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An intersectional comparison of female agency in Toni Morrison's Sula and Wang Anyi's Song of Everlasting Sorrow

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AN INTERSECTIONAL COMPARISON OF FEMALE AGENCY IN TONI
MORRISON'S *SULA* AND WANG ANYI'S *SONG OF EVERLASTING*

SORROW

by

JORDAN LYNTON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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Abstract

The opportunities created by the end of the Mao Era and legislature promoting the rights of African Americans and women in the mid-twentieth century allowed women of both cultures to break further into the literary scene and negotiate their own sense of agency through their work. Although Western feminism also grew rapidly throughout this period, its ethnocentric centering of gender prevented it from being a reliable lens with which to analyze the work of Chinese and African American women who experienced issues of race, class, and gender simultaneously. This caused Western feminists to evaluate the work of Chinese and African American women from a perspective of privilege and misrepresented the cultural, social, and political influences that impacted their agency. Thus, this paper seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the intersectional paradigm as a comparative lens with which to analyze the construction of female characters in mid-twentieth century Chinese and African American fiction in place of a Western feminist lens. To this effect, it will apply the intersectional lens to Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (2008) specifically, to determine how this research paradigm can be used to reveal the identities the female protagonists construct and their opportunities for agency. This paper hopes to increase discourse on the applications of intersectionality in literature as a tool for better understanding the literature of women of color.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The mid-twentieth century was a period ripe with political and social change in both China and the United States. 1976 marked the end of the Mao Era, which signified a change to the Chinese government's stringent control of art and literature and brought "about dramatic improvements in the quality and quantity of PRC (People's Republic of China) fiction" (Mair 737). In the United States, "the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 broke once and for all the Jim Crow legacy...and largely ended the overt and legally sanctioned forms of discrimination against Blacks," indicating a shift toward equality (Grofman 1). Although women had published prior to these historic events, the political and social changes during this time allowed women of both cultures to break further into the literary scene, and to not only narrate their portion of history, but negotiate their own sense of agency within their respective communities.

However, these women often found that the Western paradigms of feminism were not capable of analyzing their experiences as Chinese and Black women because they advanced an ethnocentric form of feminism. The intersectional paradigm, created by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, proposes a lens that can rectify these issues of misrepresentation felt by Chinese women and African American women under the current restrictions of Western feminism. It purports to create a space for women to be examined within their intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and takes into consideration historical and cultural context. In extracting these areas of oppression, the intersectional paradigm has the potential to facilitate comparative studies between various different cultures and peoples through examining what conversations occur at the center of these intersections. Thus, this thesis seeks to apply the intersectional lens to the

Chinese novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, and the African American novel *Sula* in order to access the intersectional paradigm's effectiveness as a cross cultural comparative tool for literary studies.

In order to understand the potential of the intersectional lens, one must first understand the history of Western feminism and the issues within it that the intersectional paradigm intends to rectify. During the mid-twentieth century American Feminism was in its second wave. While the goal of the first wave of feminism was women's suffrage (achieved by the passage of the nineteenth amendment allowing women the right to vote in all states), the second wave of feminism focused on women's rights to equal pay, the end of discrimination in the work place, and reproductive rights (Freedman 4). The catalyst for this wave of feminism was a book called *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* by French author Simone de Beauvoir. In this book Beauvoir discusses women's oppression as a social rather than biological construct. She examines the marginalization of women in society, often comparing it to the socially constructed discriminatory practices enacted by the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, and ones felt by the Black community in America (Nicholson 15).

The realization of their oppression as a singularly social construct pushed women to fight for rights and opportunities equal to those of men. There were many additions to legislation that protected women's rights including the Equal Pay Act (1963), the Civil Rights Act (1963), and the Executive Order 11375, also known as Affirmative Action (1965) assuring that employers give all people equal opportunity for employment regardless of gender, race, and religion (Walter 190). The National Organization for Women (NOW) was created to ensure political representation for women and push legislation for women's equality (Walter 190). This period

also produced the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade*, which extended the constitutional right to privacy to allow women the freedom to choose their own reproductive options, including abortion (Walter 193- 194).

Feminist literary theories that came out of this era of change were pluralistic in the sense that they drew from many sources including Marxism, psychoanalysis and semiotics, with the goal of highlighting “the subordination of women” (Felski 13). Specifically Marxism allowed the second wave feminists in the Women’s Liberation Movement that “emerged out of the New Left” in the 1960’s to talk about current societal issues, while still being able to incorporate change as the feminist movement grew (Nicholson 2). However, these feminists struggled to redefine this Marxist approach so that it also encompassed women-centered needs, such as nurturing, while still identifying their sources of oppression (Nicholson 2). In the end these theorists split into two groups: those who thought that women and men were fundamentally different (gynocentric feminism), and those who thought that men and women were essentially the same (Nicholson 3). Although gynocentric feminists were cognizant of the struggles of minorities (women of color, lesbians, and working women) their fundamental belief that all women were conceptually the same and all men were completely different in purpose led them to examine difference through a woman-centered lens. This perspective came from a center of privilege, where gender was the only criterion for discrimination. Therefore, White feminist theorists failed to confront the issues of class, race and sexuality, which for Black women were inexplicably interconnected sources of discrimination (Nicholson 4).

While this was most definitely a zenith for feminism, the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans was also at its peak. And although it seems that Black women would have

had the most to gain from the simultaneous achievements of the feminist and Civil Rights Movements, their needs as members of both groups were often overlooked. The book, so aptly titled *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men but Some of Us are Brave* (1982), sums up the struggle of Black women who felt they were not represented by either group. Black members of the feminist movement felt as if they were seen as tokens (statistic representations of multiculturalism without actual input or clout) and that they were “excluded from a theory that elevated gender at the expense of race or class identity,” while in the civil rights and Black power organizations, many women were demeaned as sexual objects (Freedman 89-90). In their “Black Feminist Statement” (1974), the Combahee River Collective (a Black feminist group) called for a need to “develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of White women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and White men” (Nicholson 64).

The core of this separation lay in understanding Black women’s identity. While the Black power movement addressed their needs as African Americans and the feminist movement addressed them as women, neither considered that for Black women these sources of discrimination occur simultaneously and are inseparable. Therefore the women-centered feminist paradigm could not fulfill the African American woman’s needs for representation because by placing gender at the focus of their struggle, they relegated the equally important issues of race and class to a secondary status.

Post- Mao Chinese women faced a similar issue of misrepresentation in Western feminism (known in China as *Nüquanzhuyi*). In particular, they have fought against the White feminist skew of Western feminism as women’s rights in China evolved differently than they did in the United States. Although women in the United States continued to fight tirelessly for equal

opportunity in the work force and to be treated equally to men, Chinese women viewed this concept as a restriction rather than a liberty. The “first wave” of Chinese feminism was actually spearheaded by male scholars who fought for women’s liberation as a part of the national agenda during the turn of the 1900’s (Wang 338). These men were so vehement in their petitioning for women’s’ rights that they were often considered more passionate than the Chinese women writers themselves (Wang 338). However, this perception may have been misguided because while the male scholars petitioned for a “paternalistic appropriation of feminism” which was centered in a male perception of what freedom, access, and success were, Chinese female feminists focused more on *funtü wentu* (the woman question), which included insights on the female experience (Wang 338). After the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (a revolution led by students against the Chinese resignation to Japan, that transformed China as a whole), Chinese women began to break traditional gender roles by becoming political activists and entering into the work force (Wang 392-394).

During the Mao Era (1949-76) this male-centered ideal of what women should want/be continued to evolve. Women were constitutionally given the rights and opportunity for equal pay and education. These women, known as *iron girls*, were encouraged to work in the factories alongside men and were expected to be able to handle the same amounts of labor (Wu 409). Women were also treated equally in academia and were instilled with confidence in their intellectual abilities. However, the price of this “equality” was that these Chinese *iron girls* were also expected to eradicate all evidence of femininity (equated with weakness) and individuality to become like men. All “female-specific apparel – skirts, dresses, high heels, handbags, makeup were seen as symbols of the *petit bourgeois* [hated upper class]” and women instead

donned desexualizing military uniforms (Wu 409). Instead of struggling to be treated equal to men, Chinese women strove to be respected as women, and to be able to express their individuality.

The Chinese women authors know that they cannot separate their experiences as women from their struggles as Chinese citizens. Although they seek to reclaim the ability to explore what they want as women (and not as women expected to act like men) that they lost during the Mao Era, they still want to be involved in the discourse about the sociopolitical issues they faced during the Cultural Revolution. The opportunity for this discourse is very important as the persecution of scholars and burning of academic texts that was commonplace throughout the Cultural Revolution restricted many intellectuals from being able to transcribe their experiences and opinions.

Thus, much of the post- Mao women's literature is centered on both womanhood and relationships. Many post-Mao women writers have also forayed into the genre of *sawen*, or essay. Although it is traditionally a male dominated genre, *sawen's* "expressive, metaphorical, and poetic characteristics" allow women the freedom to talk about their personal experiences (both as Chinese citizens and as women) without being held back by restrictive conventions (Wu 411).

Though African American and Chinese women are perceived as very different, they have many shared experiences of marginalization. In the struggle to be understood within their cultural and historical frameworks as well as their simultaneous experiences of oppressions in class and gender, Chinese authors have found compatriots in African American women authors. In an interview, Chinese author Wang Anyi chose Toni Morrison as the foreign author that she

could “best relate to” (Wu 406). Wang explained saying, “Her [Morrison’s] feminism is most appealing to me for she accounts not only gender but also race and class” (Wu 406). In her essay “Engaging *Nüquanzhuyi*: The Making of a Chinese Feminist Rhetoric” Bo Wang illuminates this issue further when she states that “ even when there is affinity between certain Western literary concepts and Chinese practices, a microlevel comparison that fails to situate the text within its own cultural and historical contexts may lead to distorted interpretations of the author’s intended meaning, falling back on Eurocentric practices” an issue that Black feminists have shared regarding the White skew of Western feminism (Wang 386).

Thus, the quest for a research paradigm that envelops all of their needs is a common thread for African American and Chinese scholars. In order to re-appropriate feminism so that it applied to all women, Black scholars searched for a perspective that would include race, class, and gender. They found that it was impossible to divide these categories or compound them into one theory. Instead they realized to be really understood, they must be examined as a sum of their parts including: race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. This approach was called the intersectional approach.

Leslie McCall defines the intersectional approach as a point when “individuals usually share the characteristics of only one group or dimension of each category defining their social position. The intersection of identities takes place through the articulation of a single dimension of each category ...[and] the ‘multiple’ in these intersectional analyses refers not to dimensions within categories but to dimensions across categories” (McCall 56). Intersectionality allows marginalized peoples to have their agency understood within the completeness of their

experience by examining their many intersections (class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and public policy).

