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Minding the gap : a rhetorical history of the achievement gap

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MINDING THE GAP:
A RHETORICAL HISTORY OF THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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To the students

of Glen Oaks, Broadmoor, SciAcademy, McDonough 35, and Bard Early College High
Schools in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana

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Abstract

Minding the Gap: A Rhetorical History of the Achievement Gap arose as an inquiry into the rhetorical congestion around the phrase *achievement gap* in public discourse. Having been used in support of multiple, often competing, education agendas, the phrase seems versatile almost to the point of emptiness, and yet it seemingly retains its persuasive power. Examining the history of the phrase, I reveal that the notion of the achievement gap is rooted in the logic of segregation and the rhetoric of disability, and serves to construct students in ways that paradoxically undermine efforts to expand access to educational opportunity. Although *achievement gap* is most frequently invoked in the name of educational equity, I argue that its rhetorical force can be infelicitous, erecting a discursive boundary that contains and limits students who are understood to be on the “wrong” side of the gap. This project is the first analysis of gap rhetoric, focusing on its heretofore-unexamined origins in the 1950s and the way its inheritances shape discourse since the 2001 *No Child Left Behind* act. I demonstrate that even equity-driven uses of *achievement gap* carry the baggage of the phrase’s history, which operates to re-marginalize already marginalized students and to construct educational equity as an unattainable goal.

Chapter 1

Minding the Gap: The Achievement Gap as Rhetorical Artifact

“Achievement gap,” noted Gloria Ladson-Billings in a 2006 address to education researchers, “has become a crossover hit” (“From Achievement Gap” 3). That gap has been called “the civil rights issue of our time” by both Democratic and Republican candidates for office, and closing it is the explicit goal of not only federal and state legislation like *No Child Left Behind*, but a proliferation of influential organizations like the Education Trust, Teach For America and Achievement First, funded by equally influential corporate philanthropies. Public awareness of the gap has been cultivated by extensive media coverage, including covers of *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines and feature-length documentaries like *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery*. In short, Americans across the ideological spectrum appear to have reached a nationwide, bipartisan consensus on education—a remarkable phenomenon. Despite sometimes vitriolic contention about how best to close it, the majority of participants in this discourse seem to agree that there is an achievement gap in American education and that it urgently needs to be addressed.

Although it is often used as if it need not be defined, as if its meaning is clear and agreed upon, the gap is a versatile rhetorical construct. Its specific reference can vary dramatically from one utterance to the next, indicating alternately race, class, linguistic background, and gender; it can point to disparities in various combinations of test scores, graduation rates, school funding, grade point averages, teacher quality, and any number of other factors. The dominant understanding of the gap is arguably that it describes two disparities in standardized scores: the first between white and Asian students on the one hand, and Black and Latino students on the other, and a second and overlapping gap

between students from low-income and those from middle- and high-income communities.¹ Many casual uses of “achievement gap” refer to it as a “Black/white gap,” revealing the prevailing and underexamined assumption that race is the fundamental difference between students on the two sides of the gap. The scope of the perceived gap varies as well: some iterations cite aggregate statistics of individual students categorized by ethnic background or income, where others compare schools or districts based on the composition of their “majority” population or on their status as “urban,” “rural” or “suburban.” That the phrase is often used without explanation, as Beverly Cross noted, “suggests a particular problem that does not require any modifiers at all,” as if its meaning is a matter of common sense (247).

Perhaps such overlooked slippage of the definition of the problem is one reason for what the editors of *Education Week*, among many others, have observed: despite public interest, federal policy, and local reform, progress in reducing educational disparity has been “slow or nonexistent.” This is the second remarkable fact about the

¹ I have chosen to capitalize “Black” but not “white.” Prescriptions regarding capitalization of these terms vary, many of which note that more precise descriptive terms are preferable. Although I agree, my contention is that the achievement gap debate is premised on precisely this Black/white dualism, so I will often use those terms. When I am using “Black” as a reference to the cultural group commonly understood as Americans of African or Caribbean descent, I will follow a convention of the Black press, as well as the usage of scholars including Geneva Smitherman, Asa Hilliard, and Theresa Perry, capitalizing it just as I would “African-American.” However, to capitalize “white” would be to imply that whiteness points to a parallel cultural group and, moreover, to adopt the convention of white supremacist groups. “White” does not function as a synonym for, say, “Irish Catholic” or “Croat.” I am mindful, too, of the likelihood noted by the *American Heritage Dictionary* that “uncertainty as to the mode of styling *white* has dissuaded many publications from adopting the capitalized form *Black*,” and thus wish to break from that linguistic enactment of white privilege. Retaining the lowercase “white” is a gesture towards understanding whiteness not as an ethnicity or culture but instead as a phenotype to which social status has historically been attached. I offer this explanation not in the spirit of prescription or final word, but as a partial explanation of my own usage.

gap: it has withstood the concerted, often well-funded and extensively researched efforts of manifold organizations, government agencies, and individuals.² Taken together, these facts—the seemingly easy and near-universal consensus that there is an achievement gap that must be closed, paired with an apparent inability to do so—beg for a closer examination of the discursive construction of the problem itself. A number of scholars have pointed to the operation of language in educational discourse. Gloria Ladson-Billings has called attention to the “fallacies of achievement gap discourse” that include reductionism and victim blaming (316). Andy Hargreaves argued that commonsense notions of achievement and failure “perpetuate the very processes of social exclusion that educational policies designed to eliminate the achievement gap in schools are meant to eradicate” (29). Cross asserts that “to focus on a gap, paradoxically, likely sustains it” (253) and Amy Noelle Parks echoes her, arguing that the constant reiteration of the phrase *achievement gap* in education discourse works to create the phenomenon it purportedly describes, reinscribing relations of power among the groups in question. Asa Hilliard and Camika Royal insistently remind us that those groups are imagined in fundamentally racial terms. These scholars have focused attention on the rhetorical force of gap discourse, and in this project, I take their cue. Their arguments point directly to the constitutive role of rhetoric in American educational policy, providing a reminder of an important premise of rhetorical thought: that language is not simply, or even primarily, about representation; it is a force in itself. To their astute critiques of contemporary effects of gap rhetoric, I hope to add a historical-rhetorical perspective that may help explain why the phrase has such a paradoxical force, working powerfully against the

² See, among others, English’s “On the Intractability of the Achievement Gap.”

intentions of the equity-minded reformers who invoke it. The scholarly and critical work on which I build has challenged educators to look past the value of “achievement gap” as a rallying cry, effective though it has been in focusing attention on educational inequity. In this spirit, I will consider whether, by rallying around that particular rhetorical construction, supporters of educational equity have transformed the difficult but changeable issue of inequity into a Gordian knot. In pursuing this question, I will consider how tacit assumptions operate within gap discourse to constrain it: what they are, where they came from, and what they do. At the same time, I will search for ruptures or openings in the achievement gap model that might enable stakeholders to think beyond its constraints and perhaps, by imagining public education otherwise, to break the Gordian knot.

For my purposes, I will use the phrase “achievement gap” to cite uses of the phrase in all its diversity of possible meanings. I invoke it not to argue for the existence or nonexistence of a particular inequity, but rather to point to its appearance in discourse. At the same time, I recognize the existence of various disparities in American education that have material consequences on the lived experiences of many students. My purpose here is not to delineate any particular inequality, however, but rather to consider one way in which such inequalities have been *named*. For that reason, I will frequently refer to “educational inequity” to invoke the multiple, complex, and overlapping inequalities—in funding, curriculum, discipline, teacher preparation, textbooks, technology, rigorous coursework, specialized support services, arts education, physical plant, and class size, among others—that run throughout American school systems and have been documented by numerous scholars and historians including James D. Anderson, Lisa Delpit, William

Watkins, Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, and David Tyack, among many others. I will attempt to preserve the sense that these disparities cannot be neatly captured in a single measure by referring to them in broad terms. In doing so, I hope to avoid one trap into which achievement gap discourse has fallen: appearing to, in a single pithy phrase, capture both the long and complex institutional and social history of unequal education in the United States, and the vast complex of inequalities in the current educational system and the social, economic, and political systems of which it is a part. My intent will be, of course, undermined the instant I attach a name to that vast complex. When I refer to “educational inequity,” then, I do so as a gesture towards the vast complex of events, ideas, and experiences of disparity in classrooms and school systems; my hope is that offering a *gesture* rather than a *description* will, insofar as it is possible, acknowledge the reality of many different kinds and experiences of unequal education across time, place, age, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, and nationality, to name but a few.

Situating the Rhetorical Approach

Arguing that contemporary education reform operates as a spectacle, David Granger cites Barthes in noting that the logic of spectacle enables—in fact, forces—signifiers to “discard all parasitic meanings” in order to operate as unambiguous givens and to limit reading to an ahistorical surface text (214). The uncritical use of the signifier “achievement gap” is, I would add to Granger’s analysis, a tool in the creation of this spectacle. Its assumed transparency depends upon a dehistoricized understanding of the term—what Ladson-Billings called

The silliness of isolating contemporary academic achievement without a more in-depth and robust understanding of the nature of social, cultural,

economic, and political histories and relations between Black and White and Brown and White peoples in this country. (“Pushing” 322)

She points to a usage of “achievement gap” that effaces its discursive links to a history in which racial disparities have again and again been called on to justify, not to challenge, a racist status quo. To her list of histories that gap discourse ignores and that demand robust understanding, I hope Ladson-Billings would tolerate the addition of a specifically *rhetorical* history of the phrase itself. It is perhaps unsurprising that the tools of rhetoric are rarely called upon in achievement gap-based educational discourse: for decades, education has been understood as an undertaking best informed by the sciences (Tyack). Current federal education policy has inherited this orientation in, for example, the *No Child Left Behind* act’s emphasis on data-driven, research-based practice. Much of the research done on the achievement gap derives from this model, and studies that are not driven by statistical analysis are often rooted in psychology and, increasingly, in neuroscience. Yet, as scholars of scientific discourse like Jean Fahnestock, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour have repeatedly contended, the design of scientific studies and the questions on which they are based are not neutral. Parks points this out in her critique of educational research, asserting that methods relying on “psychology-inspired questions, theories, and methods that seek to describe and order individuals” create and bolster metaphors of hierarchy in education. The quantitative basis of the concept of an achievement gap does not, in other words, render it impervious to rhetorical analysis; on the contrary, it demands analysis that considers not only its etymology but its continuing appeal to the public imagination, an appeal that has allowed it to become ubiquitous in public discourse.

In setting out to offer a rhetorical history of the term, I heed the advice of rhetoricians of public policy like Robert Asen, who notes that policy debates demand a different approach than analyses of single texts or speech events. The rhetoric of ongoing policy deliberations consists of utterances by hundreds or thousands of authors—lawmakers, community leaders, journalists, concerned citizens, researchers—across decades. Asen contends that, in such cases, discourse is a force that operates “relatively independently of individual participants,” occurring as it does in diverse texts, contexts, and temporalities (133). To treat discourse as a force independent of language users is to build upon the insights of theories such as Bakhtin’s dialogism and Derrida’s critique of intentionality. Their work also underpins my project in the form of an understanding that language operates beyond the intentions of any particular rhetor. In addition to reflecting this understanding of how language works, this assumption offers a way to avoid, at least partially, one pitfall of many arguments about the gap-based reform, which is to frame disputes as antagonisms. Granger argues that the logic of spectacle that rules many education disputes replaces critical analysis of “messy, intractable realities” with simplistic narratives of “good guys” and “bad guys.” I would suggest that this antagonistic stance is not limited to one camp in the school reform debates. Reformers and philanthropists are cast as robber barons seeking to sabotage public schools and privatize them for their own gain, whereas teachers’ unions and other critics of reform are castigated as lazy, shortsighted guardians of a racist status quo.³ This divisive view of

³ Among many examples, I will cite two: Secretary of Education Rod Paige compared the National Education Association to “a terrorist organization” (he later recanted) and characterized opponents of charter schools as “the real enemies of public schools” (Pear; Paige). Opposing Paige’s view is the influential educational historian Diane Ravitch, whose blog (boasting over three million hits) is peppered with similar ad hominem

speech and policy often rests on an assertion of nefarious motives. Proceeding from the assumption that utterances escape the control of rhetors, I aim to critically interrogate the operation and effects of *language* without making assumptions about individuals' intents or motives.⁴ As David Gillborn pointed out, critics cannot “look inside the heads of policy-makers and their advisers,” but “fortunately, their intentions are irrelevant. What matters is the effect that changes in policy and practice have” (240). In attending to the *effects* of gap discourse on larger discourses of education, race and class that shape the way Americans imagine themselves and each other, I hope to attend to what Jeffery Nealon might call the “performative ethics” of gap discourse, focusing not on what the achievement gap means in various contexts, but rather on what it does (170). In other words, where a “spectacular” version of education discourse tends to take on an epideictic stance, disputing which people or policies deserve blame and which are praiseworthy, I will take a more forensic approach in asking how utterances have played out within discourses and how they are connected not to their rhetors, but to other utterances and larger narratives.

That goal prohibits a survey approach to history that would attempt to comprehensively trace the gap's emergence and development across time. Instead, I will isolate two key moments of policymaking in its history. Although important moments in the history of the gap will therefore fall outside the scope of the project, this tight focus

attacks, including the description of former D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee as “heartless, callous, and indifferent to other human beings” (“Breaking News”).

⁴ Perhaps fittingly, my intention will be undermined almost immediately in the second chapter, where I consider the discourse of U.S. Representatives who were avowed segregationists. In their case, they made their intention of preserving and restoring racial segregation explicit in documents like the Southern Manifesto.

will facilitate an analysis that preserves the complexity of the discourses I consider, one that will allow me to heed Asen's call to "elucidate the diverse perspectives forwarded by the multiple authors of policy debate" in a given historical moment on the one hand, while also considering "the developments in policy debates over time" on the other (139). In order to do so, I will adopt the genealogical approach to history that, rather than searching for the origin or essence of an idea, works to reconstruct the play of forces at work in key events, teasing out the ideological struggles that lead to revised or preserved interpretations of concepts like "achievement gap." Genealogy is a "history of the present" pioneered by Foucault, who noted that a genealogical approach avoids imposing a linear or teleological narrative on historical events, instead understanding that concepts like the gap emerge not as the result of "rationally inevitable trends" but rather at the confluence of myriad forces, inheritances, and practices that struggle for domination. Genealogy works "to identify the accidents, the minute deviations--or conversely, the complete reversals--the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" (81). In considering the confluence of forces that "gave birth" to the achievement gap as a way of understanding educational inequity, much of my project will focus on analyzing the scene of emergence, or what Foucault might call the "historical beginning" of the gap concept.

That historical beginning was, I will contend, a now largely forgotten congressional subcommittee hearing held in 1956. The so-called "Davis Hearings" were convened to investigate the effects of integration on Washington, D.C. schools, and although they were the scene onto which the gap concept emerged, they have been heretofore overlooked by scholars of education. I will focus on a second historical

moment, the more recent and far more visible hearings that initiated lawmakers' consideration of *No Child Left Behind* in 2001, in order to get a point of comparison, asking how and whether the achievement gap of 2001 was shaped by its now obscure historical beginning in 1956. Many critics of NCLB focus on the outcome of these debates—the law itself—rather than the disputes, dissension, shared assumptions and competing historical narratives from which the policy emerged, as a genealogical approach would demand. Asen argues that moments in which policy is crafted merit attention because in these moments “meaning making appears as the central task occupying participants.” These are the “atypical” moments in the life of a policy, otherwise comprised of “maintaining and enforcing” meaning, when rhetoric’s constitutive role is particularly apparent (129-30). These are the scenes that, in the spirit of genealogy, I will isolate and attempt to reconstruct in terms of the interplay of forces and competing narratives from which “achievement gap” emerged into public discourse. The purpose of a genealogical project “is to discover that truth of being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents” (Foucault 81). By insisting upon the gap as a rhetorical construct rather than a transparent reflection of reality, I hope to re-open critical consideration of the achievement gap as a way of knowing educational inequity. This project aims to contribute to an emerging dialogue in which participants can revisit the commonsense behind the achievement gap, grappling with the contradictions and complexities that inhabit even the most fundamental tenets of educational discourse.⁵

⁵ The conversation dates back to at least 2006, when Gloria-Ladson Billings used her presidential address to the American Educational Research Association to call for critical reconsideration of the term. It has recently gained more attention at the instigation of

As a statistical construct, the achievement gap is the result of the kind of quantitative research that characterizes the sciences. With that in mind, I will draw on the work of rhetoricians of science like Jeanne Fahnestock, who has considered the particular power of scientific discourse in the popular imagination, pointing on the one hand to the widespread belief that science and quantitative studies are objective reflections of external reality, and on the other, to the particular appeal of scientific findings that reinforce an audience's already held presumptions. In other words, the popularity of the "achievement gap" as an explanatory frame for educational inequity may lie in its offer of what appears to be objective, scientific data that proves what was suspected all along about education: that students inside the dominant culture outperform those outside of it, and that the reason for this is likely related to deficits in the latter group rather than structural inequities that privilege members of the dominant group. This presumption, I will argue, is rooted in eugenic racial theories that, although now considered infamous "junk science," continue to operate beneath the surface of gap discourse. Fahnestock describes science journalism's "adjustment of new information to an audience's already held values and assumptions"; in this case, by locating responsibility for educational disparities within the nondominant group, the achievement gap offers an explanation for those disparities that preserves the American belief in a classless society in which all citizens have an equal opportunity to succeed (334).

A genealogical approach will allow me to answer the call, in Granger's words, to unpack the "simple, consoling myths of spectacle" that fuel so much discourse around

Camika Royal, whose column "Please Stop Using the Phrase 'Achievement Gap'" sparked a public conversation among alumni of Teach For America about that organizations' frequent invocation of the phrase ("Pass the Chalk")

educational reform. Granger and other scholars critical of “gap talk” recognize that the notion of the achievement gap carries a tangle of meanings, inheritances, and conceptual linkages that function undetected beneath the surface of discourse and powerfully influence it. To this end, Cross insisted that “the crisis of the achievement gap has been constructed in a way that hides what underlies it” (253). Pointing out the constructed nature of the gap, these scholars call for deconstructive readings that unveil “scenes of production” of the achievement gap that have hitherto been erased in discourse.⁶ Although it has long been taken as a transparent description of an objective reality, the achievement gap frame for educational inequity is a rhetorical choice.

Situating Myself

I have never been anything like a neutral observer of gap discourse. In fact, I would count myself among those who have long rallied around the phrase. I joined Teach For America (TFA) in 2000, and although I was not then familiar with the phrase, I was motivated by what I observed or imagined to be dramatic differences in the education offered students in two sections of the city where I lived. This was prior to the passage of No Child Left Behind, so the results of achievement tests were not yet published in my local paper, nor were there school performance scores to confirm my beliefs. In point of fact, I had not set foot in any public school other than the ones I had attended over a decade earlier. I suspect my “observations” were in fact extrapolations based on the works of Jonathan Kozol and bolstered by casual but knowing talk about “good” and “bad” schools that pervades conversations regardless of participants’ actual knowledge or experience of the schools they discuss. I applied to and joined TFA and moved to Baton

⁶ See also the works of Ladson-Billings, Love, O’Neil, Gillborn, Bainbridge and Lasley

Rouge, Louisiana to teach high school special education. It was during the subsequent years of teaching that I went from interested in improving education to passionately committed to closing the achievement gap. This commitment was carefully cultivated by the TFA staff with anecdotes and statistics meant to rally us to the task at hand, which is not to say it was not also genuine. As first-year teachers, we were faced with the most difficult professional task of most of our lives, and many of found much-needed strength and inspiration in the rallying cry of the organization's vision statement: "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education." In 2002, although the vision statement remained prominent in organizational discourse, the notion of closing the achievement gap gained prominence in my awareness and, I suspect, in TFA's organizational discourse, alongside the introduction of an initiative then called "significant gains." Prior to this, the organization had measured successes anecdotally, publicizing tales of a teacher who tutored his physics students two nights a week at their rural McDonald's, of chess clubs founded, of individual students guided to selective out of state colleges. The initiative asked teachers and staff to shift to a quantitative approach to measuring our success, striving to effect significant gains in academic achievement, which meant at least one and half years' worth of learning in each academic year. This was, we understood, part of what it would take to "close the gap." The achievement gap, then, came into my awareness alongside the mandate for data; in that sense, I suspect that my experience paralleled that of the wider education community. When I joined the staff of TFA the year after that initiative was introduced, I continued to rally the teachers I supported around the goal of closing the achievement gap in this way. And while "significant gains" and the call for data were deeply controversial

among many TFA teachers, the idea of “closing the gap” appeared to be universally embraced. It united our small staff and corps of teachers around a common goal and fueled our ninety-hour work weeks. It also ultimately motivated my return to the classroom two years later, believing that I could use data-driven instruction to do better what I had attempted to do before (a belief that turned out, in my experience, to be true). I spent the next three years teaching special education at Broadmoor High School in Baton Rouge.

It was at my new school that I became increasingly aware of other ways of understanding academic disparities between groups as I interacted with colleagues at my school. The school population had, within the previous decade, shifted from predominantly white, middle-class to a more diverse one, including a majority of African American students as well as English language learners from Southeast Asia. Over seventy percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch, the common measure of poverty. The school had also, in the previous year, emerged from corrective action after failing to make “adequate yearly progress” as mandated by NCLB, and the often coded language of my colleagues indicated that many of them attributed a decline in the schools’ performance to the change in demographics. Most did not speak of any “achievement gap” that we were working to close, and many seemed to attribute academic struggles to individual motivation, behavior, family background, or even cultural predilections rather than to systemic injustice. For me, though, the idea of the gap remained an important personal motivation, one that I strove to instill in the teachers I continued to train and support through Teach For America and The New Teacher Project, a spin-off of TFA that began offering alternative routes to teacher certification in 2000.

This other discourse community—the one centered around TFA—was the one in which I felt more at home, for its members, like me, remained invested in and vocal about the achievement gap. Compounding my passion and the passion I hoped to spark in the teachers I supported was that the students we served—students receiving special education services—not only populated, in most cases, the extreme end of the gap we perceived, but were, we felt, often neglected or dismissed in even TFA’s ambitious gap discourse. The organization was grappling with the question of students with cognitive disabilities in the “significant gains” measure, and I worked to rally special educators against the idea of their students being represented as asterisks in the data, indicating that they had been written off, left languishing on the wrong side of the gap. To this end I invoked multiple gaps in my language, though I didn’t always specify or articulate them—within this community, the signifier was, I thought, agreed upon. It was, as Cross notes it has since become in popular discourse, “fixed, sharply defined, reified.. [it] did not need to be defined” (Cross 247). The achievement gap that I spoke about was usually one between “our” students and students in more affluent communities and it went without saying that it was an intolerable affront, a matter not only of justice but of basic morality that demanded urgent action from us, as teachers, and from our students. It seemed to me like the majority of this new generation of teachers was as invested in closing the gap as I was, that it was only a matter of time and generational turnover before the teaching profession as a whole shared our understanding of the task before us.

When I left full-time high school teaching in 2007 to pursue a graduate degree, I continued to train teachers—no longer TFA corps members, but Louisiana State University juniors aspiring to teach secondary English. These preservice teachers

following the “traditional” route to training and certification (as opposed to the “alternate” route of TFA and TNTP) did not resonate in the same passionate way with the notion of an achievement gap, and in some cases resisted what they summed up as a “politically correct” focus on issues of equity, race or class in courses about, for instance, language diversity. Some of my students called the achievement gap a “euphemism,” though they did not say what it might stand in for. Many of the students I taught at LSU saw the issue as my colleagues at Broadmoor had: a matter of deficient individual motivation or background. In my teaching and research, I sought to emphasize the systemic causes of the gap as an alternative to that deficit discourse, which I realized was not only dominant among the traditionally trained teachers and teacher candidates I knew but also, beneath the veneer of shared vision, often lurked in the language of TFA and other “gap-closing” organizations. It had once seemed like a magical incantation that instantly revealed the complexities of systemic injustice, this achievement gap; an all-purpose cure for a range of misunderstandings about the social contexts of education. I began to realize, however, that it was more like a placebo. It worked beautifully with people who already shared my understandings, but the incantation turned out to be equally amenable to any number of divergent interpretations. Realizing that spurred me to question the concept itself, a question that led to this project.

I have in no way abandoned my insistence upon a systemic understanding of the disparities we annually observe in test scores or other measures of academic success, nor have I set aside my belief that we can and must repair the vast measurable and immeasurable inequities in the American educational system and society. To hone in on one key term in the debate, as I will do, is not a distraction from that purpose, but an

essential part of it. The uncritical acceptance of the concept of the achievement gap is not, as I hope to demonstrate, an idle intellectual mistake. On the contrary, it is premised on, and keeps in covert circulation, narratives and myths that powerfully undermine the project of educational equity. In his analysis of the nuclear freeze campaign of the 1980s, Michael Hogan drew similar conclusions: the campaign, he found, “substituted ‘passion for argument and celebrity for expertise,’ leading to a campaign that attracted broad but not deep public support and could be co-opted easily by politicians...who created complimentary media events to achieve divergent political goals” (qtd. in Asen 123). His analysis raises the important possibility, which this dissertation will examine, that rhetoric of social movements and policy debates that is successful in the short-term (by grabbing media attention and public support) must also be considered in terms of its longer-term trade-offs, which in the case of the achievement gap may include the perpetuation of a narrative of racial and cultural inferiority as well as an amplification and enshrinement of the gaps it measures. Social movements often rally around emotive ideas such as the achievement gap, effectively gaining public support and even funding. However, the instrumental efficacy of such a strategy may mask more insidious effects of the language, effects that undermine the movement’s long-term goals. A rhetorical analysis such as this works to reveal that less obvious, but equally powerful, operation of language, ultimately pointing to the important role of ongoing, rigorous interrogation of language within such movements.

Chapter Overview

In her analysis of contemporary gap rhetoric Barbara J. Love asked, “How did the discussion change from a focus on unequal educational opportunity, as described by

Brown, to a focus on unequal performance between African American and white children, described as an ‘achievement gap?’” (227). The question implies a kind of linear progression from one focal point to the other, suggesting that there was a time when the dominant discourse of educational equity was trained on the question of opportunity rather than performance. My analysis will reveal that the two emerged simultaneously, again bearing out one of Foucault’s contentions about genealogy, that “what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (79). The chapters I devote to the 1956 hearings will work to reconstruct that disparity, arguing against a linear progression from one view of equity (opportunity) to another (performance) and positing their simultaneous emergence as poles in the divisive school integration debates. The few commentators who gesture towards any history of the phrase “achievement gap” have overlooked the moment in which it was first used in print. They tend to locate its roots in the desegregation discourse of the 1960s⁷. Although that discourse, characterized most famously by the 1966 report “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” popularly known as the Coleman Report, is a logical precursor of current equity-minded gap language, the phrase’s history predates that report by one important decade. Moreover, that commonsense etymology misses the dissension out of which the idea of a gap emerged. The earlier scene of emergence is, as Foucault described such things, “derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation” (79). In chapters two through four, I focus on that scene, tracing the dispute during which “achievement gap” emerged into the language of

⁷ Salmonowicz’s “A Short History of the Term Achievement Gap;” Dowell’s “Achievement Gap is not a Term for our Time,” and Ravitch’s “Busing: The Solution that has Failed to Solve” all trace the gap back to 1960s reports.

education: the 1956 hearings of a small Congressional subcommittee convened by avowed segregationists to investigate the newly integrated Washington, D.C. schools. Responding to an uproar about the results of the first-ever district-wide achievement tests, in which students scored below the national average, the subcommittee asked whether racial integration had caused what was assumed to be a drop in academic performance. In Chapter 2, **Defining the Gap: Segregationist Science and the “Negro Lag,”** I will examine the pro-segregation argument constructed by the committee and their lead counsel, one that was premised on the revelation of a disparity in the test scores of Black and white D.C. students. Taking this as the “historical beginning” of gap discourse, I will trace this first incarnation of “achievement gap” back to its rhetorical precursor, eugenic theories of innate racial inequality. Following the lead of Barbara Love and other critical race theorists who ask us to view seemingly neutral legal and official doctrines as instances of “majoritarian storytelling,” I will attend to the *narrative* constructed by the committee about intelligence and school performance (228). In Chapters 3 and 4, I will consider two kinds of *counternarratives* offered by supporters of integration, using stasis theory as an analytic to ask how various challenges to the committee’s narrative failed to discredit their basic, gap-based premises. Chapter 3, **Undermining the Gap: The *Afro-American*, William Dawson, Horace Mann Bond and Hobart Corning,** will focus on four particularly robust challenges to the committee’s narrative: in the weekly Washington paper, the *Afro-American*; in a procedural challenge from Representative William Dawson; in a parody by Lincoln University President Horace Mann Bond; and in the testimony of D.C. superintendent Hobart Corning. In each case, I will examine the structure of these challenges and will

consider why each of them ultimately failed to gain much traction in public discourse. In Chapter 4, **Shifting the Appeal: Mainstream Newspaper Reports of the Gap**, I will analyze coverage of the hearings in two Washington daily papers, the *Post* and the *Evening Star*. It was in the *Star*'s coverage of the hearings that the phrase "achievement gap" first emerged, and I will suggest that the force of this coverage powerfully undermined challenges to the committee's narrative issued by the *Afro-American*, Bond and Corning. Although the editors of both papers and the majority of their readers who wrote letters to the editor were opposed to the committee and to school segregation, I will contend that coverage in the *Star* and the *Post* shifted the question at issue from one of fact to one of blame and policy, treating the existence of the gap as a given and reconstructing the counternarrative on the foundation of an overdetermined view of race and a logic of social determinism that preserved the committee's most important premises.

Having examined the dissent at the historical beginning of the term "achievement gap," I will move forward fifty years to the 2000 presidential election and the policymaking discourse of *No Child Left Behind* to consider how that discourse, constructed as it was with a dramatically different intent from that of the Davis committee, was nonetheless built on many of the same ideological foundations. Thinking of the achievement gap as part of what Foucault calls a "discursive practice" allows us to see why this matters. Speaking of the subtle discriminatory power of current educational practices, Fenwick English explains, "Over time, the theory on which...practices have been based may be eroded or even lost, but the practices may continue to be employed nonetheless" (298). Even when underlying racial theories of the gap have been discarded,

the segregating practices that derive from those ideas via gap discourse continue. In other words, while the *intent* of those who invoke the gap may have changed since 1956, the *effects* produced by its invocation remain much the same.⁸ In Chapter 5, **The Twenty-First Century Gap: The 2000 Election and *No Child Left Behind***, I will examine one recent historical moment to ask how contemporary gap discourse continues to imbue education debates with the logic of segregation and racial inequality. I will read a number of 2001 congressional hearings that led up to the passage of NCLB, attending to the force of “achievement gap” in that discourse. Heeding Asen’s point that “policymaking does not inaugurate unprecedented meanings as much as it intervenes in an ongoing symbolic field,” I will consider the way in which these hearings take up and intervene in the already-inaugurated meaning and force of the achievement gap. Because so much has been written on *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and its impact on education, and because my intent is not to critique any particular policy as much as it is to consider the force of the achievement gap in public discourse, I will train my focus on the language of NCLB policymakers, noting how that policy was built upon tacitly agreed-upon facts and definitions about the achievement gap that can be traced back to the Davis hearings. I will consider the ways in which those agreements constrained the discourse, obscuring historical, social, and economic forces and zeroing in on a pathologized representation of students and their families. Some of the failures and inequities that have since been observed in the policy, I will suggest, were written into it from the moment it was envisioned as “An Act to Close the Achievement Gap.”

⁸ On the operation of discursive practices, see Foucault’s work, particularly *An Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in an Age of Reason*.

The project will conclude, in **The Future of the Gap: Rite, Rupture and Resignification**, with a look forward to consider two possible theoretical frames through which we might consider “achievement gap” and the discourses of which it is a part. My aim in the conclusion, “The Future of the Gap: Rite, Rupture and Resignification” is to take a cue from scholars like Jeffrey Nealon and Michael Taussig, who have critiqued a tendency in scholarly studies to treat the beginnings of knowledge as the totality of knowing. Nealon draws on Taussig to describe how, in the adoption of social constructionism by countless scholars in the 1990s, “what was nothing more than an invitation, a preamble to an investigation, has been converted, by and large, into a conclusion” (49). By tracing part of the genealogy of the achievement gap, my hope is to offer an invitation rather than a conclusion. To say “the achievement gap is beholden to eugenic racial theory” only begins to address the questions of how the way educational issues are framed affects the lived realities of students, and how they might be framed differently in an effort to better serve students. To this end, I will conclude with what I hope Nealon would describe as a “one-way movement outward,” following the implications of the gap’s rhetorical history to propose two possible ways to think about its futurity. On one hand, “achievement gap” can be understood in terms of what Sacvan Bercovitch called a rite of assent, an American ritual that absorbs apparent dissent into the ultimate reaffirmation of American mythologies. For Bercovitch, there is no way “out” of such a ritual that has not already been reabsorbed by the force of those mythologies. On the other hand, by considering the term in light of performative ethics of the kind suggested by the work of Judith Butler, gap discourse, and the attending rituals, appear to be marked by rupture and therefore open to re-reading and resignification.

