Reading Multicultural Novels Melancholically: Racial Grief and Grievance in the Joy Luck Club, Beloved, and Anil's Ghost

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READING MULTICULTURAL NOVELS MELANCHOLICALLY:
RACIAL GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE IN
THE JOY LUCK CLUB, BELOVED,
AND ANIL’S GHOST

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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ABSTRACT
READING MULTICULTURAL NOVELS MELANCHOLICALLY:
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Jennifer Arias Sweeney, B.A., M.A., M.S.
Marquette University, 2019

The teaching of multicultural literature in English classrooms has focused on a liberal rather than critical approach. The liberal multicultural approach focuses on pluralism, which is actually a form of assimilationism that denies ethnic difference and silences racial conflict. This silencing produces a new kind of racial grief where ethnic and racial identities are ignored and the expectation is for racialized figures to get over their losses.

I believe we should focus on a critical multiculturalism that critiques assimilationism and recognizes racial grief. I assert that English instructors should teach an interpretive strategy called reading melancholically. I am defining melancholia as a mode of reading that encourages a distrustful attitude towards the master narrative of assimilationism. My reading technique critiques systemic racism rather than focusing on expectations for ethnic minority figures to deny their grief. In this manner, melancholic reading is a critique of systemic oppression and works towards dismantling systems of power. Melancholic reading practice allows teachers and students to analyze texts in meaningful ways that shine light on minority figures that seek to maintain their ethnic identities.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jennifer Arias Sweeney, B.A., M.A., M.S.

In my youth, I discovered a love for literature. I also experienced great loss. During this formative time, I was inspired to teach English, which has become my life’s work. When I decided to return to graduate school for doctoral study, one of my guiding reasons was to recover something. This act of recovery led to discovery -- in search for something lost, I found something more.

I’m grateful to all my professors at Marquette, whose dedication and wisdom inspired me. I especially would like to thank my director, Dr. John Su, who has taught me a great deal about scholarship. Moreover, he has taught me about writing complex arguments, demystifying academia, and believing in myself. His patience, kindness, and motivation assisted me in understanding the discipline, completing this tremendous project, and growing as a young scholar.

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for BJA
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION
Melancholic Reading of Multicultural Literature

As a student and, later, a teacher, I have witnessed a tide of change in the literary canon. As a high school student in the Chicago suburbs in the 1980s, I almost never read texts by authors of color. Discussions of race, culture, or ethnicity were absent in the English classroom. Then, as a college and graduate student of English the 1990s, I noticed a change in the curriculum that included voices of people of color and more women. This had a deep and resonating impact on me – I felt a profound sense of acknowledgment that my race was worthy of inclusion in an academic setting. Though I felt a sense of recognition, I also had questions and concerns about the purpose and meaning of discussions on race, ethnicity, and culture. When I became a teacher in the mid-1990s, I was part of a department that promoted the inclusion of texts that represented various voices of minorities. In addition, I witnessed conflicting and shifting attitudes towards the discussion of race, gender, and sexuality in the workplace and the classroom. The evolution the English curriculum in the high school where I teach and across the country demonstrates continued efforts to address race and equality in the classroom.

While efforts to include minority voices have progressed, we must continue to improve methods of teaching and reading these texts to have a more meaningful impact on students. We can encourage more inclusivity and critical thinking of racial formation through examination of how minority voices are represented in curriculum and how we engage students in thoughtful reading. This project extends Freud’s paradigms of mourning and melancholia to the examination of
racial narratives. Freud’s theories on how we respond to loss describe a dichotomy between the healthy response of mourning, which ultimately results in closure, and the unhealthy response of melancholia, described as a pathological clinging to objects of loss. The closure of mourning allows a letting-go of grief that has been resolved. Melancholia, in contrast, sustains the grieving process as a psychic position where losses of self are retained and remain unclaimed (Singleton 4).

The approach to teaching literature through the lenses of mourning or melancholia impacts how we interpret race relations. In terms of racial grievance, mourning suggests that discussions of racism have reached closure. Later, I will explain how this sense of mourning is manifest in post-racial discourse that impacts the teaching of literature. I contend that we should not allow celebratory narratives of mourning to dictate how we discuss race. Instead, we must translate Freud’s theories of melancholia to sustain discourse on racial grievance. Unmourning is a means to provoke thoughtful analysis of the continuing problems of racism. Moreover, we must continue to dismantle the effects of historical racial subjugation. I will address how translating theories of melancholia encourages important social critique and studies of race.

The inclusion of multicultural novels in the secondary classroom created spaces for students to discuss racial identity; however, meaningful discussions on race are threatened by claims that racism is a problem of the past. The presidency of Barack Obama seemed to support the view that racism was a problem of history, for the election of an African-American suggested race was no longer a hindrance to individual accomplishments nor social approval. According to Ian Lopez, this post-
racial ideology "sees race not just as skin color, but as a historical artifact" and refers to racism as “individual bigotry” rather than recognizing systemic problems (824-825). In addition, the rise of a black middle class seems to prove that the country has moved past racial problems. The success of a few operates as a screen that covers the continual deep divide of racism. Moreover, any movement towards getting “over” racial divides only further marginalizes minorities. Paula Moya notes that some conservative political pundits claim that “racial identity is becoming less important as a factor in determining life chances” (Moya Learning 5).

However, we must encourage teaching with a critical lens to examine how racism continues to function in our society. These claims that we live in a post-racial American society jeopardize the progress made in educational settings. Here, I recognize that some progress has been made in terms of texts and minority representation, yet we must persist in negotiating the quality of that inclusion. In terms of curriculum, some systemic problems of racism were attended to when textbooks were revised to include stories and information about minority groups and individuals. For example, historical attention to the lack of diversity in textbooks resulted in more representation of minorities. Lei and Grant describe how “celebrating diversity” became a more appeasing and acceptable way enforcing multiculturalism, which was manifested in equal representation by adding images and knowledge about traditionally underrepresented groups. Convenience and efficiency were made possible when publishers created canned curriculum with teaching units to supplement curriculum (“Multicultural Education” 219). But a canned curriculum suggests only superficial attention.
Beginning in the late 1960s, educators and scholars of color pressed schools, school districts, and textbook companies to produce and offer curricula that reflected the diversity of the United States population. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, textbook publishers addressed the most glaring omissions and stereotypes, but as national concern shifted toward establishing curriculum standards and systems of accountability, with a few exceptions, efforts to make texts and other curricula multicultural gradually subsided. Educators, particularly those who are White, often assume that publishers ‘took care’ of most forms of bias.\(^4\) (Sleeter 2, “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies”)

I suggest the teaching of minority voices must include a sustained critique of racial subjugation. Inclusion of minority voices and images is an improvement; however, a meaningful exploration of multiculturalism must encourage inquiry. A post-racial ideology promotes a celebratory attitude regarding the end of racism. But to enable inquiry, we must develop teaching practices that continue to protest racism. According to Paula Moya, when “we can see our present-day truths as socially constructed and historically contingent we will be free to imagine new, less repressive social practices and ways of interacting” (Moya Learning 9). We weaken the hegemonic power of post-racial ideology when we study the continuing effects of racial subjugation and oppressive social constructs.

Moreover, the value of diversity and inclusivity is questioned by the assumption that we live in a meritocracy where success is based on individual
achievement regardless of economic circumstances or racial subjectivity. The rhetoric of post-racial ideology reaffirms the concept of meritocracy. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva protests the idea that we should move beyond race and that, in fact, minorities are to blame for current racial problems: “Most whites believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘all get along’” (1). Such assumptions are used to challenge affirmative action and other race-based policies that no longer seem necessary. Moreover, this dangerous position threatens to eliminate the advances we have made in classrooms across the country. Scholars of English and Education challenge the notion of a post-racial society. David Eng, in “The Ends of Race,” asserts, “Our putatively color-blind moment is marked by the assertion that racial difference has given way to an abstract and universal United States community of individualism and merit – even as (or if) it demands the inexorable growth of the prison-industrial complex and ever-increasing militarization and unfreedom in global locales such as the middle East, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay” (“The End(s) of Race” 1479). Eng’s claims shed light on the problem of remembering and forgetting. The focus on individualism and color-blindness encourages the forgetting of a racial history of violence and inequity. The assumption that racism has ended denies the systemic problems that continue to pervade society. Progress in multicultural education is threatened by these claims. The claim that we live in a “post-racial” society where individualism is valued and people are colorblind belies the reality of systemic racism, which reproduces the silencing of minority histories. Also,
Jennifer Springer contends, “The legitimacy of race continues to be at the helm of and directly affects our engagement with conversations about race within and beyond the classroom. The distinctive struggle for recognition, rights, and resources by those from underrepresented groups makes the critical examination of race an important aspect of identity conflicts” (Springer 3). We must encourage inquiry about race and racial formation in educational settings in order to have productive discussions and any possible progress towards racial equality. The pervasive sense that we live in a meritocracy prohibits serious discourse on race. The focus on individual achievements and a generic celebratory attitude towards equality obscures any need to even acknowledge racial divide. This has created a new trauma that silences minority voices. A color-blind movement structurally reinforces the silencing of racial grievances. But we must confront this silencing and continue to examine how racial inequality continues.

We must examine how the system of education encourages or discourages discussions of race. Focusing on curriculum choices in the language arts allows us to see how the educational system can recognize and confront racial issues. Rather than focusing on racism as individual attitudes, we must encourage interventions that empower teachers and students to interrogate structures and systems of racism. A powerful intervention is my approach, melancholic reading, which invites close examination of racial issues in literature.
Transformations and Teacher Training

Transformative discussions of race can occur in classrooms when teachers and students study multivalent texts; however, many teachers recognize a need for training in the teaching of diversity. My study will address some of these needs in terms of the selection of multicultural texts and the reading approaches that encourage critical study. We can invite more complex discussions of race in our educational practices as we continue our efforts to promote inclusion and improve critical reading practices. Instructors need support to improve their practice: “They feel ill equipped and unable to accommodate the needed shift to be inclusive in that there is a general lack of knowledge of the necessary content and pedagogy required. Most often, instructors state that they do not have the knowledge base to cover topics of diversity within their discipline” (Springer 3). My teaching experience and scholarly work afford me an eye-opening perspective. Many colleagues have articulated these concerns regarding gaps in ethnic literary studies as well as lack of training in critical discussions on race. For instance, when teaching a senior English course entitled World Masterpieces, colleagues felt more comfortable “teaching what they knew,” which focused on European canonical works rather than a more inclusionary approach to world literature. In addition, other teachers have expressed unease facilitating meaningful discussions of race. My study arises out of the need for more sophisticated reading approaches that will deepen students’ and teachers’ understanding of racial subjectivity in literature.
Critical thinking and close reading are instrumental in resisting oppressive rhetoric and narratives. Stories have the power to reproduce, challenge, or rewrite the cultural imaginary. The study of novels reveals the authors’ and readers’ “particularly situated ideological communities” (McNeill 2). Furthermore, the study of narratives and literary criticism permits powerful encounters with constructs of identity and race. Literature invites relevant discussions of race through fictional scenarios that can engage students in reflection. The discipline of English has the potential to contribute to meaningful studies of race, ethnicity, and difference. Close reading can be instrumental in achieving personal and social transformation. Paula Moya argues that storytelling has the ability to propagate or rewrite the social imaginary, which makes literature a particularly effective way to engage with social issues. Moya posits that when close reading “involves a heightened attention to literary language and form in a way that acknowledges the shaping force of culture and society on the text’s development and expression, then close reading is an indispensable tool for excavating the ideological investments promoted by any given text” (Social Imperative 10). When given the tools to negotiate meaning, students can examine ideologies of race in novels and society. Critical reading can help students understand historically-situated cultural tensions. Fictional narratives provide us with scenarios to work through social problems and engage in social critique. Moreover, understanding narrative texts allows us to examine the power and function of “social narratives,” in particular the stories we tell or are told about race and culture.
Developing Critical Multiculturalism in Education

To develop relevant curriculum on racial matters, we must reflect on the critical goals of multicultural education. This will provide a framework that will clarify our purposes. What is “close reading” and “critical thinking” within the framework of multicultural education? Hasn’t “multicultural education” achieved its ends by its very existence? I will answer these questions by surveying the term “multiculturalism,” how it has been manifested in different ways, then assert my argument for close reading within a critical multiculturalism. The term “multiculturalism” is overwrought with multiple meanings and expectations. Scholars Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, in their work Mapping Multiculturalism, contend that multiculturalism is a major framework that operates as a means to study intergroup relations. They recognize that the meaning of the term is debated in society: for some, “multiculturalism” is a rejection of the great aspects of “western culture”; for others, it means a new form of assimilation in disguise. Their assertion that multiculturalism has become a disguised form of assimilationism is evident in the celebratory nature of a “liberal multiculturalism,” which is furthered by post-racial ideology:

White liberalism has generally consented to the prevailing racial common sense that, after the middle 1960s, race has ceased to be a serious obstacle to the advancement of people of color.

(Newfield and Gordon “Multiculturalism’s Unfinished” 108)

Furthermore, Newfield and Gordon argue that liberal consent to pluralism that focuses on assimilationism has detracted from serious discussions of race (108).
Post-racial discourse has subsumed the critical nature of multiculturalism; instead, the focus on pluralism has become a celebratory narrative of integration. Yet, Newfield and Gordon focus on a general concept of multiculturalism that describes the "baseline conditions necessary for the establishment of multiracial democracy in the United States" (77). Likewise, Wahneema Lubiano, in her chapter “Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor,” views multiculturalism as an “organizing principle” that uses space opened by discussions that were previously marginalized, to reconstitute the making of meaning by institutions. She posits her concern about “multiculturalism” as a form of oppressive control: "Within the parameters of the present hierarchical structure of the university, multiculturalism can be and has been in some places and in many ways thoroughly appropriated, diluted, and neutralized so that the domination of Eurocentric knowledge remains completely unchallenged" (68). I share Lubiano's concern: “multiculturalism” has been appropriated to serve a post-racial ideology that presumes the end of systemic racism. However, within the reforms of educational institutions, James Banks, in Cultural Diversity and Education, contends that multicultural education should have clear goals, which include “to reform schools, colleges, and universities so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (3). Newfield and Gordon, Lubiano, and Banks positions on multiculturalism highlight the need to focus on democratic principles that give voice to the marginalized and ultimately empower minorities. Though the definition of “multiculturalism” and “multicultural education” have been debated, I will use these
terms when I describe teaching practice that encourages critical inquiry to racial constructs and racial problems.

Extending the work of the above scholars, I will focus on how multicultural education should be transformative and dismantle the hegemonic structure of the literary canon. The literary canon in some high schools has become more inclusive; literature by or about people of color is not uncommon across secondary curriculum in the Chicagoland area. Yet the way that these texts are read is problematic when assimilationism is celebrated. In this sense, multiculturalism has become a form of hegemony. The problem with this dominant discourse is that it precludes significant discussions about racial formation and racial problems. Mere inclusion of minority figures and voices is not enough. Inclusion of texts in the secondary curriculum has become the way to “solve” the problem. While that encourages recognition of race, narratives that are interpreted as successful assimilation stories only perpetuate the blaming of the victim. In other words, the minority figures must get over the past, deny their differences, and adapt to the dominant, white culture.

My project addresses critical thinking and interpretive lenses in the secondary English classroom. There are several ways to categorize approaches to multicultural education. Banks articulates five dimensions of multicultural education: 1) Content Integration, which deals with the inclusion of content from a variety of cultures and groups; 2) Equity Pedagogy, which exists when teachers modify their teaching styles in ways to be inclusive of various cultures and ethnic groups; 3) Empowering School Culture and Social Structure, the creation of a school
culture that encourages students to become active agents; 4) Prejudice Reduction, which focuses on students' attitudes and the modification of destructive attitudes; and 5) The Knowledge Construction Process, which relates to how teachers help students to understand and investigate cultural assumptions, frames of references and bias within disciplines and the ways in which knowledge is constructed within those disciplines (Banks 5). My focus on the teaching of literature fits in the categories of Content Integration and the Knowledge Construction Process. The inclusion of particular texts will enable teachers to engage their students to become active producers of knowledge rather than passive consumers. Moreover, in this study of multicultural texts, I include voices from women and minority writers, and I teach students critical thinking methods that foster the analysis of implicit cultural assumptions and perspectives. By incorporating my approaches, teachers can understand and implement a methodology that promotes critical consciousness in their students.

Through promoting the intersection of scholarship in literary studies, critical race studies, and multicultural education, we encourage transformative practices in the classroom. Banks’ scholarship on developing effective multicultural curriculum includes a discussion of content choices. The choices in our study of literature constitute Content Integration. Including voices that were once excluded from reading lists in secondary English classes is one way to broaden student perspectives towards understanding democratic principles of inclusion. However, the addition of female and minority writers must be logically woven into a comprehensive curriculum. The hegemony of a multicultural canon of
representation ignores the remainders of trauma for ethnic groups. Rather than creating a framework of representation that suggests novels focus on experiences of different ethnic groups, a comprehensive curriculum engages readers in inquiry regarding racialization and remainders of traumatic circumstances. We must fundamentally build curriculum around something other than representation and understand that the engagement with each novel is not equivalent to solving racial problems. Finishing the end of novels should not mean closure for thinking or studying. Instead, we must continue to reflect on how the texts create remainders of trauma. For example, readers can consider what is not addressed in these texts. A melancholic approach to reading always opens what is not addressed or answered. We should open doors to discussions on race rather than close them.

My project addresses effective strategies to read these texts within the context of the Knowledge Construction Process. A foundation of literary studies and critical race theory can help teachers create meaningful lessons regarding racial subjectivity. There is a wealth of literary criticism useful to teachers of secondary English. Our school library includes various anthologies of literary studies such as Harold Bloom’s collection of critical essays. Such literary criticism is often helpful in understanding the themes and characterization in any given novel. Furthermore, literary criticism provides teachers and students information on various critical “lenses” to approach texts, such as biographical, feminist, Marxist, or structuralist interpretation. This includes some criticism on multicultural texts that have become part of the canon of literature taught in secondary schools. However, I find there is a gap between the theories of teaching multicultural education and literary
studies. The lack of anthologies or other resources on critical race theory may reflect a lack of interest or unease with the topic among English teachers. Moreover, this lack may suggest further need for larger conversations regarding race among our faculty and students. In discussions with colleagues, I have observed that many teachers care about issues of democracy and equality, but feel uncomfortable probing beyond superficial conversations about race. Some teachers express that the inclusionary approach to the curriculum is satisfactory and that the “texts and students” should do the talking about race and identity. However, an inclusionary approach limits discussions on race to representation and celebration. In other words, it is possible for a unit on the novel of an ethnic figure to avoid real discussion of racial grievance. By focusing on representation and celebrating the end of racism, this approach prevents a critique of systemic racism. Moreover, inclusionary approaches perpetuate the liberal notion of integration and pluralism in a post-racial society. We must, instead, examine the particular histories of those racial groups and the circumstances that frame the production of these ethnic texts. Post-racial discourse and inclusionary multiculturalism are forms of mourning.

While inclusion may invite the recognition of difference, I argue that more meaningful and transformative discussions about racism should be incorporated through intersections of scholarship on critical race studies and pedagogy. Scholars such as Newfield, Gordon, and Lubiano address what multiculturalism can and should do while James Banks provides more practical approaches to what can and should happen in primary and secondary classrooms. Literary studies helps teachers and students with understanding the content and various approaches to
examining novels. Yet, specific discussion of how to *teach and read* multicultural novels to empower students as critical thinkers and active agents is lacking. Without careful attention to this curricular need, dominance of white, Euro-American perspectives will continue as well as ongoing marginalization of people of color.

I believe that teachers must help students develop critical reading skills to understand racialization in literary texts. This can be achieved by fusing content integration and knowledge construction. Indeed, for multicultural education to effectively address racism, it cannot avoid “institutional and structural determinants of inequality” (Newfield and Gordon 79). I will extend the work of Peter McLaren who provides a rubric to measure the outcomes of effective, transformative multicultural education. Peter McLaren’s essay, “Critical Pedagogy,” is a helpful directive on the purposes and desired outcomes of critical pedagogy. I am using his definition of critical pedagogy, which describes a theory and practice of creating an educational system with an emancipatory ideal of democratic values, free of racism and exclusionary practices. McLaren’s emancipatory idea is based on the theory that social problems are part of the “interactive context between individual and society” (69) where critical theorists focus on dialectical understanding. Dialectical thinking demands interaction between elements such as knowledge and action, process and product, subject and object, and the complex contradictions of self and other, power and impotence. Schools should be sites of empowerment and self-transformation for students rather than places of indoctrination. McLaren argues that there are “many sides to a problem, and often these sides are linked to certain class, race, and
gender interests” (71). He contends that we should see schools as "sites of both domination and liberation”; thus, schooling should be fundamentally tied to the struggle for equality (70). Multicultural studies is a means to this end – the examination of class, culture, and power should lead to better understanding of social inequities and an end to racism. McLaren describes the different types of knowledge essential to overcoming these equalities, but does not address specific educational practices. Hence, my study focuses on reading techniques to enable close readings of ethnic texts.

With some guidelines that are helpful in shaping curriculum, I explore specific reading strategies for approaching ethnic texts. My work will expand upon the concept of transformative knowledge, as described by Sleeter and Banks. James Banks, in Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching, does provide more specific guidelines for achieving the goals of multicultural education: empowerment and equity for all students. His work describes particular goals for units that address culture, ethnicity, and reducing racial conflict. In his curriculum guidelines, he asserts, “The Curriculum should help students understand the totality of the experiences of ethnic and cultural groups in the United States” (321), which involves assisting students in understanding significant historical experiences and cultural patterns of ethnic groups to develop a comprehensive and realistic understanding of “the broad range of ethnic group heritages and experiences” (322). Christine Sleeter offers more curriculum guidance in her book, Un-Standardizing the Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based
Sleeter refers to Banks’ definition of *transformative knowledge* that is necessary in effective multicultural pedagogy. She posits that this includes:

- Concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and that expand the historical and literary canon . . . Transformative and mainstream academic knowledge is based on different epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge, about the influence of human interests and values on knowledge construction, and about the purpose of knowledge. (84)

Sleeter adds that transformative knowledge is grounded in the realities of “subjugation and visions of justice” and offers an alternative narration for the historically oppressed and excluded peoples (84). While Sleeter provides practical suggestions for curriculum design, her suggestions are broad. My work offers more specific and concrete approaches to reading.

The inclusion of texts written by people of color has been proven to change racial attitudes. Studies in multicultural education include various approaches to expand the literary canon by including writers of color. In *Cultural Diversity and Education*, Banks summarizes studies from 1952 to 2001 that prove units on racial study can affect students’ racial attitudes. Banks states, “Children exposed to a democratic curriculum expressed more positive racial attitudes; those exposed to an ethnocentric curriculum developed more negative racial feelings” (298). He confirms that teaching materials affect “children’s racial attitudes toward ethnic groups and themselves” (298). However, Banks believes that interventions to
reduce prejudice must go beyond instructional practices and must include institutional or systemic reform (301).

My project will help teachers develop instructional practices and materials to “increase the cognitive sophistication of students” (301). One concern regarding the teaching of texts by writers of color is that teachers often focus on the historical background and rarely examine the text’s formal, structural, or thematic components. I will address and extend Laurie Grobman’s work *Multicultural Hybridity: A Theory of Literature*. Grobman discusses how “a relational conception of difference regards essentialized categories as contextual and shifting” which underscores the concept that “groups are interconnected, heterogeneous, and fluid” (33). Grobman’s work provides a discussion of literary theory and critical practice that encourages multiple readings. Likewise, my work promotes an awareness critical reading. I will reference the theory and scholarship of Banks and McLaren to create a critical pedagogy for teaching multicultural works. I intend to extend the critical practices to address gaps in teaching multicultural literature. My project seeks to fill the gap between an inclusionary approach of writers of color and a pedagogical approach to teaching specific novels. My focus on melancholic reading practice extends the goals of critical pedagogy.

Narratives on Race

My interest in the relationship between literature and culture has led me to study how various narratives tell the story of racial identity. Ethnic minority figures often fail to find a homeland or a culture to which she truly belongs. My study will
examine how texts narrate the identity formations of ethnic minority subjects. Identity is overdetermined by race yet our contemporary society refuses to acknowledge that race continues to impact the material realities of minorities. Hence, a **melancholic reading** approach sustains a discussion of racial grievance and disallows closure. Certain texts have properties that encourage us to challenge the narrative of assimilationism. Examining these texts with this lens provides a means to resist dominant frames of oppression that disavow racial injury.

There are various types of multicultural texts that have been canonized in the secondary English curriculum. The types of novels chosen influence the pedagogical approach because of their textual content. The following types of texts have become popular in the high school classroom. To aid in my examination, I will distinguish among four categories of literary strategies: messianic, separatist, assimilationist, and melancholic. The first category is what I term **messianic**, those that solve the racial problem through a white figure in the text and are written by a white author. This is clearly underscored in novels such as Twain’s *Huck Finn* in the nineteenth century and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the twentieth century. Here, the white protagonist sympathizes with the black figure and operates as the savior while the black figures are cast as silent victims in the story. Both texts were critically acclaimed and canonized, though the inclusion of these texts in school curricula is increasingly being reexamined for these very reasons. The second category of popular texts ignores the problems of racial tension. Instead, these works deflect the problem and focus instead on the ethnic subject within his or her own community. For example, Louise Erdrich’s *Bingo Palace* asserts that the
protagonist must come to terms with his identity as a Native American and mature accordingly. These texts use figures to model resolutions to racial conflicts that deny any lingering of trauma. The solution to the difficulties of minority characters is evident: the onus is on the character who must find a means of living within the restraints of his own community. Thus, these narratives perpetuate the notion that minorities must overcome their own circumstances and grievances. The third category includes those that solve the problem of racial tension through assimilation. Popular narratives such as Richard Rodriguez’ memoir *The Hunger of Memory* place the onus of the problem on the ethnic minority figure to redefine his or her identity. The solution to racial tension lies within that figure to leave behind traces of his or her ethnic past in favor of assimilation. Interestingly, these texts have become vastly popular and interpreted often through a liberal multicultural lens, as stories of “universality.” The ethnic figure is exoticized and the texts become aesthetic vehicles to understand the plight of people of color. Universality posits an essentialized humanity where cultural practices are additions that can and should be subtracted. Readers sympathize with these stories, inwardly acknowledging that the individual racialized minority must change rather than society at large.

Finally, the fourth category of texts invites a reading approach of *racial melancholia*. Reading melancholically enables teachers and students to see beyond a celebratory interpretation of master narratives of assimilation. Instead, the qualities of certain texts combined with this reaching approach offer possibilities to engage in discussions of race in new and meaningful ways. Reading with a melancholic framework allows us to re-view particular texts and continue an
ongoing critique of difference. This framework will be outlined in the next section on racialized grief. With this reading practice, we can see how these narratives refuse to accept assimilation or the saving grace of a white figure. Through this lens, teachers and students can see how novels promote discussions of the unresolved grief of racism. Moreover, this critical reading practice helps us see how certain novels suspend the closure in order to continue the critique of assimilationism. Furthermore, a melancholic reading lens invites analysis of melancholic attributes of literary figures. These narratives portray characters that struggle to achieve viable ethnic identities. These characters exemplify the effects of racism through psychological suffering, difficulty forming healthy attachments, and the failure to find true homes. The practice of reading melancholically extends critical approaches to multicultural literature and the knowledge construction process.

**Racialized Subjects and Grief**

Racialized subjects experience the loss of identity and equality which leads to grief. The psychoanalytic theories of Freud offers insights to dealing with loss. Freud’s seminal work “Mourning and Melancholia” outlines the responses to loss and serves as a guide to my reading approach. Freud describes two paradigms of dealing with loss. Mourning is the normal and healthy way for an individual to deal with the loss of a loved one. On the other hand, melancholy is the failure of an individual to accept loss but instead, prolong the grieving process. In this prolonged state of grief, the individual suspends closure. While Freud’s theory gives us insight
to the psychological processes of mourning, it provides us with a model of understanding the loss of equality that is experienced by ethnic groups. Freud’s interpretation of melancholy is most useful in understanding the concept of suspended grief.

While I agree that the suspension is the refusal to let go of the lost object, I disagree that melancholy is a pathological response. For my study, I will extend Freud’s theory of melancholy and use it as a way to interpret group experience. Rather than viewing melancholy as individual pathology of failed mourning, I suggest melancholy illustrates how minority groups experience the failed promises of America. We can translate Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to a reading practice. A melancholic lens encourages readers to continue reflection of past injustices that continue to impact minorities today. We can understand how narratives make us dwell on minority histories that should not be forgotten.

**Melancholic Approaches to Reading**

This critical reading practice allows us to see levels of textuality such as attention to characterization and narrative structure. I am defining melancholia as a mode of reading that encourages distrustful attitude towards the master narrative of assimilationism. Here, my use of the term assimilationism is defined by Newfield and Gordon who separate *assimilation*, a means pursued by immigrants to join the economic and political mainstream, from *assimilationism*, which is defined by three tenets: 1) It requires adherence to specific behaviors, 2) Assimilationism rejects “racialized group consciousness”, and 3) “It repudiates cultural equity among
groups” (Newfield and Gordon, “Unfinished Business” 80). The literary strategy of reading texts through assimilationism invites a particular reading of the novels. This approach critiques the expectation that the ethnic figures must assimilate to mainstream, white culture and forgo their ties to ethnic identity. However, reading literature through a melancholic lens opens new ways to interpret texts about minority figures. I examine three novels written in the 1990s to 2000s. This time period illustrates a new racial trauma that results from assumptions of a post-racial rhetoric. This post-racial ideology suggests that race is no longer a determining factor in the experience of minorities. A multiculturalism of mourning celebrates pluralism and erases the problems of race. This optimistic narrative about race has created a new trauma. Racism has manifested itself in more covert formations after the end of Jim Crow. Bonilla-Silva delineates frames of rhetoric for this post-racial attitude, which he calls, “new racism” (228). These are ways in which whites continue to blame the victim for racial problems.11

While some studies focus on racial melancholia to understand social formation, I am primarily looking at how melancholic reading re-envisions how particular texts resist assimilationism into the dominant narrative. For ethnic minorities, assimilation demands a loathing and rejection of one’s native culture or race. I see a reading approach of racial melancholia as means to uncover aspects of the texts that function as counternarrative. This counternarration calls upon the reader to recognize the assumptions and trappings of assimilation. These expectations of social norms narrowly define identity as denying ethnic
differences. By contesting the traditional narrative of assimilation, I argue that melancholic reading uncovers the persistent problems of racism.

I suggest that reading through a melancholic lens allows us to suspend the closure of the grieving process. We can see how moments in the narratives work to deny the satisfaction or fulfillment for the characters and the readers. The monolithic narrative of assimilation is a strategy of social control. Thus, melancholia allows us to re-imagine other kinds of connecting narratives. In creating connections, we can see the common struggles of racial minority figures in literature. These characters struggle to maintain their ethnic identities against the pressures of assimilationism. Melancholic reading practice allows teachers and students to analyze texts in meaningful ways that shine light on minority figures. It operates as a critique that destabilizes the panacea of liberal multiculturalism. I posit that a melancholic reading practice invites critical analysis of particular texts. Ross Chambers' *The Writing of Melancholy* offers a guide for my approach. The features of particular multicultural texts acknowledge continual exclusions based on race, which signify the need for resistance to being coopted to a dominant narrative of assimilationism. Chambers analyzes the aestheticization of lack and alienation within the context of early French modernism. After the failed revolution of 1848, Chambers posits, “In France, where such violence was blocked by self-censorship, this anger could be expressed only in a sublimated (and hence repressed) form by becoming a writing of melancholy. For melancholia is anger vaporized, *the result of repression and a sign of the return of the repressed* . . . In other words, melancholy is not a ‘message’ to receive but a text to interpret” (33, my
emphasis). Furthermore, Chambers described the melancholy text as a “decentered text” that contains and reveals a violence or injustice. While Freud encourages a reinvestment into the American myth—in other words, to replace the desired object of equality with the reattachment to assimilation—Chambers suggests mourning is sublimated. In my approach, readers must examine where and how mourning is sublimated in the text. A melancholic reading approach is the appropriate response to texts that have been misinterpreted as assimilationist narratives. Chambers examines the formal features of mood and imagery that capture the intent of the author who represents the malaise of the French. The features of the text I will examine include narrative structure and the psychological state of mind of characters, which encourages readers to re-examine the grief and grievances of minority figures.

Melancholic reading practice resists the brand of liberal multiculturalism that hegemonizes pluralism and silences conflict. Palumbo-Liu describes this mode of multicultural studies: “Critics have pointed out that a necessary element of this accommodation is the silencing of debate over structural and material inequities, inequities that must be finessed in order that a harmonious blending of social space may be effected and the subjectivities stripped of conflict. These subjectivities in turn reproduce a vision of the world that conforms to that territorialized zone of perfect equality” (The Ethnic Canon 6). The material histories of ethnic groups are ignored and subsumed into the production of another understanding – that everyone has a culture and is influenced by it. Focusing on multicultural readings of ethnic texts is fundamentally an act of mourning. Readers can lament on the racism
of the past and celebrate the progress of a post-racial society, a world that is color-blind. However, those interpretations are dangerous because they disavow historical and current racial grievances. The unassimilable markers of race are barred from recognition and social possibilities of racial change are lost. However, melancholic forms of reading refuse to endorse moving on. Reconstituting melancholy as a critical reading practice encourages the analysis of racial subjectivity.

Through a melancholic reading practice, we encourage teachers and students to see that history is always part of the present. The past is “always and insistently re-presented to us, mobilized for present political purposes” (Eng “Ends” 1483). Moreover, ethnic literary texts operate as alternative histories, as David Eng posits:

Since the establishment of ethnic studies in the late 1960s as a political movement and scholarly endeavor, the ethnic literary text in the United States has often been said to function as a proxy for history. This has placed particular pressure and urgency on the literary to perform what is ‘missing’ in history and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities. (Eng “Ends” 1484)

Examination of how particular histories inform the psychological and economic status of ethnic figures will expand our understanding of racial formation.

Melancholic reading helps students to identify the psychological aspects of racial figures. Characters demonstrate the failure to achieve fulfillment. The melancholic figure must navigate between two separate worlds: her minority, ethnic
culture and dominant, white America. We can teach students to see how moments in particular novels reveal the minority figures’ inability to assimilate. A non-critical approach to multicultural novels seeks to erase those origins and subsume identity under the umbrella of pluralism.