Many literary theorists of color have adopted or participated in the creation of this intersectional paradigm that they hoped would “carve out an intellectual borderland in which the interconnections of race, class, and gender, could be attended to” (Donadey 24). Patricia Hill Collins talks about the “matrix of domination” that organizes the systems of oppression that in turn affects women of color (Collins 18). In *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa also alludes to the intersections of oppression when she speaks of her struggles as a *mestiza* (or someone from a “mixed” background). To this effect she says:

As a *mestizo* I have no country, my homeland casts me out... As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me... I am cultureless because as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo- Hispanics and Anglos (Anzaldúa 80-81)

Women of color of all backgrounds seek to be understood within their own historical and cultural contexts, as well as how the different parts of their identities (the intersections) work together to restrict or give access. After breaking down these intersections, we can then find areas of commonality between women based on common threads in oppression or common experiences without losing the integrity of their story. Because of this, the intersectional approach also holds the possibility to facilitate cross-cultural comparative analysis because it forces readers to understand texts within their cultural context and then begin to compare intersections within that framework of understanding.

Thus, my research question is: as a research method, how effective is intersectionality as

a bridge of comparative feminist analysis across socio-cultural divides? In the pursuit of this question I will examine Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* with an intersectional lens in order to determine the protagonists' pursuit of agency and whether they achieved it. This examination will delve into the concept of agency and how women in both the African American community as well as the Chinese community define and negotiate personal agency. I have chosen these two novels as their protagonists are similar in that they are two women from low socio-economic backgrounds who experience opportunities for expansion and the achievement of agency (Sula travels and goes to college, and Wang Qiyao receives money from a lover and experiences upper class life). Both of these novels also take place during the early to mid twentieth century, which was an era of great social and economic change in both China and the United States. Toni Morrison and Wang Anyi have taken strides to making sure their novels are not only beautiful narratives, but also function as political and social commentary. In the book *Reading Toni Morrison*, Rachel Lister says, "For Morrison, the function of the novel is... to illuminate and engage with social and cultural conflicts and do justice to their complexities" (Lister 13). Wang has been charged with the same as an author who has *youhuan yishi* ("anxiety consciousness") or one who has a compulsion to "utilize their work to illuminate a point or make a statement in the hopes of enlightening their fellow countrymen, a responsibility they take seriously out of a patriotic spirit of loyalty to their country" (Schneider 27-28).

The intersections I will be examining will be those of gender, class (which incorporates race issues in America, and strict class divides in China), and public policy in order to ascertain the protagonists' struggle towards agency.

My thesis will be structured as thus: Chapter One will be an overview of the political and social movements that affected the feminism and influenced women's literature in each country during the time period of each novel. It will also serve as an introduction to my research question. Chapter Two will present the research method of intersectionality. Chapter Three will analyze the novel *Sula* (1973) through an intersectional lens to determine what opportunities for agency the protagonist Sula has, and whether she achieves agency. Chapter Four will employ this same pattern to examine Wang Qiyao in the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (2008). Although this novel was originally published in Chinese in 1995, it chronicles the life of protagonist Wang Qiyao from the 1940's to the 1980's, which means that it encapsulates the time period of this study. Chapter Five is the conclusion, in which I will ascertain if the characters achieved agency and if the intersectional lens is effective as a bridge of comparative feminist analysis across socio-cultural divides.

Chapter 2: Framing Intersectionality

Intersectionality in its most simplistic form is a paradigm that requires the examination of how various structures of power (in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, culture, history, public policy, etc.) affect an individual simultaneously and at any given point in time. The intersectional paradigm implores researchers to be aware of the intersections (or crossing points) of these various aspects of power (and conversely marginalization) within the hierarchies of social systems, in order to reveal the actual abilities that an individual has for choice and agency versus the access that privileged peoples are afforded (Dill and Zambrana 56-57).

Intersectionality reveals that for individuals marginalized at many points (women of color, gay and lesbian peoples), a blind-sighted appraisal of one form of oppression cannot come close to exposing the actual restrictions they experience, and that these experiences then compound creating more restriction. In *Black Feminist Thought*, theorist Patricia Hill Collins explains that intersectionality “remind[s] us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (18).

Unlike other theories, such as feminism and Marxism, the historical roots of intersectionality are much harder to pin down. Before the term intersectionality was even coined, Black feminists and other women of color were searching for a theoretical framework that would encapsulate the complexities of their experiences. One of the foremost transcriptions of this struggle is seen in the “Black Feminist Statement” released by the Combahee River Collective in 1974. In their manifesto, the Combahee River Collective (a group of Black, lesbian feminists) elucidate the struggles of Black women thus far in finding representation on a political and

theoretical scale. They talk about the isolation they feel being on the bottom of all political agendas and even go as far to propose that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression “ (Combahee River Collective 67). This feeling of isolation was seconded in the brilliantly titled Black feminist anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men but Some of Us are Brave* (1982). In the first chapter Michele Wallace chronicles her experience as a part of this schism when she says, “It took me three years to fully understand that ...the countless speeches that all began ‘the Black man...’ did not include me” (Wallace 6).

In their manifesto the Combahee River Collective further outline many of the challenges that intersectionality would one day address. More specifically, they present the idea of simultaneous oppression saying that they “often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (Combahee River Collective 65). Although the framework of intersectionality was being organized by this discourse, it was not until 1989 that UCLA legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw created the term thereby exposing the ways that women of color were being marginalized by antiracist and feminist policies in legal theory (Crenshaw 57). In her paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” she proposes that women of color are “theoretically erased” by the antiracist and feminist theories and their attempts to prioritize race and womanism respectively (Crenshaw 27).

In “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” Crenshaw applies the intersectional approach to policies regarding violence against women. In one example Crenshaw explains a situation in which the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) refused to release domestic violence statistics that would illuminate the rates of domestic violence by racial groups. In their justification of this refusal the LAPD claimed that both feminists and minority groups had petitioned against the release of these statistics. The feminist domestic violence activists claimed that the release of these statistics would delineate domestic violence as primarily a minority issue while the minority antiracist groups feared that statistics showing domestic violence in minority areas would continue stereotypes that Black and Hispanic communities were violent (Crenshaw 1252-1253). Unfortunately, in their defense of their respective political issues each party ignored the repercussions of their silencing on the women of color who fell between the jurisdictions of both parties. By privileging one area of race, gender, class, or sexuality over another, the powers that be ignore those who fall between their intersections and create policies that are not capable of legitimately helping women of color. It is this injustice that intersectionality purports to reveal.

Because of its ability to examine individuals from virtually all walks of life and reveal injustice, intersectionality has been readily accepted into many fields, disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and political groupings including: philosophy, social sciences, humanities, economy, law, feminism, queer studies, disability studies, and many more outside of Black feminism (Davis 68). Anne Donadey stresses the importance of understanding the ways theory is applied in multiple disciplines in her article “Overlapping and Interlocking Frames for Humanities Literary Studies: Assia Djebar, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Gloria Anzaldúa,” saying “the

interdisciplinary and comparative areas where they [fields of knowledge] meet and are brought together can be viewed as borderland zones in which new knowledge is created” (Donadey 24). Thus it is important to understand the many applications of intersectionality in order to expose more diverse perceptions and applications of the theory.

In *Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice*, Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana propose case studies of situations where the intersectional lens has been applied to other disciplines and cultures. In one such study they talk about the duality of “Whiteness” and White privilege as it applies to poor White peoples living in rural Appalachian communities and the stigma of social stereotypes. The stereotype at the center of this discourse is that all of the poor peoples living in these homogeneously White rural areas are “White trash,” a prejudicial term that regards all poor Whites as incestuous, violent, having substance abuse problems, lazy and stupid. The negative stigmatization of poor Whites provides a foil to the Eurocentric prevailing thought that all White people are better, more powerful, and privileged, which leads to a generalization that poor Whites who are not able to take advantage of this privilege are *more* responsible for their own poverty and are outliers in the system. However, this ignores the interesections of marginalization that these Appalachian people face.

Due to the isolation of their rural communities, Appalachian citizens encounter many social and economic restrictions including, less access to “childcare, transportation, healthcare and housing,” and fewer job opportunities (Dill and Zambrana 61). These issues form a “long history of high unemployment and persistent, severe poverty” that are “equal to, or worse than, that in urban areas” leading for many to be on welfare (Dill and Zambrana 60). The high

numbers of welfare dependents in turn put caseworkers and employers into a unique position of power as the gatekeepers for the resources that most of the population depends on.

Unfortunately, although the employers and case workers are aware of the economic restraints, lack of job opportunities, and lack of “social /human capital to facilitate” job growth, they continue to .

propagate the idea that these people’s restrictions are as equally (or even more so) due to their own laziness rather than the lack of opportunity in their communities. This in turn furthers the stereotypes of a “culture of poverty,” or the idea that the community is steeped in a culture of laziness and lack of personal work ethic that is passed on from generation to generation (Dill and Zambrana 61-63).

By breaking this issue into its intersections of class (employers, welfare agency v. Appalachian people), gender (the issues that Appalachian women face as far as finding childcare, etc), and race (as it pertains to White people being assumed to be successful), Dill and Zambrana expose the false culture of poverty and welfare that further simplifies the pervasive issues of poverty in America. By relegating the Appalachian peoples to a class of outlying Whites steeped in a culture of poverty instead of legitimately adding the issues of these Appalachian peoples to poverty and class discourse we run the risk of stereotyping people in the welfare system as being only minorities. However, if one were to instead add the issues of the Appalachian people to poverty discourse, policy makers would be forced to change the face of poverty from one of primarily racial minorities, to a multicultural issue. In doing so they would have to re-examine the intersections of class, gender, race, historical issues, social locations, and sexual orientation, etc. that contribute to the pervasive issues of poverty, and create policies that better address the

underlying issues of poverty. By centering this intersectional study around “Whiteness” as a race, Dill and Zambrana show the versatility of the intersectional approach as a paradigm.

Although intersectionality has been excitedly accepted by many disciplines, many still question how exactly to apply the intersectional approach. In itself the paradigm is generally ambiguous and leaves the researcher to determine which intersections are even there to be examined. However, some claim that intersectionality’s vague nature is one of the reasons for its success as it can be “drawn upon in nearly any context of inquiry... yet also allow[s] endless constellations of intersecting lines of difference to be explored” (Davis 77).

In her article “The Complexity of Intersectionality” Leslie McCall proposes three approaches to intersectionality: the anticategorical complexity, the intercategorical complexity, and the intracategorical complexity. The anticategorical complexity rejects social constructs (as they try to force complex social situations into boxes) and calls for a deconstruction of these constructs in order to deconstruct the inequality itself (McCall 1776- 1777). On the other hand, the intercategorical complexity uses the existing analytical and social constructed categories to create intersections, and the intracategorical complexity is a mixture of the two as it augments existent social categories in order to highlight intersections that may be traditionally overlooked (McCall 1773-1774). For this examination I will be using the intercategorical complexity by examining the existing social constructs of gender, class, and race as they are centered through the frameworks of location and public policy to expose how they affect agency. Agency in this examination will be defined as the tools and opportunity that the protagonist has to act and create her own ideal. Although I acknowledge that the issues of marginalization that African American and Chinese women faced during the mid-twentieth century (and even now) are much more

complex than the three constructs listed, I will use these primary categories as the bridge to my comparative research.

