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## Depressed & Dis-eased: Storytelling, Melancholia and the Rhetorical Affordances of Affect

Carlee Franklin

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DEPRESSED AND DIS-EASED: STORYTELLING, MELANCHOLIA AND THE  
RHETORICAL AFFORDANCES OF AFFECT

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

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by  
Carlee Alexandria Franklin  
June 2020

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## ABSTRACT

Because racial oppression is often internalized, this thesis examines literature written by POC about protagonists of color struggling with depression. The pieces are Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, Haruki Murakami's "Tony Takitani," and Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Using literary concepts informed by Black feminist theory, decolonial theory, and affect studies, as well as rhetorical frameworks of silence and listening, this thesis attempts to better understand how the relationship between depression and racial oppression work to color the life expectancy and perspectives of depressed people of color.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATION

This is for every depressed black woman I have ever met, in fiction or otherwise. I see you. I love you.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## TRAVERSING THE DISCOURSE

### Introduction

I have always thought about dysthymic depression in very specific terms. The character Dory from the Disney film *Finding Nemo* (2003) said it best: “when life gets you down, you have to just keep swimming.” Well, depression complicates this slightly. If major depression is equivalent to not wanting to or being able to swim for periods of time and manic depression is not wanting to or sometimes being able to swim at faster speeds, dysthymia is swimming consistently but with a cramp in your leg. In American society especially, given our capitalistic attention to productivity and consistent expansion, a swimmer (aka person) who can continue to perform despite their ailments doesn’t necessarily garner the same concern or care as one who fails to swim consistently. And this has startling consequences. Thus, many people fail to realize that they are indeed suffering from dysthymia. Some of it has to do with the fact that dysthymia is often so intrinsically tied to one’s personality of being moody, abrasive or a “downer.” However, some of it has to do with the invisibility of its representation.

While attention has been paid to characters in the Romantic era and pre-modern literary eras, little if any attention has been paid to mental illness in contemporary characters outside the genre of memoir or autobiography. I think

here of popularized non-fiction such as *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen published in 1993 and *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel in 1994. Digging further, even literary fiction such as Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar* (1963) produces a very particular discourse on what it means to be a woman and American. In its contemporary terms, specifically, these works do not address the dual marginalization of those who struggle with issues of race and gender on top of classism and homophobia. What contemporary protagonists in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Junot Diaz's *the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Haruki Marukami's "Tony Takitani" (2002) express are several things, but more specifically: the desire of oppressed individuals to find freedom not only in their physical space but also their psychological one. What is of interest for me is how these characters navigate their everyday lives despite depression being a chronic omnipresence that alters their very world.

Likewise, racial oppression is often internalized by those who live under its juridical and extra juridical reach. Given that literature is a place to examine inner monologues and interiority, literature can provide insight into the experiences and expressions of racialization and the melancholia that the system of racism often produces. Grounded in Barbara Christian's understanding of literature by people of color—and specifically, Black-identifying authors – as always already theorizing, I will theorize alongside three pieces of literature named above. This is done for the purpose of understanding how these texts represent and theorize systemic racism and its legacy of affect which, I argue, manifests as depression.

For these characters, their internal worlds are informed by their external ones. The endogenous and exogenous nature of depression for these characters is at the heart of my analysis because it demonstrates the fluid connection between the outside pressures fueling dysthymia, the depressed dispositions of these characters, as well as the self-defeating and critical thoughts that effect the choices and agency they exhibit in their actions. Understanding environmental factors of oppression can lead to a deeper understanding of the stance that many depressed contemporary characters take. The duplicitous nature of their performance, (i.e. performing happiness, normalcy, and or self-assuredness) calls attention to the invisibility of their chronic illness. It also rhetorically situates these characters as windows for further possibility in literary criticism.

As discussions surrounding identity markers and intersectionality theory proliferates the spheres of literary studies and related disciplines of cultural and ethnic studies, this conversation calls attention to the various ways depressed folks of color are erased or otherwise misread in literature and society. Popular literature thus far has produced a very particular discourse on what it means to be mentally ill. This discourse does not address mental illness such as depression as an intersectional experience. In turn literary theory has grossly overlooked the ableist marginalization of those who struggle with depression on top of racism, gender discrimination, and classism. Thus, in order to bridge this gap, I use an interdisciplinary approach to theorize about melancholia and race

working at the intersections of black feminist theory, decolonial studies, affect studies, and rhetorical criticism.

Later in my project, I explore depression as a literary motif, but here I will draw attention to why I am using dysthymia. As such, I also explore how melancholy (and I do use them quite interchangeably) and its connection to the trauma of racialization and racism must be examined through multiple interdisciplinary frameworks to be understood in its complexity. To perform a close reading of the selected text, I use *Maud Martha* as my primary source unpacking the novel in detail. This in-depth reading is then extended by way of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and “Tony Takitani” to show the possibilities for greater analysis given the multiple frameworks mentioned above. By focusing on three selected scenes from Diaz and Murakami’s work, I am proposing a method for further study and by no means suggest my work is exhaustive. In thinking how and why I have taken up multiple theoretical frameworks, I feel that only one lens would flatten my reading. It would ultimately defeat the purpose of this project, as these frames help unpack the very real, intersectional, and enmeshed life experiences of marginalized and depressed people of color such as the ones in these fictional worlds.

Depression in literature needs to be contextualized. As anything out of context gets misconstrued, so too can the understanding of what depression is and looks like across generations, cultures, and socioeconomic status. The contemporary portrayals of mental illness, and specifically depression in modern

literature, is not without history. Many illustrations can be made: the war veteran returning home to a world he no longer knows, angst-ridden teenagers on the brink of liminal change. But one in particular has stained my mind. It is early 1900s portrayals of depressed women. Many have seen the depiction in television and film of a wealthy middle-aged woman at her wit's end. She is typically either bored of her mundane home-centered life caring for children, bored of a sexless or lackluster love life, or numb from little to no true intimate relationships with friends or family. This woman has come to stand in as a universal trope of what depression is. Her experience, though engendered, is rife with white privilege and often class privilege that presents a very narrow definition of how depression manifests and is treated.

Entrenched in sexism and misogyny, the answer to her cry for help was often swift and severe. Electromagnetic shock “therapy” was a means to quail, what psychiatrists of the time called “feminine hysteria” (Johnson 56). As Oxford English Dictionary confirms, the etymology of the word hysteria is quite literally linked to the Latin term *hystericus*. This roughly translates to the English word “hysterion: of or pertaining to the uterus or womb” (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus depression i.e. “feminine hysteria” is quite literally pathologized as a woman’s disease. Authors, particularly white women authors, have utilized their repressed white women characters in fiction to challenge this sexist diagnosis. Kate Chopin’s 1899 novel *the Awakening* comes to mind. Her main character suggests the answer to finding freedom from the bonds of a depressed existence

for any woman is to drown herself, voluntarily. While seemingly extreme, this fight for freedom amid clear systemic privilege for women of color who struggle with similar mental health issues feels far-fetched. This distinction between freedom and liberation is at the heart of much of these portrayals of depression in literature that often renders it unrelatable to most black and brown audiences. Returning then to the issue of representation, beyond being maddened by boredom, repressed sexual interests, and crushed under the heel of domesticated womanhood, these repressed women were almost exclusively white and wealthy. Given all of this, it is safe to say that the depression of women is far greater than the small scope consumed in mass media: film, television and literature.

Contextualizing depression also involves a consideration of the socio-historical lens of who can be depressed and acknowledgement that the culture of production, that is to say film, media, and literature have relied heavily on outdated tropes of illness and wellness that are ethnically, culturally and socially fixed. We must acknowledge the intersectional and interlocking systems of privilege which produce precarious conditions perfect for depression and melancholy to manifest. This is done in order to recognize the vast experiences of the condition that read dis-ease and disease for what they truly are: symptoms of structural and institutional conditions.

What is Dysthymia?

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While there are many forms of mental illness, dysthymia's pernicious nature seems most useful in my inquiry given its connection to melancholy and the daily toil of the condition. The DSM-5 pathologizes dysthymia as a:

[loss of] interest in once enjoyed activities, feelings of hopelessness, lacking productivity, having low self-esteem, and an overall feeling of inadequacy. These feelings last for years and may significantly interfere with relationships, school, work and daily activities. (DSM-5 Diagnostic code: 300.4).

Given that dysthymia is categorized in the DSM 5 as a mood disorder, it is often co-morbid affecting an individual's quality of life in drastic ways: these include an unstable sense of self-worth and trouble identifying toxic relationships, both important themes in the literary fiction to come. Dysthymia works as a chronic omnipresence coloring self-perception, behavior and beliefs. As I argue, dysthymia, despite its psychological definition, is not divorced from its close literary relative melancholy.

### A Culture of Melancholy

Melancholy as a concept has informed the lives of individuals across the ages. Used in literature as an analogy, metaphor, and motif, melancholy defines a disposition as much as it provides the backdrop for many lived experiences. It

is often described as the aftermath of great loss or change. Melancholy is relatable given its impermanence. Many have mourned the death of a loved one, an end of a relationship, and the loss of a home or way of life caused by natural disaster or circumstances beyond one's control. Yet, when feelings transmute beyond grief, they create new connotations. They become abnormal.

Melancholia is an interminable suffering that lacks a seeming purpose. In drawing a connection between grief and melancholy, Freud posits in *Mourning and Melancholia* that melancholy is grief attached to self-hatred (15). For Freud, melancholia's roots are far more ambivalent than grief, which has a direct causal effect. Thus, it would seem logical that for those who experience similar events or trauma, there will be similar affect.

For example, those dislocated by Hurricane Katrina may also understand the feelings of grief financially, mentally and physically in a way that others may only sympathize with. Further still, complicated by factors of identities and their corollary oppressions, including socio-economic class, gender, sexuality, and race, the divide between what is understood or recognized may continue to grow.

When we acknowledge that Hurricane Katrina devastated the Lower Ninth Ward, a part of New Orleans that was predominately black and already infiltrated by unemployment, lack of health resources and an impaired school system, the long-term health impact of these deficits on top of the natural disaster create serious physical health complications and long-term mental illness—among which must certainly be melancholia. As melancholia

exacerbates life circumstances of the individual, what happens within an entire group? As Jermaine Singleton writes in his book *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Race, Impossible Mourning, and African American Ritual*, “cultural melancholy’ uncovers and addresses the ideological and physical claims of the history of slavery and ongoing racial subjugation on contemporary racialized subject-formations and dominant American culture” (3). Becoming and coping and grieving as a person of color comes with melancholy. Accounting for the ambivalent roots of melancholy, when unpacked using theoretical frames attuned to addressing racism and hegemony, the picture becomes clearer. People of color who are mentally suffering do so with a complicated subset of environmental and societal factors that must be addressed in order to appreciate the full scope of their experiences.

Since antiquity melancholia has defined aspects of human existence, but in modernity it has taken more scientific dimensions. The Oxford English Dictionary centers melancholia as, “a pathological state of despondency...severe endogenous depression, with [...], feelings of worthlessness and guilt, and thoughts of death or suicide.” These feelings of guilt and despondency are unique features of chronic depression.

Melancholia represented within the daily toil of chronic depression (i.e. dysthymia) is a useful affective experience to unpack. Dysthymia as a mood disorder often is comparable to what affect theorist Lauren Berlant calls, “the buffeting emotional weather of everyday life” (67). Dysthymia silently diminishes

its host, chipping away at the person until they feel nothing is left. To assert dysthymia as a literary motif calls for a larger frame of reference for the socio-environmental factors amalgamating to produce life circumstances which breed it. Psychiatrists Dr. Clemmont E. Vontress et al. study counseling African Americans with an understanding that the legacy of, “250 years of enslavement, prejudice, and discrimination, reflect[s] dysthymia in chronic low-grade sadness, anger, hostility, aggression, self-hatred, hopelessness, and self-destructive behaviors,” (Vontress et al. 130). These behaviors can also be explored through the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance.

Defined by American social psychologist Leon Festinger, cognitive dissonance is the psychological distress experienced by a person holding contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values (Festinger 234). This discomfort leads to avoidant or proactive behavior. On a macro-level, this cognitive dissonance could be described as a culture of dysthymia given the way it is pathologized as a learned behavior, a method of survival. Vontress et.al coin the term, “Cultural Dysthymia” as a subset of dysthymia arguing that because, “personality is the internalization of culture,” it is logical to assume that communities that face similar oppression will have similar dispositions (Vontress et al 131). To believe that an entire culture can be based on denial, self-alienation, and the need for further introspection is not too surprising when we examine the legacy of empire across the globe, but especially within the United States.

