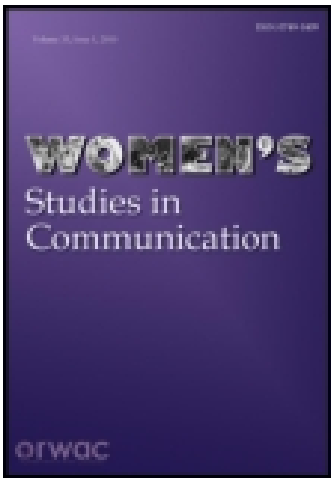

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A Wall on the Lesbian Continuum: Polysemy and *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Naomi R. Rockler

The film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) uses a type of polysemy, strategic ambiguity, to transform a lesbian relationship from the novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* to a sexually ambiguous relationship. Through textual and audience analysis, I demonstrate that audience members are unlikely to interpret the relationship as a lesbian relationship unless they define lesbianism as identity as opposed to merely as sexual behavior. Although the film illustrates the power of woman-identified experience, it rejects an opportunity to illustrate fully Adrienne Rich's (1986) "lesbian continuum" by refusing to compare explicitly a heterosexual female friendship with a lesbian relationship.

As a mainstream film, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) was a surprise success. Released in the same year as the popular female outlaw film *Thelma and Louise*, *Fried Green Tomatoes* joined the ranks of a small but growing genre of mainstream films about women and their relationships with each other. The film received mixed reviews, yet grossed over double its production cost in just over a month (Fox, 1992, p. F1).

Fried Green Tomatoes tells the story of Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ruth (Mary-Louise Parker), two Alabama women in the post World War I era who build a life together. With Idgie's help, Ruth abandons her abusive husband. Together the women raise Ruth's son, run the Whistle Stop Cafe, and remain together until Ruth's early death. As an old woman, Idgie's sister-in-law Ninny (Jessica Tandy) tells the story of Idgie and Ruth to a discontented, middle-aged homemaker named Evelyn (Kathy Bates). The story of these women's love and strength, along with her nurturing friendship with Ninny, empowers Evelyn to make positive changes in her own life.

Fried Green Tomatoes sparked controversy over Idgie and Ruth's sexual identity. Gay and lesbian activists protested that in Fannie Flagg's 1987 novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, Idgie and

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Ruth shared a more explicitly lesbian relationship, which the film downplayed to market the story to a mainstream audience. Some film critics agreed; Jami Bernard of the *New York Post* called the film "cowardly" (1991, p. 26). Other film critics denied a lesbian subtext of the film or ignored the subject altogether. John Anderson of *Newsday* argued, "'Tomatoes' isn't trying to sell us a lesbian romance . . . . Their story, simply, is one of friendship and the kind of strength of character it sometimes takes to live one's life to one's own satisfaction" (1991, p. 54).

These responses indicate that the film, or at least the relationship of the women in the film, is *polysemous*, or open to multiple interpretations. In this essay, I argue that *Fried Green Tomatoes* employs the strategy of polysemy— in particular, a kind of polysemy that Ceccarelli (1998) defines as *strategic ambiguity*— to transform the fairly unambiguous lesbian relationship in Fannie Flagg's book into a relationship that can be defined by different viewers as either a lesbian relationship or a close female friendship. Using both textual analysis and interviews, I demonstrate that viewers who read the film through the dominant ideological framework that defines lesbianism as sexual behavior, as opposed to identity, are unlikely to define the women's relationship as a lesbian relationship. The film does illustrate the emotional and empowering nature of woman-identified relationships, an unusual trait for a mainstream Hollywood film. Through its use of strategic ambiguity, however, the film rejects the opportunity to illustrate Adrienne Rich's (1986) "lesbian continuum," which posits that heterosexual women and lesbians are consubstantial because their woman-identified experiences are similar. Although polysemy often has been characterized as a potentially emancipatory rhetorical quality, this essay supports Ceccarelli's (1998) argument that "it is sometimes the case that strategic ambiguity helps maintain a social order that is oppressive to one or more marginalized groups" (p. 409).

