youth, families look out for other families’ children on regular basis. These extended family networks seem to be premised off of the age-old notion that it takes an entire village to raise a child. This village, however, is responsible for both positive and negative trajectories of Groveland’s youth. Pattillo-McCoy speaks of how some of these same individuals are responsible for luring some of the most impressionable black middle class youth into gang life and other less desirable activities.

Scholars have proven through various studies that black middle class families are more likely to live in residential areas where there is lower valued housing and a higher levels of children born to unwed parents. Furthermore, it has also been theorized that middle class blacks residing in the suburbs are consistently exposed to crime at a higher rate than middle class whites that reside in the suburbs.\(^7\) The presence of the Black Mob and other gangs speaks in accordance with these claims. Furthermore, scholars have argued that the higher percentage of people of color in a given neighborhood, the more black parents have to help their children combat the ills of social and racial injustice. In short, where there are more people of color, the affects and consequences of discrimination and racism are more palpable. Pattillo-McCoy uses thirty-three year old Kelly Harmon and his childhood friend Lance as a way to demonstrate how these

different influential factors gives impetus to the unpredictability of outcomes for black middle class children in Groveland.

Kelly Harmon is said to be “in his second year of an M.B.A. program at a Chicago university” while his friend Lance was recently incarcerated for his involvement in Groveland’s Black Mobsters. Pattillo-McCoy cites Harmon as saying,

I actually went to school with one of the top [Black Mobster] lieutenants who graduated, who lived on Third and Granger. I knew that family very well. But now he’s in jail. The top lieutenant, whose name was, whose nickname was Lance, is in jail. He’s facing an array of charges, so he’s gonna be there for a while. But his little street minions are still there. 77

This story illuminates the idea that two young lower-middle class black males can grow up in the same neighborhood, be exposed to the same things, and have completely antithetical outcomes. Not only does it show the complexity of living as middle class black children in this neighborhood, but it also shows how this particular community’s lower-middle class foundation socializes and conditions its black youth to arrive at different outcomes. With one friend in jail and the other one pursuing his M.B.A., we clearly see how Groveland’s negative influences can cause lower levels of academic achievement.

Perhaps the unpredictability of outcomes for youth can be partially attributed to Pattillo-McCoy’s thoughts on the “ghetto trance.” Although, at times her analysis lacks the complexity and attention to structural detail necessary to investigate some her findings, she talks about how easily black middle class youth in Groveland are influenced by media images and hip hop lyrics. She quotes a young man named Tyson who describes the connection between “lewd” behavior and media images.

Some people just followin’ a fad. Like e’rybody and they mama used to smoke weed. Nowadays, every video you see, “Hay, rollin’ hay”. Smokin’ weed. Tupac, smokin’ weed. Snoop Doggy Dogg talk about getting’ high and getting’ drunk all day long. That’s all they talk about. So that’s why I think some people do it. ‘Cause it’s the in thing.  

Tyson realized the dead-end to this lifestyle rather quickly, but he still speaks of childhood friends who fell victim to some of the things deemed “cool” by youth. Acceptance of these images, as Noguera mentions, for the sake of authenticity, often has a negative affect on academic performance. Furthermore, the lust for money and material gains after high school largely affect patterns of college matriculation in Groveland. She speaks about how “youth have to fight the attraction of material items that working can buy now.” This temptation often impedes their educational attainment and future careers. Since most white middle class families are not forced to confront some of these residential obstacles, it is easy to see why their children experience more consistent, successful outcomes in school. In Lacy’s ethnography of suburban Washington D.C. area communities, she attempts to show the black middle class outside of the monolithic framework we have grown accustomed to. However, we still find ways these children may be disadvantaged by their respect neighborhoods.

Researchers inadvertently cast the Black poor as a homogenous social category and overlook the ways in which space, time, and social class moderate the experience of being Black and the consequent norms, values,

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78 Ibid. 128.
79 Ibid. 64.
competencies, practices, and subjectivities that derive from that experience.  

Lacy makes the assertion that the black middle class is not merely one distinct group, but instead a rather complex collection of experiences that can be broken up into three subdivisions of class—lower middle class, core middle class, and upper middle class. This is important to take into consideration when trying to pinpoint where and how the black middle class lives because.

When describing Lakeview, a suburb of Washington D.C., she writes,

> Constructed beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s, Lakeview is dominated by modest ranch- and Cape Code-style homes, with a small sprinkling of newer, two-story homes, all positioned on quarter-acre lots. Sidewalks and small, manicured front lawns buffer the houses from the street. There is very little space between homes. Narrow driveways delineate one lot from another, but a good number of the older homes do not have garages. Many of the homeowners have lined their driveways with shrubbery or have planted colorful flowers along the borders of their lawns.

She also describes Lakeview as still predominantly white, but with a growing number of middle class blacks. From this description it is quite obvious that Lakeview and Groveland are two very different places. The former can safely be considered an integrated community while the latter is predominantly comprised of lower-middle class families. In Lakeview, both black and white families work together to create an environment where the middle class standard of living can be upheld without conflict. This is accomplished primarily through the implementation of neighborhood associations.

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that function off of the collective input of residents. These associations would make a concerted effort to stave off negative community influences like gang culture and the underground economy that had become so prevalent in Groveland.

Although there are no set rules in Lakeview, there is a mutual understanding of what is and is not acceptable within the confines of the community.

Some scholars have argued that black middle class youth who reside in integrated middle class neighborhoods like Lakeview are unable to take advantage of the “positive social influence.” Gosa and Alexander cite an argument by Turley who uses the data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to show that black middle class children are not as socially integrated into their communities as their white middle class counterparts. Black middle class children are said to have more friends outside of their own neighborhoods rather than inside of them. These children, therefore, cannot truly take advantage of the positive networks that make these neighborhoods what they are to most white middle class families. The argument then theorizes that the only way in which black middle class children benefit from the prized networks of middle class and upper middle class neighborhoods is when those neighborhoods are predominantly black. A community like Sherwood Park that neighbors Riverton would concur with this theory with its predominantly black upper-middle class composition. Unfortunately, these kinds of communities are few and far in between because of the reasons outlined earlier. In instances where black middle class children are able to take advantage of their social network, academic achievement is thought to improve.

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83 Ibid.
to make because it shows, yet again, that even when black and white middle class families share living spaces in integrated middle class neighborhoods, most black children are unable to equally take advantage of these spaces to positively affect their academic performance. This illustrates yet another way in which the black and white middle classes display their inequities.

Given the plethora of barriers and obstacles black middle youth face in their respective neighborhoods and the wealth disparities that facilitate them, it is essential that we investigate the ways in which these experiences affect the acquisition of cultural capital. Integrating cultural capital into this conversation about black middle class achievement allows us to begin making connections between what has been brought forward thus far with what transpires in the classroom on a daily basis.

**Economic Capital, Cultural Capital, and Family Structure**

As a form of economic capital, then, wealth can be used as both a direct financial resource and can be converted into other types of capital or social.84 Bordieu defines cultural capital as the, “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed.”85 He then outlines three different types of cultural capital that positively influence academic achievement. The first of these, *embodied* cultural capital, is the capital acquired both consciously and subconsciously. The subconscious element of this kind of cultural capital is often passed on to an individual. The second kind of cultural capital called *objectified* cultural capital refers to the ownership of particular objects that reflect knowledge of

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some sort. In the case of education, the presence of books at a student’s home is a good example. The last of these, institutionalized cultural capital, is cultural capital created by the ownership of academic degrees and credentials.\(^{86}\) An example of institutionalized cultural capital would be a student’s parents’ educational attainment. A parent who has secured a Ph.D., J.D., or M.B.A. passes on more cultural capital to his or her child than a parent who only holds a high school diploma or GED. Understanding how these three different kinds of cultural capital impact achievement amongst black and white middle class students is key to figuring out an important piece of the puzzle that is this research question.

