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Assessing the Vanishing Lesbian in Book-to-Film Adaptations:
A Critical Study of *Rebecca*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Black Panther*

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A Framework for Understanding the Vanishing Lesbian

Popular media consistently disregards lesbian voices and identities. The film industry, as a facet of popular media, often neglects to tell lesbian stories. When films do include lesbian characters, the depictions are often problematic and grounded in stereotypes. Literary critic and queer theorist Terry Castle argues the following in her book, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*: “The lesbian remains a kind of ‘ghost effect’ in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen. Some may even deny she exists at all” (2). Castle explains the “ghost effect” of lesbian characters in cinema, which is better identified as the process of lesbian erasure. Although the two terms are synonymous, “lesbian erasure” provides a more clear-cut verbalization of this process (i.e., there once were lesbian characters, but they are now erased). Lesbian erasure is a direct result of the following: (1) the absence of lesbian characters, (2) the inclusion of only one-dimensional/stereotyped lesbian representation, and/or (3) the use of subversion and subtextualization to hide lesbian characters from audiences.

Book-to-film adaptations reveal the ghost effect most clearly. Lesbians in book-to-film adaptations are not only apparitional; they vanish right before the viewers’ eyes. Plucked from the corporeality of their source texts, these lesbian characters become spectral figures in their film adaptations. This thesis project interrogates lesbian erasure in three novels and their original (or, first-released) film adaptations. The three source texts include *Rebecca* (1938) written by Daphne du Maurier, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café* (1987) written by Fanny Flagg, and the *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* series (2016-2017) written by Roxane Gay, Yona Harvey, and Ta-Nehisi Coates (and others) and illustrated by Alitha E. Martinez and Roberto Poggi. These texts are put into conversation with their original film adaptations: Alfred

Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), Jon Avnet's *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018). Through interrogating these three book-to-film adaptations in particular, this project assesses patterns of lesbian erasure over the span of almost eighty years major studio films¹.

Marilyn Frye provides a framework of understanding the erasure of lesbian women. She establishes the following:

Women of all stripes and colors, including lesbians but also including non-lesbians, suffer erasure. This is true, but it also seems to me that [Sarah] Hoagland is right: the exclusion of lesbians from phallogentric reality is different and is related to unusual knowing...we need to explore the differences and the connections between the erasure of women generally and the erasure of lesbians" (Frye 154).

According to Frye, all women are subject to erasure within phallogentric reality. However, the erasure of lesbian women is related to their intersectional identities as both women and as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Lesbian women do not desire sex with men – and sex has routinely been defined as occurring between a man and woman. As Frye further identifies, “when the dictionary defines lesbians as women who have sex or sexual relations with other women, it defines lesbians as logically impossible” (158). To be a lesbian is to be logically impossible within heteronormative society. As a result, lesbian women are erased from existence altogether.

In order to best understand lesbian erasure in the selected film adaptations, it is important to consult the following theoretical frameworks: feminist theory, queer theory, and adaptation

¹ All three films were distributed by major studios (United Artists, Universal Pictures, and Walt Disney Studios). GLAAD provides a list of the major studios: “Lionsgate, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures, STX Films, United Artists Releasing, Universal Pictures, Walt Disney Studios and Warner Brothers” (“2020 GLAAD”).

theory. For example, intersectional feminism – which focuses on the intersecting oppressions² of women who belong to multiple marginalized groups – provides an understanding of the multi-faceted oppression that lesbians face, as both women and people who identify as LGBTQIA+. The discrimination faced by lesbians deepens when they are also people of color. While the lesbian characters of both *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* are white women, the lesbian characters of the *Black Panther* series are Black women. Moreover, a discussion of *Black Panther* necessitates an understanding of how intersectionality plays a role in the process of lesbian erasure.

Feminist theory is also critical in terms of film analysis, especially with the theory of the male gaze. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey introduced this term in her essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She argues, “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 60). By viewing women as sexual objects, the male gaze silences women and forces them into a passive role. Film gives power to heterosexual men, who do the gazing, and takes power away from women, who are objects of the gaze. Both male characters and male spectators have the power to gaze upon women on the screen. As a result, female audiences are denied the ability to have this same power, when watching problematic depictions of themselves on the screen. For lesbian viewers, they must seek out ways to resist problematic depictions – or absences – of themselves on the screen.

² i.e., racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, etc.

bell hooks provides a framework of Black female resistance to the male gaze. hooks responds to Mulvey's theoretical framework in her essay entitled "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators": "When I returned to films as a young woman, after a long period of silence, I had developed an oppositional gaze. Not only would I not be hurt by the absence of black female presence, or the insertion of violating representation, I interrogated the work, cultivated a way to look past race and gender for aspects of content, form, language" (122). hooks, in order to watch films with Black women on the screen, had to form her own oppositional gaze. She argues that all Black women must develop an oppositional gaze in order to view stereotypical and demeaning depictions of Black women in film, as well as to view the absences of Black female representation in film. The oppositional gaze allows Black women to distance themselves from the depictions, to acknowledge that they are not seeing a reflection of themselves on the screen. For lesbian women who watch films with lesbian erasure, they too must develop an oppositional gaze. In order to resist the harmful (or absent) depictions of lesbians in film, lesbian spectators must recognize that the characters on the screen are not true reflections of their own identities.

Although the vocabulary of feminist theory is pertinent in the textual and filmic analysis of the selected works, Adrienne Rich – a prominent queer and feminist theorist – highlights the areas in which feminist theory contributes to lesbian erasure. In her essay entitled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which was originally published in 1980 in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Rich examines how feminist critical scholarship has disregarded lesbian existence both by lacking a field of discourse dedicated to lesbian existence and by discussing lesbian existence in only problematic terms:

One of many means of enforcement [of heterosexuality for women] is, of course, the rendering invisible of lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly

to view from time to time only to become submerged again. Feminist research and theory that contributes to lesbian invisibility or marginality is actually working against the liberation and empowerment of woman as a group. (647-648)

Rich's analogy of lesbian possibility as an "engulfed continent" contributes to an understanding of how scholarly conversations surrounding lesbianism have and continue to operate. Similar to Castle, Rich identifies the "ghost effect" in feminist scholarship. To be engulfed means to be hidden, out-of-sight. Without consistent study and awareness of lesbian existence, feminist theory continues to turn lesbian women into spectral figures. Rich places an emphasis on the role of feminist theorists in contributing to a sustained scholarly discourse, pointing out that avoiding discussions about lesbians is un-feminist in nature. Like feminist theorists, film has created an "engulfed continent" of lesbian sexuality.

Rich, in her paper, additionally introduces her theory of the "lesbian continuum." According to Rich, the lesbian continuum "include[s] a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; [it is] not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (648). Rich's concept allows for a discussion of lesbian identity as a broad spectrum where no two women experience their sexuality in the same way; however, it also becomes problematic because it reduces lesbian experiences to female experiences, and it then ignores the impacts of intersectionality. Furthermore, critics and viewers alike utilize the lesbian continuum to applaud subversive/subtextual lesbianism in film, since they identify woman-identified experiences as lesbian representation rather than erasure.

Pamela Demory, a queer film theorist, provides a concise explanation of queer theory in the introduction to her anthology entitled *Queer/Adaptation: A Collection of Critical Essays*. She

argues that “to queer something is to deconstruct it, to demonstrate the instability of all those apparently obvious oppositions...that structure our understanding of ourselves and others” (3). Queer theory concerns itself with defining “queer” as a verb rather than as a noun. By queering our understanding, we are able to deconstruct our own innate biases and the dominant ideologies which society teaches. Lesbian viewers, who are innately equipped with a queer critical lens, are able to uncover the subversive and subtextualized representations of lesbian identity in order to see themselves on the screen. However, the necessity to uncover subversive sexuality reveals how subversion is a means of erasure; subversion and subtextualization ostracize those who are not equipped with a queer critical lens, and they are unable to identify LGBTQ+ characters. For those who are not equipped with a queer theoretical framework, they are unable to understand art – namely literature and film – without the influence of heteronormative ideologies.

Additionally, it is important to understand the process of adaptation in conjunction with the process of lesbian erasure. While adaptation is typically defined as progressive, lesbian erasure is regressive. In the selected works, these processes occur simultaneously. Robert Stam, the leading theorist of adaptation studies, provides an overarching understanding of adaptation theory and how best to apply it. In “Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,” Stam argues that adaptation signifies the process of evolving with audiences. He writes, “Do not adaptations ‘adapt to’ changing environments and changing tastes, as well as to a new medium, with its distinct industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms?” (3). Successful film adaptations interpret their source material to create nuanced versions of the original narrative by combining the efforts of cinematography, sound, and editing. Stam crafts a successful defense of film adaptations, since critics are usually quick to reduce the artistic integrity of this genre of film. His main goal is to validate the adaptation

genre. Therefore, in an effort to bolster adaptations' artistic integrity, he ignores the ways in which film adaptations can be regressive.

Demory approaches adaptation theory through a queer theoretical lens. She defines adaptation as “to modify, to evolve, to transform, to repeat, imitate, parody, make new” (1). Similar to Stam, Demory understands the creative liberties that adaptations are able to take with their source material in order to build upon the original narratives, and she presents film adaptations as progressive, neglecting the possibility for the damaging powers of adaptations. I do not suggest that either Stam or Demory are permissive of lesbian erasure in book-to-film adaptations; however, they both characterize adaptations as more progressive and forward-thinking than original texts, which is proven false by my three selected works. In *Rebecca*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Black Panther*, the filmmakers do not “evolve” the source material. Instead, the lesbian erasure in these films is regressive.

Rebecca, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, and the *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* series serve as case studies in the process of lesbian erasure. Through critical literary and filmic analysis of the primary texts, the processes and patterns of lesbian erasure are exemplified and critiqued. By surveying these three works in particular, I uncover how filmmakers have been rewarded for subversive representation in the past and ignored the absences of queer characters. Then, I promote a framework for understanding the process of lesbian erasure as it relates to LGBTQ+ representation in film studies. Ultimately, these case studies serve as a means to re-define what is deemed lesbian erasure and to emphasize the necessity of three-dimensional lesbian representation on the screen.

***Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier**

Daphne du Maurier first published *Rebecca* in 1938 in the UK. Since its initial release, millions of readers have walked the halls of Manderley alongside du Maurier's narrator. Over the past eighty-three years, "du Maurier's classic has seen three film adaptations – including Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 version which won him his only Best Picture Oscar – seven TV adaptations and the book itself has never been out of print, selling 4,000 copies a month in paperback" ("Rebecca Wasn't a Monster").

The novel, told from the perspective of the nameless second wife of the wealthy widower Maxim de Winter, begins with the now infamous first sentence: "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again" (1). The narrator begins her narration from a small hotel on the Mediterranean coast, some months after leaving Manderley, the large manor of Maxim de Winter. She then launches into an exploration of her distant memories of Manderley, including the people who lived there:

There was enough food there to keep a starving family for a week. I never knew what happened to it all...But I never dared ask Mrs. Danvers what she did about it. She would have looked at me in scorn, smiling that freezing, superior, smile of hers, and I can imagine her saying: 'There were never any complaints when Mrs. de Winter was alive.'

(8)

This quotation constitutes the readers' initial introduction to the character of Mrs. Danvers. The narrator clearly introduces their relationship dynamic as well: Mrs. Danvers is superior. Not only that, but Mrs. Danvers also forces the narrator to compare herself to the first Mrs. de Winter, Rebecca.

Throughout the course of the novel, Mrs. Danvers, through her words and actions, reveals her lingering sexual and romantic desire for the late Rebecca. Although Mrs. Danvers never explicitly states her sexuality, she does not actively work to hide it either. Scholars have long investigated Mrs. Danvers' queerness in the novel, as well as du Maurier's own sexuality. A decade after she had published *Rebecca*, after she was "married to a man and a mother," du Maurier "experienced a powerful unrequited attraction to Ellen Doubleday, the wife of du Maurier's American publisher. Later in her life, she would have lesbian relations with actress Gertrude Lawrence" (Noe 29). When reading *Rebecca* through a biographical critical lens, Mrs. Danvers thinly veiled sexuality mirrors that of du Maurier. Through the character of Mrs. Danvers, du Maurier was able to explore a part of her sexuality that she had not yet been able to explore in her reality. Du Maurier was privileged in her ability to transgress heteronormativity; she and her husband belonged to the upper class, which made her transgressions more permissible. Mrs. Danvers, as a housemaid, does not have that same luxury. Du Maurier also exhibited discomfort with the term "lesbian," and she instead referred to her relationships with women as "Venetian tendencies"³ ("Rebecca Wasn't a Monster"). Her discomfort with the word lesbian indicates that, despite her ability to transgress, she was still held back by internalized homophobia. "Venetian tendencies" suggests a likelihood to "act lesbian," whereas claiming identity allows women to "be lesbian."

Moreover, du Maurier's sexuality can be seen in the halls of Manderley, and same-sex desire is explored through the three female protagonists: Mrs. Danvers, Rebecca, and the narrator. The readers first hear about Mrs. Danvers from Maxim's perspective as the newlyweds

³ In letters between du Maurier and Doubleday, du Maurier "habitually referred to her heterosexual encounters as 'Cairo' and to homosexual encounters as 'Venice'. The code is thought to relate to her feelings about the nature of the two cities" (Thorpe).

drive up the winding road to Manderley. He explains, ““And you don’t have to worry about the house. Mrs. Danvers does everything. Just leave it all to her. She’ll be stiff with you at first. I dare say, she’s an extraordinary character, but you mustn’t let it worry you. It’s just her manner”” (64). Although Maxim attempts to be complimentary, his use of the terms “extraordinary character” and “manner” stand out when read through a queer critical lens. By describing Mrs. Danvers as “extraordinary” and a “character,” Maxim others Mrs. Danvers. She is “extraordinary” because she is not “ordinary.” Additionally, Maxim’s use of “character” suggests that Mrs. Danvers is somehow less real than he is. Further, by dismissing Mrs. Danvers based on her “manner,” Maxim suggests that the way that Mrs. Danvers acts is not natural.

Mrs. Danvers is further othered by the narrator, when she describes her first impression of Mrs. Danvers: “Someone advanced from the sea of faces, someone tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull’s face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton’s frame...when she took by hand hers was limp and heavy, deathly cold, and it lay in mine like a lifeless thing” (67-8). Not only is Mrs. Danvers out of the ordinary, as Maxim describes her, but she is also not fully human; she is described with the imagery of someone who is already dead. A part of Mrs. Danvers died along with Rebecca, and this loss is immediately recognized by the narrator.