Polysemy and Oppositional Potential

A comprehensive body of contemporary media research has emerged from Stuart Hall's (1980) argument that mainstream media texts are open to oppositional audience decodings. Hall argues that most mainstream media texts reify the dominant ideology of a culture, and that the majority of audience members usually interpret texts through ideological frameworks that reflect this *dominant* or *preferred* interpretation. Hall further argues, however, that audience members may perform *oppositional* read-

ings, in which readers resist dominant ideology and decode texts within alternative ideological frameworks. Audience members may also produce *negotiated* readings, in which readers do not reject the dominant ideological framework but nonetheless interpret texts through a process that calls into question some aspects of dominant ideology. Hall's argument has led to a body of audience and textual analyses of media texts that examine the degree to which texts lend themselves to multiple interpretations (e.g. Morley 1980, 1992; Radway 1984; Hobson 1982; Liebes & Katz 1990; Jhally & Lewis 1991; Press 1991; Cohen 1991; Liebes & Ribak 1994; Lind 1995; McKinley 1997).

John Fiske (1986, 1987, 1989a, 1989b) has been an optimistic advocate for the ability of audiences to interpret mainstream media texts in oppositional ways. Drawing on Michel de Certeau (1984), who argues that readers "poach" meanings for their own personal use from the "hunting grounds" of dominant ideology (see pp. 165-176), Fiske argues that in order for mainstream media texts to be economically successful with a heterogeneous audience that contains many subcultures, mainstream media texts must be *polysemous*, or open to multiple ideologically situated interpretations. As products of a capitalist economy, "cultural commodities have to meet quite contradictory needs": they must appeal to ideological mainstream norms to secure a mass audience, while at the same time must offer ambiguity so that other individuals may interpret the text oppositionally (1989b, p. 28).

Critics have challenged Fiske's optimistic assessment of how often textual polysemy occurs and how capable audience members are of reading a text oppositionally. Condit (1989) argues that audience members experience serious rhetorical constraints in their ability to perform oppositional readings, and will only perform these readings under specific circumstances. The work necessary to perform oppositional readings must be outweighed by pleasure, and audience members must be rhetorically skilled enough to recognize the textual cues or "codes" that signal polysemy. Similarly, Cloud (1992) argues that mainstream media texts only "ambivalently" offer limited choices for interpretation that "are complementary parts of the system's overall hegemonic design" (p. 314). Critics such as Harms & Dickens (1996), Morley (1992, pp. 26-29), and Rivera-Perez (1996) argue that Fiske oversimplifies the role of audience members' historical and social positionality, as well as the role of political economy, in determining audience members' abilities to perform oppositional readings. In addition, Condit argues that media texts usually are

more *polyvalent* than they are polysemous; that is, most texts are less open to multiple denotative plot interpretations that they are to multiple connotative evaluations.

Ceccarelli (1998) argues that the debate over the degree to which texts are polysemous has been confused by (ironically) multiple definitions of the term polysemy. When some authors use the term, she argues, they are referring to *resistive reading*, or instances where readers have interpreted media texts through an oppositional framework not considered by the author in order to poach that text for their own purposes. An example of an author who defines polysemy in this way is Steiner (1988), who argues that when readers submit sexist advertisements for republication in *Ms.* Magazine's "No Comment" column, they resist the dominant interpretation of these ads and decode them through the oppositional framework of feminism.

In contrast to resistive reading, which refers to active and oppositional interpretation on the part of the reader, Ceccarelli defines *strategic ambiguity* as a "form of polysemy [that] is likely to be planned by the author and result in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text" (p. 404). The dominant reading of a strategically ambiguous text often promotes dominant ideology, while other readers may decode the text within an oppositional framework (in an active manner that overlaps, somewhat, with resistive reading). Although strategic ambiguity empowers oppositional readers to some degree by offering them a partially oppositional media portrayal, Ceccarelli argues that "ultimately, the power over textual signification remains with the author, who inserts *both* meanings into the text and benefits economically from the polysemic interpretation" (p. 404).

As Vito Russo (1987) argues in *The Celluloid Closet,* gays and lesbians in Hollywood films historically have been represented through strategic ambiguity. Producers sometimes included ambiguous representations because of censorship codes that prohibited open portrayals of homosexual characters and relationships. Audience members familiar with the "codes" of homosexuality could interpret these representations as homosexual, while other audience members remained oblivious. As Ceccarelli argues is characteristic of strategic ambiguity, whether these portrayals are hegemonic or subversive is a matter of perspective. On the one hand, the ambiguous images of pre-Stonewall films provided many gays and lesbians with cherished evidence that they were not alone; as Russo argues, "The secret signals and hidden signs of homosexuality in Hollywood

features were the only frames of reference for most gays, who learned about themselves chiefly from movies that said the whole world was heterosexual" (p. 98). On the other hand, Kielwasser & Wolf (1992) argue counterintuitively that the lack of open portrayals of homosexuals in the mainstream media not only presents an inaccurate vision of a world where everyone is heterosexual, but contributes to a "spiral of silence" in which individual gays and lesbians, especially gay and lesbian adolescents who are prone to abnormally high suicide rates, perceive themselves as isolated.