Reading with a melancholic lens uncovers significant movement of textual figures. Wandering provides a spatialization of melancholy. To wander forever is a refusal of closure and marks the American landscape with traumatic history. As some racialized figures are marked on their bodies with scars of violence, the movement of these figures marks their inability find acceptance and equality. In the American canon, movement appears familiar because it suggests upward mobility. However, for the ethnic minority, movement does not result in acceptance or socio-economic gain. Instead, wandering expresses the absence of home rather than the optimistic possibilities of successful gains. Narratives of wandering are prominent in these journeys, either in terms of internal searching and inability to form personal attachments or physical movement from place to place, searching for a viable link to community. Displaced and dislocated, the protagonist is alienated. Stories of the migrant experience, either forced or voluntary, entail multiple losses of identity, family, materiality, spiritual and cultural connections. I investigate the ways in which these personages within different cultural productions, navigate worlds that are often alienating and violent. If progress is typically demonstrated through a linear chronology towards a clear endpoint, then the narrative structure of these texts reveals the inability of ethnic subjects to participate. A melancholic approach problematizes our current assumptions about
the progress of globalization and equality. It challenges us to reconsider the lingering affects of racism, colonialism, and exploitation.

Sustaining a Critique of Racism

Melancholia as a reading practice sustains a critique of racism. The reading approach goes beyond a mere “additive” approach that Lei and Grant have judged problematic. In “Multicultural Education in the United States,” Lei and Grant attest to the challenges of creating a meaningful curriculum. They posit, “What was more difficult than defining multicultural education was determining how to do multicultural education – that is, how can we effectively transform the existing Eurocentric, racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and ableist policies, curriculum, and instruction into a democratic and multicultural education?” (219). Lei and Grant acknowledge that many teachers and schools approach multiculturalism as an “additive approach”:

To “add” in images of and knowledge about traditionally underrepresented groups . . . . Textbook publishers began to include more pictures of people of color, females, and maybe a picture of a person in a wheelchair in their textbooks and “multicultural” curricula became popularized as a convenient and efficient way to achieve multicultural education. Lesson plans and teaching units were created for teachers to supplement their curriculum. These curricular changes mostly occurred in the elementary grade level and in secondary grade-level subjects such as social studies and English. Added to the change in curriculum materials is the emergence of celebratory activities in
My work addresses how to “do” multicultural education by providing curriculum models for approaching particular texts in a way that transforms understanding.

My work addresses how ethnic texts should be read against the hegemonic coopting narrative of assimilationism. This hegemony is dependent on mourning, which operates as a heuristic of multiculturalism. Mourning forecloses any relevant discussion of identities that continue to be shaped by racial formation. Moreover, mourning follows a color-blind script that shows whites to support most of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement in principle but object in practice to policies that have been developed to make these goals a reality. Systemic privilege is maintained by following the normal customs and practices that help keep the system in place (Bonilla-Silva 131-132). Mourning maintains the notion that civil rights have been achieved for all, which informs the reading of multicultural texts as a celebrational end to racism. To open our eyes to color-blind racism, we should train students to become critical thinkers and question these norms. Melancholic reading approaches encourage in-depth discussions on racial formation and the remainders of racial trauma.
The inclusionary approach to addressing racism is just the start and will only remain a superficial nod towards diversity. Lei and Grant affirm a surge in the popularity of multicultural education in the 1980s though it has been a rather mild reform movement that was pro-diversity and not racial or political. Superficial addons became a common form of teaching multicultural ideas rather than a resistance to monocultural assimilation. (Lei and Grant “Multicultural Education” 222-227). A revised canon must continue to include ethnic writers of color, among other newly included minority voices. This can continue to socialize the young into a more diverse world, help racial minorities achieve greater levels of success in school and employment, create respect and tolerance in a racially diverse society, and teach students critical thinking skills to acknowledge and include other epistemes. Bethany Bryson acknowledges the potential of multiculturalism that “could begin to erode the foundations of patriarchy and racism by reducing the extent to which students learn to associate greatness with certain categories of people (white men.) After all, not only the physical attributes of the authors matter. Linguistic styles, moral claims, and religious influences” impact readers (2). But Bryson argues that the category of multiculturalism became too broad. In attempts to address the social inequalities due to economic, social, ethnic, religious, gendered, and sexual diversity, it was transformed into a celebration of difference. The category itself, by attempting to address all, collapses into meaninglessness. She contends, “As it turned out, the real bases of social inequality, then, disappear into the more nebulous but less threatening word, ‘multiculturalism’ “ (17). Teaching a noncritical multiculturalism perpetuates the hegemony of
mourning. Instead, critical reading practices invigorate multicultural curriculum by uncovering what has become invisible. Melancholia refames how students interpret texts so they can actively interrogate race. This reading practice uncovers the social binds that have and continue to restrict racial subjects. Addressing how race is constructed in texts can affect meaningful analysis. Similarly, David Palumbo-Liu argues that an ethnic canon should not be co-opted into the dominant canon where the institutionalization of multiculturalism parallels the modes of inserting ethnicity into the general curriculum – certain ‘texts’ deemed worthy of representing the ‘ethnic experience’ are set forth, yet the critical and pedagogical discourses that convey these texts into the classroom and present them to students and readers in general may very well mimic and reproduce the ideological underpinnings of the dominant canon, adding ‘material’ to it after a necessary hermeneutic operation elides contradiction and smooths over the rough grain of history and politics, that is, those very things that have constructed the ‘ethnic’ in the United States. (The Ethnic Canon 2)

The ethnic canon must not become a homogenized “difference” of neutralized conflict.

My approach encourages teachers and students to read texts in a way that avoids the ultimate silencing of the “other.” Because these texts demonstrate
features that resist incorporation, they should be taught. The texts engage readers
to question the assumptions of multiculturalism. Though Bryson and Palumbo-Liu
are concerned that academia ultimately silences difference, I contend that the
inclusion of these texts into curriculum is a starting point. By situating these texts
within a critical conversation of multiculturalism, the works cannot be reduced to
mere representation.

I agree with Palumbo-Liu that a critical multiculturalism demands a
sustained critique of racism, particularly how blacks and Asians still remain
“othered.” Under the rubric of multiculturalism, hybridity theory has deceptively
resolved the conflicts and losses of racial melancholia. The notion of a hyphenated
identity suggests choice – that one may strategically select identification with the
white, hegemonic, mainstream society’s cultures and values or choose the position
of the ethnic minority. Hybridity belies the reality of assimilation and abnegation of
ethnic culture.

My work contributes to the broader shift towards comparative ethnic
studies. Although the racialization of African Americans is distinct from that of
Asian Americans, they are related processes that offer insight into the complex web
of identity formation. A comparative critique allows us to see how constructions of
these categories have created two extremes, both used to control and coerce racial
minorities. While the pejorative stereotypes of African Americans differ from the
current “positive” model minority myth of Asian Americans, both are damaging. The
crossings and connections between these two groups forge a stronger
understanding of the gains and losses of assimilation. I seek to establish a
mutuality between the two while recognizing how dominant racial discourses have set African Americans as the “negative shadow of the Asian American model minority myth” (XVII), as stated by Bill Mullen in *AfroOrientalism*. Furthermore, the foundation of inclusivity has been challenged by notions of who belongs in America. African Americans and Asian Americans have contributed to the building and sustaining of America. Yet, Asian immigrants and their descendants are often cast as the foreigner within, perpetually on the margins¹² (Lowe *Immigrant* 5-6). Both black studies and Asian American studies are counterdiscourses to the racial hierarchy that privileges and centers the white male experience as normative. Unsilenced, minority alienation calls attention to the failures of society to create viable spaces for people of color.

In literature at the turn of the millennium, especially that which has been legitimated through literary awards, there is evidence of a particular anxiety regarding racial identity. Instead of addressing the open conflicts of racism in segregation or civil rights movements, the issues of racial identity are subsumed under the rubric of multiculturalism. We must sustain the critique of multiculturalism to find pathways towards significant cultural change. Melancholic reading continue to problematize race relations in order to further social justice. Anne Cheng, in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, offers a useful paradigm for race relations in America:

Racial melancholia tracks a dynamic of rejection and internalization that may help us comprehend two particular aspects of American racial culture: first,
dominant, white culture’s rejection of yet attachment to
the racial other and, second, the ramifications that such a
paradox hold for the racial other, who has been placed in
a suspended position. (xi)

Cheng’s theory provides a useful framework for interpreting cathected relations
between the white majority and minorities, specifically, African Americans and
Asians. While Cheng addresses the position of “suspension,” for racial minorities in
America, and therefore critiques the failure of American society to be more
inclusive, she hesitates to envision the potential possibilities of that suspended
subjectivity. I agree with David Eng and Shinhee Han who posit that the interstitial
subject position of racial minorities offers productive capacities. In “A Dialogue on
Racial Melancholia,” Eng and Han depathologize melancholia as theorized by
Freud. Rather than examining melancholia as a pathological state that must be
clinically resolved, they assert that psychoanalytic theory and clinical practices give
us insight into understanding the processes of immigration, assimilation, and
racialization. Eng and Han assert:

The process of assimilation is a negotiation between
mourning and melancholia. The ethnic subject does not
inhabit one or the other – mourning or melancholia –
but mourning and melancholia coexist at once in the
process of assimilation. This continuum between
mourning and melancholia allows us to understand the
negotiation of racial melancholia as conflict rather than
damage . . . This attention to racial melancholia as
collision rather than damage not only renders it a
productive category but also removes Asian Americans
from the position of solipsistic “victims.” We are
dissatisfied with the assumption that minority
subjectivities are permanently damaged – forever
injured and incapable of ever being “whole” . . . This
notion of communal rebuilding provides the foundation
for the reparation of individual psyches as well as group
identities. (363)

Indeed, the ongoing process of mourning and melancholia as a conflict is a rich site
of investigation. Like Eng and Cheng, I contend that melancholy is an unavoidable
feature of race that must not be concealed. We must uncover and interrogate the
effects of racism upon individuals and groups in order to rectify social imbalances
and address the psychological wounds of unbelonging.

However, Eng and Cheng fail to address how racial melancholia operates
productively. It is here where I see my contribution. I assert that the very mode of
“unbelonging” allows for a critical distance for the reader. While Bryson and
Palumbo-Liu focus on institution and Cheng addresses social formation, I see the
productive capacity of these texts manifested in the reader’s increased awareness of
identity construction. I extend Freud’s claim that the melancholic has a “keener eye
for the truth” (245) who understands himself and others. However, Freud wonders
why a man “has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind” (245). I
contend that the melancholic figure is not ill, but casts his criticism upon the failures of society to incorporate racial minorities on equal grounds. My reading paradigm works to acknowledge that race continues to impact status and power.

**Melancholic Figures**

Melancholic reading practices invite explicit engagement with categories of difference. This difference is exhibited by characters who reveal the psychological distress of racial melancholia. Never truly belonging to the privileged, white class nor rooted in native homelands, these characters continually search for viable identities. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim et al. in *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* describes the Asian American experience as having a “diasporic, mobile, transmigratory nature” due to their “continuous narrative of Asian American entry, reentry, expulsion, remigration, and movement across and between borders” that results in temporary societies and characters (1). This sense of occupying a temporary space that is unsettled and unstable reveals the need for the subject to be anchored.

Through reading melancholically, students can examine the causes of distress of racialized figures. Though physically migrant, the mental and emotional state of these characters is ironically suspended. Because the melancholic subject mourns the loss of the American ideal of a promising future, and in this study, the failure of multiculturalism to create cultural revolution, the melancholic figure reattaches itself to the past. However, the connection to the past is ruptured through violence and lost histories. Students can examine how minority figures reattachment to cultural history and the ancestral land is a means for characters to
claim ethnic difference and maintain a sense of identity. However, these connections to ethnic selves problematize assimilationism.

My work will be informed by critical race studies. Because I’m proposing that literature reflects the concerns of a cultural moment, I intend to draw from publications of the 1990s to present day, noting how racial melancholy and multiculturalism have been readdressed. My study will refer to the scholarship of David Palumbo-Liu’s *The Ethnic Canon*. Furthermore, I will reference Cheng’s work on race and social formation in *The Melancholy of Race* and David Eng’s important work on race and melancholy. I will ground my understanding of race in critical race theory, examining the work of Omi and Winant, and continuing my references to Newfield and Gordon. In addition, Victor Bascara’s text, *Model-Minority Imperialism*, is quite helpful in examining racial constructs. Bascara articulates a connection between the racialization of African-Americans and Asian Americans. The failure to absorb these populations into the fabric of American society is evidenced American history. (76) Edward Said’s description of the ontology of a minority figure is addressed at the end of *Culture and Imperialism*. He argues that the strong and perfect person “achieves independence and detachment by working through attachments, not by rejecting them . . . just as human being make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities” (336). I investigate how figures in three novels are unable to form attachments because of the continued problems of racism in the 20th and 21st centuries.

My methodology includes an examination of the Asian-American and African-American figures and the moments that deny their acceptance into the
fabric of American society. Reading melancholically, we can uncover how the protagonists do not follow a linear pattern of progression, upward mobility, or closure. Nor do these personages become assimilated successfully into society. Instead, the narrative structures are elliptical and self-reflexive. I will show students how to see structures that resist fixed readings and encourage them to investigate moments in the texts that problematize race. In doing so, we probe the very construction of racial identity – the problems, limitations, and forces that reject figures of color.

In my first chapter on *The Joy Luck Club*, I critique how this novel has been traditionally taught as a narrative of successful assimilation, and I challenge popular interpretations that often focus on its “universal” appeal. The text has been largely misinterpreted as a universal story about mothers and daughters. Instead, I uncover sites of protest against hegemony through the close reading of scenes that are obscured by “universal” readings. I argue for more critical examination of these sites that reveal injury and protest against continuing racism. Through melancholic reading, we can uncover the continual displacement of the Chinese mothers and Chinese-American daughters who are rejected from mainstream, white American society. Images of death and haunting pervade the novel, which I interpret as the continued grief over the losses of acceptance and equity. Furthermore, the haunting images underscore the inability of characters to fully claim their ethnic selves and ties to their homeland. In addition, I focus on moments where the main character, Jing Mei, serves as a figure that actively continues mourning. My reading approach
focuses on moments of the novel that actually value racial difference and reject assimilationism.

In my second chapter, I discuss teaching *Beloved* and how a melancholic lens encourages critical discussions on the remainders of racial trauma. I assert that liberal multiculturalism has wrongly rendered racism as a problem of the past. Some popular approaches to teaching novels about people of color have perpetuated this view. Another problematic interpretation is to merely focus on racism as a problem for individual figures. Such an approach ignores the oppressive power of systemic racism. My approach to *Beloved* resists these interpretations that coopt the black experience into serving a master narrative of assimilationism, which blames the problems of getting over racism on the racialized figures. Rather than focusing on individual characters’ experiences, I teach students to examine how the novel critiques systems of power. We focus on the figure of schoolteacher as representative of institutionalized racism. Moreover, I encourage students to examine images related to Sethe as metonyms for the black female voice. Teaching students to understand how this novel addresses power structures engages them in meaningful discussions about race. My approach insists on carrying the grievances of African-Americans forward; thus, we examine moments that sustain grief. This includes a study of structure and the lack of closure, the analysis of collective memory and how it operates in the novel regarding slavery, and reflecting on the grief of the melancholic figure Sethe.

My third chapter analyzes *Anil’s Ghost* and the unburial of loss. Liberal multicultural approaches bury the losses of figures of color, but I believe teaching
this novel will assist students in understanding how to uncover loss. *Anil’s Ghost* is an excellent choice for high school students to expand discussion of grievances regarding ethnic and cultural differences. The novel stages a melancholic reading through its focus on the human reaction to violence during the civil war in Sri Lanka and its aftermath. The character Anil is an Asian American figure tasked with uncovering the truth about the violent deaths in Sri Lanka. We interpret how the novel attempts to recuperate the losses of characters in Sri Lanka in order to make minority grief visible. By reading melancholically, students also learn to examine the causes of the protagonist’s displacement. Struggling to unbury the dead, Anil also grapples with unbelonging in Sri Lanka and the United States. Instead of blaming the problem of rejection on Anil, students analyze how her spatial suspension between Sri Lanka and America reveals an inability to attach to a nation-state, which is due to oppressive forces. We analyze how this figure’s displacement is a result of political and cultural rejection in Sri Lanka and racial marginalization of Asians in the United States. In addition, I invite students to closely read moments where the failures of memory and recognition of the racialized figure reveal the problematic status of Asians in America.

Through melancholic reading, we encourage students to analyze narrative structure, moments of denied access to equality, and how racialized figures continue to grieve losses. As readers, we should employ a strategy that enables us to see how race continues to overdetermine identity. Refusing the closure of mourning, melancholic reading encourages productive spaces to rethink racial injury. The popularity of these novels suggests an interest in racial categories. However, we
must continue to probe deeper to engage students in reflection of contemporary problems about race. We can examine how these literary texts bring attention to the losses experienced by minority figures. Our reading strategy enables us to examine the causes of the grief and placelessness experienced by minority figures that are denied equality. My reading approach teaches students to uncover the losses experienced by racialized figures and encourages meaningful conversations about racism.
CHAPTER 2
Melancholic Approaches and Resisting Assimilationism: The Joy Luck Club

The Need for Curricular Interventions in Secondary Schools

Multicultural education has multiple goals, which include improving the access to opportunity for people of color. A major goal cited by educational scholar James Banks is “to reform schools, colleges, and universities so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (Banks, Cultural Diversity 3). Generally, most scholars and researchers agree that successful implementation requires institutional changes such as curriculum, teaching materials, and pedagogy (Banks Cultural Diversity 3). The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) unites teachers, researchers, and administrators in their goals to promote multicultural education in k-12 schools. Those goals include fostering respect and understanding among various cultures and ethnicities, a promotion of culturally responsible curricula, the elimination of racism and inequity in society, and achieving social, economic, political, and educational equity (The National Association for Multicultural Education). NAME represents current concerns of the multicultural educational movement that continue to seek social justice and equality through effective education. We need to extend the goals of educational equity and focus on curricular interventions. Scholars James Banks, Christine Sleeter, and Carl Grant, members of the NAME association, articulate the need for these changes. The goals of NAME are helpful in providing a rubric for my curricular interventions. Furthermore, Banks suggests that the current ethnic texture of the United States makes “multicultural
education imperative in the 21st century” (Sleeter, *Un-Standardizing Curriculum* vii). According to the 2004 revisions of U.S. Census Bureau projections, by 2050 people of color and whites will each make up 50% of the U.S. population. In addition, approximately 1 million immigrants arrive in the U.S. each year (ibid). The growing ethnic, language and religious diversity makes it imperative for schools to accommodate the needs of students. Improving race relations and helping students of ALL backgrounds acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to “participate in cross-cultural interactions and in personal, social and civic action” will make our nation more democratic and just (ibid.) Christine Sleeter articulates the significance of effective curriculum: “(M)ulticultural curriculum is a valuable resource for educating citizens for participation in a multicultural democracy. Knowledge itself is embedded in social power relations. Curriculum, and who gets to define it, is political because knowledge in a multicultural democracy cannot be divorced from larger social struggles. It is a medium through which a society defines itself and forms the consciousness of next generations” (Sleeter, *Un-Standardizing* 3). Indeed, Sleeter’s point about the power of curricula to shape society reinforces the need to implement rich and meaningful curricula. In my chapter, I will articulate how we can reinforce these goals through reading practices in the secondary English classroom.

**Threats to Progress in Multicultural Education**

Recent developments by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) threaten to undermine the progress of content integration. Texts by authors of color have
been added to curricula in elementary and secondary classrooms. The intent of ISBE is to focus on reading skills, which ignores the need to include multicultural voices and perspectives through texts and units. Thus, it is all the more imperative for school districts, administrators, and teachers to make multicultural text inclusion a priority. In 2010, the state of Illinois adopted the Common Core Curriculum Standards, which are meant to address the essential skills in the English classroom for secondary students. However, the Common Core Curriculum Standards provide little direction on the choices of choices of texts or units. The standards were developed by various leaders across the country with some input from teachers. Illinois has joined “more than 40 states in a collaborative effort to raise learning standards and improve college and career readiness for all students, regardless of where they live. The new Common Core Standards establish clear expectations for what students should learn in English Language Arts and mathematics at each grade level. The standards are high, clear, and uniform to ensure that students are prepared for success in college and the workforce” (ISBE). These standards allow districts to select the texts taught in the English classroom. Thus, it is up to each district not only to include texts by writers of color, but also to meaningfully examine the themes, ideas, and concepts within those texts and promote serious discussion among students with thoughtful engagement. The English standards for grades 9-10 are prescribed so students should be able to “read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems . . . proficiently” and for grades 11-12, students should
Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics. (ISBE)

Our concern should be how we define “foundational works of American literature.” While the general nature of this phrase opens many possibilities for schools to explore diverse texts, it is also possible for schools to ignore the diverse voices and cultures that have contributed to, and are part of, the fabric of our nation. Thus, inclusion of texts written by diverse voices is all the more important for school districts. How we define “American” must include multicultural authors.

The focus on Common Core Standards may compromise teachers’ ability to address multicultural literature in the classroom. We must be vigilant and careful as to how the standards are addressed. Christine Sleeter has articulated her concerns:

“In many, many schools and school districts, the huge amount of attention being given to Common Core Standards and tests (PARCC or Smarter Balanced) has eclipsed attention to teaching culturally and linguistically diverse kids, who are already or fast becoming the majority in schools. I frequently hear teachers say they lack time for multicultural education because they need to prepare their students for tests […] I also frequently encounter the perception that multicultural education has little to do with academic teaching and learning. Fixation on standards and tests, to the exclusion of attention
to students’ diverse identities, interests, languages, and communities strikes me as very short-sighted.” (Sleeter, Blog)

Standards should not be taught to the exclusion of ethnic voices. Instead, attention to text inclusion of diverse voices will enhance standards, especially when implemented with melancholic reading practices.

Literature written by ethnic American authors has proven academic and social value and must continue to be part of the secondary English curriculum. The National Education Association (NEA), the nation’s largest professional employee organization, commissioned a review of research on ethnic studies programs and curricula. Christine Sleeter’s review of the research supports the continuing relevance and need for ethnic studies in a post-integration era. Sleeter contends, “There is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students” and that when students grapple with multiple perspectives it “produces higher levels of thinking” (Sleeter, “Research Review” viii). Moreover, Sleeter states that the simple infusing of representation of racially diverse people into curriculum only marginally affects students’ attitudes about race. Indeed, more carefully constructed curriculum can lead to meaningful understanding.
Critical Pedagogy and Melancholic Reading Practice

The National Association for Multicultural Education promotes equal rights and the end of oppression of marginalized groups. Some history of the movements for multicultural education will help us understand the evolution approaches and goals of this movement. In their anthology, *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield present a range of perspectives that are linked by complicated questions on race, power, and institutions. Tracing back to the roots of multicultural education will be helpful in our understanding of where we are now in the first decades of the new millennium. Newfield and Gordon reveal that much of the development of multicultural education took place in the 1970s in primary and secondary schools:

1970s multiculturalism was a grassroots attempt at community-based racial *reconstruction* through that vital local institution, the neighborhood public school. It attempted a multidimensional approach relatively foreign to the compartmentalized knowledges of universities, addressing institutional factors along with questions of personal identity, bi-and tricultural relations, community culture, teacher attitudes and behavior, school administrative structures, and local politics and economics among others. (76)

Reforming schools for educational equality must go beyond mere recognition of difference. We must develop approaches to assist students in critical thinking that ultimately empowers all students to understand complex race and identity relations in the context of a politically charged climate.
There is potential for multicultural education to help create an actual multicultural democracy; however, the movement towards recognizing “culture” is problematic. The recognition of multiple groups of culture is a widely accepted notion of cultural pluralism; however, the focus on cultural pluralism is often aligned with assimilationism, but I must make a distinction. Here, I am using the term assimilationism as defined by Newfield and Gordon who separate assimilation, a means pursued by immigrants to join the economic and political mainstream, from assimilationism, which is defined by three tenets: 1) it requires adherence to specific behaviors, 2) assimilationism rejects “racialized group consciousness”, and 3) “[i]t repudiates cultural equity among groups” (Newfield and Gordon, “Unfinished Business” 80). For multicultural education to reach its potential, it must reject supremacist forms that are hidden in the guise of assimilationism. In other words, we must carefully consider how schools decide what the foundational American texts are, as noted by the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. Because a list of authors and titles has not been provided, schools can potentially teach a curriculum that ignores diverse racial and ethnic authors. Teaching a curriculum of entirely European white male authors would suggest the supremacy of those voices. Furthermore, the inclusion of ethnic narratives of assimilationism would promote the erasure of ethnic identities. While the turn towards culture has some value, such as the exploration of identity as a process that involves multiple ties to groups, and a new understanding of the experiences and struggles of groups marked and marginalized by race, gender, and sexuality, the focus on culture also presents problems. Newfield and Gordon attest that cultural pluralism operates as
mere recognition: “The culturalism of multiculturalism threatens to shift attention from racialization to culture and in so doing to treat racialized groups as one of the many diverse and interesting cultures. This makes racism more difficult to acknowledge and control” (79). Indeed, a severe problem is that focusing on culture allows the avoidance of discussion and action of the determinants of inequality, which are often institutional and structural. To face this problem where race and culture are merely celebrated, and the assumption is that racism has ended, we should turn towards the scholarship of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is a method of teaching that enables students to become active thinkers who understand how racism works within the structures of institutions of power, which includes choices of content in curriculum and how knowledge is constructed. I believe to make multicultural education a potent movement towards promoting democracy, we must avoid the celebratory approach of cultural pluralism, which only recognizes the existence of the various cultures and groups in our country. Critical approaches to reading multicultural texts, as researched by Sleeter for the NEA, have more effective outcomes such as “examination of the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation; the probing of meaning of collective or communal identities; and studying one’s community’s creative and intellectual products” (Sleeter, "Research Review" 3).

The aims of teaching multicultural literature have included a better understanding of social inequities. Understanding how knowledge is constructed, mediated, and produced as forms of oppression or legitimacy can assist students to
become stronger voices for minority groups. We should critically examine to what extent these goals have been met. Much scholarship has been dedicated to what multicultural education should do, but according to scholars Joy Lei and Carl Grant, “What was more difficult than defining multicultural education was determining how to do multicultural education – that is, how can we effectively transform the existing Eurocentric, racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and ableist policies, curriculum, and instruction into a democratic and multicultural education” (Lei and Grant 219). Current practices of state and national professional teaching groups encourage inclusionary models by devoting conference workshops and support to diversity. For example, the National Council of the Teachers of English presents a diversity statement in their diversity strand which states that NCTE is “strongly committed to diversity and inclusion” (“Diversity Initiatives”).

In addition, the national convention promotes a Rainbow Strand of sessions that “focus on issues and strategies related to teaching and affirming culturally and linguistically diverse students” (“Diversity Initiatives”). The attention to multicultural education in the field of primary and secondary English is supported through this organization’s workshops and caucuses for teachers of color. But, a critical examination of teaching practices is essential to accomplishing the goals of multicultural education. We must examine any institutional problems that may limit how we encourage students to think critically or engage meaningfully. As Tony Monchinski states in his book *Critical Pedagogy and the Everyday Classroom*, “The problems with America’s – or any country’s – schools is a structural problem. Things are set up in such a way that some benefit and some do not. Some appear to
be humanized, others dehumanized” (12). In particular, I believe Monchinski’s words apply to the secondary English curriculum regarding the choices of texts and how they are taught. Furthermore, I have heard the frustrations and limitations from my own colleagues who feel that they need more training in how to conduct discussions on race. Some English teachers do not choose ethnic texts in favor of European white male writers because that is what they have studied. Moreover, many teachers have not had specific diversity training that helps them manage classroom conflicts to encourage open discussions about race, gender, or sexuality. Because of these limitations and concerns for students’ feelings and the tenor of the classroom, some teachers avoid discussions of difference. My interest lies in how multicultural texts can be implemented and promoting more effective instructional strategies.

One approach that has been popularized in secondary schools is the revision of curriculum to include various minority voices; however, this inclusion should be critically examined for effectiveness. According to James Banks, there are several dimensions of multicultural education, including content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and the development of an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks 4). Content integration has been successfully achieved in many secondary schools. Banks defines content integration as “the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline” (Banks, Cultural Diversity 5).
Furthermore, it is important that the infusion of this content is not contrived, but logical. There are many opportunities for this kind of content integration in language arts. Once dominated by texts written by white, European, males, a more inclusionary approach has been implemented across schools in the country: “[T]he emergence of multicultural education has been a gradual and evolutionary process” (Banks, Cultural Diversity 48). This inclusionary approach is shared by educational scholars Lei and Grant, who observe: “A major method of achieving this goal was by providing equal education as it was defined . . . that is, as equal representation, or more and fair representation of people of color, females, and people with disabilities in the curriculum” (Lei and Grant 219).

While the inclusionary approach may be useful in exposing students to voices of ethnic minorities and women, schools must go beyond mere inclusion. Bethany Bryson’s work, Making Multiculturalism: Boundaries and Meaning in U.S. English Departments, sheds some light on the challenges of incorporating multicultural voices in literature. Bryson acknowledges that canon expansion in literature should “represent the cultural breadth that exists among their students or within the U.S. population” (Bryson 38). According to Bryson’s study, this is a central tenet in multicultural education; however, she cautions that adding texts cannot be done in service of maintaining hidden forms of oppression. She argues, “a carefully constructed definition of multiculturalism can produce consensus if it acknowledges diversity and promotes equality without threatening any existing arrangements” (42). In other words, teaching these texts must include a rigorous examination of meaning and values, rather than an empty nod to diversity.19
An empowering multicultural education must go beyond expanding the canon to effect a more democratic culture. To accomplish this, we must clarify the goals then proceed to teaching strategies. David Palumbo-Liu examines how canon formation can be more productive in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. Palumbo-Liu articulates the challenges of creating a meaningful pedagogy: “Scholars of critical pedagogy have noted how the issues of diversity have been managed by subsuming conflict and difference under a higher imperative” (10). This imperative insidiously promotes subordinate groups to master narratives so that diversity studies serve as reaffirmation of traditional assumptions about social negotiations and conflict, which actually closes sites of exploring difference (10). Instead, he suggests that “multicultural literary studies must be explained in relation to contemporary social formations” and, like Gayatri Spivak, posits, “[T]here can be no general theory of canons; rather, canons must be thought of within specific institutional practices inscribed within particular historical moments and as securing specific positions of authority” (Palumbo-Liu 11). Certainly, providing the political and historical context of the setting of texts is important, as well as the context of the publication of the text. Moreover, models of using ethnic literary texts cannot conform to the mere management of conflict and tension.
Mourning and Melancholia

I argue that we can teach students to read with a melancholic lens that opens possibilities to transform how teachers and students engage with the text. Melancholia has been explored as cultural idea for hundred of years, according to Jennifer Radden. She notes that melancholy has been “both a feeling and a way of behaving” (Radden ix). I acknowledge that melancholy is understood by some scholars, such as Freud and Melanie Klein, as a state of being or pathological problem that must be cured. However, I translate melancholy to a reading practice that focuses on the continual grief over the loss of equity for minorities.

My approach is grounded in McLaren’s and Sleeter’s scholarship on critical pedagogy as well as Bank’s framework for critical multiculturalism. We can help students understand how knowledge is constructed by approaching novels by ethnic minorities through the theories of mourning and melancholia. The knowledge construction that I contest is how novels by and about minorities are taught in secondary schools. Interpretation of these novels tends to focus on assimilation as the narrative that ends grief. In other words, the expectations of assimilationism demands people of color to deny ethnic identities and ties. I am translating Freud’s theory of the two responses to grief into a means of interpreting literary narratives. Freud distinguishes between these responses by articulating that mourning is a normal response to loss, which ends with some form of acceptance:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as
one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition. It is also well worth notice that, although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition . . . We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful. (Freud 243-244)

The work of mourning suggests that the loss is eventually overcome. Freud’s interpretation suggests that melancholia is a pathological depressive response that must be overcome. However, this view negates the power of melancholia as a perspective that adjudicates the injustice of loss.

**Mourning and Assimilationism**

I am aligning Freud’s theory of mourning with the concept of assimilationism. This parallel helps us view what mourning and assimilation perform: racialized subjects experience the dejection and loss of the ideals of but are expected to overcome that grief by giving up their ethnic identities and ties. I argue that ethnic novels are often read through this paradigm of mourning / assimilationism, which ultimately undercuts the power of these texts to promote democratic values that recognize difference. Novels by ethnic minority writers are often interpreted through a celebratory multicultural lens; in other words, the narratives are read as artifacts that confirm racism is over. Assimilationism is
incompatible with a culture of equality because it promotes the supremacy of the dominant white culture.

**Melancholia and Difference: A Reading Practice**

Reading with a melancholic lens is a critical practice that acknowledges difference. Instead of interpreting novels by multicultural writers through the lens of assimilationism, I encourage melancholic reading that is a careful examination of markers that reveal a counternarrative to assimilationism. My theory of melancholy as a critical reading practice acknowledges Freud's interpretation of melancholy as a state of unresolved grief. However, I argue that this is not a pathological state that must be overcome. Instead, the focus on loss is a means to critique social problems. Thus, reading with a melancholic lens shifts the focus from the subject of racialization to the causes of racial grief. Rather than examining figures of racial melancholy with the expectation for them to find the closure of grief through assimilationism, I contend that critical reading shifts the critique to systemic racism. From Freud, I extend his distinction of types of losses. Freud articulates that melancholia may include “loss of a more ideal kind” and that “one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (Freud 244). However, Freud contends that a melancholic subject must undergo internal work to overcome this loss and move on. Again, I shift the focus from the subject’s inner world to the outer world – the racial attitudes, particular histories, and systems that create inequity. I contend that critical reading involves a conscious examination of these external forces.
Like David Eng and Shinee Han, I will interpret melancholia as a way to investigate group, rather than individual, positions. David Eng’s interpretation of melancholia is useful for investigating the formation of racialized groups rather than individual pathology. Eng’s theory informs group identity formation as a collective group memory of historical loss and continued suffering (Eng, “Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century” 266). I extend his view that melancholia “assumes a social dimension” that can be analyzed as a “problem of the political,” but through a reading practice that counters assimilationism. Eng contends that “assimilation into dominant society for people of color means the acquiescence to racial self-erasure” (269). For Eng and Han, racial melancholy is a particular psychological experience for Asian Americans who experience and integrate the loss of the American ideals. In addition, Eng and Han use Freud’s theory of melancholia to provide a model for how the process of assimilation works and the depression that characterizes contemporary culture in marked social groups. I translate this approach to a reading practice that emphasizes the awareness of racial difference. Specifically, I will focus on textual figures that exhibit markers of rejection by the dominant white society. In addition, I will examine texts with melancholic structures. Through this critical reading practice, we can see how some multicultural texts lend themselves to discussions of unresolved racial grievance.

Furthermore, my theory on reading works within the landscape of critical pedagogy. The scholarship of Giroux, McLaren, and Sleeter offer a framework that questions the imbalance of power and the critique of social inequities. This reading technique will allow teachers to help students explore and expose social conditions
that manage race. Instead of focusing on the obvious signs of assimilationist narratives, critical interpretation leads us to the melancholic markers of characterization and structure in a text that demand to acknowledge difference. Melancholic reading is a paradigm that empowers teachers and students to explore the productivity of minority literature as an active catalyst for social justice.