Groveland, Riverton, and Sherwood Park accurately highlight the role cultural capital plays in predicting the trajectories of black and white middle class students. What becomes quite apparent is the congestion of obstacles that many black middle class youth must navigate in order to be successful students. For example, because white middle class families possess more wealth than their black counterparts, they may be in a better position to buy books and other educational resources essential for academic success. It has been theorized that children who have been exposed to cultural events like museums, operas, and concerts have a better chance of succeeding in the classroom.\(^{87}\) Wealth, as Ann Orr argues, influences a child’s achievement through his or her parent’s quest for prestige. One way of securing familial prestige is through the investment of family assets into a child’s cultural capital.\(^{88}\) With these opportunities, white middle class families exhibit their cultural capital and their ability to purchase more of this currency with assets

\(^{86}\) Ibid. 47.
\(^{88}\) Ibid. 285.
they possess—wealth is their enabler for their continued academic success. The family structure of the black and white middle class helps support these inequities in economic and cultural capital.

The family structure of the black middle class highlights yet another difference between this group and their white counterparts. Taking into consideration that an overwhelming majority of the black middle class is first generation, it is logical that many of these families are faced with the burden of financially occasionally supporting their working class relatives. Much of this financial assistance comes from black middle class families who already lack important liquid and non-liquid assets. Not only does this dynamic take away money that could be going towards their children’s education, but it also forces many of these families to live even more rigidly from paycheck to paycheck. Furthermore, first generation black middle class families and their children do not have luxury of readily acquiring cultural capital from other relatives as many white middle class children can. Instead, black middle class children are faced with relatives who often live very different lives—some who can benefit a child’s cultural capital and others that cannot. These uncertain family dynamics are quite similar to the varying degree of influences taken note of in Groveland. With both economic and cultural capital being lost to relatives of black middle class families, the children are once again disadvantaged and ill prepared for school and its tenets of success.

As will be explored and theorized in depth later in this essay, schools support and reproduce white middle class values. Bordieu’s theories on economic and cultural

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89 Ibid. 282.
capital would support this assertion. The acquisition of these “skills” and “values” for white middle class students largely comes from the home environment they are afforded from birth. As Mary Patillo-McCoy expresses, Groveland’s proximity to the South Side of Chicago forces the children of the former to interact and engage with influences from the later. This interaction ultimately detracts from the social and cultural capital that is valued inside the classroom that facilitates academic success. When black middle class families do attempt to acquire cultural capital for their children, they are often unable to because of lack of economic capital, and specifically, lack of liquid and non-liquid assets. Furthermore, because a large majority of the black middle class is first generation there has been little to no passing down of cultural capital from one generation to the next.92

The wealth disparity outlined in the preview section plays a pivotal role in denying black middle class children opportunities to participate in activities and events that may provide access to this elusive, but ever important cultural capital. Furthermore, denial of mortgages and entrance into specific neighborhoods forces many black middle class families to live in segregated, closed neighborhoods where spaces to acquire cultural capital are few and far in between. Without being exposed to life outside of these segregated communities, some black middle class children will have little chance to acquire the cultural capital valued by the educational institution and its white middle class foundation.

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Part II: *How Culture, School Structure, Identity, and Media Representations Affect The Black/White Middle Class Achievement Gap*
Chapter Five: School Values, School Structure & Student Identity
White Middle Class Values, Education and Their Relationship

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher who forwarded groundbreaking works from 1954 to 1984, makes some bold, but accurate assertions on the role discipline and societal institutions like schools play in creating and reproducing the social hierarchy that governs the people. The categorizing, sorting, and compartmentalizing of students in schools is key in preparing these students to take their proper positions in the social order.\(^3\) Foucault’s work pertains to the black and white middle class achievement gap because it highlights the way in which all students who do not fall into the classification of white and middle class are educated in a way that attempts to facilitate conformity to their “proper” place in the social order. Ann Ferguson, in her book, *Bad Boys*, vigorously explicates Foucault’s postulates by mapping out the different ways in which white middle class values are implemented into the way schools are run. She writes,

> It proposes that the crucial element for creating and reproducing social inequality is a ‘hidden curriculum’ that includes such taken-for-granted components of instruction as differences in modes of social control and the regulation of relations of authority, and the valorization of certain forms of linguistic and cultural expression.\(^4\)

In her study of black males and the development of their masculinity in schools she highlights how Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power plays an essential role in marginalizing black students and subsequently negatively affecting their academic achievement.\(^5\) Central to this theory of discipline is the practice of punishment and outlining consequences for students who do not, for whatever reason, subscribe to the


\(^4\) Ibid.

white middle class norms advanced and fostered by the institution. Foucault defines what it means to be an individual by the amount of discipline we exhibit. In schools, we measure this level of discipline by tests, grades, and advanced placement classes and overall achievement. This is the mechanism of sorting and ranking that is so critical in determining whether a student is an achiever (the norm), or an underachiever.\textsuperscript{96} As the last section informs us, black middle class students, too, are incongruent with white middle class values of the school. This reality, for the most part, goes unnoticed and is realized in different terms. The ability and inability to conform to these specific values leads to students being assigned different labels.

Schools, in general, have a rather clear and concise way in which they classify their students. “Gifted”, “troubled”, and “at risk” are a few of the labels given to students who display different behaviors to teachers.\textsuperscript{97} However, what often goes unnoticed and unquestioned is the subjective nature of many of these labels. Taking Rist’s theory on labeling, and tweaking it, often labels will be assigned to students solely based on the way in which teachers interpret their behavior. As Gosa and Alexander write,

\begin{quote}
Black students, especially black males, have difficulty forming positive relationships with school personnel, and more generally are seen as displaying problem behaviors at a rate far exceeding that of their white peers.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

The black student must always be aware of the implications of his or her actions.

Ferguson cites body language, vocal tone and inflection, attitude, attire, and language as the different ways black students can find themselves in trouble with teachers. Bell

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid. 52.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid. 52-54.
Hooks explores the significance of language in the classroom in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.*

Hooks argues that “standard” English is a language of oppression and suppression of black culture and history. She likens the requirement to speak Standard English in classrooms as a silencing of one’s identity and complexity as a person of African ancestry. She says,

> [Standard English] is the language of conquest and combination; in the United States, it is the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse, native communities we will never hear, the speech of the Gullah, Yiddish, and so many other unremembered tongues.\(^9^9\)

Hooks points out that schools have never committed themselves to acknowledging and integrating some black vernacular into any aspect of the curriculum. This is important her line of thinking illustrates Foucault’s theory of discipline and power. Black students must be punished for refusing to abandon a vernacular that they may speak at home with family or in the church on Sundays. In order to succeed in school, one must adopt Standard English that the white middle class greatly values—no compromises are made to incorporate an important element of these black students’ identity. This is not to suggest that schools should abandon the use of standard English, but instead it illustrates yet another tenet of the white middle class value system that black students must *adjust* and *assimilate* to in order to be successful within the classroom. This point is amplified when scholars forward the theory that teachers have greater expectations from those

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students who embody these values. It is also another avenue towards reshaping the identity of black students—including the middle class. As Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa G. Hilliard ask speaking from the perspective of a black student,

Can I invest in and engage my full personhood, with all of my cultural formations, in my class, my work, my school if my teachers and the adults in the building are both attracted to and repulsed by these cultural formations—the way I walk, the way I use language, my relationship to my body, my physicality, and so on? W.E.B. Du Bois speaks to this notion of upholding one’s black identity in the face of pressure to conform to these standards when speaks about double consciousness.