Fried Green Tomatoes is polysemous in a similar fashion; it portrays a strategically ambiguous relationship that may or may not be interpreted as a lesbian relationship. Whether or not audience members will decode Idgie and Ruth's relationship as a lesbian relationship depends upon the framework through which they define lesbianism.

Dominant and Oppositional Definitions of Lesbianism

As Suzanne Pharr (1988) argues, the dominant definition of lesbianism is that it is a behavior— the behavior of genital sexual relations between women. Pharr argues that this definition of lesbianism is detrimental for several reasons. First, if lesbianism is understood as behavior, opponents of lesbianism can "blame" lesbians for their behavior; if they would only stop having sexual relations with other women, the "problem" would be solved. Second, the assumption that lesbianism is defined exclusively as sexual behavior is dehumanizing. Lesbians are denied the subjectivity of sexual *identity*, the wide range of experiences enjoyed by all persons regardless of their sexual behaviors, including "physical and affectional intimacy with other people, social interactions, home and family, a hedge against the human condition of aloneness" (p. 30).

Furthermore, lesbianism understood exclusively as sexual behavior builds an artificial wall between the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women; lesbians have sexual relations with women, whereas heterosexual women have sexual relations with men. However, if lesbianism is understood oppositionally as an identity that involves the many ways in which women receive support and pleasure from each other, then some of the distinctions between lesbians and heterosexual women become ambiguous. If heterosexual women understand themselves as similar to lesbians, they can learn from lesbians, who demonstrate that relationships with men are not compulsory. Through this, heterosexual women can learn

that even though they choose to have relationships with men, it is not compulsory that all their needs be met through man-identified relationships.

Adrienne Rich (1986) defines the patriarchal ideology that proclaims it is innate and natural for women to fulfill all their emotional and sexual needs through men as *compulsory heterosexuality*. The ideological assumption that heterosexuality is compulsory teaches women to be dependent upon men and separates them from women. In a culture marked by compulsory heterosexuality, *woman-identified experience* is powerful because it is an affront to compulsory heterosexuality. Historically, Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and Faderman (1981) contribute to the argument against compulsory heterosexuality by providing extensive evidence that in the pre-Freudian era, women publicly enjoyed friendships that often were more emotionally significant than their relationships with their husbands. Rich argues that all women, regardless of whether they define themselves as lesbian, can resist compulsory heterosexuality and be empowered through woman-identified experiences that often are ambiguous emotionally and sexually, and fall along a *lesbian continuum*. Rich defines the lesbian continuum as follows:

> I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range— through each woman's life and throughout history— of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of *lesbianism.* (p. 52)

Method

In this essay, I use both textual and audience analysis to investigate interpretations of *Fried Green Tomatoes*. Textual analysis allows critics to identify what, in Fiske's (1986) terms, are the contradictions and ambiguities of the text that allow for multiple readings. Fiske argues, "We may not be able to predict the actual reading that any one empirical viewer may

make, but we can identify the textual characteristics that make polysemic readings possible, and we can theorize the relations between textual structure and social structure that make such polysemic readings necessary" (1986, p. 392). Textual analysis alone, however, offers only limited insight into an audience's actual experience of a text. As Stromer-Galley & Schiappa (1996) argue, critics who make claims about audience effects and interpretations without collecting audience data are guilty of fallacious arguments. Radway (1986) argues that it is especially crucial in feminist analysis not to impose subjective interpretations upon female audience members because this reifies a rhetorical tradition of woman as object of discourse as opposed to subjective interpreter of her own experience.

In conjunction with my textual analysis of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, I analyzed in-depth interviews with ten students at a large, northern Midwestern university between the ages of 18-25 who had seen the film at some point in the previous four years. Participants were recruited from the classes of my colleagues, and all participants' names have been changed. My sample consisted of six women and four men; one woman identified herself as a lesbian. All but one were White; one woman was African-American. The interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour and a half. The data collected from this small and relatively homogenous group of people is limited in that this group is by no means a representative sample of audience members. However, the sample is large and varied enough to provide evidence of the film's polysemous elements.