While melancholy suggests a clinging to the lost object, an unwillingness to let go of grief, I am aligning melancholia with difference. I am adapting Giroux’s definition of difference that not only acknowledges the “otherness” of racialized subjects but also attests that difference is “an ethnical and political referent which allows teachers and students to understand how power works in the interest of dominant social relations, and how such relations can be challenged and transformed” (Giroux, “Insurgent Multiculturalism” 247). I argue that reading texts through the lens of melancholia allows us to see how these narratives can perform political work that challenges dominant structures of knowledge and power.
Resisting Assimilationism

In my experience teaching secondary students, discussions on race and identity can be tentative, but ultimately eye-opening when effective methods are implemented. Students at my school have learned to be sensitive and tolerant regarding diversity issues such as race, religion, and sexuality. Overall, this has created a positive and welcoming learning environment. However, it can also lead to hesitancy and reductive discussions about race. About 10 years ago, I taught *The Joy Luck Club* to sophomore accelerated students. Our classes consisted of majority white students with a strong representation of minority Asian students (perhaps 30-40%). Students were interested in understanding the experience of immigration and identity formation of the Chinese American characters; however, they had tendencies to universalize the experience to encompass all human struggles and journeys rather than look at the particular histories of Chinese Americans and how that overdetermined racial categories. My experience teaching this novel has led me to examine ways to address these topics more meaningfully with students. We can teach instructors and students to develop more critical reading practices using a melancholic lens to focus on systemic racism. My focus on reading melancholically is grounded in the framework of critical pedagogy.

My contention is that while novels written by ethnic minorities and females have been included in secondary school curriculum, inclusionary approaches fail to critically examine the complexities of race and oppression. This chapter focuses on Amy Tan’s popular novel *The Joy Luck Club*, which narrates the story of four Chinese immigrants and their four Asian Americandaughters. Instead of combating racial
inequalities, novels such as *The Joy Club* can become vehicles that promote assimilationism rather than extend critique of the failures of American society to recognize difference. According to Laurie Grobman, “To embrace multicultural texts as different is to simultaneously reinscribe them on the margins of American literature, yet to ignore difference is to erase it altogether, reinforcing an uncritical and untenable assimilation” (xv). Our challenge is to include texts by people of color without erasing their difference and to prescribe critical studies that engage students in the study of racial oppression.

Teaching students the critical strategies to interpret texts is a means to interrogate power relations. Reading with a melancholic viewpoint enables us to see beyond celebratory master narratives. We can help readers see how characters are melancholic figures that critique injustice. In addition, we can locate narrative structures that refuse the closure of racial grievance. In doing so, we can examine “how racism in its various forms is produced historically, semiotically, and institutionally at various levels of society” (Giroux, “Insurgent Multiculturalism” 108). Ethnic texts are too often interpreted as a celebratory function of assimilationism, which I equate with the end of racism. The closure of mourning engenders the assumption that we live in a post-racial society. David Theo Goldberg analyzes how discussions of race have disappeared, which prevents society from investigating social and political inequities. A current belief about racial attitudes is that there are no patterns of racism, but instances that are individualized racist expressions, which “draws attention away from the structural arrangements constituting socialities of the skin, from those that fix in place social subjects into
position of privilege and disprivilege, power and powerlessness” (Goldberg 120). Goldberg contends that the invocation of race to analyze the distribution of privilege and power has been outlawed and, instead, privately mobilized.23 Reading practices should focus on the acknowledgement of racial difference and grievance, which I equate with melancholia, a refusal to close discussion of racial grief. Discussing difference will allow teachers and students to engage in the work of transformation – reopening dialogue about structures of racism, power, and privilege. Such change involves comprehending how institutions, such as their own classrooms and schools, may focus on interpretations of assimilationism. Giroux supports this contention, arguing that we should use an approach to treat schools and other public sites as border institutions:

in which teachers, students, and others learn to think and imagine otherwise in order to act otherwise. For it is within such institutions, engaged in daily acts of cultural translation and negotiation, that students and teachers are offered the opportunity to become bordercrossers, to recognize that schooling is really an introduction to how culture is organized, a demonstration of who is authorized to speak about particular forms of culture, what culture is considered worthy of valorization, and what forms of culture are considered invalid and unworthy of public esteem. (Giroux, “Insurgent Multiculturalism” 110)

This approach supports multiple readings of narrative texts that go beyond examining minority stereotypes. Instead, we should discuss how various
approaches to literature help us understand how power relations are reiterated or challenged through interpretive acts. Narratives that are read as celebratory mourning continue to restrict full citizenship to dominant groups. In contrast to Eng and Han, who configure the depressive aspects of melancholy with assimilationism that groups experience, I attest that a melancholic lens of reading is a powerful way to articulate racial grievances. We should implement pedagogy that encourages students to discover a sense of critical agency through reading and discussing sensitive topics that affect their daily lives.

Melancholy as a theory of unresolved grief informs the lens through which we should examine ethnic texts. Through this approach, teachers and students will uncover ways in which the racialized subjects in novels exhibit grief. David Eng suggests that the loss of ideals haunts the melancholy psyche: “the racialized subject lives the social fate of Ralph Ellison’s invisible man as a normative structure of daily life” (Eng, “Melancholia” 269). I argue that reading melancholically is an interpretive act that makes the “invisible” visible. In other words, like Eng’s claim that an expanded understanding of melancholia can operate as political protest, critical reading practices open new understandings of how certain texts, such as The Joy Luck Club, resist the narrative of assimilationism.

I believe that melancholic reading practices will transform teaching approaches. My reading practice is a form of critical pedagogy which creates an approach to implement democratic values and resists racist, oppressive practices. It encourages the analysis of many sides to problems that are linked to issues of race, class, and gender. Eric Weiner, in “Critical Pedagogy and the Crisis of Imagination,”
argues that critical pedagogy has not reached an influential critical mass (59). There is more work to be done in how public schools teach literary texts in order to change the reproductive cycle of teaching celebratory narratives of assimilation. According to Weiner, critical pedagogy “is a critical theory of education born out of the need to better understand how domination, wrapped in educational policy, pedagogy, curriculum development, and assessment oppresses, marginalizes, and / or silences students . . . [I]t also attempts to understand how students and educators resist the domination that lay hidden within curriculum, assessments, normative practices of knowledge transmission, and behavioral standards” (Weiner 62). My use of critical pedagogy will include another dimension of multicultural education, as described by Banks. I will examine the Knowledge Construction process which “relates to the extent to which teachers help students to understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it” (Banks 5). I will provide approaches that extend Banks’ definition of knowledge construction so that students understand how knowledge is created and influenced by racial, ethnic, and social-class positions of groups and individuals. Understanding knowledge production is essential to create a transformative curriculum that engages students in a meaningful manner. Students should be given opportunities to challenge assumptions about race, class, gender and assimilation.

My chapter addresses the application of a melancholic lens to The Joy Luck Club. I apply my paradigm of reading melancholically to unearth institutional
understandings of race. Juliana Chang acknowledges, “Scholars of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race studies have been able to deploy psychoanalysis as a useful tool for analyzing racial and national different [...] Critical race scholars have long critiqued individualist understandings of race by showing how institutional structures such as capitalism and the state profit from and reproduce racial inequalities” (240). I will address popular interpretations of the novel and how they ignore problems of race or attribute racism to individual encounters. This melancholic paradigm for reading operates in the framework of critical pedagogy. For critical pedagogy to be effective, we must closely examine the resistance to assimilation present in the novel. Eric Weiner argues that critical teaching “should be creative, multiperspectival, culturally relevant, emotionally responsive, political, contextual, and psychological in mood and orientation. The best critical teachers combine intellectual and imaginative rigor with deep levels of psychological and emotional connectedness with their students to address the political, social, and cultural nature of power and knowledge” (Weiner 66). I argue that significant interventions must be made in the teaching of this novel. Previous scholars have misunderstood the novel and interpreted it as a celebratory mourning for the end of racism and the achievements of Chinese Americans. Weiner suggests, “The critical pedagogue should help students learn more about what they are not ‘allowed’ to know, either through knowledge production or experience, as well as help them unlearn previous lessons that might limit their ability to see not simply beyond the normal and acceptable, but to think that which has not been thought” (Weiner 68). My approach to this text extends the work of other scholars that reject
assimilationist paradigms, explores how melancholic figures resist a celebratory mourning of racism, and critiques orientalist interpretations. I will extend the work of McLaren and Giroux through a melancholic reading and suggested teaching approaches for *The Joy Luck Club*. First, we must reject the assimilationist paradigms that are applied to the interpretation of the novel. Assimilationism undercuts the goals of democracy by silencing the voices of minorities and subsuming them into the larger social constructs. Readings that include the interpretation of characters as model minorities are part of assimilationism. In addition, I will examine the novel through a theory of melancholia. I highlight moments in the novel that critique imbalance of power and race relations.

**Teaching Context: Secondary Education**

As a novel often taught in secondary schools, *The Joy Luck Club* may function as a representative text for Asian Americans. David Palumbo-Liu discusses the marketing and habits of reading regarding popular Asian-American novels, such as Amy Tan’s novel. He notes the limitations of interpretations that focus on the individual characters that must heal and adapt to America rather than addressing systemic racism:

> The perpetuation of the marketing of Asian American literature of an assimilated group now at peace after a ‘phase’ of adjustment is dangerous in its powerful closing-off of a multiplicity of read, lived, social contradictions and complexities that stand outside (or at least significantly complicate) the formula of the highly individuated
“identity crisis.” Not only do representations of the model minority obfuscate these complexities, the identification of Asian Americans via the representation of a narrow group of Asians in America finds confirmation in the readings of redemption found in works that are now set for as the representative texts of Asian American literature. (Palumbo-Liu Asian/American 410)

While the novel is often read as a story of model minority discourse that erases any critique of racial subjectivity and focuses on the notion that the individual minority must change or adapt, it loses potential to affect change in the attitudes of students who assume the status quo of race relations is acceptable.24

Common approaches to teaching the novel have been problematic. One approach is to merely include the text, which does foster one dimension of multicultural education, but fails to include a critical approach. This dimension is called “Content Integration” as developed by James Banks. He describes it as the “infusion of ethnic and cultural content into the subject area” so that the voices of a variety of cultures and groups are represented in the English curriculum (Banks, “Chapter One: Dimensions” 8-9). This approach is a shift towards a more inclusive curriculum, but has limited benefits. Another approach has been viewing the text as an assimilationist narrative. Rather than uncovering the passages that contest assimilation or racism, the focus has been the celebration of assimilation and universality, which ultimately silences grievances from the marginalized minority characters. More effective approaches present students with multiple viewpoints that encourage critical thinking. For example, Leslie David Burns and Stergios G.
Botzakis present a useful article that provide unit and lesson plans for the novel: “Using The Joy Luck Club to Teach Core Standards and 21st Century Literature” published in The English Journal. Burns and Botzakis provide a useful article that provides unit and lesson plans to encourage dialogue and debate among students. Commenting on NCTE’s definition of 21st century literacies, Burns and Botzakis state that teachers “must also help students create, critique, and evaluate texts” (23). The authors refer to the novel as a modern classic and share lessons that “combines students’ reading of literary and informational texts based on themes related to culture, identity, and border crossing, writing in multiple genres, and using oral language to demonstrate understanding” (24). They provide various opportunities for analyzing Tan’s novel, which support “exploring diversity, analyzing multiple viewpoints, and understanding social networks from the perspectives of parents and children during times of change. Because it explores the topic of immigration, it encourages students to examine informational texts about current events from various sources and think critically about historical contexts” (25). Their article provides a general description of projects for students, but it lacks scholarship that would help problematize the text more meaningfully. I will review some of the common perceptions of previous scholars then promote and expand approaches that offer counternarratives to interpretations that focus on assimilation and deny racial conflict.
Common Misreadings and Popular Approaches

_The Joy Luck Club_ is commonly taught in secondary schools, often functioning as representative of the Asian American experience. Published in 1989, it was chosen as one of the five finalists for the National Book Award, received favorable reviews, and its popularity was enormous.²⁵ Its perennial appeal has not faltered (Evans 33). The novel is often approached as a multicultural text that commemorates the end of a history of racism and celebrates an idea of “universal appeal.” Laurie Champion states that Amy Tan “is among the first women writers to bring Asian American cultural and experiences to a broad mainstream audience. Tan’s works . . . illustrate the difficulties of maintaining a dual cultural identity. Many of the struggles and conflicts her characters experience, however, transcend cultural differences” (16). Though such “transcendence” may speak to the appeal of the novel for a variety of audiences such as groups of different generates, gender, and race, the denial of the novel’s attention to race removes its political voice. However, such “universal” readings deny the text its function as a commentary on racism in America. I contend that these “universal” readings of the text deny the racial _difference_ as defined by Giroux. The particularities and distinctions of minority races are subsumed under the “universal” interpretation of the human experience, which ultimately privileges Eurocentric focus on individualism and silences minority voices of discontent. In addition, the novel is often taught through a lens of _assimilationism_. Assimilationism involves groups adapting to and accepting codes of conduct that they did not create themselves nor take part in the making of. An assimilationist reading of the novel thus erases any powerful impact that it may
have on effecting a political consciousness regarding the recognition of racial difference. My contention is that assimilationist/universal readings of the novel are linked because both assume that cultural pluralism can and should be erased through denying one’s historical or ethnic roots and distinctions. According to Lilia I. Bartolome, teachers need training in ideological awareness and an understanding of how conscious and unconscious beliefs can perpetuate the dominant social order, which results in unequal power relations among groups. She illustrates, “Unfortunately, this lack of political and ideological clarity often translates into teachers uncritically accepting the status quo as ‘natural.’ It also leads educators down an assimilationist path to learning and teaching, rather than a culturally responsive, integrative, and transformative one” (Bartolome 266). Transformative teaching demands an awareness of one’s ideology and a critical examination of how novels are taught, such as reading against an assimilationist interpretation.

The novel is often viewed as a universal story about the relationship between mothers and daughters, which denies its power to invite meaningful discussions on racial subjectivity. Tan’s novel develops the interconnected stories of four pairs of mothers and daughters whose cultural belief systems are rooted in China. The mothers are Chinese immigrants who left their homeland after World War II in the search of better lives. The daughters struggle to understand their mothers and to find satisfying lives as Chinese-Americans. Robert Evans comments on the immense popularity of the novel and suggests that its appeal

helped baby boomers appreciate the struggles and wisdom of their elders... because of all the sacrifices and suffering they had
endured. Tan’s text allowed members of her age group to look back on their own childhoods with a combination of nostalgia for times past, appreciation of their parents’ virtues, and understanding of their parents’ foibles. *The Joy Luck Club* is very much a book about what it means to grow older oneself and about what it also means to see one’s parents age, weaken, and die. In both respects, then, the book reflects the specific concerns of a particular (and very large) group of readers of the late 1980s, but it also reflects and enduring human experience. In that sense, the book is unlikely ever to seem irrelevant. One need not be Chinese American or female to appreciate this dimension of *The Joy Luck Club*; one need only to be an ever-aging person of any sort with ever-aging parents of one’s own.

(Evans 35-36)

Evans’ discussion underscores the “universal appeal” of the novel and the easy dismissal of racial issues. Presenting the novel in this manner erases the possibilities of any study of racism or sexism. In addition, Evans suggests that the appeal of the novel may reflect the rise of feminism and the “growing social, political and economic influence of women from the 1960s to the 1980s” because “*The Joy Luck Club* depicts its younger women as either already free from male domination or in the process of winning or asserting liberty” (Evans). Evans continues that the 70% increase in the Asian population of the United States between 1980 and 1988 may have contributed to the success of the novel. However, viewing the story as it supports assimilationism and presents Asians as “model minorities” veils any threat
to dominant White America of the burgeoning, growing “other” in American society. Furthermore, many interpretations of the novel focus on how the characters embrace the values of the larger culture. Rather than problematizing situations in the novel to promote discussion of difference, this approach encourages subordinate groups so be subsumed into the dominant culture. For example, intermarriage is common in the text and discrimination is not emphasized as forcefully as it could have been. The novel also confirms stereotypes of the “model minority” (Evans 39-40). The popularity of the novel is paradoxical: while the novel may invite interest in a Chinese American narrative, the focus on assimilation silences racial conflicts.

The focus on the “universal” nature of mother-daughter relationships is problematic; it merely functions as another form of assimilationism. Gloria Shen, in “Born of a Stranger: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Storytelling in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*” articulates such concerns. Shen addresses the complex structure of the novel, but focuses on the “bifurcation along generational lines: mothers, whose stories all took place in China, and daughters, whose stories deal with their lives in America. Though the mothers all have different names and individual stories, they seem interchangeable in that they all have similar personalities – strong, determined, and endowed with mysterious power – and that they all show similar concerns about their daughter’s welfare” (5-6). Shen’s commentary underlines the cross-cultural appeal of the novel—everyone can read it as a story about mothers and daughters. But Shen also insightfully notes the blurring of characters. Lumping similar characters into a group rather than seeing their
distinct individual perspectives is another reading that “silences” minority voices. Toni Morrison’s concerns in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* eludicate the problem. She states,

> When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum – or a dismissal mandated by the label “political.”

> Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly. I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery. A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only “universal” but also “race-free” risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist. (12)

Emphasizing the “universal appeal” of the novel disregards the challenges and difficulties due to racial subjectivity. This approach subjects the mothers to scrutiny of individual character flaws rather than interrogating systemic racism. In addition, the daughters can only find happiness when they adapt and assimilate. Mare Booth Foster also addresses the appeal of the narrative as it focuses on the mother-daughter relationship and the emphasis on assimilation. She explores a hybrid approach that acknowledges dualities but silences conflict: “In achieving balance, voice is important: in order to achieve voice, hyphenated women must engage in self-exploration, recognition and appreciation of their cultures(s), and they must know their histories. The quest for voice becomes an archetypal journey for all women” (Foster 18). Ironically, Foster’s interpretation, in an attempt to
celebrate voices, actually silences them. She focuses on the strengths of the bonds between women and generations, but fails to examine oppressive forces of racism that complicate the lives of the characters in the U.S.: “In exploring these problems of mother-daughter voices in relationships, Tan unveils some of the problems of biculturalism – of Chinese ancestry and American circumstances. She presents daughters who do not know their mother’s ‘importance’ and thus cannot know their own; most seem never to have been told or ever cared to hear their mothers’ histories. Until they do, they can never achieve voice. They assimilate; they marry American men and put on American faces. They adapt” (Foster 32). These interpretations of the novel operate as commemorations of mourning. Racial conflict is minimized while familial relationships, which can be universalized, are emphasized.

Other scholars invoke the image of the Asian as model minority, which pits Asians against other races and each other in a competition for mainstream acceptance. According to David Palumbo-Liu, the “model minority myth” has accomplished this separation of minorities and their narratives, suggesting that Asian Americans have achieved success; however, this labeling operates as a “specific form of containment” (Asian/American: Historical Crossings 4). The elevation of the model minority myth continues to suggest that Asian-Americans are assimilable to a point; this narrative services the mainstream that encourages the erasure of difference. Victor Bascara, in Model-Minority Imperialism, argues, “Despite strenuous efforts to debunk the model-minority myth, there is perhaps no idea that remains more dominant about Asian Americans than the conception that
Asian Americans are a group that has managed to achieve economic, political, and cultural success in the face of adversity. . . It is an inspirational story, and that capacity to inspire is precisely the problem as the putative success of Asian Americans is used to discipline other minority groups seeking social and economic justice” (1). Bascara’s argument supports my contention that we must revisit the novel and find moments of resistance to the model minority myth. The narrative should not be read as a solution to difference – that a simple adjustment of individual personality leads to an attainable American Dream. Instead, we should examine the obstacles of racism that are systemic or insurmountable, as suggested in the text.

**Interventions: Critical Readings of the Model Minority**

While Asian Americans have been stereotyped as the model minority and both scholars and activists have sought to debunk this myth, the image persists. Melancholic reading demonstrates that characters represent subjects suspended at distance from a dominant majority.

Eng and Han discuss the dangers of the model minority myth:

The “success” of the model minority myth comes to mask our lack of political and cultural representation. It covers over our inability to gain “full” subjectivities, to be politicians, athletes, and activists, for example—to be recognized as “all American.” To occupy the model minority position, Asian American subjects must follow this prescribed model of economic integration and forfeit political representation as
well as cultural voice. In other words, they must not contest the
dominant order of things; they must not “rock the boat” or draw
attention to themselves. It is difficult for Asian Americans to express
any legitimate political, economic, or social needs, as the stereotype
demands not only an enclosed but also a passive self-sufficiency.

(Eng and Han 678)

Through a close reading of the text, we can examine how it challenges the concept of
the model minority and rejects this label. Teachers often take the approach of
focusing on the assimilationist models in literature, which only perpetuates the
model minority. I argue that teachers should appropriate a critical lens that
examines sites of resistance to the myth. While some characters seem like models
of assimilation, there are moments to re-examine in each the novel.

Reading with a melancholic lens shifts the focus to the study of identity
construction, which is often missed. Tan’s work explores the racialization of Asian
characters and disputes the model minority myth. Asians are seen as both the
model minority and the perpetual foreigner within. The characters exhibit the
features of racial melancholia as figures who are never fully integrated. This opens
meanings of signification in an otherwise closed system that assumes
assimilationism is the answer. In addition, the novel generates disruptions and
challenges the idea that America is a post-racial society that has solved racial
conflict. Teachers and students should learn to recognize characters who assume
melancholy postures in response to oppression. Bella Adams addresses the debate
about the value of the book, noting, “the consensus seems to be that The Joy Luck
Club offers particular readers emotional closure in part brought about by the presumed formal closure of its ‘happily-ever-after’ ending” (Adams 123). Adams argues that the novel can be read against the dominant interpretations that ignore difference. Instead, her approach of reading the relationships as asymmetrical rather than balanced, is a means of affirming difference.

Through a melancholic reading strategy, students will see June as a figure who also embodies melancholy. She clings to the loss of the American ideals. Rather than attending to her individual deficiencies, we should analyze the moments of her resistance to assimilation. This second-generation Chinese American female is the narrator who brings together the stories of the four Chinese immigrants and each of their American-born daughters. Her narratives open and close the interlocking short stories. Jing-mei’s introductory story, “The Joy Luck Club,” centers on her mother’s death and legacy. The mourning of Suyuan’s death permeates Jing-Mei’s stories. Jing-mei learns the truth of her mother’s past: Suyuan had twin daughters in China and her wish was to reunite. The character of Jing-mei must undergo a journey that explores her mother’s failed American dreams and also challenges her to acknowledge her ethnic self. Furthermore, the death of Suyuan can be read melancholically, which assists readers in understanding how the novel works to sustain grief.
Jing-Mei’s Grief & Racial Grievance

My use of melancholia extends the work of Anne Anlin Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Cheng attests that “the social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychical experience of grief” (x). Her notion of racial melancholia works as a paradigm to describe the suspended position of the racial other: “One the other side, the racial other (the so-called melancholic object) also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an articulable loss that comes to inform the individual’s sense of his or her own subjectivity” (Cheng xi). This reading lens also helps us note the markers of melancholic figures. The melancholic characters in the novel express this suffering of racial identity. The loss is felt as the never-attainable American Dream of acceptance into mainstream society. But it is often an inarticulated expression because the characters sense of their own subjectivity is amorphous. For example, Jing Mei, the main narrator, is unable to identify the roots of her feelings of dissatisfaction and rejection. She, instead, blames herself for her failures. Rather than interpreting the text as a narrative about her personal failures, we should examine the novel through the critical pedagogical lens. This affirms the existence of a melancholic character who struggles with systemic racism.

Freud’s seminal work on mourning and melancholia helps us distinguish between two paradigms of approaching multicultural novels. Freud’s assertion is that the work of mourning a lost object involves grief that eventually ceases. In the
context of multicultural education and the reading of novels by minority authors, the interpretation of these texts as the “end” of racism constitute the work of mourning. If the lost object is identified as the racial subject losing equality, then we see how narratives of assimilation would be interpreted as ultimately achieving a sense of equality. The racialized subject mourned the loss of equality for a time, but eventually reached closure. The period of grief is over because she has assimilated to the dominant white society through denying her difference. Freud believes, “[N]ormal mourning, too, overcomes the loss of the object, and it, too, while it lasts, absorbs all energies of the ego” (255). Unlike the process of mourning, which ends with closure and a “letting go” of the lost object, melancholy describes the person who clings forever to the cathexed object. Freud asserts that melancholy is often associated with a lost ideal:

Let us now apply to melancholia what we have learnt about mourning. In one set of cases it is evident that melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object. Where the exciting causes are different one can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind . . . In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either . . . This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to
mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.

(245)

The melancholic figures in *The Joy Luck Club*, most particularly Jing-mei, are not quite aware of what has been lost, but exhibit a vague sense of yearning for acceptance in society. Using a melancholic lens, teachers can help students identify what has been lost. Students should be encouraged to identify the causes of Jing-mei’s grief. Useful here is Cheng’s discussion of the grieving process. I extend her definition of grief and grievance. Cheng argues, “The history of the ego is thus the history of its losses. More accurately, melancholia alludes not to loss per se but to the entangled relationship with loss. We might then say that melancholia does not simply denote a condition of grief but is, rather, a legislation of grief” (8). While Cheng focuses on the dynamics between the centrality of Whiteness and the Otherness of minority groups that suggests dominant white identity operates melancholically (11), I am examining minority characters as melancholic figures that continue to grieve over the loss of equality, which become the grievances of the novel. I contend that melancholic figures continue to grieve for public recognition. As Cheng states, “A traditional method of intervention in the history of racism has indeed been the demand for public recognition. This often takes the form of transforming the marginalized, racialized person from being an object bearing grief to being a subject speaking grievance. This move is thought to be a procedure by which a culturally disenfranchised individual or group of people come to occupy a place of speech and agency” (Cheng 174).
To reinforce a critical pedagogy, the text should be read with an understanding how racial melancholy is a means to achieve agency. Noting particular passages that voice the dissatisfaction with the status quo assists in seeing the novel and a vehicle that demands change. Jing-Mei Woo is a melancholic figure who embodies a search for justice and recognition as an ethnic minority who seeks agency. In the opening short story, she states, “I am to replace my mother, whose seat at the mah jong table has been empty since she died two months ago. My father thinks she was killed by her own thoughts” and she notes that her mother died “with unfinished business left behind” (Tan 19). This opening presents us with a story of grief and mourning, but close examination of how characters will engage students with critical thinking of racial grievance. The continuation of grievance is evident in the story her mother shared, which never reaches closure. According to Jing-Mei Woo, her mother’s narrative perpetuates: “The endings always changed” and, instead, “The story always grew and grew” (Tan 25). This signifies a continuation of racial grievance that has not reached closure. Part of Jing-mei’s task is to find meaning in her mother’s narrative. Her struggle to constitute meaning in these stories reflects a need to create her own story of authenticity, a task that continues through her successive stories.

Furthermore, the study of the text must problematize Jing-mei’s ethnicity. While many readings focus on the assimilation of the characters, we should pay close attention to moments where Jing-mei mourns the loss of her ethnic ties. Lisa Lowe’s text, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, provides cultural and historical context for these losses:
In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally. These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins (Lowe 4).

Even Jing-mei experiences mixed feelings about herself and her mother. She senses a loss of her ethnic ties that embarrasses her mother. In addition, she acknowledges the daughters who reject their mothers’ “fractured English” which is not acceptable to the dominant culture.

When Jing-Mei reflects on her mother’s dear friends, her aunties, she recognizes these losses:

> And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds “joy luck” is not a word, it does not exist.

(Tan 41)

Effective approaches to the novel do not focus on assimilation but underscore her claiming of difference through her ethnicity. Zenobia Mistri concurs that Jing-mei’s trip to China is the way she reclaims herself. Significantly, she is the daughter who
is given the strongest voice through four stories told from her perspective, and unlike the other daughters, she uses her Chinese name, Jing-mei. (Mistri 51) In this passage, the character understands the loss of her ethnic self, unwelcome in American society.

Some critics suggest the novel romanticizes Chinese culture to exploit an interest in the exotic. Though Frank Chin has criticized Tan’s novel as a construction of a fake Chinese culture, the novel works to undermine stereotypes. Chin remarks that the origin stories in the novel are not actually Chinese and he questions how the novel could suggest that all Chinese immigrants lost touch with their culture (Chin 134-135). However, the novel does not operate as a representative of all Chinese people. Chin makes the mistake of reading the novel ethnographically as a representation of culture. Instead, the use of these origin stories can be read as a setting up a framework for the characters’ search of their histories and ethnic identities. In addition, the revision of these myths at the opening of each section “dislodges stereotypical representations of Chinese culture” (Romagnolo 103). The novel’s preoccupation with origin serves as a quest to reconcile their lost ethnic identities with their Americanness.

The sense of unattainable equality in America is evident in the experiences of the Chinese mothers as well. The title of the novel is the name of the club that the Jing-mei’s mother, Suyuan, created in China to provide hope amid famine and war. The club of four women gathered to play mah jong, raise money and their spirits. Bonding together at this time was a testament of their will to survive the atrocities of war. The creation of the Joy Luck club in America signifies the survivor mentality
of Suyuan Woo and her friends. The club serves as a metaphor for preserving Chinese traditions in a new land and that these practices have value and should be continued in America. In fact, the emphasis on the Chinese version of the game (versus the Jewish variety) “announces the abandonment of efforts to adapt . . . in favor of mere ethnic survival” (Xu 101). The women want more than just to survive; they wish to be equal players in the new land. Auntie An-mei tells Jing-mei about their new approach to the club and the game of mah jong: “We can smart. Now we can all win and lose equally so everyone can win and lose equally” (Tan 30).

Significantly, they share their winnings with all four families, gesturing towards a new vision in the states. There is no longer an imbalance of power in the game where “the same people were always winning, the same people always losing” (Tan 29-30). These lessons of preserving cultural ties and achieving equal status are values that the mothers pass on to their daughters.

The development of Jing-mei as a melancholic figure who continues to grieve over racialization is evident in the section where the Chinese-American daughters are portrayed as young adults. The story “Best Quality” illuminates the Jing-mei as a forlorn melancholic figure. The character of Jing-mei represents that struggle of many Asians who are caught between two cultures and feel a sense of loss. After her mother’s death, she wonders about her life’s importance: “And she’s the only person I could have asked, to tell me about life’s importance, to help me understand my grief” (197). This recognition is an important site to explore for students. There are multiple reasons that the character grieves rather than the obvious loss of her mother. Through discussing what it means to grieve, they may hypothesize that
Jing-mei grieves for various losses: a sense of belonging to dominant culture and a need for equal acceptance. Though this character cannot fully change the system, addressing this loss is a refusal to conform and become a symbol of commodity or exchange.

To expand the critical lens of students, we should examine the tensions within this melancholic figure. Jing-Mei wallows in competition and jealousy with Waverly Jong, a character who has succeeded in complete assimilation and embodies the model minority image. After an embarrassing exchange with Waverly, Jing-mei reflects: “That was the night, in the kitchen, that I realized I was no better than who I was . . . I was very good at what I did, succeeding at something small like that” (207). A common interpretation of this scene is that Jing-mei has accepted her place in society. However, when put next to another statement, a tension appears. Jing-mei is later given a jade pendant from her mother that represents her “life’s importance.” But Jing-mei refuses it: “I looked at the necklace, the pendant with the light green jade. I wanted to give it back. I didn’t want to accept it. And yet I also felt as if I had already swallowed it” (208). Here is a moment for students to critically examine the diction that underscores rejection and eventual oppression signified in “swallowing” the pendant. Students can explore all the possible interpretations of the pendant – both positive and negative connotations. While many interpretations suggest that the pendant symbolizes the mother’s love and hope, I argue that this is the marking of difference – that Jing-mei cannot escape the stereotyped image of Asian minority, or that Jing-mei refuses obedience, and that Jing-mei continues to mourn her losses.
Furthermore, an analysis of the character’s career choice opens discussions of the material constraints of racialized subjects. Peter McLaren explores the relationship between material realities and racialization in “The Future of the Past.” He articulates Marx’s critique of political economy and his materialist conception: “The prevailing categories and forms of thought used today to justify foreign and domestic policy in capitalist societies – such as those of ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ – are shaped by the social relations of the societies that employ them. They have contributed to the perpetuation of a class-divided, racialized, and patriarchal social order” where the market “generates conditions for the ‘winners’” (290). McLaren’s point that social relations are reflected in the market, or the material realities of racialized subjects, can be applied to a discussion of the character’s job. Dejected about her place in society, Jing-mei reflects, “That was the night, in the kitchen, that I realized I was no better than who I was. I was a copywriter. I worked for a small ad agency . . . I was very good at what I did, succeeding at something small like that” (Tan 207). The significance cannot be lost upon students and teachers. The character can only succeed when she copies, which can be interpreted as an expectation to mimic mainstream society through assimilationism. The mournful tone of the passage addresses underscores the “materiality that informs the cultural adjustment deemed to be so central to American ideology and the procedural nature of ‘becoming’ American. This is never a matter of smooth and unilinear movement, but of complex transactions that take bodies as embodiments of certain psychic dispositions that might be read as indicators of acculturation or alienation” (Palumbo-Liu, Asian/American 117). Reading the passage critically, the expectation
to assimilate is clear through the nature of expected mimicry; however, the limited acceptance of Jing-mei’s "succeeding at something small like that" (Tan 207) reveals her alienation and critique of the system.

Reading melancholically allows us to see how Jing-mei sustains her racial grievance, which encourages a critical examination of the ending. The novel addresses the tensions of the main character who is polarized between exploring her difference, her Chinese ethnic self, and acculturation which would make her roots invisible. She recalls a memory of her mother when she returns to Hong Kong in search of her twin sisters:

My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese . . . So there was no doubt in her mind, whether I agreed or not: Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese.

"Someday you will see," said my mother. "It is in your blood, waiting to be let go."

. . . But today I realize I've never really known what it means to be Chinese. (Tan 267-268)

The underlying desire of the figure is to recognize her difference, her Chinese ancestry and culture. However, her desires are undercut by the memory of her mother’s behavior that embarrassed her in “public” (267), which shame her into denying her ethnic self in America. The scene underscores the erasure of Asian identity. We can now see how the ending sustains a critique of the alienation that Asian characters experience in America.
Jing-mei continues to sustain her racial grievance at the end of the novel. The novel suspends closure and demands an examination of ethnic identity. When she returns to China, she has an epiphany:

I think about what my mother said, about activating my genes and becoming Chinese. And I wonder what she meant.

Right after my mother died, I asked myself a lot of things, things that couldn't be answered, to force myself to grieve more. It seemed as if I wanted to sustain my grief, to assure myself that I had cared deeply enough.

But now I ask the questions mostly because I want to know the answers. (Tan 278)

The ending of the novel rejects the assimilationism path and affirms ties to home; in doing so, it works to perpetuate mourning of racial loss. With this examination, we extend Victor Bascara’s claim as representative of another moment that “saw the failure of the United States to adequately incorporate populations whose absorption would have validated American civilization” (Bascara 78). This moment is a site of exploration to discuss a vision of racial destiny that the story resists. Knowledge of the permanent exclusion for ethnic minorities queries the myth of inclusion.