As Crenshaw, Dill, and Zambrana propose, the intersections of class, race, gender, and public policy are exceedingly intertwined. Communities are often segregated by class (lower class versus upper class), which is often tied to race as minorities are afforded fewer opportunities for success due to public policies that determine access to resources. Because of the strict delineations of location in *Sula* and *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, and the long time spans in each novel, both novels present perfect case studies to show how the stable factors of location and transecting points of public policy (dates of legislation) affect class, gender, and race.

Dr. Gill Valentine discusses the importance of location (or space) as an addition to the intersection paradigm in her article “Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography.” In her examination of intersectionality, Valentine utilizes Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West’s definition of intersections as a “fluid coming together, of contingencies and discontinuities, clashes and neutralizations, in which positions, identities and differences are made and unmade, claimed and rejected” in order to propose that by matching this fluid idea of intersectionality with the feminist geographical concept of space we can create a better way of systematically tracking and understanding intersections (Valentine 13-14). Valentine explains the application of this system in a case study. This case study follows the evolution of Jeannette, a young deaf woman, and proves that her fluctuating sources of oppression are in direct relation to her changing physical, mental and social locations.

While attending a homogenously deaf school, Jeanette grew her identity as a deaf woman and was able to develop a sense of belonging as a part of the majority within the deaf community. However, after graduating she began to work at a company that was homogenously hearing and felt ostracized and misunderstood by her coworkers who did not understand her diverse needs as a deaf woman (Valentine 17). Simultaneously, she was in an abusive marriage with a deaf man who would not allow her to sign, or attend deaf club meetings and so she became completely isolated from the deaf community (Valentine 16). After she escaped from her marriage, Jeanette began to work in a factory which hired many deaf workers. Although the level of work at the factory was below her skill level, she was happy with the camaraderie she felt with her coworkers, whom she found to be more approachable. Unfortunately, they did not share her work ethic and she began to “disidentify” with her deaf coworkers (Valentine 17-18). In another situation Jeanette began a lesbian relationship with another deaf woman in her deaf club and was forced out due to homophobia within the club (Valentine 16).

As seen in these examples, the relationships of Jeanette’s intersections as a White, deaf, (and later) lesbian woman changed dramatically due to her social and physical locations. While at her first job she felt ostracized because of a lack of understanding and fellow deaf coworkers while in her second job she consciously disassociated herself with her deaf coworkers because she did not share their work ethic. Similarly, she faced three levels of association (or lack thereof) with the deaf community due to her location: accepting while in a deaf school, isolated in her marriage, and rejected after coming out as a lesbian. Therefore, (as Valentine proposed) by adding the feminist geographic concept of space (referred to throughout this piece as location)

we are able to anchor down the fluid concept of intersectionality and view intersections within the context of their location.

The addition of location to the intersectional paradigm is especially useful in the examination of *Sula* and *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* as location is structurally important in both novels. Location in Toni Morrison's *Sula* works twofold in that it offers both stability throughout the novel as well as a physical manifestation of the changes in racial segregation and power structures that occur from slavery to the peak of the Civil Rights movement in 1965. By locating these changes in policy and their subsequent effects on our protagonist, Sula, and her community, we can determine how this public policy affected the intersections of race, gender, and class in *Sula* and consequently either allowed or restricted Sula's attempts at personal agency. Similarly, by analyzing points where the characters move locations (e.g. from the Bottom to Medallion) and comparing how public policy affected them and their status in the Bottom, we reveal a more complete picture of the actual scope of their agency.

Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* follows a similar structure in that the novel centers in the city of Shanghai, effectively making it a character itself. In the first chapter Wang takes the time to leisurely describe the *longtang* (lower class neighborhoods in alleys) in Shanghai (Wang 3). Throughout the novel we see that although there are few illustrations of race (everyone in the novel is assumed to be Han Chinese and there are no mentions of ethnic minorities), class structure in China is just as rigid and restricting. Each level of the class hierarchy has strict regulations that restrict or allow action due to not only public policy but also inborn cultural roles and hierarchies. As the protagonist Wang Qiyao moves through Shanghai, we catch a glimpse of how class affects her opportunities for agency while each change in

setting simultaneously reveals how her gender restricts her ability to move through these social stratospheres.

Although many may assume that Sula and Wang Qiyao may be polar opposites due to their difference in nationality, language, and culture, examining the importance of public policy and location in both novels uncovers similarities in structure and provides for the beginnings of a conversation between these two protagonists. Both Wang Qiyao and Sula share the commonality that they are fluid characters that attempt to move throughout a fixed system of gender and class roles dictated by public policy in order to attain their agency. Thus, I will be centering my intersectional examinations on how the intersections of class, and gender, public policy and location restrictions affect the protagonists' ability to achieve agency.

The intersectional approach forces the reader to dig deeper and understand the true reasons for a protagonist's choice by considering the social, political, cultural, and historical restrictions he/she might face. However, by uncovering the deeper motivations for action we catch glimpses of the ways that we are all similar. Thus by using the intersectional approach we can begin to uncover the intersections that these protagonists share as women during large sociopolitical upheaval.

Chapter 3: An Intersectional Examination of Sula

This chapter will examine the intersections of gender, race, class, public policy, and location as interlocking systems of oppression that restrict the protagonist Sula. I have chosen Sula as the center for this analysis because she represents a fluid character who acts rather than one who is acted upon (such as Nel). Sula's bohemian spirit leads her to actively pursue a freedom that her status as a lower class African American woman during segregation does not afford her. This free spirit makes her an ideal protagonist to analyze as she constantly seeks freedom and often pushes against social barriers thereby illuminating their existence.

Summary of *Sula*

Before going into the analysis I will offer a brief synopsis of the novel in order to orient the reader. *Sula* begins with an explanation of the creation of its location, The Bottom. The Bottom is said to have begun as a "nigger joke" after a master tricked his slave into taking hilly, uncultivable land rather than the lush valley beneath it (Morrison 4). In the novel Morrison explains that a farmer tricked his slave into taking hilly, untamable land in return for completing difficult tasks by telling him that the land was "the bottom of heaven—the best land there is" (Morrison 6). The slaves settled into the hilly land eventually creating the homogenously African American town called (ironically) the Bottom, while the white population lives in the valley (now called Medallion).

The story then shifts to Shadrack, a Black man returning from World War I. Shadrack returns suffering from the equivalent of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and general disorientation like many other soldiers. He is immediately bound into a straight-jacket after accidentally attacking a nurse, and later unceremoniously kicked out of the hospital untreated,

with only “\$217 in cash, a full suit of clothes, and copies of very official-looking papers” and “no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book...and nothing” after a memorandum calls for more available space (Morrison 9-10). While wandering the streets, scared and confused, Shadrack is unfairly imprisoned for “vagrancy and intoxication” (Morrison 13). He is later returned to the Bottom and institutes a new annual holiday he calls National Suicide Day, where he can confront his fear of death.

The next chapter focuses on the Story of Helene. In order to escape the negative stigma that follows her as the child of a prostitute, Helene marries a distant cousin and moves to Medallion to start a family. A while later she is forced to return home for her grandmother’s funeral. On the way there Helene and her daughter Nel encounter many of the discriminatory practices of the time including having to sit in the colored section of the train and having to use the “outside” bathroom due to the dearth of colored restrooms. Helene’s adherence to social norms often makes her a strict mother. She constantly implores Nel to “pull her nose” and restricts her from interacting with anyone who she deems beneath them, especially the Peace family.

Morrison describes the Peace family as wildly opposite of Nel’s mother. Eva, the matriarch of the family, is a single mother who had to sell her leg to take care of her family after her husband abandons them. Because of this condition, she wheels around in a converted toy wagon. She runs a boarding house and lives with her widowed daughter Hannah, her granddaughter Sula, and three strange “adopted” boys named the Deweys. The house is often characterized as wild and out of control, and Eva and Hannah are often ostracized by the rest of the rest of the community for being outlandish and promiscuous.

Although Nel and Sula come from exceedingly different families, they soon become best friends because of their vivid imaginations. Over time they slowly become two parts of a whole. However one day while playing outside Sula accidentally drowns a young boy called Chicken Little, and although they promise to keep the incident a secret, it slowly changes their relationship. One day, through a mysterious incident, Hannah is set on fire. Eva tries to save her by jumping out of the window, but misses, and Hannah dies. While in the hospital Eva claims that she saw Sula (who had recently overheard Hannah say that she did not like her) watching her mother burn, and is disturbed by the thought.

In 1927, Nel marries a young waiter named Jude. During the reception Sula leaves the Bottom travelling the country and going to college. She returns to the town 10 years later and after an argument with Eva, sends her grandmother to a nursing home (to the horror of everyone else in the town). Sula reunites with Nel, and just when it seems that their friendship is on its way to being repaired Nel walks in on Sula having sex with her husband, who subsequently leaves her. Sula cannot understand why Nel is so angry about her sleeping with Jude, as she thinks that they still share everything, like when they were girls. After their friendship is over, Sula becomes licentious and is soon hated by the entire town. However, she eventually creates a connection with, Ajax a free spirit like herself, who called her “pigmeat” when she was twelve. But when she begins to become attached to him, he leaves her as well.

Sula eventually becomes sick and destitute, and Nel decides to visit her and make amends. Unfortunately, their reconciliation falls apart when Nel realizes that Sula is not apologetic for her actions and feels that Nel is the only one who changes in their relationship. Sula dies shortly after.

After Sula's death the Bottom falls apart. A huge frost wrecks the town, and the people turn against each other. On Suicide Day, many of the people join Shadrack. Together they attempt to ruin the New River Road construction project, a project they were ostracized from working for because of racism; however, the construction site collapses around them and many die. Years later the Black citizens of the Bottom seem to have more opportunity. They are more integrated into Medallion and have more opportunity for jobs and upward mobility. The novel ends with Nel leaving Sula's funeral and realizing that Sula was right about their bond and the fact that Nel had changed. She breaks into tears and bemoans her lost friend.

Policy, Access and Agency

Morrison uses the first two chapters of *Sula* to introduce the political time period that our protagonists Sula and Nel are born into. In fact, she organizes each chapter by year, which further emphasizes the influences of time on the characters. She then begins the novel with the seemingly unconnected stories of the slave who "founded" the Bottom, Shadrack, and the character of Helene (Nel's mother), and the Peace women (Sula's grandmother and mother). These stories serve to create a framework for us to understand the social and political climate that Sula later experiences as those of segregation, discrimination and neglect. Morrison also uses polarizing binary structures to expose how the intersections of race, class, and gender interlock to create barriers on many levels. In juxtaposing characters like Helene and the Peace women we are able to examine the implications of each by seeing its reactions in relation to its opposite.