When Mrs. Danvers brings the narrator to the bedroom in the east wing (Rebecca and Maxim’s bedroom before her death), Mrs. Danvers reveals her loss further as she discusses Rebecca:

‘I came here when the first Mrs. de Winter was a bride,’ she said, and her voice, which had hitherto, as I said, been dull and toneless, was harsh now with unexpected animation, with life and meaning, and there was a spot of colour on the gaunt cheekbones...It was as

though she had spoken words that were forbidden, words that she had hidden within herself for a long time and now would be repressed no longer. (74).

Mrs. Danvers, previously stoic, becomes happy when she talks about Rebecca. This shift in mood reflects Mrs. Danvers's love for Rebecca; it animates her body, previously described as a carcass, and she exhibits human emotions. Through free indirect discourse, du Maurier reveals Mrs. Danvers' repression of same-sex love and desire. Mrs. Danvers recognizes that her sexuality – which she has kept hidden within herself – has been admitted through her reaction to speaking Rebecca's name aloud. Not only has her sexuality been voiced aloud, but it also “would be repressed no longer” (74).

It is not only the narrator who identifies Mrs. Danvers's desire for Rebecca. Beatrice, Maxim's sister, openly tells the narrator about Mrs. Danvers's affinity for Rebecca. When Beatrice brings Mrs. Danvers up in conversation, she notes that she suspected that Danvers would be “insanely jealous” of the narrator; confused, the narrator asks why Mrs. Danvers would be jealous of her, since Mrs. Danvers does not appear to romantically desire Maxim. Beatrice responds: ““My dear child, it's not Maxim she's thinking of...No, you see...she resents your being here at all, that's the trouble”” (102). In the narrator's mind, jealousy is intimately tied to romantic heterosexual relationships. She does not recognize the potential for Mrs. Danvers to be jealous because of same-sex desire. The narrator pushes Beatrice further as she asks for clarification. Beatrice states, “I thought you knew...I thought Maxim would have told you. She simply adored Rebecca” (102). Beatrice makes it clear that Mrs. Danvers's love for Rebecca is not hidden from those around her; furthermore, Mrs. Danvers, although she never directly states it aloud, does not hide her affection from others.

Mrs. Danvers's queerness is most clearly exhibited, when she shows Rebecca's room to the narrator. Danvers guides the narrator through the queer-coded space, and she acknowledges her own sexuality as well as Rebecca's as they assess the different parts of the room. The narrator becomes a trespasser in the space, with Mrs. Danvers as her guide. As Mrs. Danvers exhibits Rebecca's nightdress, she recalls her time with Rebecca:

‘I did everything for her, you know,’ she said, taking my arm again, leading me to the dressing-gown and slippers. ‘We tried maid after maid but not one of them suited. “You maid me better than anyone, Danny,” she used to say, “I won’t have anyone but you.”’
(171)

Mrs. Danvers recalls how she was the only person who could have been Rebecca's personal maid, which suggests that Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers had an intimate relationship with one another (regardless of whether or not sexual desire was acted upon).

Mrs. Danvers also pays specific attention to Rebecca's body, utilizing her own gaze and subverting the male gaze in the process. She is given the authority to look upon Rebecca's body and recall it from memory, whereas Maxim is not granted that authority. She describes how Rebecca looked when lying in bed: “‘But lying there in bed she looked quite a slip of a thin, with her mass of mass of dark hair, standing out from her face like a halo’” (171). Mrs. Danvers' recollection of how Rebecca would appear in bed has a sexual undertone, especially when read through a queer critical lens. By implying that her hair formed a halo, Mrs. Danvers reveals that she views Rebecca as angelic in her mind. This creates a tension between piousness and sin; Mrs. Danvers perceives Rebecca's transgressions as angelic, unlike those in religious communities who would identify them as sinful. This imagery also plays a role in how audience members, and the narrator, understand Mrs. Danvers's perception of Rebecca.

Rebecca's hair is also an important component of Mrs. Danvers's perception. Nicky Hallett, a British gender/sexuality scholar, identifies hair and hairbrushes as objects of eroticism within *Rebecca*. She notes that for the narrator "the allowed focus of eroticism is not pearls but hairbrushes. She is constantly anxious about how her hair looks in contrast to what she is told about the beauty of Rebecca's hair. Maxim de Winter's wedding gift to his second wife, significantly, is hairbrushes" (Hallett 38). Furthermore, Mrs. Danvers focus on Rebecca's hair in this scene reveals the eroticism between her and Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers notes that Mr. de Winter would brush Rebecca's hair when they were first married. However, Mrs. Danvers, upon becoming Rebecca's personal maid, soon took over the responsibility (171-72). When considering Hallett's argument, Mrs. Danvers replaces the heterosexual marital spouse, Maxim, in the erotic transaction of brushing hair. Moreover, by brushing Rebecca's hair, Mrs. Danvers acts upon her sexuality. The regularity of the pair's hair brushing routine also reveals how Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers were able to act upon lesbian homoeroticism through hair-brushing on a daily basis. With Maxim removed from the bedroom, the space became a queer space, where Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers could act upon their "Venetian tendencies."

After this interaction between the narrator and Mrs. Danvers, they do not openly discuss Rebecca again. That is, until the next time they return to the queer-coded space: Rebecca's bedroom. Following the events of the ball, the narrator seeks out Mrs. Danvers to confront her. However, Mrs. Danvers takes the opportunity to reveal the extent of her hatred for the narrator. She says, "'How do you think I've liked it, watching you sit in her place, walk in her footsteps, touch the things that were hers?...And all the while my Mrs. de Winter, my lady with her smile and her lovely face and brave ways, the real Mrs. de Winter, lying dead and cold and forgotten in the church crypt'" (246). Mrs. Danvers takes possession of Rebecca as she calls her "my lady";

her possession mirrors that of a spouse or partner. Although personal maids typically would refer to their employers as “my lady,” it takes on a more romantic and sexual undertone in this scene due to the work done up until this point in establishing the relationship between Mrs. Danvers and Rebecca.

Additionally, Mrs. Danvers indicates that she hates the narrator for taking the place of Rebecca, since she believes that no one is worthy of replacing “my lady.” Mrs. Danvers even says, ““You came here and think you can take Mrs. de Winter’s place. You. You take my lady’s place”” (248). The use of “my lady” becomes a way of forcing the narrator to recognize that she can never amount to Rebecca. It also reveals the intimacy of Mrs. Danvers’s and Rebecca’s relationship with each other.

Mrs. Danvers also reveals that she helped raise Rebecca as a child. By doing so, she exhibits that her knowledge of Rebecca is extensive. She notes that Rebecca was always aware of her own beauty: ““She knew then, she used to wink at me like the little devil she was. “I’m going to be a beauty, aren’t I, Danny?” she said, and “We’ll see about that, my love, we’ll see about that,” I told her”” (247). Mrs. Danvers reveals the flirtatious nature of their relationship; they discuss Rebecca’s beauty, and Mrs. Danvers openly acknowledges it herself. By describing Rebecca as a “little devil,” Mrs. Danvers equates queerness with evil to protect Rebecca from judgement. This equation does not belittle Mrs. Danvers’s own sexuality; instead, Mrs. Danvers teases Rebecca playfully, undermining the heteronormative ideals that the narrator is accustomed to. The narrator similarly does so with Mrs. Danvers on several occasions, although the equation of queerness to evil is not playful for the narrator; she actually believes queerness to be evil. For example, after Mrs. Danvers successfully tricks the narrator into dressing like Rebecca, she is

described to have “the face of an exulting devil” (218). Mrs. Danvers’s “triumph” is dependent on her queerness; as the narrator identifies, “This was her triumph, hers and Rebecca’s” (244).

Once Rebecca’s body is discovered, Mrs. Danvers falls ill. Mr. Frith tells the narrator the following about her illness: “I don’t think she is physically ill, Madam, it’s just the shock of Mrs. de Winter being found. She was very devoted to Mrs. de Winter” (306). Mr. Frith is yet another outside character who recognizes Mrs. Danvers’s interest in Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers, once aware of the actual whereabouts of Rebecca’s body, becomes a key player in uncovering the complete truth of her death. When Colonel Julyan is reviewing Rebecca’s engagement diary, he discovers a meeting with a “Baker.” When Mrs. Danvers is unable to identify Baker, Favell becomes frustrated: ““Who cares about this Baker fellow?...If he had been anyone important Danny here would know him, Rebecca had no secrets from Danny”” (350).

Mrs. Danvers’s realization that Maxim killed Rebecca leads to her hasty disappearance from Manderley. After a phone call with Frank, Maxim tells the narrator, “[Frank] thinks Mrs. Danvers has cleared out. She’s said nothing to anyone but apparently she’d been packing up all day, stripping her room of things...They think she’s gone. She must have gone straight out of the house and through the woods. She never passed the lodge gates” (381). Although Frank and the other people at Manderley think that Mrs. Danvers had already left, the conclusion of the novel leaves the audience believing that she is the one who burnt down Manderley. If that is the case, Mrs. Danvers’s actions reflect a desire to preserve the past by destroying Maxim and the narrator’s future. By seeking revenge in burning down Manderley, Mrs. Danvers preserves the queer-oriented spaces by prohibiting anyone new from inhibiting them.

The discussion of queerness in *Rebecca* necessitates a discussion of Rebecca’s sexuality as well. It is revealed through Maxim and Mrs. Danvers that Rebecca transgressed

heterosexuality, despite her marriage to Maxim. When explaining how their marriage was fake, Maxim says, ““Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal”” (275). The use of the phrase “not even normal” parallels how Maxim described Mrs. Danvers as an “extraordinary character” earlier in the novel (64). He others Rebecca based upon his conception of normalcy – a conception which is dependent on heteronormativity. Maxim also argues that he always had his doubts about Rebecca, noting that ““there was something about her eyes....”” (276). By centering his focus on Rebecca’s eyes, Maxim reveals how Rebecca’s gaze held a power that he had not witnessed before. In patriarchal society, men are given the power to do the gazing, while women are relegated to being the subjects of the gaze. In contrast, Rebecca had the power to gaze due to her societal and sexual transgressions as a woman.

Mrs. Danvers identifies Rebecca’s sexual actions in order to mark her as a transgressor as well; unlike Maxim, Mrs. Danvers accepts Rebecca’s transgressions and takes pleasure in them. She tells the narrator,

‘He was jealous while she lived, and now he’s jealous when she’s dead...Of course he was jealous. So was I. So was everyone who knew her. She didn’t care. She only laughed. “I shall live as I please, Danny,” she told me, “and the whole world won’t stop me.” A man only had to look at her once and be mad about her...They made love to her of course, who would not? She laughed, she would come back and tell me what they had said, and what they’d done. She did not mind, it was like a game to her. Like a game.

Who wouldn’t be jealous?’ (249-50)

The concept of jealousy in this context is intimately tied to sexual desire. Mrs. Danvers frames her discussion of jealousy with Maxim, and this supposed jealousy stems from his marriage to Rebecca. By suggesting that she herself was jealous, Mrs. Danvers inadvertently links herself to

sexual desire as well. She attempts to escape this admission by suggesting that “everyone who knew” Rebecca was jealous. Additionally, Mrs. Danvers uses rhetorical questions to insinuate that it was not “unusual” for any person, regardless of gender, to be jealous of Rebecca. Furthermore, it was expected that both men and women found Rebecca attractive and were jealous of her.

Simultaneously, Mrs. Danvers also reveals Rebecca’s own position on sexuality. As a woman during this time period, Rebecca would have been expected to be chaste and reserve her sexuality for the benefit of her husband.⁴ Instead, Rebecca used men to her own sexual benefit. Her sexuality, in turn, becomes “like a game.” Rebecca, consequently, does not take her own sexuality too seriously; instead, she works to get her own needs satisfied. As Mrs. Danvers identifies, Rebecca did not care about the men that she slept with. Rebecca also was likely aware of the power her beauty held over other people, regardless of gender. Additionally, Mrs. Danvers notes earlier in the conversation, ““She had all the courage and the spirit of a boy, had my Mrs. de Winter. She ought to have been a boy, I often told her that” (247). By identifying Rebecca’s masculine qualities, Mrs. Danvers also suggests the potential for Rebecca’s own queer desire. In a heteronormative society, only men were permitted to desire women. Through conflating Rebecca with men, Mrs. Danvers points toward queer desire. This was certainly the case for du Maurier, who often wished that she herself were a boy (“Du Maurier’s Lesbian Loves”).

From Mrs. Danvers’s perspective, she and Rebecca had an intimate relationship with one another. Throughout the novel, the narrator is jealous of their intimate relationship (and the

⁴ Since *Rebecca* most likely takes place in the late 19th/early 20th century, the ideals of 19th century womanhood provide a framework for understanding the expectations for women in the novel. Consult the source below.

Hughes, Kathryn. “Gender Roles in the 19th Century.” *British Library*, 15 May 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century#>.

supposed intimate relationship between Maxim and Rebecca), and she often fantasizes about being Rebecca. Janet Harbord interrogates the following:

The question thus becomes, does the girl want to be like Rebecca (which she clearly is not) or does she desire her? The struggle around Rebecca for the girl is about her own social inferiority, but also about her resistance/willingness to fantasize (the memory of) Rebecca. Certainly Rebecca quickly comes to dominate her thoughts, even to the extent that, like Danny, she can imagine her presence..." (102)

Utilizing queer theory, the narrator can also be read as a queer character in the novel. However, her queerness is dependent upon whether or not Maxim, a heterosexual man, finds her desirable. As a result, the narrator's queerness reveals how she is only able to explore her sexuality outside the restraints of heteronormative dominant society. Ultimately, the narrator values dominant ideology over her potential to transgress.

Although Harbord points out the narrator's potential desire for Rebecca (and rightfully so), the narrator's potential desire for Mrs. Danvers – or desire to be desired by Mrs. Danvers – is more striking. Take, for instance, the first bedroom scene where Mrs. Danvers guides the narrator through a queer-coded space. While this scene does much work to reveal Mrs. Danvers sexuality, it also hints at the narrator's potential queerness: "[Mrs. Danvers] took hold of my arm, and walked me towards the bed. I could not resist her, I was like a dumb thing. The touch of her hand made me shudder. And her voice was low and intimate, a voice I hated and feared" (171). Mrs. Danvers becomes symbolic of same-sex desire; the narrator hates and fears this potential desire, while she simultaneously is unable to resist it. The narrator is drawn to Mrs. Danvers's intimacy, which is something that she does not receive in her heterosexual relationship with Maxim.