In addition to cognitive dissonance, which occurs when an individual has conflicting belief systems, there is also the phenomenon of incongruence. Incongruence rests on the knowledge that something is not right in one's life, but there is no seeming pathway to create change. One can view cognitive dissonance as a lack of agency to make a choice regarding what is one's truth. However, incongruence is a step beyond cognitive dissonance because it recognizes the individual's truth, yet they remain lost or unable to enact this truth. Competing outside forces create this confusion. Most often these outside forces are cultural fixtures within that individual's life. These may include heteronormative ideas of family, relationships or sexuality, but largely they buffet against the walls of hegemony despite the particular issue. Thus, I argue given the scientific and cultural implications of depression, dysthymia needs to be understood as both endogenous and exogenous.

We understand in literary studies that subjectivities of the oppressed shape life expectancy and experiences. We understand these folks live within and persist despite these legacies of racialized oppression. We also seem comfortable analyzing how this oppression is internalized psychologically in discourse as we explore the interplay of power and agency. What we don't take up enough is how these psychological affective stances are simultaneously produced internally (from genetics) and externally (from oppression). Some fields seem to be unpacking the tension between nature and nurture such as Epigenetics, "the study of heritable phenotype changes that do not involve

alterations in the DNA sequence” (Dupont 353). While this work is promising to see the impact of learned behavior on generational pathologies (in my particular interest, fear, anxiety and depression), it can also support the view that these outside forces are exogenous causes of depression.

In psychology, they use the term endogenous to describe depression originating from within a person. But given legacies of systemic oppression and marginalization, it is safe to assume that for some, especially people of color, this depression must also be exogenous. By rhetorically analyzing the affective experiences of depressed literary characters of color, we can both gauge a deeper understanding of the histories that inform their life circumstances while also more deeply listening to what they have to say about life itself. In returning to the idea of, Cultural Dysthymia, I explore how character’s internal melancholic worlds are even more constrained by their external oppressive ones.

### Building a Decolonial Praxis

Understanding racial oppression through literature must be done by listening to oppressed voices. Some argue this requires a decolonial praxis because decolonial theory is a rejection of and a divestment from exploitative power. We can reduce problematic readings of POC literature by decolonizing the very hermeneutics used to interpret them. To this end, I return to the Barbara Christian and her work “A Race for Theory,” which I named above, and specifically her argument that which posits that works of literature (by writers of color—especially black people) are always already a theorizing. While multiple

modalities are necessary to generate these understandings, four in particular inform my thesis: Decolonial Theory, Black Feminist Theory, Affect Theory, and Rhetorical Criticism.

The daily toil of dysthymia is connected to the systemic forms of oppression that create attacks to a person's physical, emotional, spiritual and financial safety. Through decolonial theory, marginalized voices are centered not for the sole purpose of identifying or representing these narratives, but as a means to enact rhetorical listening, thus decentering the perspective of whiteness in literature. Decolonial theory also connects Dysthymia as a thread between psychology and race, as it centers the daily toil of oppression through the very voices and experiences of the oppressed. In so doing, this enacts resistance disinterested in speaking back to institutions of oppression, though their subjects concern them. Black feminist studies much like decolonial theory speaks from the margins, and its use in my analysis is two-fold. For one, Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides the principle foundation for understanding the systemic pressures that affect individual's personal lives. Secondly, these institutions based on whiteness and the investment in it also seem to bolster themselves on principles like the American Dream, an affective experience of hope, shame, and rage. These intense emotive experiences about these types of idea: belonging, embodiment, and assimilation rhetorically situates a method for understanding the arguments that

these dysthymic characters are making about life, depression, and racial oppression beyond a scope of what has been heard.

Unpacking racialized experiences in literature must account for how Western Civilization has crossed sacred bounds of indigenous, diasporic, and immigrant ancestral lines. It must also understand the legacies of empire which have produced circumstances that lead to disease and dis-ease. Attending to questions of (dis)belonging, objectification, and dis-identification, dysthymia will be rhetorically analyzed within the fictional worlds of three dysthymic characters of color: Maud Martha Brown, Oscar de Leon, and Tony Takitani.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

From its roots, decolonial theory has been interested in exploring and documenting ways racialized subjects have fought for liberation or continue to participate in resistance. Born out of scholarship by Latinx, Chicanx, and Latin American scholars, decolonial theory is a revolutionary praxis devoted to the transdisciplinary study of “sub-alterity” across various Latin, Asian, and African diasporas (Taylor-Garcia). This resistance is performed in a plethora of ways including being impervious to the desire to engage with the oppressive rhetoric of colonialism.

Black Feminist theory, like decolonial theory, emerged outside of academia and is connected to Patricia Hill Collins’ work on Black women’s standpoint. Both enact resistance often disinterested in speaking back to institutions of oppression though their subjects concern them. Black Feminism in practice is decolonial as it troubles epistemic and political constructions of power to expose, reshape, and resist. Reading literature of Black feminists, decolonial thinkers, artists, and critics is arguably just as important as applying these theoretical frames. This is because, as Barbara Christian posits, works of Literature by POC have always theorized. Thus, by appreciating the literary spaces, frameworks, and discourse produced, I wish to theorize alongside work by Black women artists like Gwendolyn Brooks.

Black Feminist theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw, examination of intersectional forms of oppression is also integral to my work. Therefore, coupling Christian with Crenshaw, I more deeply analyze ways these three literary texts theorize experiences of marginalization in unique, complex, and rhetorically situated ways.

Cheryl Glenn's work, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* begins with the premise that speaking signals power in our speaking-heavy world. She continues, "Silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience" (Glenn 2). Both engendered and heavily in need of refocus, passivity and silence are interesting rhetorical stances taken up in Maud Martha and Tony Takitani's lives that will be useful to unpack. Therefore, my project hopes to rhetorically analyze these literary texts drawing connections between emotive experiences involving language that express thoughts and beliefs about who is privileged to speak and who is relegated to listen.

Thinking about multi-voicedness rhetorically is also useful to my study. Language, physical voice, metaphorical voice, audience, willing listener, and unwilling participants create a web of multi-voicedness discourse that individuals experience daily. Individuals can replicate these scripts in their minds, and often can distort them. Negative self-talk, the psychological concept of catastrophizing, and other irrational thoughts describe a type of multi-voiced discourse relevant to my study. I am interested how the voices and roles depressed individuals take up

in their mind shape their decision-making. Often, these voices become antagonizing thoughts fueling a self-defeating inner monologue that encourages similar disempowered choices and actions in their real lives. I then will explore how speech and silence can vacillate in meaning depending on two factors: one being who is listening and the second being the intended audience. This supports examples of theorizing happening in these texts that makes arguments around the importance of who is speaking, listening and judging.

Krista Ratcliffe and Cheryl Glenn's edited collection describes rhetorical listening as an act wrought with sociocultural stances and posits that whiteness functions as an invisible racial category that displaces listening. The work suggests that rhetorical analysis is needed to unpack how whiteness is both pervasive for those who experience it through micro-aggressions and also institutional. Paradoxically, whiteness is made invisible to society at large by white supremacy. It also links rhetorical studies and affect studies as it analyzes the ways discourse is constructed by listener and speaker as performance. Rhetorical criticism pairs well with Affect studies, as I often define rhetoric itself as the performance and embodiment of language. From this definition, affect is the analysis of how this performance creates emotion, behaviors or thoughts that in turn produce their own new sets of affective experiences. Coupling this with my goals of performing a decolonial reading of these texts, I will explore how these affective experiences make specific arguments about what it means to be depressed and racialized. The performance of language is interesting as it

questions how people, more specifically characters write their worlds for themselves.

Affect as a field at large has not invested in the work of decolonial theory. Lauren Berlant in her seminal work *Cruel Optimism* does not seem to relate affect to structural oppression at all. For Berlant, the paradox that is the American Dream is a deeper look into the psyche that touches on the intangible yet prevailing sentiment of hope. She does not address the structural issues, which changes the accessibility to the hope of the American Dream that depend on privilege. From a decolonial perspective, it is necessary to consider how structural racism impacts hope in the American Dream because without it, one cannot consider how this concept is entrenched in a legacy of systemic racism built on heteronormative ideals of family, capitalism, model minority citizenship and other forms of assimilation. What is useful is Berlant's concept of the cruelty in optimism itself. Often, the rhetoric around mental health is a praise of wellness and a shame around disorder and illness. In this neo-liberal construction, it is an individuals' job, (not a community) to foster behavioral health. Coupling Berlant's concepts with Crenshaw's intersectional framework, I further question how cruel optimism is related to a motif of melancholia that is constructed on a macro-scale within *Maud Martha*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and "Tony Takitani." This can be done by analyzing protagonist's investment in or apathy for the American Dream and the various social and behavioral consequences of rejecting hope. Melancholia is often predicated on the absence of hope. Due to

this, the daily toil of chronic depression (i.e. dysthymia) is a useful affective experience to unpack. Decolonial theory is the thread that sews together this discourse of depression, oppression, melancholy, and change. Unpacking the concepts and disciplinary frames of each field is necessary to further assert how each, coupled with decolonial theory in praxis, produces exciting new ways of seeing people, emotions and experiences we may have never addressed otherwise.

### Decolonial Theory

Mainstream media does not help proliferate acceptance or recognition of diverse experiences, especially as one pays attention to the multiplicitous ways folks are made “other” within society. Thus, dissenting narratives, ones that work to dismantle, reject, and reframe experiences of being “othered” and silenced do meaningful work. From its roots, decolonial theory is interested in exploring and documenting ways colonial/ racialized subjects fight for liberation. The Haitian Revolution, orchestrated by enslaved people who lead Haiti’s independence from the French in 1804, was a decisive moment within the history of decolonization. As a rejection of Western European supremacy, decolonial theory is a rich intellectual tradition which draws on local Indigenous knowledgebases while simultaneously using Marxist, rhetorical, and phenomenological methods of analysis.

Anti-colonial thinkers such as Aime Cesaire and Franz Fanon helped build the backbone of decolonial theory by centering indigenous and Black

communities and their knowledge of the land to resist the power of colonial rule. Those whose contributions to decolonial studies are great include: Juan Garrido, Gross Fogell, Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Argentinean-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, known for writing *the Philosophy of Liberation*. Dussel writes, “Against the classic ontology of the center, from Hegel to Marcuse--to name the most brilliant from Europe and North America--a philosophy of liberation is rising from the periphery, from the oppressed [...]Our thought sets out from non-Being, nothingness, otherness, [and] exteriority...” (Dussel 14). From the side lines of the academy, decolonial theory takes up space to liberate. It seeks not to understand but to be understood. As a movement, its chief concerns are critiquing the structures of colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism and globalization. It is useful here to briefly distinguish the work of postcolonial studies and decolonial studies. The roots of postcolonial studies have always been in the academy; thus, its attention has been on institutional reform, through being acknowledged by said institutional structures. Decoloniality’s aims and historical practice is more far reaching. It exists outside the academy having cultural and political implications of radical change and revolutionary teachings that postcolonial theory may at times take up but does not remain consistent with across its theoretical frameworks.

Trans modernity, which defines the creative/aesthetic production in and out of the non-Western world, has had political consequences. Some of these include the rise of independent thought and the rise of decolonial knowledge.

Theorist Maria Lugones has written about this in "Coloniality of Gender," and grappled with the concepts of aesthetics and gender in order to, "join different gendered genealogies of re-existence in artistic practices of people across the world" (Lugones 24). Decolonial theorist and anthropologist Anna Carastathis in her book *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*, discusses concerns of decolonial feminist theory within her 1<sup>st</sup> chapter entitled, "Intersectionality, Black Feminist Thought, and Women of Color Organizing" Carastathis connects mechanized nationalism to the conflict it produces. This conflict is between "U.S. nationals" whose proximity to the state, its institutions and dominant societal norms are overlooked while "aliens" are urged from above and below to disidentify with domestic black and other internally colonized communities (Carastathis 21). This divestment rests heavily on an anti-black and anti-indigenous racism. This further calls out the important absence of Indigenous feminisms that have been vanishing from women's, gender, and sexuality studies. This is called "the present absence" (Carastathis 34). I am interested in drawing connections to this concept, especially in the literature of Gwendolyn Brooks and Junot Diaz for the purpose of connecting indigeneity and erasure to the black American experience.