Either way, I will suggest, the notion of replacing “achievement gap” with a new term, or of striking it from our language, offers little in the way of remedy for the inequities that it describes and, arguably, perpetuates. I will offer no prescriptive remedy for the problems raised by the rhetorical congestion around the achievement gap, but will instead point to productive critical conversations that work to historicize gap discourse, stripping away the veneer of neutrality and objectivity that has been instrumental in the phrase’s ubiquity and identifying ruptures in the meaning and the force of the phrase.

Chapter 2

Defining the Gap: Segregationist Science and the “Negro Lag”

In September 1956, when Congress was in recess and the Washington, D.C. schools were beginning their third year of racial integration, the House of Representatives’ committee on the District of Columbia convened hearings that set out “To Investigate Public School Standards and Conditions, and Juvenile Delinquency in the District of Columbia.”⁹ The hearings were conducted largely by two representatives, Chairman James C. Davis and John Bell Williams, both Southern Democrats who opposed school integration. William Gerber, a Memphis lawyer, acted as chief counsel. Davis, Williams, and two of the other four members of the committee had signed the “Southern Manifesto,” a statement 99 members of Congress issued six months earlier pledging to “use all lawful means to bring about a reversal” of *Brown v Board of Education*. By all accounts, Davis’ hearing was among those means. In an editorial, the *Washington Post* suggested that “the subcommittee in action is as impartial and objective as a lynching bee” (“Minority Hearing” 18). The first days of the hearing were marked by protests and pleas to both presidential candidates—sitting president Eisenhower and his Democratic opponent, Adlai Stevenson—to block them from proceeding. The NAACP sent appeals to House leaders of both parties (Edstrom, “School Probe”). Other members of Congress attacked the hearings, calling their conduct “disgraceful” (Bassett, “Weir Reproves”) and questioning their legality (Bassett, “School Probe Called Illegal”).

Community leaders formed the Washington Committee on Public Schools in response to

⁹ I will draw from two documents emerging from the hearings that are almost identically named: the transcript of proceedings, *Investigation of Public School Conditions: Hearings Before the Subcommittee*, which I will cite as *Hearings*; and the final report, *Investigation of Public School Conditions: Report of the Subcommittee*, which I will cite as *Report*.

the hearings and existing organizations including Americans for Democratic Action and labor union groups sponsored meetings and sent letters of protest to political leaders (Sampson, “Mass Meeting”). The local papers, whether left- or right-leaning, criticized the motive and the conduct of the hearings. In short, few in the District of Columbia were sympathetic to the subcommittee’s investigation.

Despite being roundly rejected, the hearings would influence educational discourse for decades to come by introducing the idea of the achievement gap. To be sure, racial disparities in education can be traced back much farther, certainly to the time when enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans were prevented, often violently, from learning to read. Yet the idea of capturing these disparities in the form of a statistical gap between subgroups of students was new, and it was largely the work of lead counsel Gerber. Prior to 1955, no standardized test had been administered citywide, so there had never been a data set to disaggregate by race. Moreover, the district’s integration plan forbade compiling racial statistics, so test data was kept in the form of schoolwide average scores, with the identity of schools concealed by a code. The subcommittee, however, worked around that policy. Gerber and his small staff broke the code that the district used to identify schools, which allowed them to categorize schools as either “predominantly Negro,” “predominantly white” or “integrated,” and to compare average test scores among those categories—a controversial and revelatory move that I will consider in more depth below (*Hearings* 14; “Learning Gap”). The resulting data formed the centerpiece of the hearings; the *Post*’s coverage of the first day opens by describing Gerber’s “statistical onslaught on the District’s school system” (Edstrom and Basset, “Integration”). Noting the “strings of statistics” with which Gerber tended to preface his

questions, the paper commented that “Mr. Gerber was his own principle witness” in making the case that “Negroes score below white pupils in school achievement tests” (“Hatchet Job” 18). Although these were not the first test results that revealed racial disparities—I.Q. tests administered in the Army decades earlier were still being argued over on precisely that point—this was the first use of achievement tests in such a comparison.¹⁰ And although local papers were roundly critical of the hearings, Gerber’s statistical comparison merited weeks of front page stories, even in the middle of the Suez Canal crisis and an increasingly heated presidential contest. It was a September 27th headline on the front page of the *Washington Evening Star* that coined the phrase: “School Probers Told of Lag in Negro Learning: D.C. Survey Shows Achievement Gap in Senior Highs” (Deane and Warren).

The Birth of the Gap

It is important to note that the phrase “achievement gap” was never uttered during the hearings themselves. It was coined in the *Evening Star* headline cited above, and would serve in the papers as the kind of shorthand demanded by the headline format. In the hearings themselves, when the various disparities were described statistically, the phenomenon as a whole was not named, nor was it generally referred to as a single entity at all. The story in which the phrase first appeared to refer to a specific set of test scores that revealed, as the story reported, that

¹⁰ Where I.Q. was understood at the time to measure *ability* and thus to be a reflection of an innate quality, standardized achievement tests were considered a measure of *learning* and could thus have conceivably been understood as more innocent of implications of biological arguments about racial difference. Although “achievement” is still used as if it is innocent in this sense, the two notions, and the two kinds of tests were, as we will see, quickly and rather completely conflated in the discourse of the committee.

Seniors in Washington’s four predominantly colored high schools this year averaged in the lowest five percent of the Nation on standardized achievement tests. By contrast, seniors in three predominantly white high schools scored in the top five percent (A1).

Although this headline might be identified as the moment the phrase “achievement gap” was coined, its eventual use as a replacement for such statistics and a kind of catch-all term for academic disparity would take time to develop. Subsequent stories in the *Star* used the phrase, interchangeably with “Negro lag” or “learning gap,” to describe other sets of data as well as in an increasingly broad sense, that is, without specifying a particular data set in which a gap was evident. A September 29th article, for instance, reported that one assistant superintendent “favored making known the facts about the Negro lag” in order to solve the problem (Deane, “Smaller Classes”). The broadest use of the phrase, as a shorthand replacement for quantitative data that captures a range of disparities in academic performance, seems to have emerged in letters to the editor. It was in these letters that the phrase was often detached from data and used in the most general sense, as in the letter from Phyllis Ford that the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites as the first use of the phrase (“Achievement Gap”). Objecting to the hearings’ implications about Black teachers’ and students’ competence, she argues that critics “overlook one of the main causes of the achievement gap—inequality in the dual system of education.”¹¹

Although the phrase was not adopted unanimously—it was interchanged with putative synonyms like the particularly telling “Negro lag” as well as general references to “disparity” and “difference”—the concept it described was instantly ubiquitous in the daily papers. The notion itself was news, indicating that such a statistical picture had

¹¹ Ford’s argument is part of what I consider counternarratives, which will be the subject of chapters 3 and 4.

never been compiled before: “A wide achievement gap between white and Negro students in Washington junior high schools has been *disclosed* by Congressional investigators of the city’s schools” [emphasis added] (“Learning Gap”).¹² Because it was a new idea, reporters couldn’t rely on readers’ shared understanding of a phrase like “achievement gap”; rather than using it as a stand-alone term, stories tended to define and describe it using Gerber’s statistics. Quantitative descriptions appeared daily, dominating coverage of and commentary upon the hearings and arguably overshadowing editorials that were critical of the motives and methods that led to such findings.¹³ The statistics themselves, in other words, were the stars of the emergent narrative about integrated schools; arguments over their interpretation were relegated to supporting roles. Both daily newspapers ran multiple stories during each day of the hearings, rarely failing to mention and often to enumerate Gerber’s statistical picture. Newspaper coverage of the hearings, in other words, didn’t just name the gap, it contributed to shaping and delineating Gerber’s construct for the reading public.

The conduct of the committee, along with many of their recommendations, was rejected by the school system, other members of Congress, and much of the public in D.C. Nevertheless, their novel contribution to educational discourse, the *achievement gap*, would come to dominate public understanding of educational disparities. How, when

¹² *Time* magazine suggested that this was the result of a kind of performance on the part of the committee, who, according to the report, were “acting as though they were discovering and uncovering a pile of dirty linen” (“Education”).

¹³ A typical example comes from the *Star*’s coverage of the first day of testimony: “Mr. Gerber gave some reading and arithmetic test scores for eighth graders. The results showed on the reading test that 65 per cent of the pupils in the city’s predominantly colored junior highs ranked below seventh grade, but only about 12 percent of those in four predominantly white schools. In arithmetic 81 per cent of the colored pupils were below seventh grade and only 23 per cent in the white schools” (Deane “Sharpe Sees”).

public and official opinion were both so powerfully opposed to these hearings, did one of their major premises become one of the most influential ideas about education in the next half-century? On one level, the answer lies in cultural amnesia. In order for the achievement gap to be preserved in mainstream discourse, its origin had to be forgotten—which is evident in the fact that no mention of the Davis hearing has been made in scholarship on the achievement gap.¹⁴ Before the discourse of the hearings was obscured, however, and even though it was widely reviled, it had put a new frame for understanding educational inequity into circulation. The persuasive force of the achievement gap frame, despite the failure of the hearings to reverse the policy of school integration, is a tribute to the rhetorical force of Davis and Gerber’s argument.

In considering how the phrase emerged and gained such force I will begin with a kind of introductory case study: an exchange between Gerber and one witness, high school principal Cedric Reynolds. Reynolds was one of seven witnesses called on September 21st, and the *Post*’s coverage the following day distilled his testimony into five paragraphs of a longer story. The first two paragraphs establish the disparity between Black and white students: although “his students’ achievements were above the national average,” the following paragraph points out that “only eight of a total of 20 Negro pupils last year passed their subjects.” By way of explanation, it recounts Reynolds “pointing to a median intelligence rating for white students of 110, and for Negro students of 92.5.” The article points to differences within the achievement of Black students based on their

¹⁴A search of academic databases *Lexis-Nexis*, *Academic Search Complete*, *JStor* and *Google Scholar* reveals that, aside from Jackson’s book *Science for Segregation* (on which I draw below), the Davis hearings have been cited in only four articles, all law reviews that focus on issues other than test score disparities and the emergence of the “gap” (see Anders, Gregor, Wolters).

“economic status” and parents’ occupation, before concluding that “two classes of slow learners have been organized for the first time at Coolidge,” implying by its placement that this “special curriculum” was created in response to the needs of the aforementioned Black students, perhaps with the exception of the eight who had passed their classes (Edstrom and Bassett, “School Woes”).

The article offers a picture of a high school that has had to dramatically alter its educational program as a direct result of the arrival of Black students—more specifically twelve Black students who did not pass classes in their first year. The transcript of Reynolds’ testimony fills in the logic by which twelve students in a school of over 1200 might be understood to have necessitated a new and separate curriculum. I will quote from the exchange at some length, as it introduces key themes and techniques that I will examine in more depth below. Gerber began by establishing a quantifiable gap between Black and white students on one or more of various possible measures; achievement test scores, reading levels, and/or I.Q. scores were most frequently cited. The gap picture also relied on anecdotal information such as, in Reynolds’ testimony, the new need for a lower-track curriculum and “special classes.” This is the first of two moves in this exchange, moves that recur throughout the hearings: although the line between quantitative measures and anecdote is often blurred, and anecdote is needed to make the data fit the narrative, the information is treated (indeed touted) as almost wholly quantitative and therefore objective. Also noteworthy in the opening lines of the exchange is the slide from reading levels, in Gerber’s question, to IQ scores, in Reynolds’ answer; it is the second important move I will discuss, one that elides the difference between “achievement” and “ability.”

Mr. Gerber. Do you find the average colored students that you have over there proficient in reading?

Mr. Reynolds. Not as proficient as we would like to have them.

Mr. Gerber. Do you find them all on a high-school level in reading?

Mr. Reynolds. No, sir; we don't.

Mr. Gerber. What level do you find them on?

Mr. Reynolds. I don't recall the figures in reading per se, but from the standpoint of intelligence quotient, whereas our school has a median I.Q. of about 110, the median I.Q. for the colored students is 92.5.

Mr. Gerber. I see. Do you find any of them in lower grade levels of reading than in the high school?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes; we do.

Mr. Gerber. What grade level do you find them on?

Mr. Reynolds. All the way from a fourth-grade level on up.

Mr. Gerber. From a fourth-grade level on up. Mr. Reynolds, let me ask you this question, that has sort of puzzled me all through this hearing. How can a student on a 4th-grade reading level read a 10th-, 11th-, or 12th-grade textbook and understand what he is reading?

Mr. Reynolds. The answer to that is that they can't do it. So we provide special classes and a special curriculum for them. (*Hearings* 119)

Pushed to quantify reading level despite having admitted that he couldn't recall the numbers, Reynolds names only the lowest score among Black students, "a fourth-grade level." Gerber's follow up question highlights that lone figure, the low end of an undetermined range, treating it as representative. When Reynolds responds to his question of how such a student can read high school level textbooks—"they can't do it"—he appears to be speaking of the same "them" of the opening question, which referred to all Black students—and *only* Black students—at Coolidge. By this time, the same group ("they") has been redefined as those who, because they read on a fourth-grade level, require a special curriculum. As the only number offered in addition to the

lower-than-average I.Q., this unrepresentative fourth-grade reading level becomes representative, and the undetermined number of students on that level stand in for the entire group. The exchange continues from that point:

Mr. Gerber. Do you think that they will properly pass according to their educational achievement in the lower grades?

Mr. Reynolds. That is highly questionable.

Mr. Gerber. What kind of marks did they bring from the division 2 schools when they came over there?

Mr. Reynolds. Some of them—I don't know each individual case, but some of them came with what we consider honor marks, and when they came to our school immediately dropped to lower marks and to failures.

Mr. Gerber. They were not honor students at your school?

Mr. Reynolds. That is right.

Mr. Gerber. Are you receiving many colored students this year?

Mr. Reynolds. I don't have an exact count, but my guess is between 60 and 65.

Mr. Gerber. What reading level are they on?

Mr. Reynolds. There again, we haven't had a chance to check the records of these particular people, but we have had to create two classes that we call the basic curriculum, a category which we have never had to have before.

Again lacking the quantitative measure Gerber seeks, Reynolds supplies anecdote:

“some” students dropped from honor marks to failures, and two basic classes have had to be created to accommodate incoming Black students, although their reading levels, upon which assignment to these classes are largely based, are unknown. The emergent picture, one of many that comprises the general assertion of academic disparity, gains the façade of quantitative support by providing I.Q. scores, reading levels, and numbers of students. Gerber goes on to emphasize the cause-and-effect logic by which the arrival of Black students necessitated a new curriculum, the logic that was picked up by the *Post* article:

Mr. Gerber. You have never had that category before, and that is because of these slow learners and low graded reading levels?

Mr. Reynolds. That is right. But these classes are not composed entirely of colored students. There are many white students in there, too.

Reynolds' response, ending with "there are many white students in there, too," qualifies the strictly causal relationship Gerber seeks to establish, but it comes not only at the end of the exchange, but immediately after an affirmation of Gerber's statement ("that is right"). The qualification thus lacks much force, perhaps explaining why it didn't affect the newspaper account. The fact that these numbers are neither exact ("I don't have an exact count, but my guess is...") nor representative and that they rely upon anecdotal support to make their case is lost in the newspaper version of the testimony that the public will read, which points to failing grades and lower I.Q. scores of Black students and the resultant need for a separate curriculum. Lost in both the testimony and the press coverage is the fact not only that Black students made up less than two percent of the school population (and the twelve who didn't pass all of their classes constitute one percent), but that both Black and white Coolidge students' average I.Q.s fall squarely within what was considered the "normal" range of 85-115. In other words, what appears, through another lens, to be a small group of students that differs negligibly from the majority here takes on the appearance of a difference profound enough to literally change the curriculum. The idea that curricular standards have been lowered for all students since integration is a controlling one in the hearings, the overall thrust of which begins with the achievement gap to build its case: some Black students perform at lower academic levels than white students, and this requires changes to the usual curriculum, which lowers overall standards and therefore negatively affects all students.

The Rhetorical Tradition of Segregationist Science

Direct questions or assertions about innate racial differences were rare in the committee's questioning, yet, as we see in the testimony by Reynolds, Gerber indirectly made a powerful case for such differences. The rhetorical strategy by which he did so can be traced to a discursive tradition that John P. Jackson has called "segregationist science," the work of a small group of social scientists who coalesced in the 1930s as the scientific majority rejected the eugenic science of "racial purity" and its bedrock belief in a genetic difference between the races. The discourse of segregationist science is characterized by the use of scientific vocabulary and methodology to "provide racist ideology with important rhetorical tools that allow the perpetuation of racist claims that would otherwise not be tolerated in public discourse" (5). This multifaceted rhetorical strategy relies fundamentally upon a view of science as a value-free epistemology, a belief that "science reveals the truth about nature because it speaks with no one's voice" (Jackson 12). Gerber's use of, and the emphasis he places on that use of, quantitative data functions in this way, distancing him from any ideology and creating a narrative about racial differences that appears to be an objective reflection of reality. Taking this stance allows him to accuse his opponents of contesting scientific truth for ideological reasons. Segregationist science used this binary to paint a picture of conspiracies by which "true" science has been suppressed for ideological reasons, specifically the "conspiracy" of egalitarianism to which social scientists had fallen prey (Jackson 58). Beginning with Franz Boas, the segregationist theory ran, social science had been twisted in the service of integration, and the scientific community conspired to distort and conceal the truth in order to advance that agenda. Left unchecked, segregationists argued, the integrationist

agenda would lead first to racial intermarriage and ultimately to white “race suicide.” At the foundation of that fear was not only a conviction that members of so-called “Nordic” races were genetically superior to others, but that reproduction between members of “inferior” and “superior” races would result in degradation of the latter—the logic of “downward breeding.” In making that case, Gerber’s language implies Black inferiority by casting disparities in *achievement* as the inevitable outcome of disparities in *ability*. Built on putatively objective data—test scores—the case for inferiority does not overtly reference discredited theories of racial inequality. At the same time, those theories remain at work, reinscribed as *achievement* rather than *ability*. Gerber’s language goes on to amplify public fears about educational degradation by applying the logic of downward breeding, arguing that, as the presence of “inferior” students hampers the education of their “superior” classmates, the movement in any heterogeneous group will be inevitably downward.

I will consider these four rhetorical pillars of Gerber and Davis’ case in the following sections: casting their case as non-ideological using the language of science; using conspiracy rhetoric to discredit the opposition; eliding the difference between *achievement* and *ability* in order to covertly establish the innate inferiority of Black students; and mapping the eugenic logic of “downward breeding” onto heterogeneous classrooms and schools.

“Actual Facts:” the Ethos of Science and Conspiracy Rhetoric

One of the critiques of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision focused on Chief Justice Earl Warren’s citation of social science rather than legal reasoning in the court’s opinion (Jackson 73). In its finding, the court overturned legal precedent based largely on expert opinion about the effects of segregation on students. Warren’s written opinion pointed to the growth of social science since *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896: “Whatever may have been the extent of the psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority” (*Brown v. Board*). The “modern authority” he refers to is the expert testimony of a number of social psychologists who argued that segregation hindered children’s emotional and academic development. Even supporters of integration worried about this replacement of precedent and legal reasoning with testimony that didn’t seem dispassionate or neutral on the question of segregation. One law professor worried that such evidence blurred the line “where objective science ends and advocacy begins” (Jackson 73). Two years later, Gerber and Davis would build a case that appeared to answer that concern, constructing their case on what the *Post* called a “truckload of statistics” as the kind of answer that truly “objective” science might offer regarding school integration (Edstrom, “School Probe”). The view of statistics as incontrovertible proof was widely held; even the absent members of the subcommittee admitted, in a statement describing their refusal to sign off on the majority report, that “the statistics speak for themselves, and it is not a record of which anyone can be proud” (*Report* 48). While condemning the conduct and the findings of the hearings in general, they did not—could not, their statement seems to imply—take issue with the statistical narrative of academic disparities. The author of a letter to the editor of the *Star* captured

conventional wisdom about such data: “No one, white or Negro, should fear statistics any more than he would fear truth itself” (McClellan). Thus, when Gerber “threw statistic after statistic at witnesses,” as the *Post* reported, he adopted the mantle of objective, dispassionate, and ultimately irrefutable scientific fact. Many witnesses accepted this presupposition, including assistant superintendent Lawson J. Cantrell. Examining a chart of arithmetic scores disaggregated by race, he voiced agreement that statistics needed no interpretation, commenting that “this breaks itself down,” and that they bore no mark of subjective arrangement, finding that “they fall pretty naturally” into Gerber’s categories (*Hearings* 392). The notion of numbers “speaking for themselves,” that they offer a natural, non-interpretive view of nature, coincides with a cultural belief in scientific knowledge as dispassionate and objective, a perspective that Donna Haraway has called the “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (581). By seizing on a quantitative argument, Gerber’s questions obscure the admitted anti-integration agenda of Davis, Bell and Williams. In other words, the achievement gap, understood as the product of these hearings, is a quantitative argument that advances a thinly-veiled stance against integration.

By setting themselves up as truth-tellers faced with an ideological conspiracy, segregationists availed themselves of what David Zarefsky called a powerful “self-sealing rhetoric.” He explains that a conspiracy forms a “theory of events” that “is virtually impossible to disprove, and even discrepant evidence can be explained easily as the work of the clever conspirator” (72). Jackson traces such an argument in segregationist science, demonstrating that since scientific opinion had turned against the idea of innate racial difference, those who maintained a belief in racial inequality “held

that scientific truth was...being muzzled by a conspiracy of powerful, shadowy figures who control the public airings of scientific discourse” (9). By establishing their case as an apparently objective, data-based picture of academic and intellectual disparities, Gerber and Davis went on to characterize their opponents as just such figures who wished to hide the truth of racial disparities from the public. They positioned themselves as truth-tellers fighting for the public’s right to know against a school board so invested in the integration agenda that they conspired to suppress the truth. In support of this assertion, Davis cited the 1954 Declaration of Policy that officially ended segregation in D.C. schools, which explicitly prohibited racially disaggregated statistics. Even before the hearings began, headlines were made when some school officials provided the subcommittee with achievement records by race. School board member Ruth Spencer called the violation of policy “shocking” and the *Post’s* editorial page came to her defense, arguing that “in an integrated school system there is no more justification for classifying [students] in accordance with their racial background than there would be for classifying them in accordance with their ancestry or religion” (Sampson 25; “Breakdown” 15). The belief that racially disaggregated statistics reflected an objective, unmediated truth would, however, render that point moot. The language of “facts” and “truth” runs throughout the committee’s discourse. Responding to one member’s suggestion that the hearings be adjourned, Davis took the opportunity to emphasize this stance:

Well, of course, the facts which this committee has undertaken to bring out and bring to the light of day and bring to the attention of the people not only in the District of Columbia, but the United States, are facts which everybody has a right to know. I think that no right-thinking person ought to lend himself or herself to any endeavor to conceal these facts.
(*Hearings* 317)

The only imaginable reason to resist the hearings, for Davis, would be a desire to “conceal” the facts about public schools. He goes on to invoke the image of the “iron curtain,” a potent metaphor in cold war America:

If something is wrong, you cannot right it by concealing the facts. If it is right, bringing the facts out is not going to injure the case. I think any way you look at it it is an erroneous idea to try to erect an iron curtain around the facts. (*Hearings* 317).

In these short paragraphs, Davis uses the word “facts” six times. He makes any criticism of or opposition to the hearings appear illogical, false, and ideologically motivated:

“There has been,” he recounts, “a constant stream of abuse, falsehoods, propaganda of all kinds directed at this committee, particularly at me by radicals, crackpots, fuzzy thinkers, and organizations whose primary purpose is to promote integration” (*Hearings* 317). In addition to characterizing all opposition as *ad hominem* attacks on Davis himself, this response aligns organizations like the NAACP (undoubtedly what he was alluding to in the final item on the list) with, on the one hand, “fuzzy thinkers” who would disavow modern science, and, on the other, communist “radicals” who would “erect an iron curtain around the facts.” This is not the only opportunity the committee takes to hint at a communist conspiracy: Congressman Williams describes groups “who are attempting to force integration on the people of America, such as ADA and NAACP and other groups—I might add the Communist Party” (*Hearings* 444). Coming as it did just two years after the end of Senator McCarthy’s infamous subcommittee hearings investigating communist influence in government and media, this choice of words evoked perhaps the most widely-known, and feared, conspiracy theory of this era.

As the hearings progressed, the image of conspirators as an expansive group of communists and crackpots would narrow, in the language of the committee and their

defenders into a single body: the Board of Education for the district. The subcommittee's report concluded, "it was the intention of the Board of Education to conceal the disparity in educational achievement of the races by adopting a policy of not keeping statistics by race" (*Report* 8). Gerber pushed superintendent of schools Hobart Corning on the issue, asking why the Board "wanted to deny the public the right of releasing tests and other matters by race when they integrated the schools" (*Hearings* 421). As the hearings closed, Representative John McMillan, chair of the Committee on the District of Columbia of which Davis' subcommittee was composed, entered a statement. He praised the conduct of the hearings, emphasizing that "we were only interested in securing the actual facts," and disavowing the "thought of gaining any political advantage" or deciding the question of integration. His statement concluded with a reflection that had, by this point, become a familiar refrain: "It is rather difficult for me to see why any organization or individual would object to having the true facts existing in the Nation's Capital schools made available to the public" (*Hearings* 512).

This conspiracy rhetoric seems to have succeeded in shaping public opinion. Although the *Post's* editorial page did not comment beyond its initial support of the policy forbidding racially disaggregated statistics, one letter to the editor of that paper picked up the idea of a conspiracy to conceal the truth and leveled it at the paper itself. The hearings, the author argued, had succeeded in obtaining "the unvarnished truth" about integration in District schools. As for the committee, "truth is on its side" and a good newspaper "should encourage the revelation of the truth." By criticizing the committee, the paper fails to do so, instead perpetrating a "snow job," in an effort "to conceal or cover up the truth." (Bernard 16). The *Evening Star*, while critical of the

hearings, was equally critical of what it called “the hush-hush attitude of school officials, the unwise suppression of relevant statistical information by the Board of Education.” While acknowledging that the policy may have been “well-intentioned,” the paper’s editorial page criticized “the deliberate policy of secrecy concerning facts which should have been a matter of public record” (“Investigating” A16; “After the Investigation” A28). The complementary ideas that the statistics that pointed to an achievement gap were the *truth*, and that any effort to challenge them was *concealment*, came to characterize discourse about the hearings. Even if the speakers didn’t subscribe to the idea of a deliberate, conspiratorial concealment, the widespread use of the *language* of conspiracy—“truth” versus “concealment”—effectively activated a larger rhetoric of conspiracy.

Once that happens, Zarefsky has argued, an argument becomes “self-sealing”; any counter-argument can be claimed as proof of the conspirators’ sinister work, and the apparent “winner” tends to be the party that first cries conspiracy, thereby forcing the opposition to bear the burden of proof. Jackson contends that segregationist scientists historically “seized presumption” in this way when making their cases, presenting their opposition with the nearly impossible task of “proving the existence of a negative” (Jasinski 105). This dynamic is at work as Gerber establishes the second part of the conspiracy theory in his exchange: that the Board of Education re-drew attendance boundaries as part of their integration plan in order to “force” integration. The committee’s theory ran that the local school board rushed to integrate schools because of political pressure, despite knowing that, because of achievement disparities, it would

harm students. By asserting the truth of this theory, Gerber claims to have insight into the motives of the school board and puts Corning in the position of proving a negative:

Mr. Gerber. Dr. Corning, do you not know the boundaries were established in the District of Columbia, and it has not been done anywhere else in the United States, for the purpose of forcing integration?

Dr. Corning. I do not know that that is true.

Mr. Gerber. You do not know that that is true? You would not say it is not true? Will you say that is not true?

Dr. Corning. I do not have the information, sir. (*Hearings* 427)

Corning's "I do not know" seems to indicate two possibilities: that he can't know the attendance policy of every other school district in the United States (and so can't say for certain that the District is the only one with boundaries), and/or that he can't know the motive behind the Board of Education's boundary system. Throughout his testimony, Corning resists Gerber's narrative by pointing to the limits of what can be known, as I will examine in the next chapter. Gerber, however, has seized presumption, pushing Corning to "say that it is *not* true," to attempt to prove the absence of this particular motive. He presses on:

Mr. Gerber. You are right in the thick of the fight and you ought to know something about this thing. Do you not know the reason they established boundaries here and nowhere else in the United States was for the purpose of forcing integration?

Dr. Corning. No, sir; I disagree with that that quite entirely. Again, may I have a few minutes? I know what you are getting at—the process of integrating—the speed with which it was done, and so on.

Mr. Gerber. I am not getting at anything. I am just hitting at that one question. I am just trying to find out if it is not a fact the reason they established boundaries under the pressure that was brought to bear on them here by these certain sources was done for the purpose of integrating?

Dr. Corning. No, sir; that is not true. (*Hearings* 427)

Again, Corning is in the position of denial, of disproving that which has been positively asserted. He shifts from claiming he can't know to more definitively denying Gerber's claims as he is pressed, and as Gerber builds in more elements of the conspiracy: "the pressure that was brought to bear...by these certain sources," clearly referring to the NAACP and other pro-integration organizations that had been established, in his theory, as the radical, probably Communist, forces controlling the school board. At the same time, he denies not only a hidden agenda but even the presence of any inference at all in his questions, insisting "I am not getting at anything." Corning's extended response quotes the board's statement of policy and traces the steps that led up to integration, attempting to refute two parts of Gerber's theory: first, that integration was *rushed*—he cites a two-year period of study and planning that went into the move; and that it was *forced*—he outlines what he calls "elements of gradualism" that allowed for some students to opt out of integrated schools. Ultimately, however, his explanation plays into Gerber's theory—which, by the all-encompassing logic of conspiracy rhetoric, it could not help but do—in admitting that the board was responding to pressure: "Had not the Board of Education acted promptly there would have been more lawsuits, and with less likelihood of the Board of Education being sustained since the opponents would then have the backing of the Supreme Court decision" (*Hearings* 431). Such lawsuits, being pursued in districts around the country, were part of the NAACP's strategy to win integration. It was a group of such suits, including one against the D.C. schools, that became *Brown vs. Board of Education*, so Corning's explanation was no surprise. At the same time, having seized control of the terms of the exchange, Gerber and the committee had created a narrative in which such lawsuits are not the exercise of citizens' rights or

the pursuit of justice, but rather a vehicle of political pressure that has no regard for, and indeed works against, the non-ideological truth.

What, then, are these controversial facts that the committee cast itself as bringing to the light of day, out of the shadows of ideologues? The two rhetorical strategies I have just discussed are, after all, important only to the extent that they lay the groundwork for presenting their case as incontrovertibly factual. They are the background against which two key assertions will be offered as indisputable “facts”: first, the existence of academic disparities between black and white students, and second, a deterministic explanation for that difference.

Biological Determinism: Achievement and Ability

The committee’s discourse used two connected rhetorical strategies—the ethos of science, linked to a conspiracy argument—to create a space in which the argument could be presented as non-ideological and irrefutable but for the ravings of extremist “crackpots and radicals.” Having carved out such a space, the committee presented an argument that borrowed its logic from a long history of white supremacist ideology. Had this argument been presented without the frame built by the first two strategies, its debt to eugenic thought would likely have been obvious, probably earning them the official repudiation that groups like the NAACP and ADA sought but never secured (Edstrom, “School Probe”). As it was, the veneer of statistics and preemptive accusations of anti-American, anti-scientific conspiracy veiled the rhetorical foundations of the achievement gap argument. It is those foundations—biological determinism and the logic of degradation—that I now seek to excavate.

In order to make the case that integration was doomed to failure, Gerber, Davis and the committee sought to link *achievement* and *ability* together causally: after demonstrating the existence of an achievement gap, they had to argue that the gap was insurmountable and inevitable, that its causes could not be remedied by integration of schools or society. The gap, in other words, had to be presented as biologically predetermined, as the product of innate genetic differences between Black and white students, which they framed as “ability to learn.” This argument of innate differences in ability was rarely made in explicit terms during the hearings; presumably, such a bald statement would destroy the credibility, already under question, of the committee’s leaders and counsel. And yet, as one *Post* story recounts, Gerber “for 5 hours hammered away in an unsuccessful attempt to get [Corning] to admit that Negro pupils were inferior to White ones in native intelligence and ability to learn” (Rogers, “Segregation Blamed”). That his attempt was “unsuccessful” is a testament to the resistance offered by Corning, along with many other witnesses, which I will consider in the next section. And although he did not succeed in finding witnesses to corroborate his narrative about innate differences causing the gap, Gerber successfully linked the new concept of achievement disparities to the longstanding discourse of biological determinism using the language of *achievement* and *ability* such that the achievement gap, at its conceptual inception, was presented as a new frame for a longstanding argument for innate racial inequality.