Du Bois famously writes, “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Here, he acknowledges two conflicting identities that must grapple back and forth with one another other in order for blacks to survive and navigate American life. Even though these words were written in 1903, over one hundred years ago, it is clear that this feeling still permeates all aspects of black life—especially in the classroom amongst black middle class student. Unfortunately, for black middle class students who lack the necessary patience and maturity to manage this double consciousness, the white middle class values of schooling could easily tear them asunder. It is now quite understandable

how Hooks, then, could arrive at the conclusion that this requirement to abandon
language can be used as “a weapon to silence and censor.” However, this is not all.

Rolling the eyes, raising one’s voice, or wearing baggy clothing can all be
interpreted by teachers as insubordination and unwillingness to subscribe to white middle
class standards and values. Hooks writes, “Students who enter the academy unwilling to
accept without question the assumptions and values held by privileged classes tend to be
silenced, deemed troublemakers.” Failing to do so usually results in
being labeled as a “problem” or a student “at risk.” Furthermore, doing so could result
in a student being moved from a moderately paced class, down to a lower level class.
Once black students are displaced from their original, moderately paced class, they rarely
ever make it out of the decelerated classroom—a dynamic that will be explored in full in
a later chapter. We also find out something that confirms Foucault’s theory on discipline
and power when juxtaposing the pedagogy between the gifted classes and the slower
paced classes.

Ferguson found that the classes designed for the gifted students were more
“interactive” and conducive to student input while the lower level classes were
mechanical and rigid. For the latter, she describes teachers who watched over the
classroom to ensure students were not misbehaving and interrupting the class from
“learning.” A student in Ogbu’s study echoes this sentiment by saying,

It’s, like, it’s harder for the teacher to teach in some of
those classes; she has to, like, deal with people causing
problems and laughing and throwing people out of class.

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104 Ibid. 179.
And it hurts the people who want to learn…. And then honors classes, it’s, like, everybody just sits there nice and soft and everybody listens in those classes.\textsuperscript{106}

In short, the gifted students were given the opportunity to question, learn, and grow together intellectually as a group while the “at risk” and “troubled” students were \textit{monitored} and \textit{watched over} as if they were problem children in need of refinement and containment. This, Foucault would argue, is the \textit{real} punishment for failing to embody the white middle class standards and values that are essential if one is going to academically perform at a high level. Since black middle class students are often moved to decelerated classrooms, we can see how they would be negatively affected by this ineffective pedagogy that facilitates poor results. This conclusion can also be used to complicate the theory put forth by Ogbu.

Given this idea that education is an essential piece of reaffirming the social hierarchy, Foucault would probably argue that \textit{if} black students are intentionally underachieving, they are only doing to agree with their appropriate role in society that education consistently grooms. According to this theory, black students are placed inside the boxes of “troublemakers” and “at risk” because these roles best reproduce the order in which we have become accustomed to. When a black student realizes that these labels do not accurately describe who they are as an individual, it is quite easy to see how this may be perceived as “acting white.” There is a specific code that symbolizes what it means to be black and in agreement with society’s order. Failing to fall in place with this order leaves the student feeling odd, out of the ordinary, and uncomfortable in his or her own black skin. The middle school student from Ogbu’s study vividly captures these awkward emotional moments when he tells a principal at his Middle School,

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
You don’t have to ride home on the bus like I do…You don’t have to play in the neighborhood with all the other kids…I don’t want ‘em to know I’m smart. They’ll make fun of me. I won’t have any friends…Where I live, they’re gonna say I’m White.\(^{107}\)

This application of Foucault to Ogbu’s theory of oppositional theory must be approached with caution because it is not to agree with these claims, but rather to provide the theoretical background necessary to understand why black students may be faced with this dilemma. It is not to take away from the important role structure plays in creating a social hierarchy that so efficiently produces identity and individual meaning. If anything, Foucault’s theories disprove Ogbu’s notion that black students are making individual, autonomous decisions to underachieve in the name of “opposition” to mainstream culture. It proves quite the opposite as it shows students reprioritizing their activities and behaviors in hopes that they will be accepted into society and the codes that govern it.

**Repercussions For Failing To Adhere To White Middle Class Values**

As Ferguson so poignantly states, “I am not concerned with investigating *individual* teacher’s racial attitudes, but institutional discourses and practices.”\(^{108}\) This is what is most important and relevant to the research question at hand. Foucault’s theory of society creating and reproducing systems of knowledge and self-truth through institutional practices is wise to take into consideration when countless cultural theories are brought forward suggesting specific *individual* behaviors of students that *earn* particular educational outcomes. Foucault shows us, in very certain terms, that we cannot


\(^{108}\) Ibid. 73.
ignore the impact of institutional actors and their influence on society’s behaviors and its order. Furthermore, Ferguson’s application of this theory to the “hidden curriculum” of schools makes it clear how those who do not adhere to white middle class values are *maligned* and *marginalized*. As outlined throughout this essay, being a black middle class student entails a different experience than being a white middle class student—this is imperative to remember. Lack of cultural capital and subsequent punishment for failing to possess this capital in the classroom are the main reasons why black middle class students do not seamlessly integrate into the framework of the educational institution.

Claude Steele’s “stereotype threat” explains one widely accepted theory that could be at the root of well-intentioned, hard working black students’ achievement shortcomings. Stereotype threat claims that black students become less confident in their academic abilities because of various negative stereotypes placed upon them through schools and society in general. This lack of confidence in their ability to perform results in underperformance and therefore confirms the stereotype. Steele posits,

> Ironically, their susceptibility to this threat derives not from internal doubts about their ability but from their identification with the domain and the resulting concern they have about being stereotyped in it.\(^{109}\)

A study conducted in 2006 shows that when black students can “reaffirm their self-integrity” they achieve at a much higher level. The researchers responsible for these findings define self-integrity as “seeing oneself as good, virtuous, and efficacious.”\(^{110}\) When black students are given the opportunity to articulate their own self worth inside the classroom, much of the performance gaps disappear. These results clearly support

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\(^{109}\) Ibid.

Steele’s belief that stereotype threat dictates academic achievement for both working and middle class black students. Unfortunately, black students rarely have a chance to feel good about themselves in schools because they find themselves under attack for failing to exemplify the quintessential white middle class values. One’s identity and self-perception plays a pivotal role in how black middle class students cope with the structural shortcomings of the educational institution. As a result of their unique societal position, the black middle class identity is often subject to a radical transformation during the years of middle school and high school. Understanding this transformation is helpful in noting the affect schools, and their classroom structure, have on black middle class students and their self-perception. Noguera’s son Pedro is a living example of this assertion. He writes,

The other thing that was changing for Joaquin was his sense of how he had to present himself when he was out on the streets and in school. As he grew older, Joaquin felt the need to project the image of a tough and angry young Black man. He believed that in order to be respected, he had to carry himself in a manner that was intimidating and even menacing. To behave differently—too nice, gentle, kind, or sincere—meant that he would be vulnerable and preyed on. I learned from Joaquin, that part of his new persona also involved placing less value on academics and greater emphasis on being cool and hanging out with the right people.\textsuperscript{111}

Joaquin’s experience is not an exception to the norm. His behavior is representative of how many black middle class students try to find their racial identity in the midst an educational institution that does not value it. Understanding racial identity and its development allows us to comprehend how black middle class students cope with being punished for failing to adhere to white middle class values. This process helps us

understand how black middle class students may react to being marginalized in schools.