The work, *Junot Diaz and the Decolonial Imagination* edited by Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and Jose David Saldivar tells how Diaz's inspirations are decolonial. They begin by describing his work as, "Creolized vernacular equal parts urban and island slang that moves seamlessly between

English and Spanish” (Hanna et al. 2-3). These editors claim that Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros gave him a formative education in the aesthetics of decolonization; “from his early musings he has fashioned a decolonial aesthetic” (3). They cite his thesis titled “Negocios” (2015)” as an exploration of this. What becomes significant about two women of color driving Diaz’s explorations of masculinity is the struggle he faces within his work to think beyond the toxic masculinity embedded within and engendered through the struggles of his male character narrators. Thus, the edited collection works to connect Diaz’s work to the decolonial imagination in ways rife for good analysis.

In the anthology entitled, *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta make an important point. In the introduction they say, “It is from within theology, philosophy, cultural studies, and literature that Latina/o scholars have produced distinct ways of thinking that emerge from Latina/o experiences” (5). This frame of thinking is what makes decolonial theory so useful, as it pulls from various disciplines in the academy and grassroots sources of experience to inform its practice. Though, these frames are not without conflict. As Isasi-Diaz calls attention to in her essay, “Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas’ Subjugated Knowledge,” the academy and academics themselves have often failed to value, “lo cotidiano—the everyday,” reality of Latinas within grassroots movements (46). Isasi-Diaz’s work is decolonial because she contributes to the subjugated knowledge of Mujerista discourse that is based on liberation. This is different from freedom, in

that freedom is predicated on having been no constraints. However, liberation accounts for the knowledge and legacy of prior constraints. In some ways, liberation cannot exist without acknowledging and remembering one's own past enslavement or subjugation. Liberation is a process that strives for equity, whereas freedom is without accountability or responsibility, being that neither have ever been made limiting to freedoms of those who possess it. Returning to Isasi-Diaz, she emphasizes the importance of contributing to and collaborating with these understandings and practices of liberation on the grassroots level and not about them. She writes, "Mujerista thought is a "thinking-with," grassroots Latinas rather than a "thinking-about them" (44). She continues: Elaborated by academic Latinas, mujerista discourse takes very seriously what Paulo Freire noted long ago, "At the heart of all liberation thinking there has to be a commitment to the people" (44). As she builds her argument for mujerista discourse, Isasi-Diaz argues that, "the oppressed and impoverished are conscious of their oppression..." (48). In this recognition of a problematized daily struggle, *lo cotidiano*-- Latina's lived experiences inform mujerista theology and women's liberation:

The work we mujerista theologians have done with grassroots Latinas has taught us that the horizon of Latinas lived experience is, first and foremost, the everyday, *lo cotidiano*. We have come to see the importance of *lo cotidiano* of Latinas in such a way that we believe it has to be at the heart

of *mujerista* theology, and we contend that it is of importance to all liberation theologies and struggles (6).

Finding the universal from the specific provides a productive framework for me to unpack how depressed people of color struggle in different ways from similar racialized means. *Lo cotidiano* is also useful as it is an embodied experience that accounts for the memories, better yet the lived history, of oppressed individuals. It includes the practices and beliefs inherited and “habitual judgments” that are a part of “facing life” (48). It is subversive in that it can question oppression and resist it. Acknowledging *lo cotidiano* in my chosen literary works, I hope to continue the work of decolonial theory in a way that appreciates everyday struggles of people of color in relation to mental health.

From *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*, editors Iris D. Ruiz and Raul Sanchez want to delink from false, “universalized notions of rhetoric” that have accompanied Western modernity’s expansion and work to reclaim and create new terms that help explain or, “shed light on the great varieties of Latinx writing, rhetoric, and literacies that continue to emerge and circulate in the culture at large” (xiv). This epistemic delinking is a concept borrowed from theorist Walter Mignolo. His rationale suggests by delinking from Eurocentric/ westernized rhetorical traditions and epistemologies, it allows for decolonial praxis. Throughout the chapter titled “Race”, Ruiz and Sanchez consider how language works to either liberate or oppress in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. In the introduction entitled

“Delinking,” they also use the terms displacement and dispossession to understand a radical tradition starting after the Civil Rights movement. They cite color-blindness as a harmful rhetorical device saying that “the ideal of color-blindness-to justify a legal interpretation that, in effect, perpetuates systemic discrimination based precisely on color (xiv). Micro aggressions, silence and politeness as phenomena, I argue, work in a similar rhetorical fashion. I will expand this argument by analyzing how language displaces or dispossesses character’s sense of power and agency in order to understand how their behaviors work as a means of self-preservation or disassociation.

Citing Gloria Anzaldua’s work on *mestizaje* (miscegenation), which recognizes the duality of subjects that exist within and outside temporal borders of ethnicity, culture and nationhood, Ruiz and Sanchez argue that Anzaldua’s theoretical frames forge connections in ways hegemonic power structures try to disengage. In Anzaldua’s work, we move beyond the subject/object binary to most of what binds us: the inbetweenness. Decolonial theory, “lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, and our thoughts” (Sanchez 80). It is very telling that healing rests on thought. It is the smallest unit of ourselves that is communicated and translated from feeling. It is the beginning of our conscious selves where we can be most private, in control and most alive. This is one of the main reasons I chose to use fiction where protagonist’s inner thoughts are available to analyze and interpret. Moving beyond the binary of oppressed or free reveals potential losses and gains that

come from the interlinked experiences of racialization and depression. Decolonial theory is a study and appreciation of what Anzaldua's work embodies: a "tolerance for ambiguity" that can be transformed subconsciously in an intimate way and location (Rios 114). In embracing plurality, complexity, and even ambiguity this is a rhetorical practice.

The connection between rhetoric, affect and decolonial studies is full of tension. As Ruiz and Sanchez explain, "crucial facets of colonialism and its legacy ... [are] the epistemic quality of colonialism in its privileging alphabetic literacy and denouncing sophists' rhetorical traditions" (Rios 118). Arguing Sophical Rhetorics are based in local histories that "unify global designs"— here again we see the universal in the specific. While a gross oversimplification of the turn against sophism is important to note due to its nature of seeking the winning argument over a "virtuous truth," there is a way that Eurocentric truths harbinger the death of civilizations. Historian Andrea Smith argues that a crucial, "component of colonial legacy is ethnographic entrapment, whereby the Indigenous (and other marginalized peoples) are rendered arhetorical, and thus, put in a position to be seen only as objects of knowledge rather than as sovereign intellectuals" (115). Ethnographic entrapment brings an interesting conundrum: how can an object make or know truth? "It" cannot. How can the literature, writings, art, and musings of oppressed objectified people have truth? They cannot. Ethnographic entrapment is a philosophical and rhetorical means for devaluing the voices and bodies of marginalized people based on Empire. But

in the Black Radical Tradition, Fred Moten reminds us that “the history of blackness is testament to the fact that object cans and do resist” (*In the Break 2*). Dismantling the lie of ethnographic entrapment requires multiple discourses.

On the micro level, studying the rhetorical performance of depressed individuals, there must then be consideration for how they are objectified or abjectify—one being done to them while the latter is done by themselves to themselves. Both victim and assailant traverse the boundaries between accounts for their “sovereign” humanity. On a macro-level, nation-building is and always was a gendered and sexualized project. Nation-building on the crumpled backs of depressed blacks and people of color is arguably part of the legacy of American Empire. This connection between composition, rhetoric, and decolonial praxis will be further analyzed within all three pieces of literature in proceeding chapters.

Decolonial strategies work to normalize and recognize the value of diverse experiences and expressions. It then relocates pathology from inside individuals to the cultural and ecological context. This is explained in psychology as endogenous and exogenous. According to the article, “Decolonial Theory and Disability Studies: On the Modernity/Coloniality of Ability,” “reconceptualizing disability as a historically oppressed minority-group identity rather than an individual aberration,” draws threads between racialization and the physiology of the body (Dirth & Adams 261). This work thus turns the tables acknowledging the affective experiences of marginalized folks that are overlooked and under-

utilized. I argue this omission is caused by our society's desire to make natural and normal hegemony. In this way, they promote a neoliberal philosophy of self-help and individualized mental health disorders that fails to acknowledge the communal or societal constraints that foster the prevalence of these mental disabilities.

### Black Feminist Theory

Black literary critic Barbara Christian says it best: "If black women don't say who they are, other people will say it badly for them" (Christian 2). My analysis rests on many foundational texts in Black Feminist study to explore the experiences of black women writers. Christian's book, *Black Feminist Criticism* from where this quote, and several others to come derive, is a piece that puts black women thinkers in conversation across history. This is done in turn to highlight the very real negotiations of the characters in their material lives but also to unpack the many societal pressures and political changes occurring during the times that these Black women writers were creating. Much as the scholarship of Kimberlé Crenshaw on the legal and systemic consequences of race and gender have spoken to the experiences of black women, so too does Christian draw connections for me in these competing forces working within and around the discourse of black women's work.

In Kimberlé Crenshaw's piece, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," she defines the term intersectionality for which she has coined, and for me, she connects the concepts

of systemic racism and depression together. She begins by exploring the “problem with identity politics,” in that it flattens difference. She writes:

“...this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring differences within groups frequently contributes to tension among groups...” (Crenshaw 93).

The point that she makes about ignoring differences in groups seemed poignant, as here lies much of the trouble of anti-black sentiment within the black community and others across the diaspora. These issues include colorism and classism, and they are prevalent in the work of Diaz and Brooks as characters try to navigate around these realities. Crenshaw then goes on to break down types of intersectionality as they relate to their tangible effects. The first she highlights is structural intersectionality. This accounts for how resources are allocated, how structures of systems, “converge” in ways that erase and endanger certain marginalized groups (Crenshaw 96). Political intersectionality acknowledges the perilous situation that often women of color exist in when it comes to getting their political needs met. This occurs most often when they are not given options that work in tandem to their diverse needs. She states, “I want to suggest that intersectionality offers a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group

politics” (Crenshaw 116). Depression fits neatly into the conversation of structural and political intersectionality because at once, depression being read incorrectly as simply character flaws or anger, self-defeatist behavior and drowsiness may in fact play into stereotypical tropes of blackness that further separates sufferers from seeking the help they need from doctors, counselors or other structural resources. There is also scientific proof that in primary care, many health professionals have implicit bias when it comes to assessing the level of pain and distress happening within their black clients (Hoffman, Trawalter, Axt et al.). When taking into account the near invisibility of the language for depression in much of the black community at large, it is troubling to think how often symptoms of pain and fatigue may be taken for granted.

One such symptom is anger. Audre Lorde’s piece, “the Uses of Anger” unpacks the various ways that anger can be reimagined. She writes:

“It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power.....[it is] our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future...” (285).

In thinking about a character like Maud Martha Brown whose survival is entrenched in Black Respectability politics, poise, and subdued anger,

perhaps this message would be liberating. Many understand Lorde's point that, "Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change" (282). Literary critic Mary Helen Washington's work "Taming all that Anger Down" surely sees the value in anger, though she is quick to dismiss Maud Martha Brown's lack of outer expression of anger as a suppressed rage that is harmful (Washington 78). Though closely related rage seems to be a power that consumes its host whereas anger is a power used by the host to destroy. Looking at Maud Martha's anger as valuable thus in some ways re-centers her as an active agent of change working to her benefit and less to her own detriment. She is not corroding nor ignoring the heavy work of facing the realities that make anger among other emotions a natural response. Instead this analysis introduces anger as an act of self-preservation rather than one of rage-fueled self-destruction. The work of Lorde contributes to the larger conversation about Black womanhood and the responsibility of black women and other women of color to tend to their anger. As Lorde claims:

It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us, but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment. I cannot hide

my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts (289).

Perhaps in thinking about anger in multiple ways, not enmeshed in the manner at which it is given like Washington does, perhaps each unique experience provides a clearer portrayal of Maud Martha Brown and her many incidents that evoke her anger.

From the anthology *Critical Multicultural Perspectives on Whiteness* edited by Virginia Lea, Darren E. Lund, and Paul R. Carr, it states, “Whiteness is a narrative. It is the privileged dimension of the complex story of ‘race’ that was, and continues to be, seminal in shaping the socio-economic structure and cultural climate of the United States and other Western nations” (12). They go on to say that, “Without acknowledging this story, it is impossible to understand fully the current political and social contexts in which we live” (23). The writing of people of color then serves as the antidote to this narrative, working at the borders of these principals. Thus, critical to decentering whiteness as a narrative comes the experience of black feminist voices such as Gwendolyn Brooks.