Spectral Figure: Ying Ying St. Clair

In the short story, “The Voice from the Wall,” narrated by Lena St. Clair, the Chinese mother Ying-Ying St. Clair operates as a spectral and melancholic character. The story is framed by a tale of death and continual mourning. Lena is haunted by her mother’s tale of a beggar who was to be executed as a traitor: “But
before he could even raise the sharp sword to whittle his life away, they found the beggar’s mind had already broken into a thousand pieces” (Tan 102). Lena’s grandfather is later confronted by the beggar’s ghost who “pulled him through the wall” to the other side (102). Such images of haunting and death permeate the story, setting up a melancholic reading.

The figure of Ying Ying reflects the suspended position of the Asian in America. Ying Ying St. Clair married a Chinese man who had an affair and left her for an opera singer. We later learn that Ying Ying aborted that man’s son in an act of revenge, but the grief of this loss continues to haunt her even after she begins a new life in America. The character marries an American, Mr. St. Clair, immigrates to America and gives birth to daughter, Lena. Despite the outward appearance of successful assimilation in San Francisco, Ying Ying continues to be be haunted. Never fully accepted, she represents the suspended position of Asians in America. Lena narrates,

I have a photo of my mother with this same scared look. My father said the picture was taken when Ma was first released from Angel Island Immigration Station. She stayed there for three weeks, until they could process her papers and determine whether she was a War Bride, a Displaced Person, a Student, or the wife of a Chinese-American citizen. My father said they didn’t have rules for dealing with the Chinese wife of a Caucasian citizen. Somehow, in the end, they declared her a Displaced Person, lost in the sea of immigration categories. (Tan 104)
Ying Ying’s fear indicates the anxiety that results from placelessness and rejection. Rather than interpreting the figure’s failure to adapt to her American surroundings as a flaw of her personality, the reading of the novel should emphasize the system that categorizes, controls, and rejects Asians. Here, Anne Anlin Cheng’s work, *The Melancholy of Race*, is most helpful: “Anyone who has been confronted by racism face to face understands the complicated, vexing web of feelings that ensues: shock mixed with expectation, anger with shame, and yet again shame for feeling shame. . . . Though a difficult topic and thus rarely discussed, the social and subjective formation of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychical experiences of grief” (x). The racialized grief of the character is further supported by the denial of her ethnic self. Her new husband believes he has “saved” her from China and erases her Chinese identity: “My father proudly named her in her immigration papers: Betty St. Clair, crossing out her given name of Gu Ying Ying” (Tan 104). Their marriage reifies Cheng’s position on the relationship between dominant white culture and the racial other. The white culture rejects yet attaches itself to the racial other (xi). Furthermore, the psychological wounds that she bears from this displacement and rejection of Chinese heritage are evidenced in the character’s sustained sense of fear witnessed by her daughter: “My mother saw danger in everything” (Tan 105). Beneath the image in the photo exists a focus on the intangible wounds of racism.

The character Ying Ying operates as a melancholy ghostly figure that continues a discussion of racial grievance. Cheng asserts that white American identity is inscribed through a melancholic introjection of racial others that does not
relinquish nor accommodate its ghostly presence. Indeed, Ying Ying is imbued with a ghostly presence that belies the promise of the American Dream and achieving true equality. In addition, the major events of her life are circumscribed by grief. Ying Ying becomes pregnant with St. Clair’s son, but loses the baby during childbirth. This scene accentuates the promise of hope and new life in America and the failure of fulfillment. Later, Ying Ying withers and wallows at home, fearful of the outside world: “My mother was lying in bed. My mother was now always ‘resting’ and it was as if she had died and become a living ghost” (Tan 113). Ying Ying is the melancholic figure that functions as a sign of rejection and the loss of self as legitimacy. Her character underscores the systemic categorization of the “foreigner within” as described by Lisa Lowe:

> Historically and materially, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Filipino immigrants have played absolutely crucial roles in the building and the sustaining of America; and at certain times, these immigrants have been fundamental to the construction of the nation as a simulacrum of inclusiveness. Yet the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants have come as fundamentally “foreign” origins antipathetic to the modern American society that “discovers,” “welcomes,” and “domesticates” them. A national memory haunts the concepts of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as
an immigrant, as the “foreigner within,” even when born in the United states and the descendant of generations born here before.

(Immigration Acts Lowe 5-6)

Mr. Saint Clair represents the modern American figures that “save,” “welcome,” and “domesticate” Asian immigrants; however, the Asian figure Ying Ying suffers because of her difference. Her daughter Lena explains, “Because, even as a young child, I could sense the unspoken terrors that surrounded our house, the ones that chased my mother until she hid in a secret dark corner of her mind. And still they found her. I watched, over the years, as they devoured her, piece by piece, until she disappeared and became a ghost” (Tan 103).

Racial melancholy is articulated through the character’s grief and the metaphors of birth / death and promise / failure. This ghost-like figure of Ying Ying is underscored by the images of her dead sons. These losses exemplify another “object-loss” for Ying Ying, who does not “get over” these losses through mourning, but continues her attachment to her children, just as she never lets go of the promises of America. The psychic pain of rejection that results in alienation and depression is evidenced in these spectral figures: “The melancholic is often described or referred to as ghost-like, due to their propensity to live in and look back to the past” (Preston 43). Again, encouraging an examination of the characters as melancholic figures encourages students to see how texts present the challenges and limitations of racial subjectivity, rather than focusing on the inability of the characters to adapt.
Both Lena and Ying-Ying are melancholic figures who lament the loss of equality. Rather than viewing this piece as a failure of these individuals to successfully assimilate, the story reminds us to examine the systemic ways that American society refuses to acknowledge difference. The characters have the power to “see” what others cannot. Their understanding that the world is out of joint, that they are the perpetual foreigners, is evident. Lena’s growing understanding of her status as an outsider is underscored in her vision. She reflects upon how she sees terrible things: “I saw these things with my Chinese eyes, the part of me I got from my mother . . . And when I become older, I could see things that Caucasian girls at school did not” (Tan 103-104). Looking closely at Lena, her insights hint at the real problem of her minority position. She continues, “I didn’t tell anyone about the things I saw, not even my mother. Most people didn’t know I was half Chinese” (104). Her perspective as an alienated figure, as the foreigner within, must be examined as representational of group status rather than an individual flaw.

Though some critics such as Patricia Shu suggest that the novel can sometimes promote Asian stereotypes, I suggest that careful readings of perspective help us see a more complex vision of characters. Critic Patricia Shu believes the novel succeeds in demolishing stereotypes only in the stories told from the daughters’ perspectives. She suggests that through their points of view, orientalist stereotypes about Chinese women are debunked:

In these scenes, we find the American-born daughters struggling with the tendency to view their mothers in ways that combine immaturity (in the form of uncertainty about their own independence) with
orientalism. That is, they see their mothers as powerful, controlling beings whose psychology is unfathomable both because as daughters they still retain an exaggerated image of their mothers' powers from childhood and adolescence and because, rightly or wrongly, the daughters chalk up seemingly unfathomable differences to the fact that their mothers are Chinese. The novel is winning and persuasive when it suggests that images of the mothers as superhuman others are largely projections of the daughters' own fears and fantasies. (Chu 233)

The acknowledgement of how the daughters' immature point of view colors their sense of their mothers being other worldly is helpful. However, Chu suggests that the character of Ying Ying is exoticized in “Waiting Between the Trees” which is the final story that is narrated by Ying Ying: “the text’s insistence on her underlying ‘tiger spirit’ feels like an attempt to substitute a romantic, generic ideal of Chinese folk wisdom for a conclusion more consistent with her previous, individualized psychological profile . . . At such moments, the text ceases to critique the orientalism of particular characters and becomes orientalist itself” (Chu 234). I argue that a shift away from individual towards the oppressive systemic problems is also evident in this tale. By directing our focus on moments where the text critiques the failure of American society, we can understand how the character Ying Ying operates as a figure that sustains racial grievance. She tells her daughter of her transition to America, a place where she embodies a ghostly presence:

I became an unseen spirit.
Saint took me to America, where I lived in houses smaller than the one in the country. I wore large American clothes. I did servant’s tasks. I learned the Western ways. I tried to speak with a thick tongue. I raised a daughter, watching her form another shore. I accepted her American ways.

With all these things, I did not care. I had no spirit. . . . (Tan 251)

Examining this scene by focusing on Ying Ying’s assimilationism helps us see how her ethnic self has been lost. The “large American clothes” and “Western ways” leave no room for her to maintain a sense of agency. Notably, the novel does not blame these problems on the marriage to a husband who she respects. Again, a shift towards the oppressive forces that are represented in the passage reveal a culture that does not welcome a foreigner.

To sustain our understanding of this melancholic figure, we should see how her racialized grief is coded in her pain:

So this is what I will do. I will gather my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that will cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. (251-252)

The figure describes holding the pain of her grief until it become “clear” suggesting that she clings to her loss to make both a personal and political statement. Through this grief, Ying Ying can find strength and voice to empower herself and her daughter. Maintaining cultural ties is a way to preserve difference by “keeping the
past alive and building a bridge between it and the present, of transmitting cultural
codes and rituals, of subtly educating their daughters, and finally of somehow
imprinting the essence of their selves on the next generation” (Huntley 15). Finding
meaning, purpose, and a sense of justice can be found by sustaining their ties to
their Chinese culture. The loss of this culture is sometimes sense through a “ghost
presence, at times a sense of madness waiting at the edge of existence” (Shear 45).
The mothers teach lessons on the value of culture; the daughters also learn to value
their difference instead of erasing their cultural ties. Thus, a melancholic reading
makes visible the ghostly apparition of loss, evidenced by Ying Ying’s ghostly
presence. Kathleen Brogan supports this idea that the ghostly can help us see what
has been lost. She suggests that separation from ancestral groups can “render one
ghostly” (131).

Making Visible the Invisible: Ethnic Erasure and the Jongs

The mother-daughter relationship of Lindo and Waverly Jong reveals layers
of tension between assimilation and difference. Waverly Jong represents the “model
minority” who was a child chess prodigy and later, a successful professional who
assimilates to mainstream America at the cost of losing her ethnic ties. While one
could interpret the Jongs’ stories by focusing on the mother-daughter universality,
expounding on the misunderstandings between all generations, a melancholic
reading uncovers the particular losses of ethnicity. Here, I will address sites of ethic
erasure that must be critiqued.
A simplistic reading of “Four Directions” interprets Waverly Jong’s ability to win at chess through her uncanny ability to hide her strategic moves. Rather than centering the story on Waverly’s triumphs, careful reading problematizes the motif of invisibility. A discussion of what it means to be “invisible” would invite students to consider the positive and negative connotations. When is it advantageous to be “invisible”? When is it not? Following up with discussion of groups that are “invisible” to society on various levels will lead to a more complex discussion. For example, the current trend to be “color-blind” in regards to race could be discussed. Is society color-blind? What institutions or systems should make race “invisible”? Or, should they? What social groups are “invisible”?

Then a more fruitful analysis of invisibility and race can occur. The character Waverly reflects, “I could see things on the chessboard that other people could not. I could create barriers to protect myself that were invisible to my opponents. And this gift gave me supreme confidence. I knew what my opponents would do, move for move” (Tan 170). Paying attention to the concepts of “protection” and “opponents” can open doors for interpretation. The assumption is that the words only apply to playing a game of chess, but drawing out multiple meanings is possible.

Ultimately, I want students to be able to see how “invisibility” operates as a metaphor for the state of her racial identity. The easy interpretation is to vilify her mother in this story as the force that belittles Waverly’s strength. But careful readings reveal how the character distances herself from her ethnic self and her Chinese mother, yet blames her mother as the problem: “It was as if she had erected
an invisible wall and I was secretly groping each day to see how high and how wide it was” (172). The wall separates her from her Chinese mother and ancestry, resulting in a state of loss: “I was horrified. I spent many hours every day going over in my mind what I had lost [...] I could only see my mistakes, my weaknesses” (172). Here again, is the temptation to interpret the story as a tale of individual failing rather than a critique of group invisibility. Lisa Lowe illustrates how Asian Americans have been castigated as the manipulable opponents within our borders: “In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally. These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returns to the alien origins” (Lowe, Immigrant Acts 4).

Lowe’s scholarship helps us see how the figure of Waverly represents Asian American otherness, integrated and / or made invisible for uses of the national politic. Invisibility is also understood through Goldberg’s analysis of the disappearance of a racial lexicon in a post-racial society: “Racial dis-appearance, then, reveals the effects of a culture of neoliberalizing privatization. It illustrates the sorts of implications that follow when privilege and power are hidden from scrutiny behind the walls of privately structures social arrangements” (125). The invisibility of ethnic roots and the disappearance of race makes anti-racist discussion and action more difficult to achieve because the subjects are amorphous. We can help readers see hidden racialization and open discussion to evidence that this persists in our society.
The story “Double Face” articulates the problems of a divided ethnic self. On the one hand, there are pressures to assimilate; on the other, showing signs of difference lead to exclusion. The character Lindo reflects on her past as well as her relationship with her daughter Waverly, as she gets her hair done for Waverly’s wedding. Reflecting in the mirror, Lindo considers her new haircut and performs an acceptable role for her daughter and Mr. Rory, the hairstylist. Lindo narrates,

I smile. I use my American face. That’s the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am ashamed because she is ashamed. Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me. (Tan 255)

The character attests to the shame felt as the perpetual outsider. This denies the ethnic figure of a chance to fulfill the promises of America. The book critiques the subordinate positioning of Asians through their suffering: “Wearing a mask means the ability to suppress one’s true feelings and emotions – even to deceive -- in order to be allowed to live” (Xu 103).

The figure of Lindo has a litany of questions that can posed to readers. On one level, students can answer the questions within the context of the story and discuss the relationship between mother and daughter as well as the individual characterizations of each. To raise critical race awareness, students can answer the questions based on their understanding of historical and contemporary American society. Lindo’s voice underscores her desperation as she questions her daughter and the readers:
See how truthful my face still looks. Why didn’t I give this look to you? Why do you always tell your friends that I arrived in the United States on a slow boat from China? That is not true [...] Why do you always tell people that I meet your father in the Cathay House, that I broke open a fortune cookie and it said I would marry a dark, handsome stranger, and that when I looked up, there he was, the waiter, your father. Why do you make this joke? [...] Why are you attracted only to Chinese nonsense? You must understand my real circumstances, how I arrived, how I married, how I lost my Chinese face, why you are the way you are. (Tan 259)

Read through a melancholic lens, the figure rejects the forces of assimilationism. She clings to the loss of her culture and her “Chinese face.” Sadly, she has been forced to wear a mask in order to survive in America. Superficially, she played the game of assimilation:

Lindo Jong knows that the Chinese wearing of the mask, just like those Chinese fortunes, can convince many Americans that they know and understand Chinese people. She also has an unusual insight into the risk that the mask wearer can become psychologically dependent upon the mask, even when the mask is not needed. Continued wearing of the mask makes it difficult for the wearer of the mask to be her real self. Markedness has almost become the ethnic symbolism for Chinese-Americans like Lindo Jong. (Xu 104)
Rather than feeling a sense of compassion for her mother’s pain, her daughter, who is eager to erase her Chinese identity and become accepted in American society, only perpetuates the rejection of Chinese culture. Waverly, perpetuates this markedness through joking and false stories, resulting in the distancing of ethnic ties. Ironically, though Waverly performs the role of the model minority who has assimilated into mainstream American culture, she actually hides a deep sense of loss to her mother and her cultural ties. In another chapter, the figure Waverly admits, “And the pain I feel is worse than any other kind of misery […] I could create barriers to protect myself that were invisible to my opponents […] as if I had become invisible” (Tan 170). Reading melancholically, students can understand how Waverly performs and rejects the model minority figure. Both generations experience suffering in a society that demands erasure of ethnic selves: “The mother and daughter are co-victims of a common threatening force over which they have no control” (Xu 106). We uncover the mother’s and daughter’s sense of loss.

**Structural Suspension**

While some scholars and students interpret the novel’s ending as achieving a sense of closure, close reading suggests otherwise. On the one hand, the character June travels to China to meet her long-lost twin sisters, thus achieving a sense of closure for her mother, who was separated from the twins during the war. On the other hand, the figure June has only achieved a sense of unity when she has left America and returned to her ethnic roots in China, suggesting that recovering ethnic ties is essential for minority figures, but also problematizing the character’s sense of
belonging. Cheng’s theory on the melancholic suspension of the ethnic Other, elucidates the complexity of the final scene: “Part of the central dilemma of dominant racial melancholia – since its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by this system of the suspended other – is that it does not really want the lost other to return (or demand its right of way)” (16). Therefore, the ending focuses on the ethnic figure’s suspension between two places and two identities.

Moreover, Kandice Chuh, in her work *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, agrees that Asian Americans lack a sense of belonging. Chuh articulates, “Despite the generations-long rootedness that characterizes significant portions of the populations of Asian-raced peoples in the United States, historically and currently, a sense of foreignness accompanies the racialization of certain individuals and groups as ‘Asian’ or some specific iteration thereof. Always there lingers the idea that those considered Asian can (or should, in some white supremacist renderings) go ‘home,’ which never refers in context to a location in the United States” (124).

Furthermore, the structure of the entire novel can be interpreted as scattered and lacking a central space. Rather than seeing the structure as a cohesive interplay between generations, the stories can be interpreted as sharing “no apparently recognizable pattern or fully integrated narrative structure. The character relations are suggested but never sufficiently interwoven or acted out as a coherent drama [. . .] It is neither a novel nor a group of short stories. It consists of isolated acts and events, which remain scattered and disbanded. It has neither a major plot around which to drape the separate stories, nor a unitary exciting climax which guides the
book to a final outcome” (Xu 107). I agree with Xu’s description of the novel as a
text lacking a central arc, which further confirms the placelessness of Asian
Americans. Therefore, the structure of the novel underscores the fundamental
Otherness that continues to plague Asian Americans. Despite the remarkable
success of many Chinese Americans, they still struggle to be accepted in American
society: “From the moment the Chinese set foot on America soil, their dreams have
been American dreams. They scrambled for gold in the dirt of California. They
aspired to own their own land and businesses, and fought to have their children
educated in American schools alongside other American children” (Chang 164).
Ironically, even the success of Tan’s novel did not lead to a further welcome of Asian
faces in America. When the novel was made into a film, Amy Tan struggled to get
the film produced. A filmmaker complained to Chris Lee, the Chinese American
president of Columbia TriStart that there were “no Americans” in the film; Lee
retorted, “There are Americans in it. They just don’t look like you” (Chang 166).31

Conclusion

Melancholic reading practice calls on students to study how novels
interrogate systems of power. The novel The Joy Luck Club is a canonized text and
can be more effectively studied with this lens. Through careful study of the
culturally marginalized and disenfranchised in Asian American literature, we can
examine different types of knowledge have been legitimized. In the tradition of
critical pedagogy, melancholic reading practice empowers students to question
what is seen as truth:
From this vantage point, schools function as a terrain of ongoing cultural struggle over what will be accepted as legitimate knowledge. In accordance with this notion, a critical pedagogy seeks to address the concept of cultural politics by both legitimizing and challenging students’ experiences and perceptions that shape the histories and socioeconomic realities that give meaning to how students define their everyday lives and how they construct what they perceive as truth. (McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy” 11)

This approach teaches students to understand themselves as subjects of history in order to recognize the conditions of justice and injustice. When teachers create lessons that develop students’ abilities to examine racialized figures in literature, they can enhance understanding of racial oppression. In addition, we can encourage students to consider the possibilities of change: “This concept of student social agency is then tied to a process of collective and self-determined activity. This historical view of knowledge also challenges the traditional emphasis on historical continuities and historical discontinuities, conflicts, differences, and tensions in history, all of which serve in bringing to light the centrality of human agency as it presently exists, as well as within the possibilities for change” (McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy” 12). Moreover, students can become empowered through the systematic examination and dismantling of institutional racism (Sleeter, “Research Review” 6). We must continue to examine racism through institutional oppression. If students assume that racism is a conscious, intentional action of hatred made by a person to another person, then their understanding of racism is skewed. By that definition, it
is difficult to identify systemic forms of oppression. My approach to teaching reinforces the aims of multicultural education through techniques that underscore critical thinking about identity, race, knowledge, and its construction.
Multiculturalism and Mourning

The teaching of multicultural novels has perpetuated a post-racial discourse that resembles the dynamics of mourning. The lens of study has problematically become a means of celebrating pluralism through mourning the end of racism rather than a movement that critiques the continuing injustices of inequality. The liberal goal of celebrating pluralism in the post civil rights era has ironically led to a problematic consequence – in primary and secondary schools when teaching about multiculturalism, racism has been relegated to the past. This comforting illusion that racism is an historical problem must be addressed. As discussed in my introduction, multiculturalism has become a generalized term in schools and the workplace that superficially acknowledges pluralism, but lacks political power. The belief that we live in a post-racial world, where we have overcome the problems of racism, continues to influence how multiculturalism is manifested in school curriculum. The election of President Barack Obama seemed to signify a cultural moment that race, indeed, was not a factor in achievement. Arguments that American society had become post-racial in the 21st century after his election suggested that prejudice had been overcome in a colorblind society. This mode of celebrating diversity has informed pedagogy, notably in the elementary and secondary schools. Advocates of this brand of multiculturalism promote cultural pluralism that includes a respect for diversity and the right to participate actively in all parts of society. A common metaphor for this approach is to view American
society as a “tossed salad” with people from different ethnicities and religions contributing to our culture (Sleeter and Grant, *Making Choices* 152-153). While this approach has some positive outcomes in education, such as the recognition of diverse students and the encouragement of self-esteem through that recognition, such an approach fails to promote racial equity. Rather than reinforcing the political agenda of racial equality, multiculturalism has become intertwined with liberal values that celebrate diversity without challenging existing power structures.

The notion of accepting and celebrating pluralism became a means to ignore the harsh realities of enduring racial divides. In education programs across the country, the hope was that the inclusion of minority authors and works about people of color would expand students’ perspectives of racialization and usher in a new era of inclusion and equality. Though the movement sought to engender a new vision of tolerance for all people of color, thereby achieving closure to the historical trauma of racism, multiculturalism veiled the reality that history continues to haunt us. Widespread support of multiculturalism in the 1990s among American educational institutions promised to bring greater equality and eradicate racism. Moreover, a fundamental part of the multiculturalism was tying cultural parity to empowerment. In particular, the current pedagogical interpretation of multiculturalism as the mere recognition of diversity rather than a political movement, has created a new crisis – the silencing of racial grievance. Though multiculturalism appears to be a movement with particular ideological views, it lacks a centralized political focus that promotes political changes to increase access and opportunity for ethnic minorities. Thus, there is a perception that multicultural
studies have invoked cultural change, yet political activism is actually absent.

This current perception of cultural change – that racism is a problem of history – is why my approach to melancholic reading is an important intervention. We must teach students to recognize that the current status of racial categories continues to overdetermine identity.

The brand of multiculturalism that mourns the end of racism promotes a particular kind of silencing. While some ethnic and female writers have become canonical, there is an illusion that a political movement is no longer necessary. The institutionalization of multicultural units and novels in primary and secondary schools usurped the urgency of a political movement. Walter Benn Michaels represents the kind of silencing that occurs when one assumes that society is “color-blind,” or in other words, that we have “moved beyond” race so that it no longer affects identity formation. Michaels argues that scholars focus too much on race instead of focusing on the real problem – economic disparity. He asserts that we should focus on redistribution instead of recognition of identities. Michaels claims that racism is not a problem today:

The question here is, what’s the meaning of antiracism without racists? Why in a world where most of us are not avowedly racist (where, on the humanities faculties at our universities, we might more plausibly say not that racist ideology is rare but that it is extinct) do we take so much pleasure in reading attacks on racism? Why do we like it so much that we not only read books that attack a racism that (at least among the liberal intelligentsia) no longer exists but we also
make bestsellers out of books that attack a racism that never existed?

What – to put the question in its more general form – is the meaning of antiracism today? ("Plots Against America” 296)³⁴

Michaels’ claim that racism “no longer” exists is a problematic assumption. In attempting to shift focus to economic disparity, he ignores evidence of racial subjectivity. In addition, Michaels argues for a “race-blind” approach to alleviating poverty, suggesting that minorities would still benefit because they are disproportionately poor. Furthermore, Michaels insists that discussions of identity politics are actually disadvantageous for the very identities these discussions are “supposed to protect” ("Identity Politics: A Zero Sum Game” 10). In his article “’You Who Never Was There’: Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust,” Michaels suggests that identity should not be based on cultural memory. He argues that our current belief that cultures shape identity is problematic because this notion relies on memory that is transmitted through cultural texts. The memory of the Middle Passage for blacks and the memory of the holocaust for Jews are not a real memories embodied in current generations, but imagined memories that are transmitted through texts. Michaels’ work is dangerous because it denies the fact that identity continues to be overdetermined by race.

Racism continues to plague American society and we should examine more effective methods of teaching about race in the educational field. Indeed, the current political climate of America under President Donald Trump has revealed multiple layers of tension and prejudice regarding race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality. Fierce debates over the injustice of federal and state laws and executive
orders underscore discrimination against minorities. The work towards a critical multiculturalism in the field of education will help us see how we can make progress towards understanding the history and current problems of racial inequities. In contrast to Michaels, Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield acknowledge racism and take issue with limitations and failures of multiculturalism. They insist that, ironically, multiculturalism “was not only promoting cultural diversity and tolerance but reviving alternatives to assimilationism as a basis of social peace and justice” (Newfield and Gordon 94-97). The current state of “feeling” carries the assumption that civil rights have been achieved, that we have solved the problems of racism, and the country has been healed. This fantasy and politically impotent interpretation has created a crisis. In the popular imagination, multiculturalism’s purpose is merely to recognize the “multiracial and multiethnic nature of the United States” and has become a “deeply held structure of feeling” that most Americans believe themselves and the nation opposed to racism and in favor of a multiracial pluralism (Newfield and Gordon 77). Many refused to acknowledge that racism still existed in the U.S. despite increasing evidence of violence and inequality. David Theo Goldberg concurs, “We are nowhere near the promise of a raceless America, or of a post-racial one. Indeed, the claim to post-raciality or racelesness itself is misleading” (121).

Many other scholars critique the brand of multiculturalism that prevents meaningful interrogation of racial histories and political structures that continue to haunt us. Angela Davis also criticizes a liberal multicultural approach that fails to challenge gender, class, and racial hierarchies that “continue to shape the
institutions of this country” (42). Debates around multiculturalism have unfolded around promoting “diversity” and using “political correctness,” but Davis insists that the historical and political context for these debates is essential. She argues, “We must be aware of the fact that multiculturalism can easily become a way to guarantee that these differences and diversities are retained superficially while becoming homogenized politically [. . .] Although this is not an inevitability, multiculturalism can become a polite and euphemistic way of affirming persisting, unequal power relationships by representing them as equal differences” (44). Davis critiques the vision of multiculturalism that has embraced the idea of a “salad bowl” rather than a “melting pot.” The melting pot idea of American identity suggests an erasure of one’s former national identity and a building of a common culture while the salad bowl suggests that many different ingredients can remain separate but part of a larger piece. Both metaphors invite the idea of consumption. The problem with building a culture of unassimilated diversity, as described in the salad bowl metaphor, is that if difference is understood, it can be “consumed.” In other words, it can be controlled, regulated, or made to disappear. Davis critiques the limitations of viewing the “locus of racism in the attitudes of individuals” (46). While changing individual attitudes is certainly an important factor in eradicating racism, that does not “necessarily lead to radical transformation of power structures” (47). In addition, Sara Ahmed extends our understanding of this dilemma by insisting that liberal multiculturalism is, in fact, a “fantasy.” She applies Slavok Zizek’s interpretation of postmodernism to multiculturalism. According to Ahmed, Zizek
argues that postmodern forms of authority conceal force under the illusion of friendship and civility. Ahmed articulates the problem:

We can read multiculturalism as a fantasy in exactly the same terms. The multicultural organisation wants to be seen as diverse; as bringing everyone together; as respecting difference, as committed to equality. Such an organisation would use brochures of colourful faces; diversity would be a sign of the very qualities or attributes of the organisation. In other words, diversity becomes an ego ideal. The multicultural nation also takes diversity as an ego ideal, as if it has achieved diversity because of its qualities or attributes. We can see this at stake in the making of the multicultural nation . . . I would argue that multiculturalism is a fantasy which conceals forms of racism, violence and inequality as if the organisation/nation can now say: how can you experience racism when we are committed to diversity? (Ahmed)

Indeed, an important facet of the fantasy is that diversity is recognized, and assimilation is promoted, yet difference is denied. The underlying argument of this approach is that minorities must relinquish ties to their race, ethnicity, and culture. This type of diversity fits under the rubric of multicultural pluralism that conceals the experiences of racism and supports a hegemony of whiteness.
Beloved in the Secondary English Classroom

In the secondary English classroom, teachers are challenged with creating effective curriculum on multicultural texts and issues. The selection of texts is important in order to create a space for meaningful dialogue. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a powerful text for the high school classroom because it invites students to engage in thematic discussions of race, mourning, and melancholy. The themes and structure of the novel reject an assimilationist reading and the novel encourages melancholic reading approaches. Teaching *Beloved* enables students to consider racial injustice beyond the experience of reading and finishing the book. The novel’s structure rejects a sense of closure after the unit has ended. The text encourages students to examine how race is constructed. Although some teachers and students may prefer to ignore discussions on race, it would be a disservice to students.

Carolyn Denard articulates one of the challenges of teaching *Beloved*: “I do not want students to walk away from the novel as some are prone to do when confronted with the historical realities it presents, and to translate it into a pathological rendering of slavery, told to inform them of the barbarity of the slave masters and the slave mothers” (40). Indeed, we must teach with caution so as not to blame the victims of slavery for barbarity. Another approach is to ignore how the novel speaks to the particular experiences of slaves. Morrison contends that ignoring race might seem like a gracious gesture, but to enforce invisibility “though silencing is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (*Playing in the Dark* 10). *Beloved* operates as a text that resists easy consumption into a common culture that promotes assimilation; instead, it reveals the locus of racism.
not in individuals, but in the power structure of institutions. *Beloved* resists being coopted into narratives of assimilationism. Utilizing both melancholic figures and narrative strategies, Morrison articulates her concerns with loss and suspends grievance in order to draw our attention to racial subjectivity.

Another reason to teach this novel is that Morrison’s counternarrative protests the institutional forces that silence minority voices. *Beloved* was published the same year that two academic books appeared by scholars who articulated anxieties about the dissolution of America’s cultural unity: Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* and E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know.* These texts were concerned about the study of minority voices and the loss of a “common culture” and called upon society to reject any movements that would threaten a unified America. Bloom and Hirsch take on the roles of “definers” who privilege white culture and white, male writers. Hirsch offered a list of writers as a standard for cultural literacy, but did not include a single African American female writer (Woidat 194). I contend that Morrison’s novel disputes these claims by insisting upon the inclusion of a black female voice and critiquing the centralized power structure. Indeed, Morrison felt that it was her duty to talk back: “I felt I represented a whole world of women who either were silenced or who had never received the imprimatur of the established literary world” (Dreifus). Morrison wanted to write texts that made blackness the central experience. This is an important criteria when developing multicultural curriculum. Students should not only read texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* when studying
race. While that text may introduce the concept of white allies in characters such as Atticus, Scout, and Jem Finch, the perspective is from the white characters and the narrative focuses on Atticus as a white savior. That canonical novel by Harper Lee falls within the category of messianic multicultural literature, as I described in my introduction. Problematically, messianic literature focuses on the white figure as the savior of racialized victims and places the characters of color in the background rather than centering on their experiences.

Moreover, the selection of this text affirms the cultural contributions of African Americans and lends itself to melancholic reading practice. By teaching this book and the power that it holds, we can counter such cultural critics as Hirsch and Bloom who deny the presence and influence of African Americans in America’s cultural production. Morrison has articulated this in her work Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination: “This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States” (4-5). Power continues to be racialized in education, as seen in the texts that are chosen and how those texts are taught. Teaching this novel in secondary classrooms invites melancholic reading practices that interrogate systems of power.
Reading Melancholically

This chapter extends how a melancholic approach to reading encourages meaningful discussion and productive thinking about racial injustice. First, I will address how this reading method investigates how racial categories are created and manipulated by systems of power. I suggest that students examine how hegemony is manifest in the novel through figures like Schoolteacher. Understanding how the novel interrogates structures of power is essential in identifying how racialization operates. While meaningful discourse may include some tension among opinions in the classroom, we can teach students to feel more comfortable and confident when sensitive subjects, such as race, are the topics of discussion. Focusing on the text itself, the characters and situations within the text invite students into discussions about racialized figures rather than talking about their own, personal experiences. But we must teach students to become comfortable with conflicting opinions about race. According to David Palumbo-Liu, we must be aware of the silencing of conflict: “Scholars of critical pedagogy have noted how the issues of diversity have been managed by subsuming conflict and difference under a higher imperative” (The Ethnic Canon 9). The “higher imperative” may be disguised as “students well-being” in order to avoid what may be uncomfortable topics in the classroom. However, teachers can effectively encourage students to examine racial conflict in novels and hear a variety of perspectives. Second, I will investigate how racial melancholy is represented in the figure of Sethe. Next, I discuss how reading melancholically requires accurate identification of losses. We will examine how students study the character of Beloved and what she represents. Last, I will show how melancholic
reading illuminates the narrative structure of the novel rejects closure. These approaches to reading the novel will resist celebratory interpretations of mourning that suggest racism is an evil of the past. The narrative of mourning dictates that we let go of our losses; melancholia maintains a connection to our losses and suspends our grief. The use of melancholy as a reading strategy helps us locate moments where racial grievances are suspended. Moreover, it invites discussions regarding the inassimilable features of the racial subject and how we must continue to examine racial subjectivity beyond the reading of the novel. Melancholic reading will encourage students to revisit how these traumas operate at the forefront of group consciousness rather than allowing historical ruptures to be subconsciously buried in the national psyche. The novel demands an examination of minority subjectivities rather than conforming to the silencing of a debate that creates the illusion of a harmonious social space.

My methodology is based on Freud's well-known psychoanalytic theory regarding mourning and melancholia. To understand how we deal with the grief of historical injury, I am translating Freud's theories in his 1917 work “Mourning and Melancholia” to understand narratives. Freud's theory of melancholy gives us insight into the concept of suspended grief. While I agree that the suspension is the refusal to let go of the lost object, I argue that melancholy is not a pathological problem. Freud contends that mourning is the healthy way for an individual to let go of loss and achieve closure: it is “regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (243). In contrast, he suggests
melancholy is the failure of an individual to accept loss, prolonging the grieving process. The individual suspends closure in this prolonged state of grief. His theory provides insight to the psychological processes of mourning. I am extending this model to a reading technique that highlights the loss of equality that is experienced by ethnic groups. Rather than viewing melancholy as individual pathology of failed mourning, I argue reading melancholically illustrates how minority groups experience the failed promises of America. In addition, this reading technique will help students understand how narrative functions. Close reading invites students to understand how the structure calls upon us to revisit the past and reflect upon historical injury and oppression.