**Racial Identity Development & Education**

Beverly Tatum, who has written many books about education, race, and their relationship, outlines the way in which racial identity is shaped in the adolescent years in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* In her study, she examines why many black students gravitate towards each other during the lunch period in schools. Her research helps explain the way black students of all classes cope with feeling rejected by teachers, administrators, and school overall. She acknowledges that a racial identity development process manifests during the formative years of black students’ lives that plays an integral role in the creation and use of the “black table” in the cafeteria. To articulate the transformation of black youth’s identity she cites psychologist William Cross and his five-stage theory on racial identity development. These stages, in order, include “pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment.”

The first stage of this, the pre-encounter, is arguably the most important step in this process because it entails black children absorbing the codes and images that depict the social and racial hierarchy in society. The role of media will be investigated in further detail in a later chapter. Messages that describe race, and more specifically, what it means to be black are often accepted subconsciously by black children who witness racial hierarchy everyday. These messages collect themselves in the psyche of black children only to be realized during the encounter stage of racial identity development.

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113 Ibid.
The encounter stage, according to Tatum and Cross, is the point in time when the black child is forced to recognize his or her own race because of a particular instance or situation that highlights racial difference in a negative fashion. W.E.B. Du Bois writes about experiencing this moment in his essay titled *Double-Consciousness and the Veil*. He speaks on how his encounter stage, though he did not call it this, took place when he was in elementary school. He recalls how a white girl, much taller than him, would not exchange cards with him during a card exchange. From this point forward he acknowledged that because of his skin color, he was different from the rest of his classmates. He writes, “It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.”114 This moment for most is both enlightening and confusing. For Malcolm X, his moment came when his English teacher, in no uncertain terms, told him that he would better be suited pursuing a career in carpentry than law.115 Tatum writes, “As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism.”116 Furthermore, she postulates that black students who attend predominantly white schools in white neighborhoods are more likely to experience this encounter stage at an earlier age than those who attend predominantly black schools in black neighborhoods.117 From this finding, we can infer that most black middle class children would be forced to recognize the implications of their race at a young age because of how

116 Ibid. 55.
117 Ibid.
often they interact with predominantly white environments. Black middle class parents also stress the importance of black identity to their children. Isabella, a parent from the aforementioned suburb of Lakeview, insists her children, “Can’t forget they are black.”

It becomes quite clear that black middle class students are forced to call into question their identity and its significance early and often given their unique position in society. This process can be a confusing and overwhelming experience for these youth who may not understand how to reconcile the newly discovered implications of their racial difference. This precarious and daunting process, triggered by feelings of not belonging, can give impetus to lower academic performance in the classroom. The structure of the school, too, plays a fundamental role in racial identity development because of tiered class divisions on the basis of merit. As we will find in the proceeding chapter, this age-old system sustains and intensifies the black and white middle class achievement gap.

**School Structure, Support Systems & Their Flaws**

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. –Carter G. Woodson

Stereotypes, according to Noguera, are supported by the *structure of the school* and, more specifically, by teachers and their expectations of students. Blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asian students are all individual racial groups that have been given specific

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expectations concerning their respective achievement. This practice of assigning expectations and grouping bares striking resemblance to the labeling theory introduced and advanced by Ray Rist. Rist argues that once someone is labeled a deviant, for example, they will begin to embody the characteristics of a deviant—even if they do not originally exhibit these characteristics. Expectations based primarily off of stereotypes and notions of natural ability often dictate the racial breakdown of classes. For example, Pacific Islanders may be expected to be top tier math students. Black students, on the other hand, regardless of class distinction, may be expected to underachieve in all subjects as many studies and research has confirmed. However, the standard is always the white student—he or she is the norm. Taking it one step further, if all black students are labeled as unmotivated students who are inherently less gifted than their white peers, as suggested by “objective scientific” research in The Bell Curve, they will begin to behave in concert with these claims. Black middle class students see and participate in the structure of the school every day and, at some point, begin to understand and assume the roles and expectations each race is assigned by faculty, administrators, and the media. Noguera, concurring with this belief states that, “Black students may assume that because there are no Black students in advanced or honors courses they cannot excel academically.” Students will inevitably make these connections sooner than later and reproduce these gaps in achievement—creating a dangerous cycle. Not only does the school expect less from the student, but the student begins to expect less from the student

120 Noguera, Pedro. The Trouble With Black Boys, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.)
based on what he or she has witnessed in the classroom day in and day out. Once again, class status plays little role in downplaying the stark racial breakdown of teacher expectations and student achievement. In short, teacher expectations and school structure should be held at least partially responsible for reproducing the black and white middle class achievement gap. In light of these findings, we must ask if any mechanisms or tools are available for black students who may feel underappreciated and undervalued in educational institutions?

Lack of support systems within the school structure seem to explain black middle class underachievement more accurately than individual bad choices and apparent self-destructive behavior. Instead of being supportive and addressing the needs of those who are in need of help, underachieving black middle class students are placed in decelerated classes in what seems more like an effort to suppress achievement problems than address them. On the rare occurrence these students are placed in advanced classes, they express feelings of alienation, uneasiness, and discomfort in advanced placement classes—once again underscoring structural deficiencies. Columbia High School, an integrated middle class school in Maplewood, New Jersey serves as an example of the consequences of weak support systems for poorly performing middle class black students.

Lovie Lilley, the principal at Columbia High School in Maplewood, made note of black middle class students’ discomfort in advanced courses in an interview with National Public Radio in October 2009. She argues,

Black children in higher-level classes were ignored, or perceived that they were being ignored, or did not feel comfortable going to the teacher after school to get
help…They gave up and decided to enroll in level three classes where at least there were other black children.\textsuperscript{124}

This kind of reaction to the apparent racial segregation of classrooms speaks directly to this notion of alienation and not belonging. The figure from Ferguson’s Shaker Heights study below echoes this reality.

| Table 9. Students, by Race and Gender, Taking No Courses at the Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) Level, Taking Less Than Half, or Taking at Least Half |
|---|---|---|---|
| Coursework | Blacks | | |
| | Males | Females | Males | Females |
| No honors or AP courses | 73.7 | 61.9 | 14.3 | 11.6 |
| Some, but less than half | 17.1 | 24.9 | 24.0 | 25.5 |
| Half or more honors and AP courses | 9.2 | 13.2 | 61.7 | 62.9 |
| Number of respondents | (316) | (362) | (334) | (361) |

In this figure we see that 73.7% of black males in Shaker Heights are enrolled in no honors or AP courses while only 14.3% of white male students are enrolled in no honors or AP courses—a 59.4% difference. For black and white females there is a difference of 50.3%. These numbers are almost entirely reversed when looking at students who have at least half of their classes at the advanced level. Only 9.2% of black males have at least half of their courses at the AP level while 61.7% of white males have at least half of their courses at the AP level—a 52.5% difference. Between black and white females there is a 49.7% difference. Even though the differences are much smaller in the “some, but less

than half” response, the numbers highlighted already are truly alarming. Using Tatum’s findings on identity and its role in schools, we can explain why black middle class students enrolled honors classes may not respond positively to such poorly structured, segregated classrooms and student-teacher relationships. We can also postulate as to why black middle class students may not strive to enter these advanced placement courses in the first place.

Tatum offers, “We must understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one’s peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy.” Acknowledging black students who gravitate towards each other as a coping mechanism is essential because it, again, underscores the lack of support and safety sensed within the classroom. Columbia High School confirms that this feeling is central to black middle class students’ experience in integrated schools. Scholars have argued that as individuals grow older, they identify less with their parents at home, and more with their peers at school. Taking that one step further, one can infer that students, especially black, identify more so with their black peers than with their teachers—especially those who are white. The distrust in educators is proof enough to confidently make this assertion.