From the anthology *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* edited by Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas, they include the work of Law professor and critical race theorist Cheryl Harris. In her piece, “Whiteness as Property” Harris reminds us that, “the racialization of identity and the racial

subordination of blacks and Native Americans provided the ideological basis for slavery and conquest. As forms of racialized property were perfected, the value and protection extended to whiteness increased” (277, 280). She also makes a point to say that property was not only external but also the “relationships” that people attached to objects. These included, “human rights, liberties, powers and immunities that are important to well-being, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, freedom from bodily harm, and free and equal opportunities to use personal faculties” (Hines 280). These intangible rights to whiteness function physically in the world making whiteness a property that some are privileged to possess. Though the possession of said privilege comes at a cost. This is important to my work to understand how Maud Martha Brown’s depression is a sort of acknowledgement of the lack she continually faces in this frame, and her contempt at being unable to remove herself entirely from it.

Black studies professor George Lipsitz writes in *the Possessive Investment in Whiteness* that, “this book identifies the ways in which power, property and the politics of race in our society continue to contain unacknowledged and unacceptable allegiances to white supremacy.” He states, “Whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others” (viii). “I contend that the artificial construction of whiteness almost always comes to possess white

people themselves unless they develop antiracist identities.” Lipsitz adds that while white people have the option, “not enough have done so” (viii). He clarifies that opposing whiteness is not synonymous with opposing white people. Nonwhite people can become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants by excluding other outsiders (ix). In thinking about these consequences of privilege and property, it becomes clearer the connections made between systemic oppression and the interpersonal ways people communicate their proximity to whiteness and white privilege through speech, property and nationalism, all of which have consequences to the lives of oppressed people of color. Literature is an important space for which society can come to question why these principles are so inherent in the fabric of our American and Westernized traditions. The bulk of my attention to Black Feminist frameworks relied on the work of Barbara Christian.

Barbara Christian’s seminal work, “A Race for Theory,” points to the many problems facing literary critique. She begins with identifying new philosophers are westernized literary critics who uphold humanistic ideas of: universalism, binary thinking, and absolute truth. She posits that because New Philosophers know that the world is escaping their political control, they have redefined literature so that the distinctions implied by the term literature are:

1. Everything written

2. Things written to evoke feeling as well as to express thought.

This distinction I think of as big "L" literature and little "l" literature.

Literature that is meant to be canon and those that are not. Christian suggests that because there is a race for theory, it has gone stale, given that academic professionalism has spawned self-serving, elitist, and egotistical practices all in the name of tenure. This new turn in literary theory bullies participation as it is a determining factor in hiring, publishing, and promotion. These shifts have rhetorical affect: language changes. Literature that was once called "works" (that as Christian points out connects to connotations of labor) have become texts. Texts bring to mind blank empty things (Christian 34). Texts merely exist as a placeholder for meaning. I think of Saussure with the signifier and the signified. Texts are interpretative, but they lose much of their agency in the act of their interpretation. It somewhat forces silence upon them as the literary critic posits what it all could mean and not what it is. It also produces a situation where critics care less about texts and more about what other critics have said about them. Perhaps the reason for this practice can be connected to the fact that most Western literary critics have run out of canonized works. The phenomenon that all the important things have been said about all the great works of literature is a dangerous sentiment disempowering voices from the margins and the literature they produce.

Those things deemed big "L" literature are archaic, unchanged, and stale. There is no new meaning they can extract given the tight parameters of their theoretical frameworks and epistemologies. Literature as a field is plagued and blessed with the threat of impermanence; its methodologies are ever-evolving to either uphold outdated epistemologies or form new hermeneutics. As Christian explains, many literary scholars have gone a drastically different route and blamed theory itself for literature as a field at this crossroads. Many of them suggest a return to the act of reading literature for appreciation. While seemingly delicate in its suggestion, it encroaches deeply problematic and troubling elitist practices of class, social capital and access that again do not solve the issue of a field on life support. Here enters a resolve.

As Christian is critiquing, duplicating literary critique to the point of simulacrum is also a fossilization of the field. Theory becomes monolithic and oppressive. This is because it does not do the work of building new meaning, understanding or praxis for teaching these pieces in the classroom or in academic pursuits. As Christian posits black women academics have been influenced, even co-opted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientations (Christian 78). Liberation? Creative writers have fought for it in resisting this language. I think here about decolonial theory in praxis. Analyzing the act of theorizing requires rhetoric. Thus the

race for theory can be resolved by recognizing race and the work people of color have done that is already theoretical i.e. the title: *A Race for Theory*.

When Christian later her work calls attention to the image of the hieroglyph, it is to explain how the words of black women writers and thinkers exist. I think this concept is important to understand as often instead of being unpacked for their complexities, black women's writings and musings remain an enigma with no one in pursuit of changing this false condition. Hieroglyphs have connotations beyond their denotation: that they are artistic in their expression, they are embodied, created by labor. Rhetorically the hieroglyph is also described as sensual, abstract and communicative, something that resists being silenced, overlooked or ignored (Christian 79). In many ways Black women writer's literature is hieroglyphic decentering westernized notions of validating the written word over other forms of language discourse whose origins may be oral literary traditions.

A race for theory and a return to literary appreciation both promote hegemony. Christian states, "Instead, I think we need to read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature" (Christian 53). In other words, she insists on writing by people of color as *the race for theory*. In line with Christian's ideas I think that her words

suggests using a decolonial approach to literary criticism. Much writing by those termed postcolonial are written to address the political subjugation, imperialism and oppression of its characters and the writers themselves in order to trigger conversation within the academy. I do not wish to follow in this vein. The work does not need to be spoon-fed nor decoded. There are voices and thinkers who are more than ready to speak on the truth on the page. These are my intentions exactly with this thesis.

There are other reasons why postcolonial readings of my selected works are undesirable. Barbara Christian harkens back to this history of discourse around writers of color being "political" that she says have "denigrated" them (Christian 45). She explains this concept further in *Black Feminist Criticism*, that black male writers of the time like Richard Wright, who in the service of dramatizing the experience of black men, used stereotypical tropes of black womanhood (i.e. the mammy, the sapphire, the tragic mulatto). This is important because as Christian explores in her chapter on *Maud Martha*, Brook's character is one of the first black women written who is more concerned about the daily doings of her own life and not that of a man's. She is without racial trope or chauvinistic underpinning. Though depressed, she exists for herself. And yet as the discourse of the story unfolds, the question becomes, how can black women be heard? And why aren't they listened to?

## Rhetorical Criticism

bell hooks brings an important point of focus in answering the above question. She writes, "Certainly, for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard" (*Talking Back* 6). To acknowledge that black women's struggle is not with silence but with being heard asserts two things: 1. that black women's rhetorics have historical legacy and rhetorical identity. 2. That there is a negotiation of power and agency in speaking, listening, hearing and desiring to be heard. Rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe and Cheryl Glenn's edited anthology make interesting claims about listening. It explains in *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* that academic listening in particular ways undermines the ability to hear all of the sounds, speech, and meaning beyond one's own rhetorical lens (176-177). By privileging one's own argument, what Middleton calls rhetorical listening, "a genuine listening, with an accountability logic and the intent to change one's own rhetoric" hardly can take place.

In America, a country predicated on the protection of freedoms, rhetoric of others is taught to be tolerated. Colorblind rhetoric can be called to attention here that seeks to erase differences that simultaneously upholds white supremacist practices. But tolerance is merely an exercise of restraint; it does not question the cultural, political or psychological boundaries that remain intact to "protect" one's identity. Therefore, in considering marginalized group's desire to be heard,

the rhetorical questions: Who do these marginalized groups want to be heard by? And for what purpose? One can further complicate and make clearer the many competing factors at work within this performance.

Ratcliffe and Glenn cite rhetorician Kathleen Hall Jamieson's idea of "double bind" to explore how an amount of "rhetorical failure" is unavoidable in certain situations (79). I wonder on whose part is this failure. And how does race complicate this construction? All too well silence as guilt, refusal or avoidance is understood. Yet Watson re-imagines how using silence strategically can be purposeful and welcome perceptive listening, the desire for many who feel erased and without the platform to be heard. It also builds respect and authority for individuals to be recognized as rhetorical agents and forces of change.

Cheryl Glenn's work *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* argues that tactical silence can be as expressive as speech itself. It begins with the premise that speaking signals power in our speaking-heavy world. She continues, "Silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience" (2). Therefore, my project hopes to rhetorically analyze each literary text drawing connections between emotive experiences involving language that express thoughts and beliefs about who is privileged to speak and who is relegated to listen. This performance of speaking and listening includes multiple voices and the must consider who is speaking, who is listening, what is really meant by what is said and what is interpreted to be heard. But also as we further consider the role of

oppression in this exchange, we must also consider what is unsaid, who is meant to understand the true meaning behind what is spoken and what remains unspoken. This complex performance of language is rhetorical and argues that intention, perceived audience and the speaker's identity are wrought with sometimes conflicting agendas. I think of the rhetorical performance of these conversations as multi-voiced, happening in the moment at once out loud and internally as a speaker chooses what to say and what not to say given their audience. Further thinking about this multi-voicedness rhetorically, I will explore how speech and silence can vacillate in meaning depending on the relationship between speaker and audience.

Integral to my work is the idea that silences are not only purposeful but situational bringing to bear my question of how identity works to engender and racialize rhetorical performance. Double-voice discourse was foundational in building my frameworks for multi-voiced discourse. Glenn argues that double voice discourse is, a speaking through dominant idiom that creates dis-ease for the speaker given a specific context. Glenn's definition for the term context as, "the combination of rhetorical situation plus the power differential" (Glenn 30) provides an understanding of why language, power and discourse are inextricably linked.

Lastly, the work of Jane Desmarais titled, "Preferring not to: The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's "Bartleby" is a study of the rhetorical power in passive resistance. In perseverance of his physical and psychological

space, the character Bartleby often responds to requests saying that he prefers not to do something (Desmarais). An excellent case study in the power of passive resistance, Bartleby exercises enormous power by refusing to comply to simple tasks. What is of interest in the case of Bartleby is how politeness can be read as a face threatening act and merely a pretense of civility. More often than not, as Bartleby's polite refusals suggests, there is in reality no option given to those who are conditioned to acquiesce. So, when answers are asked to be given, but silence or passivity is served in return, rhetorical agency is being enacted. Thus, the inner monologue (inner voice) is protected from the outward demands of civil discourse. This is a reality many people with depression continually battle, second-guess and fight to assert. Often feelings of self-hate and morose are not what is expected to be heard when asked "how's your day?" or "what's up?" Depressed people, most know this and either lie to be polite (or end the interaction). Or even still, some refuse to participate by remaining silent or changing the subject. Therefore, in characters like Maud Martha Brown and Tony Takitani and Oscar de Leon, passivity can sometimes be read as empowered choices.

### Affect Theory

Asserting one's emotions and analyzing its results calls attention to the interdisciplinary field of Affect studies. Wherein the incorporeal experience of cognitive dissonance and psychological incongruence compounded by racial oppression can be derived. In the work of Affect theorists Anne Anlin Cheng, she

offers an astute reading of the connection between internalized racism and the documented psychological trauma that this cognition is wrought with within *Melancholia and Race*. She cites the 1930's "doll test" by Kenneth and Mamie Clark as just one iteration of a seemingly generational battle to fight internal "wounds" that, "endures, not only in the individual psyche but the in the American national psyche as well, inherited across time and even across racial groups" (Cheng viii). She uses this example to further complicate the engendered and racialized cognitive dissonance experienced by the black children who expressed distaste for dolls of their own skin tone and praise for one's that were fair-skinned and blue-eyed. In all, the text is an apt exploration of the body and mind. It also provides methodologies based in decolonial theory to explore how historical legacies of racism produces a cultural landscape for depression and melancholia to breed. To do this analysis is not easy. It takes a recursive and embodied method, one that accounts for how Western civilization has crossed sacred bounds of indigenous, diasporic, and immigrant ancestral lines to carve out pieces for itself. It must also understand the legacies of Empire which have produced circumstances that lead to disease and dis-ease.