Even after the fact, the narrator still thinks about the intimacy she felt with Mrs. Danvers: “I shuddered now when I remembered the touch of her hand on my arm, and that dreadful soft, intimate pitch of her voice close to my ear. I did not want to remember anything about that afternoon” (200). The narrator’s dread about their intimate moment reflects her own internalized homophobia. Despite being wholly absorbed by intimate desire in the moment, she reflects upon the event negatively. She wants to amend the past; she wishes she did not give into Mrs. Danvers’s intimate voice and touch. However, the narrator almost concedes to this desire once more when Mrs. Danvers urges her to jump out of the window. This urging mirrors seduction, and the narrator is almost tempted to listen to what Mrs. Danvers is telling her: “‘What’s the use of your staying here at Manderley? You’re not happy. Mr. de Winter doesn’t love you. Why don’t you jump now and have done with it? Then you won’t be unhappy any more’” (250). Mrs. Danvers frames the narrator’s happiness as dependent on Maxim’s reciprocated love. Furthermore, Mrs. Danvers identifies that the narrator herself prioritizes heterosexual love, while simultaneously being tempted by same-sex desire.

The narrator’s expression of internalized homophobia helps to explain her later rejection of same-sex desire – toward both Rebecca’s memory and Mrs. Danvers – in favor of Maxim. When Maxim reveals the truth of his relationship with Rebecca, the narrator’s potential for same-sex desire is removed entirely. With the security of having a heterosexual male partner, the narrator is no longer tempted by her desire to transgress like Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers. Instead, she is satisfied with retaining social order and upholding heteronormative ideals.

Ultimately, all three characters exhibit the desire to transgress heterosexuality. While Rebecca is the only confirmed transgressor, Mrs. Danvers’s words and the narrator’s inner thoughts reveal the desire or potential to transgress. When adapting these characters to the

screen, filmmakers only retained some components of Mrs. Danvers's lesbianism, ignoring the potential to discuss Rebecca and the narrator's desires.

***Rebecca* (1940) directed by Alfred Hitchcock**

Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of *Rebecca* was released only two years after the novel's publication in the UK. Hoping to capitalize on the popularity of the novel, David O. Selznik purchased the rights to the story upon its release (Greenhill 44). Hitchcock, who had recently entered into a partnership with Selznik, was called upon to direct the *Rebecca* adaptation. Selznik, Hitchcock, and the other filmmakers used du Maurier's rich text as source material for Hitchcock's directorial debut in America. His film ultimately won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1941, and it was his only film to win that award.

Although Hitchcock's adaptation is the most highly regarded, there have also been other film adaptations of *Rebecca*. The most recent of these adaptations was released in October 2020, which is a testament of the novel's – and Hitchcock film's – lasting impact and relevancy. For the purposes of this critical study, Hitchcock's film is the primary focus; Netflix's *Rebecca* film (directed by Ben Wheatley, starring Armie Hammer and Lily James) will be brought into the discussion as well for its similar lesbian erasure. It is important to note, however, that Hitchcock's adaptation was regulated by the Hays Code⁵, which was still in effect at the time. Selznik, keeping a watchful eye over the project (which he was also funding), “insisted on the strictest fidelity to du Maurier that censorship laws would permit” (Greenhill 45). While Selznik wanted to stay as close to the source material as possible, there were certain components that

⁵ For more information on the Hays Code as it relates to LGBTQ+ sexuality (or, in the words of the Hays Code, “sex perversion”) consult the following:

Mondello, Bob. “Remembering Hollywood's Hays Code, 40 Years On.” *NPR*, 8 Aug. 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93301189>.

could not overtly be included, namely same-sex relationships or “sex perversion.” The lesbian erasure in the Wheatley adaptation, over fifty years after the end of the Hays Code, simply indicates a negligence toward telling LGBTQ+ stories.

Hitchcock’s adaptation of *Rebecca* begins with an almost identical opening sequence to the novel, which introduces the audience to Manderley. It is not until Maxim and the narrator are driving to Manderley that Mrs. Danvers comes up in conversation. Maxim notes, “You don’t have to worry about the house at all. Mrs. Danvers is the housekeeper, just leave it to her” (00:28:52-00:28:56). While this line of dialogue is almost directly what du Maurier had written, the filmmakers chose to omit Maxim’s description of Mrs. Danvers as an “extraordinary character.” This omission removes the viewer’s first indication that Mrs. Danvers is “not ordinary.” By removing this section of dialogue, the filmmakers reduce Mrs. Danvers’s queerness from the first introduction.



Fig. 1. Still from Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (00:30:32).

After entering Manderley, the narrator is greeted by the entire house staff, like in the novel. Mrs. Danvers (portrayed by Judith Anderson) walks into the frame, dressed in all black

with her hair pinned up (see Fig. 1) The film version does not look as skeleton-like as the novel version describes her to be, which also erases the visual component of her grief. As Mrs. Danvers and the narrator introduce themselves, the camera alternates between medium close ups of the narrator and Mrs. Danvers (00:30:26-00:30:46). They are both centered and take up most of the frame; by framing the two women in this way, the filmmakers attempt to make each woman have equal power in the conversation. Instead, the use of lighting conveys Mrs. Danvers's superiority over the narrator. While Mrs. Danvers is fully exposed, the narrator must walk through several shadows as she approaches Mrs. Danvers. These shadows work to visually represent her naivety and give more power to Mrs. Danvers.

The filmmakers also include an additional interaction, where the narrator drops her gloves and both women lean down to retrieve them (00:30:46-00:31:02). The viewer watches Mrs. Danvers look down before they see what she is looking at; it then cuts to the narrator dropping her gloves. By having Mrs. Danvers's reaction shot prior to the action, the filmmakers are able to center focus more on Mrs. Danvers. When both women bend down to pick up the gloves, they seem to be again on equal footing. However, the narrator cowers slightly after taking her glove from Mrs. Danvers, and she walks off frame. The camera then pushes into another medium close up of Mrs. Danvers, which centers its focus on her gazing after the new Mrs. de Winter. The inclusion of these scene works to further establish the power dynamics between the two characters. The lingering focus on Mrs. Danvers's gaze works to emphasize her power; as in the male gaze, the person who does the gazing is given the power, and the subject is rendered powerless.

The following scene begins in the narrator's bedroom, where she is brushing her hair. When there is a knock at the door, the narrator stops brushing her hair and calls out, "Oh,

Maxim! Come in!”, only to find that it is Mrs. Danvers at the door. Instead of having Mrs. Danvers escort the narrator to her bedroom like in the novel, the filmmakers instead frame this scene as Mrs. Danvers arriving to check in. Mrs. Danvers delivers much of the same information as her novel counterpart; however, the delivery of the information differs in this version. In the novel, Mrs. Danvers’s mood shifts from melancholy to happiness, when she mentions Rebecca for the first time. In contrast, the film version of Mrs. Danvers is stoic, her expression unchanging upon revealing this information. The camera moves closer to Mrs. Danvers’s as she talks, suggesting that the audience is having a more intimate and personal moment with her character. However, Judith Anderson’s delivery of her dialogue does not allow the viewer to become more intimate or personal with Mrs. Danvers. We are not allowed a momentary glimpse into her relationship with Rebecca; we are forced to assume that their relationship was a working relationship and nothing more.

Once Mrs. Danvers and the narrator leave the room, they walk toward the West Wing. Mrs. Danvers points out the old Mrs. de Winter’s bedroom. Mrs. Danvers tells the narrator, “It’s the most beautiful room in the house, the only one that looks down across the lawns to the sea. It was Mrs. de Winter’s room” (00:33:54-00:34:09). As the narrator stares at the door from afar, Mrs. Danvers stares outside at the rain. Mrs. Danvers’s eyes widen, as she thinks about the late Rebecca. She is captivated by the rain because she is remembering that Rebecca died at sea during a rainstorm. She does not fully reveal her grief; instead, she seems to be trapped in a memory, horrified by the image of the dead Rebecca.

The scoring in this moment additionally re-enforces that Mrs. Danvers’s gaze is not one of longing. Once she reveals that the room was Rebecca’s, dark and ominous music plays in a minor key. The minor key makes the audience feel unsettled; they are more disturbed by the

death of Rebecca than by the information about the West Wing room or by Mrs. Danvers. This ominous music crescendos as the camera pushes closer to the door, indicating that the main focus is the mystery of Rebecca's death. The narrator herself is disturbed by the idea of the late Rebecca. When Mrs. Danvers reveals that the room belonged to Rebecca, the narrator's shoulders rise as if a chill ran up her spine (00:34:02-00:34:03). This moment does not reveal Mrs. Danvers's sexual desire; instead, it sets up suspense.

Despite the erasure of Mrs. Danvers's queerness in these early scenes, the moment between the narrator and Beatrice still holds some significance in revealing Mrs. Danvers's sexuality. As the narrator greets Beatrice and Giles, Beatrice asks the narrator, "And how do you get along with Mrs. Danvers?" (00:42:48-00:42:51). This is the first question that Beatrice asks the narrator, whereas the book version included a much lengthier introduction. By starting the conversation with Mrs. Danvers, the filmmakers are able to condense Beatrice's visit. However, they additionally draw attention to the narrator's relationship with Mrs. Danvers specifically.



Fig. 2. Still from Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (00:43:34).

Once the pair sit on the couch, Beatrice reveals Mrs. Danvers's jealousy to the narrator. Both women are evenly lit, shown in a medium-wide shot of the room. When the narrator asks for clarification, it cuts to a shot over the narrator's shoulder, looking at Beatrice. The lighting shifts to a darker tone. The narrator is enshrouded in shadows, and Beatrice is lit with dark bookshelves behind her. She asks the narrator, "Don't you know? Why I should've thought Maxim would have told you. She simply *adored* Rebecca" (00:43:25-00:43:33). The shift in lighting between these two shots underscores the line of dialogue delivered by Beatrice. It draws attention to the information that Beatrice is providing. After her line is delivered, the narrator is pulled into focus and light shines on her face (00:43:32-00:43:36). The use of focus and lighting here work to emphasize the narrator's newfound knowledge (see Fig. 2). However, she seems disturbed by this knowledge, since it subtextually indicates Mrs. Danvers's sexuality. Nevertheless, this moment does not undo the work of the erasure from the previous forty minutes of the film. Instead, it helps to build more suspense about the larger mystery at hand.

Although this scene with Beatrice hints at Mrs. Danvers's sexuality, it is made more explicit in the bedroom scene. Similar to the novel, this scene exhibits Mrs. Danvers's sexuality most clearly – although it is never explicit. Unlike the novel, however, Rebecca's bedroom is unable to become a queer-exclusive space due to one piece of décor – a large portrait of Maxim on Rebecca's dressing table. Portrait Maxim dominates the space; even when it is out of frame, it governs the space and rejects queer potential. As a result, the power of Mrs. Danvers's words and actions in this space is greatly diminished; Maxim's gaze – that is, the gaze in his portrait – re-enforces heteronormative ideals and silences the queer voice of Mrs. Danvers.

When Mrs. Danvers first enters the room, she appears behind sheer white curtains. These curtains work to visually represent how Mrs. Danvers is "pulling back the veil" to reveal more

about Rebecca. As she pulls back these curtains, she also appears as a mysterious figure. Since Mrs. Danvers is the one who provides the most information about Rebecca, she is enshrouded with the same air of mystery as Rebecca's death. The ominous tone in this scene – which is set by the harsh lighting, narrator's reactions, and musical score – additionally underscores the information being presented to the audience and the narrator.

Like in the novel, Mrs. Danvers shows Rebecca's clothes to the narrator. She begins by showing Rebecca's fur coats, and she highlights a fur coat that Maxim bought. Mrs. Danvers runs the fur over her cheek, then over the narrator's cheek (01:09:21-01:09:47). This moment eroticizes Rebecca's fur coat, and it becomes a moment of physical relish for Rebecca's lost body. However, the coat is also tied to heterosexualism through Maxim. Since the coat was a gift from Maxim, the narrator is not thinking of Rebecca when it is placed against her cheek. Instead, the narrator is thinking of her desire to be Rebecca and to receive expensive gifts from her largely absent and passionless newlywed husband.

Mrs. Danvers then guides the narrator to Rebecca's underwear. She lifts up a few pairs as she describes them, then pats others before closing the drawer (01:09:52-01:10:05). Mrs. Danvers explains that the underwear were “made specially for her by the nuns at the commonwealth of St. Claire” (01:09:58-01:10:02). Similar to the fur coat, Rebecca's underwear are then rendered “harmless” because they become linked to the piety of the nuns at St. Claire. Even as Mrs. Danvers puts Rebecca's intimate garments on exhibition, the garments do not allow Mrs. Danvers to exhibit her sexuality. Since the undergarments are rendered “holy” or “pious,” they are no longer eroticized.

After closing the underwear drawers, Mrs. Danvers leans against the wardrobe. She tells the narrator, “I always used to wait up for her, no matter how late. Sometimes she and Mr. de

Winter didn't come home until dawn" (01:10:05-01:10:13). Again, Mrs. Danvers's dialogue is focused on the relationship between Rebecca and Maxim. She is not yet given the space to discuss her relationship to Rebecca without Maxim's presence. As a result, these moments reveal less about Mrs. Danvers's sexuality and more about her desire to drive the narrator out of Manderley. The narrator crosses her arms or fiddles with her hands as she learns this new information about Maxim and Rebecca; she is less concerned with Mrs. Danvers's sexuality – or her own desire toward Mrs. Danvers – than she is with the idea of her inability to live up to Maxim and Rebecca's supposed happy marriage.



Fig. 3. Still from Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (01:10:50).

Nevertheless, Mrs. Danvers's – and the narrator's – same sex desire is not completely absent from this scene. Mrs. Danvers guides the narrator to the dressing table, where the large portrait of Maxim sits. Mrs. Danvers then relays much of the same information from the novel about her and Rebecca's "hair drill." As she speaks, she pretends to brush the narrator's hair with Rebecca's hairbrush (see Fig. 3). The camera pushes in to focus on the narrator as Mrs.

Danvers speaks (01:10:32-01:10:56). This moment then becomes less about Mrs. Danvers and more about the narrator. As Mrs. Danvers pretends to run the hairbrush in her hair, the narrator becomes more uncomfortable and finally turns to face the portrait of Maxim on the table (01:10:56-01:10:58). In this moment, the narrator is keyed into Mrs. Danvers's desires through the eroticism of hair brushing; however, the looming image of Maxim in the frame informs the audience that the narrator is uncomfortable because of her desire to be Rebecca. The camera, after passing by the narrator's face, then pushes forward even more to focus solely on the portrait of Maxim (01:10:58-01:11:01). By doing so, the filmmakers remind the audience that the only person with any sexual power in this scenario is Maxim, as the man.