My interviews followed a schedule. First, I asked each participant to recount the plot of the film, and to discuss Idgie and Ruth's relationship. If they did not describe the relationship as a lesbian relationship, I mentioned that "some critics" thought the women were lesbians. I asked the participants if the idea had ever occurred to them, and why or why not? As the interviews progressed, I asked each participant to describe their definitions of lesbianism.

Idgie Grows Up and Gets Herself a Man?

Seven out of ten audience members in this study did not believe that Idgie and Ruth were lesbians. Reflecting the dominant definition of lesbianism as sexual behavior, the most simple reason viewers gave was because the film contains no overt evidence of a sexual relationship.

Several participants, including Kristen, said that more physical evidence might have led her to believe the women were lesbians:

> INTERVIEWER: What would they have needed to stick in the film to make you say that this was a lesbian relationship?
> KRISTEN: Something physical. Like an overemotional hug, something that indicated something more than just friendship.
> INTERVIEWER: Did you see any evidence that they had a physical relationship?
> KRISTEN: No. It never crossed my mind.

Similarly, Becky indicated she would have been uncomfortable if the women were portrayed openly as lesbians. When told that "some critics" thought the characters might be lesbians, she responded, homophobically, "That never, ever entered my mind at all. And I've seen it twice. It never entered my mind at all because I thought it was a good movie." When asked what would have convinced her the women were lesbians, she replied, "Maybe a little more physical contact with each other? They could have portrayed it indirectly through holding hands. They would have needed to do more physical things to prove to me that they are."

Differences between the book *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* and the film indicate how the relationship between Idgie and Ruth in the film was transformed to become strategically ambiguous. These changes allow viewers who define lesbianism as sexual behavior, such as Kristen and Becky, to interpret the relationship as a friendship. The book, to some degree, is polysemous as well; Idgie and Ruth are never called lesbians, and there is no overt evidence here either that the women have a sexual relationship. However, Idgie has a sexual relationship with another woman, a relationship that is omitted from the film. In addition, the narrative of the book strongly indicates the two share a relationship that can be described as romantic and is not easily dismissed as friendship. In one scene, Idgie removes a honeycomb from a busy beehive and presents it to Ruth, who is spellbound. Murray (1994) suggests that the scene is "one of the swooniest erotic moments in mainstream movies" (p. b11). Yet without the book's explicit narration, the honey may be interpreted as a gesture of friendship. In Flagg's narration of the scene, she indicates that this is the moment at which Ruth falls in love with Idgie:

> It's funny, most people can be around someone and then gradually begin to love them, and never know exactly when it happened; but Ruth knew the very second it happened to her. When Idgie had grinned at her and tried to hand her that jar of honey, all these feelings she had been trying to hold back came flooding through her, and it was at that second in time that she knew she loved Idgie with all her heart . . . . She had no idea why she wanted to be with Idgie more than anyone else on this earth, but she did. (pp. 88-89)

Another significant transformation that allows viewers like Kristen and Becky to define the relationship as friendship is the film's ambiguity about whether Ninny, the elderly woman who narrates the story of Idgie and Ruth, is actually Idgie in her old age. In the book, there is no doubt that Idgie and Ninny are different women. Ninny states explicitly that Idgie is her sister-in-law, and throughout her narrative of the past, she and Idgie are two different characters. At the end of the book, Ninny is dead and Idgie is still alive.

The film, however, creates ambiguity. At the beginning of the film, Ninny tells Evelyn explicitly that she is the widow of Idgie's brother, as in the book; however, this detail is not repeated. At the end of the film, Evelyn finds a fresh honeycomb and an affectionate note on Ruth's grave from "the bee charmer," and she assumes Ninny placed it there. The polysemy of Ninny's identity is made possible through another plot change: Ruth's early death. In the book, Ruth does not die until middle age. In the film, Ruth dies while Idgie is still young enough to have a child. This change makes it possible for viewers to imagine that after Ruth's death, Idgie lived the heterosexual lifestyle of Ninny, whom the audience knows was married and gave birth to a child. From this perspective, Idgie's relationship with Ruth was important, but immature; after Ruth's death, she grows up and gets herself a man.