Much of this argument rested on a slippery distinction between two concepts: *achievement*, which in the context of the hearings reflected what a student had learned, as measured by standardized achievement tests, and *ability*, which connoted intellectual capacity as measured by I.Q. tests. In the discourse of the hearings, that is, *ability* was

treated as an innate quality, a genetic, unchanging property of an individual. Key to the segregationist case was the idea that disparities in achievement reflected, and were caused primarily by, not external systemic factors such as segregated schools or economic inequality, but deficiencies in Black students. This presumption comes to the surface frequently, as when Gerber asked a school board member whether the board “felt that by eliminating the keeping of statistics by race the deficiencies in the colored students would not be exposed?” (*Hearings* 20). Gerber’s statement constructs the disparities in test scores that those statistics reflected as directly caused by “deficiencies in the colored students.” Moreover, the question is framed such that the witness can only speak to the motivation behind the board’s policy on statistics, not to the idea that those statistics reflect students’ “deficiencies”; that assertion is smuggled in as a taken-for-granted premise: low test scores are a reflection not of systemic influences but rather of disparate capabilities.

The committee used this language of achievement and ability in order to steer the conversation consistently away from systemic factors and towards student deficiencies, as in this exchange between Congressman Williams and Hugh Stewart Smith, principal of a junior high school. Smith, a supporter of integration, had argued that economic status and prior educational experience, not race, was the primary factor in achievement disparities.

Mr. Williams. I am referring to the average white student who comes from a family of a low economic status and the average colored student who comes from a family of the same status.

Mr. Smith. Yes.

Mr. Williams. You do detect a difference in their achievements?

Mr. Smith. Yes, sir.

Mr. Williams. Does the record of the white child under the same economic conditions and the same background exceed that of the colored child—on the average, of course?

Mr. Smith. Yes, sir, but you said the same background, and once more I think there is a difference even in the low economic neighborhood between the Negro child and the white child during the years of segregation.

Mr. Williams. Do you notice a difference in the white children's rate of achievement coming from those same neighborhoods, with the same economic status as their colored neighbors?

Mr. Smith. Yes. (*Hearings* 51)

In the spirit of scientific discourse, Williams works to control for variables, asking the witness to imagine that students of the same socioeconomic status have the same background. Smith protests this oversimplification, arguing for the impact of segregation on the “background” of white and Black students regardless of similar economic circumstances and reflecting current understandings that there are disparities in *wealth* even between families with the same *income* (Ladson-Billings “From Achievement Gap” 6-7). The difference to which Smith points—the impact of segregation—is leveled by Williams’ subsequent question: “those *same* neighborhoods, with the *same* economic status.” Having secured the witness’ assent, he goes on:

Mr. Williams. You still notice a difference in the rate of achievement of the white child and the colored child?

Mr. Smith. Yes, sir.

Mr. Williams. Then, on the basis of that, could you say that environment and economic status are not the sole contributing factors to that condition?

Mr. Smith. Yes, sir.

Mr. Williams. That there is actually a physical difference, perhaps, between the two children, on the average, of course, other than the color of the pigment of the skin?

Mr. Smith. I don't know, Mr. Williams. I can't answer that one. That is too much for me. (*Hearings* 51).

Williams' line of questioning works to decouple achievement from external factors such as environment and to link it instead to "physical difference" between Black and white students. Despite Smith's refusal to assent to his final point, Williams' questions form a kind of syllogism, posing a series of yes-or-no questions that secure Smith's agreement each step of the way. The final question, of underlying "physical" difference, appears to be a nearly inevitable logical outcome of the foregoing premises. At that point, Smith's refusal lacks much power. Although such a direct assertion of biological difference was rare, this is the trajectory of questioning with nearly every witness. More typically, the link between achievement and ability was established in two moves: first, the questioner—usually Gerber—established a disparity not only in scores on achievement tests, but also on I.Q. tests. The second move was crucial and more complex: securing assent to the notion that I.Q. tests measured an innate quality, "intelligence" or "ability to learn," unaffected by external or systemic factors. The committee worked to establish these two premises in separate lines of questioning throughout the hearings—rarely did they ask the same witness to attest to both. Instead, one witness was asked, as in the case of Cedric Reynolds above, to affirm that there was a disparity in both achievement test scores (such as reading levels) and in I.Q. test scores, while another was asked about the purpose of such tests. Gerber's questioning of Smith had, leading up to the closing assertion of physical difference mentioned above, included the first move:

Mr. Gerber. Mr. Smith, do you think that the average colored student that you receive from the colored schools was on the same grade level as the average white student in your school?

Mr. Smith. Frankly, I am afraid they were not. We had a few children who were in our top group, but had I gone completely on the records of achievement, even those few colored children in that top group would probably not have been able to be there [. . .]

Mr. Gerber. Mr. Smith, has there been a difference in the I.Q. of the students that you had previous to integration, and what you have got now?

Mr. Smith. Yes, sir; that has fallen every year. (*Hearings* 41)

Gerber's first question points to the difference in grade level; his second highlights I.Q. Throughout the hearings, achievement and ability are coupled in this way, establishing a picture of a strong correlation between the two. The key second move—establishing that a disparity in I.Q. scores reflects innate intellectual inequality, comes later in the same day, when Congressman Williams interrupts another witness's testimony. The witness was describing the criteria students must meet to be admitted to the honors track, and had mentioned that it included "high I.Q."

Mr. Williams. Will you yield for a question at that point? When you refer to an I.Q. test, you are referring to a test which purportedly measures that individual's ability to absorb knowledge?

Mr. Saunders. Yes; at the time the examination is given him.

Mr. Williams. At the time the examination is given him.

Mr. Saunders. That is right.

Mr. Williams. I wanted that for the record. (*Hearings* 63)

This tag-team questioning establishes, "for the record," evidence of innate racial difference, which coalesces in the committee's examination of its final witness, Superintendent Hobart Corning. It is this exchange that the *Post* characterized as five hours (what amounts to over one hundred pages, or fully one-fifth of the transcript) of "hammering away in an attempt to get the witness to admit that Negro pupils were inferior to White ones in native intelligence and ability to learn" (Rogers, "Segregation"). After establishing the average I.Q. scores at "predominantly white" and "predominantly Black" schools, Gerber asked:

Now, on the basis, assuming that our analysis of the third grade was correct, assuming that the third-grade whites were 105, or 5 above the median, and that colored were 87, or 13 points below, would you say that the colored were on the same mental level as the whites? (*Hearings* 418).

Corning disputes this conclusion, working instead to clarify the limits of I.Q. tests. He reasserts the systemic influences on I.Q. that the committee had been downplaying, asserting that “given a better environment, given more opportunities to experience, the I.Q. will increase” (418). Gerber sweeps away Corning’s explanations and challenges to his narrative with, “In spite of all that, there is a very, very wide range in the I.Q. between those [white] students and the colored students that came in from division 2.” (421). Reducing a complex explanation of the limits of testing and the influences of segregation and socioeconomic factors to “all that,” Gerber emphasizes, indeed amplifies, the gap: “a very, very wide range,” spotlighting the data and deemphasizing the possibility of multiple, disparate interpretations of it. In doing so, Gerber consistently steers the conversation away from systemic issues and towards his interpretation of the statistics, which had been asserted not as one among a number of possible complex explanations, but rather as the transparent meaning of the data: innate racial difference. When Corning points to multiple causative factors—overcrowding in the formerly all-Black schools, lack of opportunity caused by wider cultural segregation, and limited economic and housing prospects of Black families—Gerber counters, “would the difference in I.Q. have anything to do with achievement?” (*Hearings* 416). His follow up activates the idea of conspiracy, implying that Corning had attempted to conceal the “true picture” from the committee:

Why did you not make an analysis to determine the difference between the predominantly white on I.Q. and the predominantly colored in order that you might get a true picture so that when you talk about the difference in the achievement, in addition to telling us about crowded buildings and

crowded rooms, you could also tell us there is a very wide disparity between the I.Q. of the white and colored? Why didn't you all do that? (*Hearings* 421).

Gerber's causal narrative, that differences in I.Q. are not only correlated to, but share the same biological cause as, differences in achievement test scores, is presented as the "true version," and Corning's, by contrast, is first simplified to "crowded buildings and crowded rooms" and then implied to stand in contrast to the truth as a kind of ruse used to conceal it.

Pervasive in the questions posed by committee members is the assumption, and assertion, of the link between achievement and innate ability, the belief that disparities in test scores reflect disparities in intellectual capacity. The report of the subcommittee, which included the following as findings of the hearings, joined the two grammatically:

3. The integration of the schools in the District of Columbia has focused attention upon the differences in *ability* to learn and educational *achievement* between the average white and Negro students, as reflected by the national standardized tests.

4. The wide disparity in mental *ability* to learn and educational *achievement* between the white and Negro students has created a most difficult teaching situation in the integrated schools. [emphasis added] (*Report* 44-5)

In both findings, achievement and ability are joined by "and" to form compound objects of, in the first example, "differences," and in the second, "disparity." Building on the strong correlation between the two that was established in the hearings, the grammar of this passage reinforces it: two separate dimensions have been measured, but their results correlate closely enough, the logic runs, that they can be simplified and treated as a single variable with a shared cause (Gould 270). Collapsing the two in this way makes one explanation for the disparity appear to be far more likely than any other: framed in this way, the differences in achievement and ability between Black and white students seem

to point clearly to a racial disparity in intelligence. It is this simplification that allowed Gerber to argue, in 1958, that the hearings “proved ‘conclusively’ that Negroes were intellectually inferior to whites” (qtd. in Bartley 176).

Having begun as an inquiry into standards and *schools*, the hearings shifted, through a conflation of achievement and ability, to focus on *students’* relative capacities to learn. That Black students had less capacity than white students was, judging from Gerber’s 1958 statement and others like it, precisely the lesson segregationists drew from the investigation. Throughout the hearings, however, witnesses resisted the simplification and the elision at work in this picture, building a counternarrative that was supported by editorials in the daily papers. This counternarrative argues that disparities in achievement are caused by complex social and systemic factors, all of which can be redressed. Before considering that counternarrative, however, a final and powerful strand of the segregationist narrative needs to be considered, one that used eugenic logic to activate a recurring anxiety about the degradation of American intellectual prowess.

The Logic of Degradation: “Downward Breeding”

Although the most overt eugenic rhetoric of segregationist science was absent from the hearings, the ease with which it was inserted by commentators after the fact is telling. Copies of the committee’s report were widely dispersed in D.C. and across the country—Congressman Davis had 50,000 copies of it printed, many of which found their way to the segregationist White Citizens’ Councils, which circulated both the report itself and commentaries on it (Bond). One such commentary, published as a pamphlet by the D.C. White Citizens’ Council and reprinted in *The Virginia Spectator’s* 1957 “Jim Crow

Issue,” brought the logic of “downward breeding” to the surface of the integration debate. “Integration means degeneration,” it announced, arguing that “it is a known fact that where there is fraternization there follows intermarriage.” The commentary proceeds using the language of livestock: “when intermingling, mixing or integrating, you first want to know the grade of the animal you are going to mix and then you can ascertain whether the offspring will likely be superior or inferior.” The report of the Davis hearings offers just such information for the author, who cites “the wide disparity in mental ability to learn and educational achievement between the white and negro students.” Having linked the disparity—the achievement gap—to breeding, the author can conclude that as a result of integration, “the white race becomes a mongrelized race and history records that the breeding is downward instead of upward” (Fleming). Explicit language of intermarriage or genetic degradation is absent from the hearings, which might make Fleming’s pamphlet seem like a distortion or misappropriation of the committee’s findings. In fact, however, such conclusions follow logically from the premises established in the hearings, suggesting that the discourse in which the achievement gap was first articulated was imbued from the start with the eugenic logic of degradation. Although not concerned with literal reproduction (or “breeding”), the discourse of the hearings laid the groundwork for conclusions like Fleming’s in two ways: it mapped the logic of degradation onto student achievement, and alongside that, it invoked the specter of Black sexuality as a threat to white racial purity in the form of “sex problems” at schools.

By “the logic of degradation,” I mean the assumption that when two unequal groups are combined, the inferior group will “pull down” the superior one, whether it be

genetically, intellectually, behaviorally, or academically. Building on the premise of the achievement gap between Black and white students, Gerber articulated this logic in an exchange with superintendent Corning:

When we know that the white students in Washington, the average white students in Washington are in the upper 5 percent of the Nation in academic achievement, that the colored are in the lower 5 percent of the Nation in academic achievement...is it reasonable to assume that the third-grade white children, who I say are the products of integration, are being educationally destroyed and being brought down on the lower 5-percent of the Negroes? (*Hearings* 426)

Where eugenicists worried about white “race suicide” through intermarriage, Gerber invoked a parallel “educational destruction” of the race through school integration. In doing so, he stoked a recurrent national fear, one that was particularly timely in the District of Columbia.

Anxieties about national or racial intellectual degradation were nothing new, and psychometric testing, since its emergence in the early years of the century, had long been tied to such fears. When the results of the first large-scale I.Q. test, administered to Army draftees, were released shortly after the first World War, they were interpreted to mean that the average American had a “mental age” of 13, only slightly removed from the category of “feeble mindedness” (Gould 226).¹⁵ The findings prompted crisis rhetoric around the country: one college president lamented, “we cannot conceive of any worse form of chaos than a real democracy in a population of average intelligence of a little over 13 years” (qtd. in Gould 254). Although no prior scores were available, it was assumed that the average mental age of Americans had deteriorated from some previous

¹⁵ Gould offers a rigorous refutation of the tests, their administration and the interpretation of their results, making a convincing case against the conclusions mentioned here.

higher number, and the cause was identified as increased immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia, which was diluting the gene pool of Americans of Northern and Western European descent (Gould 254). The pattern of reasoning is noteworthy, for it will recur in the crisis rhetoric of the achievement gap: a statistical finding—or what Gould called “a catchy, numerical ‘fact’”—was taken as evidence of intellectual deterioration, sparking a panic response that identifies some group of recently arrived “outsiders” as the cause of the crisis. In the 1920s, this reasoning led to a series of acts restricting immigration from putatively undesirable parts of the world, in an attempt to shore up the borders of the nation. In the 1950s, the identification of an achievement gap sparked a similar response that worked rhetorically to shore up the borders of the classrooms, this time by finding other means by which to separate those students believed to be “low achievers” without appearing to do so based on race. The narrative advanced in the Davis hearings also began with the identification of a crisis, and again pinned blame for it on recently arrived outsiders—this time, the African American students who had recently gained access to formerly all-white schools.

The crisis, in this case, was sparked by the results of the first citywide standardized test results in the District, released in 1955. One journalist led her report of the scores by announcing that, “Washington schools are in the midst of a crisis which could imperil the future of the city’s youth.” The story announced, without giving exact scores, that the city’s average test scores fell below the 50th percentile that represented a national average. It went on to invoke alarming images of invasive outsiders: “Hordes” of “migratory” students, largely from southern states, crowded city schools, “where new housing developments practically sit in the schoolyards.” Focusing particularly in the

Southeast and Northeast neighborhoods of the city, which were largely African American, the story described students who were not only “retarded” and “maladjusted,” but “can barely carry on a conversation” (Rogers, “It’s D.C. Schools”). One principal is quoted recalling a conversation with a new student from Georgia, who didn’t know his or her mother’s name, and when asked about his or her father, replied, “Ain’t got none.” Although the story’s headline, “It’s D.C. Schools that are Failing,” seems to point to schools rather than students as responsible for low scores, the coded language of regional background, neighborhood, and dialect points to Black students, evoking the recent influx as an alarming cause.¹⁶

Gerber’s narrative of academic disparities capitalized on the same fears and suspicions, evoking the old eugenic logic of “downward breeding” without having to name it. His discourse achieves this in three interconnected ways: first, it sets up the logic of degradation as a kind of statistical law; second, it provides evidence of overall downward trends in multiple metrics that will be interpreted according to that logic; finally, and in separate lines of questioning, it activates fears of Black hypersexuality and miscegenation. Just as eugenicists argued that procreation between members of different “races” would result in degradation of the superior one, Gerber advanced the premise that heterogeneous classes result in the deterioration of the overall group. This logic is established in questions like the following, which Gerber asked of multiple witnesses:

Mr. Gerber. Do you think by taking these pupils who were 3 and 4 and 5 grades removed and where there was that wide disparity between the

¹⁶ The link that the story establishes between race and disability is also important to consider. Predictably, many segregationists assumed Black intellectual inferiority, but I will discuss in the following chapter a perhaps more revealing idea that those who opposed Gerber’s narrative often evoked the language of disability as a way of divorcing race from ability, ironically bolstering the link between the two.

eighth grade students and those students, do you think that the education of the students in the eighth grade was impaired by putting all those students together?

Mr. Sharpe. Well, of course, that is an assumption that anyone can make. The definite proof of such a thing—

Mr. Gerber. You do not think a teacher could teach them?

Mr. Sharpe. No; I do not. I do not think any teacher, colored or white, would deliberately not try to do her best (*Hearings* 18).

Sharpe's response to the first question is cut off, but it seems that he was offering something less than full agreement. Although his "of course" seems to offer agreement, and he affirms that such a conclusion is indeed intuitive ("that is an assumption that anyone can make"), he begins to complicate his answer when he gestures towards a lack of "definite proof." That trajectory is diverted by Gerber's next question. Again, Sharpe's initial language is in line with Gerber's argument, a definitive-sounding "No; I do not." The answer becomes somewhat confusing when he reiterates the phrase "I do not think" but shifts the topic from the possibility of teaching a heterogeneous group to the teachers' intentions. In both answers, Sharpe appears to reinforce Gerber's assumptions, yet there is also evidence that he doesn't intend to do so. What remains is a strong, definite narrative from Gerber that subsumes an ambivalent response from Sharpe by cutting it short and treating it as if it were wholesale agreement. Repeating such questions throughout the hearings, Gerber attempts to establish the logic of degradation—that a group of students of diverse ability is pulled towards the lower end of the range of ability. Paired with the picture of the achievement gap that identifies Black students as the "low performers" and white students as the "high performers," Gerber's logic, if accepted, would lead to the conclusion that he stated to Corning: white students are being "educationally destroyed" by integration. Treating this logic of degradation as the

pedagogical equivalent of a law of physics, Gerber presents evidence of downward trends in the years since integration, using these quasi-statistical trends as “proof” of the destructive effects of integration: that the presence of Black students contributes to the decline of the entire school population. The committee worked to establish the existence of numerous such trends, most stemming from the disappointing results of the 1955 citywide tests. Williams’ query of the first witness set the precedent for a question that would be asked of nearly every subsequent witness: “In your opinion, are the standards of achievement in the public schools today at the same level as the standards of achievement were in the public schools 2, 3, and 4 years ago?” (*Hearings* 32). Witnesses’ answers ranged from strong affirmatives to categorical negatives, as in one principal’s response: “Oh, no, it isn’t. It is way down. And the teachers are saying to me, ‘We have just got to lower everything we do’” (55). The affirmative answers, asserting that standards had not declined since integration, tended to point to complexities that had been lost in Gerber’s simplified formulations such as the meaning of *standards* versus *achievement*. Such gestures towards complexity form a counternarrative about the gap that will be considered in the next chapter. Yet even these answers, as well as responses—like Sharpe’s, above—in which witnesses qualified their own or the questioners’ accounts of lower achievement, tended to uphold the underlying logic of degradation:

I would say that the level of achievement in our lower end has probably gone down. But as long as we can practice grouping, where we can place children of almost equal abilities in certain groups, our achievement would not be affected on the high levels. (*Hearings* 82)

Witnesses, in fact, almost unanimously agreed on the necessity of homogeneous grouping—putting “students of almost equal abilities in certain groups” in order to avoid the “degradation” predicted by Gerber’s logic. In other words, this logic operated to

uphold the idea of segregation: even if it wasn't based on race, the conclusion seemed to be, students would have to be separated into homogeneous groups based on some criteria in order to "protect" the high achievers from the others.¹⁷ I.Q. loomed large in these new schemes, being among those criteria. I.Q. was, according to Gerber, another metric that had taken a downward turn since integration. In his examination of Superintendent Corning, Gerber points to the fact that the average I.Q. score of district students is below the national average before providing a breakdown by school population:

Mr. Gerber. We find in your verified records that your 12th grade on the American Council of Education psychological examinations, that the national average is 89. You recall that?

Dr. Corning, Yes, sir.

Mr. Gerber. The District of Columbia, the integrated school system of the District of Columbia, that is, all the white and colored that were tested on that score, the score is 69. Did you find that to be the case?

Dr. Corning. I think that is correct. (*Hearings* 420)

The fact that the D.C. average was below par nationally on I.Q. scores invokes the two past crises mentioned above: the I.Q. panic from the 1920s, and fears about the "future of the city's youth" after the 1955 tests in D.C. In the light of the echoes of that 1920s panic, in which immigration was imagined to be causing a drop in national intelligence, the leap from low achievement test scores to "downward breeding" was not a long one. Even the hint of such a connection would presumably be enough for many Americans to fill in the blanks, as Fleming had in his pamphlet, reaching the conclusion that "integration means degradation." The hearings offered such hints in seemingly unconnected questioning about discipline at schools since integration, which focused disproportionately on what

¹⁷ The integrationist counternarrative will offer disability as that criteria, displacing race as the determining factor but preserving segregation. The importance of the language of disability will be explored in the next chapter on that counternarrative.

participants referred to as “sex problems.” A typical exchange classified passing notes as such a problem:

Mr. Gerber. Have you had any sex problems over there?

Mrs. McKnew. We have had some, but I think we handled them very well. We made it clear we would not tolerate such things, and I think we have gotten it across.

Mr. Gerber. Did you find any colored boys bothering the white girls?

Mrs. McKnew. They have passed notes to them. I know there have been a couple instances of notes being passed, a colored boy asking a white girl if she would like him for a boy friend, things of that sort. (*Hearings* 291).

To interpret this as a “sex problem” is to adopt a logic similar to Fleming’s, that “where there is fraternization there follows intermarriage.” An affidavit from a former principal that pursues the logic further was read at the hearings, as well as being reproduced in its entirety in the *Star*:

There were many sex problems during the year following integration. The first evidence of this came about when some colored boys began writing notes to the white girls, telling them their phone numbers and asking the girls for their numbers in return. I overheard two colored boys making obscene remarks about a white girl who was passing in the hall... white girls complained of being touched by colored boys in a suggestive manner when passing them in the hall (Collins).

The question of “sex problems” was asked of nearly every witness, and many of them denied the existence of any such issues. Those who offered more than straight denial demonstrated an understanding, never articulated in the questions, that the inquiry was specifically about Black male students interacting with white females. The question itself, then, raised the specter of miscegenation, which formed the background against which queries about pregnancy rates at schools might be interpreted. Representative Williams sought to establish for the record that pregnancy rates had increased since integration,

then asked the witness to translate a perhaps forgettable raw number into an alarming percentage:

Mr. Williams. Mr. Storey, you mentioned, also, that you had had five cases of pregnancy in 1955. Could you tell us how many cases, if you recall, you had of pregnancy in 1954?

Mr. Storey. I do not know the exact number. We might run 1 or 2, something of that kind or something of that number, before last year.

Mr. Williams. Do you recall having had any such cases in 1953?

Mr. Storey. No I do not remember the data for that. We would occasionally get a pregnancy.

Mr. Williams. You would have an occasional case of pregnancy?

Mr. Storey. Yes, sir.

Mr. Williams. But am I safe in assuming that since integration there has been a sharp upswing in pregnancies at your school?

Mr. Storey. This last year's figure represented an increase over what it had been.

Mr. Williams. And that would be an increase of several hundred percent or would it be a small increase, percentagewise?

Mr. Storey. Well, if I knew exactly the figures of the year before, if we were running 1 or 2 cases every year, then it would be an increase of 150 percent, if it were 2, and 500 percent if it were one. (*Hearings* 76)

Coupled with the supposed trend of Black young men's pursuit of their white female classmates, the idea of a 500% increase in pregnancy indeed paves the way for Fleming's assertion that intermarriage and miscegenation will be an inevitable consequence of integration. The notions of the achievement gap, interpreted as evidence of innate intellectual inferiority, combine with the logic of "downward breeding" are added to the mix to create the foundation of the segregationist narrative.

Perverse Twist or Inheritance?

In her critique of gap discourse, Barbara Love suggested that the kind of syllogistic logic that runs throughout the committee's line of questioning was lurking in the *Brown* decision and was brought to the surface by overreaching policies such as forced busing in the 1970s. She suggested that such policies represented an interpretation of *Brown* premised on the following logic:

If separate educational facilities are inherently unequal, and

If all black schools are inherently unequal to all white schools,

and

If all the resources in the two schools are exactly equal, and

If the only difference between these unequal schools is that black schools are attended by black children while white schools are attended by white children; in other words, the race of the children in the schools makes the schools unequal, then

The black children in the black schools make the black schools unequal.

Therefore, it is the black children themselves that lead to these schools being characterized as 'inherently unequal' schools.

Unequal schools are considered inferior schools

Therefore, black children make black schools inferior.

Therefore, black children are inferior. (240)

That logic, which Love identifies as circulating in 1970s policy, had in fact already been entered into the public record by the Davis Hearings, hinging in large part on the logic of "achievement gaps." Both Cross and Love have argued that the notion of "achievement gap" represents, in Cross' words, a "perverse twist" in discourse about education, a turn away from "critiquing the roles of schools and institutions" and toward analyses that "question the innate intelligence and academic potential of particular students" (248). My

analysis of the Davis Hearings confirms both scholars' suspicions, but also forces us to reconsider the implication that there was ever a time in which discourse about race and education focused its critique predominantly on institutions rather than students. These hearings reveal that the logic of innate racial inferiority may always have coexisted with, and always exerted a "twisting" force upon, American discourse about opportunity and institutional reform. Cross rightly suspected a link between eugenics and the achievement gap, and she traced eugenic logic through a series of metaphors used to describe, and she would say denigrate, nondominant groups since the 1960s. She suggests that "achievement gap" is the heir to a string of signifiers that include *culturally deprived*, *underprivileged*, *culture of poverty*, *at risk*, and *inner city* (249). What this historical analysis of gap rhetoric reveals is that "achievement gap" is not so much the latest heir to that discursive legacy, but that it emerged prior to the other terms she lists and thus might be better understood as the organizing frame within which all such terms have gained legitimacy since the middle of the twentieth century. In other words, I am suggesting that the "achievement gap" is not the *heir* but the *inheritance* itself. That is not to say that the idea of the gap burst unchallenged onto the discursive scene. In truth, the segregationist narrative in which it emerged was roundly and rigorously challenged, and I will now consider how those challenges shaped the gap's meaning and force.

Chapter 3

Undermining the Gap: The *Afro-American*, William Dawson, Horace Mann Bond and Hobart Corning

Despite having compared the hearings to a “lynching bee” and a “hatchet job,” the *Washington Post* assented to the committee’s main premise: “The fact of Negro deficiencies in educational and cultural attainment is real and must be reckoned with” (“Intelligence”). In a similar move, the dissenting statement in the hearings’ official report challenged Williams’ and Davis’ motivation, conduct, and policy recommendations, but declined to challenge the premise on which their case was built: “The statistics speak for themselves, and it is not a record of which anyone can be proud” (*Report* 48). The idea that Gerber’s statistics were indisputable permeated reporting in both the *Post* and the *Star*, in contrast to that in the *Washington Afro-American*. While the former papers’ editorial pages posed questions about the subcommittee’s intent and effect upon education, the front page reported the story more or less precisely as Gerber constructed it. The *Post*, for instance, mentioned in the first day of coverage what it would expand upon in almost daily stories thereafter: “tests showed wide differences in the achievement levels between white and Negro children in four predominantly white schools and 11 predominantly Negro schools” (Edstrom and Bassett, “Integration” 1). After adding, somewhat parenthetically, “school officials have noted that these gaps existed because of the District’s previously segregated system,” the article recaps Gerber’s numbers:

In summing up the achievement ratings on one test, Gerber noted that 8 percent of the Negro 8th graders had reached the 10th, 11th and 12th grade levels, 17.4 percent tested at the seventh, eighth and ninth grade levels, and 81.8 per cent tested at the second through sixth grade levels. Of the white children, 26.7 per cent had attained 10th, 11th, and 12th grade levels, 50.1 were at the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade levels, and 23.1 tested at

the second through sixth grade levels. (Edstrom and Bassett, “Integration” 1, 47)

Gerber’s “statistical onslaught,” then, was reenacted on the front pages of the *Post* and *Star* for the full run of the hearings. His data was presented as an indisputable picture of academic reality, even by those who reviled the committee’s segregationist agenda. I have argued that what the committee presented as a purely quantitative picture was in fact a layered narrative that made the case for the genetically-based intellectual inferiority of Black students and against the academic benefits of integration in the District. In other words, the “statistics” that appeared to “speak for themselves” were in fact a carefully crafted, rhetorically complex set of texts that interpreted statistics using a thinly veiled eugenicist and white supremacist hermeneutic. To accept the gap as it was thus presented, as “the fact of Negro deficiencies,” was to concede to the terms and definitions of the segregationist case, and yet the *Post* and the dissenting committee members did precisely that. How did these supporters of integration come to offer such a limited challenge to the segregationist narrative? Why did the dominant voices in public discourse fail to craft a more robust counter-argument? To put it most simply, why did the “achievement gap” appear in the integrationists’ defense of desegregation, when it was constructed precisely to discount that policy? That is the question that will drive this chapter and the next one, in which I will tease out a number of counterarguments, examining what each conceded and what it challenged in the segregationist case. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which counter-narratives that challenged the gap failed to gain attention or traction in broader public discourse. In Chapter 4, I will consider the versions of the integrationist narrative that *did* gain traction, demonstrating how they also powerfully, if unintentionally, carried forward segregationist premises.

Stasis Theory

I will frame my analysis using stasis theory, a taxonomy of questions developed and articulated between the second century B.C.E. and the second century A.D. by Hermagoras, Cicero, Quintilian and Hermogenes. Stasis theory originated as a way to organize legal proceedings according to question types, and continues to shape the logic of modern legal discourse. It is a hierarchical ordering of questions; in other words, the first stasis must be settled before the disputants can move on to the second, and so forth. The questions proceed according to this logic:

1. Conjecture: Did the act happen? Did the accused do it?
2. Definition: What is the nature of the act? To what category of acts does it belong?
3. Quality: Is the act good or bad, serious or trivial? What circumstances mitigate its quality? Who is affected by it?
4. Jurisdiction and policy: What should be done about it and by whom?

Before considering whether to convict a person of murder, for example, it must first be determined whether someone is dead and whether the accused killed him (conjecture), whether it was murder or manslaughter (definition), and whether it was in self-defense, in the heat of the moment, the product of mental illness, or premeditated (quality).

Disputants use this taxonomy to identify the question at the heart of the dispute, the central point of contention. As the example suggests, stasis theory is widely considered to have originated in forensic rhetoric that is concerned specifically with criminal acts, and therefore may seem far afield from my consideration of policy debates. It has been flexible from the start, however, a “lively theory continually remolded and modified by its users” (Fahnestock and Secor, “Grounds” 136-7). Fahnestock argues for stasis theory’s usefulness as an analytical tool, asserting that beyond its place in criminal trials, it also “turns out to be a general scheme capable of accounting for the way issues

naturally develop in public forums” (“Accommodating” 345).¹⁸ Her work points to the ways that reasoning in Western culture continues to reflect the influence of stasis theory, which is why it will be a useful tool for my analysis of these congressional hearings: not only because of the hearings’ quasi-legal nature, but because stasis will allow me to examine the emergence and development of racial disparities in test scores as a policy issue.¹⁹ Fahnestock, with co-author Marie Secor, suggests a revised version of stasis theory for this more general use which has been widely adopted by contemporary rhetoricians including Laura Wilder, Leah Ceccarelli, and Lynda Walsh. Perhaps the most salient change in this model, for my purposes, is that it separates the question of *cause* from the first stasis of *conjecture* and puts it alone in the third position. The new hierarchy follows:

1. Conjecture (or fact)
2. Definition
3. Cause
4. Quality (often called “value” or “evaluation” in this version)
5. Policy (also called “action”)

In the classical version, “cause” falls under conjecture, suggesting that the cause was an individual—the accused in a criminal trial, for instance—who either was or was not responsible for the act in question. Separating cause and moving it to the third position allows disputants to consider issues rather than the innocence or guilt of a defendant, making room for debate about more complex causality that might involve multiple forces

¹⁸ See also Fahnestock and Secor, “The Stases in Scientific and Literary Argument” (428) and Rosa A. Eberly’s “Plato’s Shibboleth Delineations, or, the Complete Idiot’s Guide to Rhetoric” (46).

¹⁹ Whether that is because human reason “naturally” follows a linear path captured in this theory, or because we have been socialized into a way of thinking that is deeply influenced by classical rhetoric is an open question that falls beyond the scope of this inquiry.

and agents. This difference will become important when I analyze third stasis questions below.

I will consider various integrationist counterarguments in these chapters, organizing them according to the stasis at which each one posed its challenge to the committee's narrative. In doing so, I will identify what each counterargument treats as the heart of the issue, and by the same token what each one concedes to the opposition—in other words, what parts of the segregationist narrative each argument left intact. Beginning with the most fundamental disagreements, those that raise questions at the first stasis of conjecture, I consider how successful each counterargument was in reaching the public through the vehicle of newspaper coverage. I contend that the arguments that were most successful in doing so—the ones that became dominant in public discourse—were not the only nor necessarily the most well-developed ones, and that they were in fact the arguments that accepted most of the premises of the Davis committee. Reconstructing various integrationist arguments in this chapter, and tracing their reportage in the mainstream local press in the next, will supply a clue, if not a comprehensive answer, about how the integrationist narrative that ironically embraced the Davis committee's definition and evaluation of the achievement gap became the dominant answer to segregationist constructs and the narrative that would circulate in discourse about educational equity for decades to come.