Finally, Mrs. Danvers brings the narrator over to the bed. Her discussion of Rebecca's body is absent; however, she does introduce a new component: her hand-embroidered nightdress case for Rebecca. The inclusion of this case works to again subtly imply the intimacy of her relationship with Rebecca without fully revealing it. Additionally, hand embroidery was deemed a feminine and domestic task in this time period. As a result, the audience can excuse this case as a product of Mrs. Danvers's own feminine desires and domestic capabilities.

When Mrs. Danvers pulls the nightdress out of the case to show the narrator, the narrator cowers behind the shadows of the fresh flowers in the room – presumably put there by Mrs. Danvers (01:11:17-01:11:28). Mrs. Danvers urges her to look at the nightdress, and she places her hand beneath its sheerness to show the narrator its delicateness (see Fig. 4). Upon seeing the nightdress closer and listening to Mrs. Danvers describe it, the narrator has to avert her eyes. By recognizing Mrs. Danvers's subverted sexuality, the narrator is horrified and immediately tries to flee the room. More importantly, the narrator's recognition of Rebecca's sexuality and her presumed sexual relationship to Maxim makes her repulsed. In both the film and novel, the

relationship between Maxim and the narrator is depicted as chaste and passionless, which is why the assumed relationship between Rebecca and Maxim is so repulsing to the narrator.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the portrait of Maxim sits across the room from the pair during this interaction. Portrait Maxim watches as the narrator submits to desire – both for knowledge and for Mrs. Danvers – and she immediately is regretful of her choices.

Ultimately, Portrait Maxim keeps both the narrator's and Mrs. Danvers's same-sex desire silenced.



Fig. 4. Still from Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (01:11:27).

More silencing appears in the scene where Mrs. Danvers urges the narrator to jump out of the window (see Fig. 5). Whereas the book version of Mrs. Danvers repeatedly refers to Rebecca as “my lady” during this portion, the film version is more concerned with emphasizing that the narrator does not deserve Maxim. Mrs. Danvers's film counterpart also neglects to reveal more about her own relationship with Rebecca; instead, the focus is put solely on Maxim being distraught after Rebecca's death. Mrs. Danvers reminds the narrator that she can never replace Maxim's “one true love,” Rebecca: “He doesn't need you. He's got his memories. He doesn't

love you. He wants to be alone again with her” (01:23:18-01:23:26). Mrs. Danvers heavily relies on Maxim to make her argument; if the narrator is not able to live up to Rebecca for Maxim, she might as well leave Manderley or die. The suggestion of jumping out the window then becomes a means for Mrs. Danvers to remind the narrator that she is a failed heterosexual partner, rather than to emphasize her own agency in getting rid of the woman who replaced “my lady.”



Fig. 5. Still from Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (01:23:15).

The erasing powers of the film are suddenly lifted in the final scenes. Unlike the novel, the narrator is not allowed to go to London with Crawley or Maxim. As the two men are driving back to Manderley, Mrs. Danvers carries a candle through the house. When she reaches the library where the narrator is sleeping, she pauses and stares down at her. Through the blocking of the scene, Mrs. Danvers is given the power since she is standing and alert whereas the narrator is sitting and asleep (02:07:26-02:08:05). The inclusion of this scene also hints at the fact that Mrs. Danvers burns down Manderley, a fact which is not explicitly stated in the novel. The narrator, upon reuniting with Maxim in front of the burning Manderley, says the following: “Mrs. Danvers. She’s gone mad. She said she’d rather destroy Manderley than see us happy here”

(02:09:14-02:09:20). The inclusion of this line brings Mrs. Danvers's sexuality to the forefront once more. Her destruction of Manderley is done to prevent heterosexual happiness from persevering.



Fig. 6. Still from Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (02:09:44).

However, this inclusion of sexuality is a tool to condemn same-sex desire. The audience sees Mrs. Danvers accidentally burn herself alive in the West Wing bedroom (02:09:24-02:09:52). As noted earlier, the portrait of Maxim removed the potential for the bedroom to be a queer-exclusive place. If Mrs. Danvers's queerness was fully preserved and explored by the film, this moment would be more impactful. It would reflect Mrs. Danvers inability to surrender the queer space to future inhibitors. In contrast, the ending casts Mrs. Danvers as deranged and unable to reconcile her desires with herself. Furthermore, the filmmakers hint at Mrs. Danvers's same-sex desire in this last scene as a means to condemn and punish her for it – a condemnation only achieved through death. The use of fire also connotes Hell imagery, which suggests that Mrs. Danvers is headed toward Hell for her sins of same-sex desire (see Fig. 6).

Although the Hitchcock adaptation of *Rebecca* subtly suggests Mrs. Danvers's sexuality, it simultaneously erases and punishes her for it. The Hays Code certainly played a role in the depiction of same-sex desire; however, it did not totally erase the filmmakers' abilities to create subtext. For the Ben Wheatley adaptation in 2020, the absence of Mrs. Danvers's sexuality is perhaps even more damaging. Free from the restrictions of the Hays Code, Wheatley falls into even more traps than Hitchcock did. Not only does he erase Mrs. Danvers's sexuality, but he also similarly punishes Mrs. Danvers at the end of the film. While the Mrs. Danvers of the Wheatley adaptation (portrayed by Kristin Scott Thomas) admits her love for Rebecca, she also dies by suicide (01:52:10-01:53:25). Again, the lesbian character is punished for her same-sex desire, except in this case she punishes herself intentionally. Although the Hitchcock version fails to fully recognize Mrs. Danvers's sexuality, it ultimately serves her character more justice than Wheatley's version.

***Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café* by Fannie Flagg**

Fanny Flagg originally published her novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café*, in 1987. Since its publication, a companion cookbook and spin-off sequel (*The Wonder Boy of Whistle-Stop*) have been released. Many readers have identified the romantic relationship between Idgie and Ruth in the novel. However, Flagg, in interviews, often denies the overt presence of their relationship – exhibited through crushes, co-parenting, and intimate conversations – throughout the novel.

Although Flagg denies the presence of lesbian characters in her novel, it is likely a component of her own internalized homophobia. As noted by Jan Whitt, Fanny Flagg was in a relationship with Rita Mae Brown when she came up with the idea for *Fried Green Tomatoes* (48). Further, Whitt shares that “Brown...calls Flagg ‘one of the great loves of my life’...” (48).

Fanny Flagg, while denying the presence of lesbian characters in her novel, likewise denies her own sexuality. As Whitt identifies Flagg's internalized homophobia, she poses a question and answer using queer critical theory:

Finally, as in Flagg's case, could a 'lesbian text' be written by a woman who is ambivalent about her own sexual orientation? If she is uncomfortable with her sexuality and claims she has not created a lesbian character, do critics have a right to identify her character as a lesbian in spite of her protests? The answer to the last question...is a resounding 'yes.' (49)

Through the lens of queer theory, critical readers are able to queer a text regardless of authorial intention. As *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café* (both in novel and film adaptation format) is read through a queer critical lens, readers/audience members are able to identify Idgie and Ruth's sexuality and relationship.

Flagg centers queer experiences without ever explicitly identifying sexuality directly; the story of Ruth and Idgie is not a coming-out narrative. Idgie's deviance from social norms for women works hand in hand with her sexuality. Not only is Idgie a transgressor of heterosexuality, but she is also a transgressor of gender norms. Her family's acceptance of these transgressions creates a safe space for Idgie to grow as a character.

Idgie's gender deviance is exhibited through her choice of clothing. During the first description of Idgie's appearance, Ninny tells Evelyn,

'Idgie was about ten or eleven at the time and she had on a brand-new white organdy dress that we'd all told her how pretty she looked in...out of a clear blue sky, Idgie stood up and announced, just as loud... "I'm never gonna wear another dress as long as I live!"

And with that, honey, she marched upstairs and put on a pair of Buddy's old pants and a shirt. To this day, I don't have any idea what set her off. None of us had.' (10)

Idgie's rejection of dresses at this young age is symbolic of her rejection of conventional femininity. By choosing to wear Buddy's clothes, she establishes how masculine clothing makes her feel more empowered. Her mother dismisses this choice, saying, "Now, children, I'm sure your sister will make that one small concession and wear a proper dress if and when the time ever comes. After all, she's stubborn, but she's not unreasonable" (10). Despite Mama Threadgoode dismissing Idgie's rejection of dresses as stubbornness, she eventually recognizes that Idgie will not be comfortable in a dress and instead buys her a "green velvet suit with a bow tie" (11). Ultimately, Idgie's family's support permits her to have a safe space to transgress from societal expectations.

Idgie's sexual transgressions are explored once Ruth arrives, after Buddy's death. As Ninny shares the details of Buddy's death, she shares that Idgie "never was the same after that, not until she met Ruth, then she started getting back to her old self" (33). Ninny identifies Ruth's role in helping Idgie through the healing process. Idgie's closest relationship was with her brother prior to his death. After his death, Ruth then becomes a savior for Idgie, healing her through her companionship. Both Idgie and Ruth identify their companionship as a source of intimacy and desire – although Idgie identifies this intimacy and desire first. Due to Idgie's familial support, she is able to come to terms with her sexuality more easily than Ruth.

Idgie's crush on Ruth is made clear through her actions. Ninny tells Evelyn about how Idgie acted, when Ruth arrived in Whistle Stop:

'The first week Ruth was there, Idgie just hung around in the chinaberry tree, staring at her whenever she went in or out of the house. Then, pretty soon she took to showing off;

hanging upside down, throwing the football in the yard, and coming home with a huge string of fish over her shoulder at the same time that Ruth would be coming across the street from church” (74).

Idgie’s exhibition of her talents for Ruth indicates her desire to impress Ruth. Mama Threadgoode tells her children, “Now children, your sister has a crush, and I don’t want one person to laugh at her. Is that understood?” (74). Mama Threadgoode recognizes that Idgie’s actions are related to her desire for Ruth. Mama Threadgoode does not criticize or condemn Idgie’s interest in Ruth. Instead, she protects Idgie from being ridiculed by her other siblings. Furthermore, Mama Threadgoode acts as a moral compass for both her children and the reader; she teaches both groups that Idgie’s queerness is valid and accepted.

Ninny also indicates the reciprocal nature of Idgie and Ruth’s companionship. She says, ““Everywhere Ruth was, that’s where Idgie would be. It was a mutual thing. They just took to each other, and you could hear them, sittin’ on the swing on the porch, gigglin’ all night. Even Sipsey razzed her. She’d see Idgie by herself and say, “That ol’ love bug done bit Idgie”” (75). While Idgie’s crush on Ruth was clear to her family and Sipsey, Ruth’s romantic desire was less clear. That said, characters outside of the Threadgoode home, such as the members of the River Club, were still able to identify how Ruth enjoyed Idgie’s companionship. Ninny’s explicitness when she shares that “it was a mutual thing” further reveals how Idgie and Ruth would eventually move past friendship.

Perhaps the most intimate moment shared between Idgie and Ruth is when Idgie shows Ruth the beehive at the big oak tree. Idgie tells Ruth to watch her as she collects wild honey from the oak tree, swarmed by thousands of bees. When Idgie returns to Ruth, Ruth begins to cry. Idgie tries to comfort her by saying, ““Just think, Ruth, I never did it for anybody else before.

Now nobody in the whole world knows I can do that but you. I just wanted us to have a secret together, that's all'" (78-79). Idgie's desire to have a secret with only Ruth indicates her desire for intimacy. Simultaneously, this desire mirrors the necessity of secrets when it comes to lesbian sexuality. Scholar Jeff Berglund, an English professor at Northern Arizona University, argues, "Putative heterosexuality makes homosexuality a secret, an absence. In her thought-provoking study *Fatal Women*, Lynda Hart notes that lesbian sexuality entered into discourse *as a secret* (for white women, primarily) and continues to be circulated as a haunting secret..." (132). Furthermore, Idgie's desire to have a secret just between her and Ruth becomes a subversive means to reveal her true feelings to Ruth.

Once Idgie reveals her feelings, Ruth starts to unpack her desire for Idgie. When Idgie asks if Ruth is mad at her, Ruth tells her the following: "'Oh, Idgie, I'm not mad at you. It's just that I don't really know what I'd do if anything ever happened to you. I really don't'" (79). Without consciously acknowledging her sexuality, Ruth identifies that she needs Idgie. Ruth then gives Idgie the pet name of "bee charmer," saying, "'My Idgie's a bee charmer'" (79). By giving Idgie a pet name, Ruth makes their relationship more intimate. She blurs the lines between a friendship and a romantic relationship. As a result, Idgie feels "as happy as anybody who is in love in the summertime can be" (80). Unfortunately, Idgie's happiness is short-lived, as Ruth decides to return home at the end of summer.

Ruth's decision to return home to Valdosta, Georgia is a result of her own internalized homophobia. She learns, through her day at the oak tree with Idgie, that she is unable to deny her feelings for Idgie any longer: "When Idgie had grinned at her and tried to hand her that jar of honey, all these feelings that she had been trying to hold back came flooding through her, and it was in that second in time that she knew she loved Idgie with all her heart" (81). Flagg reveals

Ruth's conscious repression of her "feelings that she had been trying to hold back." In this moment, Ruth acknowledges her sexuality and desire for Idgie; as a result, she believes that she has to punish herself. By returning home, Ruth is able to maintain the heteronormative status quo and uphold her mother's plans for her life. Flagg, through Ruth's perspective, reveals the following:

She had no idea why she wanted to be with Idgie more than anybody else on this earth, but she did. She had prayed about it, she had cried about it; but there was no answer except to go back home and marry Frank Bennett, the young man she was engaged to marry, and to try and be a good wife and mother. Ruth was sure that no matter what Idgie said, she would get over her crush and get on with her life. Ruth was doing the only thing she could do. (81).

Ruth's discomfort with her own sexuality leads her to reject her desire for Idgie. As a religious woman, Ruth relies on God for guidance with her sexuality. Since her religion frowns upon homosexuality, Ruth is unable to reconcile her religious beliefs with her romantic desires. She concludes that the only way to fully reject her desire is by marrying Frank Bennett.