These plot transformations clearly affected the interview participants' interpretations of the film. Eight out of ten participants interpreted that Idgie and Ninny were the same person. Several participants said explicitly that because Ninny and Idgie were the same person, then Idgie and Ruth must be heterosexual. Early in the interview, Rachel speculated that perhaps the women were lesbians, but concluded that they must not be because Idgie eventually married and had a child. Similarly, when asked

if he thought it possible that Idgie and Ruth were lesbians, Andrew responded no, because Ruth and Idgie were both married to men during their lives. When asked to describe Idgie and Ruth's relationship, Andrew's response reflected the interpretation that when Idgie finally matured, she got herself a man:

> ANDREW: I think in a way they needed each other. Ruth needed Idgie to teach her how to stand up for herself and be her own woman. Idgie needed Ruth to give her some faith in things, and to finally settle down with a man, which she finally did at the end of the movie. And she had a child. I think both women were really helped by each other.

Idgie and Ruth as Lesbians

Audience members of *Fried Green Tomatoes* might interpret Idgie and Ruth's relationship as a lesbian relationship for several reasons. First, the film provides textual clues that a sexual relationship might exist. At the beginning of the film, adolescents Idgie and Ruth walk across a bridge together, and Idgie grabs Ruth's hand, where the camera pans markedly. In another scene, Idgie watches Ruth, who is intoxicated, swim in a lake. Ruth's dress clings erotically to her wet body as she bathes, and she tenderly kisses Idgie on the cheek. As Ruth plunges back into the lake, Idgie beams radiantly, and the scene ends. In a later scene at the Whistle Stop Cafe, Idgie and Ruth have a food fight. The women roll on the kitchen floor together as they laugh in delight and rub flour and blueberries over each other's bodies.

A second and perhaps more important reason why viewers might interpret the relationship to be a lesbian relationship is that regardless of the sexual nature of their relationship, Idgie and Ruth share an identity that may be interpreted as a lesbian identity. They appear to be a romantic couple. Idgie and Ruth's early relationship can be described as a courtship. At first, Idgie does not like straightlaced Ruth, who has been summoned by Idgie's mother to help Idgie overcome her grief after the death of her brother. Soon, however, the young women are inseparable. Idgie woos Ruth; she throws her a birthday party and delights her with the above mentioned honeycomb. Later, Idgie rescues Ruth from her physically abusive husband. In a violent display of patriarchal power, Ruth's husband

pushes her down the stairs as she tries to leave. Idgie threatens to kill him if he ever touches Ruth again, and Ruth flees compulsory heterosexuality in exchange for a relationship with Idgie. Together they run the Whistle Stop Cafe, and because Ruth is pregnant at the time of her rescue, they are able to have a son together. Idgie waits eagerly outside the delivery room, and when the birth is announced, she hands the preacher a cigar, like an expectant father.

Three out of ten participants oppositionally coded Idgie and Ruth as lesbians, and brought up this detail immediately in their plot descriptions. All three participants primarily defined the women as lesbians not because of evidence of sexual behavior, but because they felt the women shared a lesbian identity. When asked why he considered the women lesbians, Sam replied, "Well, partly because they decide to spend their lives together. Whether or not you can see them being sexual, they are the world to each other."

These three participants explicitly defined lesbian relationships as more than just sexual. Erin defined a lesbian relationship as "two women loving each other, and not necessarily physically, but mentally and emotionally." Lori, who had come out as a lesbian five years before, discussed how she herself was just learning how to define what lesbianism meant to her. She said that while she thought most viewers would call the women friends, she called them lesbians "because lesbian relationships are more complicated than people make them out to be."

Sam and Erin both felt that Idgie and Ruth probably shared a physical relationship, as evidenced by their emotional closeness. Lori, however, concluded that the women did not have a sexual relationship. In Lori's interpretation of the film, the two women were sexual with each other early in their relationship, as evidenced by the erotic scene by the lake, but they stopped being sexual after Ruth married and "tried to play the role of a heterosexual woman." Unlike viewers who cited the absence of sexual behavior as evidence that the women are not lesbians, Lori still considered the women to be lesbians without hesitation.

All three of these participants speculated that their interpretations were unusual. Sam remarked, "The way it was portrayed, if you really wanted to, you could avoid thinking of them as lesbians" because "you never see them being sexual together . . . and that's what people generally think of when they think of a lesbian relationship."

A Wall on the Lesbian Continuum

Although *Fried Green Tomatoes* uses strategic ambiguity to transform Idgie and Ruth's relationship in the book to a more ambiguous relationship, the film does offer a story about women who are empowered, in Rich's terms, through *woman-identified experience*. The women in this film find strength not through their relationships with men, but through their relationships with each other. Regardless of whether Idgie and Ruth are interpreted as lesbians, they clearly share a woman-identified relationship.