Instead of turning to teachers and administrators in times of need and guidance black students tend to turn to each other to share stories, comfort one another, and build networks that they can rely on when school becomes especially alienating. The “black

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tables”, for example, are symbolic of both the solidarity amongst black students as well as the importance of race identity as one matures and moves through the stages of racial identity development. These tables are safe spaces where black students, working class and middle class, can retreat from everything they believe is working against their best interest in school. This dynamic centered on distrust for teachers and administrators, however, is not truly conducive to good academic performance. It implies that black students will not seek help from teachers regularly leaving them unprepared for some of the academic rigors of school. It also implies that black students are less likely to build relationships with their teachers. Unable and unwilling to channel support and assistance from teachers, these students lose an opportunity to learn, which negatively affects achievement.

This study of Columbia High School in Maplewood highlights school structure’s role in catalyzing underachievement for its black middle class students. What is more, Lilley insists that teacher expectations shift for students predicated on which level class they are enrolled in. She discovered that when one-time AP black students moved down to moderate or lower level classes, they became more comfortable because of the increased number of black students, but their teacher’s expectations of them lowered significantly. From earlier in this essay we learned lower teacher expectations beget lower achievement—seemingly more so for black students. According to one student, the lower level class was crudely dubbed the “retarded class.”\footnote{Solomon, Nancy. “Racial Achievement Gap Still Plagues Schools.” National Public Radio. National Public Radio, 31 October 2009. Web. 1 April 2010. \url{http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=114298676}} This pattern of lower classes leading to lower expectations and consequently lower achievement is seemingly triggered entirely by the structure of the school and teacher pedagogy. It is a system that clearly
stagnates any real chance of closing the achievement gap between black and white middle class students.

All things considered, we realize that the current system that separates students on the basis of merit is one of the main problems of the black and white middle class achievement gap. Scholars have forwarded the idea that the current system implemented in education is simply another form of segregation. It has been argued that middle class students who do not attend racially segregated schools instead are placed in racially segregated classrooms—all in the name of achievement. Even though there has been an historical push for the desegregation of schools, like Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, not much has really changed. Mickelson, in her study titled “Subverting Swann,” introduces two terms to describe racial segregation in education. She names the division of black and white students between different schools as “first generation segregation” and the division of black and white students between different classrooms as “second-generation segregation.”129 This second-generation segregation, again, points to an ineffective approach to school structure that facilitates unequal learning and achievement on the basis of “merit.” It is also the kind of segregation that most middle class blacks are ultimately disadvantaged by. Ladson-Billings and Tate refer to this kind of segregation as the absolute right to exclude exercised on behalf of schools through this merit based ranking and classroom division systems. They posit that this segregation and subsequent exclusion for black students forces them to “come to the university in the role of

intruders.” Instead of banishing those who are in need of reformed educational structure to the “retarded class”, schools must be bold enough to consider abandoning a flawed system that ultimately impedes higher academic performance from black students.

The structural explanations, as just expounded, provide a contextualized and nuanced understanding of the some of the factors causing this racial middle-class achievement gap. However, many scholars and administrators ascribe to a far less sophisticated analysis, which focuses on the negative cultural traits of specific racial groups—in this case black students. This type of analysis justifies and normalizes racial/ethnic grouping in regard to educational potential and performance. The following chapter will address some of the primary concerns with this kind thinking.

Chapter Six: The Problem with Cultural Theories & Explanations
Cultural theories that attempt to explain the link between race and academic performance generally locate the cause of the problem within students (lack of motivation, devaluing academic pursuits, and others) and, in so doing, effectively absolve educational institutions of responsibility for finding solutions.\(^{131}\)

Indeed, describing any racial achievement pattern matter-of-factly, in research or in the everyday life of schooling, always risks reinforcing an ingrained American assumption that race groups will naturally achieve differently. American racism has relied upon naturalizing a racialized hierarchy of academic and intellectual potential ever since racial categories were created and solidified with pseudoscience.\(^{132}\)

Many of the available cultural explanations for the achievement gap in American schools too often focus on the different cultural characteristics of certain racial group—as if they are fixed. Ogbu places the onus on the black community and its culture when he says,

> Although, good teaching and some changes in the educational process are important, the academic achievement gap is not likely to be closed by restructuring the educational system…Equally important are what the black community can do or the changes that must take place within the community and community forces.\(^{133}\)

Many of these cultural explanations actively naturalize the achievement patterns of these racial groups. A classic example of this practice is the discourse pertaining to Asian student’s academic excellence in the field of mathematics. Natural discourse claims that this is an area in which Asian students are inherently better than everyone else—that is just what we should expect from them. Likewise, explicit in this discourse is the rhetoric

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that black students *naturally* lack the ability to achieve at a high level, or attend class, participate in class, and graduate at the same level as their white peers. This, unfortunately, has become the dominant discourse amongst students, teachers, and administrators. We can now see how closely teacher expectations are linked with these supposed natural cultural abilities and behaviors. Mica Pollack, a former teacher, makes note of this reality in her ethnography of California City’s Columbus High School appropriately titled *Colormute.* In this study, she examines and juxtaposes the way in which the subject of race was discussed both privately and publically among students and teachers. What she uncovers can be attributed as one of the primary reasons why the racial achievement gap sustains itself.

In a moment of contestation, Pollack argues against Ogbu’s aforementioned oppositional culture theory because of its implicit use of this naturalized racial discourse. She emphasizes *how* Ogbu poses his questions and insists that they are overtly written in a language that fosters the idea that certain races exhibit certain, *natural* behaviors within the confines of the classroom. She uses the example of a question from his study that asks, “Some people have told me that black and Mexican-American students are not doing well in school because of the influence of their friends. Do you agree?” Pollack refers to this kind of framing of questions as “leading.” When these kinds of questions were presented to students and teachers alike, they facilitated responses that were consistent with the naturalized behavior discourse. In short, respondents tended to answer using the language of the question. These leading questions serve as one of the many flaws of Ogbu’s study of the achievement gap. Still, his work is considered scholarly

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135 Ibid. 151-152.
despite the inherently problematic methodology of his data collection. His study, however, is an example of how race is spoken about privately amongst students, teachers, and administrators. His questions accurately capture to what extent racial behavior and performance has become naturalized in the minds of students, teachers, administrators and even scholars. Pollack takes note of the language being used surrounding race and achievement inside the classroom and discovers a disturbing pattern.

After conducting a myriad of interviews, Pollack was able to discern two distinct ways in which race was discussed at this California high school. She argues that the tone and content of these conversations varied depending on whether achievement and student behavior was being discussed privately or publically. Privately, teachers especially, would claim that it was primarily the black students who were roaming the hallways and skipping class. They would also note that the black students were the ones who were most disengaged and poorly performing in class. However, in public scenarios, such as teacher meetings, or board meetings, race was rarely mentioned, let alone discussed. Instead, the issues concerning black student underachievement were framed in such a way that often excluded the words “black” or “African-American” highlighting an overall reluctance to go there. One might ask what exactly are the implications for these decisions by those in authority? They are, unfortunately, quite detrimental to any progress schools hope to make regarding closing the achievement gap between black and white middle class students.136

This denial of race when it most matters exacerbates the problem because it refuses to provide solutions for the students at risk while everyone is well aware of the racially distinctive achievement patterns at hand. It also speaks to the power of naturalize

136 Ibid.
race discourse because their inability to talk about race shows how accustomed we have become to the way different races “naturally” behave and perform academically. This problem also pertains to the black middle class, because their underachievement persists in light of the *unwillingness* of schools to address the racialized nature of outcomes. If teachers and administrators are *afraid* and *hesitant* to acknowledge race and the implications it has in the classroom, these issues will reproduce themselves while black working and middle class underachievement becomes even *further cemented* as what is natural and normal in schools.