Adding to the field, as mentioned above, affect theorist Lauren Berlant's recognition of melancholy and the hope in the American Dream when further complicated do incredible work. Here I wish to point out how Berlant in her seminal work *Cruel Optimism* does not relate affect to structural oppression. For Berlant, the paradox that is the American Dream is a deeper look into the psyche

that touches on the intangible yet prevailing sentiment of hope. She does not address the structural issues which changes the accessibility of the American Dream depending on privilege. It's necessary to consider how structural racism impacts hope in the American Dream. Coupling Berlant's concepts with Crenshaw's intersectional framework, I wish to further question how cruel optimism is related to a motif of melancholia that is constructed on a macro-scale within these texts. This can be done by analyzing protagonist's investment in or apathy for the American Dream and the various social and behavioral consequences of rejecting hope in this idea.

It is her attention and dedication to the mundane and banality of everyday life that draws my immediate interest. *Cruel Optimism* is in line with many thinkers within the affective turn of the early 2000s that has considered the numbness of a post 9-11 America. Scholar Hua Hsu suggests the affect theorists were, "circling around a kind of overstimulated numbness, considering everything from what it meant to call something "interesting"—a hedge against actual judgment—to the relationship between economic anxiety and mental health" (Hsu). Thus, it is important not to collapse the many affective stances taken up in the study of mood, feeling and emotive performance that mediate a sense of personal powerlessness amidst a backdrop of unsurety.

Hsu explains that in the 1990s, affect and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick took up the theoretical framework of psychologist Silvan Tompkins who Hsu explains had a background in theatre. He coined the idea that people

enacted a discourse based on “social scripts” (Hsu). The scripts worked best by avoiding situations which triggered negative effects. In rhetorical study, this is referred to as face threatening acts. Berlant’s work continues this legacy although her concern is less about people’s ease of living but more about analyzing what happens when these emotional tensions arise in everyday life.

In her piece, “The Hundreds’ [it] is a bizarre and mesmerizing account of what Berlant and Stewart call ‘ordinaries,’ which arise from encounters with the world that are ‘not events of knowing, units of anything, or revelations of realness, or facts’” (Hsu). They are what Hsu calls, “records of affect, meditations, manifestos, and prose poems.” Berlant says, “All attachment is optimistic” given the vulnerability and hope it takes to find solace outside of one’s self. As Hsu agrees, “...feelings of exhaustion, indifference, or disillusionment may have been naturalized, that doesn’t mean they’re natural” (Hsu). And in effect here lies my argument that while depression is a reaction and reflection of the world in which many people of color live, it is not a natural condition but a means to explore the very problems that exacerbates its condition.

To this end, the work of Affect theorists, rhetoricians and decolonial black feminist thinkers alike make possible my inquiry into the very real life-circumstances of depressed people of color trying to make their way through disease and dis-ease. Pulling threads between disparate disciplines, one can engage with depressed literary characters to encourage new interventions and lenses. They express the desire of marginalized individuals to find freedom not

only in their physical space, but also their psychological one. Their rhetorically situated performance is indicative of the ability to persistently define one's own life on their own terms.

CHAPTER THREE  
LOOKING AT THE LITERATURE

*“What you do to children matters”*---Toni Morrison

*“We don't ask a flower to give us any special reasons for its existence. We look at it and we are able to accept it as being something different, and different from ourselves. Who can explain a flower?”* ---Gwendolyn Brooks

Flowers and Weeds: Unpacking the story of Maud Martha Brown

When setting out to begin the analysis of *Maud Martha*, I was stunned by the amount of rich text to pull from within the one hundred and twenty some-odd pages. I always liked the story because it seemed sad. The character seemed small, but her presence in the life of my depressed mind was far greater than I imagined. I am biased, and I will be fair in saying that I saw myself in Maud. Even her name called attention to the way I felt—just beyond the black and white fading into the grey, a void. The etymology of the term Maud itself is ambiguous, but according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is a term referring to the black and white checked pattern of a plain, plaid cloth; to me, it symbolizes the binary-like thinking of a depressed mind. The all-or-nothing pattern where decisions are made seems a fitting name for a character who is so self-contained and ponderous. The other entry was a pejorative term for old hag. I didn't see Maud Martha that way, a hag... no, and she certainly didn't see herself as such. However, if Gwendolyn Brooks did is still uncertain. Brook's poem entitled “Sadie

and Maud” where two sisters go about living life on drastically different paths seems somewhat indicative of Brook’s sentiment towards Maud. While much is said about the sordid tale of Sadie, we end with a stiff effigy of words for Maud: “Maud, who went to college/ Is a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone/ In this old house.” One could speculate that this poem published nearly 10 years prior in Brook’s book, *A Street in Bronzeville*, is the same Maud Martha Brown from the novella. But Maud has changed some. She is given a life beyond the confines of her family home, and she resists the walls of discrimination she faces on multiple affronts of class, race, and gender. So, a hag? No. A thin brown mouse? Perhaps.

What is of importance in my analysis of *Maud Martha* is to be open to multiple perspectives. Whether it be my own as a reader, Maud Martha Brown’s perspective as a character, or Gwendolyn Brooks’ as the author, I hope to build an understanding of what can be gained from thinking along the borders of these differences. Using a decolonial framework to build my analysis of this text means two things: It means for one that my framework is built on an understanding and appreciation for the fact that *Maud Martha* as a literary text, despite the author’s interpretation, does something in the world. By recognizing this, one can unpack the complex and challenging negotiations that Maud Martha Brown as a character makes more greatly because we can understand that what critics have called her “failure” to embody a “strong” black feminist character may in fact be a matter of using a different lens to see that she is already just that. Coupling this

rhetorical analysis with the work of Barbara Christian is decolonial as Christian's work "A Race for theory" seeks to liberate marginal voices. Utilizing Barbara Christian's notion that the work of people of color does *work*—i.e. "theorizes," calls attention to the ways that scholars and even authors themselves may not recognize how a text is speaking on multiple levels. I do wish to be clear that my work is not an argument on the validity of Gwendolyn Brook's rendering of Maud Martha Brown or any others, but more so an exploration of how Maud Martha herself makes an argument about her position and her responses to the oppressive forces of racism, sexism, and self-hatred predicated on Black Respectability Politics and Black womanhood she faces daily.

Secondly, it is also important to understand that this decolonial praxis is informed by the work of Black Feminist musings that challenge engendered notions of blackness and racially homogenous forms of feminism. This is to say that the work of Black Feminism is and has always been decolonial. Anthropologist Anna Carastathis more closely connects the intertwined legacy and history of Indigenous voices and black American ones, emphasizing that both have experienced internal colonization within their respective communities. She builds the argument that, "coloniality of the United States and other white settler formations reinstates its imperial claims [of] territorial sovereignty that elides the ongoing colonial terrors it perpetuates against indigenous, Hawaiian, Puerto Rican, African diasporic, Chicanx, and latinix or otherwise internally colonized groups" (Carastathis 78). These terrors are often psychologically

traumatic and pernicious: (i.e. dysthymia). This, “mechanized nationalism” produces dominant social norms that urge immigrated communities to, “disidentify with domestic black and other internally colonized communities” which shows how anti-black racism is linked to anti-indigeneity.

But not only does black feminist decolonial theory focus on the intertwined racial oppression of black and Indigenous communities, it also emphasizes the fact that colonialism has always perpetrated engendered violence. Connecting the struggles of black feminist perspectives is one that openly speaks to the experience of Black American women who call attention to the many ways inter-community discourses refract, (dis)engage, and (in)validate each other across generations. This explains why one’s feminism will not be an exact replica of their mother’s. Given that Maud Martha is a text written from the context of Black working class life in 1940’s Chicago (Southside), the choices made will read differently to more modern contexts. Pulling from the thought of bell hooks on “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” will provide a lens to unpack how Maud Martha’s dysthymic disposition is exogenous, in that the socio-cultural environment creates and contributes to her dysthymia. The pathology of an exogenous disease suggests that an organism from outside a subject can infiltrate its system causing harm. Therefore, I argue that it is not Maud Martha’s depression that keeps her from experiencing greater moments of happiness, but the systemic and social norms that dictate how she *should* feel about herself that wears her down. To read through these examples more greatly, I will rhetorically

analyze how Maud Martha Brown's actions and emotions situates an argument about Black womanhood that is redemptive.

Maud Martha Brown does much with silence, passivity and suppressed rage. I will use Affect theorists Anne Cheng and Rhetorician Cheryl Glenn's work on silence to process how Maud Martha's affective experiences of racialized and engendered oppression create precarious circumstances for her to navigate that fuel her dysthymia in ways that express an internal battle to liberate herself. In unpacking her passivity, I will also use the work of Jane Desmarais to explore how passivity may in fact hold greater possibility for studying the wielding of power. I will view two occasions of Maud Martha's passiveness as an empowered act of agency. Lastly, in thinking about Maud Martha's many cases of suppressed dissatisfaction and rage, I will use the work of semiotician Julia Kristeva and literary scholar Mary Helen Washington to tease out the way rage and anger can be reimagined.

Experimental and perhaps ahead of its time, *Maud Martha* is arguably a seminal text. Given its play with form as poetic prose painting a picture across 34 vignettes, it captures the social, cultural, and political conditions of most black women during a period of change in America. Published just one year before the landmark case of *Brown V. Board of Education* (1954), the first and only novella written by Brooks was ill-received and little but ignored. Maud Martha Brown herself is the protagonist, whose life is told from adolescence through adulthood. In youth, her working-class family living in Chicago are near comfortable but just

a ways off, as they are homeowners. For a time, they remain in constant fear of losing the home her father has purchased. The 1940s for Maud Martha set the pace for a life led with dashed hopes and melancholy “thick in the air.” In young adulthood, she tells us the apartment she lives in even smells of grayness (49). Yet much is to be learned from the story and words of Maud Martha Brown.

The story of a young black woman’s life that is set just after the Great Depression in Chicago may seem a time of prosperity, but there is a tepid quality to Maud Martha’s prospects. Desegregation produced new race-relations during this time as boundaries of social distance between whites and blacks were now in flux. In “the Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: a Study in Social Control” Bertram Doyle outlays the strict and invisible code of conduct insulated in the ideas of segregation from the Jim Crow era. Ironically much of these practices of social distancing and conditioning were pertinent across the country. Maud Martha Brown is provoked through micro-aggressions caused by this social chafing, though often she resists. Her depression and disposition are rife with opportunity for rhetorical analysis by unpacking Black-respectability, rage, and silence.

By studying Maud Martha’s purposeful silence, suppressed rage and poise, one can understand how systemic factors breed duplicitous feelings, diminished self-worth, and low expectations threaten an individual’s quality of life much like those for someone with chronic depression (dysthymia). Arguing that Maud Martha is dysthymic draws a connection between her internal and external

worlds and the exogenous and endogenous relationship of what Anne Cheng calls “racial melancholia.” Bridging the gap between literature and mental health, *Maud Martha* demonstrates black women’s careful task of both understanding the limitations of redefining their own self-hood and doing so despite stifling institutional power dynamics of sexism, racism and colorism.

When reading, many questions can be raised around the agenda of author Gwendolyn Brooks in her use of the main character, Maud Martha Brown.

Gwendolyn Brooks, like many great writers of her time, has been connected to literary movements for which she may or may not have intended. However, the literary genre of Naturalism often is discussed with Brooks and her more polemic contemporaries. The term Naturalism defines a category of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike Realism, which focuses on literary technique, Naturalism implies a, “philosophical position; for Naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in [French novelist] Emile Zola’s phrase, ‘human beasts,’ characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings” (Campbell 2017).

Notable writers include Stephen Crane, Richard Wright, John Steinbeck, and Kate Chopin. As a literary movement, Naturalism utilizes real-life themes and language to show the austere and stark reality of everyday life. While Brooks may very well have written *Maud Martha* in this vein, I wonder if attention to the everyday as *lo cotidiano* can provide a different structure of analysis that reframes the hermeneutic of scientific objectivity in the subjective art of literature.

Decolonial theologian and Mujerista feminist scholar Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz writes in her essay, “Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology,” that the chief concern of “women-centered liberation” is built on the knowledge and respect of lo cotidiano grassroots efforts. She describes lo cotidiano, “everyday life,” as a hermeneutic to explore how structural oppression can be grappled with at the level of the everyday people and how we must continue to do so on the level of scholarship and policy as well to be effective.