One strand of argument worked to preempt any consideration of the questions posed by the committee, effectively intervening prior to the first stasis. As multiple scholars have noted, these arguments often take the form of fourth-stasis questions of jurisdiction, but are raised not to consider who should act but rather whether the given

forum is a legitimate one in which to address the issue in the first place. From there, I will proceed first to challenges at the level of *conjecture*, which raise doubts about the existence of any racial disparity in educational attainment. They ask, albeit indirectly, “does such a disparity actually exist?” Questions of *definition*, next, grant that there is an academic disparity between Black and white students, but challenge how it is defined. These arguments raise the question, most basically, “is the disparity accurately and comprehensively captured by I.Q. and achievement test scores?” These arguments highlight the importance of interpretation in the use of statistics, denying their objective nature. Beyond that, these challenges work to unpack the committee’s definition of the gap, raising questions about the underlying meanings of “achievement” and “intelligence” by revealing and challenging the assumption that these qualities were innate and fixed, and by insisting on the influence of opportunity and environment on student learning. Questions in the third stasis, *cause*, attempt to offer explanations for the disparity in test scores other than innate racial difference, such as economic and social stratification. These questions bleed into the stasis of *quality*, which itself encompasses a wide range of questions; indeed, the categories are not hermetic. For my purposes, however, I will identify questions of quality as those that begin by accepting the committee’s definition of achievement disparities between Black and white students and that consider factors other than race not as alternative *causes*, but rather as *mitigating factors*. Finally, I will consider questions of *policy*. Having separated issues of jurisdiction as preemptive in this debate, I will instead consider questions that accept the committee’s formulation of the problem in its entirety—that there is a gap, that it is fundamentally racial, and that it has the potential to inhibit the achievement of all

students—and ask only what should be done about it. Policy arguments were focused less on accurately framing the problem and more on making the case for a particular set of solutions: academic tracking, along with increased, separate services for “atypical” students and smaller class sizes across the board, all of which hinge on the need for increased funding for the schools.

In tracing and classifying these integrationist arguments, I am working to advance two claims: first, that robust arguments were advanced against the gap-based segregationist narrative, but that they reached a limited audience and—as will become clear in subsequent chapters—exerted little influence on the notion of the achievement gap that has been shaping education policy for the past decade. It is these arguments that I will consider in this chapter. My second claim, which will drive Chapter 4, is that the most widely circulated counterarguments ceded a significant amount of ground to the committee; the dominant challenges were, in other words, surprisingly superficial. I will suggest that, in this early struggle over the meaning of the phrase, this historical beginning, the logic and rhetoric of segregation secured its place as the controlling frame for understanding the gap.

Wholesale Rejection: William Dawson and the *Afro-American*

There were few direct denials of a disparity in test scores between African-American and white students in the District of Columbia. Such a denial was implied, however, in challenges to the validity of the hearings, which argued either that the committee itself was without jurisdiction and should be disbanded, or that its members were so ideologically motivated that any findings, including evidence of academic

disparities, should be rejected outright. A number of community leaders, citizens' groups, including the Washington Committee on Public Schools, the NAACP and Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), as well as a small number of U.S. Representatives took this tack, often by raising doubts about the committee's procedure and its legal right to hold such hearings.²⁰ Perhaps the most forceful such argument came from Rep. William Dawson, chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, who announced that the committee had not followed procedure in calling the hearings. "The meetings of this committee," he charged, "are without the required legal sanction" and must therefore be considered "a fraud" ("Dawson Breaks Silence"). He later asserted that any findings would be "illegal and a nullity" ("Davis Subcommittee"). Dawson's assertions raise questions of procedure and jurisdiction that, in the classical model, belong to the fourth stasis. He does so, however, in a way that would discredit the findings of the hearings, a move that Zarefsky identified in the Lincoln-Douglas debates as a preemptive argument in that "it is idle to consider a matter until it is clear that one is entitled to do so" (137). Dawson's argument would, if successful, render the committee's findings—including the narrative of achievement disparities—moot. Issued as it was near the end of the hearings, but well before the full, official report was released to the public, his argument was not designed to prevent the hearings from taking place so much as to declare them invalid and to reject their findings. In effect, his challenge would affect the issue at the level of conjecture, undermining the truth claims of anything they reported.

²⁰ Minnesota Representative Roy Weir, for instance, asked the chair of the larger committee of which this subcommittee was formed to consider suspending Gerber and halting the hearings. Clarence Mitchell, head of the D.C. chapter of the NAACP, sent telegrams to both presidential candidates and multiple congressional leaders with similar requests (Lautier, "Dixiecrats Defy").

This is the same vein in which the *Washington Afro-American*'s coverage ran.²¹ The *Afro*'s coverage of the hearings was radically different than that of the *Post* and the *Star*, which also reported challenges like Dawson's. The *Afro-American* devoted the bulk of its coverage to this kind of first stasis challenge, declining to engage questions of definition or cause, where doing so would imply assent to the committee's basic facts of the gap. The other two papers devoted the majority of their space to precisely those kinds of higher-stasis questions. While the content of Gerber's questioning and witnesses' testimony constituted the bulk of the *Post*'s and the *Star*'s reporting, the pages of the *Afro-American* were dominated by questions about the legitimacy of the hearings, which consistently qualified that paper's coverage of the testimony. Even before the hearings started, the paper's headline asked, "School 'Probers' Ducking Witnesses?" The story reported that the committee was not only screening witnesses in closed-door preliminary testimony, but that it had ignored official requests by a professor at Howard University and representatives from the NAACP to testify ("School 'Probers'" 1). The story the following day adds to the contention that the hearings were hopelessly biased, reporting that Davis had banned *Afro* reporters from press conferences about the hearings (Still, "Afro Denied" 1). The paper utterly rejected the committee's claim to objectivity, not only by pointing to its selective use of pre-screened witnesses, but by highlighting Davis' former membership in the Ku Klux Klan and Gerber's role as "a political fixer and hatchet-man" in corrupt Memphis politics. The paper would not even grant the

²¹ I will occasionally refer to the paper as the *Afro*, in the same spirit as I refer to the *Post* and the *Star*, and adopting the same shorthand as the paper's reporters often used (see, for instance, Still, "Afro Denied Report on D.C. Schools.").

committee's function, always hedging its reports with phrases like "*so-called* hearing" ("Democrats are Still Responsible").

Questioning the very premises on which the committee was convened, the editor of the *African-American* issued perhaps the most direct challenge at the level of conjecture. Lamenting that the results of the hearings "will be held up as the unchallenged and factual findings of a Congressional Committee," an editorial insisted that they were in fact "half-truths, innuendo and racial libel" as well as "anti-colored propaganda" ("Democrats are Still Responsible").²² A letter to the editor from the president of the American Council of Human Rights offers another complete rejection of the committee's facts, asserting that "the testimony so far consists of phony statistics intended to show that colored students can't learn" (Blue). Racial disparities in achievement, as presented by Gerber, were characterized not only as false but as maliciously so; not just a lie but a vicious, slanderous one. Barring the *Afro* from hearings was reported as further evidence that Davis knew "that the farce he is conducting under the guise of an investigation cannot stand up to the cold glare of truth" ("Congressman Davis"). The question of "truth" highlights the paper's insistence on challenging the most fundamental facts of the hearing, contesting the committee's claims to objectivity. Davis' exclusion reporters from the paper speaks to the way discourse breaks down when disputants cannot reach assent at the first level of stasis, rendering consideration of higher

²² Allegations of slander and half-truth were not limited to the editorial page, but were also quoted in stories covering community leaders' criticism of the committee, in which the hearings were characterized as "a malicious smear campaign" and "an overdose of race-baiting" ("Rev. Williams") as well as a "fraud" and a "circus" (Hoskins). Other such assertions came from the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, the American Council on Human Rights, Americans for Democratic Action, the NAACP, the American Jewish Congress, and the president of Howard University, among others ("Ministers Call").

stasis issues impossible. It should not be surprising, in this light, that the phrase “achievement gap” appears nowhere in the *Afro-American*’s coverage. The stark contrast to the *Post* and the *Star* is clear from a comparative glance at one day’s headlines: when the *Star* proclaims, “Learning Gap in Junior Highs Noted in Probe: Test Scores Show Colored Schools on Lower Level” and the *Post* leads with, “School Age Cut Asked to Cope with Slow Pupils” (Edstrom and Bassett)—both headlines focusing on problematic *students*—the *Afro-American* instead highlighted the problematic conduct of the committee itself: “Dixiecrats defy GOP, Democrats” (Lautier). When test score disparities are named in the *Afro-American*, it is often in hedged language, reminding the reader of the open conjectural questions: “the *apparent* lag in colored pupils” (Still, “These are the Witnesses,” emphasis added).²³ The thrust of the paper’s coverage throughout the hearings is consistent: the bulk of reportage, editorials and even letters to the editor relentlessly insist that the facts of the issue were subject to doubt, never assenting, as the much more widely-circulated *Post* would, to “the fact of Negro deficiencies” (“Intelligence”).

Both of these counterarguments—Dawson’s attempts to shut down or dismiss the hearings on a procedural basis and the *Afro-American*’s challenges to the accuracy of the hearings’ basic premises—were quickly appropriated by Davis and other committee members as evidence of the ideological motivation and conspiratorial operation of integration advocates. Davis explained his exclusion of *Afro-American* reporters by

²³ The disparities are referred to in the paper as an entity twice, once in a letter to the editor that refers to “achievement lags between colored and white pupils” (Jefferson). The paper also quotes a report produced by the Washington Committee for Public Schools that included a caution that “the gap in school achievement scores needs careful interpretation” (“Blast Davis Report”).

insisting that the paper's coverage "would not be fair or objective" (Still, "*Afro Denied*"). Dawson's challenge was met with repeated invocations of the committee's devotion to the truth, as in the telegram from Committee Chairman John McMillian congratulating Davis and his colleagues for their "effort to secure the actual facts," despite what he characterized as obstructionist tactics employed by opponents of the hearings, like Dawson (Lautier). The idea of bringing previously hidden facts "into the light of day" recurred in the committee's responses, which enabled them to fold the arguments for wholesale rejection neatly into the conspiracy theory the committee had constructed, portraying the *Afro-American* and Dawson as fundamentally opposed not to segregation or to the conduct of the committee, but rather to the truth itself. Davis' and McMillian's language of truth and conspiracy was not the only way in which the wholesale rejection approach was muted, however; in fact, and evidencing the depth of Americans' confidence in statistics, it was sometimes undermined from within.

A protest meeting attended by four hundred community members at a local church demonstrates how easily this argument unraveled. One speaker called the hearings a "shameful fraud" and its findings "myth," advancing the same kind of challenge I describe above. However, this version of the challenge shifted stases in a single utterance. Adding to the contention that the hearings were a "fraud," the speaker above went on to insist that "the vast majority of experts in the field credited poorer performance of Negroes in school and psychological tests to social and economic factors, not race" (Sampson, "Mass Meeting" 21). Even at the heart of a wholesale rejection of the subcommittee's findings is the tacit acceptance of data—here, from psychometric tests—

that points to “poorer performance” of Black students in academics.²⁴ This is not to say that such arguments were fallacious or false, but rather to point out that the argument about conjecture—characterizing all findings of the committee as suspect—is here undermined by the speaker’s leap to an argument of cause, pointing to “social and economic factors” to challenge the contention that the gap is the result, primarily, of racial differences. This shift, which I characterize as one from first to third stasis, dilutes the initial challenge when it adopts an argument that implies agreement to the “fact” of a racial gap in test scores. Gerber’s statistical picture of the gap is, in that moment, treated as exempt from allegations of “fraud.” I will consider arguments at the third stasis level in some depth in the next chapter, as they formed the dominant version of the integrationist argument. First, however, I will follow the logic of stasis to consider another important challenge to the segregationists’ case at the level of definition.

Questions of Definition: Horace Mann Bond and Hobart Corning

In the last chapter, I contended that the vocabulary and assumptions of science were an important frame for the committee’s narrative about the achievement gap. Presenting their data as objective and their argument as strictly “scientific” allowed Gerber and Davis not only to divorce their case from racist ideology, but to present it as if it were unassailable. The data was hard to refute, in part because of the force of presumption that attaches itself to quantitative measures in Western culture (Fahnestock). Attempts to dismiss or deny it were countered by allegations that those who objected were opposed to the “truth,” and, as we have seen, such objections sometimes even undermined themselves by appealing to the same statistics they challenged. Tricky as it

²⁴ The latter comment, it should be noted, was reported only in the *Post*.

was to reject the data out of hand, the further assumption that the data was transparent and somehow innocent of interpretation or ideology was vulnerable to stout challenges that took issue with the generalizations drawn from the data and raised questions about the legitimacy of statistical conclusions. In other words, they challenged the gap narrative at the level of definition, offering two overarching challenges. First, they questioned the committee's assertion that the gap fell "naturally" along racial lines by highlighting the important role of *interpretation* in compiling the statistical picture. They further disputed the committee's underlying definitions of achievement and intelligence as innate, fixed quantities by insisting on the influence of *opportunity* and *environment* in test results. I will take the specific arguments advanced by two men to represent two versions of definitional argument: Horace Mann Bond, a well known educator who was at the time president of Lincoln College in Pennsylvania, challenged the racial definition of the gap in a parodic pamphlet published by the NAACP. Hobart Corning, superintendent of D.C. schools, offered a similar challenge, albeit in a very different tone, during his testimony before the committee. Both men called attention to the rhetorical function of scientific vocabulary and statistics. They remind us of the *dual* function of science, which was described by Pandora as not only "a set of activities pursued by individuals who can be located within sociological aggregates"—scientists doing science—but also as "a source of symbolic representations that carry various meanings within the larger culture and are used as resources in constructing and debating shared and contested realities" (492). Where the segregationist science that underpins the committee's argument relies on the first definition, assuming the authority of scientists as a "sociological aggregate" to advance an ethos of disinterested pursuit of truth, Corning's and Bond's responses point

to the second, revealing the inescapable role of ideology in even quantitative, “scientific” frames for issues. Both Bond and Corning point to the limits of statistics as a way of understanding human learning and intelligence. In order to see the way in which their objections function, it is worth briefly considering the kind of data used by the committee. The statistics were drawn primarily from two sets of numbers: I.Q. scores and achievement test scores. Gerber obtained schoolwide average scores from school officials, along with enrollment figures by race. In order to compile the picture of academic disparity, he grouped the schools into three categories of enrollment: “predominantly white,” “predominantly Negro,” and “integrated.” He averaged the scores within each group to obtain a single number for each subject test to represent each school. In other words, every school was represented by its students’ average scores in math, reading, language, etc. (*Hearings*). The resulting statistical picture, which would be presented in the hearings and reported extensively in local papers, had two themes. First, that the average scores at predominantly white schools were higher than those of the schools where no single racial group predominated, which were themselves higher than those of the predominantly Black schools. Second, predominantly white school averages were above the national median in I.Q. and achievement, while average scores at Black schools were below it. This was the committee’s definition of what would come to be called the “achievement gap” between Black and white students, and it is the target of Bond’s satire.

Parody and Hidden Polemic

Horace Mann Bond, then president of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, published his satire as a pamphlet presenting the results of his own “study” of the

intelligence of Southern Congressmen. In case readers didn't make the connection to the hearings, his subtitle guided them: *a study à la Congressman James C. Davis, Chairman, and William Gerber, Chief Counsel, of the Congressional Sub-Committee to Investigate "Public School Standards" in the District of Columbia*. Bond was not new to the psychometry debate; in fact, he had published responses to the 1920s Army Alpha tests, the first significant sample of intelligence testing in the country. The test data had been used by proponents of eugenics and immigration restrictions to "prove" a hereditarian argument about intelligence that supported the belief that white individuals of "Nordic" descent were superior to those from Southern and Eastern Europe, who were in turn superior to people of color of any extraction. Such interpretations were roundly attacked by scholars—including Bond, who used the very same data to "prove" that white Americans in the Southern states, believed to be the most consistently "Nordic" demographic in the nation, were inferior to those in the North, where larger numbers of recent immigrants from other parts of Europe should have, according to the Nordacist argument, depressed the region's average scores (Thomas 272). The obvious dilemma was one of a number of "seemingly intractable problems" with the hereditarian view of intelligence that led to its abandonment by mainstream science in the 1930s (Jackson, "Racially" 265). Bond replicates this approach thirty years later in his response to the hearings: he again uses the committee's own data and logic, following it to an absurd conclusion that would have forced Davis and Gerber, had they acknowledged it, to admit flaws in either their method or in their ideology.

In his study, Bond examined two sets of data: first, using the Army I.Q. tests from the years in which Congressmen served broken down by state, he found that their home

states—Davis’ Georgia, Williams’ Mississippi, Jones’ Alabama—were not only at the low end of average scores, but that their average scores fell into the range that had been, in the 1920s, considered high-grade “feebleminded” or “moron” (7-9). Second, he turned to average I.Q. scores of students at the congressmen’s alma maters, noting that their schools were in the bottom 10% of the nation on that measure. In pursuing the argument, Bond not only accepts but adopts the premises of the segregationist narrative, treating its methods as objective and “scientific” and accepting I.Q. tests as a valid measure of intelligence unaffected by external factors. He uncovers, and exaggerates, another assumption beneath the committee’s discourse: that from average group scores, conclusions can be drawn about the ability of individual members of the group. Indeed, Bond highlights these assumptions by anticipating theoretical objections from “a research purist” who might dispute such conclusions, using his refutation to parody the committee’s treatment of such objections from Superintendent Corning and other witnesses: “We feel justified in brushing aside such an argument, as impatiently as Messrs. Davis and Gerber refused either hearing or credence to any opinion contrary to their *idée fixe*, that ‘I.Q. tests’ measured inherited racial capacity ‘to learn’” (5). Replicating the manner of the committee, Bond responds to the imagined objection with a chart demonstrating the consistency of average I.Q. scores at particular colleges, parodying the way that Gerber’s charts offered sometimes tangential data, distracting from witness’ objections rather than substantively addressing them.

Bond’s use of parody complicates the structure of stasis somewhat, requiring us to consider it in the light of indirection—he challenges the committee’s definition of the gap by appearing to accept it. Jackson describes Bond’s argument as a “clever and effective

reductio ad absurdum argument that undercut segregationist claims while accepting their terms of debate” (275). Building on feigned assent to data from I.Q. tests and Gerber’s line of reasoning, Bond sets out to “follow in the directions where the sub-committee has pointed, and pursue their analyses to their logical implications,” conclusions that the committee would find insupportable: namely, that their constituencies, and by extension they themselves, were intellectually inferior to Americans from other regions (15). Where Gerber arranged a body of data along racial lines, Bond arranged similar statistics by region, demonstrating that disparities existed by that measure as well. On the surface level of the parody, his argument asserts that Southern white Americans are innately inferior to Northerners. His underlying point, however, is that I.Q. tests can’t be used to compare individuals who live in dramatically different social, economic, or regional contexts. Northern white Americans will always score higher than other groups, he argues, because the tests were normed to that group (16). Such arguments in the 1920s successfully convinced mainstream scientists to reject I.Q. as a measure of intelligence, and presumably Bond felt that they would have a similar effect in the 1950s.

Scholars have noted that Bond’s career is marked by ambivalence about psychometric testing. Jackson, for instance, points out that despite his critiques, Bond used I.Q. tests as a college administrator, and he contends that this ambivalence is reflected in Bond’s parody (275-6). While he views the parody as effective critique, he argues that Bond’s acceptance of the terms of the debate could not be dismissed as pure ruse; the parody’s surface meaning, he implies, was not entirely overshadowed by its underlying point. Jackson’s argument is in part a response to Thomas, who characterized Bond’s discourse, as part a larger body of writing by Black scholars about psychometric

testing, more harshly. Thomas contended that Bond failed to raise questions about “the testing instrument itself or the raw data that it generated” and that his thought was therefore easily “co-opted into an ironic and paradoxical legitimation of the instrument” (288). I do not question these scholars’ arguments, insofar as they speak to the scope of Bond’s career in higher education and body of work. Yet I would suggest that the framework of stasis theory allows for an alternative reading of this particular text, one in which it powerfully levels the challenges that Thomas feels are lacking in Bond’s work as a whole, and in which his critique of I.Q. testing as a measure of intelligence is unequivocal. Such a reading is supported by Henry Louis Gates’ work on the African-American rhetorical tradition of “Signifyin(g),” which includes, among many other modes, parody. “Signifyin(g) upon white racism through parody,” he asserts, is characterized not only by the repetition of rhetorical structure with an added element of absurdity or incongruity, but also by the presence of a “hidden, or internal, polemic” (93, 110). Quoting Bakhtin, Gates describes parody as “a second voice” that, having “lodged in the other speech” forms a polemic force by turning that structure to “directly opposite aims” (110). Within this framework, Bond’s surface advocacy of I.Q. tests and gap-revealing statistical breakdowns can be understood as a powerful rejection of both. Indeed, Bond brings that “hidden” argument to the surface in the conclusion, wherein he shifts into analyzing his own parodic paper: “the findings and conclusions in the paper above is the Gospel of Human Inequality” preached by the members of the committee, he announces before offering his own “Gospel” as a corrective. The critique of I.Q. tests here is direct; shorn of the double meanings, it conveys little ambivalence. He argues that:

“Intelligence” is the proven ability of the human being to adapt himself within the social and environmental World into which he is born, and in which he is bred. To measure “intelligence” adequately, therefore, as between different human Worlds, it would be necessary to invent, for each differing World, its own “intelligence test.” (16)

He goes on to reveal the flaws of his own—and by extension, the committee’s—method:

What most often has been done—and what Congressman Davis tries to do in comparing white and black children in the District of Columbia, in “intelligence” tests; and what here, in the Davis fashion, I have done in comparing white Army draftees from the South with Northern white draftees; and in comparing Southern white college students with Northern college students—is to take a test devised on the premises of one World—the World of a long-literate, long-schooled white, or North—and apply that test to the children of other Worlds—the World of black people, the separate World of Southern white people. (16)

The conclusion removes any doubt about the polemic force of the parody, namely, to demonstrate the absurdity of using intelligence tests to gauge intellectual capacity in a society as socially and economically stratified as the United States. Moreover, it allows us to consider the layered function of Bond’s argument: the surface meaning of the parody and the underlying meaning, brought to the surface in the non-parodic conclusion. Neither denies the I.Q. disparity between Black and white students in Washington, D.C., but the underlying, non-parodic meaning questions the significance of that disparity, ascribing it to biases in the test itself rather than to different levels of intelligence. Bond challenges the assumption that disparities in the results of such tests constitute a “gap” that reflects the ability of students, suggesting instead that the gap is the product of the test itself.

Bond raises another important point about the history of psychometric testing that unmasks its entanglement with white supremacist ideology and challenges its status as objective science. His conclusions point to regional, in addition to racial, disparities in

intelligence. His earlier work indicates that conclusions about white Southerners being less intelligent than white Northerners was less a jab at the South and more an attack on theories of Nordic supremacy. This text, too, targets not so much Southern white Americans as the outdated and dangerous eugenicist thinking that underpins uncritical uses of intelligence testing. Reminding readers that Gerber was born in Russia, Bond invokes the infamous immigration restriction acts of the 1920s that worked to stem the flow of emigrants from nations, including Russia, whose representative Army recruits had scored low in the 1917 I.Q. tests. Bond twists the knife while highlighting the violence of such restrictions by adding, in a footnote, “Mr. Gerber might also reflect, that several hundred thousand of his fellow-nationals were prevented from coming to the United States by his interpretation of ‘I.Q. Test Scores’, and were subsequently incinerated by the Nazis” (3).

Bond’s gesture to the I.Q. debate of the 1920s and 30s suggests that the hearings’ use of I.Q. data should be considered another iteration of the same debate, equally rooted in white supremacy, American nativism, and eugenics. Indeed, this is the genealogy of the “achievement gap.” Although the phrase was a neologism in 1956, Bond’s critique suggests that it was essentially a new name for an old idea. This notion might help us understand the function of the hearings in more depth. In his analysis of the intelligence debates of the 1920s, Thomas characterized the “seemingly scientific social explanations” of eugenic, nativist thinking as a response to contemporary challenges to “the racist assumptions which had underpinned slavery in America” (260). In other words, I.Q. testing gained favor during the 1920s as a way to shore up racial boundaries that were being threatened. Its resurgence after the federal order to integrate public

schools that resulted from *Brown v. Board of Education* was a similar response to a similar threat. Bond's underlying argument allows us to see the discourse in which "achievement gap" emerged as an iteration of a historically repeated effort to preserve white supremacy against egalitarian threats.

Understanding Bond's argument in this light requires, of course, an awareness of the operation of parody to see how it retroactively reveals the weakness of the premises it initially appeared to accept. Newspaper reports of the pamphlet stripped away that irony and thus obscured its intent. The headline of the United Press syndicate report had no hint of satire: "Southerners Branded 'Moron' by NAACP" (Jackson 272). The *Afro-American* printed the headline "Are Manifesto Boys Dumb?" and led with what it called "the conclusion" of Bond's study: "Most members of Congress who signed the 'Southern Manifesto' fall into the slow learning category and the majority of their constituents are in the dull normal or moron category." In both stories, the surface level of Bond's text—the one that readers were, according to the text's conclusion, supposed to reject as absurd, became its only meaning. Without the reversal that would come from such a rejection, readers are led to believe that Bond accepts the disparity between Black and white I.Q. in the District of Columbia and merely adds to it his contention of a similar disparity between Southern and Northern I.Q. Bond's piece appears to be more *ad hominem* attack than satiric critique, and the polemic force is lost. It is reported as if Bond advocates and himself adopts a statistical analysis of average I.Q. score to measure group differences. Thus, while I maintain that Bond's text offers a critique of intelligence testing more pointed than Thomas suggests the body of his work might have been, I must also concede that the version of the critique that reached the public was stripped of most of its power.

Interestingly, this distorted picture of Bond’s thought—the argument that he treated as too absurd to be taken at face value—mirrors the *actual* counterargument offered by many witnesses and reported in the *Post* and the *Star*. Before considering this strand of argument, I will look at another kind of definitional challenge in the testimony of D.C. Schools Superintendent Hobart Corning.

Interpretive Statistics and Fluid Intelligence

Superintendent Corning offers what at first appears to be a minor point of disagreement: “I am not denying the validity of the figures themselves,” but “the only objection I am making is that it is a generalization of a group on the basis of a medium achievement.” (*Hearings* 494). This seemingly simple objection is in fact a rich and complex critique of Gerber’s use of statistics that requires unpacking. In doing so, I will consider two themes within Corning’s objection: first, in discussing the use of statistics, he emphasizes the importance of *interpretation*, rejecting the common sense idea that the numbers speak for themselves. Second, he challenges Gerber’s treatment of test scores as a comprehensive measure of either achievement or intelligence by insisting on both the outsized influence of external factors—what he commonly calls *opportunity* and *environment*—and on an understanding of individual intelligence and learning as complex and unstable phenomena.

Midway through his testimony, Corning responds to questions about I.Q. as “ability to learn” by insisting, “you can’t put human beings into a catalog and say this is expected, this is going to happen” (*Hearings* 417). Corning’s comment makes a salient point about use of statistics in education, one that underlies the counterargument I am analyzing here. It calls attention to the historic use of statistics, rooted in probability

theory, to predict phenomena ruled by the laws of physics. In astronomy, for instance, statistics were used to make predictions about celestial events; their function was, in fact, precisely to “say this is expected, this is going to happen.” Applied to anything that followed natural laws, statistical prediction was highly effective. Imported into human sciences like education, statistics seemed to have similar analytical potential, giving rise to the assumption that human behavior is as predictable as the movement of the planets (Grey 308; Davis 26). Corning rejects this, asserting that humans are unpredictable: “sometimes a child with a very low I.Q. will surprise you very greatly by the achievement” (*Hearings* 417). Corning’s comment doesn’t reject statistics or testing wholesale, but rather insists upon both their limits—they could not be used to predict outcomes. He also highlights the importance of interpretation—they did not, in fact, “speak for themselves.” For instance, Corning made it clear that the use of median scores to represent a school or a group of students was itself an interpretive choice:

The interpretation of test results and the giving of tests both are extremely technical operations, and even in our own profession we find people misunderstanding the meaning of results. Comparisons are ordinarily made. For example, median grade placement for subject-matter achievement. Many people in the public and too frequently people in our own profession regard that as the only measure. It is not the only measure, because in any classroom in any school establishing a certain median achievement, there is a wide range of achievement, from much below the median to very far above it, and that fact is often overlooked. (*Hearings* 409)

Corning’s comment reveals that the “gap” cited by Gerber is the result of an interpretive choice to consider only average scores. He implies that this choice conceals other aspects of the picture, such as individual variation. He later returns to the point:

Dr. Corning. You are talking in terms of the very fallacy I tried to point out earlier, that you are taking the median as the total measure when there is a wide range of achievement in that third grade.

Mr. Gerber. How else can you measure it except to take the median? You have to have some point of measure.

Dr. Corning. I can take any number of others. You can take the complete range. You can take the percentile rank. But to just take the median and say these children are not doing it is not a true statement, not a fair statement, because many, many of them are way up in fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade achievement. (426)

Corning's statement here is unequivocal—by highlighting racial differences and concealing individual ones, Gerber's picture of achievement disparities is neither true nor fair. Corning contests the idea that an average or a median can serve as a fair representation of any individual child: "We look at the child making the median or middle score as being representative of all, and that is not a fair interpretation" (*Hearings* 409). He reminds the committee that children can "surprise you very greatly," that their learning is complex and unpredictable—they are, he implies, a bad fit for Gerber's statistical methods. His comment is prescient; it resonates with critiques of the bell curve model in education that scholars like Stephen Jay Gould, Lennard Davis and Stephanie Houston Grey would later offer. In terms of the rhetoric of the hearings, and specifically Corning's challenge to Gerber's definition of achievement disparities, the latter works to denaturalize Gerber's statistical model by calling attention to the interpretive choices that constitute it. His comment challenges what Grey calls the "assumption that the average is simply the manifestation of a natural law" (308). In doing so, he asserts that the gap, as presented, is *not* a natural occurrence, but rather a rhetorical construct, and that its statistical definition is subject to question and scrutiny.

Corning also challenges Gerber's reliance on test scores, calling for recognition of their limits that would forestall sweeping conclusions about race. Taken out of context, he argues, test scores reveal much less about achievement or intelligence than Gerber

assumes they do. They are meaningful only when taken in the context of what Corning repeatedly calls *environment* and *opportunity*, pointing away from supposedly intrinsic qualities like intelligence and toward external factors that result from segregation such as employment, income, housing and food insecurity. He insists that “We cannot just say, my point is, we can’t just say that in the colored schools the achievement was not satisfactory unless we go back of that and find out what the conditions were that were contributing to this condition” (414). Asserting that “conditions,” presumably external to students, must be considered *prior to* arriving at a definition of the problem—whether achievement was satisfactory or not—Corning calls the definition of the gap into question. Throughout the hearing, he expands on this point, frequently using the notion of “opportunity” to problematize Gerber’s assumptions about intelligence and achievement. In response, for example, to Gerber’s inquiry whether, based on I.Q. test scores, Corning would “say that the colored were on the same mental level as the whites,” the superintendent insists, “I couldn’t answer that categorically, sir . . . I don’t think you can make a generalization out of a situation even like that because given better environment, given more opportunities to experience, the I.Q. will rise” (418). Opportunity, reinforced here by “environment” and “experience” and recurring each time he is asked about I.Q., breaks down the idea that I.Q. is biological or intrinsic. Corning points to the way that a picture of the gap that treats scores as if they speak for themselves conceals or ignores the systemic causes of educational inequity, holding responsible the students themselves, represented by their racial category and their test scores and without regard for opportunity or environment. In other words, Corning attacks the premises and elisions that allow Gerber and the committee to define the achievement gap in a way that makes

innate racial difference seem obvious. Simultaneously, by noting that it “will rise” given increased opportunities, Corning challenges the assumption that intelligence is fixed over the course of a person’s life.

Just as he challenges the definition of “intelligence” as an innate, fixed and measurable quantity, Corning questions the committee’s definition of “achievement” on the same basis. He highlights the assumption that achievement tests provide a holistic picture of student learning, erroneously treating learning as if it were a single variable. He explains to Gerber: “I think the misconception is you look at arithmetic test scores, here is a child that is below grade level in arithmetic. Are you going to put him in a grade on that basis? Because that same child is not uniform in all his achievement” (*Hearings* 414). Again, Corning redirects attention away from statistical averages and towards individual students, whose complexity, he seems to be saying, is effaced in Gerber’s picture. Corning attempts to limit the generalizations about students that could be made from test scores by insisting on their partial scope and arguing against a reified view of “achievement.” Both learning and intelligence are, he repeatedly reminds the committee, complex and multifaceted processes rather than measurable qualities. Ultimately, Corning’s testimony uncovers and challenges key assumptions of Gerber’s achievement gap narrative: that intelligence is fixed, and that both intelligence and achievement are single, measurable variables.