When teachers cite certain cultural characteristics that seem natural, fixed, and unalterable, this discourse also speaks to the expectations these teachers hold for their students. More concisely, when a teacher named Mr. Vane says, “Like I said, Latino don’t come [to class], Filipinos are more passive—I think it’s in their culture to be more passive,” it is clear that his expectations of students in these two racial groups have been set based on a notion of natural racial behavior—that is just what *they* do.\(^{137}\) Judging from the historical underperformance of both working class and middle class black students, one can easily see how these culturally naturalized terms negatively affect teachers’ expectations of black middle class students. Tatum says,

> The point, I guess, that I think is important about talking about race, particularly with educators, is that there are unexamined assumptions that we bring into the classroom. And that, when we don't talk about them, we tend to act on them. So, when I am working in the classroom, if I have a belief, however unconscious, that some students are going to be smarter than other students, I may respond differently.

\(^{137}\) Ibid. 153.
to those students who I think are not likely to perform as well.  

This quotation accurately captures the major problems with the way we speak about cultural tendencies and behaviors in the classroom. In the end, what do Pollack’s findings tell us about cultural explanations of the achievement gap? She highlights,

Having naturalized racial achievement patterns as normal school orders, we rarely talk seriously together of how our own practices might undo achievement patterns that are racial. Americans are experts at thinking communally about race and achievement problems, but novices at thinking communally about race and achievement solutions.

In short, naturalized racial achievement discourse takes our attention away from educational problems that are fixable given that the proper language is used to describe and explicate the achievement gap—in this case between black and white middle students. This discourse also encourages underachievement for black middle class students through stereotype threat and its aforementioned affects on confidence and self-integrity. As this essay has proven thus far, there is nothing natural about the academic shortcomings and behaviors of black middle class youth. This debilitating discourse robs teachers and administrators the necessary foundation to critically answer the implications race has in the classroom. Schools can do one of two things, either confront the significance of race or continue to pretend it does not exist when it is time to make policy. The deconstruction of discourse that champions natural tendencies and behaviors is an approach that must seriously be considered. To understand how some of this

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naturalized racial discourse comes about, we turn to media representations and their implications for black and white middle class achievement gap.
Chapter Seven: Politics of Media

Representations, Discourse & Education
In the contemporary period, the production of a racial Other and the constitution and regulation of racial difference has worked increasingly through mass-produced images that are omnipresent in our lives.\textsuperscript{140}

Exploring the research and findings of Stuart Hall should provide a concrete foundation for understanding the way in which the media and its representations of different groups and ideas affects the way we, as a society, understand our reality. It should also give us a platform to understand how this reality negatively affects academic achievement for black middle class students. Hall introduces key concepts that are paramount to comprehending the politics of representation. These concepts underscore the implicit nature of the countless images we accept into our psyches on a daily basis. Some of the most important, essential tenets of representation are \textit{discourse} and \textit{language}. Defining these words brings us closer to making sense of our reality Vis a Vis the media.

Discourses, as defined by Hall,

\begin{quote}
Are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or \textit{formation}) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society.\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

Hall then posits that language is very much a “signifying practice.”\textsuperscript{142} Without language, there is no meaning and the combination of language and culture produce meaning. Furthermore, another term of importance relating to language is \textit{semiotics}. Semiotics, defined as the “science of signs” helps illustrate how certain symbols in society create

\begin{footnotes}
\item[142] Ibid. 5.
\end{footnotes}
specific meanings. Semiotic approaches to representation are often focused on how language affects and “produces meaning.” Discursive approaches, however, are much more nuanced and applicable to the questions being answered in this research essay. This particular approach confronts the effects, politics, and consequences of representation. Furthermore, discursive approaches allow us to discover the ways discourse constructs knowledge, dictates our behavior, and creates and maintains our identities. Meaning, according to Hall, defines “what is ‘normal’, who belongs and therefore, who is excluded.”

Deconstructing our representations, language, and culture is an imperative step in concretely grasping how the media and its images affects how black middle class students may self-identify and the perceptions and expectations their teachers may hold of them both consciously and subconsciously.

More succinctly and concisely, Hall outlines three important ways that language helps represent the society in which we live. These terms are, reflective, constructionist, and intentional. The first of these, the reflective approach, is fairly self explanatory as it sees language reflecting what is already present in the world as it is. The constructionist approach is founded on the idea that language, and subsequent meaning, are products of the symbolic “practices” in society and not the material ones. The last of these, the intentional approach, gives the power to the author by saying that it is the author who determines the meaning of whatever he or she produces. However, two of these approaches lack the necessary intellectual depth to be considered viable approaches to explaining how language influences representation in society—they also do not help this answer this question of self-identification.

143 Ibid. 10.
144 Ibid. 25.
The reflective approach is flawed because language cannot just reflect what already exists in society because this language is also a sign. Since language is considered a sign there are codes associated with it. The intentional approach is also flawed because it implies that the author is working entirely outside of set of codes or norms that govern the world in which we live. Instead, as we have already acknowledged, it is unrealistic to posit that we live in a society where we are autonomously expressing ourselves without outside influences. Hall says that, “the essence of language is communication and that, in turn, depends on shared linguistic conventions and share codes. Language can never be wholly a private game.”\textsuperscript{145} This is especially important when teachers and administrators comment on achievement pattern, but claim to be colorblind. The problems and inconsistencies with these two theories ultimately encourage us to embrace the constructionist approach, as it is the most comprehensive way to look at the connection between meaning and language. Taking this one step further, analyzing the techniques of others studying language and signs will prove to be beneficial for understanding how pieces of culture and representation can be carefully deconstructed and applied to black middle class underachievement.

Roland Barthes, the well-known French intellectual, attempted to look for signs and meaning in wrestling culture scene on television. He dug deep to label the “exaggerated gestures of wrestlers as a grandiloquent language.”\textsuperscript{146} In the end, he read these moves, and the entire wrestling culture, as a “spectacle of excess.” Claude Levi-Strauss also set out on determining the underlying signs of a culture by analyzing the way in which people in Brazil lived. More specifically, he wanted to know the codes that

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid. 36.
governed this society. He also looked to uncover the meaning that was produced with each ritual and cultural norm they practiced.\textsuperscript{147} Both of these examples, that are rather straight forward in nature, illustrate the way we must be thinking critically and outside of our breadth of knowledge in order to understand the implications certain aspects of our culture have on us as a society, and more specifically, on education and the achievement gap. Instead of looking closely at advertisements and magazines, perhaps it would be most affective to analyze hip-hop culture and news journalism and see how its discursive formations determine what we consider truth about race in our society. Hall refers to this result of discourse as the \textit{regime of truth}.\textsuperscript{148}

Preferred Meaning of Hip-Hop Music \& Images

Hip-hop music, which originated in the late 1970’s, quickly grew and flourished in New York City during the early 1980’s. DJ Kool Herc is credited as one of the founding fathers of this culture when he began rapping over looped disco breaks at parties where he would bring his turntables and speakers. From these humble beginnings in the late 1970’s and 1980’s hip-hop increased in popularity as an art form well into the 1990’s, the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, and beyond. What started out rich with culture and empowering words of resistance and pride has now evolved into something very different—at least from a mainstream perspective.