Ada Isasi Diaz writes:

“Lo cotidiano constitutes the immediate solaces in our lives[...]It has to do with the practices and beliefs that we have inherited, with our habitual judgments, including the tactics we use to deal with the everyday [...] we understand by lo cotidiano that which is reproduced or repeated consciously by the majority of people in the world is a part of their struggles for survival and liberation” (8).

Connecting this concept back to the topic of Naturalism shows some pitfalls of this framework for a text like *Maud Martha*. Given that the “beasts” that Zola speaks of invests in the hegemony that this text works to call attention to, perhaps *Maud Martha* interprets the use of everyday struggle and austerity to look at possibilities for change and liberation amidst the grey. Though this is not without complications.

Maud Martha exhibits symptoms of self-hate throughout her life, but these feelings are not unfounded. Chapter one titled, “Description of Maud

Martha” begins with Maud Martha relating herself to a dandelion, “She liked their demure prettiness second to their everydayness; for in the latter quality she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could also be a flower” (5). Though seemingly comfortable in her skin and able to see, even in youth, that she is averagely attractive, Maud Martha’s attempt to place more value in the dandelion (herself) than in societal beauty standards is hard to maintain. For one it stands to question why the “everydayness” of the dandelion as beautiful cannot exist alongside the beauty of other flowers. To appreciate the unique beauty of each flower is as much an idealistic concept as it would mean to respect racial differences and one’s humanity. Yet, Maud Martha Brown understands the circumstances for which she is dealt. Her skin is brown and her sister’s is fairer. Her nose far less aquiline to her sister’s. The “heart-catching beauty” of her “prettier” sister, Helen, interrupts her thought process on the page. “... her sister Helen!... But oh, the long lashes, the grace, the little ways with the hands and feet,” (6). In this pathology of colorism, women, even young light-skinned black girls who are pretty by society’s standards inherent more intrinsic value than darker-skinned ones because they are more desired. We know this through Maud Martha’s mimicry of praise for her sister. We are to understand that this seven-year-old girl is trying to develop self-worth in a world that has already told her she is less than and inadequate in some way.

Affect theorist Anne Cheng analyzes Pecola from Toni Morrison’s *the*

*Bluest Eye* examining how the fictional character has internalized racial discrimination (Cheng 17). She utilizes eight-year-old black child, Pecola's experience of receiving a blue-eyed doll for Christmas. Morrison writes:

I had only one desire, to dismember it... The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls...What made people look at them and say, "Awwwww," but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them [...] Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her (Morrison, 48).

Cheng connects racialization with gender norms that create the complex, "web of self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility" that forces the little girl to internalize these standards of beauty while in turn believing deep down that she is enough, and she is worthy and beautiful. Here, Pecola is experiencing incongruence in her life. She knows that she as much as any other child is valuable and should be adored but is not because of her skin tone and race. This rejection is made further complicated on the part of black women.

Connecting to Crenshaw's work in that the experiences of black women are encoded with variables of weight, skin-tone, hair texture and a plethora of

other identity factors. Thus, the principle of treating the same thing different being just as harmful as treating different things the same renders this reading of black motherhood and daughterhood further complicated. Barbara Christian argues, the "concept of motherhood is of central importance in the philosophy of both African and Afro-American peoples" (123). Kalia Ada's book aptly titled *Patricia Hill Collins: Reconceiving Motherhood* agrees that to Collins herself Black motherhood is plagued with "myth, self-policing" and too much "outside influence over what it actually meant to be a Black mother in America" (Adia). As a black girl-child, these black women are supposed to be a place of comfort, validation and support. Instead Pecola is left questioning and sad, asking desperately, *why not me?* Her rage against white girls becomes a twisted admiration built on resentment and the very real necessity of self-preservation. Even still, white girlhood becomes endemic of the larger societal pressures of beauty, racism and colorism that exist far beyond the representation of a Shirley Temple. Much in the same way as Pecola, Maud Martha Brown begins to vocalize praise for her sister to meet an expectation (albeit a societal one and a familial one) of acknowledging Helen's beauty. It is a deferent affective position that she takes up, but it is also somewhat hollow in that no one will ever acknowledge the everyday beauty of Maud herself. She says, "...it was hard to believe that a thing of only ordinary allurements-if the allurements of any flower could be said to be ordinary- was as easy to love as a thing of heart-catching beauty" (Brooks 7). This quote works on multiple

levels. For one it points to a seemingly healthy sense of self, one that recognizes that a flower is a flower and should be worthy. And yet in the end, it is heart breaking to hear her doubt that foundational belief. And what makes her doubt this? At seven who else would Maud Martha be seeking love from? And we know for a fact that she is seeking love. Just mere lines before, the narrator interjects, “And could be cherished! To be cherished was the dearest wish of the heart of Maud Martha Brown” (Brooks 5). The answer... her parents—and more specifically her mother. This is confirmed years later, when Maud Martha has settled down into marriage, resigned to a life of poverty amongst those she regards as, “kitchenette folks.” She shares afternoon tea with Belva Brown, her mother. The conversation begins cordial but takes a turn when Maud Martha brings up her sister Helen. In the chapter aptly called, “Mother Comes to Call,” Brooks writes:

“I’m thinking of Helen.”

“What about Helen, dear?”

“It’s funny how some people are just charming, just pretty, and others, born of the same parents, are just not.”

“You’ve always been wonderful, dear.”

They looked at each other.

“I always say you make the best cocoa in the family.”

“I’m never going to tell my secret.”

“That girl down the corner, next to the parsonage—you know?—is going to

have another baby” (78).

From this exchange Maud Martha’s mother is practicing psychological avoidance. Why doesn’t she affirm her daughter’s self-esteem? Some might say it’s a mother’s place to validate her child. I wonder what would be lost if Belva Brown had validated her daughter’s beauty and charm? Perhaps her avoiding the question isn’t as insulting as her centering her response on Maud’s “usefulness” and “value” as a good maker of cocoa. What can make a mother behave in this way? Perhaps Belva Brown has internalized colorism. There is no mention of her mother’s complexion, but if Belva Brown was brown-skinned like her daughter, perhaps she cannot give her the validation and love she was never given. Perhaps Belva Brown was taught to think of herself in the same limiting ways that she has passed down to her daughter. Cheng later explores the concept of endocryptic identification calling it a “tool” that works to substitute and preserve loss without “acknowledg[ing] that loss as loss” (86). Cheng connects endocryptic identification with the mother-daughter relationship where the mother is the mourner and the daughter is the “melancholic repeater of her grief.” This is what has happened between Maud and her mother, a woman who does not know how to shield her daughter against the many racist and colorist ideas of beauty is bound to repeat them.

In the chapter, “Tree leaves leaving trees” Maud Martha takes her daughter to see Santa Claus. “Santa Claus’s neck turned with hard slowness carrying his unwilling face with it” (123). And when her daughter questions to

Maud Martha why Santa Claus didn't like her, Maud Martha avoids just like her mother instead saying, "baby of course he liked you...He maybe got tired of smiling. Sometimes I get---" "He didn't look at me, he didn't shake *my* hand" (123). Almost admitting the fragility of her façade of happiness, Maud Martha ends exasperatedly making her daughter distrust her own beliefs, ignoring the incongruence of her treatment in the world by racist people to the love and respect she is taught she deserves at home. She encourages her daughter to believe that, "people don't have to kiss you to show you they like you" (124). Both examples seem to fuel an inner dialogue of low self-esteem and self-worth that are sparked in childhood and reinforced across life by community and family.

Maud Martha's relationship with her husband may also be alluded to in the above quotation. Lacking affection, attention or tenderness, Maud Martha accepts the relationship of a man she seems to think is the best she can do. After a time together and "hooking" him, Maud Martha finds an invitation to The Foxy Cats Club intended for her beau Paul:

"'He'll have to take me,' [she] thought... 'I'd guess he'd like to leave me home. At the ball, there will be only beautiful girls...There won't be more than a handful like me... he'll want to humor me, now that I'm pregnant... 'I'll settle,' decided Maud Martha, 'on a plain white princess-style thing...I'll go to my mother's. I'll work miracles at the sewing machine. Then he might be the tree she had great need to lean

against, in this emergency,” (61-63).

This situation seems to stir up feelings of insecurity and anxiety, but ultimately there seems to be no consideration of Maud Martha herself. Instead, she takes on the rationalization of Paul, overcompensating and even compliments his character by calling him “kind,” (61). Believing she is inadequate, Maud Martha becomes complicit in her husband’s “absent courtesy,” (62). In the negotiations of a woman who is devalued for her skin and features but not appreciated for her brains, Maud Martha becomes reduced to what she can provide (a baby and good cocoa) and not for who she is. This makes her accepting of her husband’s neglect as well as settle for her role as wife and mother to his unborn child in ways that she wishes could access the security and support she wishes to “lean on” from him.

Unlike more mainstream forms of white feminism, Maud Martha later comes to view the coming of her child as a place for her own liberation. The hope she has for her baby and the ownership she takes in being able to birth the baby seems to buoy her and even gives her occasion to advocate for herself in more vocal ways. “She folded her arms triumphantly across her chest, ‘did you hear the news? I just had a baby, and I feel strong enough to go out and shovel coal!’” (73). Returning to the theory of *lo cotidiano*, Maud Martha has found solace in the mere fact she survived child birth and could birth the child without having the emotional support of her husband. However, it is more nuanced than that. Black motherhood has a deep-rooted history

pulling from slavery and onward. From practicing infanticide in an attempt to ending the cycle of suffering under the institution of slavery, to birthing a child as a means to having another person in the struggle of revolution, black women's motherhood is a complex and liberating expression of womanhood and blackness. One could argue that Maud Martha has desired to have a nuclear family. This is not unlike many people of the time. And yet when one expects themselves to create this family and fails, there can come with it guilt and shame either on the part of the individual or more commonly, their community. Maud Martha giving birth to the child on her own is an action that troubles these limiting constructions of normativity and her own beliefs that she couldn't do it. Her shouting to the neighbors about the great feat she accomplished shows she's is unashamed. What could have easily broken her down, makes the act of the everyday miracle of childbirth, labor, and pregnancy a feminist act.

Returning to the issues of external struggle, Maud Martha cannot escape the belief that her sister and lighter skinned women are somehow better than her. Perpetuated throughout the chapter, aptly titled "If You're Light and Have Long Hair," colorism produces a silent rage for Maud Martha, who comes to recognize that her non-action is better than "scratching and spitting" on the woman who steals her husband's attention and time (63). Thus, her poise in this situation gives her a certain air of class that the "red-haired and curved, and white as white," black woman does not (64). Her

inaction here suggests that if she cannot be desired, at the least she can be respected. Leaning on a sense of Black Respectability of being a woman of class and dignity over being sexually desirable seems to make Maud Martha feel a small semblance of value, though ultimately this act of self-containment is not truly ever in her control, as her internal monologue constantly is appraising and devaluing herself in comparison to other women. This instance works against Maud Martha Brown and is endemic of a larger issue that shows the damaging effects of colorism and black respectability politics on black women's self-esteem.

Colorism cannot exist without its close relative passive racism, which travels throughout Maud Martha's life creating her casually cold demeanor. Racism in the North was socialized to be an unspoken segregation between whites and blacks, that when crossed produced conflict. This attempt to mask blatant racism in a cloak of respectability, by some of her white counterparts, renders Maud Martha speechless, often in rage. As she waits in the beauty parlor, Maud Martha listens as a black female shopkeeper, Sonia, speaks to a white saleswoman looking to leave samples of product in the salon. Miss Ingram seems to be leveling with Sonia about the demands of work, "People, confided Miss Ingram, 'think this is a snap job. It ain't. I work like a nigge\* to make a few pennies'...Maud Martha's head shot up. She stared intently at Sonia Johnson. She did not look at Miss Ingram," (100). In a state of confusion, Maud Martha tries to disengage from the scenario by denying the

plausibility of the racial epithet being spoken:

“I must have been mistaken. I was afraid I heard that woman say ‘nigge\*.’  
Apparently not. Because of course Mrs. Johnson wouldn’t let her get away  
with it. In her own shop...She began to consider what she herself might  
have said, had she been Sonia Johnson, and had the woman really said  
‘nigg\*.’ ‘I wouldn’t curse. I wouldn’t holler. I’ll bet Mrs. Johnson would do  
both these things. And I could understand her wanting to, all right. I would  
be gentle in a cold way. I would give her, not a return insult-directly, at any  
rate! -but information. I would get it across to her that’-Maud Martha  
stretched. ‘But I wouldn’t insult her’” (Brooks 100).