Ruth's decision to leave Idgie and marry Frank causes Idgie's first heartbreak. After Ruth leaves, Idgie periodically checks in on her. Flagg writes, "Two weeks after Ruth Jamison left to go home and get married, Idgie drove into Valdosta and parked on the main street..." (150). Idgie does not wait very long before going to Valdosta to ask about Frank and Ruth; her inability to go more than two weeks without checking in on Ruth reflects her undying love. The next time that Idgie checks on Ruth, it is her wedding day: "Ruth looked as beautiful in her wedding gown as Idgie thought she would...Idgie had been drinking a bottle of rotgut rye since six o'clock that morning, and just before the bride said 'I do,' everyone in the church was wondering who was

outside in the car blowing their horn like that” (154). Idgie’s focus on Ruth’s beauty reminds the reader of her romantic and sexual desire to be with Ruth. Additionally, Idgie attempts to disrupt the wedding by honking the car horn outside. Her attempt ultimately fails; however, it re-affirms her continued love for Ruth.

Two and a half years later, Idgie actually talks to Ruth. Over the course of those two and a half years, “Idgie...had driven over to Valdosta almost every month...to watch Ruth going to and from church” (169). Idgie consistently checked on Ruth, which reveals her continued love. When Idgie arrives at Ruth’s house to talk to her for the first time in years, she tells her, ““I still want you to come back and I’m not a kid anymore, so I’m not gonna change. I still love you and I always will and I still don’t care what anybody thinks –”” (170). Idgie acknowledges that Ruth dismissed her love as a “phase” a few years ago. Through her admission of love, Idgie tries to convince Ruth to come back with her to Whistle Stop. However, Frank interrupts their reunion. His interruption signifies how Ruth’s ties to heteronormativity are still in the way of her full acceptance of her own sexuality. Further, when Frank asks Ruth about Idgie, Ruth says that Idgie’s ““just a friend of mine, someone I used to know”” (170).

Once her mother dies, Ruth no longer has to rely on Frank to support herself and her mother. She sends scripture to Idgie: ““It was just a page torn out of the Bible, King James Version. Ruth 1:16-20: ‘And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from the following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God’”” (183). Ruth is able to surreptitiously ask Idgie for help through this piece of scripture, intentionally from the Book of Ruth. This scripture is also tied to traditional marriage ceremonies, which further reveals Ruth’s romantic desire.

While Idgie's visit plays a role in Ruth's desire to escape, Ruth also identifies all of the toxic and abusive aspects of her marriage as reasons to leave. Flagg returns to the idea of praying to dispel same-sex desire: "But, sometimes, in the middle of a crowd or alone at night, she never knew when it was going to happen, Idgie would suddenly come to mind, and she would want to see her so bad that the pain of longing for her sometimes took her breath away. Whenever it happened, she would pray to God and beg Him to take such thoughts out of her head" (186). Multiple times Ruth exhibited her inability to reconcile religion with desire. Once her mother dies, she is finally able to accept herself and her religion simultaneously. As a result, she uses scripture as a means to tell Idgie to come save her.

Flagg also acknowledges why Ruth stays in her marriage with Frank for so long. She writes,

Ruth couldn't help but think that something inside of her had caused him to hate her; that somehow, no matter how hard she tried to suppress it, Frank felt the love inside she felt for Idgie. It had slipped out somehow, in her voice, her touch; she didn't know how, but she believed he must have known...So she had lived with that guilt and taken the beatings and the insults because she thought she deserved them. (187)

Ruth's internalized homophobia and Christian guilt lead her to believe that she deserved the abuse from Frank. As a result, she remained complacent to the abuse that she received. After talking to her mother about Frank and with Idgie, Ruth is finally able to reconcile her desires and recognize that she deserved better – she deserved Idgie.

Once Ruth returns to Whistle Stop, she finds out that she is pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy, Buddy Jr. By naming her son after Idgie's lost brother, Ruth indicates that she and Idgie are co-parents of her son. Ninny notes that "“Momma said, the first time she saw him, “Oh

look, Idgie, he's got your hair!'" (184). Not only is Idgie identified as the co-parent of Buddy, but her family also jokes that she is the biological parent of the baby. By including these details, Flagg solidifies Ruth and Idgie's relationship and co-parentship. Additionally, much like a daughter-in-law, Ruth apologizes to Idgie's parents: "I should have never left her four years ago, I know that now. But I'm going to try and make it up to her and never hurt her again. You have my word on that" (191). Through her apology to Idgie's parents, Ruth proves to herself and Idgie's parents that she is worthy of Idgie's love and Idgie is worthy of hers.

Even though Buddy Jr. (re-named Stump) calls Idgie "Aunt Idgie," her role as a co-parent is clear. The inclusion of "Aunt Idgie" is a means for Flagg herself to deny Idgie and Ruth's relationship. While Stump's name for Idgie indicates that Idgie and Ruth are not in a romantic relationship, it can also be viewed as a means of protection. During this point in the novel, it is still the 1930s in Alabama. It would not be safe for either Idgie or Ruth to openly admit to their relationship, so they have to protect themselves in all ways possible. As a result, Stump is taught to call Idgie "Aunt Idgie," although she is essentially his parent. Even in a newspaper clipping from *Birmingham News*, this preventative tactic can be seen: "[Stump] is the son of Mrs. Ruth Jamison of Whistle Stop, and when asked about how he became so proficient in sports, he said that his Aunt Idgie, who helped raise him, taught him everything he knows about football" (250). Idgie's role extends beyond just "helping" to raise him, although the *Birmingham News* claims otherwise.

Nevertheless, the *Weems Weekly* – as a safe community space – affirms their co-parentship. In the July 1, 1935 issue, it reads: "Saturday, Ruth and Idgie had a birthday party for their little boy" (70). Idgie is acknowledged as a true parent of Stump, since he is her, and Ruth's, little boy. The *Weems Weekly* also affirms their co-parentship in the June 24, 1936 issue:

“I am sorry to report that Idgie’s and Ruth’s little boy lost his arm last week while playing on the tracks in front of the café” (100). Again, Stump is identified as belonging to both Ruth and Idgie. Besides these two instances where Dot Weems uses possessive language to hint at Idgie’s role as a co-parent, she also calls Idgie a parent directly: “Stump Threadgoode, son of Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison, got a big write-up in the *Birmingham News*. We’re all mighty proud of him, but don’t go in the café unless you’re willing to spend an hour having Idgie tell you all about the game. Never saw a prouder parent” (257). Weems also acknowledges the fact that Stump uses Idgie’s last name, rather than Ruth’s. Although Idgie is relegated to only being “Aunt Idgie,” her role as a parent is re-affirmed by outsiders and by her actions.

After Stump loses his arm, he becomes insecure about how he is different from the kids he is playing with. Ruth does not know how to comfort him: “She knew this day would come, but now that it had, she didn’t know what to say...She looked to Idgie for help” (107). Ruth relies on co-parenting with Idgie, which is why she looks to Idgie for help with Stump. Idgie, who is better with advice, immediately knows what to do. She brings Stump to see her friend’s three-legged dog to teach him that he can do anything. Idgie tells Stump, ““Now, you’re my son and I love you no matter what. You know that, don’t you?”” (108). Idgie herself refers to Stump as her son, and she identifies her unconditional love for him. Additionally, as a transgressor, Idgie is able to teach Stump how to embrace his differences as she did for herself. Idgie, then, creates a safe space for Stump to learn how to accept himself and his body. She does not make him feel bad for his differences; she teaches him how to embrace them as a part of his identity, as indicated by her insistence to call him “Stump.”

Idgie’s role as a co-parent cannot be ignored. Even after Ruth’s death, Idgie continues to care for Stump. Ninny explains Ruth’s death in brief detail to Evelyn. She says that Ruth’s death

was caused by ““that terrible cancer in her female organs”” (272). Ruth’s death, most likely related to ovarian cancer, is a type of punishment for her transgressions away from heteronormativity. Like du Maurier’s Rebecca, Ruth is not able to successfully live a life of transgression. Since Ruth was such a religious character, she is ultimately unable to gain forgiveness for her “sins.” However, her choice to return to Idgie indicates her reconciliation of religion and desire within herself, even if the religious community could never fully accept her. Ruth, as a part of her dying wishes, requests that Idgie and Stump not see her on her deathbed. They are not there for her death, as explained by Ninny: ““Big George and Stump and Idgie were way out in the woods looking for pinecones for her room when Ruth died, and by the time they got back, she had been taken away”” (272). Ultimately, Ruth dies on her own terms, although she is punished for her transgressions.

At the end of the novel, Flagg hints at what Idgie is up to in the present day. When Evelyn goes to visit Ninny’s grave, she finds “a glass jar filled with freshly cut little pink sweetheart roses” by Ruth’s gravestone (376). These roses, left by “Your Friend, The Bee Charmer,” are symbolic of Idgie’s lasting love for Ruth. Idgie can also be seen in the final chapter, where she is running a roadside stand in Marianna, Florida. Although she is not identified by name, readers can easily identify Idgie’s outlandish stories and the wild honey for sale as hints. Ultimately, Idgie is able to live a full life, and she is never punished for being who she is.

Fried Green Tomatoes (1991), directed by Jon Avnet

Jon Avnet’s adaptation of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café* was released in 1991. Working alongside Fanny Flagg (who co-wrote the script), Avnet translated the novel into film format. According to Naomi R. Rockler, the film was a “surprise success” due to its

focus on female friendships: “The film received mixed reviews, yet grossed over double its production cost in just over a month” (90). Although the film’s reception was a surprise to audiences and the filmmakers themselves, widespread adoration for the film hints at the broad spectrum of viewership.

The filmmakers all have different stances on the film in terms of lesbian representation. For *Avnet* and *Flagg*, sexuality is of no importance to the story or characters. *Flagg* argues, “It’s not a political film at all. It’s about the possibilities of people being sweet and loving each other” (*Isaak and Pryor*). *Flagg*’s assertion that *Tomatoes* is not a “political film” insinuates that lesbian representation is a political act. Her argument, then, is that lesbian representation always comes at the cost of viewership and therefore is not worth inclusion. Additionally, she downplays the love of *Idgie* and *Ruth*. While the pair are “sweet” and love each other, they are not in love with each other (*Berglund* 146). Moreover, she trivializes the potential for a lesbian relationship by calling their love “sweet,” which denotes a level of childlike infatuation rather than adult lust. *Avnet*’s argument is similar to that of *Flagg*:

The sexuality had no interest for me. It is what it is or whatever you wanted to think it is. What I wanted to deal with was the intimacy. I wanted two women who loved each other. Women seem to be closer to each other than men. I’m talking about straight women as well as gay women. And that interested me quite a bit. I think intimacy is the most frightening experience of our lifetime. Sexuality has so little to do with it. (qtd. in *Berglund* 147)

Avnet uses vague language to avoid admitting his willful omission of lesbian sexuality. Like *Flagg*, he refers to *Idgie* and *Ruth* as women “who loved each other,” rather than *in* love with each other. He additionally tries to protect himself from ridicule by suggesting that, as a man, he

is fascinated by female relationships simply because he is not a woman. He then reduces the film to a study in female relationships – specifically, friendships.

In contrast with Flagg and Avnet, Mary-Louise Parker (who portrays Ruth in the film) argues that her character's sexuality is overt and expressive in the film. She is the only cast member who has spoken out about representation and sexuality. According to Jeff Berglund, Parker "believes that Ruth and Idgie's lesbianism is so *obvious*, if you simply know how to read between the lines, it does not require any commentary. According to Parker, it also should be *obvious* to anyone why a Hollywood production would deep-six lesbian sexuality: conservative studios and audiences alike would *obviously* spurn such a narrative" (146). Berglund's emphasis of the word "obvious" underscores the one critical issue with Parker's argument: it is not *obvious* to all audiences. Expecting all viewers to immediately pick up on subverted sexuality privileges those who are informed by a queer critical lens, and it disadvantages – or "protects" – those who are unaware of the subtext from ever picking up on lesbian sexuality.

The narrative of Idgie's life, framed by Ninny's narration, begins similarly to the novel. It starts with Idgie as a young girl, and it centers on her relationship with her brother, Buddy, and her transgressions from gender performativity. Ninny tells Evelyn, "I guess to understand Idgie you have to start way back with her brother, Buddy. Idgie was Buddy's pet from the day she was born" (00:07:26-00:07:36). Ninny describes Idgie in relation to her brother, and she emphasizes Idgie's desire to be like him. On the day of her sister's, Leola's, wedding, Idgie descends the staircase wearing a dress. Idgie smiles – perhaps facetiously – at her family waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Her smile falters, however, when her brother, Julian, teases her (00:08:37-00:09:15). Idgie's rejection of dresses, then, becomes a result of teasing. She is not given the opportunity to make the decision to reject conventional femininity on her own. Instead, she relies

on her brother to make her feel unconfident in feminine clothing. Nevertheless, Idgie is still able to transgress from conventional femininity. Like in the novel, Idgie is safe to transgress within her community. However, her transgressions are never verbally accepted by her family members, unlike the novel.

The most striking delineation from the novel occurs during Ruth's introduction to the film. Ninny narrates the wedding scene, telling Evelyn that "I don't think there ever was a sweeter boy than Buddy Threadgoode. I had the biggest crush on him. He was the biggest flirt. But his heart belonged to Ruth Jamison. Now she was the daughter of a friend of his momma's, who was visiting that summer" (00:12:05-00:12:28). The film introduces Ruth in relation to Buddy. As a result, her ties to Idgie are changed entirely. She is no longer Idgie's childhood crush; instead, she belongs to Buddy.

The act of gazing becomes important in this first introduction as well. Buddy looks up at Ruth as Ninny narrates. Idgie, on Buddy's back, looks away from Ruth (00:12:20-00:12:23). It is clear that Buddy, as both the man and a young adult, is given the power to gaze at Ruth. Idgie is not granted that same power, since she is still a girl. After Buddy looks past the camera toward Ruth off-screen, the film cuts to a shot of Ruth looking up to meet Buddy's gaze. She smiles at him, before averting her gaze bashfully (00:12:23-00:12:29). The film, through Buddy and Ruth's gazes, is able to establish their flirtatious relationship. Additionally, in the following shot, Buddy puts Idgie down as he talks to Ruth (whose face is not shown). Buddy and Ruth are then on equal footing in the shot, as they both have the same stature (00:12:29-00:12:35). Idgie, in contrast, is placed below them; she is trivialized as the "pet" of Buddy.

A similar tactic is used when Buddy and Ruth are kissing. They are in the foreground of the shot, with an umbrella blocking outsiders – namely, Idgie – from watching them kiss. When

Ruth's hat blows off of her head, she lowers the umbrella as her and Buddy separate (00:13:38-00:13:44). In between Buddy and Ruth, Idgie can be spotted in the background as a spectator (00:13:41-00:13:42). Again, Idgie is ostracized from the moment, although she is allowed to be a witness (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Still from *Avnet*, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (00:13:41). Accessed from MovieClips.com.