The complexity that Corning and other witnesses worked to inject into the consideration of test scores and averages was mostly lost in newspaper reports of the testimony. Although they did recall his assertion that Gerber’s uses of numbers were a “fallacy,” such statements were overshadowed by lengthy rehearsals of those very

numbers. Moreover, they tended to shift the argument from the second to the third stasis, as I will examine in the next chapter. Ultimately, too, Corning's challenges were muted by the committee's relentless questioning, which lasted for an entire day without the usual lunch recess and constitutes over one hundred pages of transcript. The Washington *Afro-American* reported that "near the end of the grueling six-hour session, the superintendent appeared exhausted. He began to waver in his answers under the constant questioning of Williams and Davis who had taken over for Gerber (Still, "Investigating"). Corning did, in fact, begin a protest, which was quickly cut off: "I am extremely exhausted, sir. I think this is—" (*Hearings* 509). The transcript shows committee members repeating the same question across multiple pages, eventually eliciting statements of resignation from Corning, as when he declared, "I will drop my defense, because I do not get my point over" (*Hearings* 494). Much of the questioning worked against the complexity that Corning attempted to inject into the testimony, often by asking Corning to "translate" his expert language into a kind of "common sense" non-experts could understand. After a lengthy exchange about the limits and uses of I.Q. tests, for example—and coming not long after Corning "drops his defense"—Representative Davis shifts the discourse:

Mr. Davis. I would like to talk in terms that a layman can understand. When you give a person an I.Q. test, are you determining by that test mental ability?

Dr. Corning. To the best of our ability, yes.

Mr. Davis. That is what I thought all along, and that is the theory I have been working on. It tests that ability to learn insofar as the children in school are concerned?

Dr. Corning. Insofar as it is a valid measure. (*Hearings* 496)

Corning's answers are still hedged, and he has, at this point, already lodged repeated explanations of the limits of the test and its validity. However, Davis frames his questions as a call for simplified "terms that a layman can understand," which appears to be the vehicle by which he finally secures at least partial consent from Corning. He exaggerates the extent of Corning's agreement, implying that it applies to the entire "theory I have been working on," that Corning's challenge has not, after all, undermined what Davis "thought all along" in any significant way. This appeal to common sense is an important move, for Corning's counterargument rests on the assumption that academic disparities are a complex question. Shifting the tenor and vocabulary of Corning's specialist language in this way dilutes the argument's persuasive force by forcing it into the same mold as the committee's narrative, crafted for public consumption. The appeal to common sense operates as a struggle over definition; in the example above, it allows Davis to reassert the committee's one-dimensional definition of intelligence as "mental ability" or "ability to learn," obscuring the notions of environment and opportunity that Corning had worked to inject into that definition. This move runs throughout the hearings, and is a testament to the role of common sense in the segregationist achievement gap narrative. Gerber uses a similar appeal to reassert the contention that his statistical methods are not interpretive choices but represent a simple and transparent picture of reality. For instance, after Corning challenges his reliance on averages and neglect of other comparative methods, Gerber defends his method with an appeal to statistical common sense:

Mr. Gerber. The way-uppers help those low-downers, and the low-downers brought the way uppers away (sic) down. That is what the record shows.

Dr. Corning. O.K., that is probably true, but just be sure you know how your way-uppers are and the way-downers. They are not all one designation. (*Hearings* 426)

Corning grants Gerber's point, even adopting his lay terminology of "way uppers," a concession that is, in many ways, emblematic of the way the committee quite literally set the terms of the discourse. Although the assent he offers was qualified and limited to a single point, conceding that the average does account, in its way, for the range of scores, his strong challenge to Gerber's reliance upon schoolwide averages was effectively muted. What had been the strong denial—"it is not a true statement, not a fair statement"—morphs into mild agreement: "O.K., that is probably true."

Responses like those offered by Bond and Corning complicated the picture of education and learning by revealing oversimplified definitions at the heart of the segregationist achievement gap argument. Where Gerber presented statistics that appeared to be self-explanatory, pointing to a single trend with a single cause, Bond and Corning insisted upon a proliferation of possible interpretations of data and a tangle of contributing factors. I have characterized the committee's argument as a "narrative" based in part on its neat, linear packaging and simple logic. What Bond and Corning offered could not be labeled similarly—in fact, it might be considered a challenge to the very notion that that questions of learning and education can adequately be captured in narrative form. Had their tactics been effective in shaping public discourse, we might not have inherited an idea like "the achievement gap," for the logic of such a gap was, in light of their challenges, tenuous at best. The survival of the gap points to their failure to gain traction. I do not attribute that failure to the quality of their challenges, both of which were pointed and prescient, reflecting scholarly consensus of their day and

anticipating scholarship to come. Instead, their influence on public discourse was limited, in large part, I suggest, because of their insistence on the irreducible complexity of the issue, which prevented them from forming a simple or linear counternarrative about Black students in Washington, D.C. That complexity limited their influence in two important ways: first, it made for a poor fit to the generic constraints of newspapers, which had to be able to capture their argument in headline form; and second, it was difficult to use in addressing the urgent policy needs of participants in the discourse: to defend District schools' integration policies and to secure increased funding for those policies. The integrationist arguments that *did* gain traction in public discourse were better suited to this double need, and key to their ability to do so was to adopt the term "achievement gap" in their language and attempt to turn it to their purposes. In adopting the phrase, these arguments grant the committee's presumed answers to questions of conjecture and definition, focusing challenges on the higher-stasis questions of cause, quality and policy. Better suited to the genre of newspaper headlines and stories than Corning and Bond's complex approaches, these counternarratives in turn gained wider circulation and therefore can be considered the dominant integrationist arguments, supplanting and even obscuring alternatives.

Chapter 4

Shifting the Appeal: Mainstream Newspaper Reports of the Gap

In perhaps her most often cited study, Jeanne Fahnestock analyzes the way journalistic reports of scientific studies “accommodate” their language to lay audiences, highlighting the way such accommodations tend to shift the appeal from questions of conjecture and cause to those of evaluation and action. Newspaper coverage of the hearings doesn’t conform precisely to Fahnestock’s model, if for no other reason than that congressional hearings are significantly different from scientific reports. However, her contention that journalistic accommodation of specialist discourse for a popular readership often involves a shift in stasis certainly applies. Bond and Corning attacked the committee’s definition of the problem, and press accommodations of their reports—particularly Corning’s, since Bond’s was barely covered at all in the popular press—resituated their testimony in two ways: first, it focused on *cause*, but second, and more profoundly, these stories tended to use the specific language of *blame*. Corning’s and Bond’s arguments both point to multiple social and systemic factors that contribute to test score disparities: biased tests, inequitable economic and social conditions, and longstanding educational segregation among them. Their complex arguments were not easily captured in headlines, which demand a strict economy of words. The headline form demanded a simplified version of their arguments; this is the case with any even remotely complex issue that becomes headline news. More important than the mere fact of simplification is the question of what was preserved and what was effaced from their arguments in the name of accommodation to public readership. The headlines of these stories, even those covering the most adamant objections to the committee’s segregationist narrative, reproduce the logic of that narrative. A double shift—from

definition to cause, and then from cause to blame—creates a narrative with protagonists and antagonists; *people* rather than *systems* are imagined to be responsible for the educational inequity. Ultimately, I will suggest, such a narrative is built on an overdetermined notion of race and a logic of social determinism, the effects of which include continued racial segregation.

Bond's complex parody was reduced, as I noted in the previous chapter, to headlines shouting slander that transformed his parody into a straightforward acceptance and adoption of the committee's reasoning. While Corning's testimony received more press, and significant portions of it were even reprinted in multi-page stories in the *Afro-American*, *Post* and *Star*, his challenges to the definition of the problem were largely overshadowed or subtly distorted by headlines and leads. Gerber's narrative, on the other hand, was not only straightforward, but lined up with dominant American "common sense" about race and intelligence. It was, in that sense, a much better fit for the newspaper genre, and so dominated most stories. I have already argued that Gerber's data dominated the *content* of news coverage. Here I will additionally suggest that Gerber's narrative also determined the *syntax* of mainstream newspaper coverage, even when the *content* was pro-integration. The logic of his narrative is simple, linear cause and effect: there is a single problem (the gap) with a single cause (innate racial inequality) that logically calls for a single solution (re-segregation). A series of headlines in the *Post* demonstrates how newspaper coverage adopted the same syntax, and the logic, of cause and effect. The *Post's* headline about Corning's testimony that announced "Segregation Blamed for School Ills" (Rogers) capped off a series of headlines in the same style of single problems with single causes:

School Quiz Told of *Slow Learners*: Principals Claim *Pupils From South* Bring Problem of Low Achievement (Edstrom and Bassett)

School Woes Here Laid to *Mixed Classes* (Edstrom and Bassett)

Environment Blamed for Lagging Pupils (Eisen)

Hansen Lays School Ills to *Segregation in the Past* (Edstrom and Bassett)

Segregation Blamed for School Ills (Rogers) [emphasis added]

Here is a parade of single, even interchangeable, causes with uniform effects, and it is reductive in at least two ways: first, each short phrase or single term signified complex phenomena—“pupils from South” pointed to historical migration patterns and “mixed classes” indicated both racial difference and the wide range of academic skills in classes. “Environment” was a particularly loaded term, often used as shorthand way to refer to students’ homes, families, and neighborhoods. Even the word “segregation” pointed to a myriad of complex forces: Corning and, as we will see below, assistant superintendent Carl Hansen both pointed to the ways that segregation led to inequalities in class size, staffing, school facilities, funding, school procedures and pedagogical practices. Each of the terms or phrases named in the headlines above effectively collapses a complex and conflicting phenomenon into a single concept—the first oversimplification that reproduces the committee’s cause-and-effect logic. That logic was evident, for example, when Representative Williams asks Corning to assent to a simplified summary of his testimony, asking if he is asserting that “the reason achievement levels were so low in the District of Columbia schools is the *direct result* of segregation” (*Hearings* 454, emphasis added). Corning refuses to assent to this translation:

I would have to qualify “direct result.” I do think that the conditions that existed under segregation contributed very largely to it as I previously testified. I wouldn’t say that that or any other one thing was the sole cause

of it, but I do think there were certain bad situations inherent in the segregated plan which contributed to, weren't the sole cause of, but which contributed to the difficult situation we are talking about. (454)

Corning consistently resisted such reductive thinking in his testimony, peppering his responses with statements such as, "Mr. Gerber, you said you thought I was a reasonably intelligent person...I certainly wouldn't pick out any one thing and state that it is the cause" (*Hearings* 425). Yet the *Post's* headline announcing his testimony the following day does precisely what Corning refused to do: it names a single factor as the cause of low test scores, "Segregation Blamed for School Ills." This headline, purportedly reflecting Corning's testimony, in fact amounts to a paraphrase of Williams' version of it. Both the question and the headline translate Corning's explanation into a statement of blame that identifies a single cause of "school ills." The committee's questioning often seemed blatantly reductive, as if to strategically dilute divergent testimony. The headline, on the other hand, operates more insidiously, presented as an argument *against* the committee in an avowedly *anti-segregation* newspaper.

Recalling that this was one headline in a series, the newspaper offers it as one in a procession of causes, in which each already-simplified term is equivalent to the others, insofar as it can simply take the place of the one before it. What has caused problems in schools? Yesterday it was "mixed classes," today it is "environment," tomorrow it will be "segregation." This series of substitutable terms homogenizes the various causative factors described by witnesses by fitting them into the template of the committee's single problem/single cause structure. Just as a broad range of data had been simplified into a single "achievement gap," so would it seem that the cause of the problem could be equally easily named. Such reductive language would arguably not hold up without the

“achievement gap” or similar frames for educational inequity that treat it as a monolithic problem. Granted, the headlines above do not use the phrase “achievement gap,” but instead more general terms: “Low achievement,” “school woes,” “lagging pupils” and “school ills.” Just as the causes are constructed as simple equivalents, these names for the resulting problems create the impression that the problem is equally simple, single, and nameable. They also avoid any mention of race, though the stories that followed make it clear that the pupils in question were Black. In both senses—constructing the problem as nameable and using language that points to race without naming it—the headlines create a seemingly coherent concept that covers the various disparities present in this formerly segregated school district. In other words, they are among the logical and linguistic precursors of “achievement gap.”

Without such a monolithic definition of the problem, the reductionism of the language of blame would likely have been more obvious—that is, if educational inequity were understood as a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple social, economic, and historical factors, the idea of blaming it on any single phenomenon or force would be plainly incongruous. In this way, the emergence of the concept “achievement gap” reinforced the language of blame that asked *who* rather than *what* caused the gap, a procrustean bed that stripped the complexity from disputes about cause. Ultimately, the *Post*’s headlines worked against its editorial agenda—that is, while the paper condemned the committee and its agenda, its language was infelicitous, reinforcing the committee’s most important assumptions and hermeneutics.

Replacing *Cause* with *Blame*

Not only did the structure of this argument demand that the problem, causes, and, presumably, solutions could be described by a single word or phrase; it often replaced the notion of *cause* with the importantly different sense of *blame*, which reflected the language of the committee and shifted the focus away from systems and towards people, changing the question, “What *caused* disparity in test scores?” to “Whose *fault* is it?” The way questions worked to translate witnesses’ answers into a language of blame—and the distortion required to do so—is particularly evident in the following exchange. It comes at the end of Assistant Superintendent Carl Hansen’s testimony; he is about to be dismissed by Davis when he asks to make a clarifying statement. Hansen admits that teachers and administrators had not been prepared for all the challenges that arose after integration, but he says, “I think no one can be blamed for that. I place the blame for that upon the system of segregation,” which he explains caused “insularity” and “isolation” of faculty, preventing them from knowing what the teaching and learning had been like in the other half of the district (*Hearings* 356). Davis begins the string of questions that turns out to be a kind of tag-team interrogation, picking up on Hansen’s choice of the word “blame” in order to translate a systemic explanation into an attribution of guilt and shifting the tone of this investigative hearing to one suited better to a criminal trial:

Mr. Davis. Do I understand from that that you mean that the colored teachers were not capable of teaching the students?

Dr. Hansen. I did not say that.

Mr. Davis. Well, did you mean that?

Dr. Hansen. I did not mean that. I meant that there is a lack of sharing of know-how which in the end result may have some effect in impairing the capability of teaching in the classroom.

[. . .]

Mr. Gerber. Who is responsible for this lack of know-how on the part of colored teachers?

Dr. Hansen. I did not say it was a lack of know-how. I said it was a lack of communication, which may have impaired the system to some degree.

Following Davis and Gerber, Representative Williams steps in, taking the notion of blame to almost comical lengths:

Mr. Williams. Are you saying that the colored people themselves are incapable of developing their own society and their own intellects, and are incapable of maintaining high scholastic standards of their own and that they must move into white society and receive instruction from the white people before they are able to do that?

Dr. Hansen. I believe firmly that any isolation or any pocketing of a cultural group results in their eventual submersion. It has an effect. Our country is great—

Mr. Williams. Is it not a fact that they placed themselves in it? Well, let me put it this way: where facilities here are equal and opportunities are equal but are not intermixed, and then one group objects to it because it considers itself as not having the opportunity that the other group has, that group is placing itself in an inferior position; is it not?

Mr. Hansen. If I understand your question correctly, I would say “Yes.” (*Hearings* 356-7)

Davis, Gerber and Williams each, in turn, translate Hansen’s statements into increasingly far-reaching attributions of fault, first directed at Black teachers, then by implication administrators or teacher educators, and finally at Black integrationists in general. Hansen resists this trajectory, as did other witnesses, by pointing to systemic factors, primarily, in this instance, segregation’s effect on communication within the school system and the larger society. The questions, however, work to pin responsibility on a group as if they were defendants—and the series of questions ends, as it did with Corning, in a kind of tepid assent from the witness. The language of blame shifts the

focus from the question of *what* to one of *who*, for it implies a single act and a responsible agent. Ethical philosopher Bernard Williams put it succinctly: “Blame needs an occasion—an action—and a target—the person who did the action and who goes on from the action to meet the blame” (qtd. in Sher 7).²⁵ Where the committee’s questioning adopts the language of blame to indicate that, literally, a group of people are responsible for academic disparities, the *Post* headline makes a gesture towards Hansen’s systemic argument, while preserving the sense of blame: “Hansen Lays School Ills to Segregation in the Past.” The drive to identify a target that the problem can be “laid to” or blamed upon implicitly treats segregation as a single *agent* rather than a complex system. In other words, it reifies and even personifies the system it names—here segregation, elsewhere other social systems and concepts such as “environment.” Tellingly, the *Post* removes the word “system” from Hansen’s initial statement. He testified, “I place the blame for that upon the *system* of segregation.” And lest one conclude that the deletion was a matter of space, the headline also *added* a phrase that Hansen had not uttered: “In the past.” This phrase importantly compounds the reductionism of the headline. Whereas Hansen’s testimony covered residential, social and cultural segregation as causative factors in test score disparities, these areas remained segregated long after the schools had discarded their dual system. By specifying segregation that was “in the past,” the headline implies that he spoke only of school segregation. This doubly reductive move is arguably necessary for the logic of blame to work: removing “system,” a word that at least gestures towards multiple functioning parts, thus allowing “segregation” to appear as a reified

²⁵ Sher traces historical disputes about the theory of blame, but identifies *agent* and *act* as central in each philosophy. While the relationship between agent and act is in question, the presence of each is treated as a necessary condition for the application of blame.

entity, then adding “in the past,” to imply that he was speaking of a single instance of segregation. This body of headlines, then, adopts the language of the committee in multiple ways: first, by treating both the problem and its cause as if they were singular, and second, by adopting the language of blame, which not only bolsters the logic of a single cause but demands a *who* rather than a *what* upon which to pin it.

Fahnestock and Secor’s stasis hierarchy identifies *cause* as the third stasis—consisting of questions that are addressed after the disputants have agreed upon *fact* and *definition*, or the existence and nature of the phenomenon under consideration. The *Post*’s headlines consistently treat the argument in the hearings as one of cause, implying a consensus at lower stases that was not actually there, and effectively eliminating a fundamental dispute from public discourse. The second phase of the shift, from cause to blame, is where the logic of stasis becomes particularly tricky, and where the distinction between the classical model and the modified one becomes important. I have noted that the shift to blame brought about a shift in tone, to that of a criminal trial rather than an investigative hearing. This points to the effect on stasis that I wish to highlight.

Fahnestock and Secor’s model adds the stasis of cause in order to be able to consider the development of social and political issues, whereas the classical model, lumping cause and conjecture together in the first stasis, was more suited to disputes about the guilt or innocence of a particular individual for a particular action, more like a criminal trial. The discussion of *cause*, which took for granted Gerber’s definition of the problem as a racial disparity in academic outcomes, becomes, when it shifts to *blame*, a first-stasis question of conjecture. It appears to be a challenge at the most fundamental level of conjecture—“did the act happen, and did the accused do it?”—when in truth it has already accepted

some of the most important premises of the opposing argument. Dawson and the *Afro-American* had implicitly raised doubts about the existence of a gap in the first place, while Bond, Corning and Hansen questioned the definition of the gap as primarily racial. The thrust of the *Post's* coverage, however, implies not only that both points are settled, but that they were never even at issue. The argument to which this kind of coverage contributes accepts not only the existence of disparities, but their unified nature as a single “achievement gap” that is defined, *a priori*, as fundamentally racial. While stories and headlines may cite other contributing factors like a segregated society or unequal economic prospects, they do so to explain a gap between Black and white students, arguing as if the fundamental question is who or what should be “on trial” for causing what the paper accepted and asserted as “the *fact* of Negro deficiencies” (“Intelligence”). What might have been a third-stasis argument about *cause* takes the form, through the language of blame, of a first-stasis question of conjecture. The stases are, in a way, “reset,” effectively erasing the questions that were at issue for Dawson, Bond, and the superintendents. The narrative that results—what I contend is the dominant integrationist narrative—adopts *all* of the premises of the segregationist argument, replacing the segregationists’ biological determinism with an equally deterministic picture of Black students doomed by social conditions to academic failure and resultantly re-segregated into special education and remedial courses according to the logic of degradation. Key to this phenomena is an overdetermined notion of race, where Blackness is not merely a signifier of phenotype but is inextricably, rhetorically linked to poverty, pathological families, and ultimately—in an ironic return to the segregationists’ assertion of innate racial differences—disability.

Overdetermining Race

The logic of the headlines above, which present alternative possible *causes* of the gap but take the *definition* of the gap for granted, do not so much replace race in the committee's cause/effect equation as they tack other issues onto it, creating an overdetermined notion of race that continues to haunt achievement gap discourse. By implying race while naming another cause—socioeconomic disadvantage, for example—they link the two, forming a logic by which Black students are poor and underachieving, while white students are affluent and successful in school. When they go on to propose explanations for that lower achievement—“environment,” for instance, and all that it implies about family structure—those explanations are effectively pinned to Blackness. In other words, the causes are not structured as an alternative definition of the gap along the lines of, for instance, income, but instead offer income as a reason why Black students fail at a greater rate than white students. The parade of causes effectively creates—or, more accurately, builds upon and reinforces—a picture of Black students as not only less successful in school, but also poor, from unstable families, migratory, and intellectually disabled²⁶. In other words, when arguments accept that the “deficiencies” are specifically “Negro,” they effectively attach environment, regional background, socioeconomic status and a formerly segregated school system to race as second-level causes in a picture where race is the primary correlate of school failure. This picture is particularly clearly developed on the editorial pages of the *Post*. The first op-ed on the

²⁶ I do not mean to suggest that the intersection of race, income, geography and poverty was created or first noticed in the context of these hearings; indeed, that complex equation can be traced back to the beginnings of American discourse. What I will contend, however, is that the discourse I am examining deployed race in this way, and in doing so not only reinforced its discursive power but defined the “achievement gap” in terms of this overdetermined notion of race in ways that, while not always obvious, have been persistently powerful.

hearings announces its underlying assumptions in its title: “Imported Deficiencies.”

Treating the “deficiencies” of Black students as real, it challenged the committee’s assertion that they were exacerbated by integration, arguing instead that it was migration from Southern states that “imported” the problems. One principal, it noted,

Blamed the scholastic deficiencies of students in part on an influx of children, mainly from the South. A hundred outsiders enrolled in his school alone last year, he said. The same thought was brought out by Edith Keleher, a retired teacher, who deplored putting all the blame for backward scholars on the District schools when many of the underprepared Negro children were migrants from Southern states. (22)

The language of blame continues here—and more to the point, the last line confirms the assumption that, even when considering other contributing factors such as region, the problem is fundamentally racial; it is about “underprepared *Negro* children.” It accepts that the gap is a racial phenomenon and offers other influences almost as if—to return to the notion that the hearings had adopted the tenor of a criminal trial—they were aggravating or mitigating factors offered in a defense of either Black students or the D.C. schools, the accused parties in the case of “scholastic deficiencies.” In this sense, the language of blame plays into the narrative arc of panic and exclusion that I have suggested parallels 1920s anti-immigrant policy debates.²⁷

The stases again become tangled at this point. Although the question of who or what is to blame for the problem is, I suggested above, a first-stasis consideration, the question of mitigating or aggravating factors is one of *quality*. Editorials like this imply that Black students are the cause of “scholastic deficiencies,” but that the public should consider their regional, economic, and cultural circumstances as factors that mitigate the question of innate racial difference. Such slippage points again to how what seems, in

²⁷ See Chapter 2.

headlines, to be a first-stasis challenge belies an unexamined assumption that the “real” responsibility lay with students, or even with blackness itself. These challenges to the committee’s argument were presented in the headlines as fundamental, seeming to replace race with “environment” or “socioeconomic status,” yet editorials like this indicate that they in fact failed to question the key assertion that race was the crucial variable in the question of academic ability. This assumption comes through in the language of editorials, as when the same op-ed piece twice describes schools as having to “cope” with these students, completing a picture of deficient students—Black “outsiders” from Southern states—who burdened District schools and caused the gap. A later editorial submitted additional factors for readers’ consideration, still in reference to Black students’ purported shortcomings. It argued that:

The simple truth is that Negroes lag in scholastic achievement in part because they were confined to inferior segregated schools, in part because they come disproportionately from homes that were disadvantaged economically and culturally as a result of segregation. (“Segregation is the Root”)

While on one level presenting an alternative to the committee’s argument, the editorial also grants, as part of the “simple truth,” that “Negroes lag in scholastic achievement,” conceding again that the gap is a specifically racial one. The subsequent explanations—economic and cultural disadvantage caused by segregation—are, again, *tacked on* to race rather than displacing it as the defining factor in the gap. The editorial concludes with a defense of integration: “The community is now paying for the caste status inflicted on Negroes. It is obliged to educate children who are scholastically handicapped because of that caste status. Integration is the indispensable key to the elimination of caste status.” The overall argument of the column is that segregation created the differences in academic achievement, and it develops some complexity in its discussion of segregation

by touching on not only separate schooling but economic and social disadvantage. It works against assertions of biological difference between the races by pointing to *social* factors that have contributed to test score disparities. “Handicapped” complicates the biological/social distinction and demonstrates how, upon scratching the surface of many social explanations for racial differences, the same fundamental paradigm of inferiority is revealed. The idea of Black students as “handicapped” demands close consideration, for it invites multiple interpretations. To say that a student had been handicapped by social structures would be to leave room for the possibility that the “handicap” was a disadvantage imposed from without that was not attached to the student him- or herself, similar to the handicapping system in horse racing or golf. That interpretation lines up with Bond’s and Corning’s assertions that test scores are shaped by more than just a student’s innate ability. The alternative meaning—perhaps more widely understood when applied, as it is here, to individuals outside the realm of sports—describes a condition that, though it may have been caused by external factors, is commonly imagined to inhere in the person: “scholastic handicap” parallels what is now often termed “learning disability.” This reading of the word is consistent with other stories in the *Post* that link blackness to low IQ by way of family dysfunction and poverty, as in the story of a “boy whose intelligence rating has been pulled up from 66 to 71”:

He entered school a week late this year because he had been hospitalized for plastic surgery all summer after his father pushed him through a glass door. The father, Mrs. Weber said, now is in St. Elizabeths. The mother and her seven children are on public assistance. This is a boy, she said, who failed every subject last year. (Edstrom and Bassett, “Principals”)

This story was offered as a counter to the idea that Black students’ behavior was to blame for school problems, anecdotally suggesting that students were victims rather than

perpetrators of problems. In attempting to vindicate the students with a supposedly representative anecdote, however, it constructs them as having a low IQ, and their families as not only abnormally large, unstable and financially dependent but startlingly violent. Social and systemic factors might be implied as the ultimate cause of these problems, but the problem in the foreground is a pathological Black family and a “scholastically handicapped” black student. Such stories saddle Blackness with a host of negative signifiers, many of which toe the line between innate and socially imposed. The similarity to the segregationist case is striking: where it had proposed that Black students “lagged” academically because racial differences in intelligence made them less capable than white students, this alternative argues that they lag because various social factors made them less capable than white students. In other words, the segregationist argument has been preserved in all but one specific: what they had identified as a biologically predetermined outcome, this counterargument proposed was in fact socially predetermined.

Social Determinism

What I have called social determinism is also evident in the idea of “cultural disadvantage,” mentioned but not explained or defined in the editorials above. Another column, titled “Deprived Children,” illuminates the meaning of that loaded term, arguing that “the more statistics Mr. Gerber elicits showing Negro disadvantage...the more he reveals the terrible cost of segregation.” The problems enumerated by Gerber, it argues, “flow inevitably from ghetto life.” The editor cites “the wise, gentle and illuminating testimony” of a district administrator, who, after schools were integrated,

Had been shocked...at the deprivations of Negro children. Many colored children, she said, had no home life, indeed no concept of home, nothing on which to build. They came from families entirely isolated from contact with the dominant culture of the community, denied access to many of the cultural opportunities taken for granted by most white families. Can there be any wonder that children with such backgrounds should fail in school? (“Deprived Children” 20)

Again, and consistent with other commentary in the *Post*, the editorial identifies segregation as the heart of the problem. However, that segregation is represented in this case by a lack of “home life” or even a “concept of home” that somehow results from being “isolated from contact with the dominant culture of the community.” In other words, the problems it highlights are located in the Black home and culture, rather in the structures and forces that enforce segregation. Although the editorial ends with a call for “equality of educational opportunity” that echoes Corning’s language, it does so only after having twice asserted the *inevitable* nature of Black students’ academic failure: since it “flows inevitably” from the circumstances in which they live, there cannot, it seems, “be any wonder” that these students fail. Such language builds a case that academic outcomes are not merely influenced, but *predetermined*, by a student’s social environment. This sense of determinism pervades language in the papers, as when failing Black students are described as “the *product* of a vicious social system” and “the *fruits* of discrimination” (“School Probe Held,” “Schools: A Balance”).²⁸ Such phrasing constructs the students’ academic shortcomings as the only possible outcome of a neat cause and effect relationship. This language not only assents to the reality of a racial achievement gap, but adds a sense that—at least at this moment in time, conditions being what they are—it is the *only* possible reality. Overtly, this argument dismisses the

²⁸ Describing this view in current gap research, Artiles et al. sum it up thus: “In this view, ‘the culture of poverty’ deprives children of sound developmental experiences and becomes destiny” (291).

possibility that the gap is artificial or constructed, as well as the idea that if it is genuine, it is not simply racial. More subtly and ironically, in an attempt to defend Black students against allegations of innate inferiority, the argument has essentially excluded them from the possibility of academic success. Having imagined “Black” to mean poor, migratory if not homeless, and disabled, and having made the case for the strong causal link between these factors and school failure, the logic runs that, for Black students, academic failure is all but inevitable.

In both cases, the achievement gap is presented as an urgent problem demanding attention. For segregationists, this legitimized their desire to keep racially separate school and social systems. For integrationists, it was both an indictment of the segregated system and a pedagogical challenge that demanded, as I will contend in the next section, a *differently* segregated system. In both cases, the focus shifted quickly to questions of policy. Having saddled Black students with a monolithic subjectivity in which race was linked with disability, poverty, geographical and family instability and, as a result, intellectual deficiency and inevitable academic failure, the question of what to do with such students was a massive one.

Arguing Policy

The report published by the committee offered eleven policy recommendations: ten were listed at the end of the main report, and one was treated separately, constituting its own section immediately before the committee’s signatures. After a statement that the foregoing recommendations “would serve to improve public-school education in the District of Columbia,” it offers a caveat: “However,” the damage done by integration

actually has “little prospect of remedy in the future”—presumably even if the first ten recommendations they had outlined were followed. In light of that circumstance, the report concludes: “Therefore, we recommend that racially separate public schools be reestablished...and that such schools be maintained on a completely separate and equal basis” (*Report* 47). Recalling that the majority of committee members had signed the Southern Manifesto in which they pledged to resist school integration by all legal means, their final recommendation was hardly shocking, and was in all likelihood a foregone conclusion throughout the proceedings. In other words, the question of policy was on the table from the start of the hearings, as a powerful subtext in the questioning, and this was not lost on anyone.

Witnesses seemed to be aware of this, for they often volunteered policy recommendations in their testimony. These suggestions were surprisingly uniform, especially as reported in the papers: smaller classes, academic tracking, and the separation or removal of “slow” students. A number of headlines in the *Post* and the *Star* report such policy recommendations:

School Age Cut Asked to Cope with Slow Pupils (Edstrom and Bassett)

Probers Hear Dr. Hansen Advocate More Attention to Individual Students
(n. auth.)

Smaller Classes Urged to Help Integration (Deane) [emphasis added]

Focusing on the two specific policy proposals—tracking and exclusion from school, both based on ability—I will make two points about such arguments at the fourth stasis of policy: first, that to argue policy is to imply agreement on the lower three stases, an agreement that ultimately preserves all of the key premises I have discussed in the segregationist case. Second, I will build on Asen’s point that “rhetoric articulates policy

purposes and populations, and negotiates fits between them” (“Reflections” 129). He observes that proposals of policy often include a strategic representation of the people they would serve. I will suggest that witnesses’ policy arguments, many of which were in favor of integration, were built on a logic in which Black students were portrayed as inherently less capable than white students, building on the overdetermined sense of race examined above. Although many (certainly not all) of these witnesses appeared to be motivated by a far more egalitarian notion of race than the committee’s, the policy suggestions emanating from both camps result in essentially the same portrait of the students in question. Many of the policy suggestions that emerge in the hearings ultimately preserve both the premises and the logic of segregation, using the more palatable language of *ability* in place of overtly racial language. Given the overdetermined sense of race in which “slow” could reliably be used in place of “Black,” these arguments strengthened the discursive link between Blackness and disability in ways that continue to be felt in public schools.²⁹

Accepting the Logic of Degradation

Arguments that focused on policy—on what was to be done about the racial achievement gap—implied acceptance not only of the committee’s definition of the problem, but of their assertion at the stasis of *quality*, in this case, the question of whether the gap was a problem, how serious it was, and for whom. The suggestion, offered by several veteran educators, that gaps in student achievement were neither unusual nor necessarily problematic, was largely ignored in the majority of accounts that, on the

²⁹ On the issue of overrepresentation of Black students in special education, for instance, see Artiles, et al. “Justifying and Explaining Disproportionality, 1968-2008” and Harry and Klingler, *Why are So Many Minority Students in Special Education?*

contrary, took it as an article of faith that the problem was serious, if not downright catastrophic.³⁰ The policy suggestions I will consider worked on the assumption that academic disparities were a problem, and not only for the students who did poorly on standardized tests. These policies were tailored to the same logic of degradation that characterized the committee's argument, the belief that the presence of supposedly "inferior" students would compromise the achievement of the "superior" students. The *Post* reported that, in response to Gerber's contention that "a heavy influx of Negro pupils in certain schools brought grade levels down," witnesses described a program of "classifying pupils into special learning groups...it is possible to help them progress educationally while still maintaining high educational standards" (Edstrom and Bassett, "School Age" 23). The effect of such policies, crafted to address the problem of the achievement gap, was to change the official criteria by which students were segregated, but to preserve *de facto* racial segregation within schools. By accepting that the presence of so-called "slow" or "retarded" students in a class inevitably hampered the learning of the larger group, they reasoned that such students must necessarily have separate classes or schools. That most of these "slow" students were also Black was a foregone conclusion in a discourse where the two operated as equivalent terms.