She sets up the first binary with the location of the Bottom. Because of the "nigger joke" the Bottom is situated on a Hill and Medallion lies in the valley (Morrison 4). Thus, the Black

populace of the Bottom can “literally look down on the White folks,” a distinct discrepancy from their actual social status at the time (Morrison 5). By making their social orientation (below the White community) diametrically opposite of their geographic location (above the White community), Morrison uses geographic orientation to accentuate binaries of class and race differences between the Bottom and Medallion.

Throughout *Sula* we note that the citizens of the Bottom are cemented in a system of resignation to the discriminatory policies that restrict them. They do not even begin to consider or question the seemingly blatant injustices acted against them as they are “mighty preoccupied with earthly things—and each other” (Morrison 6). This resignation is steeped in a system of continuous restrictions of power and access.

One of the struggles highlighted throughout the novel are the opportunities for Black laborers, specifically in regards to building the “New River Road,” a tunnel meant to give Medallion more access to other towns. The tunnel is a symbol of future growth and prosperity; however, when the men in the Bottom attempt to work on the tunnel as a part of this progress, they are consistently rejected in place of “thin-armed White boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians”(Morrison 82). This is a perfect example of the binary of access that separates the Black and White residents of this area.

Although they have autonomy in the homogenously Black Bottom, we see that Black laborers do not have the same access in Medallion. Because of their privilege as White men, the men in Medallion have the power to decide who can and cannot have work. Black men, on the other hand, are restricted because of racism, which also designates them as a lower class. Without this access to power the Black men from the Bottom are forced to rely on choices of the

privileged White class in order to grow. Their dependence on the White class in turn stifles their agency. Although this thesis focuses on the access of Black women, rather than Black men, in examining the restrictions that the Black men faced we can see perceptions of the Black community in general, as well as how this discrimination trickled down to how Black women (who additionally face sexist discrimination).

We see this in the case of Jude, who realizes that because he cannot work on the road, he cannot be anything but a waiter and can only feel fulfilled (or powerful) as a man by being the head of a household (marriage). In this way, the discrimination that Jude experiences because of racism in *Medallion* affects his treatment of Black women, as he feels that the only place that he has power and access is within a heterosexual union where he is the head (thus exerting power over women).

Later in the novel when the citizens of the Bottom (men and women) try to wreck the tunnel in rebellion against their restriction, it collapses on top of them killing many (Morrison 161-162). This incident is symbolic of the fact that even when the Black community tries to fight against the oppressive system, they are still struck down.

This resignation is not only limited to within the Bottom. While on her way to her grandmother's wake with a 10-year old Nel, Helene is immediately verbally accosted by the train conductor for entering the White part of the train, instead of the back of the train where the Black people were supposed to sit. While she is being degraded, she looks to the other African American passengers for support but receives indifference instead of solidarity. Racist Jim Crow policies force Helene to have to sit in the colored section (the back) of the train. However, the most poignant part of this scene is the (originally) indifferent response that she gets from the

Black males on the train. Black men hold a position of power within the Black community (over Black women), thus their lack of action or protection infers that they have become accustomed to this treatment and their marginalization and reflects on the even more limited options that Helene (who has even less access than them) has to defend herself.

Throughout the novel we see that the intersections of race and class are enacted all over the United States through discriminatory policies. Shadrack's story unearths a more national perspective of discriminatory policies and practices. After he returns from war racist ideals within the United States strip Shadrack, a Black man, of any chance he has to be treated fairly. He is unceremoniously kicked out of the hospital with very little care, and subsequently jailed for public vagrancy. It is not until a day later that anyone thinks to look at his papers from the hospital (Morrison 14). Shadrack's experience shows that his status as an African American male during Jim Crow times makes it so that his race and class are wholly linked, effectively making him doubly disadvantaged. He has no one to petition for him, and therefore his access to help was inextricably linked to the decisions the White community made on his behalf. If no one "decided" to check his papers, he could have been jailed indefinitely. In addition, racist policies and discriminatory tendencies made it less likely for them to put him in a system of care after jailing him. In examining Shadrack's experience as a Black male, we are able to see how discrimination affected the Black community, as well as how that discrimination would have affected Black women who were additionally oppressed by sexism.

Location

Medallion: Class and Power Structures

Although Morrison highlights the obvious juxtapositions between White Medallion and the Black Bottom, she also takes time to present class structures within these communities. One of the first incidents that Sula and Nel face together is when four Irish boys attack them on their way home from school. The Irish boys have an interesting class status because even though they are White, the American White community in Medallion discriminates against them. The White Americans in Medallion reject them because of a “pervasive fear of their religion” and therefore present a “firm resistance to their [Irish immigrant’s] attempts to find work” (Morrison 53). However, the interesting factor is that this discrimination does not carry over to their authority as White over the Black citizens of the Bottom. In fact this is the only area in which they can enact power; as Morrison says, “their place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old residents’ [Medallion White class] attitude toward blacks” (Morrison 53). Therefore, although they are discriminated against as a lower class within the Medallion White community, and suffer the same injustices (as far as opportunity for work) as the Black community, their White skin allows them to be in a position of power over the Bottom. By positioning the Black Bottom community and the White Irish in similar situations of discrimination Morrison exposes the fact that the intersections of race and class are linked and create structures of power. And although these experiences are ones experienced by men, we can use them to expose levels of discrimination as well as how much more women in those situations would be oppressed. Because of their race, the Irish immigrants will always be of a higher class than the Black community, and the Black community will be persecuted and powerless against both groups.

The Bottom: Power Structures, Access, and Gender

Morrison not only exposes class and power distinctions between the White and Black communities, but within the Black community itself. Although the women in the Bottom may seem to have autonomous power over their households, in the end it is the men who create and maintain social hierarchies. Similar to the Irish man, the Black man has no power within the White American Medallion community and can only exercise power over ones below him on the social hierarchy, or in this case the Black woman. Because of their dual identities of marginalization as Black and as women, Black women in the Bottom have the least access to power and agency or as Maw Gwendolyn Hendersen says in “Speaking in Tongues,” they are the “naturally’ inferior female within the Black community” (Hendersen 127). Thus in order to create power, Black men exercise their status as men over Black women.

Morrison again uses binaries to show how the power of Black men affects the community’s perception of the reputation and worth of Black women. One of the more obvious examples of this is the dichotomy of Helene and the Peace women (Eva and Hannah). The first sentence in our introduction to Helene says explicitly, “it [wherever she lived] had to be as far away from the Sundown House as possible” (Morrison 17). Helene’s agency is centered around her desire to separate herself from the negative stigma that follows her as the “daughter of a Creole whore,” but the only access she has to escaping is to marry out (Morrison 17). Her husband’s occupation as a seaman affords her the opportunity to live comfortably in a nice house, and it is with this access that he provides her that she establishes herself as the moral compass of the town.

We see this specifically in the example of Jude's marriage to Nel. After Jude is rejected from working on the tunnel because of racism, he looks for a way to regain the sense of power and control that is taken away by the White community's restriction. Morrison says, "he needed some of his appetites filled, some of his posture of adulthood recognized" (Morrison 82). Because of this he decides to marry Nel, an act that he describes as a "conquest," and that together they "would make one Jude" (Morrison 83). He in essence is fulfilled by his ability to exact control over another human being, making him seem less powerless. The converse of this action is that Nel becomes an object signified by her ability to fulfill him, not herself. Her identity is tied up in his perception of her, or as Hendersen says, "the male gaze constitutes female subjectivity" (Hendersen 128). In this way Black men are given the power to speak and signify the worth of the Black woman's existence.

Gender, Subjectivity, and Signification

The first scene after the novel shifts to Sula and Nel's life (rather than stories about Helene, Hannah, Shadrack, and Eva) is a perfect descriptor of the Black man's power over the perception of Black women. Black men, young and old, line the streets and ogle women as they pass by. Although they are young Nel and Sula are not treated differently, and when they pass by the term "pig meat" (an assumed sexual term for women) is said to be on all of their minds. However, when Ajax says it out loud his acknowledgement of their existence is a signification of their importance as sexual beings and the girls must "guard their eyes lest someone see their delight" (Morrison 50). We see that Sula is still signified by this statement seventeen years later when Ajax comes to her "looking for all the world as he had seventeen years ago when he had called her pig meat" (Morrison 124).

The Peace women are perceived negatively throughout the town because of their lack of attachment to men. After losing both of their husbands (Eva's leaves and Hannah dies) they both create uncommitted relationships with men. While Eva flirts with men and stimulates them intellectually, Hannah unceremoniously sleeps with most of the men in the Bottom. The fact that Hannah and Eva are not tied to a particular man worries the women in the Bottom because it means that they have the ability to take their men. Because they are signified and defined by their relationship to men, the loss of their "man" could result in a loss to them both economically as well as rock their self-concept. Morrison cements this point later in the novel when she says, "They were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs" (Morrison 119). Eva herself says, "Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man" and that neither she nor Hannah were alone by choice (Morrison). Thus, because the Black woman's concept of her own worth is tied to a man's acknowledgement of her as a woman (or a sexual being), the chance of losing their man proposes a dangerous threat to their worth. Because of this threat, Hannah is viewed as a threat and a whore throughout the town.

Gender, Race, and Ownership

As we have already ascertained the Black man's power is contingent on his ability to enact agency on a being "lower" than him (i.e. the Black woman), therefore he is protective of this ability. We see this specifically in situations where Black women interact with the White community outside of the Bottom. When Helene is verbally accosted by the train conductor for entering in the White part of the train, she is met with indifference by the Black soldiers on the train. In her moment of desperation Helene flashes a dazzling smile at the aforementioned

conductor, and the soldiers' indifference quickly changes to instantaneous disgust and revulsion from the Black passengers. When Helene uses her "feminine power" as a beautiful woman to subdue her Caucasian attacker, she is viewed with the utmost contempt.

Michelle Wallace discusses the dual discrimination felt by Black women during the Civil Rights movement in *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black but Some of Us are Brave* saying, "The message of the Black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a Black woman, that any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean I'd be denied even the one role still left open to me as 'my man's woman'...the 'new Blackness' was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters [Black women]" (Wallace 7- 9). In this instance Helene experiences two levels of restriction: racial discrimination and policy that forces her to the colored section of the train, and sexist discrimination within the Black community that objectifies her power as a woman. Sula also experiences this upon her return to the Bottom.

But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing—the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt could never be washed away. They said that Sula slept with White men (Morrison 112).

Their contempt is an effect of the perception of women as objects. By using her feminine wiles to defend herself, Helene "betrays" her race as she acts to please her oppressor and becomes tainted as she is no longer under their control. Sula does the same in allegedly sleeping with White men. They are thus marked by the Black men who signify their worth and reputation. These women have committed the worst sin by leaving the Black man and being with the White

man that objectifies them as well. These experiences expose the helplessness of the Black woman during this time period who is both affected discriminatorily by racist policies that degrade her as a sub-class, and sexist objectification in the Black community.