Both Idgie and Ruth become witnesses to Buddy's death. As Buddy chases Ruth's hat down the train tracks, Idgie and Ruth giggle at his failed attempts to catch it. However, he ultimately is unable to escape the tracks as an incoming train arrives (00:13:42-00:15:07). Idgie and Ruth's relationship, from here on out, is framed by their shared trauma over Buddy's death, rather than their own interactions with each other. For Idgie, she loses the person she was closest to. For Ruth, she loses her lover. This moment in the film directly contrasts with the novel. Ninny explains the story of Buddy's death: "He had been flirting around with that pretty Marie Miller that day, and as the train pulled away, he'd stepped on the track, tipped his hat, and flashed his lady's smile at her; just as the whistle blew...But the one who took it the hardest was Idgie. She must have been twelve or thirteen at the time, and had been over in Troutville playing ball" (33). The film makes Idgie a witness to her brother's death, whereas she is not present in

the novel. Additionally, the substitution of Marie Miller with Ruth establishes a relationship between Buddy and Ruth that was non-existent in the novel, since Ruth arrived after Buddy had already died. Ultimately, the film versions of both Ruth and Idgie are bound together by their shared trauma over losing Buddy, who they both loved. The film, then, undoes Idgie and Ruth's romantic desire for each other by informing the audience that their relationship is grounded in their grief for Buddy.

The film, upon re-introducing Ruth, once again ties her to heterosexuality. She is tied to Buddy in the first introduction, and she is tied to Frank in the second. The next time that audiences see Idgie and Ruth is years later, when Idgie is older. As Idgie (portrayed by Mary Stuart Masterson) returns home, she runs into Frank Bennett standing by his car outside of her house. It is soon revealed that Ruth has arrived to stay for the summer; Mama Threadgoode hopes that Ruth could help Idgie work through her grief (00:23:03-00:24:25). Frank's presence in this moment indicates that he was the one who drove Ruth to Whistle Stop. Their relationship is visually confirmed for the audience, whereas the novel suppresses the information of their engagement until Ruth reveals it.

With the film's re-writing of Buddy's death, it additionally re-casts Idgie as stubborn and unwilling to spend time with Ruth. This directly contrasts the novel, where she is actively seeking ways to spend time with Ruth and impress her. The film version of Idgie seeks out ways to avoid Ruth to the point where Ruth pleads to Idgie: "If you give me a chance – a chance to get to know you – maybe it'll be fun!" (00:27:25-00:27:34). Moreover, Idgie's unwillingness to forge a relationship with Ruth indicates that she is not sexually or romantically attracted to her. She is forced to spend time with Ruth; through these forced hangouts, she is able to become her

friend. Audiences only see Idgie and Ruth forcibly hanging out once after Ruth pleads to spend time together: when they throw the cans of food off the trains.

The lack of relationship development beyond this one forced hangout erases the intimacy of their relationship. When Idgie willingly decides to hang out with Ruth the next day, she brings her to the big oak tree. In the novel, this moment occurs after Ruth and Idgie have both developed their intimate relationship with one another, a development which is nonexistent in the film. The scene opens with a shot of a picnic blanket with a meal (00:33:06-00:33:08). While, in other contexts, a picnic lunch may appear to have a romantic undertone, it loses its symbolic meaning in the context of the film. Throughout the film, there are prolonged shots of food in each new setting. Food is not used as a symbol of love; it is used as a symbol of friendship and community. Evelyn and Ninny share different snacks at the nursing home, while Ruth and Idgie share a picnic lunch. By paralleling the relationships between people in the present and in the past, the film works to underscore its driving topic: friendship. No longer is Ruth and Idgie's relationship romantic, it is a friendship.

When Idgie leaves to collect honey from the beehive, the sound design reveals the disconnect between Idgie and Ruth. In the shots where Idgie is near the bees, their buzzing is dominating. This contrasts the shots of Ruth watching Idgie, where the buzzing is almost silent (00:33:23-00:34:30). Although this sound design effectively communicates how Ruth is not in the same place as Idgie, it additionally distances Ruth aurally from the action occurring. In the novel, Ruth's reaction to the bees is visceral. Her reaction stems from her fear that she could lose Idgie in that moment. Her reaction to Idgie's bee charming is additionally the first moment where Ruth admits her own desire to be with Idgie. If the filmmakers wanted to translate Ruth's

emotional state to the audience, the inclusion of loud buzzing during her reaction shots would have been an effective means of placing Ruth closer to the action emotionally.

Instead, audiences have to rely on Ruth's facial reactions and the camera movements to understand how she feels. This reliance leaves much room for audience interpretation, which allows audiences without a queer critical lens to ignore the potential for desire in this scene. In each reaction shot, the camera pushes in closer to Ruth. Her proximity to the camera indicates that the audience is meant to be learning something intimate about the character. However, Ruth's – or, rather, Mary Louise Parker's – reactions do not reveal anything new about her character. Ruth appears to be more shocked than genuinely fearful for Idgie's life. Instead of trying to move toward Idgie and attempt to save her, she backs away (00:34:07-00:34:10). When Idgie begins walking more steadily toward her, Ruth's reaction shifts from fear to wonder (00:34:18-00:34:22). She is no longer afraid of the bees; she is impressed with Idgie.

Besides Ruth's facial reactions and camera movement, her impassiveness when Idgie returns indicates her lack of emotional and romantic connection to Idgie. In the novel, Ruth breaks down into tears when Idgie returns, and she admits her fear (78). The film chooses to omit key lines of dialogue that make Ruth's – and Idgie's – desire clear. For example, Idgie does not express a desire to share her bee charming secret with Ruth. As a matter of fact, Idgie does not claim it is a secret at all: "I'm sorry. Don't you want the honey? Got it just for you. It's alright. I do it all the time. I never get stung. Honest. Don't be mad at me, Ruth" (00:34:48-00:34:56). Although Idgie defends her actions and tries to assure Ruth that she is safe, she does not do so in an effort to calm or soothe Ruth. Since Ruth is not crying, Idgie does not have to console her. Instead, this line of dialogue works to defend her actions from her new, and cautious, friend. Ruth's caution about the bees parallels her caution about throwing the canned food to Troutville

in the scene prior. Ruth is characterized by her caution, and Idgie is characterized by her impulse.

Additionally, Ruth's admission of desire is omitted from the dialogue. She responds with a simple, "Idgie, I'm not mad at you" (00:34:57-00:34:59). In the novel, Ruth goes on to explain that "'It's just that I don't really know what I'd do if anything ever happened to you. I really don't'" (79). However, the film version of Ruth does not deliver this critical piece of dialogue, which reveals Ruth's reciprocal desire in the novel. Flagg even notes that, in response to Ruth's words, "Idgie's heart started pounding so hard it almost knocked her over" (79). With the omission of this line – and Idgie's response – the film effectively removes sexuality from the scene. Although the next few exchanges of dialogue and smiles could work as subversive expressions of sexuality, they are rendered powerless by the filmmakers neglect to include Ruth's admission of desire (00:35:00-00:35:40). Even when Ruth finally calls Idgie a bee charmer, the possessive use of "my" is omitted (00:35:29-00:35:37). Idgie is not Ruth's because they do not have sexual or romantic desire for each other in the film; they do not have the power to claim each other.

The transition into the next scene is a knock on a door (00:35:46-00:35:47). If some audiences read the exchange of honey as an admittance of sexuality, they are visually and aurally disoriented by the quick transition out of this moment. Additionally, the knock is heard before it is seen, since the editor(s) use a j-cut for the audio. Even as the audience is contemplating the possibility of Ruth and Idgie's sexualities being revealed, they are drawn quickly out of the moment and forced to move on to the next scene. Through subversion and limited screen time, this exchange of honey should not be viewed as a legitimate moment of representation, since the

filmmakers do not allow sexuality to be vocalized or for the exchange to end without aural interruption.

Nevertheless, there is one moment in the oak tree scene that some scholars use to “prove” the presence of sexuality (see Fig. 8). Idgie offers Ruth some honey, and Ruth reaches over and scoops some out of the jar with her fingers (00:35:41-00:35:46). Expanding on an analysis of the film by James Parish, Laura Lindenfeld, a contributor to the anthology entitled *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, argues, “Honey comes to signify the love and affection between these two women in this ‘quietly stated study of (un)requited lesbian love, of two women sharing friendship, obstacles and joys as their reliance on one another deepens over the years,’” (228). As Parish and Lindenfeld argue, this scene is a “quietly stated study.” Moreover, the exchange of honey in this moment is a subversive means to express sexuality. Ruth and Idgie are not given the power to vocally or physically express their attraction to one another in this scene, like they are granted in the novel. Instead, they are given a five second moment, which subtextualizes their desire. Since the rest of the bee charmer scene re-writes this moment from the novel to be devoid of sexuality, this five second clip of subversion cannot be accepted as a rewardable moment of representation.



Fig. 8. Still from *Avnet*, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (00:35:43)

Additionally, viewing this exchange of honey as a sexual encounter becomes problematic, especially in Lindenfeld's argument. She argues that the exchange "underlines the connection between food and female sexuality" (228). By tying female sexuality to food, she reinforces a gendered perspective, which relegates women to being inextricably bound to food and food production. According to Lindenfeld, even in the expression of sexuality, women are valued based upon their connections to food. For a lesbian relationship, this perspective is dually harmful, since it trivializes both partners' sexual and romantic experiences and ties these experiences to heteronormative domesticity. Furthermore, this exchange of honey can and should only be viewed as an extension of good will, as Idgie and Ruth solidify their friendship and nothing more.

In contrast with the novel, Idgie does not continually check on Ruth after she leaves Whistle Stop. However, Idgie still visits Ruth on her wedding day, and she watches as Frank and Ruth return home as a newlywed couple (00:38:25-00:38:38). Idgie does not go to the church and honk her car horn to disrupt the ceremony. The filmmakers' omission of this detail indicates that Idgie is not upset or heartbroken over Ruth's marriage. Instead, Idgie appears to miss her short-lived friendship with her clearest connection to Buddy. Since she does not periodically check in on Ruth and Frank, her visit to Ruth's front door is less impactful. She appears as an old friend, curious to see what Ruth has been up to in the past years. Once Ruth comes to the door, Idgie hands her a pie and says, "Oh, Momma said to give you this pie, so..." (00:44:01-00:44:09). Idgie's visit is then motivated by the task of delivering the pie. In the novel, Idgie does not give any sort of excuse or reason for her visit. She just arrives and declares her persistent love for Ruth.

Ruth voices heteronormative ideals while talking to Idgie at her doorstep. Ruth muses: “The guys must be wild about you. Tell me, do you have a fella yet?” Idgie tells her, “Uh, a couple. I haven’t decided on any. Grady’s the most persistent” (00:44:22-00:44:37). Ruth expects Idgie to be in a relationship by now. More importantly, Ruth expects Idgie to be in a heterosexual relationship. Idgie admits that Grady, the sheriff, has persistently tried to be with her, but Idgie’s rejection of Grady does not seem to be a rejection of heterosexuality. Her use of the word “decided” implies that Idgie is actively seeking a male partner, although she has not found one that she wants to be with yet. In the following scene, Grady unsuccessfully hits on Idgie at the River Club. In a voice over, Ninny laughs and says, “None of the guys at Eva’s River Club could tame Idgie” (00:46:56-00:46:59). The film then suggests that the only reason why Idgie is not with a man yet is because she has not been “tamed,” which implies that the taming process is related to heterosexual relationships. Since she was still able to transgress gender norms, she is not able to be “tamed” like the other, gender norm-conforming women. Her inability to be “tamed” is used as the excuse for why Idgie never marries a man during the rest of the film. Furthermore, Ruth and Idgie’s discussion during Idgie’s visit starkly contrasts that of the novel, where Idgie is proclaiming her love for Ruth and only Ruth: ““I still love you and I always will and I still don’t care what anybody thinks –”” (170).

Idgie’s visit in the film is primarily used as a plot device to reveal Ruth’s abuse. In the novel, Idgie learns about Frank during her frequent check ins. Conversely, the film reveals this information during Idgie’s visit. After Idgie’s visit, Ruth sends the obituary of her mother along with the quotation from the Book of Ruth (00:47:00-00:47:38). In the following scene, they go to rescue Ruth. When Idgie, Julian, and Big George arrive, Ruth is sitting upstairs at the window. Without turning to look at Idgie, Ruth tells her, “Momma died...and I’m pregnant” (00:48:08-

00:48:16). In the novel, Ruth does not know that she is pregnant until after she moves to Whistle Stop. Ruth's letter to Idgie in the film then becomes a means to save her future child, rather than an admission of desire. Ruth is not leaving Frank because she is finally accepting her sexuality; she is leaving him because she will not tolerate the abuse of her unborn child.

Once Ruth returns to Whistle Stop, they open the café not too long afterward. One key scene takes place in the café: the food fight scene. For viewers and some scholars, it serves as "evidence" of same-sex relationships in the film. Jon Avnet himself, despite sexuality being of "no interest" for him, has also spoken about this scene in terms of same sex desire. In the director's commentary of the DVD, he says, "This scene, you know, was a very important scene to me...in terms of finding ways to physicalize and fun the relationship between Mary Stuart and Mary Louise because, in a way, it's a love scene." Like Laura Lindenfeld and James Parish, Avnet ties female sexuality – and, more importantly, lesbian sexuality – to food and food production. Despite Avnet's claim that sexuality is not a component of the film, this commentary reveals that he does identify the characters as having a "physicalized" and "fun" moment. As a result, his intentions are unclear; he tries to omit their sexualities entirely, while he claims that this moment is intentionally tied to the physical expression of love. If this moment is intentionally sexualized, it simultaneously sexualizes food (as prepared by women) and makes Ruth and Idgie players in a heterosexual fantasy – a fantasy reinforced by the presence of Grady throughout the scene.