We can read Morrison’s text to recognize multiple states of injury, but rather than blaming the racialized subjects, we can examine how the novel critiques racism and national amnesia of slavery. David Eng extends our understanding of racial melancholia as a theory of unresolved grief. Indeed, the stories of minority voices involve multiple states of injury and loss. Eng asserts that melancholia is a useful model for understanding group formation:

As Freud’s premier theory of unspeakable loss and inexorable suffering, melancholia serves as a powerful tool for analyzing the psychic production, condition, and limits of marginalized subjectivities predicated on states of injury. In this regard, melancholia as a theory of unresolved grief is useful for investigating the formation of not only gendered subjects but also a host of other minoritarian group
identities mobilized through identity politics movements of the last quarter-century . . . (“Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century” 266)

Eng focuses on the geneology of melancholia in the context of gendered, queer, racialized, and postcolonial subjects. His analysis is useful in understanding how Beloved acknowledges and interrogates racial subjectivity through its characters. Additionally, Eng’s discussion of revisiting melancholia as a strategic response is useful: “Ultimately, a critical reevaluation of melancholia in terms of these intersecting subject positions allows us to strategize ways of challenging liberal society’s refusal . . . to recognize the very possibility of multiple states of injury even as it expressly blames those who experience them for their own conditions of suffering” (266, my emphasis). I will address how a critical reading practice encourages students to focus on the culpability of these conditions, such as race and power, rather than expecting victims of oppression to individually overcome such injustices.

**Critiquing Systems of Power: Schoolteacher**

Reading with a melancholic lens invites an examination of characters that represent systems of oppression of the past and present. The pedagogical figure, schoolteacher, represents the power of education as the technology used to contain and coerce. Much scholarship, such as Caroline Woidat’s “Talking Back to Schoolteacher,” interprets schoolteacher as signifying white male dominance (Woidat 182-183). I invite students to analyze how this figure functions as a system of oppressive power.
I encourage my students to examine the multiple inflections of characterization to see how systems of power are represented and contested. Thus, we examine scenes and study how Schoolteacher is more than a singular character. For instance, I asked my AP students about the effect of the character’s name. “What is the effect of not having a specific first and last name? Why ‘Schoolteacher’ rather than ‘School Teacher’ or ‘Teacher’?” Students responded with interesting interpretations that suggested the novel focuses not on one particular individual, but on a larger group or system of power such as patriarchy, privilege, and pedagogy. Students discuss the long-term effects of indoctrinating hierarchies of status and examine how Sethe, Paul D, and the other Pauls continue to be haunted by Schoolteacher’s brutality. I invite students to closely examine the resonating mental, emotional, and economic effects of schoolteacher’s racism. The trauma lingers for the characters long after slavery has ended. For example, Paul D reflects on schoolteacher’s cruelty: “At the peak of his strength, taller than tall men and stronger than most, they clipped him, Paul D. First his shotgun, then his thoughts, for schoolteacher didn't take advice from Negroes [. . . ] For years Paul D believed schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men” (220).

Through close reading, students learn that closure to the trauma of racism is an illusion. Students begin to understand the ongoing legacies of racism through the struggles and narrative arcs of Sethe and Paul D.

Analyzing how the novel interrogates systemic power, students were able to deepen their understanding of textual implications. Close reading of the schoolteacher character invites students to see how difference is consumed and
conflict is managed. Students examined scenes that show the increasing reach of Schoolteacher's domination as he takes possession of Sethe's ink, her milk, and attempts to take her child, Beloved. In addition, I invite students to view Sethe's figure as representative of African American identity. Though I make a point to specifically state that we cannot and should not interpret all characters as representatives of their race or culture, this approach can broaden discussions to investigate a possible subtext that enriches students' reading. For instance, David Eng's scholarship on melancholia articulates an understanding of group formation. He attests, "A political reading of this aspect of melancholia is crucial, for the social status of the lost object seems largely to determine whether the subject is fated to an existence of depression and despair... This attention to the social dimensions of melancholia insists on a thinking of the dis-ease less an individual pathology than as a model of group formation" ("Melancholia 20th Century" 268). Thus, students interpret the scenes between schoolteacher and Sethe not only as tragic crimes against an individual, but they see how the relationship between whites and blacks during Reconstruction continued to be parasitical. The actions of schoolteacher expose the systemic problems that reinforce racial structures that continue to oppress minorities. Indeed, Michael Omi posits, “The distribution of power – and its expression in structure, ideologies, and practices at various institutional and individual levels – is significantly racialized in our society” (244).40

Furthermore, I ask students to reflect upon schoolteacher as a representative of institutions of learning, which deepens our discussion of race. We continue to discuss how this figure's actions and words haunt Sethe and Paul D long after he is
part of their lives. I want students to recognize the continual trauma of racism as it is shown through characters. This invites further discussion regarding current racial problems in America (which I will discuss later in an activity on collective memory.) When we interpret schoolteacher as a figure who institutionalizes the racialization of blacks, then we can examine what he “teaches.” In the scene of Sethe’s description of giving birth to Denver, she discusses rememory. He is described as a man with authority despite his small stature: “Nothing to tell except school teacher. He was a little man. Short. Always wore a collar, even in the fields. A schoolteacher, she said. That made her feel good that her husband’s sister’s husband had book learning and was willing to come farm Sweet Home after Mr. Garner passed” (*Beloved* 37). We discuss how “book learning” in this passage becomes synonymous with power and privilege. My students often note that schoolteacher wields his power insidiously here – through his manners, his politeness, and his authority. Sethe provides his background as she explains schoolteacher’s presence to Denver:

She didn’t want to be the only white person on the farm and a woman too. So she was satisfied when the schoolteacher agreed to come. He brought two boys with him. Sons or nephews. I don’t know. They called him Onka and had pretty manners, all of em. Talked soft and spit in handkerchiefs. Gentle in a lot of ways. You know, the kind who know Jesus by His first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face. A pretty good farmer, Halle said. Not strong as Mr. Garner but smart enough. He liked the ink I made. It was her recipe, but he preferred how I
mixed it and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn’t know that right away. We just thought it was his manner to ask us questions. He commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what we said.

(36-37)

Students note that only schoolteacher has the power to inscribe while Sethe and the other slaves are objectified. The scene includes some important details that reveal the insidious power of hegemony. Mrs. Garner, though viewed as a kind and supportive slave owner according to Sethe, is complicit. Being the only “only white person” reveals a concern that even white allies may subconsciously hold – the desire to be set apart in “opposition to the resident black population” (*Playing in the Dark* 47). Significantly, schoolteacher is not initially viewed as a threat – his gentility and manners are impressive. Such is the power of white privilege, which is the normative behavior and expectations to which all others fall short. White norms wield power by accepting, rejecting, or consuming the culture or production of others. I ask students to discuss the symbol of schoolteacher’s “book” and “notebook.” Students sometimes interpret the “book” as a study of slaves that is used to justify his treatment of blacks as animals. I encourage students to probe further regarding the book and notebook as symbols for institutions. When probing further, students discussed how “writing, education, or studies” seems to be ways that were used to oppress slaves in the novel. I then make connections to how institutions of power such as the economy (the slave trade), education (as represented by schoolteacher), and publishing or writing are systems that
contribute to the racial subjugation of black figures. These discussions open students’ eyes to viewing schoolteacher as more than a mere individual racist figure.

I continue to invite a discussion of race, identity politics, and cultural hegemony in this scene. I ask students what is the significance of Sethe’s “ink.” Some suggest the ink is her “voice” while others even see it representative of Morrison’s voice. Melancholic reading means we interpret Sethe’s ink as her loss: a cathected object that symbolizes her agency, her equality, and her selfhood. Students theorize about how systems of white male dominance can erase the voices of people of color. I make a connection to black female writers’ cultural production and further that interpretation by “giving voice” to Morrison’s scholarship and interviews. Morrison articulates that images in literary imagination matter: “I am a black writer struggling through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work” (Playing in the Dark x). Here, Morrison describes the canon consuming the black female voice. Morrison articulates her concerns about representation. She posits that readers examine the very apparatuses of power themselves. When students see the stealing of Sethe’s ink as a commentary on the struggle for black female writers to claim legitimacy amid the cultural wars, they open discussion of racial matters beyond the text. Inviting further discussion of the canon and multicultural voices allows students to consider canon formation and voice representation. Lisa Lowe illustrates that scholars should not merely celebrate ethnic culture as an object separated from material conditions, but encourage a
study of the relationship between cultural artifacts and the social groupings that
bequeathed their production: “A multiculturalist agenda may thematize the
pressures that demographic increases of immigrant, racial, and ethnic populations
bring to the educational sphere, but these pressures are registered only partially
and inadequately when the studies of ethnic traditions are, on an intellectual level,
assimilated as analogues of Western European traditions or exoticized as primitive
and less ‘developed,’ and, on an institutional level, tokenized as examples of the
university’s commitment to ‘diversity’” (Lowe, “Canon, Institutionalization, Identity”
52). Moreover, she has stated concerns about being compared to white male
authors such as Faulkner, suggesting that the voice of a black, female writer has its
own value. She asserts, “A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only
‘universal’ but also ‘race-free’ risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes
both the art and the artist” (Playing in the Dark 12). Reading the novel as a critical
examination of the ideological power of the canon allows us to see the damaging
effects of systemic racism.

An examination of the scene where Sethe’s milk is stolen further deepens our
understanding of canon formation. Education was the particular technology
deployed to control and coerce minority subjects. The figure of schoolteacher
reinforces the objectification of bodies. I invite a critique of schoolteacher’s
exploitation in the scene where Sethe recalls the traumatic stealing of her milk:

“After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s
what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner
on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears.
Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.”

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison, *Beloved* 17)

I ask students to read this scene closely and consider the connotations of “milk.” Students respond that milk has connotations of innocence, purity, and nurturing. Once stolen, the character of Sethe can never recover completely. Her continual mourning of this loss operates as the refusal to let go. I invite more discussion of symbolism to develop their understanding of her melancholic clinging to her “milk.” Students explore other possibilities such as Sethe’s milk as the contribution of the four-hundred-year old presence of Africans in the United states. I take issue with the assumptions of conventional literary historians and critics who ignore the contributions of African Americans on the development of America's literature. Morrison attests that the African and African American population “preceded every American writer of renown and was, I have come to believe, one of the most furtively radical impinging forces on the country's literature. The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and show not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (*Playing in the Dark* 5). The taking of Sethe’s milk reinforces the power of institutional oppression. To reinforce oppression, “the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body: even if they do not make use of violent
or bloody punishment, even when they use ‘lenient’ methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission” (Foucault 172). Foucault’s statements help students analyze how physical bodies are exploited, as understood in this scene. Furthermore, I encourage students to consider how the text expands our understanding of what has been lost in the trauma of slavery: bodies of language, bodies of culture, and bodies of history.

Historical and Cultural Connections

In my introduction, I described ethnic figures whose movement in the novels are spatialized, indicating a lack of roots. Sethe’s story takes her beyond Sweet home and the house on 124 – her memories are not fixed on her present time and place. This spatial movement operates as a melancholic refusal to let go of the past. Morrison’s novel resists assimilation through Sethe’s undeniable connections to her lost history. Though Freud interprets the melancholic refusal to let go of the lost object as a pathological problem for the individual, examining Sethe’s undeniable connection to her African ancestry allows us to understand how group formation for African Americans must rely on maintaining ties to history and memory. This refusal to let go of the past is signaled in the tree on Sethe’s back. While she cannot see those roots directly, the presence of her African past is undeniable. Though schoolteacher inscribed his domination on Sethe’s back, Sethe’s body rejects complete submission. Beloved sustains connections to lost histories to resist forgetting. Barbara Christian argues that the kinds of criticism immediately
following the publication of *Beloved* were quite limited. She argues that it should be looked at as a particularly African American text. She asserts that “precisely at this contemporary moment, a desperate moment for African Americans as a group, the power of this novel as a specifically African American text is being blunted” (6). I agree with her concerns that the Middle Passage has “practically disappeared from American cultural memory” (7). Unfortunately, African cosmology has been denigrated in the West because of culturally dominant patterns. Without this study of African cosmology, we lose meaning in texts that are “clearly derived from it” (7). I would like to extend Christian’s claims and examine how the text ties itself to African ancestral cosmology that was lost in the Middle Passage. Like Morrison, Christian posits that African heritage has been denigrated in the West; thus, focusing on its study is important in honoring the voices of African past and understanding their contribution to culture. Through examination of African cosmology, we can see how Morrison is sewing ties to the past and refusing assimilation into culturally dominant patterns of worship or constructs of time. Christian asserts, “For West Africans, a particular tree, rock, or grove embodies that relationship between themselves as human beings in Nature, and other aspects of Nature that are often seen as separate from human beings. Thus, Nature is seen as a part of the human and the divine” (12). The tree on Sethe’s back signifies connections to her lost past. We can see how the signs on Sethe’s back refuse to be coopted into schoolteacher’s signs of power. Instead, they hold a significance of their own – maintaining roots to her culture. Inscribed on Sethe’s back is the scar in the shape of a tree, which takes
on multiple significations. The image calls to mind the roots to Sethe's ancestral past. As Amy, a white woman, helps deliver Denver, she speaks to Sethe:

“It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk – it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What god have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don’t remember nothing like this.” (Beloved 79)

While images of birth and new life connote possibilities and change, the verbal acknowledgment of the tree scar on Sethe’s back, one that she can feel but cannot see, represents the collective history that we all must acknowledge. Sethe bears the pain and sorrow of slavery, though she often tries to forget those memories.

Inscribed on Sethe is a significant marker that carries forward grief and grievances. Much scholarship has attended to Morrison’s use of African symbols and references. In this way, she reaches back to history to carry forward a culture that had been all but destroyed. Notably, however, is Sethe’s numbness to the tree. These oppositional forces – the ability to carry the past forward, and the turning away from it – are present in this scene.

Through a melancholic reading lens, I invite students to analyze how Morrison continues to connect characters to their ancestry. Here, I am extending Freud’s argument that “melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object” and “that there is a loss of a more ideal kind” (Freud 244). We examine the
symbols on Sethe’s body, which represent the loss of African culture and language. Though schoolteacher attempts to inscribe a master narrative onto Sethe’s body, her scars are reinscribed with new meaning. Morrison draws connections to African ancestry and Yoruban folklore evidenced in Sethe’s scar. Interestingly, Morrison uses Amy, the voice of a white female, to witness and describe this reinscription that recalls African ancestry to reject the domination of white culture. The tree symbol comes from a Yowa cosmogram that underscores a backward reference to time. LaVinia DeLois Jennings, in her work *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, delineates the African influence. She underscores the presences of an Africanist tradition in Morrison’s works, and goes further to argue that African cultural influence has existed beneath the overwriting of western religious and cultural traditions. Jenning’s recovers those elements of African traditions that were transported through the Middle Passage. She emphasizes the use of images such as the cosmogram, or tree, as a means to locate African symbols: “To evoke their presence Morrison turns to the most discernible African symbol in the Americas, the cross within a circle, which survived the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade. She uses it as the substructure for her literary landscapes and interior spaces, and as a geometric figure performed by or inscribed on the bodies of her characters” (2). This symbol of the ancestral cosmogram underscores the backward spatialization of time that spirals “backward into an infinite past” (3). This cosmogram pays homage to the ancestors, the living-dead. Thus, Sethe is called again to recede into the past. Morrison privileges these cultural ancestors and their teachings. Furthermore, cultural anthropologist Jeannette Mageo has studied how memories within a group,
function politically. She contends, “We can only hope that our memory maps will serve as navigational tools for people reconsidering their own culture, others’ cultures, and the relations between them” and that “intragroup memory is allowed to dissolve the essentialized images and frozen orders of political discourse” (Mageo 29). When applied to the novel, we see that Morrison’s use of the cosmogram serves to undermine white cultural superiority and hegemony.

A Melancholic Reading of Memory

To sustain our study of the novel as an ongoing critique of racial grievance, I introduce my students to the concept of collective memory, as outlined by Maurice Halbwachs. He posits that recollections are located with “landmarks that we always carry within ourselves, for it suffices to look around ourselves, to think about others, and to locate ourselves within the social framework in order to retrieve them” and that organize memories by the meaning we attribute to them for each has a “corresponding notion that is both and idea and an image” (175). The relationship between past, present, and future is continually mediated. Interest in Maurice Halbwach’s collective memory theory has grown in recent decades. This theory from sociology about group memory impacts literary study in various genres. Memory is dynamic not static, recursive not linear, shared not owned.

A melancholic reading of memory is a mode of literary interpretation where we recover lost histories and memories of racialized figures. Beyond the lens of individual memory, we view literature as a means for diverse groups to recover lost history, form cultural or national identity, and call for social justice. Thus, the act of
re-membering is a way to re-write the past, re-invent the present, and re-vision the future. Collective memory works implicitly and explicitly to explore historical and more recent events, shaping cultural and national consciousness. “Official histories” in textbooks or documents often deny multiple perspectives, injustices, violence, and exploitation. Furthermore, we examine how memory operates as a means for social justice regarding race in America. We examine how the collective memory of the U.S. involves cognitive dissonance: the recovery and recognition of a traumatic past working against the denial and erasure of that history. Here, memory works ethically as a cultural haunting that recalls the violence and brutality hidden from history and ultimately calls for social justice.

Our challenge is to include texts by people of color without erasing their difference and to prescribe critical studies that engage students in the study of racial oppression. I teach students that melancholic reading practice reveals that Sethe’s rememory indicates the continuing trauma of racism. In this activity (see Figure 1), I share some background about collective memory with my students, then differentiate that from individual memories. Students reread Sethe’s description of the boys swinging in the trees. They analyze why Sethe remembers the trees more than the image of the lynched boys. Students share comments such as, “The pain is overwhelming so she shifts to the trees.” Cathy Caruth, in her work, “Recapturing the Past,” illuminates how Sethe’s rememory reveals how the past escapes full consciousness because of the intensity is too much to bear (Trauma 153). She notes that there is a paradox in how memory works: there is an elision of some memories, yet a precision of recall in some details. Here, Sethe remembers the image of the
lynched boys with some clarity, but she elides the pain of the overall trauma by thinking about the trees. Caruth comments that such history may be relegated to the corners of the mind because it has no place in the present (153). While this may be true regarding how individual consciousness works for the survivors of trauma, our task in the classroom is to teach students to see how texts force us to remember the past. Melancholic reading means we must consider why this character cannot escape her past and what is means for us as Americans to confront the trauma of slavery. I argue that reading narratives critically should include what Caruth calls “historical listening,” which acknowledges the traumatic past and recognizes that crises are not yet over (156).

Next, I show students how collective memory on trauma functions in American consciousness, as represented on websites commemorating three historical periods. My goal is for them to see the paradox of how we remember historical traumas that victimized different racial groups. The first excerpt is from a website to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau, the next is a site for the World Trade Center, and the third is a site to visit Southern Plantations (see Figure 1). Reading closely, students note that the diction and tone for the Holocaust and 9/11 Memorials are reverent tributes to the deaths of innocents. However, the site describing the Southern Plantation is a jarring description with a whimsical tone, celebrating the glory of the South and ignoring the brutality of slavery. We discuss how and why this is, and students theorize ideas such as, “The guilt of slavery leads to denial,” and, “We don’t want to recognize racism and slavery in America, but the other two passages focused on external enemies to the U.S.” They continue to explore racial
attitudes towards whites, Jews, and blacks. Though the discussion may be uncomfortable, it is important for students to voice their opinions. They need not all agree, but should be open to listening to each other. Students continue to theorize why such national amnesia exists and why such symbols as the Confederate flag continue to persist in America. This leads to a fruitful discussion of the power of Morrison’s novel. I ask students how the novel works as an artifact of collective memory. Students come up with answers such as, “We have to remember the past because it continues to affect us,” and, “The novel forces us to confront our history.” When students are given the tools to contextualize the novel as a cultural artifact, their minds are opened to examining how literature continues to comment on the past and the present. Indeed, we must work against the pattern of American amnesia where “the grief of racialized others is managed through the expectation that they relinquish those oppressive histories around which minority identity is often organized. Histories of hurt, oppression, and struggle are dramatically whisked away into the past, where traumatic histories bear no tangible effect in the present” (Cho 38). Teaching students the skill of reading melancholically encourages them to re-open discussions of racial formation.

Sethe as Melancholic Figure

The figure of Sethe exhibits features of the pathological problems associated with racial melancholia. While this may be interpreted by Freud as an unhealthy refusal to recover from grief, I interpret it differently. Freud describes the melancholic as a person who clings unhealthily to her loss that she must get over.
However, I believe *not* getting over her losses signals another way to read the character. I teach students to understand how the embodiment of this pathology in Sethe functions as a means of literary protest against racism. The scars of the character’s past clearly deny her a satisfying present. Her inability to let go of the loss of Beloved prevents her from forming strong attachments to Denver and Paul D. In these scenes, Sethe represents victims of racist oppression. Sethe’s melancholia is not only indicative of depression resulting from oppressive forces. I suggest that Sethe’s clinging to past memories is a protest against the pressure of assimilationism. Morrison’s use of rememory is a coded means of rejecting the white hegemony that willingly hides the history of racism as well as current racist ideologies. I encourage students to see how her memories reject schoolteacher’s psychological and physical domination by maintaining her ties to her past. In addition, Sethe never completely moves on from her past or her daughter’s death; she is never completely integrated into society. Morrison uses the character of Sethe to suspend the grief over historical loss experienced through racism. The figure Sethe describes how rememory operates:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I
don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened […] Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away” (Beloved 35-36).

Sethe’s description about the function of rememory emphasizes how it “stays” and is “real” even outside of her own mind. I invite students to discuss why Sethe’s words emphasize that her memories exist “outside” her head. Students share ideas such as the need for individual experiences to be validated and for the history of slavery to be remembered by all, not just African Americans. We examine Sethe as a character whose struggles with memory represent both African Americans as well as the nation as whole who cannot – and should not – just “forget” about slavery and “move on.” I encourage further analysis of Sethe’s psychic wounds and we study other scenes regarding her memory and rememory. These activities extend student discussion beyond focusing on Sethe as an individual figure and invite students to consider how memory about racism functions in our society.

Melancholic reading encourages students to see how characters, such as Sethe, cling to loss. The oppositional images in Sethe’s mind reflect America’s paradoxical views on the past. Confederate images of the South as heroically “rebellious” glosses over the dark history of slavery.41 This irony is also present in Sethe’s memory. Morrison establishes Sethe’s struggle with her past and plays upon the idea of her “terrible memory”: both terrible in the dehumanizing power of slavery and her infanticide as well as “terrible” in the sense that she is so willfully forgetful (Morrison 6). Sethe ponders her ability to understand her past and
recognize truth as she reflects upon Sweet Home:

It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (Morrison 6)

Again, the scene describes the psychic denial of the nation. In her own individual memories of experience, her mind chooses the images of sycamore trees as the focus rather than the lynched boys. Her selective memory, though perhaps operating as an ability to survive and not drown in past abuse and pain, delivers her to a present that is empty of emotion and oddly nostalgic about natural images in the past. Morrison believed that the novel would be the least read of all of hers because of the subject matter of slavery, which she referred to as an institution placed under “national amnesia” (Rushdy 39). The novel’s use of melancholy helps us find ways to negotiate the tension between the forces of forgetfulness (forced assimilation) and remembering. Sethe’s rememory draws the reader into an examination of the brutality of slavery. Morrison insists that to understand the present day sense of loss, we must recover the past. This historical trauma of genocidal violence resulted in lost cultural ties, family histories, personal and tribal identities. Morrison’s novel works to recover occluded histories of African Americans. Refusing the closure of mourning, melancholia becomes a productive
space to rethink historical injury.

Melancholic reading rejects the blaming of the victim and forces readers to examine systems of oppression. Some scholars suggest that the figure of Sethe shows that individuals must overcome their traumatic past. This interpretation puts the onus on the victim rather than focusing on perpetrators of the problem. As earlier stated, David Eng asserts that society blames racial melancholics for “their own conditions of suffering” (266). In addition, Freud’s theory of melancholia suggests that the melancholic is responsible for detaching herself from the cathected object. Studies of posttraumatic stress disorder also suggest that the victim should narrate her own story, otherwise, involuntary memories will persist. For example, Daniel Erickson posits, “Freud’s psychological studies of posttraumatic stress attempted to explain the involuntary persistence of traumatic memory. In posttraumatic stress syndrome, memory is experienced as a persistent, haunting presence, a revisitation of the event itself . . .” (Erickson 26). Some scholars suggest that Sethe’s rememories operate as post-traumatic stress syndrome, where memories resurface incontrollably for the victim. The turning point for the victim, or the process of healing, relies on the ability of the victim to narrate the trauma and compartmentalize the story into the larger narrative of her life. My issue with this interpretation is that it puts the onus on the victim to heal herself. I suggest that the novel points the responsibility outward. Society must listen to the social grievances of the racialized subject, acknowledge, and respond. In her description of rememory, Sethe articulates these concerns to Denver:

“I was talking about time . . .
“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.”

“If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.” (Beloved 35-36)

The audience of this discussion, ostensibly, is Denver. The character Denver represents a generation of Americans who must continue to listen to stories of forgotten history. On another level, the novel speaks to a larger audience – “you who never was there.” This includes the dominant society that should acknowledge the dark history of slavery and its lingering effects.

We interpret the story of infanticide so that students understand how the novel critiques slavery and racism, not the individuals who suffered under this tyranny. Blaming the victim for racism is problematic. When the victim of racism is continually responsible for the problems of racism then the U.S. is saved “from confronting its own involvement in the production of minority grief” (Cho 46). Instead, we must examine how the novel critiques systems of power. The figure of
Sethe protests this oppression as she exclaims, “I couldn’t let her nor any of ’em live under schoolteacher [...] I stopped him” (163-164). I focus our class discussion on why the death of Sethe’s children was deemed better than a life of slavery. Students discuss the horrors of slavery and cite evidence from the text. Moreover, through melancholic reading, teachers can extend discussion of racial politics by examining passages that describe white oppression, such as Sethe’s reflection to Beloved: “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you . . . And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (251). I teach students to examine how racial identities in the novel are social constructs that create an imbalance of power.

*Beloved* further invites discussion of melancholia through through its thematic representation of white dominance. This white dominance seeks to define African American identity and operates melancholically. Anne Anlin Cheng advances this theory and suggests the following:

Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national idea, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. (10)

In her commentary, Cheng urges us to consider how race relations in America are based on the Dominant White Ideal that rejects and consumes its creation of the
Other. The illusion of a dangerous, dark Other that threatens the norm of Whiteness legitimizes White oppression. The novel develops this troubled racial dynamic as the mother figure warns her daughter of these dangers. As Sethe speaks to Denver, Morrison rejects these formations of the racialized other:

“Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood [...] The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one [...] The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own.” (198-199)

Morrison describes the pervasive power of “othering” through uses of the uncivilized jungle. Moreover, the diction in the passage underscores these racial attitudes. When I invite students to analyze the use of the words “whitefolks” and “coloredpeople” as single words as opposed to “white people” and “colored people,” they reflect on how skin color defines identity so powerfully that colorblindness is impossible. The character Sethe articulates the concerns that Morrison writes about
in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. Morrison contends that American artists and American society “transferred internal conflicts to a ‘blank’ darkness, to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies,” which is a major theme in our nation’s literature (38). Moreover, the whiteness of the young America was developed in stark contrast to the imagination of darkness. Morrison continues, “For the settlers and for American writers generally, this Africanist other became the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos […] and following out the ramifications of power” (47-48). Close analysis of this passage in the novel encourages students to reflect on constructions of race that continue to serve the dominant white norm today.

We can develop students’ critical thinking skills by examining the remainders of racial trauma. The character’s engagement with the past continually impacts the present. The novel rejects the American inclination to equate progress with a relinquishing of a dark past. Morrison’s novel operates as a counterdiscourse to forgetting; it insists the traces of slavery continue to shape African American identity. Anne Cheng’s work, The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief, describes the significance of attending to history: “The rhetoric of progress or cure can produce its own blind spots . . . Rather than prescribing how we as a nation might go about ‘getting over’ that history, it is useful to ask what it means, for social, political, and subjective beings to grieve” (7). The myth of social progress has blinded society to the difficulty for African Americans to just “get over” this historical trauma. Morrison’s novel confronts the past and serves as reminder that African Americans have not been successfully incorporated into the social
fabric of America. Cheng argues that racial melancholia is a theory that explains racialization. The dominant, white, majority center demonstrates a rejection of, and yet attachment to, the racial other who is placed in a suspended position in society (xi). The novel draws our attention to Sethe’s position as the suspended minority subject. Schoolteacher’s attachment to Sethe – his desire for what she produces, her ink, her milk, and her child -- is further evidence of this process of racialization.

While racialized subjects have been categorized in hierarchies of race that put whites at the top, I help students see how group formation and agency can operate against systemic racism. This group formation can be viewed in scenes where characters come together in the African American community. In a manner that unites and empowers minorities, these scenes show how group identity can function. Elizabeth Kella claims, “Morrison has attempted to reclaim the pasts of African Americans in order to widen and strengthen concepts of group belonging which can sustain contemporary identities and communities” (115). As the figure of Sethe remembers schoolteacher, she speaks to Beloved about the community of slaves at Sweethome. In her process, Sethe demands her worth and rejects her assigned value: “I thought he was a fool. And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all” (191). When the figures of Sethe and Beloved form a strong attachment, they demonstrate the strength that can come from communal bonds. In this scene, the figure of Sethe rejects the limitations placed on her, “The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them” (Dreifus).
Identifying Losses: Beloved

Freud’s theory on melancholia suggests that the melancholic has “a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic” (Freud 246). In my theory, I contend that the melancholic reader has the “keener eye” for truth. In revising Freud, I suggest that the melancholic reader has productive capacity to see. I believe that readers should “consciously perceive” what has been lost by identifying layers of losses that are described in literary texts (Freud 245). In one of my first lessons, I have students examine the inscription “Sixty Million and More,” the epigraph from Romans 9:25, and the reference to “Dearly Beloved” (Beloved 5). Students discuss the allusions and all possibilities of meaning, which results in conversations about the number of lives lost to slavery, the idea of forgetting and remembering in Romans 9:25, and the baby’s headstone. This sets students up to read multiple meanings of the figure of Beloved so that they do not merely focus on the character as the individual entity representing Sethe’s baby returned to life. In subsequent lessons, we examine the passages narrated from Beloved’s point of view (Beloved 210-217). I ask students to identify moments in that section that seem to be from the voice of the character Beloved as well as identify passages that could represent other voices or characters. Students share examples where there seem to be multiple voices of slaves in this section. For example, they point out that “the face that is mine” (211) indicates a desire to own or love another, but these voices seem to be coming from the bottom of a ship in the middle passage. We discuss how Beloved represents the black bodies in history that are often ignored because of the difficulty of listening to trauma. This body of Beloved represents various realities:
Sethe’s dead daughter, her lost mother, or the 60 million lost lives in the middle passage.

But we expand our discussion to discuss how we, as a nation, have mourned slavery. The figure of Beloved is also the collective memory of slavery that should not be erased. Students understand how the novel refuses closure and that Beloved is the loss that we must continue to mourn. We study how the novel continues to grieve over the lost lives, lost histories, language, and culture of African Americans. In the work of social psychologists, Glenn Adams et al. argue that we must challenge implicit constructions of racism that currently prevail in America. One way of combating racism is to examine the constructions of American identity and representations of history: “In the American case, the need for positive social identity may influence people to supply and demand representations of history that celebrate conquest or progress toward a ‘manifest destiny’ while erasing from collective memory incidents of racist oppression that were an integral part of that manifest destiny” (239). In other words, the erasure of the history of the middle passage is all too easy. We examine how Beloved is the body of memory that counteracts the desire to forget.

I encourage my students to think about how and why we should remember the losses that have been identified. Students consider how Beloved embodies the voices of slaves who have “passed on” over the Middle Passage – those who have drowned without a voice of their own. They also reflect on all of the figures who died because of slavery. We see how the work of mourning is central to the text; Morrison honors the dead and also refuses to let the memory go. We discuss the
“national amnesia” regarding slavery’s “Sixty million and more” while at the same time acknowledging competition for America’s attention, knowing that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Here, we discuss competing memories of loss. Morrison argues against the miseducation of Americans who fail to understand the enormity of the trauma of the Middle Passage. We discuss the value of this text that remembers loss and how this contrasts novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* that mourn the loss of racial figures. This allows students to see that losses of humanity that must never be forgotten and we discuss how we must learn from the past. Freud argues that “the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged . . . when the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 244). I believe our white students and students of color can carry these racial grievances forward in our study of the novel.

Students dive deeper into analyzing Beloved as the object that has been lost and learn more about the work of continual mourning. We apply Freud’s notions of loss here: Beloved is a figure that represents the loss of human life, and Beloved also symbolizes the loss of equality and belonging that people of color experience in America. Beloved is the cathected object-loss of the Middle Passage that has been buried in America’s national amnesia. The watery imagery used to describe Beloved is a clear reference to the Middle Passage. In her first appearance, “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (50). We investigate why the novel does not directly reference the Middle Passage. Students share that their reading experience of the novel mirrors the process of unburying loss in society: they must revisit the past and consider remainders of loss in the present to understand how racial grief
operates. Morrison complicates the readers' understanding of who or what Beloved is, for she represents the suffering and loss of human lives, the lack of remembrance for those lives, and the attachment that Morrison claims to the past. Morrison conjures the lost voices of the Middle Passage: “They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water ... I am standing in the rain falling the others are taken I am not taken I am falling like the rain is ... I am in the water” (212-213). The sea as signifier represents the exchange of the slave trade and becomes a symbol of pronounced loss. The racialized subject’s identity is recursively suspended in this oceanic journey that reminds us of the lost homes, ancestral ties, language, religion, and lives. The “we” calls upon the national psyche to remember the past. Tammy Clewell interprets Freud’s theory into actions that include “hyperremembering”:

The work of mourning ... entails a kind of hyperremembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence. This magical restoration of the lost object enables the mourner to assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing the other. (44)

The hyperremembering of the past is evident in the imaginary presence of Beloved. In the work of mourning, the mourner should eventually let go of the object of loss and reattach to a new object. But melancholic readers should never let go of the past or “move on.” Beloved's pervasive presence is a constant reminder of the
wounds of the Middle Passage. Dominick LaCapra explains how a founding trauma produces lingering effects:

> With respect to identity formation, one should make special mention of the founding trauma in the life of individuals and groups. The founding trauma is the actual or imagined event (or series of extreme or limit events) that poses in accentuated fashion the very question of identity yet may paradoxically itself become the basis of an individual or collective identity . . . it disorients and may reorient the course of a life. (LaCapra, *History in Transit* 56)

The founding trauma of the Middle Passage becomes the historical event that is the basis for collective identity of African Americans. While assimilation stories of upward mobility may console and assuage America's culpability, *Beloved* acknowledges that these psychological, emotional, and historical crises and critiques the grand narratives of racial progress.