As the commercialization and commodification of the art form has increased, the images being produced by music videos, lyrics, and advertisements have become more graphic, violent, and degrading. There has always been a strong element of documentation, or what Gosa calls “lyrical ethnography”, of what is going on the inner

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid. 36-37.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. 49.
city in hip-hop. However, there is a fine line between documentation and glorification that has been crossed by many hip-hop artists in the mainstream. More specifically, there has been an increasing prevalence of the glorification of violence, drug dealing, and objectification of women. This then begs the question of why are these particular artists being pushed toward the limelight and receiving the most promotional dollars, while other, more positive artists, are pushed back and ignored by the record companies?

Hip-hop, at least what is readily available in the mainstream, is part in parcel of constructing the reality for black middle class youth. The signs present in much of hip-hop music today are so pervasive they have infiltrated all of society—it is no longer a culture shared by inner city working class black adolescence. However, these signs and the meaning they create and reproduce have different implications for different members of society. This is very important to remember. The meanings derived from the language of these images and the lyrics of music are often dictated by record label executives, marketing firms, and video directors, and rarely by the artists themselves. Hall’s theory on preferred meaning provides insight into this reality because it focuses on asking what part of an image does the company want you to take away from it?

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When we see this 50 Cent advertising Vitamin Water Formula 50, what does Glaceau, the parent company, want us to think about when we see a shirtless, muscle bound black male with a bottle of their product? It becomes rather clear that they would like for us, the audience, to make the connection that their product, which is rich in vitamins, will transform our bodies into a chiseled work of art. Furthermore, an advertisement taps into a certain code and shared language of the black male body and how desirable this body is in American society. This discourse is part of our regime of

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truth that overvalues the black body and lusts after the black body, but discounts and undervalues the black mind, spirit, and intellect. It is conceivable to see how these images can penetrate the psyche of black youth and communicate the intended messages, while the deconstructed messages remain unacknowledged and invisible.

Hall, however, emphasizes that it is “the conjunction of image and text” that meaning is derived from, not just the image. In the case of hip hop music itself, there is always a running dialogue between the words of the rapper and the image that he or she conveys either on the television screen, on YouTube, or inside the CD package’s artwork. Without the proper image, a given rapper cannot convey his or her words authentically without resistance from the audience. This is particularly true for rappers who must sustain a “gangster” image in order to stay relevant. This is important to remember because this relationship between image and text is ultimately what makes their words, movements, behavior, and swagger so real and believable to the consumer. Unfortunately, this “realness” is what increases the ease of accepting these images of young black male and female hip-hop figures and what they represent for society as a whole. Acknowledging these theories then requires of us to make the connection between these images and the achievement gap between black and white middle class students.

Being careful not to indict hip-hop music and its culture as the primary problem in educational achievement, we must carefully examine how hip-hop culture and media representations affect the academic outcomes for black students. As we have learned from the Barthes, Hall, and even Foucault, images are essential to shaping our reality and how we self-identify within our society. This molding process produces and reproduces the social order and white middle class hegemony that was touched on earlier. Ferguson
posits, “For Black and Hispanic youth, more than for Whites, hip hop probably transcends the realm of entertainment to become an integral aspect of identity and a lens through which to understand the world.” He makes a very important point here because it differentiates the relationship black students have with hip-hop from that of white students. What began as culture with rebellious overtures and defiant rhetoric has since been replaced with the aforementioned corporation controlled images of artists depicting caricature-like personas. As we learned earlier, these messages in hip-hop do not mirror the white middle class values perpetuated within the confines of the classroom. Therefore, what is learned through these messages both in image and text work against the skills valued and needed to succeed in schools on a daily basis—this is very important. However, it is not just hip-hop music that is responsible for these coded messages that help mold and shape the social order. Another way in which racial difference and hierarchy is depicted is through a variety of news journalism.

Preferred Meaning of News Journalism

At first thought, for most, the news represents a collection of factual stories from around the country and around the world. This form of journalism and reporting is put forward in an attempt to ostensibly keep the masses informed about the events of the day. Furthermore, these news stories are usually broadcast or written under the assumption that the audience has some invested interest in their content whether it be a piece on “terrorism”, a burglary down the street, or joblessness in America. The most important element of these stories, and the news in general, is the premise that all of these stories are factual, objective, and unbiased. They, too, help contribute to our regime of truth.

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People rarely question the validity of what they are reading, watching, or listening to—everything is accepted as valid. We rarely ask the right questions, or any questions at all, concerning the news. We do, however, allow these stories to construct our identities, the language we use to describe one another, and our modes of being. Roland Barthes indicts this omnipresent coupling of image and text to present the questions that society fails to ask.

Barthes’ theory on this relationship of image and text is also applicable to news, and especially television news broadcasts. He writes “Today, at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon.”152 Included in this could be the teleprompter on every television news set that provides this “linguistic message”, or script, necessary to accompany the images on the screen. These words, usually written by writers, and regurgitated by reporters require the audience to acknowledge and understand a particular news story in a specific light. Barthes suggests that in “every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques.”153 When he uses the term signified, he is referring to the ideas that enter one’s mind when seeing a particular image. This image itself is labeled as the signifier.154 This dynamic is important in relation to the news because the images seen in a newspaper article or television broadcast are shaped by the words they share space with. The text forces individuals to narrow down the different ways a

153 Ibid. 39.
particular piece of news can be comprehended and understood. In short, the text guides the audience or reader into making a specific *interpretation* of the image that is usually in line with that of the social order. As Barthes says, “It limits… the projective power of the image.” In the end, this practice becomes repressive and oppressive.\(^{155}\) Applying these theories to the images of blacks in the news, it becomes clear how a racial hierarchy is supported.

As Ferguson writes, “The headlines of newspaper articles and magazines sound the alarm dramatically as the presence of black males in public spaces has come to signify danger and threat to personal safety.” She claims that blacks are either depicted as criminally intentioned dangers to society or helpless victims who cannot change their self-inflicted circumstances.\(^{156}\) DuBois echoes this statement when he writes “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”\(^{157}\) On October 12\(^{th}\), 2006 article on ESPN.com, a popular sports news website, describes a shooting at a strip club involving the National Basketball Association’s shooting guard Stephen Jackson.

Concerning the marriage of text and image, here the author writes the article in such a way that triggers *specific* signifieds for the signifier of the Stephen Jackson’s face. Some of which include describing Jackson as a basketball player, strip club attendee, firearms owner, and criminal. The highlighting of Jackson’s probation not once, but twice, confirms that his lewd behavior is a pattern and not a mistake. All of these signifieds are coupled with the black face of Jackson at the top of the article. This preferred meaning, put forward by the author, falls in line with the notion that black males are *naturally* athletically inclined, over-sexualized, violent criminals, who lack social graces. Jackson

also represents blacks as problems, malcontents, and dangers to society. As Shirley Chisholm once wrote, “Racism is so universal in this country, so widespread and deep-seated, that it is invisible because it is so normal.” The infamous inadvertent juxtaposition of the looter versus the finder in the wake Hurricane Katrina is another example of this dynamic.


The images of news journalism not only shape, influence, and determine how society interprets blacks, but also shapes whiteness and the supposed ontological difference between the two groups. Implicit in many of these articles and stories aired on the ten o’clock news, crimes and atrocities committed by blacks, often against one another, reaffirm that this group of society is unruly and must be contained and controlled through policing and government programs. Seeing images of blacks in this light also cements whites as the antithesis. They do not embody these destructive, illogical characteristics that blacks exhibit—they are the norm and the hegemonic. Again, with the assistance of text, this discourse is repeated time and time again until society falls under its powerfully gripping hypnosis. This is the naturalization process of these images—repetition of these messages begets validity and fact. Ferguson argues that the symbolic violence that directs the media representations of blackness has served as the replacement for the pervasive de jure racism of yesteryear.