Passing Down Subjection

These female hierarchies and signification are very important in this novel because they show that the meanings made from the intersections of race, class, and gender continue on as learned behaviors. As previously stated, the first few chapters of the novel focus on peripheral stories in order to set up a framework of the communities and systems that Sula and Nel are born into. Although Sula and Nel are not in the forefront of their parents' (Helene, Hannah and Eva) stories, we note that they are still present as observers: watching, listening, and learning from their mothers' examples and using them to define their own agency and what they want from their lives.

Specifically there is an issue where Helene cannot find a Colored bathroom. Jim Crow Policy of that time required that African Americans could only use COLORED ONLY bathrooms; however, not all of the train stops had colored bathrooms. Because of this limitation Nel and Helene find that they have to degrade themselves by peeing outside (an act more uncomfortable for a woman). This experience resonates acutely with Nel who experiences both situations as she notes that "she remembered clearly the urine running down and into her stockings until she learned how to squat properly" (Morrison 28). The idea that these are lessons that she is learning by watching her mother experience discrimination at the intersections of her race (which dictates her lower class amongst White people), gender, the current restrictive

policies highlight the fact that discrimination is a fluid concept that is passed and adopted by the children of those who experience it, and ingrained into their self concept.

At the end of the chapter Nel muses on these experiences and creates her own definition of agency in spite of her mother's experiences when she says, "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.... I want to be...wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful" (Morrison 29). In this statement we see Nel deciding to not only move away from her parents' definitions of achievement and (more likely from the experiences she is gleaning from) restrictions, but also creating her own definition of self outside of the societal restrictions. In the end she decides, "leaving Medallion would be her goal" (Morrison 29). Unfortunately, the difference between Nel and Sula as they shift into adulthood is not dreaming about agency, but enacting it.

Effects of Intersections of Marginalization on Sula's Agency

In the end Black women are relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy. They are at the points of many intersections of marginalization and thus their agency is restricted by the multiple levels of power above them. As Morrison says in the novel, "Each [Nel and Sula] had discovered years before that they were neither White nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" (Morrison 52). It is because of these intersections that Sula's declaration of agency is even more poignant.

The first time we hear the definition of Sula's agency is when she is confronted by Eva upon her return from college. Eva asks her when she wants to get married and have children, and Sula responds, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison 92). Simply Sula's goal is just to define herself by herself, in essence her agency is just to have agency. While this may seem like a low conceptualization of agency by current standards, in

looking at all the areas of marginalization that Sula faces we realize the power in her statement. When she says, "I want to make myself," she effectively decides to fight against all of the ingrained systems of oppression that restrict her at every level: her class, gender, race, access to express sexuality, opportunities for success, etc. She takes active steps in making herself as Morrison explains:

Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self indulgence merged in her and with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased hers (Morrison 118).

Sula's determination to achieve this agency causes her to resist marginalization. When Nel is attacked by the Irish boys, she starts to take elaborate routes to escape them. Sula, on the other hand, does not stand for this injustice, and in an act of defiance she cuts off the tip of her finger as a warning to the Irish boys who immediately stop harassing them (Morrison 54). Sula's reaction to this discrimination immediately sets her apart from the rest of the Bottom. While all of the other Bottom residents (Helene, Shadrack, etc.) seem to acquiesce to blatant prejudice, Sula viscerally fights back, and wins. This action sets up our understanding of Sula's character as a woman who does not blindly follow the rules set by society, but instead pushes social mores in order to assert her own sense of self.

While the other women in the Bottom are stuck inside the systems and mores within the Bottom or require men to create mobility, Sula leaves of her own volition, " a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut" (Morrison 85). She does not conform

to the lessons of restriction passed down from women in the community and her own family as Nel does. After she overhears her mother saying that she does not like her, Sula loses her “one major feeling of responsibility” and realizes that “there was no other that you can count on” (Morrison 119). That rejection gives her a sense of freedom that many of the other characters do not have. She is able to indulge in her innate cravings for adventure without being tied down to family commitments and responsibilities that chain others to the Bottom.

When Sula comes back she astounds even the White community in Medallion by having items that “no one had seen before, including the mayor’s wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome” (Morrison 90). She goes to college and gets an education, which is also an experience that many of the White people in Medallion (a working class town) would not have had. The idea of a Black woman like Sula having more access, education, and experience than the White community during the 1920’s problematic to racist social binaries.

Although at the end Sula is dying, alone, and destitute, it seems that in living without restrictions she has achieved her agency and is happy. Nel cannot understand how Sula can be satisfied in her situation:

You *can't* do it all. You a woman and a colored at that. You can't act like a man. You can't always be walking around all independent- like, doing whatever you like, taking whatever you want, leaving what you don't. (Morrison 142)

However, Sula does not confine herself to the same restrictions that public policy and social hierarchies place on her. She reappropriates what it means to be a Black woman

saying, “You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?” (Morrison 142). This is a very powerful statement as Sula effectively breaks down the systems of oppression that exist around her and claims the power, access, and opportunities of a White man for her own, regardless of what intersectionalities of marginalization are actually in place.

Conclusion

Sula neither conforms to the restrictions placed upon her in the world, nor the ideals of success and happiness perpetuated by the American dream. She does not equate success to a monetary value or having the ideal family, as Nel does. She is satisfied in her situation because it is one of her own making and not prescribed to her by someone else. To this effect she says, “My lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (Morrison 143).

In the end it seems that Sula is a character way ahead of her time (and maybe even ours). Her agency is not understood or appreciated by anyone in the novel because they are steeped and restricted in the discriminatory intersections of race, class, public policy and gender that continuously work together to create barriers against agency and opportunity. Sula realizes that these intersections are reflected all over the United States because “in Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego. All those cities held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat” (Morrison 121). In the end, the world is “a big Medallion” (Morrison 99).

The last chapter is 1965, a year after the Civil Rights Act was passed and twenty years after Sula's death. Medallion is more integrated, and now "you could go downtown and see colored people working in the dime store behind the counters, even handling the money with cash-register keys around their necks. And a colored man taught mathematics at the junior high school" (Morrison 163). The people of the Bottom still do not understand the impact of Sula's choices and sing "'Shall We Gather at the River' over the curved earth that cut them off from the most magnificent hatred they had ever known," Sula (Morrison 173). Although these signs denote that some of the policies that negatively affect people of color and women are being lifted, we are still left with the haunting reminder of some of Sula's last thoughts: "Nothing was ever different. They were all the same. All of the words and all of the smiles, every tear and every gag just something to do" (Morrison 147).

Chapter 4: Intersectional Examination of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*

In this chapter I will analyze the intersections of gender, class, public policy, and location present in Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* that restrict or enable the protagonist Wang Qiyao.

Summary of Song of Everlasting Sorrow

Before stating the examination of this novel I will start with a brief overview of the novel. Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* chronicles the life of the protagonist Wang Qiyao, a young woman living in Shanghai, from 1946 to 1986. When we are introduced to Wang Qiyao, it is not as a singular person, but as a composite of all the girls in the Shanghai *longtang*. We are immediately reminded that this novel is not just a story of a woman, but also a representation of a city. Wang Qiyao is Shanghai personified. In one description of Wang Qiyao Wang Anyi writes:

Behind every doorway in the Shanghai *longtang* a Wang Qiyao is studying, embroidering, whispering secrets to her sisters, or throwing a teary-eyed tantrum at her parents. The *longtang* neighborhoods of Shanghai are filled with a girlish spirit—the name of this spirit is Wang Qiyao. (25)

After a trip to a film studio, Wang Qiyao becomes enamored with film and becoming a movie star. Through her interactions with the studio director she is referred to a photographer, Mr. Cheng, who takes the picture that spirals Wang Qiyao out of her *longtang* obscurity and into the limelight. She becomes known as “A Proper Young Lady of Shanghai,” the ideal of the everyday girl in Shanghai. With the help of her friend Jiang Lili and the photographer Mr. Chen, Wang Qiyao soon enters the Miss Shanghai Pageant and wins third place. Her third place title makes her even more endearing as a symbol of everyday life.

After being catapulted into fame, Wang Qiyao falls in love with the powerful military leader, Director Li and moves into Alice Apartments as his mistress. She becomes one of the many “society girls” living in the Alice Apartments, a name denoting a woman in a position “halfway between wife and prostitute” (Wang 144). She falls away from all of her friends and loved ones and spends all of her time waiting for Director Li’s sporadic visits. However, we soon find out that Director Li has died in a plane crash leaving Wang Qiyao with only a box of gold bars (Wang 137).

Following Director Li’s death Wang Qiyao moves to her grandmother’s ancestral home in Wu Bridge to recuperate, but before long she returns to Shanghai where she rents an apartment on Peace Lane and makes a living administering shots in her home. It is there that she befriends Madame Yan, a well- to- do woman who lives at the end of Peace Lane. Madame Yan, her cousin Uncle Maomao (later known as Kang Mingxun), Sasha (the half Russian son of a Chinese official), and Wang Qiyao soon form a close knit group who spend their leisure time playing mahjong, drinking tea, and eating lavish snacks.

After a while, Wang Qiyao and Uncle Maomao start to develop feelings for each other. When Madame Yang finds out she tells Uncle Maomao’s family about his illicit relationship, and in cowardice he leaves Wang Qiyao pregnant with his child. Wang Qiyao at first decides to frame Sasha as the father and the two decide to get an abortion. However, while on her way to the clinic she decides to keep the baby and raise it with Sasha, but he has already left town.

1960’s Shanghai begins to bear the signs of the political change in China, and food becomes scarce. Forced to raise her unborn child alone, Wang Qiyao reconnects with Mr. Cheng (who is still desperately in love with her) and together they are able to scrounge up enough food.

Soon Mr. Cheng realizes that Wang Qiyao will never love him back, and entrusts her welfare to their old friend Jiang Lili -- a devoted member of the Communist Party. Their reunion is short lived though, because soon Jiang Lili dies from cancer. Later Mr. Chen commits suicide, after being falsely accused of being a spy.

Wang Qiyao is left alone once again to raise her daughter, Wei Wei, as a single mother. Wei Wei and Wang Qiyao constantly clash because while Wang Qiyao sets herself apart as a beacon of timeless class and grace, Wei Wei is content being like everyone else. Consequently, Wang Qiyao connects more with her daughter's best friend, Zhang Yonghong, who admires Wang Qiyao's style. Wei Wei eventually gets married and leaves for America, and Wang Qiyao continues her youthful persona going to parties. It is at one of these functions that she meets Old Color, a much younger man obsessed with the nostalgia of the "olden days." She falls madly in love with him, and although she tries to give up everything for him to stay, he also eventually leaves her. In the end she is alone, and is robbed and murdered by Zhang Yonghong's boyfriend Long Legs who tries to steal the box of gold bars Director Li left her in order to repay his copious debts.

Location, Class, and Gender

Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is centered in the city of Shanghai, effectively making it a character itself. Throughout the novel we see that although there are few illustrations of race (Everyone in the novel is assumed to be Han Chinese, and there are no mentions of ethnic minorities); however, class structure in China is just as rigid and restricting as each level of the class hierarchy has strict regulations that restrict or allow action due to not only public policy but also inborn cultural roles and hierarchies. As a fluid character Wang Qiyao moves into these

various locations and becomes the “prototype” for that environment. Thus in examining each space that Wang Qiyao moves into we catch a glimpse of how intersections of class, gender and policy affect her opportunities for agency.