³⁰ I have not dedicated a section to these arguments of quality, in large part because the majority of discussion in the newspapers focused instead on questions of cause. Such questions were raised, however, mostly by educators (including assistant superintendent Hansen) who argued that having students with a wide range of ability in a single class or school—the gap—was normal nationwide. This argument was advanced most forcefully by the head of the National Education Association, Martha Shull, who asserted it was "very normal" for schools all over the country to have children three and four grades behind grade level" ("NEA head").

Blackness and Disability

The drive to separate students by ability was a focus in both the *Post* and the *Star*, which frequently quoted witnesses' mention of students who were "slow," "of low learning ability," or otherwise "atypical."³¹ The *Post* made headlines out of the story twice, first with a story announcing "School Quiz Told of Slow Learners" (Edstrom and Bassett). That story emphasized disability as a defense of integration policy. After recapping the testimony of a teacher who cited discipline problems as evidence that integration had failed, the story suggested that the presence of students with disabilities in "regular" classes and schools—rather than racial integration—was the real problem:

Many of the problems cited yesterday appeared to be not so much a problem of integration but lack of special facilities for children within the school. For example, one teacher cited difficulties caused by a 'psychopathic' child who disrupted the classroom when she had temper tantrums, knocked over her desk, tore up papers, and yelled. But, she pointed out, that this Negro child should never have been in her classroom, had been on a waiting list to be placed in a special group but there was "no place for her." (Edstrom and Basset, "School Quiz" 1)

The journalist, it is worth noting, points out that the "psychopathic" child in question is Black. More to the point, the story suggests that the solutions to this problem were removal or isolation of this student, who in the context of the article, stands in for all of the "discipline problems" cited by the first witness. The call for separate facilities was not limited to anecdotes like this; it runs throughout both testimony and news, often as a defense of integration and integrated schools: "The decision of the Supreme Court was a 'right one,' [the witness, a teacher] asserted, adding that she believed the schools

³¹ There was much talk about student "retardation," but the term's meaning was not, at this time, as firmly linked to disability as it would later be. It referred to all students who were below grade level, putatively without implication about the causes for their lag. Taken in the context of this discourse, however, rife as it is with the language of (dis)ability, it would be naïve to say that the term is without such connotations.

‘can take care of this problem’ with the aid of remedial classes and special instruction” (Edstrom and White). The problem, here, is not with the system, but rather with certain students, and that once those students were separated into remedial classes, integration would proceed more successfully. That the dominant theme was not so much *servicing* these students as it was *removing* them is indicated by the frequent pairing of the suggestion for more special education classes with the apparently equivalent proposal of allowing these students to drop out of school:

The need for a special school for problem children and stop-gap legislation to permit exclusion of some of these children now also were cited as major needs by Emilie Lasalle, chief attendance officer for District schools . . . A special school for problem children, she said, would result in helping them, as well as permitting capable children to progress without distraction. Until the school is built, she suggested a revision in the school exclusion laws to include serious problem children as well as those who are physically handicapped or mentally retarded. (Edstrom and Bassett “More Cash Urged”)

The demand for increased separation of “special” students recurs throughout testimony and press coverage thereof: “The principal of an integrated junior high school today urged the *setting up of special social-adjustment schools for problem pupils* who are causing difficulties in the classroom” (Deane and Warren, “Pupil,” emphasis added). One principal “said the problem would be reduced if the most difficult cases could be *removed to special social adjustment schools*” (Edstrom and Bassett, “School Quiz”). Another principal “said that success in working it out will depend on having enough teachers, reducing class sizes, getting more help from social and welfare agencies and *finding more places to put problem children who need special help* (Deane and Warren “5 to 10”). This language of segregation or exclusion of “problem” students is, on the surface, race-neutral. Yet in arguing for a policy shift that would include more special education personnel and facilities, witnesses had to argue that there was a sizeable population of

students with disabilities who would necessitate such programs—they had to, to borrow Asen’s reasoning, articulate a *population* that would fit their preferred policy. In many cases, the problem of *slow* learners was offered as a counterpoint to the argument that *Black* students were depressing test scores and standards. One teacher testified that the average “ability to learn” had been declining for years prior to integration, insisting that “it is not confined to the Negro child” (Edstrom and Bassett, “Principals”). Such contentions, however, are belied by the logic of the argument: we don’t want to separate students by race, but there is a gap between Black and white student achievement and I.Q., and we must separate students based on achievement and I.Q. Policy arguments like this assented to the committee’s narrative of the gap, in which Blackness was firmly equated with intellectual disability.

The testimony of Lawson Cantrell, Assistant Superintendent in charge of junior high schools, reflects the underlying logic by which Blackness appears to be replaced by, but is in fact *entwined* with, disability as a criteria for separation. His statements, especially as reported by the papers, appear to be largely motivated by a policy suggestion: The *Post* reported his hearings with “School Age Cut Asked to Cope with Slow Pupils: Cantrell Criticizes Legal Requirement That Children Must Attend Until 16” (Edstrom & Bassett 1). The *Star* highlighted a different policy recommendation from Cantrell’s testimony in its headline: “Smaller Classes Urged to Help Integration” (Deane). His policy goals were underpinned by the idea that students either needed more individual attention from teachers, or should not be in school at all, which I will contend rested upon an image of these students as disabled. Both papers quoted Cantrell’s assertion that “there are a great many children who are emotionally and mentally so

constructed that their interests and the interests of society would be better served if they dropped out of school and went to work” (*Hearings* 402; Deane, ”Smaller Classes;” Edstrom and Basset, ”School Age”). The *Star* quoted him as saying that many students who are behind “haven’t the capacity to go above the fourth-grade if we keep them in school forever.” Neither article identifies the “many children” so constituted as Black, although given the extensive previous coverage that established Black students as low achieving and “slow,” it is not much of a leap to assume that most readers would assume a link. Interestingly, pro-integration school board member Wesley Williams countered this implication with “seven pages of statistics,” demonstrating that many of these “slow learners” had recently moved to D.C. from Southern states (Bassett, “School Probe” B14). Williams did not dispute that many of the “slow learners” were Black, but rather that they were not the “product” of Washington’s integrated schools. The argument is essentially that segregation in the Southern states caused much of the “retardation” observed in D.C. schools, but the effect is arguably to attach region to the already fraught construction of race along with disability. The link between blackness and disability is obvious in the hearings, as when Cantrell explains that the gap articulated by Gerber was not evidence of lowered standards, as the counsel implied:

You can see those children in the buildings where the children have ability to advance have standards as high as you or I or anyone would want them to have, or as high as the mental capacity of the child permits. But if we take children with lower mental ability, I think we confuse at times standards with achievements. (*Hearings* 402)

The schools Cantrell describes as having high standards were those with high average test scores in Gerber’s statistics: that is, predominantly white schools; those where standards or test scores were lower were the predominantly Black schools. The

latter schools were, in Cantrell's account, attended by "children with lower mental ability." In other words, where the committee had set up a binary pair of predominantly white versus predominantly Black schools, Cantrell substitutes an equivalent pair: students with "the ability to advance" versus those "with lower mental ability." The link between Blackness and disability is not lost on Congressman Davis, who adopts the assumption in his follow up questions:

Mr. Davis. One who lacks the mental capacity to acquire an education is not going to be helped merely by being permitted to go to school with white children, is he?

Mr. Cantrell. Not necessarily. (*Hearings* 404)

Where the binary pair of Black and white had ruled the integration debate, Davis substitutes for the first term "one who lacks the mental capacity to acquire an education," and sets it in opposition to "white children." "Black," then, becomes equivalent to lacking mental capacity, but the question does not invite the respondent to notice or challenge the substitution. Davis goes on:

Mr. Davis. If he cannot learn in a colored school, he could not learn in a white school either?

Mr. Cantrell. I think that is right. (*Hearings* 404)

Again, the hypothetical student of Davis' question is not overtly identified as Black, but the implication is clear. My contention is not merely that arguments like Cantrell's—where supporters of integration offered policy suggestions that perhaps unintentionally but nonetheless powerfully bolstered the notion that Black students were intellectually disabled—*existed*, but that they *dominated* public discourse, shaping the notion of the achievement gap that subsequent discourse would inherit. In other words, I suggest that they overshadowed the arguments at lower stases that had been articulated in the *Afro-American* and by Dawson, Bond and Corning. The *Star's* coverage of Cantrell's

and Corning's testimonies serves as a case study of this phenomenon. The day after its story on Cantrell's testimony—quoted at length above—the paper announced the upcoming testimony of Corning and anticipated the probable content thereof:

It was suggested by one Capitol Hill source that the subcommittee likely would deal with several suggestions so far offered by witnesses. Among these were the school board policy of having boundaries for individual schools or some relaxation of the rules on assignment of pupils to particular schools; establishment (sic) of special classes or schools for slow learners; and relaxation of the law on compulsory school attendance so that students of low IQ or low achievement could be dropped from school before reaching the age of 16. (Warren A2)

Two of the three points anticipated and highlighted in advance of Corning's testimony directly reflect Cantrell's testimony about "slow" students, continuing a trend of such students dominating press coverage of the hearings. Moreover, the source's suggestion frames Corning's future testimony within the policy stasis, preemptively assuming that he would have little to say about the fact, definition, or quality of the gap but would—like Cantrell and many other witnesses—accept it as defined by the committee. The lead-in to the next day's coverage of Corning's testimony focuses on his policy-oriented statement, "I do say I know what our problems are and they are many and we're doing our best to solve them," and follows with his defense of the integration policy crafted by the Board of Education as the only feasible response to *Brown v Board of Education*. The story mentions Corning's challenge to the cause of low achievement and his questions about the reliability of IQ testing only as a one-sentence caveat within a multiple-column report of Gerber's "new evidence of the gap between Negro and white children in school work" which had "colored children averaging a considerable number of points behind white" (Deane and Warren, "Corning"). It exemplifies the second step of a kind of syllogism by which disability is powerfully linked to race while concealing the link with race-neutral

language. Cantrell had proposed that “that students of low IQ or low achievement could be dropped from school,” and this story suggests that students of low IQ and achievement are Black. Therefore, the syllogistic logic would conclude, closing the gap requires the isolation or exclusion of Black students. In other words, even as Corning was disputing the definition of the gap as racial, the logic that dominated newspaper coverage implied that Black students were not only behind, but were essentially uneducable. Witnesses and journalists who employed this logic offered, intentionally or not, as clear a portrait of racial inequality as did the segregationists themselves. And although not every witness spoke so directly about “special classes” or exclusion from the schools, the call for segregation based on ability was not limited to discourse about “atypical” students. The four-track plan designed by Assistant Superintendent Carl Hansen, a particularly strong advocate of integration, was another well-intentioned route to the same goal—separating the “less able” students from the “more able” ones based on the logic of degradation.

Multiple witnesses cited the school district’s newly-implemented “four-track” policy designed by Hansen as the answer to the problems of integration, another race-neutral policy that worked to solve the problem of “mixed classes.” Under the plan, students would be assigned to one of four academic tracks: honors, college prep, general, or basic/remedial—based on test scores and teacher recommendations. A fifth and separate program was designed for “atypical” students and “slow learners”—those who today would be described as having a disability. The committee quickly and repeatedly establishes that these ability tracks correlate neatly with race, questioning multiple witnesses about the racial breakdown of each track. A representative instance was reported by the *Star*:

James N. Saunders, principal of almost all-Negro Cardozo High School, testified that none of the school's 500 tenth-graders qualified for a new 'honors' course being instituted in the city's high schools this fall. About 30 are in a college-prep course and 192 are in a general course. The rest are in a basic program for slow learners, he said. (Deane and Warren "Pupil Problems")

Similar reports of the racial breakdown of each track were requested from nearly every school in the district. It was also noted that the demand for classes in the "lower" tracks had exploded since integration, outstripping the supply of teachers: One school "set up three remedial classes for slow readers, and ought to have more but has no teachers available" (Deane and Warren "Taft Integration"). It would seem, in statements like this, that the influx of Black students after integration was also an influx of "slow readers." In short, although the four-track plan was offered as a moderate alternative to re-segregation or exclusion based on disability, its logic amounted to racial segregation by other means.³² School board member Ruth Spencer recognized this and ordered a review of statistics on academic "retardation," noting that although it clearly affected students regardless of race, it had been treated as an exclusively Black phenomenon: "All reference since integration to retardation in educational performance and achievement has been in terms of Division II (the colored schools)" ("Prior Data").

Where Spencer contested this notion, committee member Joel Broyhill viewed it favorably as a solution to the integration conundrum in his home state of Virginia, home of Senator Byrd's "massive resistance" movement designed to obstruct integration efforts

³² In his analysis of the continued practice of curricular tracking, Fenwick English makes the connection explicit by contending that "these divisions are a form of instructional and curricular eugenics" (309).

(“The State Responds”).³³ His questioning and follow up comments to the press made it surprisingly clear that such a policy could be used to maintain racial separation. Many of the policies proposed or adopted in the state, such as defunding integrated districts, were understood to be vulnerable to lawsuits that the NAACP was actively filing across the nation. Although he had been absent through most of the hearings and rarely posed questions, his inquiry of one principal indicates that he viewed ability tracking as a potentially defensible policy that would nonetheless advance the goals of massive resistance:

Mr. Broyhill. As for this four-track system that has been discussed here, is that a form of pupil-assignment plan?

Mr. Reynolds. That is a form of pupil-assignment plan within a given building.

Mr. Broyhill. For people to be assigned to various classes based on I.Q.?

Mr. Reynolds. And previous achievement, and so forth. (*Hearings* 120)

Later that same day, Broyhill’s comments to the press were reported in the *Post*: “He said his state was looking for an assignment plan not based on ‘racial discrimination,’ adding that the four-track plan might allow them to use I.Q. and achievement to ‘gerrymander the boundaries in Virginia to keep segregation’” (“Four-Track”). His comment amounts to overt articulation of the same equation that had covertly underpinned discussions of the four-track system: that schools could lawfully separate students based on IQ and

³³ Virginia Senator Harry Byrd simultaneously launched the campaign against integration and coined its name in February 1955 when he declared, "If we can organize the Southern States for massive resistance to this order I think that in time the rest of the country will realize that racial integration is not going to be accepted in the South" (qtd. in “The State Responds”).

achievement, and that Black students scored lower on both measures consistently enough for a statistical “gap” to be observed. The segregationist narrative had presented that gap as a reason for scuttling integration altogether. Policy arguments from District administrators arguably undermined integration just as powerfully—and even more lastingly—by suggesting that students must be segregated based on I.Q. or “achievement.” Within a discourse that had so overdetermined Blackness that either measure could easily stand in for it, the policy effectively preserved racial segregation while following the letter of *Brown*.

Accidents and Complete Reversals

It is worth remembering that throughout these debates, the precise phrase “achievement gap” appears only a handful of times and only in newspapers. Phrases like “negro lag” and “differences in achievement” were used synonymously, and they didn’t coalesce into what would become the preferred term until years later. This moment in 1956 did not mark the ascension of “achievement gap” to the status of ubiquitous catchphrase. It was, however, the moment at which the notion of a gap emerged and was reified such that it would seem possible to capture it in a tidy concept with a single name. The first instance of this use of the phrase—as a stand-alone descriptor of educational disparities that required no elaboration or support—was in a letter to the editor that was printed in both the *Star* and the *Post*. Like many of the witnesses and journalists cited above, the author of the letter, Phyllis Ford, wrote in defense of integration. She was particularly concerned with the “tendency on the part of some witnesses in the current school investigation to criticize or devalue the quality and efficiency of Negro teachers.” The author writes that:

The validity of this judgment is questionable, as it is based, in many instances, on a comparison of achievement records of Negro and white pupils, while it overlooks one of the main causes of the achievement gap—inequality of the dual system of education. (Ford)

Ford offers an argument that resembles Corning's in its call for consideration of the multiple effects of inequity in school, social and economic systems. Her letter is powerfully opposed to the arguments of the segregationists, and in that sense her use of the phrase "achievement gap" would not be out of place in today's discourse of educational equity. Yet to take this use of the phrase out of context, to deny the imprint of the surrounding discourse on its lasting meaning, is to ignore the nature of etymology and language use. If this is the moment of emergence of the phrase "achievement gap," it will be important to consider, as best we can, the broader discourse that shaped what the phrase signified to readers and participants in the conversation. What I have attempted to demonstrate, in a nutshell, is that while the *phrase* "achievement gap" was coined within pro-integration discourse, the *concept* that it was used to name was built upon a narrative crafted to suit a white supremacist agenda. Tracing the genealogy of the phrase and the concept to which it refers is, as Foucault reminded us, a process that aims "to identify the accidents, the minute deviations--or conversely, the complete reversals--the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" (81). Based upon the way it is currently used, it would seem that the concept of the gap has, since 1956, undergone a "complete reversal" to become a watchword of advocates for educational equity. In the following chapters I will suggest that regardless of how complete that reversal may seem, the phrase continues to operate within the heuristic it inherited from Gerber and Davis and that while its *meaning* may be

understood as a demand for equity, its *force* in public discourse is decidedly anti-egalitarian.

Chapter 5
The Twenty-First Century Gap: The 2000 Election and *No Child Left Behind*

*We're here to thank our president
For signing this great bill.
That's right! Yeah, research shows we know the way,
it's time we showed the will!*
The "No Child Left Behind" Tour Song (Cerf and Durkee)

To leap from 1956 to 2000 is to elide half a century of discourse on education that included landmark disputes, texts and events that include the first Elementary and Secondary Education act, the Coleman Report, the advent of forced busing, *A Nation at Risk*, the Ebonics debates, and the rise of the standards movement, to name a few. Considering whether and how the discourse of those moments shapes the rhetorical history of the gap is an important task that I must leave to future projects. What I will demonstrate in this leap forward in time is that the "achievement gap" of recent education talk retains the imprint of its scene of emergence, and that this helps explain the paradoxical operation of contemporary gap discourse. How the gap changed, how it was challenged and what became of those challenges in the intervening years is a ripe question for future research. With that said, I will turn my attention to a second moment in the rhetorical life of the gap, beginning with the front page of the *New York Times* on August 24, 2000.

Two stories were above the fold that day. The headline announcing George W. Bush as the official Republican nominee for president dominated the page, and between that and a photo of the nominee with his wife was an unrelated, but presciently placed, story: "Racial Gap in Schools Splits a Town Proud of Diversity." It describes a contentious debate in Nyack, New York that began a year earlier when the NAACP and a parent

group released a report documenting racial differences in test scores, an “achievement gap” that, along with disparities in disciplinary suspensions and enrollment in special education classes, was offered as proof of continued “systematic segregation” and lack of equal opportunity in the Nyack schools (Perry 7; Zernicke, “Racial”). The report contained a decade’s worth of racially disaggregated statistics that had not previously been made public in Nyack; the group published them, according to the article, in a frustrated effort to use “public shame” to spur the school district into action. The report sparked angry confrontations between parents as well as splits between former school board allies; the dispute was peppered with accusations of racism, broken car windows, and public shouting matches (Zernike).

What is noteworthy about the case of Nyack is not only the emotional pitch of the dispute, but the question that was at issue. Although the nationwide trend towards disaggregating and publicizing test score data was well underway by February 1999, when the Nyack report was released, it was not yet a taken-for-granted first step in education reform. And where much gap discourse centers on the efficacy of various remedies for it, the citizens and school board of Nyack were arguing over more fundamental questions of how—and whether—to talk about the gap. The debate was not about the existence of racial disparities in Nyack schools; a separate report commissioned by the district indicated that nearly all the stakeholders acknowledged inequalities:

1. All administrators interviewed are aware of racial disparities.
2. All but one parent interviewed are aware of a disparity.
3. All School Board members interviewed are concerned about racial disparities.
4. All students interviewed are aware of some racial disparities.
5. All but three teachers interviewed are aware of racial disparities.

6. All people of color interviewed are aware of racial disparities.

7. All community leaders interviewed are aware of racial disparities. (Grantham and Tulin)

The debate hinged on whether such disparities should be publicized and discussed as a racial achievement gap. School board member Pierre Davis expressed his concern about making the data public: “For some folks, this is just going to prove the point, ‘Hey, I told you those folks weren’t too bright.’” Another parent, author James McBride, felt that the ensuing debate brought out latent attitudes of many white citizens. Fears that the reports “made the district look bad” and would harm, among other things, real estate values, revealed, he said, “an assumption that if you’re a black, you’re a drag on the town.” The worry was that publicly framing the problem as a “gap” between white and Black students would bring complications, provoking community anxiety that would ultimately reinforce assumptions about Black inferiority. Indeed, one letter to the editor of the local paper asserted that the gap didn’t arise from inequity in the schools, but rather from “failures of the home, the conduct of absent child-bearers or irresponsible, immoral and criminal parents” (Zernike, “Racial”). In her analysis of the incident written several years later, Theresa Perry located it as part of a pattern in achievement gap discourse, “yet another location for the recycling of the ideology of African-American moral, cultural and intellectual deficiency” (9; see also Love 227).

The *Times* reported Nyack’s story as a “cautionary tale,” and I cite it as a case study of one kind of public discourse around the achievement gap at the turn of the twenty-first century. While most mainstream debates about education dispute specific policies such as vouchers, school closings, and alternative certification programs, the dispute in Nyack centered on the idea of the achievement gap itself. The powerful

emotions sparked by the debate suggest that it touched deeply held fears or challenged fundamental assumptions. Unspoken beliefs about racial difference were brought to the surface of discourse, where they had previously been submerged in the idyllic “town proud of diversity.” Also brought to the surface in Nyack was the divisive nature of the gap—the headline “Racial gap splits town proud of diversity” calls attention to the *splitting* force of gap talk. In this case, the gap was described as creating—or perhaps reopening or widening—rifts in the community. It might seem redundant to point out that the force of gap talk is splitting, for when gaps open up, by definition, they create two (perhaps more) positions on either side of their void. The Nyack dispute revealed that talking in terms of a gap can exert a splitting force; as Cross puts it, “to focus on a gap, paradoxically, likely sustains it” (253). That force had been obscured in 1956 by the consensus that the gap was a neutral description of a longstanding reality. Effectively, the Nyack dispute turned “achievement gap” into a contested phrase, opening a space in which its meaning and force could be reexamined, in which participants were forced to consider commonsense notions of race, culture, schooling, and the way they imagined one another. Moreover, such examination would likely have revealed the remnants of eugenic racial theories in current educational systems and practices, representing a potentially radical critique of public education and the orthodox beliefs in meritocracy and equal opportunity. It was a space not only of conflict but also of possibility, and among those possibilities was the kind of “complete reversal” of the force of the phrase “achievement gap” whereby its logic of segregation might be revealed and turned against itself, perhaps allowing the phrase to become a non-ironic tool for equity. The way it has most often been used in the past decade or so, as a rallying cry for equity-minded

education reform, suggests that this is precisely what happened; that gap discourse is an example of the kind of insurrectionary speech that Butler has suggested can reverse the force of injurious speech (61).

I would like to suggest that any sense of the achievement gap having been resignified in this way is misguided, however. While there have been moments—such as the Nyack dispute—in which a discursive space suited to resignification has been opened, such spaces were just as abruptly closed. In 1956, critiques like those of Horace Mann Bond and Hobart Corning were overshadowed by a dominant narrative that assented to what they interrogated. In 2000, the possibilities of the Nyack dispute were swallowed in the rhetoric of a presidential campaign. That foreclosure is captured symbolically on that front page of the *Times*, where the Nyack piece is dwarfed by news of then-Governor Bush’s nomination. The Bush campaign’s version of the gap submerged the splitting force of the gap in favor of a narrative of consensus. Beginning with that campaign and continuing through the discourse of *No Child Left Behind*, the gap as tool for potentially critical analysis was transformed, in popular discourse, into a non-threatening, bipartisan truism that reinforced the existing social order. In other words, what might have been a threat to the status quo at one point was reshaped, remarkably quickly, into a rite of assent. I am not arguing for a golden age of achievement gap discourse in which it was some kind of pure rhetorical tool for radical thinkers. At the same time, the unrest in Nyack indicates that the idea of the gap did, at some point, have disruptive potential. And yet, even as the parents’ group in Nyack went “renegade,” as the *Times* story put it, to release disaggregated test scores, many state departments of education had already begun officially publishing the same data. In fact, New York had already laid the groundwork

for a similar plan under which districts, including Nyack, would be required to publish annual data much like that released by the parents' group. Within a year, then, the provocative action of a "renegade" group would become mandated by law. The quick transition from activism to law, from margin to mainstream, hints at the nature of gap discourse at this time. Cross noted this timing, arguing:

Just as some U.S. schools were opening this small space for dialogue and social critique, particularly around the role of educational institutions in inequity, the insertion of the achievement gap metaphor took hold and guaranteed that we would not focus on apartheid education...we inserted a cultural explanation (an achievement gap with an identifiable, blaming, offending problem group) for a societal problem. (252)

I differ from Cross only insofar as she implies that the achievement gap was newly inserted in the conversation to steer it away from structural critique. Instead, I contend that the gap metaphor had long been in circulation, and that it even had been used in the service of social critique prior to coming to function as the kind of cultural explanation that Cross critiques here. More than a quibble, this point allows us a view of the struggle over the meaning of the gap, a struggle for control of its rhetorical force that has taken place across decades. Although I will focus on one historical moment, I offer it as one iteration of many such contests, where groups like the one in Nyack threatened to force public acknowledgement of deep, structural racial inequities in the American educational system that powerfully undermined any sense of equal opportunity or meritocracy.³⁴ The discourse of the presidential campaign and subsequent education policy debates replaced

³⁴ I use the Nyack debate here as emblematic of a broader movement, noted by Cross and also evidenced in the so-called "Ebonics" debates in Ann Arbor and Oakland, where critics focused on the way linguistic bias hampered Black students' learning. Like the Nyack report, both the Ann Arbor lawsuit and the Oakland resolution sought to address achievement disparities as *outcomes* of inequitable institutional arrangements, focusing their calls for change on those institutions. See Perry and Delpit, *The Real Ebonics Debate*, and Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*.

the threat with a version of the gap that reaffirmed those American myths. It was during this time that the phrase came to be used with unprecedented frequency, as figure 1 below suggests. The coincidence of the campaign and NCLB debates with the proliferation of the phrase in newspaper coverage suggests that the “achievement gap” that has gained such prominence in public discourse today was shaped within a discourse controlled by (largely conservative) political insiders.

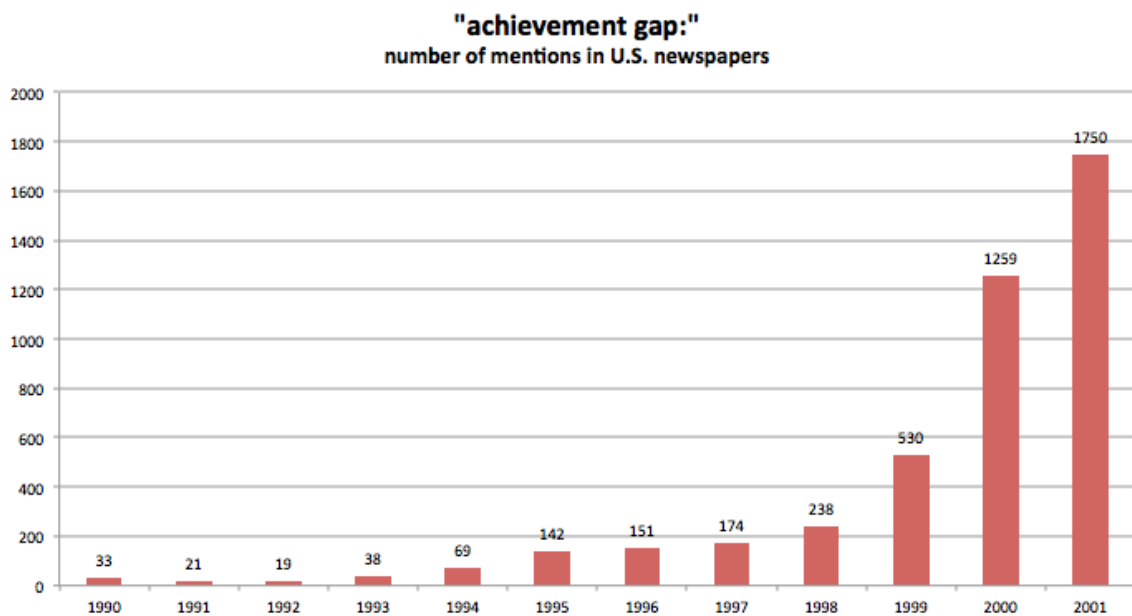


Figure 1. Source: “achievement gap” search in Lexis-Nexis database of major U.S. newspapers 1990-2001.

In this chapter, then, I will examine how, in the Bush campaign and subsequent policy debates, the gap was (re)defined to cover dissension with assent. Ultimately, I will contend that this version of the gap hearkened back to its 1956 iteration, constraining discourse and preserving the same deterministic logic of racial and cultural inferiority. I am not the first to argue that the gap as codified in NCLB works to preserve a symbolic hierarchy of white supremacy—important work has been done by Hilliard, Ladson-Billings, Cross, Love and Royal, all of whose work I am building on here. What I hope to

add to these analyses is one answer to the question of how this particular discursive practice—what Gillborn has called “gap talk”—has come to work so directly against the intentions of so many of the speakers deploying it. Understanding the paradoxical rhetorical force of the achievement gap in this sense requires an analysis of how the theory out of which the phrase emerged may, although it has been explicitly rejected, continue to shape the discursive practice of which it is a part.

Although I will again examine congressional hearings, two key differences between the NCLB hearings and the Davis hearings must be noted. First, the Davis hearings were investigative; they set out to uncover the nature and causes of a perceived problem. The hearings on NCLB, in contrast, are intended to consider a particular policy. Whereas it was fair to expect consideration of lower-stasis questions in the former case, in the latter, the hearings will be concerned primarily with fourth (or fifth, depending on the scheme we choose) stasis questions of *policy*. Creating exigency for the policy debate possible required rhetorical groundwork at the level of fact and definition that was laid during the campaign. I will consider press coverage of that campaign first, then move into transcripts of the policy hearings. Second, the Davis hearings were a single, two-week event overseen by five U.S. Representatives who called just over fifty witnesses; deliberation over NCLB spanned over a dozen hearings in which over fifty Representatives participated and called hundreds of witnesses. I will focus my attention on four of the first five hearings in that series, all chaired by House Majority Leader John Boehner and Minority Leader George Miller. Three of those were field hearings held in Florida, Georgia, and Illinois. These hearings were intended to gather information from state and local stakeholders that would, Chairman Boehner said, “lay the foundation for

legislative action” (*Flexibility 2*). In addition, I will consider the one hearing that addressed the president’s education proposal in its entirety.³⁵ Together, these four hearings represent the terms and rhetorical trends that were carried through the deliberation, and this somewhat restricted focus will allow for more depth of analysis.

Establishing Exigency, Building Consensus: the Bush Campaign’s Education Recession

The 2000 presidential election could hardly have been viewed as a referendum on the economy, which was booming. In order to attack Vice President Gore’s record, the Bush campaign needed another avenue, another issue that was as potent with voters as was the nation’s current prosperity. Amid talk of the “Texas miracle” in public schools, the Bush campaign zeroed in on education.³⁶ More specifically, Bush characterized the achievement gap as part of a nationwide “education recession” that also included, harkening back to the Davis hearings, anxieties about declining test scores:

Mr. Bush's assertion of an "education recession," a phrase that aides said tested well in internal campaign polling with women and independent voters, will coincide with the release of a Republican National Committee advertisement that makes the same point. The campaign will attempt to back up the charge by discussing declining test scores, safety concerns, and widening achievement gaps between rich and poor. (Sack)

This version of the gap emerged at least partially, if not largely, out of political expediency—it was part of an argument that “tested well” with key blocs of voters and

³⁵ The remaining eight hearings addressed specific aspects or policy proposals such as assessment, early childhood education, and the federal government’s role in education policy.