Yet another way that students can understand mourning is by making connections between prolonging grief and remembering the past. The past encompasses ties to ethnic heritage. The haunting figure of Beloved is also an ethical call to honor cultural heritage. While many scholars focus on Beloved as a gothic tale of haunting, their work emphasizes the danger and fear of the past. I argue that *Beloved* should not be interpreted as a “dangerous haunting,” but instead, an ethical call to reflect on the past. Offering a new perspective on remembering, Kathleen Brogan’s work *Cultural Haunting* explores the phenomena of cultural haunting in American literature of the 1970s to 1990s. She posits that the
predominance of haunting images of the deceased represents a fear of the loss of ethnic identity. In addition, Brogan addresses this phenomena in a pan-ethnic methodology, ignoring the specific histories of racial groups. Instead, she examines the attempt to recover and recuperate lost or ruptured histories of ethnic Americans. Regarding her theory on Morrison’s *Beloved*, she claims, “*Beloved* plots the movement from trauma to history as a story of possession and exorcism in which traumatic memory – or the eruption of a denied history – is figured as a dangerous form of haunting” (63). Brogan purports that the novel reveals the need for “second burial” that anthropologists describe when bodies are exhumed and put to rest again. She attests that literary history acts as a mourning ritual that constitutes social identity.

Some scholars have incorrectly interpreted *Beloved* as a novel of successful grieving that enables a healing process. For example, Linda Krumholz addresses the novels work to reconstruct history:

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* reconceptualizes American history... history-making becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author...Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process...If Sethe’s individual memories exist in the world as fragments of a historical memory, then, by extension, the individual process of recollection or “rememory” can be reproduced on a historical level. Thus, Sethe’s process of healing in *Beloved*, her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers
who must confront Sethe’s past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live.” (107-108)

I agree that the novel works to reconstruct history; however, the novel does not aim to heal. Morrison allows her characters to relieve some of their suffering, but refuses to give them full closure. The novel calls upon us to revisit the past again and again. Beloved carries grievances and the possibility of healing as well: “In giving that ‘ghost’ a renewed voice and life, Morrison shows the healing knowledge that accrues to those attentive to the ghost’s presence. What Morrison does in Beloved is to remember in order to revive, to survive, to rename, to re-possess” (Rushdy 61). In addition, scholar Tammy Clewell posits that memories of the mourner should be revisited and then detached: “Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and the detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it . . . When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Clewell 43). However, Sethe articulates the difficulty to move on: “I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do.” (Morrison 36) The historical truth of slavery has been buried and ignored in our studies of literature in the secondary classroom. Reading melancholically is a means to recover and revisit what has been occluded in order to have meaningful discussions about race.
Melancholy and Structure

Reading with a melancholic lens helps us interpret the structure of the novel, especially the puzzling ending. The lack of closure reminds us that we must continue to investigate the remainders of racial trauma and defer historical closure. We must remind our students that the novel’s structure destabilizes the reader, but we should also be wary of reconciling this displacement too quickly because it affords us an important experience (Holland and Awkward 48). In our reading, we acknowledge the psychological affects of racial melancholia, evidenced in Sethe. We also must study how narrative structures can actually challenge a linear trajectory of “progress” regarding race relations in America. Too often, discussion of race relegate the problems of oppression to the past. In fact, according to Rinaldo Walcott, some black counternovelists are attempting to bring closure to the past 500 years of black history (141). I insist we continue to study the open wounds of the past and their impact on us today. I ask students to examine the elliptical framework of the novel and its lack of closure. Students realize that these narrative structures encourage them to read and reread and cross-reference back to pages they have already read. They note that this process makes them reread the characters’ traumas and reflect upon the inescapable aftermath of continued suffering. Cathy Caruth contends that we must continue to learn “how we can listen to trauma beyond its pathology for the truth that it tells us, and how we might perhaps find a way of learning to express this truth beyond the painful repetitions of traumatic suffering” (Unclaimed viii). Indeed, Morrison’s work draws our attention to the truths of the past that have been ignored. The elliptical framework of the
novel reveals a cultural anxiety about the future and the inability to move forward without redressing past social injury. The structure of the novel demonstrates a refusal to erase the past. Thus, the recursive journey to the past is essential in understanding how America has failed its promises. In my approach to the novel, we see how it undermines the grand narrative of progress and continues the grievance of social injury. Continual reminders of the past, as evidenced through Paul D’s memories of the chain gang and Sethe's sexual abuse and rape, give clarity to the African American experience: “[M]emory as part of the experience of a group is bound up with the way that group relates to its past as it bears on its present and future “ (LaCapra, History 67). The novel addresses the lingering affects of a history of violence, genocide, and exploitation. Thus, our analysis of the past traumas of these figures sheds light on their continued difficulties.

In a culture of progress and upward mobility, Morrison’s novel is a reminder that we can only address present-day problems when we carefully examine the past, however difficult. The history of the American slavery should be continually grieved. Prominent expressions of American postwar multiculturalism suggested a false closure upon the past – that an inclusive and celebratory pluralism would solve the social ills of racism. However, melancholic reading of Beloved works to suspend the grievance of racial injury. Cheng argues, “Though a difficult topic and thus rarely discussed, the social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychical experience of grief. This psychical experience is not separate from the realms of society… “ (x). Melancholic readers employ strategies to explore how the novel reminds us of such
memories. The imagined inner lives of slaves can work as alternative histories that humanize these figures for readers. The novel clings to the lost object of African American history through Sethe’s rememory. Jennifer Heinert, in “‘Re-membering’ Race: Realism and ‘Truth’ in Beloved” calls attention to the details of physical brutality that Morrison includes: “These physical experiences are horrible, yet are rarely mentioned in conventional slave narratives . . . In contrast to the plot-driven slave narrative genre, Beloved shows how slavery affects the psyche of the characters” (81). Notably, Sethe’s state of mind is never at peace, but is constantly working to recall the past. The trauma of slavery is so severe that trusting in human relationships and connectedness has become dangerous. Through filling in gaps of slave narratives, Morrison explores the psychological effects of slavery that had not been represented in literature (82). As human chattel, the bodies of Sethe and Paul D’s underscore the subjugation of slave owners such as schoolteacher who dominate through physical and emotional brutality. The trauma of this discipline effectively objectifies Sethe and Paul D. Slaves are both literally and figuratively dis/membered from the human race as they are subjected to inhumane punishment. According to Foucault, “The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (173). The pragmatic approach of schoolteacher reinforces exploitation. Mae Henderson asserts that schoolteacher assigns “worth” to slaves. However, “Against these forms of physical, social, and scholarly dismemberment, the act of (re) memory initiates a reconstitutive process in the novel. If dismemberment deconstitutes and fragments the whole, then rememory functions to re-collect, re-assemble, and organize the various discrete
and heterogeneous parts into a meaningful sequential whole through the process of narrativization” (Henderson 89). Furthermore, Ross Chambers articulates a vision of melancholy that is useful here. “The melancholy text . . . presents itself as a decentered text, containing and consequently revealing an anger, a violence, a cruelty of which it is the product but not the direct expression” (143). We read Morrison’s work in a way that invites recollection of the history of slavery in order to demand social justice.

**Suspending Racial Grievance**

Melancholic reading encourages students to find moments of continued grief. I have students analyze the final images of Beloved to consider what literally and metaphorically happened to this character. They find that Beloved is exorcised by the community, but the figure cannot be completely exorcised and the significance of her presence continues in the final chapter of the novel. That scene suggests, “Beloved is truly gone. Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes. Ella is not so sure” (263). Student discuss the significance of her return and disappearance, sharing how she impacted Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, which allowed them to revisit their pasts, open up, and feel their losses fully. Moving through this shared pain allows these characters to interact with each other more meaningfully. According to Krumholz, Beloved manifests suppressed memories and also operates as the analyst who pries open those memories: “Beloved is both the pain and the cure [. . .] Countering traumatic repression, she makes the characters accept their past, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, as beloved” (114). I ask
students what the exorcism of Beloved suggests if she represents the memory of slavery. This further complicates the interpretation of her as the body of memory. I ask them to revisit the final image of the pregnant character because it complicates a narrow reading of her disappearance. While full of possibilities, the image connotes the pregnant Sethe escaping from slavery. Students share possibilities: the communal exorcism could suggest a double reading: this could offer a hopeful sign that the community has taken interest in Sethe or that Morrison calls upon the African American community to gather together to exercise their powers of voice. Certainly the parallel between individual and collective is addressed in this scene: “The metaphors of personal and communal wholeness in the text heighten the psychological realism of its womanist themes of black kinship, motherhood, sisterhood, and love” (Bell 55-56). Yet, another reading suggests a denial of the pains of history and a rejection of Sethe and Beloved. Underscoring the ambiguity of Beloved’s character, Henry Louis Gates discusses how several writers choose to reinvent traditional African figures in folklore: “Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representation of the recurring referent of African American literature, the so-called black experience” (912). The unclear presence or absence of Beloved underscores the recognition and rejection of African influence in American history and literary production, as earlier described by Morrison. The ambiguity of the ending allows for multiple readings, most notably, it denies a stable or narrow construction of the reality or truth. Students are struck by the repeated lines on the final pages: “It was not a story to pass on” (274-275). Readers note that “pass on” suggests this story of
infanticide or the history of slavery should not be continued or revisited, for the pain is too great. Yet another interpretation is that society should not “pass” – or ignore – the history of slavery, and must remember and never forget. Rereading those lines as continued grief is how we suspend the mourning of racial grief.

The novel articulates that a resilient spirit of ethnic survival occurs through the attachment to grief rather than the relinquishing of it. I disagree with Bernard W. Bell who posits, “On a sociopsychological level, Beloved is the story of Sethe Sugg’s quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness” and that the novel speaks to the “resilient spirit of blacks in surviving as a people” (53). However, the figure of Sethe never achieves that “psychological wholeness.” The relationship to loss continues to establish the conditions of identity formation for minority subjects. Mourning becomes an endless process. Though Sethe is given sympathy from Paul D, her past is never forgotten. Years later when Paul D returns, he pries open this possibility once again, for Sethe had closed this narrative space after killing her child. His ability to soothe Sethe comes following their discussion of their past and forgetting. Sethe recounts her story of getting milk to her child. She conveys a voice she rarely shares with her daughter Denver. Effectively moved by Paul D, she can be herself: “He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches . . . And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years” (17-18). Cathy Caruth speaks to the relief of suffering without the erasure of reality: “The study and treatment of trauma continue to face a crucial problem at the heart of this unique
and difficult phenomenon: the problem of how to help relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* vii). While Morrison's work calls attention to historical trauma, melancholic readers must see that the novel pointedly does not allow Sethe an escape from her past, for her back “had been dead for years.”

**Melancholic Reading as a Method of Critical Pedagogy**

Melancholic reading practice extends the goals of critical pedagogy, which include understanding racial formation and resisting hegemonic systems that oppress people of color. Denying fixed readings is a means to resist hegemony. Robert Lee discusses reflexive narrative strategies in “The Postmodern Turn: Metafiction, Playfield, Ventriloquy.” Lee situates ethnic writing within the postmodern movement. In particular, he articulates the ways in which ethnic minority writers create narratives that defy a unified reading. I argue that the melancholic suspension is the basis for narrative structures that are self-reflexive. He argues against the assumptions that ethnic writing always be interpreted as naturalistic or realistic. Instead, he suggests that the metafictive style invites a revisioning of binaries of otherness. Lee claims, “U.S. ethnic literary voice, on this reckoning, moves yet more through, or beyond, or simply around, some minority niche. It both refuses the cultural governance of whiteness, and its pre-emptive boundaries, as usually assumed universal marker of value, and at the same time challenges any too-narrow cultural-nationalist ideology” (214). The African
American tradition plays with Signifying – its reflexive tactic of wordplay and textual self-knowing (215). Thus, ethnic writing can be interpreted as using the postmodern turn that defies fixed readings. Morrison’s novel, especially the ending, extends this idea. The very complexity of the novel’s construction demands a critical reading. Critical literacy “challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development” and is “an attitude toward history” (Shor 1). The novel invites the questioning of discourses, power relations, and identities. Morrison engages the reader in a dialogic reading of the text that must be read over, revisited, and reconsidered in order to fully comprehend the multiple layers of meaning.

Reading melancholically is a way to put the theory of critical pedagogy into practice. To deconstruct fixed narratives about ethnic minorities, we must open possibilities of interpretation and possibility. The idea of suspension is underscored in the novel’s ending chapters. Noting the final words that include “what is forgotten” and “disremembered,” (275), the story ends abruptly with the exorcism, but not neatly for traces of Beloved persist. Morrison allows for multiple readings, encouraging the reader to reflect upon the relationship between history and memory. The ending should not be read as problematic, but open with possibilities of Sethe’s future. Morrison, addressing the challenges of extending the study of American literature into what she hopes will be a wider landscape, has stated that imagining does not mean taking oneself intact into the other, but must be a process of becoming. Thus, through the figure’s process of discovery, of pain and rebirth,
and of telling and reshaping her story, the possibilities for racial identity are open as long we continue to reclaim the past.

Beloved calls upon us to think in ways that are more productive. The lack of clear closure spurs us to reclaim history and explore avenues of social change:

Some of the most extreme and dire experiences, including those involving radical loss, may be transfigured into founding traumas as the (variably earned or unearned) foundations for personal and collective life. Hence slavery and the Holocaust have become markers of group identity and, in contested ways, founding traumas for groups living with their fraught heritage. . . In perhaps its most politically pointed dimension, the founding trauma may be a way for an oppressed group or an abused person to reclaim a history and to transform it into a more or less enabling basis of life in the present.

(LaCapra, History in Transit 57)

The reclamation and transformation of history is suggested in the final scenes. Paul D reflects on the disappearance of Beloved and though he knows she “is truly gone,” he hears her voice insisting that he call her by “name” (264). His desire for Beloved can be understood as the need to revisit the painful history of the middle passage:

In daylight he can’t imagine it in darkness with moonlight seeping through the cracks. Nor the desire that drowned him there and force him to struggle up, up into that girl like she was the clear air at the top of the sea. Coupling with her wasn’t even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive [. . .] in the midst of repulsion and personal
shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. *(Beloved 264)*

Though full of pain and shame, the novel suggests that African American identity is continually shaped by the past. Moreover, Cathryn McConaghy suggests that we revisit the past to engage ethically with the social issues of the present. “Freud observed that when we remember, it is not the past that is invoked, but rather, our crises in the present” (13). She articulates an important concern: that effective curriculum should not merely console, but provoke. Indeed, *Beloved* calls upon its readers to witness the damage and repercussions of historical injury. To bear the truth of history, readers must acknowledge the psychological and emotional crises of the middle passage. Ethical witnessing must involve an analysis of the structuring of knowledge. We must deconstruct the assumptions of race and closely investigate the systemic, insidious power of “racial” and historical knowledges.

Racism is rooted in false constructs of reality. We must deconstruct these assumptions through melancholic reading practices and the inclusion of melancholic texts in the curriculum instead of allowing multicultural voices to be tokenized and aestheticized. In “Beyond Prejudice: Toward a Sociocultural Psychology of Racism and Oppression,” Glenn Adams et al., argue that the “most important manifestation of systemic privilege is the power to impose particular constructions of reality as objective truth” (230). The authors argue that the imposition of these constructions operate as tools of oppression. Constructs of “color-blind” ideology and “fairness” that prevail in mainstream society “tend to be those that benefit people from dominant groups” (230). In addition, Adams et al. argue that “At the individual level,
White Americans may be motivated to deny the extent of racism to maintain a positive social identity or to defend a status quo from which they continue to benefit… The struggle against racism requires deconstruction of these mainstream narratives" (232). Their analysis locates racism in the structures of reality that individuals inhabit. Morrison’s work enables us to deconstruct official histories and knowledges that have legitimated racist ideologies and it challenges us to envision ethical educational practices.

Through a melancholic reading lens, students understand how the novel critiques education when it is used to oppress and deny humanity. Morrison’s work rejects certain knowledges about race that were legitimated as truth. In a lesson that focuses on Margaret Garner, I invite students to analyze how historical document, such as newspapers, reported her story (FIGURE 2). I have students analyze the language of the passages, noting the diction, tone, the details that are included and not included. Students share ideas such as the matter-of-fact tone, the dehumanizing “it” in reference to the baby, and the lack of voice given to Margaret Garner. They are shocked by the idea that Garner and slaves were said to “allege” the cruel treatment of their master, which underscores the denial of slavery’s atrocities. Moreover, they discuss how these articles about Margaret Garner and the group of slaves report the events, but deny their human perspective and how the writing lacks a sympathetic tone. They begin to see how this reported history has occluded the humanity of black lives. When they analyze the passages about infanticide in the novel, they see how the novel explores the emotional life of Sethe and gives this figure a voice – the voice that was denied to Margaret Garner. The
character’s emerging consciousness is especially important in the advocacy of voices for the oppressed. The novel employs strategies of political advocacy that Paulo Freire describes in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire’s political piece that argued for the political rights of the oppressed in Brazil continues to speak to us today. He argued that the “banking concept of education” had the power to anesthetize human agency whereas “problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” (62). Freire’s words resonate with the narrative power of *Beloved.* The novel repeatedly unveils the reality of history as it works to intervene in our present day dilemmas regarding race. While racial progress continues to be the slogan of the 21st century in a “color-blind” world, American sociologist Michael Omi points to the realities of racial inequity that continue to be denied: “The civil rights establishment confront a puzzling dilemma – formal, legal equality has been significantly achieved, but substantive racial inequality in employment, housing, and health care remains, and in many cases, has deepened” (245). Evolving racial meanings continue to complicate the struggle towards justice, and narratives of racial identity and lost histories offer means to understand and reexamine these intractable issues. The novel engages readers in the practice of critical literacy that is reflective. It challenges inequality and questions how knowledge and history is constructed.

Melancholic reading practice is necessary at this particular cultural moment, where assumptions of progress and colorblindness create an illusion of racial
equality. Studying *Beloved* through this lens extends the work of cultural studies advocates who posit that texts “cannot be understood outside of the context of their historical and social production” (Giroux, “Is there a Place?” 50). While *Beloved* invites a thematic discussion of melancholy and racial formation, the skill of reading melancholically can be applied across texts in order to see how representation of race may have changed, yet the ideology of race has not. We must not be so afraid of controversial discussions regarding race that we silence our students. Paula Moya discusses how some teachers, in efforts to create a “safe” environment, disallow students to speak about their true feelings. In one case, the black and white students were worried about upsetting each other when sharing ideas about race; thus, their teacher censored discussion (Moya, *Learning from Experience* 151-152). But an important part of learning is to understand how minority groups continue to experience racial grief and how some white people still fail to recognize that. While there may be some struggle to understand each other, we must allow voices to be heard. Thus, as part of a broader struggle, we can reinforce critical thinking skills so that reading and classrooms become sites of social contestation. The absence of a political multicultural movement means this moment is ripe for my approach. Students are so willing to concede that racism is over that they cannot see their own participation in systemic racism. However, as Laurie Grobman articulates, “When we teach with race, class, gender, and other social categories of difference at the forefront, we raise the stakes of our students and ourselves. We push our students (and ourselves) to think and feel beyond what they and we are accustomed to” (147-148). Indeed, we must undo the comfortable idea that racial struggle is a
problem of the past. Though the novels we study may engage students with history, we must teach them how that informs our present. Paula Moya posits,

A narrative might begin generations in the past and then carry the reader up through the present and into the future. The significance of this feature for the study of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality reveals itself when one considers the effects of time on the development of a self, or the effects of past historical events on the shape of present-day. (Moya, *Social Imperative* 34)

We remember the impact of the past on our present by teaching melancholic reading practices in language arts classroom. Melancholy denies the satisfaction of closure for the characters and the readers. We must teach students to recognize the traces of racial grievance in order to invoke social change. Only then can identities be refigured and hopes for racial equity be realized.
In Maurice Halbwachs’s work, *The Collective Memory* published in 1950, he distinguishes between individual and group memories. Societies have group memories that exist and live outside of the individual. Just as individual memories may not be exact, but carry emotional weight, and still shape how we view ourselves and our place in world, collective memories serve a social function: they impact our understanding of our past which continues to influence our present. Collective memory is not fixed—it is in a state of constant change according to society’s needs. Thus, the past and present are intertwined. An individual or group, such as a family, rehearses memories through stories that keep them alive. While these memories may not be entirely accurate, they create meaning for the individual and group. Similarly, collective memory may shape group identity and perception. As a society, what we choose to remember and how we remember (such as public events, memorials, museums) reveal social values.

1. Individual Memory
Reflect upon Sethe’s memory of Sweet Home:
“Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamore in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamore beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that.”

What does this passage suggest about Sethe and her memory?

II. Collective Memory
Examine the treatment of these hallowed grounds:

On the website for visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau:
The Memorial Site has a complex system of presentations of the former camp areas. Special plaques, placed in the most symbolic and important locations, describe and commemorate the most important venues and objects, as well as, the historical events related to them. Plaques include commemorative stones with the inscription: "To the memory of the men, woman and children who fell victim to the Nazi genocide. Here lie their ashes. May their souls rest in peace." These are situated next to the places of mass extermination and where the ashes of the murdered are located. (http://auschwitz.org/en/visiting/information-plaques/)

On the website for the World Trade Center Memorial:
Honoring the lives of those who were lost is at the heart of our mission. Occupying eight of the 16 acres at the World Trade Center, the Memorial is a tribute to the past and a place of hope for the future . . . The names of every person who died in the terrorist attacks of February 26, 1993 and September 11, 2001 are inscribed in bronze around the twin memorial pools. (http://www.911memorial.org/memorial)
On a website for southern plantations:

Visitors looking to gain a deeper appreciation of the South’s long and varied history should make a point to experience one of the region’s many well-maintained plantations. These architectural gems provide a peek into bygone days, providing the public with a genteel slice of the old Southern ways while also educating about the region’s complicated past.

**Boone Hall – Mount Pleasant, S.C.** This iconic antebellum plantation has gained modern fame as the site of such films as "The Tempest" and "The Notebook." Visitors drive through the famous Avenue of Oaks, which stretches for nearly a mile, before exploring the site’s nine original slave cabins, butterfly garden, and colonial revival-style mansion, which was completed in 1935.

**Houmas House – Darrow, La.** The "Crown Jewel of Louisiana’s River Road" was at one point in the 19th century America’s largest sugar producer, hence its nickname as the "Sugar Palace." Today, visitors tour the mansion and grounds for a peek into the luxurious lifestyle of the sugar tycoons who lived here. Visitors enjoy two restaurants and 38 acres of gardens so lush that countless couples have opted to hold their weddings here.

(https://experience.usatoday.com/south/story/best-of-lists/2014/06/30/10-best-historic-southern-plantations/11782813/)

1) What do you notice about the diction and tone in these examples?

2) What does this suggest about social attitudes for each place of memory? (Explain how this may be an example of “cognitive dissonance.”)

3) Consider Morrison’s inscription “Sixty Million and more” and the title of the novel. Discuss the implications of the novel in terms of the nation’s collective memory.
Consider the story of Margaret Garner as depicted in the newspapers in 1856. How does the novel offer an **alternative history** to these “official” historical documents? What is the work that the novel achieves that “official histories” do not?

**Directions:** Read the articles on Margaret Garner and answer the questions below.

| From the Cincinnati Gazette, Jan. 29 | The Cincinnati Fugitive Slave Case.  
[From the Cincinnati Gazette, Jan. 30] |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **ARREST OF FUGITIVE SLAVES.**  
A SLAVE MOTHER MURDERS HER CHILD  
RATHER THAN SEE IT RETURNED  
TO SLAVERY  

Great excitement existed throughout the city  
the whole of yesterday, in consequence of  
the arrest of a party of slaves, and the  
murder of her child by a slave mother, while  
the officers were in the act of making the  
arrest. A party of seventeen slaves escaped  
from Boone and Kenton counties, in  
Kentucky, (about sixteen miles from the  
Ohio,) on Sunday night last, and taking with  
them two horses and a sled, drove that night  
to the Ohio river, opposite to Western Row,  
in this city. Leaving the horses and sled  
standing there, they crossed the river on  
foot on the ice.  

*Excerpt from the Feb. 2, 1856 Issue of the  
Anti-Slavery Bugle* |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **The Cincinnati Fugitive Slave Case.**  

Yesterday morning the Sheriff made a  
return on the writ of habeas corpus, that the  
slaves were in the custody of the United  
States Marshal [...] This returned the slaves  
to the custody of the Marshal. By an  
agreement with all, the parties permitted the  
slaves to remain in the county jail all day  
yesterday, with the understanding their  
examination should commence this morning.  
We learn that the mother of the dead child  
acknowledges she killed it, and that her  
determination was to have killed all the  
children and then destroyed herself, rather  
than return to slavery. She and the others  
complain of cruel treatment on the part of  
their master, and allege that as the cause of  
their attempt to escape. |

1. **Diction:** Which words or phrases capture your attention and why? How do those words shape the response of the reader / audience? You may annotate in the margins.

2. **What type of information is included in these news articles? Hypothesize: Why?**

3. **What kind of information is NOT included? Hypothesize: Why not?**

4. Analyze painting of Margaret Garner by Thomas Satterwhite Noble (1867) (onscreen) & discuss.
Directions: Analyze these excerpts from *Beloved*.

But she had all the children she needed. If her boys came back one day, and Denver and Beloved stayed on – well, it would be the way it was supposed to be, no? Right after she saw the shadows holding hands at the side of the road hadn’t the picture altered? And the minute she saw the dress and shoes sitting in the front yard, she broke water. Didn’t even have to see the face burning in the sunlight. She had been dreaming it for years.

“I couldn’t let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn’t let her nor any of them live under schoolteacher. That was out.”

Because the truth was simple […] Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Noono. Simple. She just flew …

“I stopped him,” she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.”

1. Describe the tone in each excerpt.

2. Diction: Which words or images capture your attention and why? How do those words shape the response of the reader / audience? You may annotate in the margins.

3. What type of information about Sethe is included in the novel? (As oppose the the articles about Margaret Garner.) Hypothesize: Why does Morrison include this info.? What is the effect?

4. What does the novel offer to readers that “official” histories, such as newspapers, cannot?

5. Discuss the function of novels in society. How does fiction operate differently than nonfiction? How does this affect individual readers? The popularity of fiction persists: Why is fiction essential to society?
On a personal level, I have experienced how racial identities are constructed, categorized, stereotyped, and rendered invisible. I grew up in the Chicago suburbs learning that the voices of people of color are insignificant. Coming of age as an Asian American in the 1980s, a time when the English curriculum in my high school was dominated by the canon of white males, I grew concerned with aspects of my racial identity and vaguely aware of the lack of representation of Asians and female voices in what we studied. I felt a sense of loss without the language to express it: loss of connection to some of the novels we studied, loss of ability to ask questions about race or gender, loss of exigence regarding ethnic discussions. The only discussions about race were during our study of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as freshmen, which focused on blacks and whites and underscored a rather simplistic reading of the novel. There was little to no discussion of other minority identities. I was silenced for various reasons: a high school curriculum that did not address multiculturalism, being part of a high-achieving ethnic minority of Asians in my school, and, perhaps too, the assumption that there were no major racial problems in our high school and community.

In my research, I have explored the systemic erasure of Asian Americans and I can see how my adolescent experience was part of a larger American problem. Asian Americans have not been fully accepted as true Americans, yet this has hardly been acknowledged. The desire to be “colorblind” has rendered racism invisible. In fact Frank Wu attests, “As a nation, we have become so seemingly triumphant at
vilifying racists that we have induced denial about racism” (13). We need to openly acknowledge America’s history of racism towards Asian Americans. In addition, we need to address the continual racism that is often ignored. Furthermore, we must address how the discussion of race in America has tended to focus on a black and white paradigm and has rendered Asians as “foreigners.” Stacey Lee addresses the place of Asian Americans in the American landscape of race:

Asian Americans have been understood within the black-white racial paradigm, and depending on the historical period Asian Americans have been likened to blacks or whites [...] Significantly, the positioning of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners has played a central role in excluding them from dominant discussions on race. (4-6)

Because Asian Americans have been viewed as “foreigners” within our country, we have been made invisible. In my experience, and as expressed by some of my students, the history of Asian Americans has also been occluded. Ronald Takaki contends that this erasure is evident in American society: “Very little is known about Asian Americans and their history. In fact, stereotypes and myths of Asians as aliens and foreigners are pervasive in American society” (6). We see this exclusion in secondary curriculum. Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin address the exploitation and oppression of Asian Americans:

In the classroom, our non-Asian students, regardless of their backgrounds, are often shocked to hear about Asian American oppression. These students have never been taught Asian American
history, or been privy to significant events that have shaped these communities in the United States. Students often ask us why these things have been “left out” of their regular curriculum. (5-6)

A contributing factor to the erasure of Asian Americans in secondary curriculum is the model minority myth, which I explored in Chapter One. This stereotype “implicitly denies Asian American experiences with racism” and is used to divert attention from racial inequalities by setting standards by how minorities should behave because Asians were seen as quiet and hardworking. (Lee 16) The model minority myth silences the needs of Asian students to be recognized as individual human beings that demonstrate a diversity of abilities and interests. Takaki posits that the image brings expectations, “While this image has led many teachers and employers to view Asians as intelligent and hardworking and has opened some opportunities, it has also been harmful. Asian Americans find their diversity as individuals denied: many feel forced to conform to the ‘model minority’ mold and want more freedom to be their individual selves” (477). An even more complicated view of Asians acknowledges Orientalist images persist.45 Asian American are often seen as an “invasion” and their demeanors are viewed as “inscrutable,” they are viewed as having characteristics that are “static and unfree” in contrast to “dynamic and free” westerners, and they are rarely considered for top management positions (Chou and Feagin 13-15). Understanding the racial past of Asian Americans and recognizing current racial stereotypes is necessary to uncover racism.

From personal and professional experience, I know our choices in what we teach -- and how we teach it -- can impact students profoundly. The choice of texts
and topics invites students to participate in meaningful discussions regarding identity formation. Moreover, teaching with a melancholic lens empowers students to be critical readers of systemic problems of race. In the high school where I teach, our student minority population has grown to 33% Asian in 2018 (“Adlai E. Stevenson High School Report Card”—update). A large number of these students are high-achieving and enrolled in AP and accelerated courses. The success of these students may suggest, to some, that there is little need to discuss racial problems because of their academic successes. However, I believe we should invite critical and sensitive discussions of race that may speak to the particular needs of this student population. This includes the pressure to conform to a model minority, the lack of knowledge and representation of Asian American history and author, and the silencing of Asian American voices. Moreover, Asian American students feel pressure to hide their ethnic or cultural identities:

Asian Americans frequently feel stressed, embattled, isolated, and inadequate. Many passively accept that they must hide or abandon their home culture, values, and identity to prevent future mistreatment. Significant educational and economic achievements do not effectively shield them. Some analysis have argued that Asian Americans are “lucky “ that they do not face the negative imagery that African Americans experience. This view of Asian Americans is incorrect. The Asian American experience with racial hostility and discrimination is also very negative and largely untold, and such an
untold experience is indeed a very harmful invisibility. (Chou and Feagin 4)

Though there is an assumption that a “positive” stereotype such as the “model minority,” does not harm racial groups, Lee’s study found that many Asian American students “censured their own experiences and voices” to live up to the model minority standard in order to feel accepted (Lee 12).

In my earlier chapters, I addressed the problems and limitations of liberal multiculturalism in the context of secondary English education. The approach to celebrate pluralism dangerously overlooks the hidden expectations of assimilationism -- the expectation to renounce one’s own ethnic ties to adapt to the American mainstream. Novels by people of color, American or not, are sometimes taught under the generic umbrella of liberal multiculturalism. This approach perpetuates superficial celebrations of pluralism without examining the hidden pressures of assimilation to the white hegemonic norm. In addition, liberal multiculturalism renders inequalities and atrocities against minorities invisible. Current trends in teaching multicultural texts merely reinforce the metanarrative of assimilationism. As discussed in my chapters on The Joy Luck Club and Beloved, teachers and students often focus on the protagonist who must solve the problem of racial oppression by letting go of any claims to injustice or inequality. The problem of liberal multicultural interpretive practice is that this buries the losses for figures of color, such racist views of Asian Americans, the expectations to conform to a model minority, and the broken ties to their home culture. As I discussed in those
chapters, the burial of grief can be observed in the practice of “colorblindness” where racial and ethnic identities are ignored rather than recognized.

In this chapter, I argue that we should expand our understanding of American multiculturalism and its limitations through teaching *Anil’s Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje. The melancholic reading of this novel will expand students’ awareness of racialization. Our study of the text underscores the oppression of minorities in America and Sri Lanka. By reading melancholically, we make these grievances visible. It can be more difficult to see our own society clearly because we are immersed in that world. However, reading a global voice allows us to look at both another country and America in interesting ways. Through the lens of outsiders to Sri Lanka, we examine how power and loss function in *Anil’s Ghost*. Students examine how systems work to make minority losses invisible in that novel. Additionally, from the lens of a Sri Lankan-American figure, we can understand the experience of an immigrant character. Thus, students can see how this character experiences invisibility and grief in America. Educational scholars Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor discuss the metaphor of teaching literature as “windows” and “mirrors” to disrupt the single narrative of the white experience. The concept of “mirrors” suggests that a book allows readers to “see something of themselves in the text. Such a book reflects back to readers portions of their identities, cultures, or experiences” (29). When many selected books tell the story of the dominant voice of white males, the experience of “reflection” is limited for females and students of color. Thus, teaching an inclusive curriculum of various voices encourages more opportunities for students to see themselves reflected. The metaphor extends to
how books can also act as “windows” to move readers beyond themselves “allowing for vicarious experience to supersede the limits of the readers’ own lives and identities and spend time observing those of others” (29). While Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor focus on selecting children’s literature that showcases a variety of cultural backgrounds to build a sense of identity and validation, I believe the analogy works for our text choices that address multiculturalism. My previous chapters investigated the teaching of The Joy Luck Club and Beloved in American classrooms and how approaches to those texts can challenge underlying assumptions of multiculturalism in America. I believe a text that addresses minority perspectives in another country as well in America can allow readers to understand that perspective in a new light. The protagonist traverses between her country of origin, Sri Lanka, and her adopted home in America. From an American view, we can look into the “window” of this novel and examine how power structures operate to bury the losses of minorities in Sri Lanka. The scenes set in America operate as “mirrors” where we can study how the burial of loss operates similarly or differently in our country. When students examine the perspective of the protagonist, Anil Tissera, they are reflect on America through a “mirror” that highlights the racialized figure’s experience in our own country. In other words, readers can compare and contrast the circumstances of racial grief in Sri Lanka and America in Anil’s Ghost.