The Longtang

Song of Everlasting Sorrow starts with a description of the Shanghai *longtang* and an overview of the community. There are multiple class levels within the *longtang* community, from the “trendy *longtang* neighborhoods” with “walk-out balconies” to slums where the “makeshift roofs leak in the rain, the thin plywood fails to keep out the wind, and the doors and windows never seem to close properly” (Wang 4-5). However, the *longtang* in general represent the everyday community. It is described as restrictive and stuck in time, as even “when the city’s lights are ablaze, its *longtang* remain in darkness” (Wang 7). The people within the *longtang* are also stuck within this frozen space. The walls of the *longtang* are described as “old, clinging tentacles.... [and] inconsolable pain, on which are inscribed the records of time, the accumulated debris of time as it is pressed down and slowly suffocated” (Wang 26).

It is here that we find our protagonist Wang Qiyao. She is described as the epitome of a *longtang* girl and “the vehicle for everyone’s fantasy” (Wang 45). In their bedchambers girls like Wang Qiyao dream that “old Chinese parables like *Tales of Virtuous Women* coexist with Hollywood romances; high-heeled shoes are worn under a *cheongsam* of indigo blue... Confucian homilies on the segregation of the sexes are discussed in the same breath as women’s liberation” (Wang 16). However, for the girls in the *longtang* these are “silent dream[s]” for they are unachievable, because “behind the cavernous walls of the back *longtang* apartments who could aspire to these perfectly pure dreams... Their hearts are wild; they desire to travel the

world, but they couldn't be more timid and hesitant" (Wang 14-16). These girls' dreams are often described as clouds that are "trance-like and short-lived, yet blissfully ignorant that they are destined to be short-lived, occurring night after night" (Wang 15).

In analyzing the opportunities of the *longtang* girls we are able to begin to see what Wang Qiyao's opportunities were if she stayed in the *longtang*. Her status as woman within the middle/lower class would have restricted her living within the monotonous cycle of the *longtang*. The dark imagery of the vines as tentacles further cements the point that Wang Qiyao would not have been able to achieve agency within the structure of the *longtang*: instead, she would have just gotten married and continued the *longtang* cycle.

Alice Apartments

The next location that Wang Qiyao lives in is Alice Apartments. It is here where she lives as Director Li's mistress. The apartments create a strange dichotomy of freedom and subjectivity as most of the women in the apartments are kept mistresses. The women in these apartments are described as :

...free spirits... They are wind-borne seeds, disseminated from the sky, that grow into the wild... they spread in all directions, putting down roots wherever there is soil; they do not adhere to principles, nor do they fit into any mold; they have an irresistible urge to live, and dying they have no regrets. (Wang 122)

Within this community they are not subject to the gossip and social mores that denote behavior in the *longtang*. However, there is a duality in this freedom as their existence is subject to their lover's whims. While in the Alice Apartments Wang Qiyao spends most of her time waiting for Director Li's visits. She slowly moves away from her friendships with Jiang Lili and

Mr. Chen and becomes entirely focused on Director Li. Her entire livelihood is contingent on his affection for her as he pays for her apartment, maid, and allowance. She has nothing to do, and nothing that is hers, so her time is spent waiting for him. Because of these constraints the women in Alice Apartments are also seen as “oppressed” as they wait by the phone for calls that “come in the form of summons or consent”(Wang 113).

The women that live in the Alice Apartments traverse the intersections of class and gender. Although these women have access to an upper-class lifestyle through their lovers, they are still not considered a part of the upper class because they have no ownership of their belongings or the lineage to be considered upper class. Although they are free from restrictions of class, judgment, and social mores, they are still restricted as women because they live to serve their lovers. And while this action might be noted as a “choice” it is the only opportunity that any of these women have to access outside of their community. However, the downfall of this decision is that Wang Wiyao has no stability, and consequently when Director Li dies, her life is completely turned upside down as she not only loses the man she loves but access to her luxurious lifestyle.

Wu Bridge

After Director Li dies, Wang Qiyao is sent to live with her grandmother in their ancestral home at Wu Bridge. Wu Bridge is a calming canal town where “refugees from the city” come to recuperate (Wang 141). The town is said to be “our mother’s mother” and a place of stability, distant yet comfortable (Wang 141). The canals along Wu Bridge illuminate choice and give a sense of hope as opposed to the sea outside of Shanghai that “is a place without hope, what happens there is dictated by fate” (Wang 142-143).

In Wu Bridge, Wang Qiyao's grandmother tries to help her realize the error in her choices and get back onto a safe path. However the allure of Shanghai is too strong. Even in this small town there are reminders of Shanghai in the "colorful label on Dragon Cure-all Medical Ointment...calendars featuring pretty girls [that] had been produced in Shanghai... Little Sisters cologne and Old Knife cigarettes from Shanghai" (Wang 159).

Rather than an intersection of gender, in Wu Bridge we see an intersection of class. The town itself is rural and reminiscent of a time passed. Wang writes that "every grain of rice eaten at Wu Bridge has been winnowed, hulled, polished washed and strained in baskets...Everything at Wu Bridge—the roads, the bridges, the houses, the pickled vegetables...has been accumulated day by day, generation by generation" (Wang 142). Wang Qiyao does not fit in this rural town, and the locals "address her as Shanghai lady... implying that she did not belong there" (Wang, 159). As a city girl she is perceived as belonging to a *higher* class. She inadvertently demeans young Deuce, a young man who falls in love with her, because he does not have the same class as a man from Shanghai. Wang Qiyao constantly seeks a refinery and an opulence that she will never be able to achieve within Wu Bridge. And although as a city girl she has more social currency and power of action within Wu Bridge, she will never be able to "fit in" with the slower pace and smaller dreams of the rural class. Therefore, like the many before her, she is only a "passing traveler among innumerable others," and soon feels the pull to return back to Shanghai (Wang 148).

Peace Lane

After leaving Wu Bridge, Wang Qiyao returns to Shanghai and lives in a modest apartment on Peace Lane. Peace Lane represents a shift in Wang Qiyao's evolution as a woman.

It is in this space that she spends most of the novel, and where she eventually dies. It is different from the *longtang* as it allows for “memories and aspirations” instead of repetition and decay. It is also different from the other locations within the novel because although the other locations described Wang Qiyao as a “standard” within that environment, Peace Lane is the first section where she moves away from the standard and begins to create her own unique identity. While in the *longtang* she is described as one of many Wang Qiyao’s, in the Alice Apartments she is another “society woman,” and in Wu Bridge she becomes a “passing traveler among innumerable others;” however, Peace Lane is the first time that she breaks from a pre-existing mold.

This is also the first location where Wang Qiyao becomes semi self- reliant. She becomes certified as a nurse and makes her living administering shots. Although she still receives help from Uncle Maomao, Jiang Lili, Sasha, and Mr. Cheng at times (and has the gold from Director Li), she does not depend on them for all of her expenses and instead subsidizes her living with their help. Thus, in examining the intersections within these chapters we can better illuminate Wang Qiyao’s agency.

Class Distinctions

When the novel starts, Wang Qiyao is a normal girl, living in a *longtang*. She is stuck within the working class repetitive cycle of the *longtang* and destined to continue that cycle. Although she experiences relative notoriety because of her photograph in *Shanghai Life* and her participation in the Miss Shanghai competition, she begins to mingle with the upper class and subsequently has more access to opportunity. But after her relationship with Director Li ends, she loses both her access to the upper class and her reputation as a “proper girl.” This shows that

Wang Qiyao's access to the upper class lifestyle is entirely contingent on who she knows. Alone she does not have the social currency to sustain a position within the upper echelon.

This point is continued later in the novel as Wang Qiyao's begins a relationship with Madame Yan, Uncle Maomao, and Sasha. Her friendship with them allows her to experience the luxuries of upper class life once more during their tea and mahjong sessions. As Wang Qiyao's relationship with them, and specifically Uncle MaoMao, blossoms we see the restrictions of class that separate Wang Qiyao from ever being "one of them."

The first indication of difference follows a scene where the older Madame Yan convinces twenty-five year old Wang Qiyao to get a perm in order to regain her youthful appearance. After Wang Qiyao gets the perm, Madame Yan comments, " 'I had no idea you were so pretty'" (Wang 168). This comment in itself would not normally be anything to remark about; however, directly after Madame Yan states that the thing she likes the most about the Communist Party is the "law against concubinage" (Wang 168). Wang Qiyao is confused as to how this conversation even got started, however it seems that Madame Yan is creating lines of class distinction. Born into the lower class, the only way that Wang Qiyao can be a part of her family is by becoming the concubine or mistress of an upper class man, like she was to Director Li.

The issues of class between the two friends are doubled when Wang Qiyao and Uncle Maomao begin a relationship. Madame Yan feels used by Wang Qiyao who she thinks is a "former taxi driver or a night club girl who had to go into hiding now that the world had changed" (Wang 214). Although Madame Yan is not exactly sure of Wang Qiyao's past, she is sure that Wang Qiyao is no longer a pure woman (a contrast to her previous title as proper lady

of Shanghai), or of an appropriate class to consort with her cousin. Because of this difference in class status, Madame Yan goes to Uncle Maomao's family and tells them of his indiscretion, thereby forcing him to break up with Wang Qiyao in order to save his family's reputation.

Wang's intersections of past and present class standing not only illuminate issues that Wang Qiyao has as a member of the lower class, but also restrictions within the upper class. Uncle Maomao specifically has an interesting family dynamic. He is actually the son of his father's concubine, or second wife. However, because he is the only boy in his family, he is raised by his father's wife rather than his own mother. Uncle Maomao suffers under this dynamic because he is forced to neglect his own mother and integrate himself in a family that he does not really belong to. These feelings of neglect and confusion cause him to lack real dreams and aspirations and to subsist on his father's wealth.

Uncle Maomao's situation highlights how important lineage is within the class dynamic. Because he is the child of a concubine rather than a first wife, he has to deny his biological mother in order to continue the family structure. Similarly, Uncle Maomao's father cannot put Uncle Maomao's mother in a place of legitimacy in the family (no matter how much he loves her) because of the strict familial hierarchies. These strict familial hierarchies also restrict Wang Qiyao in her pursuit of riches. Because she is born into a lower social class, she does not have the lineage and consequently access to become a legitimate part of the upper class. Therefore even if she were able to become a part of the family as a concubine, second wife, entertainer, etc her status within the upper class hierarchy would still be less seen as legitimate.