Evelyn and Ninny also share a woman-identified relationship. Before meeting Ninny, Evelyn sought happiness through pathetic attempts to coax her emotionally distant husband out of his television den. After Ninny empowers Evelyn by telling her the story of Idgie and Ruth's relationship, Evelyn takes control of her life and her compulsive eating disorder, and gets a job. She also stops letting people push her around, including her husband, who comes home one day to find her demolishing his television den. When two young women rudely steal a parking space from her, Evelyn summons Idgie's nasty alter ego, "Tawanda," and then smashes repeatedly into the girls' car. In exchange for the empowering story, Evelyn visits and nurtures Ninny, who has no remaining family and is deserted in a nursing home, and Evelyn even makes her fried green tomatoes like Ninny used to eat in the old cafe. In the film's last scene, Evelyn and Ninny walk together through the graveyard in Whistle Stop, where Ruth is buried, and arm-in-arm they head towards Evelyn's home, where Evelyn has built Ninny a room out of the demolished television den.

The film also celebrates woman-identified experience in that its climax features a woman's powerful action. Towards the end of the film, Ninny reveals the mystery of who killed Ruth's husband. In a scene replayed from earlier in the film, the abusive husband barges into the women's home in search of his child, and knocks Sipsey, the elderly African-American servant, onto the floor, before taking the child. Earlier in the film, the husband is attacked by an unknown person as he attempts to place the baby in his car. At this point in the film, the identity of the killer is revealed; Sipsey smashes a frying pan onto his head and kills him. The *least* empowered individual in the film, an African-American, elderly servant woman living in the segregated South, destroys the white patriarch. Sipsey's action allows Idgie and Ruth to continue their relationship in peace.

Although most interview participants did not think Idgie and Ruth were lesbians, almost all the participants were prompted by the film to discuss the power and intimacy of female friendship. Several male participants discussed how women are lucky because they have a freedom to be close with one another that men do not share. Other participants, like Becky, discussed how Idgie helped Ruth leave her abusive husband and become more independent; she argued, "Ruth was kind of the motherly homebody type. And the other girl was kind of adventuresome and on the edge. But they became friends, and I feel the one who was wild and adventuresome brought that out in Ruth. She brought out the life in Ruth, and the friendship strengthened." Several participants, including Rachel, also discussed how Ninny helped Evelyn by telling her the story of Idgie and Ruth:

> RACHEL: The story is about two women. One that feels that she's not going anywhere in life. That she's kind of serving her husband. And she meets this woman at a nursing home that starts telling her stories . . . She tells her this story about this woman who survives struggles and opposition. As she keeps telling this story, the other woman starts getting stronger and caring more about her body and starts becoming more in control of her own situation.

Thus, the film to some degree echoes Rich's "lesbian continuum" of woman-identified experiences. Sam, one of the participants who did define Idgie and Ruth as lesbians, actually used the word "continuum" to describe women's relationship. Sam explained that relationships— all relationships, but especially women's relationships— fall along this continuum and sometimes cannot be easily categorized as either romantic or platonic:

> SAM: I don't think it makes sense to really draw a boundary actually between, okay, this is a friendship and this is a romantic relationship. A lot of people fall in between those and will move back and forth. Maybe they'll try a little romance and then will move back into the friendship category. And I think this is indicative of a real blurring of relationships. So it comes down to whether or it's lesbian or straight, depending on where it lies on this continuum.

Sam's understanding of women's relationships reflected Rich's lesbian continuum in that he placed female friendships and lesbian relationships on the same continuum, and blurred the lines between them. Because he defined lesbianism as an identity and not as sexual behavior, he felt it was hard to distinguish between these kinds of relationships.

Other participants, however, saw the continuum differently. Like Sam, the film inspired them to discuss the intimate nature of female friendships; however, because they defined lesbianism as sexual behavior, they interpreted Idgie and Ruth's intimacy as something *separate* from lesbianism. Rachel explained that audience members might have interpreted the women mistakenly as lesbians because "people don't understand relationships between women, because women are so much more open." From Rachel's perspective, female friendships and lesbian relationships are similar in terms of emotional intimacy, but it would be a mistake to assume that just because women share this intimacy, they also engage in sexual behavior.