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162 Ibid. 80.
The above figure from Ronald Ferguson’s Shaker Heights study shows the hours of television watched per day versus the hours spent on homework per day for advanced

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placement and non-advanced placement students by race. Even though honors students watch less television, they still watch a considerable amount each day. The images and text of the media infiltrate the impressionable minds of students a little more everyday—a little more so for black students. Speaking from the perspective of a black student, Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa G. Hilliard ask,

How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the power of the mind, when African-Americans intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and out of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence?164

This is precisely the impact that these images, coded messages, and preferred meaning have upon the institution of education. The affect on black youth aside, teachers, administrators, and education policy makers are equally affected by the collection of signifiers and signifies known as the mass media. For black middle class students these messages help facilitate a certain construction of identity through the processes outlined earlier. Specifically, these messages conveyed in hip-hop can effectively deemphasize the role education plays in potential social upward mobility and valorize alternative, but negative routes to “success.”165 Media representations as a whole play a very significant role in determining which expectations teachers set for which students. How can teachers have high expectations of their black students, regardless of class when society claims they are naturally athletes, criminals, or entertainers who are either victims of their own

circumstance or the propagators of society’s violent tendencies? That is the identity of black youth being constructed by media representations. Bordieu refers to the unconscious dispositions that guide behavior as one’s *habitus*. It is quite plausible that teachers’ habitus is constantly being shaped by media images and their preferred meanings. Coming to this realization means that teachers are not really colorblind in their actions, labeling practices, and expectations as they so vehemently argue.

Scholars have taken note of the relatively high achievement of blacks that immigrate to the United States from other countries. This is important because it implicitly juxtaposes the self-perception of the black immigrant with that of the black American. Used in this way, Ogbu and his theory on oppositional theory is useful. This phenomenon suggests that there is a *socialization* process takes a long time to teach the codes of self-perception to foreign-born students of color that American born black students have experienced since birth. This speaks to the sheer power of the media representation and its politics because it illustrates that the longer one is conditioned by these images and their preferred meaning, the more one will embody and carry its hegemonic discourse. It cannot be understated just how influential media representations are in shaping the face of education and the subsequent academic success of the nation’s students. What we learn from examining these representations is the fact that just because some black students may be middle class, they cannot escape the power of these images and how they shape the way society orders itself around a racial hierarchy that delineates and defines black as the ontological other in every institution—especially education.

166 Ibid.
Conclusion
As it stands, black middle class families and their children climb over a myriad of tall hurdles in order to even stay in the race for the American Dream—they are not running the same race. Consider, too, that these hurdles were almost exclusively set up by members of another, more powerful team that happens to make the rules for the race. From the material presented throughout this essay it is quite evident that the achievement gap between black and white middle class students is a multifaceted problem that can be analyzed through an array of lenses ranging from wealth disparities to school structure to media representations and discourse. Since this particular question about educational achievement has been sparsely researched and explored, the diverse set of arguments implemented throughout the body of this work is necessary to bring us closer to solving what has been characterized by many scholars as a conundrum. Taking this interdisciplinary approach into consideration, we must ask ourselves what these different arguments and critiques have in common with each other in respect to this gap in academic performance. What affinity do all of these explanations share? After historicizing the problem and then contextualizing it in a myriad of ways, it becomes rather clear that the discourse surrounding black and white middle class achievement is a key contributor in the persistence of this performance disparity. This discourse, in particular, misrepresents and frames the “problem” of underachievement in such a way that permits the continuation of the status quo. The power of discourse and the language that creates and supports it has been both implicit and explicit in many of the different ideas and potential explanations explored throughout this thesis.

Beginning with the discourse surrounding the middle class and the American Dream, we see that it is implemented in way that supports the tenets of free market
capitalism while also frowning upon those who cannot lift themselves up by their
bootstraps and make a way. This discourse ultimately sets the tone for the rest of the
debate concerning black middle class underachievement because it redirects the
responsibility for the wealth and homeownership inequities from historic and current
policy, discrimination, and institutional racism that project these gross disparities onto
black middle class families. Concisely, it is the black middle class’s individual
shortcomings and faults that place them in a disadvantaged position—they need to correct
their self-destructive behavior. Discourse manifests itself again in the exploration of
subjective teacher labeling and expectation setting that is largely predicated off of the
adherence to ascribed white middle class value sets put forth inside the classroom. The
discourse here being that teachers believe they are making objective, color blind
assessments about black middle class students, when that is clearly not the case. Lastly,
discourse is reintroduced in this essay in the analysis of media representations and the
preferred meaning of what being black in American society means—criminal, athlete,
entertainer, etc. All of these discourses come together to form a truly powerful, but
dangerous discursive formation.

This discursive formation is the creation of a hegemonic discourse of a color blind
American society. This same discourse is most prominently exhibited by those who
oppose affirmative action calling it a radical policy that goes against American ideals of
equality. To these opponents this policy is an example of reverse racism that
disadvantages white students. They say race is no longer an important factor in
determining one’s life outcomes and then list an limited assortment of black men or
women who “made it” to support their argument. Echoing this statement is a poll
conducted by the Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University measuring racial attitudes towards blacks. In it 72% of blacks said blacks have “less” opportunities available than whites while 27% of whites agreed with this response. This disconnect highlights this hegemonic discourse and its power in numbers. The hegemonic discourse always uses language in ways that maintains and sustains this hegemony for the group in power. As it stands, education and its current model is a prime mechanism for sustaining this hegemony.

This colorblind discourse is most destructive for education, amongst other institutions, because it says two things. For one, it says that as educational institutions, we create policy on a colorblind model that does not take into consideration ways of addressing a particular group’s underachievement—in this case black students who happen to be middle class. Secondly, it rejects the notion that there is a set of structural factors that facilitates these unequal academic outcomes. It is articulated by the premise that every student must be treated the same and given the same opportunity to learn. It fails to acknowledge how wealth disparities, teachers, administrators, school structure, and media representations are actively contributing to this equation of underachievement. This colorblind discourse ultimately proves to be the way in which black middle class students continue to be underserved in schools. This discourse too, despite its pseudo-liberal intentions, causes the black middle class student to become the other in his or her classroom by pointing the finger of blame at this student for his or her academic shortcomings. By shifting the responsibility off of those who need to be held accountable,

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black middle class students will continue to underachieve even in the midst of a society that believes it is becoming more and more color blind everyday.

What we fail to realize, however, is that as a society this colorblind discourse does not take into account any of the ways race and racism matters. The critical race theoretical undertones of this essay make this point. Racism has not gone anywhere, but instead reshaped itself into new forms like the racial resegregation of the classroom. As some scholars believe, history has brought racial inequality to where we stand, but it is this colorblind discourse that helps recreate and sustain this pattern.169 How can we really watch television or read the newspaper and truthfully be colorblind when the preferred meanings of these media images suggest otherwise? How can we expect to ameliorate the tragedy of black middle class educational achievement if we refuse to ask ourselves the tough questions about the role race plays in education? If black middle class children have difficulty academically performing, clearly race must still play a leading role in our society. A multifaceted strategy towards uncovering explanations, similar to the approach employed in this essay is entirely necessary, but in far too few cases implemented. In an age where racism is more concealed than ever, but still omnipresent, we place ourselves in a position to seriously inflame and exacerbate the vast inequities in education and beyond if we do not tackle these problems head on. It is not always easy to confront the inconvenient truths of race’s significance in America, but the black and white middle class achievement gap is a testament to its lasting power.

169 Ibid.
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