Another character that Wang uses to illuminate upper class distinctions is Sasha. Although Sasha comes from a wealthy family, the fact that he is only half Chinese, has never left

home, and has no education causes him to not really be accepted within his class. As Uncle Maomao says, “Not only did Sasha’s background fail to reassure the ladies, it actually made them even more apprehensive about him” (Wang 185). Because of his poor background Sasha is able to experience the perks of the upper class without the restrictions that Uncle Maomao faces as the male heir of his family. It is for this reason that Wang Qiyao sees him as an opportune prey to frame as her child’s father. Although at some points she feels guilty for using him, she is reassured by the fact that “he did not have parents to answer to and that sheltered by his position as heir to veteran revolutionaries, he could afford to take this rap” (Wang 223). Therefore, Sasha’s dual status as a part of the privileged class by birth and an outsider allows him a freedom that Uncle Maomao is not afforded because of his upper class status and Wang Qiyao cannot afford to risk as an aspiring upper class woman.

Although there are already strict social and family structures within the novel, another way that class divides are reinforced is through gossip. Wang makes gossip an important facet of communication throughout the novel. It is how the women in the community signify class and create an unofficial history. Wang positions gossip as the unofficial language of the *longtang* saying that “if the *longtang* of Shanghai could speak, they would undoubtedly speak in rumors” (Wang 9). She describes it as:

...the silent electrical waves crisscrossing in the air above the city, like formless clouds that enshroud the while city, brewing into a shower, intermixing right and wrong....Never underestimate these rumors: soft and fine as these raindrops may be, you will never struggle free of them (Wang 8).

These rumors reinforce the class distinctions within the novel. When Wang Qiyao moves to Peace Lane, the people assume that she is a young widow. Many try to set her up, and although she eventually declines their offers, they still like her because she has a nice disposition (Wang 164). However as her relationships with Uncle Maomao and Sasha change so does their perception of her. They begin to think that she is one of “those women,” and she becomes a part of the community gossip cycle (Wang 239). When husbands and wives argue, they tell each other that they are going to go off and live loosely like Wang Qiyao (Wang 239). Although Wang determines that Wang Qiyao was “not viewed by her neighbors with contempt,” it is obvious that her reputation is now scarred, as she has become a part of gossip.

Intersections of Public Policy

In the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* public policy serves not only to restrict the lower class but also to change the entire class system. As the novel takes readers across four decades (1946-1986), we are able to see how public policy changes social and class hierarchies and consequently our protagonist’s opportunities for agency. The beginning of the novel depicts the restrictive lower class *longtang* where there seems to be few opportunities for our protagonist who yearns for the bourgeoisie lifestyle. She is stuck within the repetitive cycle of the everyday *longtang* life and the pre- Mao political and social hierarchies that benefitted the upper class and continued the subjugation of working/ lower class peoples. Because this system is so skewed against her success, when Wang Qiyao is asked to take a screen shot at the movie studio she thinks, “Could my big chance really come this easily,” showing that she has become accustomed to not having these opportunities (Wang 35). However, through her screen test she is able to attain access to participate in the Miss Shanghai pageant, an opportunity that would have usually

been reserved for the upper class as it is described as “nothing more than the playthings of rich officials and celebrities” (Wang 67).

Although Shanghai is described as a “city of wealth, colors, and stunning women,” there are hints of blossoming social change (Wang 65). The movie director comes to her during the Miss Shanghai competition and tries to convince her to quit the pageant in the name of Women’s liberation (Wang 68). Through this passage Wang describes the beginnings of the Communist Revolution and the ideals of “women’s liberation, progressive youth, and the elimination of decadence in books ” that have begun to take root (Wang 68- 69). These ideals would eventually form into Maoist policy that resisted intellectualism, capitalism, bourgeoisie class structures, and advocated for one class, the working class.

Under these policies women would be encouraged to “come out of their homes and set up sewing groups, processing workshops, and other economically productive activities” (MacFarquhar and Fairbank 707). However, in order to do this they were expected to reject all forms of femininity. Therefore, when the director asks Wang Qiyao to leave the competition, he sees it as his “historic mission” because he is asking her to make a political statement, reject the decadent and individual ideals propagated by the pageant, and take on the cause of working class (Wang 68). Wang Qiyao ignores these changes in order to participate in the pageant because she believes that it will raise her social status (Wang 67-69). However, in doing so she ultimately restricts herself in the future, not knowing that these anti-bourgeoisie rumblings would one day become policy that would restrict her further and change the power structure within China. Because Wang Qiyao is so adamant in her pursuit of a luxurious lifestyle (which is the direct antithesis of the future of China), the movie director realizes that “the more truculent she grew,

the more uncertain she realized her future was. But if he had wanted to help he there was nothing he could have done” (Wang 69).

While with Director Li, Wang Qiyao is generally shielded from the changes around her. As a “towering figure in military and political circles” and a member of the Nationalist Party, Director Li represents the old regime. While in the Alice Apartments he shields Wang Qiyao from the gossip, perceptions and change going on in the real world. However, the same changes that she is shielded from inside of her apartment are the same ones that ultimately lead to his death. It is only when he realizes that the end is near that Director Li begins to prepare Wang Qiyao, telling her to deny his existence and their relationship together; however, she continues to wait for him in denial (Wang 131-137).

The direction that Wang Qiyao pursues seems to be in direct opposition to the changes that are occurring elsewhere in the country. Although we as readers see the changes coming in the distance, Wang Qiyao seems to be completely oblivious (or at the least in denial). Even at the zenith of this struggle (when Director Li dies) she does not realize it because she “had shut off the world outside. She had stopped reading the newspapers and listening to the radio”(Wang 137). To further drive this point home Wang lists important news highlights that Wang Qiyao was oblivious to including the “crucial battle between the Nationalists and the Communists being fought in Huaihai.... The stock market collapsed; Wang Xiaohe was shot by the government; [and] the Jingya steamship running between Shanghai and Ningbo exploded and 1,685 people sank to the bottom of the sea” (Wang 137). Thus in not understanding (or being aware of) the implications of the political changes surrounding her and choosing to be a part of the upper class, Wang Qiyao is further restricted by the intersections of class and policy.

As Mao becomes head of the party, the power structure changes to favor the working class and the bourgeoisie becomes the restricted class. Although Wang states that “the large world outside was undergoing shattering upheavals,” Wang Qiyao, Sasha, Uncle Maomao, and Madame Yan are said to be in part “forgotten and for this reason safe” from these changes (Wang 193). When they do talk about the socio-political changes in China, they seem to be completely oblivious of their privilege in being able to eat so comfortably. In one such conversation Sasha argues that he is the only true member of the proletariat while Wang Qiyao, Uncle Maomao, and Madame Yan are all capitalists (Wang 193). Madame Yan retorts that she has been “forced to give everything that my family had to the proletariat... so I am the real proletarian and you are the rentier” (Wang 193). Although Madame Yan’s statement does uncover the fact that the bourgeoisie are suffering from the political changes, it seems that they still are not fully affected given that their daily mahjong session are antithetical to the values of the party. We see the shift in ideologies in the political undertones to their conversation when Sasha thinks, “You capitalists, stinking of rot, you dregs of society! You have no idea what awaits you” (Wang 194).

We also see a shift in the luxuries and extravagance afforded by the upper class. One indicator of this is the fact that concubines (an upper class luxury) are banned (Wang 168). This policy in turn further restricts Wang Qiyao’s access to the upper class. Because of her class and her status as a woman, one of the ways that she could become a part of the upper class (in the previous regime) was as a concubine or mistress (as she was for Director Wu). However, because of the policy change she no longer has access to this class for multiple reasons as sexism

restricts her opportunities for upward mobility, she does not have the familial background to marry in legitimately, and the policy has restricted her options as a concubine.

When her relationships with Sasha, Uncle Maomao, and Madame Yan dissolve, Wang Qiyao begins to experience the results of the economic turmoil plaguing the rest of the country. From 1959- 1961, China experienced a huge food shortage, which led to “mess hall portions and rations... to be cut, and a period of nationwide hunger set in” (MacFarquhar and Fairbank 709). Wang Qiyao finds herself barely able to cover her expenses (much less afford food for her and her unborn child) and considers dipping into her reserve of gold bars that Director Li left her (Wang 233). However, she is luckily saved by a chance encounter with Mr. Cheng. Together they are able to pool their resources and plan meals (albeit much less extravagant than her mahjong teas). Wang describes the atmosphere in Shanghai as one where people are obsessed with the thought of food. She says that although “saying that the city was in a state of famine would have been a bit extreme... people were doing whatever they could to satisfy their palates” (Wang 237). This atmosphere was prevalent all over the country. For example, one history book quotes that people had to “get up at 3:00 AM in Tientsin in this period to claim a place in line in order to have any hope of buying the vegetables being brought into the city” and in the rural areas many died from malnutrition (MacFarquhar and Fairbank 709).

We begin to see more of the Communist backdrop in the delineations between characters. We are reintroduced to Jiang Lili, who has become the ideal iron girl. She eschews her college education for a job as a “common laborer” and soon becomes a union officer, married to the “factory’s military representative” (Wang 241). Instead of the delicate *cheongsams* that Wang Qiyao is known for Jiang Lili dons defeminizing clothes and a Lenin suit (Wang 243). A year

later, when the Cultural Revolution starts, the naturally timid Mr. Cheng becomes the target of suspicion. The Cultural Revolution was especially dangerous for the upper class and artists (of which Mr. Cheng was both) who did not comply with or promote the Communist Party. It is estimated that 2,600 people in Shanghai literary and art circles...were all “falsely charged and persecuted” and that an unspecified number of them died as a result (MacFarquhar and Fairbank 212).

Mr. Cheng suffers from this persecution and eventually commits suicide as a result. Wang describes the Cultural Revolution as having “penetrated into the hidden hearts of the city. From this point forward there was no place to hide, everything was caught in its grip... the city’s secrets were laid bare, paraded throughout the streets” (Wang 282). She describes “books, phonograph records, high-heeled shoes, and store signs” and eventually bodies piled in the streets and in garbage cans (Wang 282).

The movement to Communist policies restricts all people from achieving lofty and extravagant dreams, and instead promotes service to country. Through these changes we see Wang Qiyao weave through the different class levels. Although she is born into the working class *longtang*, her desires to be a part of the bourgeoisie put her in the unique situation to be affected by both sides of Communist policies simultaneously. She is restricted from her dreams of a luxurious life but is still able to live under the radar, as she is not technically a part of the bourgeoisie.

Effects of Intersections of Marginalization on Wang Qiyao’s Agency

Throughout the novel Wang Qiyao weaves through multiple restrictions with relative ease in order to achieve her agency, which is to be part of the upper class. In the beginning of the

novel Wang writes about these girls who dream of “Hollywood Romances” and “high-heeled shoes worn under a *cheongsam* of indigo blue” (Wang 15). Although Wang Qiyao is one of these girls, her opportunity to go to a film studio and be “discovered” allows her to escape the cycle that would have relegated her to a life in the *longtang*. When told that she should join the Women’s Liberation movement during the Miss Shanghai Pageant, Wang Qiyao argues that “the Miss Shanghai pageant confers social status for a woman” which exposes her desire to climb the social ladder and escape her class structure.