Similarly, Don argued that female relationships fall along a "spectrum," but unlike Sam, he made a clear distinction between the intimacy of female friends and what could be "looked down upon as being lesbian":

> DON: I got into a discussion with my aunt about this. My aunt has a best friend, and she kisses her friend and stuff like that, and that would not be considered lesbian. Whereas if two men did that, it would be seen as being gay. We both came to the conclusion that when females do that it's accepted and not looked down upon as being lesbian, whereas if males do that, they'd automatically be characterized as being homosexual. So I think there's a lot of leeway of women being together and not actually being lesbians.

Thus, through its portrayal of women who seek strength and support from women instead of men, *Fried Green Tomatoes* inspired many of the participants to discuss woman-identified experience. However, because many of the participants did not define Idgie and Ruth as lesbians, they did not define the "continuum" of woman-identified experiences as does Rich. On Rich's continuum, as Sam reflected, all woman-identified experiences are similar, and there is no clear boundary between lesbianism and friendship. The continuum as understood by most of the other participants, however, is a continuum where emotional intimacy is common among all

women, but where a clear distinction exists between women who have sex together and women who do not. The film inspires viewers to discuss a continuum of women's experiences, but in this continuum, there is a solid wall built between (sexual) lesbian relationships and (nonsexual) friendships.

Conclusions

Fried Green Tomatoes rejects an opportunity to illustrate Rich's lesbian continuum properly. The lesbian continuum is oppositional not only because it honors woman-identified experience. It is oppositional because it blurs the distinction between lesbianism and other kinds of relationships between women. By defining lesbianism as more than just sexual behavior, Rich emphasizes that the experiences of heterosexual women are similar to the experiences of lesbians. By blurring the distinction, Rich challenges the patriarchal assumption of compulsory heterosexuality that it is natural for women to receive emotional and sexual support exclusively from men. All women, not just lesbians, argues Rich, can resist compulsory heterosexuality through powerful woman-identified experiences that are not inherently different than the experiences of women who identify themselves as lesbians.

Potentially, *Fried Green Tomatoes* could have illustrated the lesbian continuum beautifully. The continuum, after all, creates a parallel between lesbians and heterosexual women. What better narrative for illustrating the lesbian continuum than a narrative that parallels two female relationships? Evelyn and Ninny share a bond that is similar to Idgie and Ruth. Evelyn and Ruth resist their patriarchal husbands with the help of Ninny and Idgie, and it is the story of Idgie and Ruth that inspires Evelyn to stop trying to please her husband and develop her own identity. Had Idgie and Ruth been portrayed explicitly as lesbians, the film could have portrayed unambiguously the blur between friendships and lesbian relationships by directly comparing a heterosexual female friendship with a lesbian relationship.

Instead, through the use of strategic ambiguity, *Fried Green Tomatoes* transforms Idgie and Ruth's relatively unambiguous lesbian relationship from the book to an ambiguous relationship. The film did inspire viewers to discuss the value of woman-identified experience, and a few viewers discussed the ways in which the emotional intimacy of heterosexual female friendships is similar to the emotional intimacy of lesbian rela-

tionships. However, for viewers who defined lesbianism as sexual behavior, the film rejects an opportunity to challenge viewers to dismantle the wall that they perceive is on the lesbian continuum between lesbianism and friendship.

This essay provides further evidence that polysemy as a rhetorical strategy can be used in ways that are far from liberatory. As Ceccarelli argues, "It is sometimes the case that strategic ambiguity helps maintain a social order that is oppressive to one or more marginalized groups" (1998, p. 409). In the case of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the use of strategic ambiguity is oppressive to heterosexual women, and supportive of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, in that it fails to illustrate the full oppositional possibility of the lesbian continuum. Moreover, the film is oppressive to lesbians, and not simply because a 1991 film that relies on the kind of ambiguous portrayal of homosexuality seen throughout the history of Hollywood films can be described more as wimpy than subversive. By portraying Idgie and Ruth's relationship ambiguously, *Fried Green Tomatoes* evades an opportunity to challenge the dehumanizing dominant definition of lesbianism as sexual behavior. Unlike many mainstream representations of homosexuality, Idgie and Ruth have a complex, emotionally intimate relationship that could have helped shatter the conception that lesbianism is about behavior and not about identity. Instead, the film refuses to send the unambiguous message that lesbians are complete human beings who ought to be supported by their heterosexual sisters who share similar woman-identified experiences.

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