Lindenfeld devotes attention to the food fight scene in her article. She writes, "The scene gradually builds up the sexual tension between the two women, and it comes as no surprise that the most sexually charged and physical scene between the women in the film occurs in conjunction with food" (235). Again, Lindenfeld suggests that food and female sexuality are tied

to one another. However, this argument is grounded in heteronormative domesticity. Even if Lindenfeld's assessment of same-sex attraction had merit, this scene is a subverted expression of sexuality. The presence of Grady reminds the audience that same-sex desire is not permissible. The filmmakers interject the shots of the food fight with shots of Grady eating his pie in the diner (see Fig. 9). The first shot pans from his half-eaten pie up to his face. He looks suspiciously toward the kitchen as the two women laugh (01:02:09-01:02:14). His reaction shots reinforce heterosexual ideals and denounce lesbian sexuality. As he eats his pie (prepared by the women), he is thrown off by the sounds of their laughter in the kitchen. After Idgie and Ruth fall to the ground, Grady furrows his eyebrows and gets up from his seat in the diner (01:02:21-01:02:23). He then inserts himself into their subversive expression of sexuality, standing above the two women, who are on the ground, effectively ruining their personal moment. The filmmakers use a low angle to reflect that Grady is the one with the power in this scene. Also, due to his exhibited interest in dating Idgie, this moment punishes Idgie further for her transgressions. He symbolizes a potential heterosexual partner that Idgie rejected due to her inability to be "tamed."



Fig. 9. Still from *Avnet, Fried Green Tomatoes* (01:02:13). Accessed from MovieClips.com.

Grady then threatens to arrest the women, and Ruth takes action. She tells Idgie, "Let me handle this" (01:02:45-01:02:46). She smears chocolate pudding on Grady's face, effectively

bringing Grady into their food fight (see Fig. 10). Ultimately, due to Ruth's actions, the food fight cannot and should not be viewed as a sexual encounter. Their playful moment is not related to sexuality; instead, it is related to power dynamics. As the two women fight, they challenge one another for power in the scene. Ruth makes fun of Idgie for her inability to embrace feminine ideals (as dictated by patriarchal society), since Idgie is unable to make fried green tomatoes. They then challenge one another's expression of femininity and masculinity, respectively. Once Grady arrives and asserts his male dominance, Ruth brings him into this fight in order to give herself, and femininity, more power. If this was a sexual encounter, Ruth would not want Grady to be included in their fight. Ultimately, this scene is best understood as a playful exchange of power.



Fig. 10. Still from Avnet, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (01:02:52). Accessed from MovieClips.com

After this scene, there are no others that suggest acting upon subverted sexuality. During the trial of Frank Bennett, the filmmakers reinforce the key topic of friendship. In the novel, the trial happens years after Ruth's death. Conversely, the film includes Ruth in the trial, and she is used as a witness. When Ruth is on the witness stand, she delivers a key line of dialogue: "She's the best friend I ever had, and I love her" (01:31:12-01:31:18). While this line could be viewed

through a queer lens, it ultimately is unable to escape its literal meaning in favor of queer subtext. The film relies heavily on the idea of friendship – specifically female friendship – and ignores the possibility for deeper relationships between women. The distinction between loving and being “in love” is also pertinent when watching this scene. Since the women never overtly reveal or act upon lesbian sexuality, this line merely serves to allow Ruth to express to Idgie how thankful she is for their close friendship. Their close friendship mirrors that of Ninny and Evelyn, and the conclusion of the film conflates these friendships further.

The last scene of the film solidifies the erasure of Idgie and Ruth’s sexualities. It is established early on in the film that Ninny married Idgie’s brother, Cleo. However, the last scene conflates Ninny with Idgie, and, for the casual viewer, it is difficult to understand the truth of Ninny’s identity. When Evelyn and Ninny visit Ruth’s grave, Evelyn finds a jar of honey and an attached note. As Evelyn walks over to the gravestone, the film cuts to a shot of Ninny smiling broadly, knowingly (02:04:00-02:04:04). Evelyn reads the note, which says, “I’ll always love you, the Bee Charmer” (02:04:08-02:04:10). Evelyn reads the card and looks at Ninny and asks, “Idgie?” (02:04:11-02:04:12). Ninny smiles with a small shrug.

The scene continues as both Evelyn and Ninny talk about Idgie, but their expressions suggest that Ninny is actually Idgie. By conflating Ninny with Idgie in these last moments of the film, the film firmly grounds all female relationships in friendship. The filmmakers parallel the friendships between Ruth and Idgie with Evelyn and Ninny to the point of conflating Idgie with Ninny. As a result, audiences understand Idgie as “the best friend” that Ruth – and Evelyn – ever had.

Naomi R. Rockler conducted reader-response interviews for the film, and she found that the majority of the participants (of which there were ten college-aged students) thought that

Ninny and Idgie were the same person because of this conflation. She writes, “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” (98). Furthermore, the conflation of Ninny with Idgie in the last scene of the film is another means of erasing lesbian sexuality. Before audiences conclude the film, heterosexuality is reimposed on both Ruth and Idgie. As a result, people are unable to decipher whether or not a queer critical lens is even effective in uncovering the sexualities of these women. Arguably, what is left out of the film reveals Idgie and Ruth’s sexualities better than the film on its own ever could. Through a framework of friendship, the film retains “safety” in its exclusion of lesbian identity. By subverting and excluding moments of sexuality, the filmmakers were ultimately able to protect their “surprise success” film from losing viewership due to the inclusion of lesbian relationships and identity.

Nevertheless, the film also received an accolade that suggests that it should be praised for its representation: the 1992 GLAAD award for Best Feature Film with Lesbian Content. However, this award does not reflect *Fried Green Tomatoes*’s success in representing lesbian identity on the screen. Instead, this award works to pointedly criticize the filmmakers for erasing Idgie and Ruth’s sexualities. As GLAAD executive director Ellen Carton noted at the time,

Lesbians are invisible in Hollywood...The only movie coming up that portrays one at all is *Basic Instinct*, and she’s a man-hating killer. *Tomatoes*’ filmmakers may have wanted to tone down the lesbian content. Too bad. But we recognize these women as lesbians. And giving the award is a way for us to acknowledge that these are lesbians.” (qtd. in Isaak and Pryor)

Furthermore, Carton, and the GLAAD organization as a whole, queer the film in order to make mainstream audiences aware of what the film omits, rather than what it includes. By “rewarding” the *Tomatoes*’ filmmakers for their “lesbian content,” GLAAD effectively draws attention to the glaring lack of representation of lesbians in mainstream film media. More importantly, GLAAD recognizes the subversion of lesbian identity in the film; with a queer critical lens, viewers are able to point out the moments where Idgie and Ruth’s queerness can be seen. Nevertheless, the ways in which the filmmakers erase identity throughout *Fried Green Tomatoes* has more impact on audiences.

The representation of Idgie and Ruth on the screen does not end with Avnet’s film. In October 2020, *Variety* released an exclusive article about a Reba McEntire produced (and Fanny Flag executive produced) television series that is slated to come to NBC. The article provides the following premise:

The hour-long drama project is described as a modernization of the novel and movie that explores the lives of descendants from the original work. When present day Idgie Threadgoode (McEntire) returns to Whistle Stop after a decade away, she must wrestle with a changed town, estranged daughter, faltering café and life-changing secret.

(Otterson)

Based upon this premise, it is likely that the show will further erase the sexualities of Idgie and of Ruth. With the introduction of an “estranged daughter,” Idgie is apparently the biological mother of a daughter. Additionally, Fanny Flagg’s involvement in the show as executive producer implies that she will have a hand in further erasing and hiding the sexualities of her characters. At this time, it does not seem like either Idgie or Ruth will ever be able to openly express their sexualities on the screen.

Black Panther: World of Wakanda

In 2016, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther #1* debuted. Coates is the most recent in the line of Black Panther writers, a lineage which began with Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1966. At the time of his creation, Black Panther was a Black character created by white men for a predominantly white audience (Peters). According to an interview with Jack Kirby in 1990, he created Black Panther because "I realized I had no Blacks in my strip...I had a lot of Black readers. My first friend was...Black! And here I was ignoring them because I was associating with everybody else" (qtd. in Mattimore). While well-intentioned, the initial version Black Panther was created through a white perspective and was inherently problematic.

Nevertheless, Black creators soon made their mark on the Black Panther universe, starting with illustrator Billy Graham in 1973. Graham had started working in the comic industry just four years earlier in 1969 for Warren Publishing, where he became the first Black art director in the comics industry (Howe). Once he joined Marvel in 1972, he became the first Black person to work for Marvel. For his first year working for Marvel, he primarily worked on Luke Cage comics. When Marvel started dedicating more attention to Black Panther, Graham became the main Black Panther artist (Howe).

While Graham made history as the first Black illustrator – and employee – for Marvel, it was not until 1998 that a Black writer spearheaded a Black Panther comic series. Christopher Priest was the first Black editor/writer to work on the Black Panther character. Even more striking, he was the first Black editor/writer to work for a mainstream comic industry, like Marvel (Riesman). Priest was also the man behind the creation of the Dora Milaje, the exclusively female group of warriors in Wakanda. Unfortunately, his creation of the Dora Milaje was rooted in sexism and heteronormative idealization. As andré carrington notes, "Priest's

introduction of the...Dora Milaje, a moniker to which he assigned the pseudotranslation ‘Adored Ones,’ left a troubling legacy for future writers...He depicted the women warriors as wives-in-waiting for the Black Panther; they spoke only to him and addressed him as ‘Beloved’” (227). Priest’s creation of the Dora Milaje as “wives-in-waiting” stems from both a sexist and heteronormative standpoint, wherein the authorial male figure is able to take advantage of whatever woman he desires.

Despite the origins of the Dora Milaje, Priest’s successors have worked to give power back to female characters in the Wakandan universe. Christopher Priest’s series – which Ta-Nehisi Coates dubs “*the classic run on Black Panther*” – ran until 2004, when his spin-off series *The Crew* was cancelled after seven issues (Riesman). Priest, tired of being relegated to only Black Panther comics, left Marvel in 2005 (Riesman). Once Priest had vacated the position, Reginald Hudlin took over, writing two Black Panther series which ran from 2005-2008 and 2009-2010, respectfully. During Hudlin’s time at Marvel, he worked to flesh out Wakanda as a location and introduced Shuri, T’Challa’s younger sister, to the comics. More importantly, he also moved Shuri into the title role of Black Panther in 2009, which was the first time that a woman stepped into the Black Panther role (Morse).

Ta-Nehisi Coates, upon taking the reins in 2016, re-imagined the character that his predecessors had brought to life. Coates additionally brought two Black lesbian characters to the forefront of the Black Panther universe: Ayo and Aneka, two ex-members of the Dora Milaje. However, Coates did not create either character. Instead, he worked to expand upon their existing characters. Aneka was first introduced by Jonathan Maberry and Will Conrad in *Black Panther* (2009) #8. Ayo first appeared in *Ultimates* (2015) #1, and she first spoke in the second issue of that series. In the second issue, she stands up to T’Challa and challenges his decision

making. According to the Marvel overview of her character, she “is not one to spare the truth or cave to the might of the Black Panther” (Williams). With the groundwork completed for Aneka and Ayo’s characters, Coates took their characters a step further in *Black Panther* #1 and fleshed out their sexualities.

These characters were soon given their own dedicated comic series, written by Roxane Gay, Yona Harvey, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. This comic series, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, centers on the backstory of Ayo and Aneka’s characters and their journey to becoming the Midnight Angels, a version of the Dora Milaje not governed by the Wakandan throne. The series also devotes focus to developing Ayo and Aneka’s romantic relationship against the backdrop of the Black Panther universe and fleshes out Aneka and Ayo’s sexualities in a three-dimensional ways.

The story begins at the headquarters of the Dora Milaje: Upanga. Mistress Zola and Captain Aneka greet the eighteen new recruits, one from each of the eighteen Wakandan villages. Ayo is among these new recruits, and she immediately makes her presence known as she criticizes Upanga’s facilities. Aneka, asserting her dominance, immediately rebuttals: “‘Ayo,’ is it? Ayo, you are nothing more than a beautiful village girl, and you presume to think this space, which has forged hundreds of Dora Milaje, doesn’t look like much?” (A few pages into issue #1).



Fig. 11. Panel from *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, Issue #1.

During this first interaction, the creators foreshadow Aneka and Ayo's romantic relationship. In the panel following Aneka's rebuttal, the two women are shown inches apart as they talk to one another (see Fig. 11). Aneka's gaze is directed toward Ayo's lips, and Ayo focuses on Aneka's word choice in her thoughts: "She called me 'beautiful'?" (A few pages into *Issue #1*). Through the textual and visual components of the comic, Aneka and Ayo's relationship and attraction to one another is explicit; the comic book format lends itself to this explicitness. As Ta-Nehisi Coates notes in *The Atlantic*,

An old saw in art and in journalism holds that one should show and not tell. In comic books, the notion is doubly true. Unlike in prose or even poetry, the writer has to constantly think visually. Exposition and backstory exist, but the exigencies of comic-book storytelling demand that they be folded into the action.

The visual component of the comic-book format also means that Aneka and Ayo's lesbianism is not sub-textualized or subverted by the creators. Whereas *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café* are able to hide their lesbian characters from certain readers through the use of subtext, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* cannot, and seemingly does not want to, hide its lesbian characters.



Fig. 12. Panels from *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, *Issue #1*.

After their first interaction, Aneka and Ayo's dynamic is further developed as they pass one another in the lower levels of Upanga. Aneka stops Ayo, and Ayo questions, "Why do you care if I walk away?" (halfway through *Issue #1*). Aneka verbally dismisses Ayo's question, but her inner thoughts are revealed: "Because even if it is mere moments, that will be too long before I see you again" Aneka's inner thoughts voice her same-sex desire that she is not yet able to vocalize or act upon; she restrains herself from doing so. In contrast, Ayo is comfortable with her desire. In a following panel (see Fig. 12), she corners Aneka and places her hand on her cheek. In this close-up, Ayo and Aneka's gazes reflect their desire for one another. In the following panel, their hands and mouths are centered in an extreme close up. Readers are brought into this intimate moment, and they are forced to focus on the pair's hands and mouths. However, the two go on their separate ways, as they hear other Dora Milaje making their way up the stairs.



Fig. 13. Panels from *Black Panther: World of Wakanda, Issue #1*.

Later that evening, Ayo goes to visit Aneka. After knocking on Aneka's door, Ayo waits for a response (see Fig. 13). The panels for this interaction work to visually distance and separate Aneka and Ayo. They both lean against the door, which indicates their desire to talk. However,

the door blocks them from being able to act upon their desire. Aneka's hand hesitates above the door handle; it is her hesitation that comes between their relationship. Aneka's internalized homophobia and duty as the captain of the Dora Milaje prevent her from acting on her desire. She thinks, "I am a captain of the Dora Milaje. I will not be broken by an initiate still wet behind the ears. She is nothing to me. The softness of her skin is nothing to me. Her eyes are nothing to me" (Halfway through *Issue #1*). Aneka reveals, through her thoughts, that she is actively trying to bury her desire for Ayo's skin and her eyes.