Casual verbal assault was one of many racial threats that the American North  
posed for Black Americans nearing the mid-20th century. With the economy in  
collapse, many poor whites felt a special sense of hatred for well-off blacks.  
Retaining one’s own dignity in the face of racism such as this is not unique in  
black literature. Richard Wright’s characters often face this trauma; however,  
Maud Martha’s response signals a deep sense of control. She chooses not to  
share her inner-most thoughts with the reader. Once again, she compliments her  
transgressor, “she’s pretty and pleasant. If she had said it, I would feel all  
strained and tied up inside, and I would feel that it was my duty to help Mrs.  
Johnson get it settled, to help clear it up in some way. I’m too relaxed to fight  
today. Sometimes fighting is interesting. Today, it would have been just plain old  
ugly duty,” (101). Though Maud Martha chooses not to fight, her choice in

absconding the obligation to stand up for herself and her peer by existing in a state of denial, is at the very least troubling. Behaviors of denial, rationalization and binary thinking create minimization, a psychological phenomenon that serves as a defense against guilt (Adler, 190). Ultimately, either taking too much personal responsibility for a traumatic event or too little can create imbalances in self-esteem and distorts “cognition and reality,” (Adler, 192). In her youth, Maud Martha reasoned that stereotypes had to be based in some truth and this was often to her own detriment.

“You’re Being So Good, So Kind” is a chapter where a white beau is coming to her home. Everything inside is subpar in Maud Martha’s eyes. She even worries if there was a “certain heavy, unpleasant smell,” as it was often said to be true for “colored people’s homes,” (15). Internalizing this stereotype, believing that she was “the whole colored race, and Charles...the personalization of the entire Caucasian plan,” makes it near impossible for the young woman to grow-up without feeling responsible for her race first, and herself second (16). This moment is pivotal too because it marks the beginning of Maud Martha tailoring herself through the eyes of a man and developing racial verisimilitude. This is quite unlike her peer David McKeemster, who she resents as “white-washed” trying desperately to assimilate into a white privilege built on his degradation. Maud Martha knows his classicist views only mask his own self-hate. She describes crossing paths with him one night at the university and his feigned fatigue, “Then nothing more was said by him, or by her-till they met a

young white couple, going east. David's face lit up. These were his good, good friends," (93). However, it is unknown, if Maud Martha is more disappointed with him because his pompous attitude is too transparent (unlike her austerity) or because he hates being a black man. In essence, Maud Martha has to question how much self-hate is acceptable. Ideally, the answer would be none. But how then can Maud Martha grow up trusting the view of her family on one issue and yet trust that her sister Helen is not better than she? How can Maud Martha marry a light-skinned black man and not, from the previous experience with her sister, condone his wandering eye, or silent contempt for herself.

In "Taming All That Anger Down" scholar Mary Helen Washington posits that it is in fact Maud Martha's rage which makes her literally unable to speak. From this inability to express this muted rage and cold, silent hate, "Maud's passivity in the face of the persecutory actions of others inhibits her growth and reflects her resistance to [face] her anger," (456). Though I agree that Maud Martha's self-expression is purposeful, I do not believe that it is caused by her inability but rather the contradictions of the life she must lead. The contradictions to be young, black, woman, and working class and yet prove that she is: Smarter than her sister in grace and wit but unbothered by not being valued for it, young and has her destiny in her own hands and not the circumstances she inherited, and lastly subservient to her husband, though she is the breadwinner is near impossible. A loving mother though she must be able to raise her daughter to respect elders and people that view them as less than human and ultimately not

feel guilty for doing so. Her self-control does not inhibit her growth, but rather empower her to endure the conditions that cause the anger, that would prompt her to lose herself in rage; this is what works to destroy her.

Another example of Maud Martha being faced with a situation that would produce rage occurs in the chapter "Millinery." Maud Martha finds herself shopping at a hat store when this white saleswoman is the same one from "Self-solace." The racist woman is desperately trying to sell Maud Martha a hat. And in a very cool and frigid way, Maud Martha dismisses her without speaking rising from the chair after the woman states the price. Recognizing she's about to lose a valuable sale, the white saleswoman tries to haggle the price. Maud Martha when asked her expectation of the price gives a surprisingly low figure for the quality of the hat. Out of desperation the woman doesn't protest much, but instead of going through with the purchase Maud Martha says, "I've decided against the hat." The woman is surprised, disappointed and confused shouting after her, but Maud Martha "tenderly closed the door" (111). In thinking her about passivity, I call on the work of Jane Desmarais. She writes, "... refusals constitute a "no-entry" syndrome which "performs the defensive function of blocking access to any input experienced as potentially intrusive and persecutory" (12). When the woman initially threw in the n-word to her casual conversation, she was at once supposedly commiserating with Sonia Johnson as a businesswoman, yet was careful to keep the social distance of racial hierarchy with the slur disguised as an idiom or colloquialism. And now the tables have turned. The woman is

desperate for a sale and must be deferential to her black patronage. But Maud Martha, no matter the process was not going to stoop to her level, but instead in her passive enactment of superficial disinterest reasserts the boundary between herself and the racism that she faces by empowering herself to not only believe but make it known that she is literally above the bullshit of racism and bigotry. This act of passive resistance is wrought with awareness her audience and their limited expectations of her as being poor and unable to afford quality though she is more than capable. She exercises her freedom of capitalism to invest in what she wants to support to uplift her spirits and bring discomfort to the racist white woman who must strain to put on the pretense of politeness and tolerance to secure a sale for a failing company. Julia Kristeva explores how sadness holds back hatred. Yet, she also points to how depression is not as an illness to be corrected but a discourse to be listened to and analyzed. In this way, the work of Maud Martha here is one that masterfully navigated the discourse of neoliberal racism by turning it on its head. In this way the saleswoman herself is responsible for the loss of business. Her failure to persuade her patron is solely her own, despite the intention of Maud herself upon entering the store. While hooks' work is fashioned in a sense to theorize the possible uses of anthropologically studying whiteness, what I found of greatest interest was her statement that though systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, racism, actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating, and many of us succumb, blacks who imitate whites (adopting their

values, speech, habits of being, etc.) continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred (338).

What struck me about the quote was how systems of control through force and in some ways coercion influence black folk's internalized hatred. With dysthymia, (the chronic form of depression I am studying), the key symptom is low self-esteem. It is interesting to think about the ways culture and underlying values and principles teach certain groups of people to hate themselves and feel they are unworthy. Yet Maud Martha has found occasion to exercise some power against this by weaponizing the social distancing of etiquette and politeness of white counterparts as a means to figuratively kill racists with kindness, which at once disproves their limited views of black people's classlessness and also affirms one's own ability to engage or not.

But alas extenuating circumstances lead Maud Martha to question, "What, what, am I to do with all this life?" (126). She asks this same question at the beginning and end of the book, a soliloquy begging: if I have to follow all these rules, be this way and exist in duplicity, what is the point if I am fundamentally unhappy? Dysthymia does not manifest from merely a place of self-blame, but also a sense of pointless suffering for a lack-luster existence. It begs to question why must an individual merely survive and not enjoy living? We aren't meant to leave Maud Martha here in this liminal phase of self-actualization. The last chapter of the novel, "Back from the Wars!" to the reader, upon first

glance, might seem defeatist, empty even. We see an older Maud Martha who is unreasonably optimistic, because of the weather:

“she did not need information, or solace or a guidebook, or a sermon-not in this sun! -not in this blue air! They ‘marched’ they battled behind her brain-the men who had drunk beer...the men with two arms off and two legs off...parts of faces. Then her guts divided, then her eyes swam under frank mist. And the Negro press (on those front pages beamed the usual representations of womanly Beauty, pale and pompadoured) carried the stories of the latest of the Georgia and Mississippi lynchings...But the sun was shining, and some of the people of the world had been left alive...would man succeed in destroying the world...the basic equanimity of the least and commonest flower: for would its kind not come up again in spring? Come up, if necessary, among, between...out of the smashed corpses...infallible and sincere,” (127).

The phrase “Equanimity of the flower” signals the return of the dandelion metaphor. To exist and survive despite the circumstance, to be a flower in any form, in any circumstance is the true feat. This is especially true in times of great disarray. In times of war, a great deal of literature studied the disillusionment and the ramifications of terror that war times left behind for white people. Ironically this amelioration of the past is not the same for black citizens. Surely being a black woman seeing a barrage of death and those continued in the Deep South, did not perpetuate a sense of shock continually. For black Americans being

desensitized to our own suffering is pressed upon us as normal. Lynchings, mass public killings, and senseless brutality is enough to render anyone hopeless. If anything, the war may have affected her the most in that it took the pest of her husband away. Maud Martha continues on. We know she is able to see that the “thing worth leaning on” is not her husband Paul, though she thought the idea of marriage was (75). Perhaps what Maud Martha knows is that her thing to lean-on is her children, her reasoning abilities, and acting out only what’s in the best interest for her survival. Mary Helen Washington argues that Gwendolyn Brooks does not solve the problem of Maud Martha’s anger or silence, because it signals her “ambivalence toward women as heroic figures,” (460). I disagree entirely. If we read Maud Martha as a Naturalist text, we understand that the purpose of writer and narrator are in fact not to assert or assign any meaning to the character’s reality—only to present it. In this way, Brooks’ own silence can be read as Maud Martha using her agency to draw her own conclusions about the ultimate meaning of her existence. The ending is done as an invitation to watch Maud Martha imagine her future, not to witness her failure.

Creating and then maintaining a sense of subjectivity, as Maud Martha does, is heroic. Perhaps instead of a failed ending due to, “the incompleteness of Maud’s Quest,” it is the ending of a cycle and the beginning of a new phase (462). The stories’ end provides reassurance that though circumstance of class struggle, gender dynamics and racial stratification will always remain, there is room for the individual, the melancholy, and the persistent seeker alike to grow

and learn. We cannot know all things. Brooks respects this boundary interjecting only when context is necessary and does not embellish, edit or distort Maud Martha's voice or intent.

When interviewed in 1969 regarding her work and Maud Martha, the interviewer suggested Brook's characters make a, "pitiful attempt to be what they cannot be," (8). Gwendolyn Brooks had this to say, "Some of them. Not all of them; some of them are very much interested in just the general events of their own lives," (8). The only certainty the reader can have about Maud Martha herself is that she leads a life worthy of her own concern and possesses the ability to navigate in the way that best suits her own purpose. She survives because she can and finds reason to do so because she remains curious, open, discerning and longs to be able to "lean" on something outside her conditions and herself. What makes Maud Martha special is her ability to speak through these oppressive forces, to exist and aspire to thrive despite them. This text makes black women feel seen and heard because it draws attention to the very emotions that we are taught to put to the side for the sake of the black man and black revolution. Maud Martha gives us a reflection of ourselves.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

Doing the work of any close reading requires an attention to the circumstances that the character exists in, the world they navigate. Thinking about characters of color like Maud Martha, ones that are depressed present certain challenges that are rife for unpacking in ways that are both intersectional and contextual. And while chronic depression as a phenomenon is not uncommon in the struggles of a production-obsessed and an increasingly self-centered, isolated world, one can further unpack how dynamics of race, gender and body politics complicate and change the way dysthymia is expressed in the life of marginalized folks.

Maud Martha in its context as a black feminist literary masterpiece, for all its gems is overlooked, a quiet memory in the lifework of literary giant Gwendolyn Brooks. Much in the same way, the short story "Tony Takitani" by Haruki Murakami exists, receiving most of its attention from the film adaption of the same name. The quiet way these characters exist with thick emotional interiors causing minimal changes to their outward daily routines, *lo cotidiano* if you will is a recipe for the depression they carry.

This weight of depression has both emotional and physical resonance. While Maud Martha and Tony Takitani exist quietly in the shadows of their own tales, so too does Junot Diaz's protagonist Oscar de Leon. Although he attempts to be erased in much of his own interactions with others, the retelling of his life

through the narrative of Yuniór depicts his almost larger than life struggle to just be happy. His physical body is also a reflection of his depression, as he often attempts to eat away his fear, feelings of sadness and rage and then diet his way to self-love. Unpacking how these particular characters manage and navigate their depression is not without intersectional forces of race, gender and class. By beginning to survey these pieces within my analysis, I am hoping to extend the conversation to reveal further how once unpacked, literary texts theorize around the effects of systemic racism on the psyche. In carrying over themes present in theoretical frameworks of rhetoric, psychoanalysis and affect studies, I hope to further situate the place of depression in communities of colors as a literary motif and point of analysis. Thus is done in order to further situate the power of decolonial praxis as it relates to writers of color and the topics they choose to write about. Given that decolonial studies is driven for the people by the people, I hope to further draw links between the academy and lo cotidiano of people that these literary texts were written for and about.