Furthermore, this novel supports an Illinois Common Core State Standard of Literacy, which is to “Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature” (Common Core Standards). By engaging in worlds
outside of the U.S., students can explore other perspectives and cultures of people whose experiences differ from their own. This enables them to communicate more effectively with people of varied backgrounds and evaluate other points of view critically and constructively, as well as their own. Reading texts from global voices stages opportunities for students to examine loss from another perspective. Looking beyond familiar approaches to American multicultural novels can provide students a critical look at the dynamics of power structures elsewhere. High school students gain critical reading skills when we open their worlds to larger scopes of understanding. Students develop their abilities to compare and contrast American and global voices, understand how ethnocentrism may operate in texts, and open their eyes to other value systems.

In particular, my focus on melancholic reading practice extends students’ critical reading skills regarding racial difference. Melancholic reading practices show students how certain differences can never absorbed, but need to be recognized. This is a rejection of liberal multiculturalism pedagogy, which only subsumes the trauma of loss and forces a fantasy of healing. Reading texts from other countries allows students to gain global perspectives on race, power, institutions, and identity. Indeed, Paula Moya and MarYam Hamedani encourage critical reading practices of racial identities:

Teaching students how to read race through doing contextualized close readings of multicultural literature is a pedagogical strategy that can help teachers meet several contemporary educational demands. Preparing students for college and careers requires a set of cognitive,
interpersonal, and intrapersonal competencies that include being able to engage and work across social differences. (Moya and Hamedani 12)

Learning about global voices can counter the limits of American multiculturalism which overgeneralizes concepts of American pluralism. The assumption, which is reinforced through pedagogy, is that all cultures should share a similar arc in their process of assimilating to white, mainstream American society. This reading practice continues to be problematic in k-12 schools that reinforce assimilationism through their reading practices. Acknowledging differences in narratives can assist students in being able to “work across social differences” as stated by Moya and Hamedani.

*Anil’s Ghost* is an excellent choice for high school students to expand discussion of grievances regarding ethnic and cultural differences. The novel presents the story of Anil Tissera, a character born and raised in Sri Lanka who migrated to the United States. We can investigate the circumstances and effects of minority grief in Sri Lanka and America. The novel stages a melancholic reading through its focus on the rejection of minority figures. By examining layers of complex history, we engage readers in a search for emotional truth and justice in the aftermath of the civil war in Sri Lanka. In addition, we explore how the protagonist’s desire to unbury the losses of minority life in Sri Lanka actually parallels the need to recognize losses in America. The compelling plot operates as a mystery novel, yet the story lends itself to thematic discussions of melancholia. The novel thematizes melancholia and critiques narrow readings of nationhood and
identity that uphold expectations to conform to dominant views. The novel addresses the history of loss and violence in Sri Lanka, which has been mired in ethnic conflict since its 1948 liberation from British rule.48 We explore how the characters respond ethically, emotionally, and psychologically. After gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lankans were engaged in a civil war between two dominant ethnic groups, the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil, enforcing their own ethnic nationalism.49 This tension and political unrest resulted in massive death tolls, described by Ondaatje in his Author’s Note. He writes, “Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north.” The tension between language, ethnicity, education, and economic opportunity between the two groups led to massive death tolls.50 Ondaatje has been critiqued because of his avoidance of political blame. In response, he stated that the book “isn’t a statement about the war,” but an exploration on several characters, “a personal tunneling” (Bolton 221). The absence of political focus encourages student discussions to focus, instead, on minority identities.

Literature provides access to worlds that students do not regularly explore. Unlike history, the imaginative qualities of literature encourage students to place themselves in situations and explore new possibilities. Close reading encourages the production of multiple viewpoints and multicultural literature, in particular, can expose students to alternative perspectives they may never encounter in their daily lives. Paula Moya, in The Social Imperative, articulates the possibilities of a reader’s engagement with literature:
A work of literature is thus a creative linguistic engagement, in the form of an oral or written artifact, with the historically-situated cultural and political tensions expressed at the level of individual experience . . . A close reading of a work of literature can thus serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas – such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality – of social worlds, as well as the world of sense, within which both authors and readers live. *(The Social Imperative 9)*

Literature is one of the best ways to confront social issues because it allows readers to explore ideas as they are embedded in a social world. The discussion of literature provides students with a venue to explore themes and their impact on individuals and society. Through the analysis of characterization, story arcs, and themes, students engage in meaningful discussions of topics such as identity, values, and justice. Moreover, multicultural literature can be used to combat prejudice through practicing engagement with social issues and learning different ways to respond. The discussion of what racialized figures experience is a means for students to talk about race through the situations in the narrative. I believe discussing literature is a safe space for students to engage in these topics without having to disclose their personal experiences. The circumstances and characters invite students to explore the inner and outer lives of racialized figures.

In addition, *Anil's Ghost* encourages students to expand their understanding of minority perspectives. This novel stages a melancholic reading because it gives voice to the grief of buried voices. The author has openly discussed his aims in
writing the novel as a work that acknowledges the marginalized, dispossessed, and
forgotten. Ondaatje affirms a concern for expressing loss: “When I wrote *Anil’s
Ghost* I felt that responsibility very heavily . . . I spent time with doctors and traveled
with them and lived with some of them for a week or so. I was witnessing how one
lived in such a situation. I knew it was not a book that was going to change things,
but I still wanted to represent some of those voices” (“Adventures in the Skin Trade”
Interview). Though these minority voices in Sri Lanka have been made silent by the
dominant, Tamil majority, the novel seeks to make these voices heard. Chelva
Kanaganayakam affirms that Ondaatje’s novel demonstrates a focused attention to
history which is revealed in “writing styles” and “subject matter” (45). Through
melancholic reading, we can study how the novel attends to minority grieving in
America and in Sri Lanka. In this way, melancholic reading extends the goals of
critical multiculturalism. Sneha Gunew posits that critical multiculturalism
can serve to remind one or both the local and the global in that it
introduces minority perspectives as well as suggesting diasporic
networks. It continues to be a way of situating subjectivities outside
certain nationalist investments and hence may be used as a way of
paying attention to minority perspectives, using them to critique
dominant discourses and practices. (38)
Gunew’s views shed light on the importance of investigating subjectivities beyond
national boundaries and agendas. Reading *Anil’s Ghost* enables students to see what
they may not recognize in American multiculturalism: the “minority perspective”
that critiques the “dominant discourses and practices.” The story of oppression in
this novel highlights similarities and differences between losses in Sri Lanka and America.

**Racial Grief and Minority Figures**

The racialized subjects of the novel experience the loss of identity and equality which leads to grief. The protagonist, Anil Tissera, is a Sri Lankan character who has lived in America and exemplifies the losses experienced by Asian Americans. The character experiences invisibility and rejection from American society. In addition, there are multiple figures of unnamed dead that represent the Tamil minority. The figure of Sailor operates as the representative of ethnic minority grief in Sri Lanka. The narrative focuses on Anil, a forensic pathologist, whose task is to unbury and identify the multiple victims of oppression.

Freud’s work in “Mourning and Melancholia” guides my reading approach. In his theory, mourning, the healthy way for an individual to deal with the loss, contrasts melancholy, which is the failure of an individual to accept loss, prolonging the grieving process. The individual suspends closure in the prolonged state of grief. Freud describes the mental features of melancholia as a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings” (Freud 244).

Melanie Klein, who expanded Freud’s theories, describes the individual’s response to loss. After the inner world of the individual has been destroyed, “The rebuilding of this inner world characterizes the successful work of mourning” (“The Depressive Position” 308). The problem with Klein’s claim in the context of racialization is
that the victim of oppression is expected to change. Through melancholic reading, students will recognize how the texts reject this position and, instead, continually push for the institutions and oppressors to change. Students can learn to recognize how constructions of race can have devastating effects.

Translating Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to a reading practice, a melancholic lens encourages us to continue to reflect on injustice. I am applying this response to the interpretation of melancholic figures in the text. I agree with Freud that the suspension of mourning operates as the refusal for characters to let go of loss; however, I do not believe melancholia is limited as a pathological response to grief that must be overcome. Instead, I argue that teaching students to read with a melancholic lens encourages them to develop their critical reading skills so they identify and analyze racialization in novels. In my earlier chapters on The Joy Luck Club and Beloved, I discussed how common approaches to reading perpetuated assimilationism. In other words, students are taught that the figures that experience loss, such as the loss of the American ideals of equality and justice, must adapt to their surroundings by relinquishing ties to their ethnic or racial identities. I posit that melancholic reading disrupts that common reading pattern of interpretation. Rather than focusing on how racialized figures should adapt, readers should examine systems of oppression in the text. Melancholic reading encourages students to investigate how institutions of power shape and manage ethnic and racial identities.

The work of mourning should be continued because it acknowledges the human need to make connections between past and present, it permits the
encounter with difficult histories, and it encourages examination of how ethnic identities are shaped by loss. We search for a meaningful way to engage with past trauma to understand our present day sense of loss. Melancholic reading practices continue this work of grievance. Reading Ondaatje sustains a melancholic suspension of grief in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The novel addresses this inability to confront the difficult truth of the past. Through this excavation into the past, he reopens questions and grievances, unburying long forgotten stories and hidden truths. We can encourage students to ponder: How do we respond to human loss that is so overwhelming that it is more easily forgotten? What is the value in revisiting the wounds of historical injury? Melancholic reading practices reveal the lingering traumatic effects of imperialism. The devastating losses in Anil's Ghost conjures specters of colonial history and the cycles of violence.

By revisiting grief and grievances, readers explore the capacity to grieve, to honor the dead, to witness suffering, yet to fight against numbness. Through this kind of critical reading, we strive not to forget. We seize the opportunity to speak to this historical moment. We can teach students to analyze connections between the horror in Sri Lanka with terror in other parts of the world: “The novel repeatedly correlates such specific brutalities to those occurring in Guatemala, China, Kurdistan, and the Congo, implying that each conflict performs a version of the others, and of larger confrontations taking place at the transnational level – together forming what many now call a ‘global civil war’ of the governed against state-sponsored wars ‘on terror’” (Higgins and Leps 202). The response to these crimes seems inadequate. Alessia Ricciardi argues that we need a meaningful mediation on loss:
Our anguish at the shock of loss, I would contend, should not be viewed in such mechanical terms, but rather in terms of an ongoing interpretive challenge without a prescribed end, without knowingness. Now it is exactly this enigmatic and open-ended quality of mourning that is increasingly denied by contemporary culture’s refusal of a genuinely critical relation to the past [...] The failure of the twentieth century to develop a hermeneutics of loss in this sense results in a problematic philosophical and ethical condition. (Ricciardi 4)

Our reading can address the lack of ethical urgency, within Sri Lanka and across the world, in response to these crimes. Melancholic reading gives voice to the private aspect of loss, which provides an ethical dimension through the examination of oppressive systems. We can examine how figures in the novel have been subjugated.

Examining loss through a window into another country allows students to clearly see unresolved historical losses. When we examine the novel as a meditation of loss and its continuing impact, we read melancholically. We can teach students to examine how this novel interrupts the notion of “progress.” Students can examine moments in the novel where American-Sri Lankan and Sri Lankan figures cannot be liberated from their traumatic past. As we read the novel, students understand that the continual search for truth and the persistence of mourning are a means of response that invoke the voices of the dead, the ethnic Tamil minority. Frantz Fanon’s chapter “On Violence” from The Wretched of the Earth addresses the need to narrate stories of oppressed peoples. He describes the ongoing struggle for psychic and physical control between the colonizers and the colonized. Amid the struggle,
he contends, “In order to maintain their stamina and their revolutionary capability, the people also resort to retelling certain episodes in the life of the community” (30). The statement illuminates how Ondaatje’s novel addresses the postcolonial condition in Sri Lanka. We can teach students the value of retelling stories and locating identities of minority figures that are swallowed up and forgotten by history.

This mode of reading demands a careful analysis of master narratives of assimilationism and progress. We examine levels of textuality such as characterization of melancholic figures and narrative structures. I define assimilationism based on tenets ascribed by Newfield and Gordon who separate *assimilation*, which is a means joining the mainstream economically and politically, from *assimilationism*, which demands specific behaviors, rejects “racialized group consciousness,” and denies cultural equity (Newfield and Gordon, “Unfinished Business” 80). I critique the assumption that ethnic characters must assimilate to mainstream, white culture and relinquish their ethnic identities. Through melancholic reading practice, we can teach students to see how the novel recalls history and refuses it to be coerced into mourning; it disallows the death of this historical moment. Melancholic reading allows students to reopen the wounds of the past and refuse the closure of this historical injury. Moreover, we can find productive spaces for discussion by comparing scenes of loss in Sri Lanka with those that frame racial injury in America. In my other chapters, I examined the differences of race: the black minority versus the white majority in *Beloved* and the Asian minority versus the white majority in *The Joy Luck Club*. Here, I will examine both
racial and ethnic minorities in the context of oppression: the South Asian minority in America and the Tamil ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. Developing awareness of how characters are shaped by their minority status will increase understanding of how oppression operates.

**Anil as a Melancholic Figure**

Reading melancholically can help us better understand how characters function as melancholic figures. We can discern layers of losses in these characters. Melancholy is an unavoidable feature of race that must not be concealed. Uncovering and interrogating the effects of racism upon individuals and groups can rectify social imbalances and address how unbelonging creates loss. I assert that the very mode of “unbelonging” allows for a critical distance for that figure. Anne Cheng addresses social formation while Bryson and Palumbo-Liu focus on institution, yet I see the productive capacity of these texts manifest in a reading strategy that allows us to better understand identity construction. Freud claims that the melancholic has a “keener eye for the truth” (245) who understands himself and others and wonders why a man “has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind” (245). Indeed, I propose that melancholy characters are not ill, but we must read their circumstances differently. Melancholy reading casts criticism back upon the failures of institutions and society to incorporate difference on equal grounds. Reading melancholically helps us to see how these figures are continually impacted by race, status, and power. We examine how these characters help us perceive minority status. David Eng and Shinhee Han contend the subject
position of racial minorities offers productive capacities. In "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," Eng and Han depathologize melancholia as theorized by Freud. Melancholia is not viewed as a pathological state that must be clinically resolved, but gives us insight into understanding the processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization. Eng and Han assert that mourning and melancholia coexist through a continuum in the process of assimilation and assert that "attention to racial melancholia as conflict rather than damage not only renders it a productive category but also removes Asian Americans from the position of solipsistic 'victims.' We are dissatisfied with the assumption that minority subjectivities are permanently damaged" (363). Instead, reading the conflicts of racial melancholia allows us to see productive capacities in understanding racial identities and imperial institutions.

Reading literature through a melancholic lens opens new ways to interpret texts about minority figures. We can teach students to understand melancholic figures and how such characters sustain a search for lost ideals. In the age of progress, the ideals of true acceptance, equality, and justice should be met. However, we must recognize that the novel continues mourning over the loss of these ideals. The character of Anil does not experience equity in America nor her homeland. If successful mourning means that one will let go of the cathexed objects and form new attachments, then we see how figures that fail to reattach demonstrate melancholy. Freud contends, "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-
regarding feelings” (243). These concepts can be readily seen in the character Anil who fails to establish successful relationships because she longs for the recognition of equality. Her continual longing for this loss underscores her sense of unbelonging, which is evidenced in her failed romantic relationships, dissipating friendships, and even her belonging to a nation or country. Furthermore, as a melancholic figure, Anil's spatial suspension underlines her sense of displacement. A nomadic character, Anil Tissera reveals an inability to attach to a nation-state, America or Sri Lanka. This continual movement between locations reminds us of the rejection by two separate worlds. Anil negotiates ties to her minority, ethnic culture in the East and her scientific education in the West. We can examine Anil's inability to be accepted by either American or Sri Lankan culture, which is emphasized in the “back and forth” movement between time and place. In addition, the ocean operates as a signifier that offers insight to the challenges of a migrant character. Anil's journeys entail a separation from homeland and an estrangement from roots. Never fully accepted in America, nor welcomed home as a female scientist who studied in the West, Anil operates as a melancholic figure that forever wanders, rejected and unable to attach. We must recognize that her character arc does not actually find acceptance. In doing so, we see that the figure represents the continued grievances of minority status. The figure represents political and cultural rejection in Sri Lanka and racial marginalization in the United States.

I assert that productive interpretation entails reading against Freud's pathologizing of the melancholic figure. Rather than interpreting the character's difficulties as a narrative about personal experience where figures must deal with
unresolved grief individually, we must investigate moments that reveal the larger problem of belonging for minority figures. In other words, we reject notion that the problem of melancholy is solely that of the individual who must overcome her own grief. Instead, we must examine how external forces have subjected these figures to grief. Anil’s spatial movement reinforces her sense of unbelonging.\textsuperscript{55} We can read her diasporic identity as disruptive because she cannot assimilate to one particular culture or identity. In this manner, she maintains her suspension of grief. The opening of the novel reveals she has been abroad for 15 years and returns home to Sri Lanka. Her work as a forensic anthropologist teams her with Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist. Together, they investigate multiple deaths of unnamed bodies. Significantly, her work as an anthropologist grounds her symbolically in this humane search for identity amidst the atrocities of the Sri Lankan civil war. The victims she identifies are those who have suffered injustice because of political turmoil. The political confusion and unrest has traumatized the nation since colonialism. The novel instead explores the difficulties of exclusion for multiple groups in Sri Lanka: scientists, journalists, women, and ethnic minorities.

Reading Anil as a suspended figure allows us to see how the novel focuses on the effects of oppression and the paradox of belonging nowhere. Melancholic reading encourages examination of character development in order to perceive areas of unrecognized loss. These areas include loss of ties to homeland and culture, loss of connection to new countries, and loss of aspects of identity. A native of Sri Lanka, Anil has since moved to the West, working as a forensic anthropologist uncovering bodies and ghosts from the past and present. Sent by an international
rights organization to examine victims of political campaigns, Anil has returned home. She is haunted by the past and awakened to the present, continually uncovering truths about herself, her family, and her homeland. The novel embeds a pastiche of personal and national memories in the trajectory of Anil’s search to discover the truth about political murders. Her diasporic identity defies “ascription to anyone national culture” (Cook 2) and keeps her forever suspended as a foreigner (Farrier 84). She was educated in Western medicine, employed by the United Nations, and yet, upon returning home, felt “the buried sense from childhood alive in her” (15). We can these moments as signifiers of lost identity. The mixture of cultures and perspectives invites reflection on what it means to belong. One critic suggests that her movement suggests freedom: “Anil’s nomadism, as she does engage in the unburial of intimate testimony, represents a potential freedom from geographical as well as historical consternation” (Farrier 85). However, the novel explores how her nomadism actually inhibits her sense of belonging -- the figure demonstrates the loss of true attachments. In fact, her desire to build a new life in America fails, but she does not find solace in her roots either: “The island no longer held her by the past . . . and she now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze” (11). Melancholic reading reveals that the failure of attachment is due to the “production of minority grief” (Cho 46).

Melancholic reading practice allows us the ability to locate moments in the text where systems erase minority identities. Figures in the novel represent larger institutions, as seen in the character of her ex-husband, a signifier of patriarchy. The character of Anil reflects on her time in London where she had a relationship with
another Sri Lankan character. Readers can interrogate how institutions deny her autonomy. We examine how patriarchy attempts to manage her. Her brief, unsuccessful marriage describes these limits:

She would return from the lab in the evenings and be met by his jealousy. At first this presented itself as sexual jealousy, then she saw it was an attempt to limit her research and studies. It was the first handcuff of marriage, and it almost buried her . . . After she escaped him she would never say his name out loud. If she saw his handwriting on a letter, she never opened it, fear and claustrophobia rising within her. (Ondaatje 145)

Her unnamed husband seems threatened by her career and seeks to contain her. Anil rejects the conditions of marriage, and seeks satisfying relationships outside that institution. In addition, we interpret another character, Cullis, acting as a figure representing patriarchy and whiteness. When Anil meets Cullis in Miami, she is employed by a forensics team in Guatemala. Students can construe how this relationship further develops the racialization of Anil. By examining the limitations of this relationship, we see how the novel stages permanent detachment for Anil. The figure Cullis is “permanently defensive” and married (36). Melancholic reading draws us towards moments in the text that reveal the cause of rejection and loss. We see how Anil’s foreign status keeps her forever marked when Cullis states, “I can’t imagine your childhood . . . You are a complete stranger to me” (Ondaajte 35). This remark underscores the notion of Asians as the “foreigner within.” We can ask students to make connections between this scene and Asian American erasure. The
notion that Asians are outsiders and not accepted as Americans is evident in the history of Asian immigrant exclusions. Students can examine how Cullis’ figure represents the dominant white American identity. Their relationship works in a similarly to the white majority and Asian minority, as noted by Anlin Cheng, who attests that white American identity is based on psychical and social consumption: “Like melancholia, racism is hardly ever a clear rejection of the other. While racism is mostly thought of as a kind of violent rejection, racist institutions in fact often do not want to fully expel the racial other; instead, they wish to maintain that other within existing structures” (11-12). Cheng provides support to interpret the character of Cullis as a symbol of white American identity that desires control and management over the minority figure. The climactic end of their relationship is highlighted through a violent act. Anil interrogates, “Why don’t you let go, Cullis? Let’s stop” (Ondaatje 100). The character of Cullis demands control:

He held on to her.

She knew where it was. She reached back and her fingers grabbed it, and she swung until the small knife [...] (Ondaatje 100)

The character Anil escapes the role of mistress in a violent act. At the end of their relationship, Anil recognizes and protests the role of Asian other that is only to be consumed and silenced by the hegemony. Significantly, Anil reflects on her past while she investigates the truth of the victims in Sri Lanka. We can ask students to compare and contrast this scene of a white figure restraining a minority figure and the political domination of majority Sinhalese over the minority Tamils. I want students to see how this intimate domestic scene can represent larger structures of
power. In addition, I hope they can see how the dominant political group of Sinhalese control and coerce the minority Tamils through violence. Whereas the violent acts against the Tamils results in a massive loss of life, the losses experienced by the figure Anil are psychological. The burial of Tamil bodies is described literally: numerous deaths are hidden in unmarked graves. However, the burial of Asian American loss, as depicted through Anil, is made invisible in different ways. Asian American grief is unrecognized by the dominant, white American psyche, as stated by Cullis who believes Anil is “a complete stranger to me” (Ondaatje 25). Discussing these parallels will help students see how minority figures are managed, forgotten, or erased in America, and how these figures are expected to acquiesce to a dominant power.

The novel further develops the inability of Anil’s character to form strong attachments because of the problem of memory and recognition. The formation of lasting friendship is also impossible. Anil’s closest friend in America, Leaf, is introduced as a figure who struggles with recollection. Examining the figure of Leaf as a representative of white America enables readers to see how the white America connects and disconnects with Asian figures. The friendship between these women is formed as they both become obsessed with American images and characters in film. They bond over movies and their discussions focus on remembering the perpetrators and victims in their American films. Their actions offer a coded discussion of victims as they examine “frame by frame for any sign of outrage at this unfairness on the victim’s face. There seems to be none. It was a minor act directed towards a minor character” (236). The scene where they analyze movies
exemplifies the notion of victimization of Asian Americans. There is little recognition that any harm has been done; furthermore, their seems to be no outrage from the victims themselves. The friends banter about even remembering the victim in a film by repeating questions about who shot Cherry Valance (236-237). When Anil lives in Arizona, her friend Leaf suddenly moves to Mexico, leaving Anil destitute. Ironically, the characters are able to make a close connection, but the friendship deteriorates because of Leaf’s illness. Early in Anil’s investigation of the deaths in Sri Lanka, she gets a phone call from Leaf, who mutters, “I’m not remembering. I’m forgetting your face” (Ondaatje 63). This is a moment for students to make connections to the kinds of losses these characters experience. Leaf’s character signifies the psyche of dominant America that disremembers minority identities. Anil represents the voices that are forgotten in the silences: “Anil could hardly breathe . . . Crackle and silence as she held the phone tight” (Ondaatje 63). The motif of memory loss pervades the character’s life – from the intentional burial and forgetting of the innocent lives lost in Sri Lanka to her personal relationships with family and friends. Leaf, who was Anil’s closest friend, also underlines the tentative nature of Anil’s sense of belonging in America. Without human recognition of her worth, Anil’s ties to U.S. dwindle. The truth of Leaf’s memory loss evades Anil until she communicates with Leaf again at the end of the investigation of Sri Lankan deaths. While Anil was in Europe, she received a surprising call that brings her back to America. During her return, the characters discover the “truth with each other’s lives” (Ondaatje 255). Anil’s strongest bond to America was Leaf, who is ill. Leaf announces, “I just keep . . . forgetting things. I can
diagnose myself, you see. I have Alzheimer’s. I know I’m too young for this, but I had encephalitis as a kid” (Ondaatje 256). The relationship demonstrates Anil’s fleeting ties to America continue to disappear, rendering her invisible. She acknowledges that Leaf suffers from Alzheimer’s: “She was starting to lose her memory” (256). The relationships between these two figures is a coded way to examine race relations between whites and Asians. This bond is only fleeting and will be disremembered. This erasure of Asian Americans as part of America is apparent in beliefs that Asians are still considered foreigners. But Asian Americans have been silenced even further – acknowledgement of racism is denied. Erasure is further evidenced in a 2001 study that showed “even though many non-Asian Americans were themselves being prejudiced, they still believed that Asian Americans don’t face prejudice” (Wu 14). The novel invites an investigation of how Asian figures and their losses are unrecognized.

Through our approach to reading, students scrutinize how various losses represent losses of identity. The figure of Anil, an Asian minority in America, continually contends with absences. When she returns to Sri Lanka, the scene with her childhood caregiver exemplifies the loss of culture: “Anil could hardly recognize the tiny aged woman” (22). The distance between the Asian American character and her cultural roots are evident as communication is strained: “There was a lost language between them” (Ondaatje 22). The scene underscores the figure’s inability to reattach strong roots to her own culture and land. Moving between America and Sri Lanka, the character underlines the “incomplete narratives” (Lim 4) of Asian Americans. Furthermore, when Anil returns to her native country, ironically her
individual identity is further erased. She is no longer viewed as an individual, but as a sort of “foreign celebrity” (Ondaatje 25). Homi Bhabha asserts that this loss of individual identity is because of being seen as part of a cultural group: “the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification” (219). The character is not fully Sri Lankan nor American, and is viewed as the Other in each country.

Contextualizing these scenes within the immigration history of Asian Americans is an opportune means to engage students. This includes examining a nativist agenda which can be better exposed through novels such as Anil’s Ghost that problematize notions of belonging. The tenuous status of Anil’s connection to America can be better understood through a reflection of the rejection and suppression of Asians in America. A melancholic reading of the text encourages us to see how personal losses of figures can be memorials for larger cultural losses. We can draw attention to historical gaps and fissures in our study of the novel. The scenes signal a recognition of American immigration laws and policies that have supported nativist sentiment, which underlines the tentative state of belonging for Asians in America. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 denied entry and labor to Chinese workers and the National Origins Acts of 1921 and 1924 created immigration quotas explicitly favoring western and northern European immigrants while also limiting immigrants of other origins. This resulted in 90% of the immigrants being white between 1924 and 1950. The 1965 Immigration Act opened some doors to Asians. By the 21st century, the majority of immigrants were from other parts of the world: 52% come from Latin America and the Caribbean and 29% come from Asia. However, this new shift in immigration has stimulated anti-
immigrant nativism (Bell, Joshi and Zuniga 146-147). Moreover, Maurianne Adams exhorts her concern about pedagogy and power:

Assumptions that the content of learning is neutral ignore the privileging of some academic subjects over others, the focus of dominant social groups at the core of the curriculum, and the approaches to teaching and learning that advantage socially dominant groups and marginalize and exclude others based on race, gender, and class... (Adams 28)

Her argument on social justice education informs melancholic reading practices. Both approaches expose unequal power relations by urging us to examine hidden ideologies of power and belonging. Through melancholic reading, we can unbury what has been hidden by dominant groups.

Reclaiming Loss: Making Political Terrorism Visible

Melancholic reading helps students understand that political and racial losses must be uncovered. In addition, readers can see how this kind of terrorism continues today by making connections to current events. Reclaiming these losses is a way to continue mourning. Our reading of the text prolongs the grief of these human atrocities, which invite further study of the dehumanization of minorities. The interpretive framework of melancholy suggests not just a continual mourning of loss, but the reclaiming of buried loss. For readers, this reclaiming functions as an act of identification. The reader can recognize Anil’s actions as a forensic pathologist – to identify, to name, and, in essence, to remember – as an act of social
justice. The novel stages this search for evidences as another means to register loss. I believe the registering of loss is a way to make visible that which has been invisible. Judith Herman’s work on trauma and recovery offers a medical perspective on such recognition. Her work examines the importance of reconstructing the story:

> Traumatic losses rupture the ordinary sequence of generations and defy the ordinary social conventions of bereavement. The telling of the trauma story thus inevitably plunges the survivor into profound grief. Since so many of the losses are invisible or unrecognized, the customary rituals of mourning provide little consolation. (Herman 188)

Herman’s work provides insight regarding how we can recognize loss as it is thematized in literature. Melancholic reading of *Anil’s Ghost* underscores the theory that stories of loss must be recovered because they are often rendered invisible, especially losses that are at the hands of political and racial terrorism. But a melancholic reading goes further than mere reclaiming loss. Herman’s work addresses how rituals of mourning provided “little consolation.” The work of my approach is a way to find meaning through grief and grievances, which should help students see how political and racial losses must be uncovered. Moreover, readers can see how this kind of terrorism continues today. Students must recognize the power structures that perpetrate the kinds of losses that are examined in the novel.

The concept of identification should be addressed sensitively in secondary English classes. Creating a safe space for all students is important for all classrooms, which also encourages more meaningful engagement with texts. I use activities for
students to safely explore multiple levels of their identities, which include race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and political views. I have been a facilitator for the Anti-Defamation League workshop called A World of Difference and have adapted diversity training activities for the classroom. In addition, I have adapted approaches from Courageous Conversations about Race. These kinds of activities allow students to decide how they identify and what they wish to share or not share in the classroom. When students understand that they can identify as part of various groups, including those that may be considered “dominant” and / or those that are considered “different” or the “Other,” then they can become more fully aware of how identity functions in this novel. Anne Anlin Cheng’s views on identification help us understand self-recognition: “Identification is a psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition, but it produces a very peculiar form of recognition: a recognition borne out of a drama of otherness” (Cheng 180). For my purposes, the “self-recognition” occurs on two levels: within the narrative and without. Readers can examine how Anil gains a sense of self-recognition as she understands her role as a pathologist through the journey of unburying the dead and searching for truth. On another level, the character Anil models what the melancholic reader can uncover – the awareness of self in relation to Other. Students can share aspects of their identification based on the class activities. Understanding one’s relation to otherness has the potential to unlock feelings of sympathy and identification. Cheng develops this notion as an ethics of sympathy that circles “around misgiving about comparison between the self and other and the implications of the comparison” (186-187). While Cheng focuses on the paradox of
sameness in the context of multiculturalism, and points to the problems of appropriation or self-confirming forms of identification, I insist that recognition of “sameness” is essential in a reader’s response. In other words, destabilizing the separation of “self” and “other” to identify with the other is what urges a call to action. The process of identification expands outward: from our understanding the function of figures in the text to reflecting on our roles as citizens. The reader is thus positioned to examine the book as it presents us with a pathology for reading – for us to examine a causal study of “dis-ease” for minority voices and to expand class discussion to students’ experiences.

Melancholic reading approaches are needed to recognize minority grief. Without this reading practice, students miss the opportunity to understand how minorities experience unbelonging. Simplistic reading of this novel may evoke only sympathy or curiosity about a world far away from America. But our reading of the novel encourages recognition of the disempowered in America as well. The need to be recognized is articulated by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He interprets the black man’s desire for recognition in the context of Hegel:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another main in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, it is this other who remains the focus on his actions. His human worth and reality depend on this other and on his recognition by the other. It is in this other that the meaning of his life is condensed [...] There is at the basis of
Hegelian dialectic an absolute reciprocity that must be highlighted.

(Fanon *Black Skins, White Masks* 191)

Fanon’s emphasis on the need to be recognized illuminates how we understand the significance of continued mourning. When we study the disempowered, represented in this novel by Anil and the unidentified dead, we bring to light their stories of grief. Students can further discuss the grievances of minority figures. In the context of the novel, further study of the Sri Lankan Civil War opens understanding for students. But we can also expand their concepts of minority status by making connections to our discussion of identities and marginalization. In addition to exploring the relationships between Anil and the white figures, Cullis and Leaf, students can examine the images of America in the novel. The character Anil describes her vision of the American Southwest. She states, "[Y]ou needed to look twice at emptiness, you needed to take your time, the air like ether, where thins grew only with difficulty. On the island of her childhood she could spit on the group and a bush would leap up" (148). Students can reflect on the imagery of unbelonging and the difficulty of thriving in America versus the nurturing imagery of her former homeland. In addition, readers can discuss Fanon’s comments about the need to be recognized and what that means to individuals and various groups in society. Then, they can turn their attention to the novel and the act of naming, which signifies identification and recognition. Naming the dead is critical in recognizing and honoring their location and place in history. Individual lives have been lost, but remain suspended, unidentified. By reopening the wounds of the nameless dead, we are urged not to forget. Remembering operates as a form of
recognition for Asian American grievances that have been buried and ignored in the national psyche. As I discussed in my introduction, liberal multiculturalism absorbs minorities into the dominant, white majority, excluding and ignoring difference. The prevailing assumption is that minority figures must accept assimilationism and deny their ethnic ties. But our reading approaches to this novel highlight the continued sense of unbelonging for minority figures.

The never-ending unburial of minority losses sustains grief. The novel disallows a neat and tidy burial of Asian American grief, as developed through the estrangement of the figure Anil. The work of the Asian American figure is to uncover and continue to mourn the losses in her homeland Sri Lanka and deal with the losses in her adopted homeland America. This forensic pathologist uncovers loss in America: “They couldn’t miss death, it was in every texture and cell around them” (Ondaajte 147). These images connote the emptiness experienced because of unbelonging. In addition, her work to uncover the dead in Sri Lanka offers a connection to the psychological losses she experiences in America. Readers continually explore how mourning is never-ending. For example, the character Anil reflects, “And who was this skeleton? […] Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest” (56). The work to identify and name a body involves uncovering, maneuvering, and continuing movement. The novel gives voice to the unspeakable and continues to grieve over those atrocities hidden in the dark, buried in political turmoil of Sinhalese versus Tamil, of power and corruption. Even the bodies of the dead are buried and unburied in a cyclical fashion. Sarath and Anil unearth fragments and debris that
reveal bodies that have been killed, moved to a sacred, prehistoric site, and always under police supervision. The challenge is overwhelming because of the lack of evidence: “The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses” (43). The official powers attempt to deny the truths of the murders. Anil works to locate their identities: “In her work Anil turned bodies into representatives of race and age and place” (55).