One of the tools that Wang Qiyao uses towards this goal is her beauty and femininity. Wang Qiyao is described as an approachable kind of beautiful, “pretty but not a stunning beauty,” and because of this people are captivated by her (Wang 42). She is also often described as having poise and class that attracts people as well, especially people in the upper class. When Madame Yan first meets Wang Qiyao, she is astounded by “her clothes, the way she ate, her every move and gesture [which] hinted at a more splendid past” (Wang 164).

Because of this allure Wang Qiyao is constantly sought after. Women want to be her friend and men want to be with her. She maintains relationships with people in higher classes than her own, and it is because of these relationships that she is often protected from the events happening in the outside world. Wu Peizhen introduces her to the upper class life which gives her the opportunity to leave the *longtang*, Director Li guarded her in Alice Apartments, Madame Yan, Uncle Maomao and Sasha allow her to experience the extravagant mahjong parties when the rest of Shanghai is starting to starve, Mr. Cheng and Jiang Lili protect her through her pregnancy and make sure that she has adequate food and supplies. Due to this support Wang

Qiyao does not really begin to experience the consequences of the Cultural Revolution till much later, and even then to a lesser degree.

One thing that does affect Wang Qiyao is class hierarchy. Because she was not born to the upper class, she does not have the familial background to grant her access. Although she befriends people from the upper class, there is always a line of demarcation between her and them. Because of her status as a woman, the only way that she is really able to become part of the bourgeoisie is by becoming a concubine. However, later on as Chinese policy changes, the intersection of class and policy restrict her further. As luxuries are taken away from the hated bourgeoisie, opportunities are taken away from Wang Qiyao to be a part of them.

Conclusion

Although Wang Qiyao constantly strives toward a luxurious lifestyle, in the end she can not achieve it, and one can even argue that it was always impossible. After experiencing the beauty and glamour of the movie studio she constantly seeks after that luxury. Her goals are constantly reaffirmed by the people in the upper class (Jiang Lili and her family, Mr. Cheng, Wu Peizhen) who support and reinforce her self-indulgent lifestyle. When told that she should join the Women's Liberation movement during the Miss Shanghai Pageant, she argues that "the Miss Shanghai pageant confers social status for a woman" and does not want to give up the opportunity to raise her social status and escape from the *longtangs*. Ironically, in her attempts to secure this status she becomes Director Li's concubine, which further marginalizes her and restricts her to the Alice Apartments. She constantly resists the political signs around her that point to the demise of this lifestyle and continues towards her goal, and Wu Bridge struggles against the rural lifestyle and longs to go back to the luxury of Shanghai. Thus, although Wang

Qiyao's agency is to be able to obtain the decadent lifestyle she fell in love with at the movie studio, this lifestyle is antithetical of the direction of the country. The few opportunities that she has towards upward mobility are constantly restricted by the policies of the upper class who create barriers based on lineage, and the Communist government that discriminates against the upper class and upholds the working class. As a working class woman who aspires towards a higher-class life she is constantly restricted by the fact that she is at the intersection of two structures that diametrically oppose each other.

It is not until the end of the novel that Wang Qiyao begins to question whether her struggle was really worth it. Jiang Lili and Mr. Cheng have died, Uncle Maomao, Madame Yan, and Sasha are long gone, and her daughter has moved to America leaving her alone and lonely. She tries to cling to Old Color, her much younger lover. She tells him that all of her life the only thing that she depended on was the box of gold from Director Li, but that she is willing to give it to him if he will just stay with her until she dies (Wang 417). She desperately tells him "she didn't have much time left, she could see that. He wouldn't have to worry, she wouldn't take up too much of his time; she just wanted him to be there for her, and it wouldn't be for long" (Wang 417). However, in the end he still leaves, as money is not enough of an incentive to keep him.

When Long Legs strangles her for that same box of gold, he is disappointed when he realizes that it is not as much as he thought it would be. As he murders her he realizes that her face is "ugly and desiccated. Her hair was brittle and the roots were gray, but the rest was dark and shiny with hair dye" (Wang 427). Ironically, in the final scene Wang Qiyao's body is said to be reminiscent of the murdered woman in the movie she watched being filmed on her movie studio visit. Although the movie was the catalyst for Wang Qiyao's agency, in the end it does not

represent the opulence she thought it would. In this light, we see that the opulence and beauty that Wang Qiyao focused her life on was all a facade. She does not achieve the agency to maintain the lifestyle because it was in the intersection of two oppositional forces, and in the end she is left with no one and nothing.

Because of her status as a Chinese woman during the Mao Era, Wang Qiyao would have inevitably had to give up something whether that was her dreams by continuing within the longtangs or her femininity as a comrade in the Communist government. However, because of the specific intersection of class and policy that her choice of agency puts her she loses everything.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

To conclude this research we will ascertain whether the intersectional paradigm was an effective resource for cross-cultural comparative research. In order to do this we must first compare the protagonists' achievement of agency in both novels to determine whether agency did occur, and if similarities do occur, they can establish a cross-cultural conversation.

Comparisons of the Achievement of Agency within Both Novels

Although the protagonists in both novels had different outcomes, both Wang Qiyao and Sula are similar in that they have a foremost responsibility to self, which allowed them a certain level of fluidity within the fixed intersections of oppression and restriction that affected them. While it can be argued that Wang Qiyao had more access to choice (the choice to become a concubine and to attempt to join the upper class) within her society, it is clear that her ability to create an individual dream and identity outside of her class structure was extremely limited. Yes, she would have been able to live within the *longtangs*, but not to have the lifestyle that she yearned for.

Sula's entire identity was an agency based on her commitment to "make herself" (Morrison 92). Wang Qiyao shows that she shares a similar commitment in her statement, "Me? I live for myself" (Wang 169). This dedication to self released both women of a certain level of responsibility to the people around them. Sula sends Eva to a nursing home, bribes off the Deweys, and pushes away Nel due to her self-serving nature. We see this also with Wang Qiyao who cycles through characters like Jiang Lili, Mr. Cheng, and Wu Piezhen and then distances herself once she no longer needs them.

Although the core of these characters might be similar, their agency is the determining factor that changes their end result. While Sula's agency is centered around her desire to be herself without constraint, Wang Qiyao has a more specific goal to achieve, status. Thus, Sula's blatant disregard for restrictive policies and social mores allowed her to achieve agency and happiness (even though it might not be within the societal norm's barometer of success).

Conversely, Wang Qiyao's disregard of others and self-centered nature does not help her achieve agency within the system that she is in. Because her agency to experience the luxuries of the bourgeoisie is contingent on her climbing the social ladder, she does not have the ability to disregard rules and social mores in order to achieve her agency, as her agency is entangled within these social structures. Although her beauty and likeability get her in the door, she is not able to end successfully. Additionally, because her social class and public policy are in direct conflict with each other, her agency turns out to not be achievable at all. Thus, although Sula's nature and the tenor of her agency allowed her to achieve it, Wang Qiyao's worked against her.

Effectiveness of the Intersectional Paradigm

The intersectional lens pushes readers to further distinguish the areas of marginalization that affect the protagonists Wang Qiyao and Sula. Because of the intersecting matrices of oppression that restrict in both societies, we realize that both Sula and Wang Qiyao had very little opportunity for the stereotypical measures of success (money, fame, fortune) within the constraints of their communities. Through this analysis we also see that the intersections of race, class, policy, and gender were inseparable areas of restrict that often interlocked or clashed simultaneously. For Sula, her status as a Black woman corresponded with racial systems and racist policies that continuously excluded her, but for Wang Qiyao, her desire for class status was

impaired by the fact that her current status as a working woman, her dream to be part of the bourgeoisie, and Maoist policy were in constant conflict with each other.

As a researcher the intersectional paradigm made me more aware of the areas of restriction and how they interlocked and affected the protagonist. I was constantly forced to be aware of how historical context and cultural norms affected the character in different ways, and to be thoughtful of how these intersections would or would not work together to affect a certain aspect of the protagonist's agency.

Although this aspect of intersectionality made me hyper vigilant of the areas of restriction and oppression, I also experienced the issue that many scholars before me have faced -- which is how exactly to apply the intersectional paradigm. Though one of the benefits of the intersectional paradigm is that it allows for an unlimited amount of intersections (as stated in Chapter 2), this is also its greatest deterrent. The reader must decide which intersections to pursue all the while making sure to stay within topic, not overwhelm the audience, not skew the research, and not ignore vital intersections. This makes it difficult to organize one's analysis.

This issue extends to the comparative aspect of intersectionality. Although breaking intersections of restriction into their parts could possibly lead to comparisons at the root of these intersections, the fact that many of these systems of oppression constantly interlock and occur simultaneously and are unique to the person, situation, and location often makes it difficult to find legitimate points of singular comparison. For example, Sula's interlocking oppressions within the Bottom (primarily gender and class) are different than those that she experiences within Medallion (race, gender, and class). Similarly, Wang Qiyao does not experience a restriction in class, and her struggles with policy and gender are not always simultaneous

(although they are with gender and class). Thus, many of the intersectional headings within each examination are different because the points of intersection vary. Therefore, to compare the experiences of Sula during one singular event to Wang Qiyao's at one event, creates an unfair analysis as it does not take their entire experience into consideration (the deterrent of Western feminism from which the need for intersectionality arose in the first place) and may even lead to ethnocentrism or considering one form of restriction as more legitimate than another without understanding the entire experience.

The underlying purpose of intersectionality to stop ethnocentrism makes the reader hyper vigilant of any historical or cultural aspects that may affect the protagonist's agency and choice. However to understand the importance of these intersections, we must also understand that not all intersections of oppression are created equal. Thus, while the restrictions that Sula and Wang Qiyao faced within their communities were not equitable (it is unfair to singularly equally compare the restrictions of racism to gender and vice versa) the struggle for access is relatable. As readers we can identify that the opportunities that the protagonist had within their community, and thus the protagonist's experiences create discourse through the common link of female oppression and restriction. However, these experiences are unique and their restrictions and options are different (some argue that many of Wang Qiyao's hardships come from choice). Thus, in this comparison the reader must be aware that the goal within the intersectional paradigm is not to compare oppressions but to use the understanding of agency that is revealed through the analysis of intersections of oppression to create conversation (while still respecting individual experience).

To conclude, the intersectional paradigm is difficult to use as a close comparative resource between cultures without losing the spirit of intersectionality or applying an ethnocentric view (the deterrent of Western feminism from which the need for intersectionality arose in the first place). This is not to say that it is impossible to use the intersectional paradigm as a comparative method at all. However, in doing so the reader must make sure to use these comparisons as a basis for creating a relational conversation, rather than delegitimizing another's experience. It could possibly work as a close comparative resource between two characters of different backgrounds within the same novel or situation. For example, if Wang Qiyao and Sula were within the same novels, we would be able to compare them with greater ease because they are experiencing the same situation and the only dependent variable would be how their restriction affected their agency within that situation (the independent variable). Thus, although this analysis did not create the results that I expected, it has created the opportunity to see more ways in which the intersectional paradigm can be applied, and contributes applications that can be used across disciplines and further create opportunities for oppressed peoples' experiences to be understood.

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