#### Fuku & Oscar as the Melancholic Subject

The character of Oscar is one best described as dysthymic, one that isn't even the star of his own story. Much research done on the popular hyper-genre fictional tale is in fact more interested in the narrator Yuniór. Though often unreliable and seemingly disinterested in much of the origins of Oscar's depression, Yuniór stands in the middle of the narrative, often interrupting his own retelling of what he calls the curse of the de Leon's (89). But beyond the

discussion of Yunion and toxic masculinity rampant in the book, there is a more quiet discussion. This quiet discussion is not centered on vocal silence. Instead this discussion is focused on the ways that Oscar navigates the world as a depressed and overweight straight man of color.

Oscar is depressed. There are many lines that indicate his struggle with loneliness, boredom and self-disgust. But what is of interest in this depression is the ways that it manifests and shapes Oscar's life circumstances. The legend and cultural commentary surrounding the concept of Fuku is one that makes complicated ties to depression. For one, this curse is embedded within the de Leon's lineage, marked with a fascinating commentary around the legacy and pathology of familial dysfunction and trauma marked by the presence of this curse.

Described as Afro-Caribbean and taken up in the history of European imperialism and empire, Fuku is misfortune compounded by ethnicity and class. The dispassionate unyielding rule of a Trujillo during the 1900s affects the life of Oscar's grandmother who was in love with a general in Trujillo's army. This lost love, the inability of his grandma to be with the man she loves makes Oscar's mom Belinda grow up without a father. Her inability to know her father made her choose men that weren't emotionally viable forcing Oscar and his sister to grow up without a decent father-figure. And here the powerful curse of Fuku continues in the very brief life of Oscar, a man torn by his desire to love and be loved when he so often feels so unlovable.

Oscar wasn't always unattractive. In fact the narrative starts with a glimpse at Oscar in his aesthetic hey day at six or seven years of age. There Yunion relays the one and only love triangle where Oscar was the prize. In later life, when Oscar is faced with another third party situation, he is not nearly as fortunate. Forever the friend and never the boyfriend, Oscar's desires to be loved are often thwarted by the unapproachability of him. Albeit his weight being a partial factor, but his inability to dress, his non-swing (not being what Yunion calls a true Dominican man) and his nerdiness all prevail. And unfortunately for Oscar, the loneliness is not merely romantic, but also in his friendships. Diaz writes: "When finally he couldn't take it no more he asked, pathetically, what, these girls don't have any other friends? Al and Miggs traded glances over their character sheets. I don't think so, dude. And right there he learned something about his friends he'd never known (or at least never admitted to himself). Right there he had an epiphany that echoed through his fat self. He realized his fucked-up, comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no sports-playing friends were embarrassed by him" (Diaz 29). Oscar is lonely because he fails to embody both the suaveness for the women he wishes to attract and the manliness that would earn the respect of his friends.

In the introduction to the piece, Junot Diaz and the Decolonial Imagination Hanna et al. write: "Diaz revealed how decolonial theory shaped his writing of *the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." "For me, what I attempted to do in Oscar Wao was to align the nerd stuff with the Dominican colonality of power because I

saw them sharing a discourse or vocabulary” (15). In thinking about this unique concept, I connect the colonality of power to the intense circumstances of hyper-masculinity of Dominican men that Yuniors narrates. Oscar is not allowed to be both a Dominican man and one who enjoys the more nerd-like fictional worlds of the Hernandez Brothers. In one particular scene that expresses this Diaz writes:

“Oscar shaved his Puerto Rican afro and the barber was surprised that he was Dominican. Made other changes, lost the glasses starved himself and...tried to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness, tried to be more like his cursing swaggering cousins, if only because he had started to suspect that in their Latin hyper maleness there might be an answer. But he was really too far gone for quick fixes” (30).

What Diaz’s book uncovers is the ways that systems of power around identity such as race and gender and sexuality shape expectations in the real world. Diaz explores, through the narrative of Oscar, how when subverted, in the fiction of many male writers there is a pattern of making relationships and romance fodder for the background, when in reality themes of self-love, desire and passion are not as far removed as they seem. Oscar’s attention to themes of chivalrous love, of princesses and knights in shining armor present in the fiction he reads and writes is indicative of the internal desire to find true love and acceptance.

What Freud has written in “Mourning and Melancholia” helps to unpack the ways that this acceptance of loss and ego work together in ways that

produces what he calls the melancholic object. In Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race*, she uses Freudian theory of melancholia to produce her own theory "racial melancholia" (ivx). What Cheng calls the melancholic object, I understand as a melancholic (aka Dysthymic) subject whose agency is predicated on WEB Dubois' double consciousness that makes them aware, as Cheng says, "[that their] racial identity is imaginatively reinforced" (ivx). This in turn makes the act of being both object and subject a cyclical crisis/process of failure. We can understand this failure as the melancholic subject recognizes the futility of self-actualization and attempts to regain missing steps in stability. Cheng explains, "Melancholia...refuses substitution (that is, the melancholic cannot "get over" loss.) The melancholic is stuck [...] which thus denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment" (Cheng 8). Oscar is much like the melancholic who constantly refuses to let go of his lost loves, ultimately choosing to face death for the woman he loved. What is of interest and can be furthered explored is how melancholia as a concept is internalized, consumed and seems to lead to self-denigration in ways much like racism in its systemic forms works to cut back and disempower those deemed lesser under its oppressive forces. Thus the legacy of racial oppression is not without ties to the melancholia produced internally for characters like Oscar. He is not merely depressed because he is overweight or "unattractive" and thus undeserving of love (in his own pathology) but because the culture for which he belongs has deemed him as such.

Cheng continues that “Dominant white identity in America operates melancholically off of...social consumption and denial” (Cheng 11). The discourse of belonging to as Diaz puts it the “coloniality of power” is one that mourns and denies what cannot be called to attention. It is the Fuku of its own making that requires the Zafa (redemption) of recognition of the invisible pain to reassert the racialized identity and legacy of Empire in America and abroad.

#### Tony Takitani: American Empire & the Rhetoric of Silence

Tony Takitani is someone unconcerned with the political unrest around him. The art that he produces in graduate school is cold and mechanical while his cohorts' ideological content was what Tony perceived as “immature, ugly and inaccurate” (Murakami 3). The American occupation of Japan is intertwined in this commentary on art as often the adage applies that art imitates life. The focus on the physical accuracy of things including mechanical structures and architecture to replicate to a degree of near perfection is indicative of internal struggle that Tony Takitani faces.

Tony grew up a Japanese young boy who was othered because of his weird sounding name and his “mixed-blood features” (Murakami 1). Living in Tokyo after the second world war, Tony's father Shozaburo Takitani comes to meet and marry Tony's mother whose sudden death seems to physically begin the melancholia bereft in the short tale. Murakami writes: “He could not seem to grasp with any precision what death was all about...All he could do was swallow it whole, as a fait accompli. And so he came to feel that some kind of flat, dislike

thing had lodged itself in his chest...he even forgot the baby in the hospital” (3). So begins the life of Tony Takitani bereft with neglect, grief and melancholy. Named after the army major who helped Shozaburo cope, Tony was named much after he was brought home to be cared for. His name was an afterthought, a choice made in quick consideration.

The silence between Tony and his father was palpable. Shozaburo had his Jazz trumpet and Tony had his art drawings. Both men shadows existing in each other's presence phantom-like. So when Tony moves out and begins a successful business of drawing his home is as cold as the one he grew up in, but he doesn't seem to mind. The details of Tony's pathology are so important because it his quiet and small life that has made such a big impact on the story. The tale is arguably calling attention to the malaise and disillusionment that Japanese people felt as they were forced to re-identify what it meant to be Japanese, not only amongst themselves but also internationally. The struggles and conflict that arise from the attempt to reconstruct the social imaginary is why the presence of Cultural Dysthymia exists in the piece.

The cultural trauma of Japan can be seen in the subsequent occupation that the piece points to. It is mentioned as Tony's father considers after a few days that, “the American occupation of Japan was probably going to last awhile, he thought, and American-style name might just come in handy” (Murakami 5). This occupation only further cemented the radical shift that occurred within the Japanese national conscientiousness from what Matsuki Kunitoshi calls attention

to America went, “from colonial power to liberator of East Asia and war-time aggressor to an occupied liberated defeated and demilitarized post war nation” (Kunitoshi 536). Holding in contention the industrious art that Tony produces and the content of his peers speaks to the silenced voice of activists and those seeking the old regime. Encoded in the unspoken language of practical usefulness and utility Tony Takitani’s art is unveiling the silenced voices of those oppressed by the devastating blow to Japan’s independence and freedom. While his artwork is seemingly detached and despondent, much like Anne Cheng’s theory of racial melancholia, the object of defeat and a disrupted fractured communal identity is present in the silence noiselessness throughout the piece.

Often forgotten, Haruki Murakami’s piece “Tony Takitani” made into a film by the legendary director, Jun Ichikawa, is a sad tale about a sad man. With little dialogue, the piece is a quiet portrait of a technical illustrator who falls in love with a materialistic young woman. His wife’s materialism is also an interesting expression of cultural dysthymia. Depressed and depleted Tony Takitani’s wife is made whole by the action of buying expensive and often impractical clothes. She is in love with the process of shopping, addicted to the hunt for unique fashions. Used in contrast to Tony Takitani’s meticulous and profoundly meaningful work, the frivolous nature of his wife’s shopping seems a direct link to American empire in the legacy of empty meaningless consumerism and consumption. It is as such this emptiness that the wife is constantly tries to fill that leads to her untimely death. After her death, her clothing literally speaks as a presence absence in the

life of Tony Takitani in such a way that connects to the work of Cheryl Glenn in *Unspoken: the Rhetoric of Silence*. Using the self-explanatory concept of situational silence as a muse, in thinking about the inability of both Tony and his father to express the grief they feel at the loss of their spouses, is metaphorical of the cultural melancholia (i.e. dysthymia) that forces them silent and renders useless unless made productive by working. Tony's father's death quickly following the loss of his wife seems indicative of the necessity for productivity and no time to mourn the loss of past hopes and liberty as a country.

Beyond creating these situational silences where the absence of speaking is metaphorical as the absence of making material change of production in the physical world. There is a need to suffocate and swallow down emotions. Speaking often obstructs the ability to swallow. And much in the same Glenn and Ratcliffe explain in *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* that rhetorical power is situated in understanding rhetorical agency. It is the ability to "reconceptualizing the acts of silence and listening as calculated and determined activities within a larger rhetorical system" (Glenn and Ratcliffe 58). And this rhetorical system permeates the literal air of the story in the cloud of cultural dysthymia present.

### Moving Forward

Depressed characters like Maud Martha, Juno Diaz's Oscar Wao and Haruki Marukami's Tony Takitani exist for many purposes. They express several things about the desire of oppressed individuals to find freedom not only in their

physical space, but also their psychological one. For some, that freedom may look like dispelling tradition, holding on tightly to it, or performing poise, sadness, or rage. This rhetorically situated performance, this ability to persist and to survive despite not fully understanding one's power, does not diminish or replace one's subjectivity. In literature such as this, a character's freedom to define their own lives, if anything, gives readers the same ability to do so. Unpacking depressed characters such as Maud Martha, Oscar Wao, and U Takitani calls attention to a gap between literature on mental health and the varying intersections that perpetuate life circumstances of marginalized/depressed people of color. Understanding depression in literature calls attention to the very ways emotive experiences, those spoken and unspoken color the life expectancy, probability of change, and the happiness of those who mourn the loss of worlds, people, and feelings they once knew. Depressed protagonists encourage new interventions and lenses. They also express the desire of marginalized individuals to find freedom not only in their physical space, but also their psychological one. Their rhetorically situated performance is indicative of the ability to persist and to thrive. In thinking of these characters' self-determination to define their own lives, it gives readers the courage to do so as well. As we move forward in the field, perhaps utilizing the thematic elements of decolonial theory can provide further context to unpacking the ways that people of color navigate and speak back to the worlds they occupy.

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