³⁶ That “miracle” quickly came under scrutiny in various ways. One RAND study raised questions about the rigor of Texas’ standardized tests, and others found instances of cheating and “push outs,” a phrase coined to evoke “drop out” while implying coercion of students who might have performed poorly on tests to leave school or to be excluded by other means. Critics also contended that the leap in scores was due to schools’ emphasis on test preparation in reading and math at the expense of other subjects (Yardley, “The 2000 Campaign”).

that brought one of Gore's strengths, economic growth, into question while also redirecting attention toward Bush's wheelhouse issue. This "miracle" gave Governor Bush an edge over Vice President Gore in education that he was believed to lack in economic and international issues. That edge would be enhanced, moreover, if education could take center stage as the most pressing issue facing the nation, as not only an issue but a crisis: a "recession" characterized by "declining test scores, safety concerns and widening achievement gaps." The campaign's first televised advertisement asserted the need for a *crusade* to address the issue: where the previous administration complacently oversaw the nation's educational decline, "George W. Bush will challenge the status quo with a *crusade* to improve education" (Rosenbaum, emphasis added). In the struggle with Gore for control of the agenda, Bush spoke of a "national tragedy" in schools:

Today, incredibly enough in our country, 7 out of 10 fourth graders in our highest poverty schools cannot read. They are children who are destined to be locked into failed hopes and diminished dreams. The achievement gap between minority and non-minority students is wide and growing wider. And we must do something about it in America early, before it's too late. (Sack and Dao)

Echoing the religious language of "crusade," Bush's speech is a kind of jeremiad, hinting at impending doom if listeners fail to heed his warnings "before it's too late."

The figure Bush cites—that 70% of American fourth graders living in poverty are illiterate—offers an instructive example of the amplification of urgency; it is one that would recur not only throughout the campaign but in the NCLB debates. In fact, Chairman Boehner's opening remarks in the first NCLB hearing used precisely the same figure, applied this time specifically to "inner city" fourth graders (*Flexibility 2*). The source of the number was never credited by Bush or Boehner, but Representative Miller did point to it: "As we look at the NAPE [sic] exams in the last round, only 31 percent of

our fourth graders were reading at what we call grade level” (*Reading 5*). Miller’s citation is an accurate reflection of the results of the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), released annually as “The Nation’s Report Card.” In 1998, 31 percent of all fourth graders taking the test scored at or above “proficient” in reading. What Miller characterized as students who were not “reading at what we would call grade level,” Bush and Boehner seem to have translated to “cannot read.” A glance at the source reveals that this is a convenient exaggeration; the same test revealed that 62 percent of fourth graders read at or above “basic,” which, while perhaps not satisfactory, is a far cry from illiteracy (20).³⁷ Moreover, Bush and Boehner’s versions attach the statistic to a slippery subgroup of students: for Bush, it is those living in poverty; for Boehner, it is “inner-city” students. Neither assertion aligns with the NAEP report, which found that 45 percent of students living in central cities and 58 percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunch tested at “below basic” on the NAEP. Although the actual test results could certainly be cited as evidence of a problem in education, the malleable “7 out of 10 [poor, inner-city] students cannot read” figure served throughout the campaign and the NCLB hearings as a kind of emblem of educational crisis and the achievement gap. This is not to say that the Bush campaign created a problem where there was none, but rather that where there was an agreed upon problem, they strategically amplified its urgency to create a sense of crisis.³⁸

³⁷ The report describes the “basic” level of performance for fourth graders thus: “Demonstrate an understanding of the overall meaning of what they read. When reading text appropriate for fourth graders, they should be able to make relatively obvious connections between the text and their own experiences and extend the ideas in the text by making simple inferences” (19)

³⁸ Much has been written about crisis rhetoric in American education, which has characterized educational discourse for centuries. Berliner and Biddle’s *The*

Cultural historian Sacvan Bercovitch theorized the role of crisis rhetoric as part of a “ritual of anxiety and control” recurring throughout the history of American discourse that ultimately enforced compliance and consensus (“Rites” 12, 32). Such rituals of consensus channel “volatile emotions of revolt,” transforming what might have been a *threat* to the social order into an *affirmation* of the same (17). The educational crisis cited by the Bush campaign was part of a similar movement in which “achievement gap” shifted from controversy to consensus. The *Times* noted that in the early days of the administration, “on education, it seems, the political spectrum is collapsing into near consensus” (Wilgoren). This new unanimity facilitated a Bush campaign victory, as well as an early legislative triumph: the passage of *No Child Left Behind*.³⁹ The *Times* noted that the consensus was built by combining “the goal of helping a constituency long represented by liberals,” on the one hand with, on the other, “methods—competition, accountability, and a focus on fundamentals—that are conservative at their core” (Wilgoren). The consensus also significantly and importantly constrained policy debate, in much the way Bercovitch suggested rites of assent do: they “defuse all issues in debate by restricting the debate itself, symbolically and substantively, to the meaning of America” (“Rites” 21). More specifically, I will consider in the next sections how the gap consensus limited the scope of debate to an ahistorical present moment, decontextualized

Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools considers such rhetoric beginning with the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. See also Bracey’s “Disastrous Legacy” and Bass and Gerstl-Pepin’s “Declaring Bankruptcy on Educational Inequity.” Tyack’s *The One Best System* provides a longer view on reform efforts in American education, demonstrating that crisis rhetoric in education predates the 1983 report by centuries.

³⁹ Congress had tried and failed to pass essentially the same reauthorization of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act under Clinton (Rees). Just two years later, it was passed with relative ease, a testament to the power of the achievement gap consensus (Hess and Petrilli).

schools and academic performance, and the domain of individuals imagined to be independent from social forces. The effect of the constrained debate was to preserve a market-based view of education and notions of meritocracy that naturalize a social hierarchy rooted in white supremacy and cultural hegemony.

The Gap Fixation: Obscuring Historical and Structural Inequities

The language of *concealment, moral indignation, excuses* and *expectations* frequently recurs in the gap talk of the NCLB hearings, seeming to bolster the truism that “all students can learn” and that their academic failures are in fact failures of the education system. The language, however, works against its apparent intent, insulating social and educational structures from critique by spotlighting the gap itself—as an ahistorical and purely scholastic phenomenon—as the target of reform.

The language of revealing and concealing—of conspiracy—that was so prevalent in the Davis Hearings remained a fixture, though on a lower frequency, of the 2001 debates. In 1956, Davis had generalized his opponents as “radicals, crackpots and fuzzy thinkers” (*Hearings* 444). In 2001, the language was considerably toned down, but still focused on the committee’s role of *revealing* what had been *concealed*. In the full house hearing, Representative Johnny Isakson evokes this trope in his characterization of NCLB’s plan for accountability:

We have the opportunity for the first time in the history of federal involvement in the education of America’s poorest children to *remove the cloak* of mediocrity and lack of attention from administrations and school boards. By allowing those teachers who are working their hearts out and those kids who will rise to expectations to finally achieve because we are *no longer going to mask* the problem. (*Leave No Child Behind* 21, emphasis added)

Gone, here, are the crackpots and communists. The language of concealment is far less heavy handed, but it continues to exert effects: it constructs the gap as a kind of revelatory discovery, giving it center stage in the discussions. Whereas the gap in academic outcomes had been cited in Nyack as a *symptom* of a deeper problem, namely longstanding systemic segregation, comments like these draw attention to those outcomes as the *primary* object of consideration, distracting from questions about what structural issues the gap in turn pointed out. Having been dramatically revealed, the gap itself, rather than the survival of segregation and inequity, has become the star of the show. James Warford, who was then Superintendent in Marion County, Florida, spoke as if simply revealing the gap to the public would eliminate failing schools:

The simple truth is that failing schools like the ones I've described can exist only where there is no accountability. The Bush/Brogan A-Plus Plan put in place a system of accountability that made the conditions in our failing schools *impossible to hide*. (*Flexibility 8*, emphasis added)

The implication is that schools have all the resources and wherewithal they need in order to serve their students well, and that their failure to do so up to this point was a function of the will, or lack thereof, to succeed (recall the lyrics of the NCLB “theme song” at the beginning of this chapter). An accountability plan that spotlights the gap, making it “impossible to hide,” is imagined to provide what’s missing in failing schools: the motivation to serve students.

Warford’s comment doesn’t name any conspirators, but the idea of making problems “impossible to hide” implies that there are people who have hitherto been doing just that. The language focuses attention on individuals, whether shadowy conspirators or hardworking teachers who must be freed from their machinations, replacing a picture of

endemic social and educational inequity with a narrative centered on human agents.⁴⁰ In Isakson's comment, "administrations and school boards" were the bad actors. Others cast the achievement gap itself in the part:

Rep. George Miller. This country can no longer allow that gap to continue. (*Flexibility* 4)

Gov. Ray Barnes. That is all education reform is about. Education reform is about closing the gap. (*Reading* 12)

In Miller's statement, the gap is a kind of agent whose continued operation must be disallowed, while Barnes spotlights the same gap as the *only* issue that merits consideration. To that singular focus on the gap as a quasi-agent, other participants add a sense of moral outrage:

Sec. of Education Roderick Paige. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of "No Child Left Behind," President Bush's plan to strengthen elementary and secondary education, *close the inexcusable achievement gap*, and discuss the president's 2002 budget for education. (*Leave* 5)

Sec. Paige. Consider *the appalling achievement gap* between disadvantaged and minority students. (*Leave* 6)

State Supt. Glenn McGee. The achievement gap in Illinois is *intolerable*. (*Improving* 26)

The gap is described, then, not merely as a problem but as a kind of arch-enemy of reformers, a reprehensible force that constitutes the sole focus of the education crusade. By casting the gap in this role, participants in the discussion used the language of moral outrage without dividing their constituencies with assignments of blame. Although educators and administrators are implicitly accused in the language of conspiracy, the

⁴⁰ Many scholars have revealed the way policy discourse, in education and beyond, often zeroes in on individuals and obscures any critical view of social or economic structures. For discussions on this phenomenon in welfare reform and discussions of poverty, see Asen's *Visions of Poverty* and O'Connor's *Poverty Knowledge*. In educational discourse, see Bomer's "Miseducating Teachers about the Poor," as well as the works of Tyack, Valenzuela, Van Galen and Watkins.

most dramatic and direct approbation is reserved for the gap itself. The anger that was sparked in Nyack was targeted at institutions and people: at the school system, and at the cultural biases on one hand and parenting practices on the other of specific groups of citizens. Here, however, blame has been primarily assigned to the gap, reigning in the splitting force of the gap in order to unite partisan policymakers and district administrators. The language of anger—*inexcusable*, *intolerable* and *appalling*—remains, but having been redirected toward an abstract phenomenon against which all participants can unite—the “achievement gap”—it is transformed into shared indignation and a shared purpose. It is a virtually bulletproof consensus, for the opposition against which it sets itself is the idea that the achievement gap is either tolerable or inevitable.⁴¹ The call to “close the gap” became a powerful and broadly appealing rallying cry that brought diverse stakeholders together with a common purpose. Moreover, it preserves a logic in which individual bad actors—here, an almost personified gap—are the target of policy, obscuring the view of structural inequities.

Granger theorizes this phenomenon as a “spectacle” that frames school reform as a narrative pitting “good guys” against “bad guys.” Indeed, the mission implied in comments like Paige’s is to eradicate an enemy, rather than examining intersecting economic, social, and educational forces that influence academic outcomes. Within such a narrative, these forces become *excuses*, and the solution to the problem becomes a

⁴¹ As one teacher pointed out in his critique of straw man arguments in the reform debate, “the quickest way to ‘win’ an argument” against critics of NCLB or other reform programs, “is to claim they believe poor kids can’t learn” (Britt).

simple matter of *expectations*. Superintendent Warford taps into the shared indignation and goes on to condemn excuses for inaction:

It is no surprise that students in these [low-performing] schools were also poor, often minority, spoke other languages, and had a high mobility rate. These were the exact reasons given by our district for their poor performance. I refused to accept that....these were just excuses.
(*Flexibility* 7)

Warford makes an important point about the too-common phenomenon of institutional neglect and miseducation of historically marginalized students, which is then blamed on the students themselves—their poverty, their culture, their language, or their mobility. Ironically, however, the cumulative force of the discourse to which he contributes has essentially the same effect when the paradoxical operation of the gap is taken into account. Recall Paige’s characterization of the villainous gap as “inexcusable,” wherein the language of excuses connotes moral condemnation. By characterizing race, language, income and high mobility as *excuses* for the *inexcusable* gap, this strain of gap discourse essentially shuts down those lines of inquiry, foreclosing consideration of the way that structural racism, linguistic bias and poverty are woven into the fabric of American education, and disproportionately hinder some students’ academic performance.⁴² Rather than *opening up* a conversation about educational malpractice in the past or structural obstacles to students’ success, the rhetoric of excuses tends instead to *narrow* the dialogue by dismissing social and historical forces. What might be examined as forces

⁴² On the “no excuses” discourse surrounding NCLB, see Nichols and Berliner’s *Collateral Damage*; also see Hess and Petrilli’s “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” in which the authors contend that NCLB’s “charge to the schools” could be summed up by the phrase “no excuses” (16). Since 2001, the phrase has come to characterize the approach of many charter schools, often characterized as part of the “no excuses” camp of education reform, which has itself become a contentious idea.

that shape educational outcomes are characterized as distractions from the “real” issue of the gap. Warford’s continued explanation reiterates this distinction:

Here’s what was really happening in those schools. The parents of these students were also poor. They paid few or no property taxes, they often had little education themselves, they did not know how to access the “system,” or to help their children, and here’s a point that this committee might appreciate. They tended not to vote. But more importantly, I believe these parents and students were victims of the most damaging form of racism in our country today, the racism of low expectations. (“Flexibility” 8)

Warford begins with a gesture towards social and economic factors, working to convey a sense that these complex factors contributed to an inequitable school—and even social—system that shapes the gap. His language undermines this argument, however, first by fixing attention on students’ parents—poor, uneducated, disenfranchised, helpless—rather than describing the operations of the institutions that have excluded them.

Moreover, the last sentence downplays everything that came before it by asserting what we must “*more importantly*” consider, “the *most* damaging” kind of racism: expectations. To be sure, the role of self-fulfilling prophecy in schools and the impact of teacher expectations on student learning have been convincingly demonstrated;⁴³ I do not intend to say that expectations are unimportant. Warford’s comment, however, twice insists that expectations are more important than all other contributing factors. The various forms and material effects of racism—disparities in employment, income, housing, transportation, and health care—are all subordinated. In other words, as important as expectations are, they also operate here to obscure the operation of institutional racism at the expense of individual mindsets. If educators, perhaps citizens in general, simply

⁴³ Among the most well-known example of this research are Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson’s study on the “Pygmalion effect” and Claude Steele’s work on stereotype threat.

needed to change their *minds* about particular groups of students, larger institutions need not be reexamined.⁴⁴

Taken together, the language of concealment, moral indignation directed at the gap, excuses and expectations exert significant constraints on the debate, one of which is to limit focus to individuals rather than social and institutional structures. Ladson-Billings observed other constraints, contending that gap-focused policy “forces us to look to the year-to-year progress on various standardized tests measures and allows us to conclude that the problem lies solely in the realm of scholastic disparity” (“Pushing” 316). The gap constrains the time and place of the problem, restricting it to a dehistoricized present moment—year to year comparisons, as opposed to a longer historical view of inequity—and to schools in isolation rather than as institutions situated in a complex and overlapping social realm. In this discourse, to paraphrase Warford, the “simple truth” of the achievement gap is that erasing it is a matter of will. In the comments I have considered thus far, it is largely school personnel who are described as lacking that motivation. Another pervasive strand of the debate, however, scrutinizes students and their parents as the site of the problem. The policies of NCLB were championed using what I will call a child-centered paradigm, a call to craft the law to suit children rather than institutions. Where children were described on one hand as *beneficiaries* of policy, they were also, on the other, represented as *targets* of reform.

⁴⁴ O’Neil noted a similar use of the trope of “expectations” in her article on news coverage of youth issues in 2007. She argued that “journalists’ inability to frame systemic racial inequality as something concrete and connected to social structures has the effect of obscuring systemic sources of racial inequality in education” (45). My analysis suggests that the “inability” she observed is not limited to journalists, but characterizes the policy debates they cover. Thus while O’Neil calls for less individualist thinking and more “policy solutions” to address this problem, my analysis indicates that such solutions would already be framed in the individualist worldview she critiques.

The Child-Centered Paradigm and the Politics of Representation

The idea of leaving no child behind evokes movement—that as they progress through school, students are moving forward toward some ultimate goal. The policy recognizes that not all students have historically reached that goal, that many were “left behind.” The nature of that movement is hinted at in Chairman Boehner’s remarks: “We must close the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged of our nation’s students and make sure that the American dream is within the grasp of all our nation’s children, not just a selected few” (*State Leadership* 3). Boehner’s focus on the “American dream” indicates that this forward movement is social mobility, the opportunity to enter any occupation or social class based on “merit, and not from family wealth, heredity, or special cultural advantages” (Bass and Gerstl-Pepin 917). This rhetoric of the gap rests on the meritocratic idea of a classless society: the opposite of the gap is social mobility for all American students. The politics of representation that characterize gap discourse, however, ironically *cement* symbolic hierarchies whereby the students in question are consigned to the lowest rungs of the social order.

The call to focus on children over and above institutions formed a persuasive argument for two unrelated but contentions aspects of NCLB. First was a proposal, rejected by Congress the previous year, to consolidate multiple streams of funding that were targeted to specific programs into block grants which the states could allocate at their discretion, often called “flexible funding.” Second was the issue of school choice, the idea of allowing students at schools labeled as failing to enroll in another public, private, or charter school. *Flexibility* and *choice* were buzzwords in deliberations and would ultimately be two of the three organizing principles of the law: recall that its

formal title was “An Act to Close the Achievement Gap with Accountability, *Flexibility* and *Choice* so that No Child is Left Behind.” The intention of Title I of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was to support districts in meeting, as the law stated, “the special educational needs of children of low-income families” (27). Part of the task in passing NCLB, then, was defending the ideas of flexibility and choice against fears that they would undermine that purpose by allowing funding and school options to be influenced more by social and political capital than need. Charlie Crist, then Florida Education Commissioner, summed up the thrust of that argument: “When we make children and not institutions the center and the beneficiaries of education reform, there is no way that we can help but win” (*Flexibility* 6). The idea of “winning” reinforces the adversarial narrative of heroic officials versus the villainous gap and the schools that willfully perpetuate it. A cynic might add that the same “we” Crist uses in the first phrase to describe policymakers who choose this focus is the “we” that “wins”—rather than the children he wants to benefit. More than mere semantics, it reminds us that as much as Crist and other participants may have been genuinely invested in helping students, they were also always engaged in a political battle. The theme of a newly child-centered policy focus was a central strategy in that battle. Education Secretary Rod Paige, for instance, argued that a reform program without school choice “continues the school solution and it does not specifically give relief to the individual child.” (*Leaving* 28). Throughout his testimony, Paige reiterated that “the focus needs to be on the individual child.” Representative Castle offered the same argument in more dramatic terms, saying that by allowing school choice “we are going to help rescue those kids” (*State* 4). School choice is framed here as a way for the federal government to protect children rather than

continuing to align itself with the “failing school.” To the hero/villain narrative it adds students in the role of victims, as captives awaiting rescue. Just as the gap had been characterized using the language of moral indignation, students would need to be characterized according to their roles in the narrative. Moreover, as the policy was intended to help a specific group of students, that characterization would need to distinguish them from the general population of school-aged children. In other words, policy had to define who “those kids” awaiting rescue were. Asen describes this process as part of a politics of representation that enacts “symbolic hierarchies”; while they may appear to reflect the world as it, such representations in fact actively construct and grant value to (or withhold it from) the individuals it represents (127-8). Where conversation becomes focused on children, we must interrogate the way in which those children are represented, what spot they have been granted in the symbolic hierarchy.

The argument for flexible funding will serve as a case study. Proponents argued that existing funding formulae funded entrenched programs with mixed records of success and costly bureaucratic structures, and that reform should enable federal dollars to benefit students more directly. The idea was first advanced in 1965 during deliberation over the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, when federal funding of education, traditionally a state issue, was challenged. It proposed “targeting” the money to students who had historically been underserved by state departments of education (McGuinn 30). In 2001, the idea of targeted funding to students was resurrected in order to navigate political opposition to a reallocation of those funds, this time under the auspices of closing the achievement gap. Glenn McGee, Illinois State Superintendent, described it as an approach that consisted of two steps: “measuring of the students in each grade,” and

then “pouring money into those kids who need it the most” (*Improving* 42). It is a child-centered plan, to be sure, but one that imagines the student as an almost inert object, a vessel to be measured and filled with money.⁴⁵ Individual students, in this language, were invoked in the service of a policy initiative, and thus their representation was not so much premised on their actual subjectivities as it was on a role in the policy debate; they were vessels, in this sense, for policy purposes.

In this role, students took on a series of identity markers that shifted according to the policy purpose at hand, if not at random. For instance, in the closing exchange of the first field hearing, Representative Castle works to clarify the testimony of two local superintendents: “You said something to the effect that federal dollars should be targeted for those kinds of kids, referring to *poorer kids* and *kids that move around*, etcetera.” If one wonders what “etcetera” might stand in for, here, subsequent comments supply two of many possible answers. One superintendent affirmed Castle’s statement by saying “we have no problem with targeting for the *most disadvantaged* of our students”; another echoed the need to “make sure that those dollars are focused on *low achieving* students” (*Flexibility* 34 emphasis added). The targeted group of students begins as those who are “poor and move around, etcetera”; the descriptors are paraphrased as “disadvantaged” and “low achieving.” Kohl might characterize descriptions like the ones above as a not-uncommon case of “sloppy habits of reference” by which culture, race, income, (dis)ability, family structure, and academic prowess are frequently collapsed (22). Together, the comments create an equivalence between terms, implying not so much

⁴⁵ An obvious but nonetheless important point is that no one proposed literally giving money to students or families; Even in voucher programs, the actual funds would go to the schools and districts.

that, for a host of complex reasons, there is a correlation between poverty and academic achievement but rather that “poor” and “low achieving” are interchangeable; that a student who is low achieving is also poor, and vice versa. Exchanges like this, throughout the hearings, conflate multiple identities and characteristics to create a paradigmatic child who is the “target” of the policy. Journalists picked up this slippery use of signifiers; a story that ran in March 2000 in the *Times*, for instance, described disaggregation as intended to “tease out the scores of black, Hispanic, non-English speaking and special education students in each school, to distinguish gaps between their performance and that of white students” (Zernicke, “New York”). In opposition to “white students,” the kids who are the concern of policy here are “black, Hispanic, non-English speaking and special education.” The implication is that white students are not only not-black and not-Hispanic, but that they are also the non-disabled.

The logic of the gap forces us to conceive of students in binary terms: there are two sides of the gap—the right side and the wrong side—and students on the same side become a monolithic group.⁴⁶ When viewed through the dualistic achievement gap frame, efforts to acknowledge their diversity by listing identity markers—black, Hispanic, non-English speaking, special education—don’t evoke a diverse group of singular students so much as they attach each new signifier to a paradigmatic student on the wrong side of the gap, lumping identities together as markers of low-achieving students. Zernicke’s description is representative, too, in that the students on the “right”

⁴⁶ Carpenter, Ramirez and Severn note the problematic dichotomy created by the notion of a singular achievement gap. They suggest that if we recognized that “there are multiple achievement gaps, and gaps between the races may not be the most serious of them” the problem would be at least partially remedied (122). In my reading, this solution may multiply the terms on each side of the binary, but it would preserve the logic of gaps in which there are ultimately only two groups of students, one on each side of the gap.

side of the gap are described simply as “white.” The gap is, fundamentally, a “cross-racial comparison that holds up white student achievement as the universally standard goal” (Royal, see also Love 230). Asa Hilliard argues that such a comparison constitutes the “common sense” understanding of the gap:

When speaking of “the achievement gap” it is understood by virtually everyone that this does not refer to a gap between Africans and Asians or a gap between Africans and Latinos or a gap between anyone else other than Europeans. (137)

Consistent with the history of the gap elaborated in previous chapters, the organizing binary of the achievement gap is whiteness and its opposite; again it is an overdetermined notion of *Blackness* that stands in for poor academic outcomes.⁴⁷ A historical view of the gap forces us to read it not only, as so many have done, as a present-day attack on public schools, but also as an iteration of a far older and farther-reaching logic of white supremacy. To be sure, the language of race is often replaced with that of socioeconomic status in these hearings and media coverage: the gap is often described as being between “rich and poor” or between “inner-city and suburban” students. However, the substitutability of terms operates not to shift the focus away from race but rather to reinforce its overdetermination.⁴⁸ Such constructions reveal that, in the public imagination, the gap functions to invoke the idea that Black students lag behind their white counterparts. That the gap is so often described in racial terms is emblematic of

⁴⁷ Here I draw upon the thought of many critical race theorists including, especially in regards to gap discourse, Love, Gillborn, Bass and Gerstl-Pepin. For one argument for Blackness’ function in the American cultural imagination as the opposite of whiteness, see Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*. More immediately relevant, this reductive binary was long used in monitoring public school systems under desegregation consent decrees. Under its decree, for instance, the Baton Rouge public school system was required as recently as 2004, when I worked with their human resources office, to categorize every student, faculty member and employee as either “white” or “black.”

⁴⁸ Cross (252) and Love (230) speak of the racialized operation of “colorblindness” in these purportedly non-racial descriptions of the gap.

this commonsense. Ultimately, it links race to achievement, just as Gerber and Davis had done in 1956.

I have suggested that “achievement gap” was enlisted in the service of conservative impulses in 1956 and again in 2001. In 1956, it was called upon as a defense of school segregation, a notion that had long since lost its legal sanction by 2001. My suggestion is that while the gap in contemporary discourse does not argue in favor of physical separation, the symbolic hierarchy that it props up reinforces a discursive racial segregation that impacts students’ material realities with equal profundity. The splitting force of the gap may no longer affect political constituencies, as it did in Nyack, but rather—and following the child-centered paradigm of the hearings—it splits students into two distinct groups separated by the gap: the standard and the substandard, the white and the Black. Consider the “etcetera” of Castle’s description, for example—students who are “poor and move around, etcetera.” Judith Butler has theorized such gestures as the invariable “embarrassed ‘etc.’ at the end of the list” of identities, which often seems aimed at inclusiveness. And yet, she asks, what are the effects of this effort, what “political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated ‘etc.’ that so often occurs at the end of such lines?” (182). For Butler it indicates not only the failure, but the inevitable violence, of descriptions of identity, carrying as they do “normative injunctions” that are based on a “strategy of domination that pits the ‘I’ against the ‘Other’” (184-189). The discourse I am considering here frequently contrasts the “we” of policymakers to the “other” of students on the wrong side of the gap—poor, mobile, residents of inner cities, English language learning, from unstable families, disabled, low achieving, Hispanic—not white; Black. This specifically racial binary offers a glimpse of the foundations of

gap discourse built in 1956. Although eugenic racial theories are absent in the contemporary gap debates, they were the mold in which the achievement gap was formed. The imprint of absent theories of white supremacy remained, shaping the logic of gap-based reform such that students who are the intended beneficiaries of such policies quickly come to be viewed as problems for policy to solve. Superintendent Till, for instance, contended that “the population you’re talking about is the most difficult population we have in America.” His language is picked up—and treated as commonsense—by Representative Miller: “Obviously we’re talking about a population here . . . about many of the most difficult and the poorest children from the most difficult environments” (*Flexibility* 30, 32). Although—perhaps indeed *because*—neither names the “population” to which he refers, it is taken to be “obvious.” Scrutiny is no longer, in these remarks, reserved for students alone. It has been broadened to include entire populations that are particularly difficult for policymakers. Shared indignation about the gap had, in other comments, seemed to displace the splitting force of the gap with consensus. Their representations of students, however, suggest that any sense of unity is limited to policymakers, who are discursively separated and insulated from the *difficult populations* who are the objects of their discourse. Students and their families here replace schools and systems as the target of reform. It is important to note that this substitution, pervading as it does lawmakers’ deliberations, is not a *distortion* of policy, but is *written into it*. Although that implication runs through multiple strands of policy debates, it is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the language of *investment* and *accountability*.

Investing in Students, Expecting Returns

Positing a crisis in the form of an “education recession” and advancing choice and competition as solutions, the Bush administration tapped into a well-established convention of applying neoliberal free market logic to education.⁴⁹ Echoing Superintendent Corning’s earlier argument that learning was a poor fit for Gerber’s statistical methods, Nichols voices the belief that “primary and secondary education make poor markets.” Like uncritical use of I.Q. statistics, the logic of the market can distort one’s view of education (177). The notion of education as an investment is a timeless one, providing even the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and John Dewey with a persuasive trope to argue for the place of education in national priorities (Bass and Gerstl-Pepin 918). The logic of investment, however, is that the investors will demand a profit in return, begging the question of how the idea of *returns* maps onto education. I will suggest that in deliberations over NCLB, where students were figuratively described as the targets, or recipients, of funding, the logic of investment reinforced a sense that it was students—rather than schools or districts—who would be expected to perform for investors.

Chairman Boehner offered opening remarks for each hearing, often using the idea of a failed investment to establish exigency for the debates:

Although Congress has spent more than \$80 billion on Title 1 since 1990, achievement scores remain relatively stagnant. Despite spending billions of dollars on education, too many students have fallen short in meeting goals for educational excellence. (*Leaving 2*)

⁴⁹ The work of Henry Giroux constitutes perhaps the most influential critique of this phenomenon (see, for instance *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for Opposition*). For a historical view of market logic in education, see Tyack’s *The One Best System* and Watkins’ *The White Architects of Black Education*. For critiques of market logic in gap-based reform discourse, see Bass and Gerstl-Pepin; Francis; Hunter & Bartee; and Nichols.

Minority Leader George Miller, Boehner's Democratic counterpart, echoed the sentiment: "We have clearly and simply got to get better results for the money we're spending at the federal level" (*Flexibility* 3). Moral outrage about the gap has been replaced by a call for fiscal responsibility, the sensible demand that an investment should yield a return. Chicago superintendent Paul Vallas sounds like he's managing a portfolio when he describes his proposed solution to the gap: "If we could invest up front and get those 30 percentiles to 50 percent, then by the time they get to 8th grade, they will be at 80 or 90 percent" (*Improving* 34). The notion of targeted funding was presented as a child-centered policy, prioritizing students over institutions. When coupled with the logic of investment, however, it raises questions about what the students on which the policy centered were imagined to be.

A local superintendent suggested an answer when he lamented, "Georgia has become the largest importer of college-educated talent in the nation," and insisted that "we have got to focus on how we can home-grow some good students, some college-educated students to fill the economic needs of our state" (*Reading* 23). Students, here, are commodities: they are "grown" like crops in order to fill economic needs. A Florida superintendent echoed the sentiment when he said of his district that "we are a business and we are businessmen...I have this special commodity called 255,000 students" (*Flexibility* 10). The idea of students as commodities follows logically from the language of investment, and in turn sets up its own further logic. Commodities are, by definition, *fungible*: they must be essentially uniform, regardless of their origin, in order to be

interchangeable.⁵⁰ The “good students” that schools are expected to “home grow” are, in this view, homogeneous; individual differences become liabilities that successfully reformed schools would be able to erase. This view of difference, often referred to by critics as a deficit paradigm, underpins the policy of increased testing and disaggregation of data as described by Secretary of Education Paige. The policy’s aim was to identify the “specific area where the student’s deficit exists,” and “to make these deficits visible” (*Leaving* 16). Where national standardized testing, in the form of the NAEP, had long been used to monitor performance at the national, state, and to a lesser extent, district levels, the call here is for data that monitors *individual* students’ performance. That monitoring takes on a medical valence that emphasizes scrutiny of students, in Georgia Governor Barnes’ language, whereby educators use data to “observe children” and “make a diagnosis on what needs to be corrected” (*Reading* 6). Although he goes on to specify that the goal is to “find the weaknesses in the education system,” the logic of diagnosis belies such a systemic view. After all, it is the patient who is *observed* and *diagnosed* who is understood as the site of an underlying pathology and treated accordingly. Barnes’ further comments succumb to this logic when he summarizes the criteria by which reform proposals should be weighed: “The standard should be in the improvement of the child” (*Reading* 14). Whether described as commodities that must be uniform or patients in need of cure, the individual student is the target, here, of a normalizing impulse. Gap discourse is shot through with such language of deficit and remediation, of diagnosis and cure that

⁵⁰ Marx gives the example of wheat as a commodity: “From the taste of wheat it is not possible to tell who produced it, a Russian serf, a French peasant or an English capitalist” (270). Although my critique of the achievement gap relies on theory that is indebted to Marxist critique in attending to power relationships and the reproduction of existing social hierarchies, a more explicitly neo-Marxist reading of gap rhetoric is a promising avenue for future work.

ultimately points to students, rather than schools or districts, as the fundamental cause of the problem with American education. Following these logics, the problem appears to be one of difference, of deviation from a standard that, while overtly described in terms of academic performance, is filtered through the achievement gap metaphor and becomes a mandate for whiteness.