We read the process of locating Sailor’s body and discovering his identity melancholically because it prolongs grief. The figure of Sailor represents the minority identities who are lost and buried by the nation. As we uncover Sailor’s personal story, we note that the individual figure represents multiple losses. These losses include minority identities and cultures that are forgotten on a national landscape. Furthering the image of “digging” theme, is Sailor’s occupation: “Sailor worked in a mine” (179). The wounds inscribed on his skeleton are markers of physical and historical injury, buried beneath the surface of official truths. The nickname “Sailor” connotes movement across the ocean. Like Anil’s movement as a literal and figurative swimmer, we can interpret Sailor’s suggestive movement as an illustration of nonclosure. The body that represents lost ideals and lost voices of minorities will not be still. Ondaatje provokes an uneasy recollection of the mournful events of political unrest. Reclaiming loss emphasizes the significance of representation. The figure of Sailor represents both specific loss of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka and human loss on the global stage. Higgins and Leps suggest that awareness occurs in a hybrid manner:
Through a series of dialogical encounters, a hybrid method of knowing emerges, which no one can fully claim, but which succeeds, uncannily, both in naming Sailor and apprehending him differently: not only as an individual “representative of race and age and place,’ [...] but also as one of [victims] across the world. (206)

In this practice of reading, Sailor is identified as an individual, but also representative of victims of political injustice that are refracted in other stories within the novel, including human losses in Guatemala and China. Here, Bakhtin’s discussion of dialectic is useful. He calls this the “inner dialectic quality of the sign” that comes out during social crises or revolutionary changes (Morris 55). The dominant political powers in Sri Lanka wish to erase any signs of unrest, but Anil’s act of uncovering, naming, and identifying Sailor destabilizes that regime. By naming Sailor, Anil invests him in the interplay of language, meaning, and the “thousands of living dialogic threads” that make him an “active participant in social dialogue” (Morris 76).

Recognizing Invisible Losses

While we focus on interpretations that underscore loss through a melancholy lens, we can recognize that there are particular kinds of recuperation that are desirable. Recuperating loss makes grief visible. Understanding that causes of these losses are due to systemic violence is part of the task of melancholic reading. Cheng’s interpretation of invisibility as a trope is helpful in understanding how we can read the text. She discusses Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, as a seminal text that
theorizes “invisibility as a trope for the melancholic incorporation of the self-as-loss . . .” (127) In a similar manner, the magnitude of loss in *Anil’s Ghost* is made invisible by the absence of evidence. The bodies of the dead have been hidden away, moved, and erased from history. Anil’s partner, Sarath, is an archaeologist who describes the scope of loss:

> Bodies turn up weekly now […] This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers . . . A couple of years ago people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There’s no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are. I am just an archaeologist. This pairing by your commission and the government was not my idea – a forensic pathologist, and archaeologist, odd pairing if you want my opinion.

(17)

The physical, spiritual, and psychological loss is overwhelming. Though bodies have been discovered, they are unrecognizable. The concept of invisibility is heightened by the absence of their identities. Melancholic reading helps us see how these losses represent more than the death of those individuals, but the exclusion of power and voice, which is signified “not as a presence but as invisibility” (Cheng 128).

Moreover, interpreting the specter of these racialized subjects works as a strategy to identify absence and loss. We can interpret the move to make the “invisible visible” as a recuperation. However, this recuperation should not be interpreted as mourning; instead, recuperation is another form of identifying the losses, the victims, and the perpetrators. Readers can examine the figure of Ananda as an agent
that retrieves identities. Anil and Sarath cannot identify Sailor solely on the methods of Western forensic science so they rely on the spiritual advice of Palipana and the artistry and skill of Ananda. Ondaatje invests us further into the journey, by enlisting the aid of a Sri Lankan artisan. The craftsman Ananda continues the rare tradition of reconstructing faces. Palipana describes him as one who spiritually grants vision to the dead:

The man I mentioned, the artist, there was tragedy in his life. Now he works in the gem pits, goes down into them four or five days a week. An arrack drinker I’ve heard. It is not safe to be with him underground. Maybe he’s still there. He was the craftsman who painted eyes – as his father and grandfather did. (108)

The reification of Sailor’s body makes the invisible visible. Ananda’s work in the gem mines contributes to the theme of uncovering valuable material, be it identity, history, or truth. Melancholic readers should approach Ananda as model for the unburial of wounds. The character Ananda repairs the wounds of invisibility. As readers, we must become aware of this strategy of delineation. The figure Ananda works to discover the identities of the dead so they can be mourned. But we must read this recreation of identity as a mere specter that sustains the vision of who and what has been lost. Readers recognize the problem of invisibility because it is impossible for Ananda to attempt this recovery for all the victims. This operates as a sign for the multiple unmourned figures in the text. Sarath describes the continuing disappearances:
We have seen so many heads stuck on poles here [...] These were blows to the hearts. There was only one thing worse. That was when a family member simply disappeared and there was no sighting or evidence of his existence or his death. In 1989, forty-six students attending school in the Ratnapura district and some of the staff who worked there disappeared . . . Ananda’s wife, Sirissa, disappeared at that time. (185)

The ghostly presence of these disappearing figures complicates the process of identification for the reader. We read this melancholically as a metaphor for studies of racial and minority grievance. We can ask students to find parallels between this horrific scenario and the struggle to see and recognize problems associated or disassociated with power and race.

I believe the recuperation of invisibility includes understanding how social problems are often connected to race, but those connections are not seen. Making connections to other texts invites students to examine this social problem. Ijeoma Olua’s book *So You Want to Talk about Race* is helpful in presenting students with rules and situations regarding meaningful conversations about race and power. Olua asserts that there are several situations for acknowledging that conversations or topics are about race, as opposed to ignoring the racial element. These situations include if a disproportionate number of people affected are people of color and if any person in the conversation believes that it is about race. Too often, in America we resort to “color blindness,” which I discussed in my earlier chapters. By providing students with excerpts from Olua’s book, we can discuss how discussions
of race are often made invisible and draw parallels to how figures and losses are rendered invisible in the novel. Olua provides basic rules for determining if an issue is about race. This helps us focus or refocus on racial issues rather than sweeping them aside and assuming issues are about something else, such as class or individuals. Olua presents three rules:

1. It is about race if a person of color thinks it is about race.
2. It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of color.
3. It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of color. (Olua 14-15)

These rules can help us avoid colorblindness. Olua attests that all human beings have racial identities, whether or not they are aware of them: “We are all products of a racialized society, and it affects everything we bring to our interactions” (15).

Teachers can present historical or current event scenarios that engage students in discussion of race. For example, students can discuss issues within the school, such as where students sit during lunch in the cafeteria and whether or not races are integrated and why.

Making race a visible part of discussions mirrors how we attempt to “see” Sailor’s face. We are trying to make something visible. But our reading of the novel must acknowledge that the cycle of mourning continues because full recovery has not been achieved. The depth of loss may be difficult to understand, but the attempt to identify continues with the reconstruction of Sailor’s face, a haunting specter. After the completion, Anil and Sarath gaze at Sailor’s face. They realize “It was not a
reconstruction of Sailor’s face they were looking at” (188). Here, we can acknowledge the importance to identify and personalize loss; however, we also recognize the impossibility of full recognition. Anil and Sarath are able to identify Sailor as Ruwan Kumura who was a toddy tapper (269). This work required him to walk on a tight rope between trees to harvest coconut wine sap. After a fall, Ruwan Kumara worked in a mine. He was later abducted and disappeared, supposedly because he was a rebel sympathizer. A few days after their discovery of the truth, Sarath disappears. I view this pattern as representative of America’s recognition of racialized loss. We can make connections between Sailor’s pattern of re-emergence and disappearance with our country’s vexed view of race. Students can examine to what extent America recognizes racism as a problem and to what extent that those discussions are buried. For example, students can examine various articles about building the border wall between the United States and Mexico and discuss to what extent this political act is motivated by racism. If teachers feel that students may be sensitive about sharing their political views, the teachers can provide various articles about the border wall for students to examine. Then students can focus on the arguments in the articles rather than sharing their political and racial views.

We can interpret Sailor’s haunting voice as a call to make racism visible. Sarath’s final actions give voice to Sailor. To protect Anil, Sarath leaves a message recorded on a tape which is placed inside Sailor’s ribs (284). Sarath requests that she erase his words from the tape. But she replays his voice over and over. Like Anil, readers are haunted by the victims of political violence.
Revisiting Lost Narratives

We study this novel as a narrative that reminds us how history has been buried, but as readers we can examine how to continue to grieve these losses. Furthermore, reading melancholically allows us to see that there is no monolithic authority on history. Through understanding the structure of the narrative, readers can see how the novel makes the absence of history present. The structure of the novel is elliptical; instead of a linear trajectory that brings us to a satisfying, complete closure, the novel rewinds to the past, and tunnels deeper into each personal story. This never-ending revisiting extends the process of mourning, which can be understood as a melancholic suspension. The elliptical framework of the novel's structure disrupts the notion of one official history and encourages the interrogation for lost histories. Readers transgress the boundaries of narrow truths through analysis of this melancholic suspension that lacks closure. The act of rereading sheds light on racial subjectivity. Kandice Chuh describes the construction of Asian American identity. This “knowledge is always only partial and situational, that it is constantly in need of revision and reinvention” (Chuh 150). We can interpret the character of Anil is only understood partially by other figures, American or Sri Lankan. In this way, her characterization mimics the construction of Asian American identity. Furthermore, students can examine the figure of Palipana as a singular authority on the past. The figure urges readers to erase the totalizing boundaries of truth and knowledge. Bhabha’s description of vision is helpful in understanding the idea of truth:
Despite appearances, the text of transparency inscribes a double vision: the field of the ‘true’ emerges as a visible sign of authority only after the regulatory and displacing division of the true and the false . . . such a bringing to light is a question of the provision of visibility as a capacity, a strategy, and agency. (157)

The character of Palipana illuminates limitation of official truths. The story of Palipana is an allegory. When the figure reports history that is supported by the nation, he is viewed as an authority. Once the figure reports different kinds of stories, he is labeled an impostor: “The moment he shifts his perspective and ‘imagines’ realities that history has suppressed, he becomes a traitor and impostor” (Kanaganayakam 48). Reading this figure’s story as allegory disrupts the notion of stable history. We understand that official histories and controlling narratives are supported or rejected. The rise and fall of this character illuminates this idea.

Palipana’s tale is of a respected ethnographer who becomes a fallen prophet. When Palipana’s translations served the nation, his position was secure; however, when he stepped beyond these legitimated truths, he was repudiated: “Palipana risks and loses his ability to speak with authority in order to tell transgressive, ‘unproveable’ truths” (Higgins and Leps 205). A simplistic reading would render Palipana as a mere fake; however, we should interpret his story as an allegory for the continual search for lost stories and lost voices. At first, the figure’s work was applauded at home and abroad until one his proteges voiced that there was “no real evidence for the existence of these texts. They were a fiction.” (81). We can examine the debate about historical truth in terms of power and authority. Melancholic reading
suggests that official truth is constructed and negotiated: "In realist texts, dogmatic truths about the nation and its people – about race, ethnicity, faith, and freedom – are produced and transmitted [...] In order to disentangle this skein of power-knowledge relations, Ondaatje’s text interrogates and complicates their claims. Only thus can the bearers of such demanding truths resist subjectification" (Higgins and Leps 207). We interpret the question of authority as a call for readers to continue to search for stories that express minority experiences. The story of Palipana can remind readers that “multiple narratives in the text destabilize the notion of a univocal narrative voice . . . truth is a matter of perspective . . .” (Kanaganayakam 48). In other words, we must find ways to incorporate the voices of the marginalized in our curriculum so that their truths can be heard rather than perpetuating a monolithic narrative of a dominant, white canon.

Conclusion

How do we respond to overwhelming loss? We can recover humanity by identifying losses and continuing to mourn. When we search and revive lost stories, we can investigate how minority figures are portrayed in narratives and what that reveals about racial constructivity. Again and again, the racial figures experience loss of equality, ideals, accessibility, and their lives. We can understand how the figure of Anil continues to mourn when she describes her grief:

[Anil] used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic [. . .] This was the
scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it. (Ondaatje 55-56)

Melancholic reading exemplifies the idea that “death, loss, was ‘unfinished.’” But we continue to query how racialized figures are portrayed in texts and how that helps us understand racial subjectivity and political terror in America and abroad. We must interpret the novel as an allegory for the unburial of minority experiences, histories, and losses. In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon questions man’s responsibility in responding to histories of racism, colonialism, and oppression. He concludes that he cannot be a prisoner of history, but must constantly question and confront. Fanon’s words speak to Ondaatje’s work: “In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself. I show solidarity with humanity provided I can go one step further [. . .] It is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (204, 206). We attempt to respond adequately to loss and unspeakable crimes. However, in prolonging interrogation, we can explore ways in which we can respond emotionally. Ricciardi spurs us to continue to remember and “to imagine new forms of mourning that permit negotiation between the subjective and intersubjective spheres of memory” (Ricciardi 13). My “new form of mourning” is melancholic reading, which persists in grieving social damage and psychic injury. Ondaatje articulates, “This experience was a gift to me because I didn’t want to write about a country, my country, and leave it as something solely dark and vicious. So, the stories portrayed allow some virtue, the beautiful and courageous to accompany the tragic and senseless. The end of the novel and the
small discoveries won are frail but real” ("Adventures in Skin Trade” Interview). We can counter irrevocable loss with continued reflection of those losses. Reading *Anil’s Ghost* through a melancholic prism urges us towards social justice because we interpret this as a narrative that demands a search for lost stories of ethnic subjects. We cannot forget the failure of civilization to respect humanity. Melancholic reading encourages us to see what has been made invisible: political terror and racial subjugation. When we deepen and refine our understanding of loss, we recognize the urgent need to recognize Asian Americans and all people of color in our journey towards social justice.
CODA

My life’s work has been dedicated to improving the lives of students through the study of literature and its power to impact individuals, society, and cultural values. When I began this project several years ago, our president was Barack Obama. At that time, I felt hopeful because it seemed our American society had achieved a sense of racial equity. During the course of my project, our country transitioned to a Trump administration. The rhetoric of hate, xenophobia, and racism visibly and materially affected our nation.

We must persist in our struggles to promote our democratic ideals. I believe our study of literature can help shape a more just world. We must continue to include voices of authors and literary figures that represent the multicultural make-up of our society. Melancholic reading practice can help us understand how to form a shared group consciousness about a history of oppression. We recognize how the history of minority oppression has been forgotten and we can resist that amnesia by opening discussions about race. Moreover, reading melancholically addresses exclusionary practices in education. I encourage teachers and administrators to expand their literary text selections to include voices of Asians and African Americans and develop critical pedagogies that address racial grief and grievances. This study can help mobilize students and teachers around active engagement that empowers people of color.

Through reading melancholically, we encourage students to analyze narratives and study how racialized figures continue to grieve losses. We should encourage examination of how race continues to overdetermine identity. Reading
melancholically encourages productive spaces to rethink racial injury. English departments should examine their curriculum to be more inclusive of authors and narratives about people of color. Effective curriculum design should address narrativization, linguistic and structural patterns and how these techniques shape perceptions of race. Teachers should disallow multicultural voices to be tokenized or merely aestheticized. Moreover, these narratives should aim to address the range and richness of experiences for people of color. Furthermore, teachers should implement critical multicultural approaches to pedagogy so students understand how narratives of race are constructed in empowering and disempowering ways.

My approach to teaching reinforces the aims of multicultural education through techniques that underscore critical thinking about identity, race, knowledge, and their construction. I encourage the inclusion of careful study of the culturally marginalized and disenfranchised in literature so we can examine different types of knowledge that have been legitimized. In the tradition of critical pedagogy, melancholic reading practice empowers students to question what is seen as truth. My reading techniques enable us to examine the causes of the grief and placelessness of minority figures that are denied equality. This approach teaches students to understand themselves as subjects of history in order to recognize the conditions of justice and injustice. When teachers create lessons that develop students’ abilities to examine racialized figures in literature, they can better understand how the institutions of education and literature impact perceptions of race. Ultimately, I hope teachers and students enhance their understanding of racial oppression and combat inequities.
Racism is rooted in false constructs of reality. We must deconstruct official histories and knowledges that have legitimated racist ideologies. Moreover, we are challenged to envision and develop more ethical educational practices. English departments should discuss the goals of critical multiculturalism and antiracist pedagogy. Effective critical multicultural reading can lead to more positive racial attitudes. Our schools can transform institutional practices to address systemic racism. In addition, schools should implement a critical multicultural approach that examines which narratives on race should be taught and how they are examined. Assimilationism is a disguise that subsumes differences of identity under the rubric of pluralism. We can teach students how to recognize systemic oppression and encourage liberating practices. English departments should re-examine how the texts we choose and how we teach may actually reinforce stereotypes of people of color, whose stories are merely ancillary to the dominant narrative of white figures. Instead, teachers should include texts and adopt praxis that empowers all students to engage in the study of multicultural polyphony rather than purport a monolithic narrative of white centrality. Literature is a particularly effective way to engage students with social issues and promote emancipatory ideals.

We remember the impact of the past on our present by teaching melancholic reading practices in language arts classrooms. We must teach students to recognize the traces of racial grief and grievances in order to invoke social change. Only then can identities be refigured and hopes for racial equity be realized.

We cannot forget the failures of American society to respect the humanity of people of color. Melancholic reading encourages us to see what has been made
invisible: political terror and racial subjugation. When we deepen and refine our understanding of racial loss, we see the urgent need to recognize the narratives of Asian Americans, African Americans, and all people of color in our journey towards social justice.
NOTES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva addresses the assumptions of post-racial society. Though we had an African American president and a black middle class exists, he argues that the majority of African Americans struggle economically. Bonilla-Silva compares “post-racial” to “color-blindness” suggesting that racism continues to create inequities, but the new attitudes towards race as individual bigotry merely hides a critical examination of hidden systemic racial problems.

2 Paula Moya rejects the claim that society should move past the focus on identity politics. She counters that identities continue to be politically and epistemically important and the group identity is still an organizational feature of our society. Her work Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles is grounded in a postpositivist realism that rethinks the idea of objectivity.

3 Lei and Grant further discuss how equal representation of people of color, females, and people with disabilities were included in a pluralistic fashion that was appeasing. In addition to images and supplementary curriculum units, the emergence of celebratory activities in schools such as “Multicultural Week” and “Black / Women’s / Asian History Month.” While these token attempts to include traditionally underrepresented groups can offer a spotlight to the diversity in our society, they are limited to a superficial approach that focus on food, clothing, or highlight some famous individuals.

4 Christine Sleeter provides a report on the value of ethnic studies for the National Council for the Teachers of English. Her overview describes how adapting multicultural texts and creating spaces to investigate race, ethnicity, and culture have improved the academic progress of all students.

5 Paula Moya’s work, The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism, addresses the concept of schemas (personal yet socially learned means of reading the world). Understanding schemas as acts of interpretation encourages racial literacy. She attests that readers can become aware of their own schemas and the schemas in texts. This is a means to combat oppression of consciousness.

6 Newfield and Gordon differentiate the terms “assimilation” and “assimilationism” in their article “Unfinished Business.” I am using the term assimilationism as defined by Newfield and Gordon who describe assimilation as a means pursued by immigrants to join the economic and political mainstream, from assimilationism, which is defined by requiring adherence to specific behaviors, the rejecting of racialized group consciousness, and the repudiation of cultural equity among groups
(80). For multicultural education to reach its potential, it must reject supremacist forms that are hidden in the guise of assimilationism.

7 Reading lists of the high school curriculum include the following examples: Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston, The Life of Pi by Yann Martel, The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston have been taught at Adlai E. Stevenson High School; How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents by Julia Alvarez and Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison are on the reading lists on the Reading lists for Whitney Young High School in Chicago; Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie and Of Beetles and Angels by Mawi Asgedom are listed on Hinsdale Central’s reading list. These reading lists, which include authors of color, are available on the schools’ websites.

8 “Blaming the Victim” is a concept that Bonilla-Silva describes as a common frame. In Chapter 2 of Racism without Racists he describes various frames for interpreting race. These frames serve to reinforce the status quo of white dominance and power. An indirect critique in color-blind racism, Bonilla-Silva describes how whites may interpret policies such as affirmative action as preferential treatment, which seems to undermine the ideal of equality.

9 Grant and Sleeter outline five major approaches to multicultural education. “Single Group Studies” is the focus on the history and contributions of particular groups whereas “Multicultural Education” is the approach that includes goals towards social

10 Sleeter’s suggestions are helpful, but remain broad such as including the use of Bloom’s Taxonomy to develop critical thinking skills. The hierarchy of thinking skills is helpful in designing units of study, but does not address particular aspects of study in reading lessons.

11 Bonilla-Silva establishes four frames that are used by whites to interpret information. This includes abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of race. Bonilla-Silva attests that these frames demonstrate how whites continue to promote racism but in indirect forms. In addition, the frames twist racial opinions to seem moral or like common sense. For instance, racial quotas are not discussed in terms of equal opportunity but preferential treatment for minorities, which challenges notions of fairness.

12 In Immigrant Acts, Lisa Lowe articulates how the history of immigration restricted and regulated the possibilities of Asian American’s settlement and expression. She lists the exclusion of the Chinese in 1882, of Asian Indians in 1917, of Koreans and Japanese in 1924, and of Philippine immigrants in 1934 as the means to control and racially mark Asians (5-8).
CHAPTER 2

13 According to Banks, many school and university practitioners primarily view multicultural education as curricular reform. This concept was the main focus of the multicultural movement when it first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. (Banks Cultural Diversity 4)

14 NAME acknowledges the various definitions of multicultural education and clarifies their own definition: “Multicultural education is a process that permeates all aspects of school practices, policies and organization as a means to ensure the highest levels of academic achievement for all students. It helps students develop a positive self-concept by providing knowledge about the histories, cultures, and contributions of diverse groups.” The organization works towards achieving equality through redistributing power and addresses issues of racism, sexism, classism, linguicism, ablism, ageism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia.

3 Illinois adopted the Common Core Standards. Each school district has implemented the standards as they interpret them.

16 According to the Common Core Development Process, leaders from 48 states including governors and state commissioners launched the standards. The development included teachers who provided feedback through national organizations such as the National Education Association.

17 The Relevant Common Core English Language Arts Standards are described here:

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10
By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

GRADES 11-12: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7
Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9
Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century
foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

18 NCTE, the National Council of the Teachers of English, has existed for over 100 years and has over 30,000 members in the United States and other countries.

19 Bryson’s work is a thorough study of the implementation of multiculturalism in four higher education U.S. English departments. She explores how multiculturalism lacks a clear definition and approach, which acknowledging that literature somehow operates as a vehicle for culture and values. Moreover, she critiques approaches to teaching multicultural literature that actually reduce conflict rather than engage students in debate and empowerment.

20 Jennifer Radden’s anthology, The Nature of Melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva, is an illuminating compilation of texts that examine what melancholy is. Notably, many of these texts posit that melancholy is an aspect of depression, loss, or individual quality.

21 Melanie Klein focuses on the depressive position as an extension of Freud’s insights. In “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” she articulates how mourning is a psychic reality and suggests that infantile neurosis is similar to melancholia, a type of depressive positive, which is a stage of child development.

22 I am using the term Asian American to describe people and characters that are part of American society and have mainly Asian roots. I will use the hyphenated version Asian-American with respect to those authors who prefer that form and the term Asian /American accordingly.

23 Goldberg examines the case of Trayvon Martin, a teenage African-American boy, who was shot to death by a neighborhood watch vigilante. Goldberg uses the tragedy of Trayvon Martin to highlight how discussions of systemic racism have been silenced.

24 Asians are often represented the model of assimilation to which other groups aspire and some Asian American texts are interpreted as models of assimilation, according to Palumbo-Liu in Asian/ American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier (399).

25 The Joy Luck Club received numerous accolades such as a nomination for the Los Angeles Times Book Award, status as a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, winner of the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Best Fiction, the Commonwealth Club Gold Award, and the American Library association Best Book for Young Adults Award. In addition, it was on The New York Times hardcover best-seller list for nine months and sold more than 4 million copies. Moreover, the novel has been translated into 25 languages and chapters from the novel appear in anthologies that are taught in high schools and universities. (Champion 23-24)
Morrison’s work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, discusses the Africanist presence in the fiction of canonical works. She exposes the parasitic nature of white freedom and individualism as dependent on the black population. Moreover, she addresses how blacks, in the literary imagination of American, white authors, served as embodiments of their own fears and desires. This work is helpful in shifting the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject, which is an important critical lens in my study.

Victor Bascara recovers the lost histories and cultural production of Asians in America who have contributed to the economic and cultural history of America, but have been denied access to the benefits of true citizenship. *Model Minority Imperialism* examines the practices of U.S. Imperialism that have become forgotten memories.

David Palumbo-Liu presents the case for the limited acceptance of Asian Americans in dominant American culture. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, he describes how Asian/Americans are depicted as “overachievers,” thus successful in some ways, but lacking in others such as social skill. Therefore, the limited acceptance is apparent as Asian/Americans achieve economic success but are still defined as “foreign.”

Lowe cites the orientalist racialization of Asians that were predominant in periods of domestic crisis that intersected with immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization of Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934.

Frank Chin criticizes Chinese American writers such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston for creating their own versions of Chinese mythology. His article provides excerpts of Chinese mythology and other stories.

According to Lee, the Mattel toy company “did not release an Asian Barbie doll in their 2000 fantasy collection of future female American president though they included a white, black, and Hispanic doll.” In addition, anti-Asian sentiment was expressed when Maya Lin won a nationwide contest to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Some veterans and citizens questioned the choice of an Asian-American woman to create the memorial.
CHAPTER 3

32 President Barack Obama signified unity in his first speech to a national audience by declaring that the country was not divided by racial categories: “There’s not a Black America or a White America or a Latino America or an Asian America, but the United States of America.” Tim Wise, in Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity. Wise argues that Obama was seen as disconnected from racial movements and unthreatening to whites who were turned off by identifiably black political struggles (Wise ii).

33 Christopher Newfield and Avery Gordon explore the varied goals and tenets of multiculturalism from the 1960s to the 1990s in “Multiculturalism’s Unfinished Business.” They examine how this political movement that focused on reorganizing the education of minority students has come to mean something else in the 1990s, or what is now referred to as the post-civil rights context.

34 Walter Benn Michaels critiques Phillip Roth’s novel The Plot Against America (2004). Michaels describes it as counter history with imagined anti-semitic events that didn’t occur in America. He satirizes identity politics (with respect to race and difference) focuses on imagined racial problems rather than real issues.

35 Trump’s Travel Ban that focused on seven Muslim majority countries was challenged by Federal Judges and raised a number of legal questions. The Travel Ban was eventually blocked by federal judges. (Kulish et al)

36 The crisis is evident in two major changes in American legislation: the loss of national support for Affirmative Action and the 2013 repeal of the Voting Rights Act. Affirmative Action is now dependent on state interpretation of minority needs. Similarly, the repeal of the Voting Rights Act, which supported minority voters in states, rests on the assumption that racism is over. The claim of a raceless America continues to deny real examination of guilt and blame. For example, the tragedy of Trayvon Martin’s murder has evoked significant differences in how blacks and whites narrativize the concept of post-racial America. Martin, a 17 year-old African-American boy visiting his father’s fiancée in a mostly white area in Florida, was shot to death by George Zimmerman, a white man on neighborhood watch. National responses to the tragedy elicited varied responses as to whether the incident was race-related or symptomatic of racial profiling in America.

37 David Theo Goldberg, in his article “When Race Disappears,” shares a recent Newsweek/Daily Beast national poll that reveals divisions in America’s racial experience. A majority of whites, 65%, believe there is racial equality between blacks and whites in the US, but only 16% of blacks claim to have achieved racial equality. Also, in a recent state of Mississippi poll, 21% of residents believe racial marriage should be illegal and 11% are unsure.
Published in 1987, both of these academic texts speak to concerns that a unified American identity was threatened by the diversification of culture. This included the "theat" posed by the inclusion of multicultural novels.

Harper Lee’s posthumous novel *Go Set a Watchman* was published in 2015. The novel is understood to be an earlier version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Lee never intended to be published. *Go Set a Watchman* portrays Atticus Finch as a racist who once attended KKK meetings. (Kakutani) While this version changes our understanding of Lee’s conception of Atticus Finch, many teachers at my school choose to ignore referencing this novel when teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Michael Omi’s work examines the fluid meaning of race in the United States. While calls to get “beyond race” have become popularized, racial awareness or consciousness ironically is viewed as racist.

The romantic vision of the south that is evidenced on vacation spots such as “plantations,” souveniers that the “South shall rise again,” and various historical sites. James Loewen's *Lies Across America: What our Historic Sites Get Wrong* delineates markers of history across the nation that celebrate people or things that didn’t happen.

Morrison responds to the focus on the Holocaust of World War II and the genocide of the Jews. Morrison insists that the history of African Americans cannot be forgotten. The inability to acknowledge slavery’s utter debasement of humanity may be related to competitive victimization. The current trend to examine America’s guilt in different historical genocides offers an understanding of such denial. In his work, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of DeColonization*, Michael Rothberg posits, “To be sure, the truths of memory are often in tension with the truths of history” and such truths “produce insight about individual and collective processes of meaning-making” (14). Thus, the recursive narratology of the novel demands a reflection on historical injury of the middle passage. While some scholars adamantly defend the uniqueness of Holocaust studies as an attempt to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, Rothberg suggests that the Holocaust serves as a “screen memory” – borrowing from Freud’s terminology. In this sense, one traumatic event “covers up” other traumatic events. The book demonstrates that cross-referencing between the Holocaust and colonialisms reveals many moments of shared consciousness in marginalized texts. Ultimately, Rothberg’s trajectory demands a more just future for memory where acts of empathy and solidarity enable the possibility for constructs of justice and the remaking of political space.

Ross Chambers examines the melancholic text as a mode of opposition during the period of early French Modernism. Rather than openly engaging politically, he claims that the writers could “bear witness against a social system” through their
oppositional stance. Chambers asserts, “Melancholy is not a ‘message’ to receive but a text to interpret” (34).

44 Paulo Freire’s text that argues for the political advocacy of the illiterate and impoverished people of Brazil continues to be read in philosophy of education courses today. The work critiques the “banking concept of education” that creates passivity and reinforces oppression. He argues that education should empower all students to become dialogic thinkers with agency.

CHAPTER 4

45 Orientalism refers to the work of Edward Said who argued that the Orient and images of mysteriousness, submissiveness, and fear were created by the Occident in order to justify colonialism. The concept of the Orient was “made” in opposition to the West. Thus, Europeans and their ideas were promoted as logical and open in contrast to the inscrutable and threatening Oriental culture.

46 Illinois public schools report racial, language, and economic figures each year through the Illinois Report Card, a public document.

47 Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor extend the analogy of literature as “windows or mirrors” from Rudine Sims Bishop’s work “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors” that originally appeared in Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom Volume 6, Number 3, Summer 1990. This metaphor is not uncommon in references to expanding the canon to include multicultural literature, as I have observed in multiple conversations and conferences with educators over the years.

48 Tensions between the majority Sinhalese population and the minority Tamil population (seen as favored by the British). This civil war has led to mass deaths among soldiers and civilians. The Sri Lankan military and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a terrorist group) have fought for three decades and have been accused by international watchdogs of human atrocities including “abduction, conscription, and the use of child soldiers” (Bajoria).

49 The Tamil communities had been brought from southern India by the British in order to provide labour for the tea plantations. However, Sri Lanka made the Sinhalese the official national language in 1956 with the Sinhala Language Act, which furthered the tension with Tamils. Though violence between the two groups has existed since then, a great eruption occurred in 1983 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam attacks and Sinhalese counterattacks (Ratti 125-126)

50 The Buddhist speakers of Sinhala constitute about 70% of the population while the Hindu, Tamil-speaking minority makes up about 18%. In 1972, a decision
changed entrance examinations scores to favor students from rural or outer districts reduced the number of Tamils admitted to university. In 1982, Newly Elected Sinhala United National Party government made political changes that resulted in disproportionate representation, which maintained the two-thirds majority control. In July 1983, The Tamil Tiger guerillas killed 13 Sinhalese members of the Sri Lankan army. At a mass funeral for the victims in Colombo, some 10,000 mourners rioted, which led to similar violence in the country. By the end of that week, some 1000 Tamil people were dead and another 100,000 to 200,000 were left homeless. Between 1987 and 1990, the Indian government deployed about 100,000 soldiers in Sri Lanka to “maintain peace,” which resulted in “internationalizing the civil war.” (Scanlan 304-305)

51 Melanie Kelin (1882-1960) was an influential and controversial thinker who extended Freudian insights. Klein was interested in the infant interplay between love and hate, which was felt in relation to the infant’s “objects.” She postulated that adults relive these childhood positions on loss. (Radden 297-298)

52 Ondaatje avoids a strong political commentary on these crimes. He actually stayed away from Sri Lanka except for personal visits and assists writers by setting up a fund (from his Booker Prize money) for the best writer in the country (Kanaganayakam 47) Though Ondaatje, born in Sri Lanka and of Tamil background, has been criticized because the novel fails to take a clear political stance, he has stated he was not interested in taking sides. Instead, he problematizes the political issues in new ways: through multiple narratives that intersect and signal a new consciousness.

53 United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, has urged the Sri Lankan government to fulfill its obligation towards social justice. He laments the long-suffering of the Sri Lankan people. Despite the resolutions made in 2015, two years later, little progress had been made. (“Sri Lanka: 2 Years On, Scant Progress on UN Resolution)

54 According to the Human Rights Watch, Sri Lanka has begun addressing demands for accountability and reconciliation due to its 27-year war that ended in 2009. Progress has been slow, which casts doubt upon the restoration of justice. (“Sri Lanka” Human Rights Watch 2018)

55 The character of Anil reflects Ondaatje’s state of unbelonging. He has been critiqued for not being Western enough to “acknowledge his family’s complicity in the Ceylonese colonial exploitation, and second, in not being non-Western and Other enough in acknowledging his own ethnic background” (Bolton 223). As a Canadian immigrant from Sri Lanka with Dutch and Tamil ethnic roots, Ondaatje poses interesting questions about representations of identity.
Frank Wu references a May 2001 major study that included national surveys and focus groups. The study was sponsored by the Committee of 100. The committee hired independent firms that had done some work for the Anti-Defamation League. The results indicated that prejudice against Asian Americans persisted. Surveys indicated that there were patterns of other Americans feeling threatened by or disliking Asian Americans. The studies also revealed that other Americans balked at the idea of an Asian American president or CEO or boss (moreso than they balked at the notion of someone African American, Jewish, or female in those roles.)

I was trained as a facilitator for diversity workshops. We have used A World of Difference program approaches and materials at Stevenson High School for several years. This program was created by the Anti-Defamation League (https://www.adl.org/)

Courageous Conversations is a protocol for effectively engaging and sustaining dialogue about race and equity. The Pacific Educational Group, founded by Glen Singleton in 1992, created a Framework for Systemic Racial Equity Transformation. (https://courageousconversation.com/about/)


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