I refer to whiteness not exclusively as a phenotype, but as a package of characteristics that mark a dominant culture in the United States. As I demonstrated above, gap discourse sets *white* up as the opposite of a slew of identity markers and characteristics. To be white in this sense is to be not-Black, not-Hispanic, not-poor, not-disabled, and not “low performing.” In 1956, this dualism served the policy proposal of re-segregating white and Black students in D.C. schools. In 2000-01, it has become a demand that all students conform to a standard of whiteness, which I will suggest operates not merely as a proxy for high test scores, but as a normative assertion of dominant cultural values and behaviors. Lawmakers’ preoccupation with parenting practices is a case in point. Ladson-Billings has noted the way achievement gap discourse lends itself to the theories of cultural deficit that target families, explaining the gap as an indication that certain “parents just don’t care”; certain “families don’t value education” (“Pushing” 318). She reads such essentializing and fallacious statements as deferrals of responsibility when uttered by school personnel. When circulating in policymakers’ discourse, they take on an additional valence: social problems are caused by a lack of homogeneity in the values and behaviors taught to children by their parents. Chairman Boehner attests to this:

When you look at some of the core problems that we have in our society, you have some parents who aren’t there, some parents who don’t care, and

if every parent in America were like ours we probably wouldn't be here today. I don't think we'd have all the problems that we're dealing with and, I presume, that you're dealing with in your schools (Improving 13).

Miller asserts a similar belief when he laments, “We can’t legislate good parents... What can we do to help the parents to be motivated to be good parents, to get good quality education? I mean, I’m not sure we can legislate it,” although his wording suggests a wish to do precisely that⁵¹ (*Flexibility* 30). Boehner’s comment reflects an ideology in which “good parenting” means the kind that policymakers themselves received: that is, in the case of Boehner, Miller, and the vast majority of members of the committee that would constitute the “our” in Boehner’s comment, the practices of relatively affluent white families. Some commentators adopted this stance even more explicitly: James Traub wrote in the *Times* that schools alone will not succeed in closing the gap; in order to do so, “we have to unambiguously embrace the virtues of a ‘middle-class parenting style.’” Quoting Jencks and Phillips’ *The Black/White Test Score Gap*, he echoes Miller’s lament, suggesting that school reform is a next-best alternative to legislating parenting practices: “Changing preschools is less important but easier than changing homes.” Ultimately, the gap metaphor combines with the logic of investment and commodity in a picture of educational inequity wherein blame rests firmly in the laps of non-white students and their families, whose values and behaviors, insofar as they differ from those of lawmakers and district administrators, are understood to be the underlying problem for education to solve. Closing the gap, in this lens, means reducing heterogeneity. And where this fails, it is those who carry the marks of difference who will be held to account.

⁵¹ The shift from “we can’t” to “I mean, I don’t think we can” even suggests a measure of hope that such legislation might, in fact, be possible.

Accountability: Blame and Bad Behavior

Among the buzzwords surrounding NCLB deliberation, *accountability* was foremost. Recall that it was the first strategy named in the long title of the bill, “An Act to Close the Achievement Gap with Accountability, Flexibility, and Choice.” Overtly, accountability was advanced as a way of holding schools and districts responsible for educating students equitably. Just as it had with “investment,” the logic embedded in “accountability” belies its denotative use. In this case, similar to the language of blame, accountability demands an *individual* who can be “held to account” for a problem, distracting from potential *systemic* causes. In questioning a Georgia superintendent, Boehner articulates this logic:

Chairman Boehner. Who is ultimately responsible for every child getting a good education?

Mr. Vollmer. That is a very insightful question. The concern, if I can give you some background on this...

Chairman Boehner. No, no. I do not want to get too way laid here. I want to know *who* is responsible.

Mr. Vollmer. I would have to say the local school system, the local school.

Chairman Boehner. Well, that is kind of a building; it is a group of people. When I think about accountability in my business, there was *somebody* that had the ultimate responsibility. And if somebody does not have the ultimate responsibility, then they are not really accountable. So I am trying to determine under your system who is ultimately responsible. (*Reading 28*)

Boehner rejects Vollmer’s contention that it was not a person but a system, impatiently cutting off what appears to be a gesture towards complexity when Vollmer begins to offer background. “Account” has two important senses, both of which operate here. The first part of Boehner’s definition, “when I think about accountability in my *business*,” points to an economic sensibility insofar as “accounts” literally refer to financial statements or

arrangements. He goes on to say that “*somebody*...had the ultimate responsibility,” indicating the sense of the word that demands an *individual* be saddled with it. Parallel to the language of blame I considered in Chapter 4, accountability asks not *what* causes a problem but rather *who* is responsible for it.⁵² Moreover, its logic holds individuals responsible for the economic standing of an enterprise. The sense of holding schools and districts accountable for serving students would reverse this logic; it would be equivalent to some agency holding businesses responsible for the performance of their employees. The original logic, as we will see, held sway and shaped the force of the word.

Many critics of NCLB and the surrounding reform debate have contended that the language of accountability blames teachers, and indeed that is a strand in these hearings.⁵³ More prominent in these texts, however, is a strand that assigns responsibility to students and their parents. Comparing two usages of the term in the hearing reveals the way accountability is shifted from schools to students. One parent and local school board member described “bottom-line accountability” as a safeguard against institutional neglect that would “determine which groups are being essentially kicked to the curb” by the school system (*Flexibility* 15). Her use of “bottom-line” reveals how inextricable accountability is from the discourse of business, but here school systems are held accountable for serving, or failing to serve, certain groups of students. Indeed, this is the

⁵² I also contended that *blame* in gap discourse deceptively appears to be a first-stasis question, obscuring even more fundamental questions about the existence and nature of the gap by treating them as taken for granted. Although I will not recapitulate a stasis-theory analysis of accountability here, I will suggest that in directing scrutiny to students, *accountability* operates similarly, insulating the idea of the achievement gap from critical consideration.

⁵³ See, for example, Weingarten’s “Where Crisis Meets Opportunity” and Ravitch, “Why America’s Teachers are Enraged,” among many other interviews and blog posts in which she identifies what she calls the “demonization” of teachers in education policy discourse.

surface meaning of accountability in NCLB. Yet the logic of accountability works against systemic explanations in the remarks of Illinois State Superintendent McGee, who had called for “pouring money into students.” He further stipulates that such a plan would require “beefing up reporting so we focus on the students who are direct recipients of those funds” in order, ultimately, to “make students accountable for that money” (*Improving* 28). Where targeted funding would figuratively direct money to students, this comment more literally saddles them with the responsibility for producing returns on that investment. His comment tells us that responsibility for academic performance will not rest with the schools or districts under McGee’s auspices, but rather on the students themselves. Similarly, Superintendent Warford describes a plan for holding “each school accountable by grading them from A to F on how well their students perform” (*Flexibility* 8). Although Warford’s comment describes schools as accountable, the measure is ultimately one of student performance.⁵⁴ Students on the “wrong” side of the gap, then, are held responsible not only for their own academic success, but for the standing of their schools. In other comments, their burden is even heavier: the future of the nation itself. Secretary Paige asserted that “if we can get this program approved...we will make a quantum leap into the future of America with *better students*” (*Leaving* 42). Reinforcing the sense that it is students who need to become “better” than they are, his comment implies additionally that any failure to do so could somehow tie the nation to the past, preventing America from making the “leap” into a millennial future. What might it look like to hold students accountable for a venture with such astronomical stakes?

⁵⁴ “Performance” is another unexamined and oft-cited word in gap-based education discourse that merits further examination, perhaps in the sense that an investment “performs” or, even more suggestively, using Judith Butler’s ideas about performative identity.

In fact, the notion of holding students accountable carries forward two key premises of the segregationists' argument back in 1956. The achievement gap that emerged as part of that argument included a logic of degradation by which Black students' supposedly inferior academic ability was imagined to be a threat to white students that could only be diffused by re-segregation. The discourse of NCLB is far more focused on improving educational outcomes for students on the wrong side of the gap than on "protecting" students on the right side, which in itself is an important departure from the Davis Hearings. At the same time, the language of separation recurs throughout NCLB deliberation. Where the call in 1956 was to separate students by *ability*, the same call in 2001 is issued based on responsibility and, more specifically, *behavior*. A parent who testified in Chicago summed up the impulse: "There should be a place that we can send these children that are not responsible" (*Improving* 18). In other words, children who fail to assume their protean "responsibilities" as students must be separated from the others. Chicago superintendent Paul Vallas, testifying in favor of school choice, offers a slightly clearer sense of who these irresponsible students might be:

We literally have a network of 32 private schools that we consider to be our alternative schools. These are private schools that help us provide educational services to students who drop out, students who are disruptive, and that's not even mentioning the private special education institutions that we have contractual relationships with. So we have taken school choice to another level. (*Improving* 24)

Here the students who are to be separated are those who somehow fail to perform, either because they have left school, breached behavioral expectations, or—interestingly—have been diagnosed a disability.⁵⁵ These students remain on the wrong side of the gap either

⁵⁵ Note that disability is the only overlap in the 1956 and 2001 criteria for exclusion. Asking in more depth how disability functions in gap discourse as what Mitchell and Snyder called the "master trope of human disqualification," is an important question for

willfully—because of their own behaviors—or because they lack innate ability.

Alternative schools were not a new phenomenon; nor were disciplinary expulsions, drop outs, or segregated special education services. However, Vallas' testimony suggests that his district's gap-based reforms were accompanied by an increase in such techniques of exclusion: "In addition to our high academic standards, we have high disciplinary standards. We have a zero tolerance policy. We've expelled 500 students over the past five years" (*Improving* 21).⁵⁶ His comment equates "high standards" with a high rate of expulsion, as if the presence of certain students had been a threat to those standards. One principal adopted this assumption when he spoke of the importance of expulsion, saying, "It's not fair to those students who are doing the right thing and families who are doing the right thing for their education to be compromised by those who don't" (*Improving* 17). Here, students who don't "do the right thing" are held responsible for the educational prospects of those who do; again, their presence is described as a threat.⁵⁷ Certainly, student behavior can be disruptive and in that sense can affect other students and teachers in a classroom or school. However, scholars have repeatedly found that students of color, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities are disproportionately the

future research. I argued in chapter 4 that it was attached, in 1956, to Blackness, and I would contend that it operates similarly in 2001 (for an excellent analysis of the operation of such a conflation, see Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History"). That assertion does not by any means exhaust the critical questions that I hope will continue to be raised about disability.

⁵⁶ Much has been written on "zero-tolerance" policies in schools, which have been widespread since the mid-1990s. The debate on the fairness and effectiveness of such policies is beyond the scope of this project; for an introduction and overview of the debate see Steinberg, Allensworth and Johnson's "Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools" and the Civil Rights Project's Issue Brief, "On 'Zero Tolerance' Policies."

⁵⁷ Along similar lines, Franci analyzed the discourse of the "gender gap" in England, finding boys are cast not only as the "architects of their own failure" but as impeding the growth of their female peers and of the nation itself (193).

subjects of such exclusionary practices (Steinberg, et. al. 8). In other words, the behaviors that merit separation, in discourse and practice, are strongly correlated with identity markers—just as ability was, in 1956, powerfully linked to race. Although there are no explicit calls for re-segregation or ability tracking in 2001, the same groups of students continue to be separated.

While theories of racial segregation have been rejected, the practice continues in American schools. This is no new or contested observation. What has not been adequately considered, however, is how discourse around the achievement gap not only reinforces segregation—its splitting force represents students in terms of a hierarchical dualism—but also insulates it from critical analysis. The frame of “achievement gap” constrains the education policy debate such that historical, social, and economic forces are blurred in a picture that focuses most sharply on individual students in terms of their pathologized difference from a white, middle class standard of test scores, family structure, values, and behavior. Many critics would add that closing the gap is in fact an impossibility. English, among others who echo Horace Mann Bond, points to the design of tests themselves, saying they ensure cultural and socioeconomic disparities. Gillborn argues that the gap between Black and white students is an example of “locked-in inequality,” that is, a disparity so deeply rooted that it will never be closed within the “‘normal’ workings of the system” (240).⁵⁸ More to the point, in my understanding of the gap, closing it entails the impossible task of effacing markers of cultural, racial, linguistic and behavioral differences in order to achieve an essentially homogeneous population. If closing the gap is impossible, the full frontal assault on it that began with *No Child Left*

⁵⁸ Granger also noted that NCLB sets up a “no-win” situation (219). Bass & Gerstl-Pepin suggest that the goal of 100% proficiency is “statistically impossible” (913).

Behind has another important, and resonant, effect. The proliferation of programs designed specifically to close the gap is premised on, and in turn buttresses, the belief that the gap can be closed, and that educators and leaders know how to do it—recall the lyrics of the NCLB theme song: “Research shows we know the way” (Granger 213). If, despite the concentrated efforts of lawmakers and “highly qualified” educators, the goal of closing the gap remains elusive—and if we refuse or neglect to interrogate the goal itself—the logic of the equation will always point to deterministic explanations for disparity. Within such a framework, the old notions of biological inferiority and cultural deprivation—of white supremacy—take on the appearance of common sense. The meritocratic ideals on which the goal is based are enshrined, affirming the enduring American belief that “there is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune” (Emerson).

Conclusion

The Future of the Gap: Rite, Rupture, and Resignification

The case I have worked to make in this project is for an understanding of “achievement gap” as a phrase with a complex history and legacy. Each time it is uttered, “achievement gap” is a repetition, a *citation* of its past uses; even when its historical beginnings are forgotten, the theories and logics out of which the phrase emerged continue to shape its force in public discourse. In 1956 and 2001, we have seen “achievement gap” used as part of a recurring process: naming an educational crisis, classifying students according to a binary logic, and then insulating social and educational institutions from calls for change by scrutinizing and isolating students on the “wrong” side of the gap as if their presence among the mainstream of American students was the cause of the educational crisis. This narrative arc—from “catchy, numerical fact” to crisis, then to classification and exclusion—characterizes gap discourse, but it is not unique to it. Rather than demonstrating something unique about the rhetoric of the gap, what I hope I have demonstrated is that this rhetoric fits a familiar pattern. Fears about the degradation of American intelligence and academic competence run deep, and did not begin in 1956. Certainly, the pattern fits the panic that ensued after the first IQ tests were administered to Army recruits in 1917 and that led to the classification of immigrants based on national origin and date of immigration, which in turn led to immigration restriction acts designed to exclude people from genetically “undesirable” parts of Europe. Although it may be overly dramatic to identify current education practices as “educational sterilization,” as one critic has, it does arguably fit the pattern of data, crisis, classification and exclusion that led to eugenic policies (English 309). Questions that remain to be considered include why educational discourse, in particular, has become the

site of such a cycle, as well as whether other moments of crisis in education—the response to *Sputnik* in 1957, the debates over the first *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1965, the now-infamous *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983, the “Ebonics” debates of the 1990s, for example—fit this pattern and if so, what that means. Future research should ask whether and how the notion of “achievement gap” functions across American educational history, whether its historical reach is still deeper, its legacy still more resonant, than I have suggested here. The moments I have considered indicate that the recurring invocation of an achievement gap and the accompanying pattern of crisis and exclusion maintains a symbolic hierarchy and insulates systems and institutions from critique. This invocation can be understood within the frame of a ritual in American educational discourse, one that reaches across partisan and pedagogical divides. I would like to consider two possible ways of understanding the function and futurity of such a ritual. For cultural and literary critic Sacvan Bercovitch, it must be understood as a broader “rite of assent” that comprises the inescapable, all-encompassing juggernaut of American ideology. Consistent with a Marxist understanding of ideology, Bercovitch envisions American exceptionalism as capable of absorbing any critique, resulting in what many have found a rather bleak prognosis for resistance or change. In Judith Butler’s more deconstructive vision, on the other hand, every ritual carries within it the possibility of its own unraveling. Butler speaks of the political, counter-hegemonic possibilities of “insurrectionary speech.” Although gap discourse has, in the moments I’ve considered, operated as the kind of self-sealing ritual of consensus theorized by Bercovitch, I will suggest that a deconstructive view of language offers an alternative view of iteration and the possibility of transformation.

Rite of Assent

Many scholars, skeptical as they may be about reform initiatives, nonetheless repeat the same language of *crisis* that that President Bush and Chairman Boehner invoked in 2000 to describe the stakes of gap-based reform. A sampling of academic journals from the past decade highlight the almost formulaic nature of crisis rhetoric in this discourse:

The substantial gap in educational achievement between Black and White children is one of the most pernicious problems facing American society. (Burchinal, et. al. 1404)

On a long-term basis, the achievement gaps reflect a decline of the U.S. (and the West) and the rise of the East. (Ornstein 424)

The achievement gap poses a very real problem and danger to individuals, families, communities, businesses, states and the United States, as a whole...time is running out. (Donlevy 3)

The concern of closing the achievement gap is not a domestic issue; it is global... The ability of the United States to continue as a powerful nation, in many ways, resonates within its capacity to provide quality education. (Hunter and Bartee 157)

Even Randi Weingarten, the leader of the American Federation of Teachers and vocal critic of NCLB and other reform policies, used near-apocalyptic language: “We cannot allow our children to move from educationally shortchanged to economically extinct in a global economy” (75). The crisis rhetoric has even been directed against NCLB itself, which one scholar called “a time bomb ticking at the center of the public education system,” ominously adding, “Unless we want to find ourselves standing amidst the rubble, we need to get to work” (Neill 119).

Bercovitch has viewed the rhetoric of crisis, hearkening back to the Puritan jeremiad sermons, as a normative force that at once activates and reins in the

individualistic and enterprising spirit of American subjects. Such language, in Bercovitch's view, operates by "simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream" (*American Jeremiad* 86, 180). Framing social problems in terms of the distance between reality and national principles performs a recommitment to those principles, reinscribing the importance of the American "promise" (83). Contemporary gap discourse thus serves a dual function when closing the gap is framed as a "moral imperative" demanding that the nation "deliver on the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*" (Weingarten 70). In this vein, even the most scathing criticisms of NCLB policy begin by affirming the policy's goal of closing the achievement gap, often invoking, as Weingarten does, a central American *promise* and decrying the distance between that promise and current policy. A collection of essays by prominent educational scholars, revealingly titled *Many Children Left Behind*, begins in this way:

Isn't this the great promise of our public school system—that all children, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, creed, color, or disability will have equal access to an education that allows them to enjoy the freedoms and exercise the responsibilities of citizenship in our democracy? As proposed, the federal No Child Left Behind legislation stood as a continuation of this historic promise. (Meier and Wood vii)

The essays in the volume go on to demonstrate the failure of that legislation to deliver on its promise. Such sentiments are also reflected in public opinion, which polls consistently indicate reflect an affirmation of the drive to close the gap even when they have unfavorable opinions of specific plans for doing so (Hess and Petrilli 22). As I noted in the beginning, the importance of closing the achievement gap has secured nearly universal assent from citizens, policymakers, and scholars whose opinions are otherwise vastly divergent. The goal carries within it logics that maintain the gap and de facto segregation, yet it is consistently re-inscribed to do its paradoxical work. This is the

nature of a rite of assent in Bercovitch's thought: In renewing citizens' commitment to an egalitarian national "promise," it also defines who is considered part of that promise by way of exclusion. This dual purpose is one way to understand what might seem to be a contradiction in the foregoing chapter. I suggest that gap rhetoric operates, on the one hand, to overdetermine race, reinforcing white supremacist hierarchies and thus discursively separating students, recapitulating the logics of degradation and segregation. On the other, I have also discerned in recent gap rhetoric an impulse to commodify students, to make them homogeneous and interchangeable. These seemingly competing urges—to segregate and to standardize—mark gap discourse as a rite of assent. As a means of fortifying American identity, the ritual is premised on exclusion, or a kind of definition through negation: what it means to be American is defined and revised by shifting notions of who is not included in the category. At one point, for instance, the opening line of the Declaration was redefined, in discourse and practice, to guarantee only that "all propertied, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant males are created equal" ("Rites of Assent" 18). The notion of a persistent achievement gap is a similar movement of exclusion, positing a divide between the good students who constitute Paige's "leap into the future of America" and the rest, who threaten to hold it back. "But in the long run," Bercovitch notes, "exclusion was a strategy for absorption" (22). Similarly, the gap is most often invoked as part of an effort to close it. Chairman Boehner's comment opposing the achievement gap to the American dream is emblematic of this movement: "We must close the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged of our nation's students and make sure that the American dream is within the grasp of all our nation's children" (*State Leadership* 3). On the one hand, it is an example of the way that "those on the

losing end of the achievement gap metaphor are viewed as outsiders to the U.S.” (Cross 252). On the other, Boehner’s call is for bringing those “outsiders” to the center of “the American dream.” The identity markers of students on the wrong side of the gap cannot be erased to achieve perfect interchangeability with the paradigmatic white, native-born, middle class, non-disabled suburban-dwelling student. And yet, as Boehner’s comment indicates, the American myth is more importantly about homogeneous *values*, a “moral framework within which a certain complex of attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs can be taken for granted as being right.” What Bercovitch describes as the “tyranny of middle-class thought” forms “the basis on which the most heterogeneous people in the world was molded into what remains the most monolithic of modern cultures” (Bercovitch, “Rites” 20).

In this light, the achievement gap can be seen as a kind of exclusion that aims for absorption: the goal of gap-based reform is, after all, to “identify those gaps and see what we can do to close those gaps in all areas” (*Reading 24*). *Identifying* gaps highlights problematic differences of students who are Black, Latino, non-native English speakers, disabled, poor, immigrant or migrant; Seeking to *close* them, then, is a wish to erase those differences. If that goal could be realized, it would indicate that those students had been successfully socialized into the moral framework that David Tyack described as the *raison d’etre* for American common schools, whose proponents argued that “public education was the most humane form of social control” in a state that depended upon homogeneity (75).

By hearkening back to the early republic, the period upon which Bercovitch and Tyack focus, I intend to suggest that the outcome of an analysis like mine reveals that the

thinking behind achievement gap rhetoric can be traced back further than its first appearance in print back in 1956. An understanding of the achievement gap must be re-historicized in such a way that any pretensions of it being a liberatory notion, a tool that might be used to dismantle existing structures of inequality and discrimination, fall away. In this analysis, its extraordinary force in the public imagination since 2000 points less to a new national preoccupation with equity and more towards preservation of the longstanding socializing function of American schools (Tyack). When scholars and organizations that decry NCLB affirm its goal of closing the gap, they offer tacit agreement to the theories and assumptions that underlie the idea that educational problems are best described as an achievement gap, and that solving those problems would require closing it. My objective in the foregoing chapters was to demonstrate that those theories and assumptions are far from neutral, and that the rhetorical force of “achievement gap” is decidedly anti-liberatory. And yet, in Bercovitch’s theory, there is no escape from the conservative function of the ideology of consensus; dissent is always already part of the larger rite of assent. In his formulation, my project would likewise have to be understood as superficial dissent that ultimately plays into the larger ritual of affirming American exceptionalism. It is a fairly hopeless view to take, and it is one that I cannot wholeheartedly accept. While helpful in bringing the powerful but often subterranean forces within seemingly ordinary U.S. policy discourse into view, Bercovitch’s insistence upon the inevitability of the near-perfect reproduction of myths in a kind of hermetically sealed ritual cycle is undermined by an important insight about language’s inescapably unruly force. While there may be no simple ways out of those

cycles, and while many attempts at critique are easily and instantly swallowed within them, I would stop short of labeling transformation impossible.

Rupture and Resignification

What, then, should we, as language users who have a stake in educational equity, *do*? During my work on this project, I have been asked that question countless times. “If we can’t say ‘achievement gap,’ what do we say instead?” Some commentators have taken to calling it an “opportunity gap” in an effort to shift the focus from student performance to educational and social structures. Others have taken Ladson-Billings’ suggestion that we talk about an “education debt” rather than a gap. The notion that renaming the gap will solve the problem of language undermining a speaker’s intention to remedy educational inequity is beset by precisely the problem of Bercovitch’s ritual (it is also, I would suggest, an oversimplification of Ladson-Billings’ critique). At the same time, imagining an ideology that is perfectly whole and hermetic, offering no way to say “no” without actually and more fundamentally saying “yes,” is to suggest that language users have no agency, no responsibility for their words and their effect upon larger discourses. This fatalistic view overlooks what Butler has called the “insurrectionary” potential of language, the ruptures or fault lines that appear in even the most ritualistically-cited phrases as they are repeated. The paradoxical force of “achievement gap” is a case in point of the unruly force of language. That most invocations of the gap are “infelicitous” in their effects is, on the surface (and as Austin’s word suggests), unfortunate. Beyond that, however, it reminds us that utterances don’t predictably align with any particular intention or reliably preserve the meanings of any ideology. The potential of “achievement gap” is the same as my problem with it—its unlimited iteration

in public discourse and its unruly citationality. Like any speech act, notwithstanding the speaker's intended meaning, each new utterance of "achievement gap" points to, or *cites*, earlier uses of the phrase. As speakers, we cannot control or limit the ways our utterances link to previous speech acts, nor can we dictate or predict the perlocutionary effects of our utterances. At the same time, Butler has suggested that this very quality of language, each utterance's inevitable link to previous utterances, can in fact "enhance and intensify our sense of responsibility" for discourse—but not, I would add, if we have erased or forgotten the scenes of those previous utterances. Butler contends that such responsibility rests on a recognition that "the responsibility of the speaker does not consist of remaking language *ex nihilo*, but rather of negotiating the legacies of usage that constrain and enable that speaker's speech" (28). It is this call to which my project of re-historicizing gap rhetoric has responded, hoping to submit these "legacies of usage" for consideration in the discourse of educational equity in order that we might more mindfully negotiate them. Would this kind of recognition and negotiation of the mixed and problematic legacies of a phrase exempt us from the operation of the kind of ritual of consensus that Bercovitch describes? Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that. Butler's paradoxical call—to negotiate legacies over which we have no control; to assume responsibility for that which exceeds our intentions—is a dilemma in the true sense of the word; moreover, it is one that characterizes all speech. The question at the heart of an ethical engagement with discourse is how, recognizing that "one speaks a language that is never fully one's own," one can nonetheless exercise responsibility.

Recognizing that language operates within a "social ritual," Butler acknowledges that the force of that ritual is difficult to resist because it is invisible and ubiquitous in its

effects (159). Her vision of ritual coincides with Bercovitch's insofar as it is linguistic and it serves to reproduce symbolic hierarchies and cultural myths. Unlike Bercovitch, however, Butler views the ritual as the potential site of rupture, arguing that because the contexts in which utterances occur are illimitable and unpredictable, every repetition contains the possibility that a speech act might "function in contexts where it has not belonged," taking on an unanticipated force and meaning that might amount to "subversive resignification" (157). The parody of Horace Mann Bond, the assiduously skeptical language of the *Afro-American*, and the unexpected arguments against the NAACP's Nyack report might be understood as moments of rupture, even if they were quickly subsumed (then again, this project is evidence that they remain in circulation, however limited it may be). Aside from these moments, the phrase "achievement gap" seems to have largely escaped scrutiny and become an article of faith. If that is true, however, it reveals one of Butler's potentially transformative "contexts where [the gap] has not belonged": in the spotlight of rhetorical analysis.

Educational historian Camika Royal recently challenged the education world to "Stop Using the Phrase 'Achievement Gap,'" arguing in a widely circulated and much-discussed column that the phrase was "inaccurate, inflammatory, insensitive and incorrect." Her column sparked a conversation within, among other places, Teach For America, the organization that was the primary subject of her critique and a prominent site of gap-based discourse. I will briefly consider that column and some of the dozens of responses to it to ask whether they offer moments, or glimpses, of the kind of counter-hegemonic rhetoric that Butler describes. Of course, Royal's column—despite its entreaty—didn't lead to the erasure of the phrase from education discourse; in fact, it had

the opposite effect. The column itself, which was reposted dozens of times, contributed to the proliferation of the phrase. That is not to mention the responses, which included a series of five columns on Teach For America's public blog, *Pass the Chalk*, and the addition of a page-long note on the phrase "achievement gap" in the TFA curriculum for new teachers. Far from eliminating the phrase, Royal's column called attention to it, making it more visible, and arguably *differently* visible, than it had been before. This is, for Butler, an irony of attempts to regulate speech—that in a campaign asking for the end of a phrase, one must repeat that phrase endlessly. Paradoxical though it may be, the effect is potentially productive for the way it establishes the speech act in question as a site of contestation. While the hate speech on which Butler focuses her analysis has long been contested, for "achievement gap" to be a contested term within the public discourse and the official documents of Teach For America is certainly new. What had been an unquestioned consensus, an unexamined presupposition, has been offered for interrogation, and a new space for critical conversation has been opened.

The counter-hegemonic potential of language requires, for Butler, an understanding that we, as language users, are not the *origin* of speech acts, but are rather the site of a *repetition* by which we "renew the linguistic tokens of a community" (39). A recognition of the limits of intention is a part of this understanding, and such a recognition was among the insights offered in responses to Royal's column. One argued against dismissing Royal's critique as a misunderstanding of speakers' intentions, insisting that "it is a privilege to live in a world where I have complete control over the meaning of my words and how they are interpreted, and where I do not have to think about the broader implications of the things I say and the words I use" (Diaz, et al.).

Rather than a privilege, I would suggest it is an impossibility. More to the point, this comment calls for readers to “think about the broader implications” of language, asking us to take responsibility for our words not in spite of, but precisely *because* of, the way in which they exceed our intent. One teacher’s response to Royal recounted a meeting at which a Black high school student asked a panel of white education reporters what they meant when they kept saying “achievement gap.” The student’s question was left unanswered because, the author inferred, no one could bring themselves to say “we mean the difference between the academic achievement of our kids and you.” She later reflected on the discomfort, concluding that “we were speaking in a way that made clear the definition [of the gap] was intended for those ‘outside the gap’” (Scherer). The student’s question and the teacher’s realization point to a rupture in the consensus that has been central to the force of “achievement gap” since the Davis hearings. It offers a way to interrogate the notion of the gap that doesn’t attempt to deny any statistical finding, but rather points to the phrase’s political valences, dissolving the veneer of objectivity.

Conversations like the one sparked by Royal are contentious and unsettling, even if we set aside (as I will) the *ad hominem* attacks that cropped up regularly in comments, tweets, and blog posts about the column. Even those who recognize the problematic implications of the phrase argue that it has functioned to call attention to disparate academic outcomes and, in doing so, importantly focused educators’ efforts to remedy inequities at a school level. Abandoning the phrase in recognition of the complex social and economic causes of educational inequity might lead to a return to institutional neglect of historically marginalized students, the “throw-up-our-hands perspective that says ‘until

you solve poverty you can't solve the achievement gap” (Farr). Although the question explicitly at issue in the debate is whether we should stop using the term “achievement gap” altogether, I would suggest that a simple abandonment would accomplish little, and that a search for any single term to describe the complex of disparities and inequalities in American education, one that acknowledges history and avoids simplified notions of causality, is asking words—not to mention institutions and social dynamics—to function in a way that they do not. It is asking for a way to name a phenomenon without limiting it or imposing an ideological frame upon it, when framing and limiting are precisely the ways naming makes concepts or phenomena intelligible. I would suggest that we ask a different question than whether to preserve or strike “achievement gap” from our language, perhaps considering instead how to break out of the either/or frame in which “throwing up our hands” in the face of forces like poverty seems like the only alternative to bracketing, downplaying, or ignoring such factors. How, that is, might we *simultaneously* acknowledge the powerful effects of institutions and systems on students’ lives and learning *and* critically reexamine popular assumptions and understandings about the nature of intelligence, learning, and education? Perhaps more to the point, how can we use language in such a way that we at least minimize the extent to which we foreclose that possibility from the moment we open our mouths to speak?

If we simply abandon the phrase “achievement gap,” we lose the rupturing potential of the phrase. Butler asks us to consider “interrogating the terms that we need to live, and ... taking the risk of living the terms that we keep in question” (163). For those of us who talk about education in the United States, the challenge is whether we can continue to cite “achievement gap” *and* to hold it in question. Past utterances and the

gap's scene of emergence will continue to exert their force, but would it be possible to graft other meanings and forces onto the term in a way that would complicate the notion and undermine its utility as a vehicle for easy political consensus? Could we talk about the "achievement gap" while recognizing that, in doing so, we invoke both the structural inequities we seek to address *and* a subterranean narrative of white supremacy and cultural homogenization? Could we then cite the phrase *against* its own logic of segregation, using it instead to expose, and remind ourselves of, a history of racial subordination along with a cultural tendency to pathologize difference and quarantine those students who, whether in terms of race, nationality, income, (dis)ability, or conduct, are deemed problematically different?

To do so, if it is possible to do so, will require that we dwell in discomfort. Steven Farr, the author of *Teaching as Leadership*, a cornerstone of Teach For America's teacher training curriculum, responded to Royal, ultimately failing to reach a particular conclusion: "The truth is that I am at this point feeling unsettled by these conversations and uncertain about whether and how they should change my actions." His failure to attain closure is a productive and important one, for attention to the history and rhetorical force of "achievement gap" necessarily renders it profoundly unsettling. Like the teacher who realized that she was reluctant to tell her students what she meant by a phrase she had been uncritically using to describe them, a mindful stance towards language can be profoundly uncomfortable and can defy easy answers about how we might change our actions (Scherer). What if we dwell in the discomfort and paradox of "achievement gap," continuing, rather than concluding, conversations about it? If the force of the phrase has indeed become an *unsettling* one, perhaps therein lies its transformative potential.

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