Fig. 14. Panels from *Black Panther: World of Wakanda, Issue #1*.

Despite Aneka's efforts to disguise her desire, she does subtly hint at her romantic and sexual attraction to Ayo. During the Dora Milaje Initiation Ceremony, Aneka gives a toast (see Fig. 14). When she says, "...and we love together," Ayo is the subject of her gaze (Near the end of *Issue #1*). Although Aneka is addressing all of the members of the Dora Milaje when she says this, the panel looks at Ayo over Aneka's shoulder. By using this over-the-shoulder perspective, the illustrators force readers to take on Aneka's perspective. Both the reader and Aneka look at

Ayo as she discusses love. Moreover, Aneka is given the power to gaze upon Ayo as she brings up love. This conclusion to the first comic acknowledges both Aneka and Ayo's desire to be with one another, a desire which is acted upon in the second issue of the series.

Halfway through the second issue, Aneka and Ayo's sexual tension culminates in an almost full-page image of them kissing (see Fig. 15). The dedication of almost a full page to this image forces the reader to slow down and focus on this moment. When there are many images on a page, the pacing of the action is faster. However, the almost full-page panel of them kissing indicates that the creators want readers to pause and take in this moment. The illustration is a close up of the two women; the readers are brought into their intimate moment, and they are not able to ignore Aneka and Ayo's romantic and sexual relationship. Alongside this illustration, an extreme close-up of Aneka's finger on Ayo's lip is also shown. These panels ultimately work to emphasize the explicit sexual nature of their relationship.



Fig. 15. Panel from *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, Issue #2.

These sexual undertones are made even more overt on the following page, where there are multiple panels depicting “the morning after.” In the “morning after” scene, Gay begins to further explore Aneka’s inner conflict. Although neither of the women seem to have an issue with acting upon their attraction at first, Aneka becomes self-aware of her duty to the throne afterwards. Priest’s casting of the Dora Milaje as “wives-in-waiting” for King T’Challa works as an obstacle to Ayo and Aneka’s expression of their sexualities. Ayo questions if she, and their potential relationship, is a “bad thing,” which brings internalized homophobia to the forefront. For Aneka, her role as a Dora Milaje means that she must live in a state of self-denial for any romantic interests, including her interest in Ayo. Aneka immediately dismisses Ayo’s question of homophobia, noting the following: “You are a very good thing, the **best** thing. But we are supposed to offer ourselves in service to the king in all ways” (Halfway through *Issue #2*). Although Aneka tries to suggest that their relationship is not a “bad thing,” she simultaneously exhibits her own internalized homophobia. The issue with Aneka’s interest in Ayo is twofold: (1) it makes her unavailable to King T’Challa and (2) it is not readily accepted by society.

Nevertheless, Aneka and Ayo’s relationship is not explicitly taboo in the Wakandan universe. During Aneka’s interactions with Mistress Zola, it is clear that Mistress Zola is aware of Aneka and Ayo’s attraction to one another. She does not condemn Aneka or Ayo for their attraction; instead, she tries to encourage Aneka to acknowledge their joint attraction. Prior to Aneka and Ayo acting upon their attraction in issue two, Mistress Zola and Aneka talk with one another. Aneka states: “Ayo continues to resist authority. Everything I say makes her snap at me. I swear, the woman has fangs, and those fangs are forever exposed.” Mistress Zola then responds: “Is it authority she resists? Or **something else**?” (A few pages into *Issue #2*). The choice to bolden the words “something else” in this line of dialogue works to emphasize Zola’s

knowledge. Zola hints that Ayo is not resisting Aneka's authority; rather, Ayo is resisting her attraction to Aneka.

Mistress Zola's knowledge about their relationship is once again made clear in the third issue, when the Aneka and Ayo ask to go on a trip to New York City together. After Aneka calls Ayo her "friend" to Mistress Zola, Ayo gives her the silent treatment until they are in the airport. When Aneka questions Ayo about her silence, she angrily explains, "We are far more than just friends and yet you denied this to Zola! Who, let us be clear, knows and **always has known** that we are more than just 'friends'" (A quarter of the way through *Issue #3*). Ayo acknowledges that Mistress Zola is aware of their sexualities, which further illustrates how Zola is an ally. However, Aneka is still unable to fully accept her sexuality, even with the acceptance from both Ayo and Mistress Zola.



Fig. 16. Panel from *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, Issue #3.

Two key relationship moments take place during the NYC trip. The first key moment is Aneka and Ayo telling one another that they love each other (see Fig. 16). As Aneka talks about

her love for Wakanda, Ayo questions, “Oh? And what **else** do you love?” Ayo leans to kiss Aneka, when Aneka responds, “I love you.” Ayo reciprocates the “I love you” moments later. Furthermore, the visual component of these panels reinforces that their love is grounded in sexual and romantic love, rather than platonic. Aneka and Ayo are visually intimate with one another, as they lie on a picnic blanket in Central Park.

Later that evening, Aneka and Ayo go on a date at a restaurant. As they walk back to their hotel, two men catcall them. When one of the men grabs Aneka, she twists his arm and says: “Now apologize to my girlfriend and I.” This is the first time that Aneka verbally confirms her relationship to Ayo. As a result, Ayo is excited by Aneka’s identification of their relationship. Ayo thinks, “She called me her girlfriend!!!” (Three-quarters of the way through *Issue #3*). Although Ayo is able to vocalize and accept their relationship from the start, Aneka needs the separation from Wakanda in order to voice her true feelings. While in Wakanda, Aneka was consistently reminded that her relationship with Ayo violated her role as a Dora Milaje. In New York, Aneka is able to separate herself from Wakanda for the first time and act upon her true desires and emotions. Furthermore, both Aneka and Ayo must resist the authority of the Dora Milaje’s – and Wakanda’s – rules while in Wakanda in order to be together.

Resistance plays a large role in both Aneka and Ayo’s character development. Although Aneka is more hesitant about acting upon her attraction due to her duty to the throne, both Aneka and Ayo question their sexualities. This questioning does not suggest that either of them are not lesbians. Instead, their hesitance reflects the societal pressures that they must obey in order to successfully be together. When they are no longer able to hide their relationship, they end their roles as members of the Dora Milaje and become the Midnight Angels. The Midnight Angels

represent a form of anarchy that seeks to challenge the unjust throne as well as the patriarchal and heteronormative standards in place for Dora Milaje and women at large within Wakanda.

The Midnight Angels are not a concept created by Roxane Gay and the writers of *World of Wakanda*, however. They are first introduced in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Black Panther #1*, and the *World of Wakanda* series seemingly ends where *Black Panther #1* begins. As a result, there are several scenes in both series that overlap. These scenes are not identical, which indicates Gay's agency in terms of revising what has come beforehand.

One parallel scene appears in *World of Wakanda #4*. Aneka, upon hearing about the mistreatment of women by Chieftain Diya in a nearby village, goes to confront the chieftain. When she arrives, she asks him to surrender himself to her custody. When he refuses to do so, she kills him in an effort to free all of the women under his grasp. In the *Black Panther #1* version of this scene, Aneka wears a bra, cape, and underwear (see Fig. 17). This outfit, while quite memorable, is not ideal for a secret mission to free trapped women. Instead of serving a functional purpose, Aneka's outfit seeks to please the heterosexual male viewer.



Fig. 17. Panel from *Black Panther #1*, Coates

In the pages following this scene in *Black Panther #1*, Aneka and Ayo escape and find refuge in a nearby cave. Backlit by a bonfire, only their silhouettes are visible as they talk to one another (see Fig.19). They decide to go against their duties as Dora Milaje and become the Midnight Angels, since they are “dead women.” This scene is not included in *World of Wakanda #5*, although some lines of dialogue carry over. However, it is interesting to note that both Aneka and Ayo’s faces are visible, rather than silhouettes, in the *World of Wakanda* aftermath of the prison break. By showcasing the silhouettes of Aneka and Ayo, *Black Panther #1* emphasizes Aneka and Ayo’s new role as “dead women.” However, it simultaneously disconnects the reader from understanding the intimacy of these moments, since they are unable to see either Aneka’s or Ayo’s facial expressions. In contrast, the *World of Wakanda* panels allow readers to see the facial expressions of both women during the fire scene and during their conversation the following morning.



Fig. 20. Panels from *World of Wakanda*, Issue #5.

In *World of Wakanda*, Aneka sleeps on the ground next to the fire after the prison break; neither woman is seen as a silhouette. Ayo gets water for the two of them and tucks Aneka in

(see Fig. 20). She thinks to herself: “I could watch you sleep and be content for the rest of my life. I would never leave you to be murdered by the very people who should have honored the justice you exacted. Never.” Her thoughts emphasize how deeply she cares for Aneka, even when she is not awake to hear it. The following morning, their love is again re-enforced through a page of illustrations, where the pair hold one another and kiss.

Aneka and Ayo then verbally re-iterate their love for one another, as well as their decision to leave the Dora Milaje. The pair exchanges the following dialogue:

Aneka: This is our **true purpose**, serving not one man but all the men and women of Wakanda. This is what we will do, for as long as we can stay free.

Ayo: To love each other true, hard, and completely is **also** our purpose.

Aneka: Yes, beloved. It is. (A few pages from the end of *Issue #5*).

This exchange of dialogue re-enforces the explicitness of Aneka and Ayo’s relationship with one another, an explicitness that cannot be located within either *Rebecca* or *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café*.

As evidenced by the selected panels from the *World of Wakanda* series and *Black Panther #1*, both Gay and Coates put their own distinctive mark on the Black Panther universe. Roxane Gay, as Marvel’s first Black woman lead writer, brought in a new perspective that previously did not exist within the Marvel comics. When asked whether she was intimidated by the fact that she was the first Black woman lead writer, she shared, “Intimidating isn't the word that comes to mind. I know how to write. But I do feel a lot of pressure. All too often, black creators aren't allowed to make mistakes. We aren't allowed to fail. If we do, we're not only the first, we're the last. That keeps me up at night” (Cadenas). The pressure to do well certainly motivated, rather than inhibited, Gay to create a groundbreaking series for Marvel comics.

Coates identifies that one of his primary motivations for getting involved with *Black Panther #1*, when he says, “When I was a kid, Spider-Man was a star. Spider-Man was right under Malcolm X for me in terms of heroes. I would like Black Panther to be some kid’s Spider-Man” (“Ta-Nehisi Coates Hopes”). For Coates, the decision to further develop the Black Panther universe was based in a desire to make a superhero that young Black kids could look up to. His comics, in tandem with the introduction of Black Panther to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), brought about a sort of renaissance for the Black Panther character. Non-comic book readers had little to no idea about the presence of Black Panther in the Marvel Universe. However, with the introduction of the films and new comic series, many young kids began to identify with and look up to T’Challa. Due to the popularity of Coates’s comics, many comic readers also looked forward to seeing his characters, including Aneka and Ayo, on the big screen.

***Black Panther* (2018) directed by Ryan Coogler**

Black Panther, portrayed by the late Chadwick Boseman, first appeared on the screen in Marvel’s *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The release of this film coincided with the initial releases of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Black Panther* series. The filmmakers also seized the opportunity to include a new character from Coates’s series in their film: Ayo, portrayed by Florence Kasumba.

In *Civil War*, Ayo accompanies King T’Challa (Boseman) to witness Bucky Barnes’s, the accused murderer of his father T’Chaka, interrogation. Afterwards, when Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) attempts to block King T’Challa from leaving in his car, Ayo says the following: “Move, or you will be moved” (01:25:08-01:25:10). Despite only having one line, Kasumba’s performance as Ayo left a lasting impression on viewers. Her performance, and the

dialogue itself, aligned with the personality of the Ayo from *Black Panther #1* and the *World of Wakanda* series. For comic fans, this performance was just the beginning of Ayo's forthright presence in the MCU.

Months before the release of *Black Panther* (2018), *Vanity Fair* published an exclusive article based upon an early screening of the film. In this article, Joanna Robinson, the TV/film columnist for *Vanity Fair*, gives details about the scene which was screened. She writes the following:

In the rough cut of this Black Panther scene, we see [Danai] Gurira's Okoye and Kasumba's Ayo swaying rhythmically back in formation with the rest of their team. Okoye eyes Ayo flirtatiously for a long time as the camera pans in on them. Eventually, she says, appreciatively and appraisingly, 'You look good.' Ayo responds in kind. Okoye grins and replies, 'I know.' ("*Black Panther Footage*")

Robinson then goes on to argue that this moment of flirtation mirrors the *World of Wakanda* series. Fans, upon reading this article, became more optimistic about the possibility of LGBTQ+ representation in the MCU. As identified by Michaela D.E. Meyer, "Several fans felt the scene marked Ayo's queer sexuality in ways previously absent from the Marvel Cinematic Universe" (236). In the twenty-three films that have been released in the MCU, there has never been LGBTQ+ representation. The closest thing to representation, before *Black Panther*, was *Thor: Ragnarok*, a film which was apparently hailed as the "Queerest Superhero Movie Yet" (Meyer 239). The filmmakers of *Ragnarok* noted that they filmed scenes to openly discuss Valkyrie's bisexuality, but these scenes were ultimately omitted from the final version of the film, which further exemplifies the MCU's inability to follow through on their promises of inclusivity (Meyer 239).

Black Panther was no exception to this inability. Soon after the publication of Robinson's article, Marvel denied any claims of lesbian representation in the film. Upon the release of the film almost a year later, the scene which Robinson had discussed was omitted. Joe Robert Cole, co-writer of the film, claimed that the scene may never have existed. He said, "The scene you're talking about, I don't remember. I can't remember the exact exchange you're talking about, but I think it was really brief. I'm not sure. I know that it was not – there wasn't some major theme through that we were looking to explore with that in terms of the story. We didn't like, pull out a full thread of some theme" (Whitney). Cole, through his meandering words, does not fully commit to admitting the scene's existence. However, his hesitance does seem to suggest that he has some awareness about the scene. Additionally, the use of "theme" to describe Ayo's sexuality is interesting, since it relegates her sexuality to merely an overlooked film component. Cole does not consider the ramifications of the absence of her sexuality on viewers.

Moviegoers were quite disappointed to find that the scene was indeed absent from the film. Fans immediately took to social media to note their dissatisfaction. The hashtag #LetAyoHaveAGirlfriend became popular on Twitter, as people noted the absence of Ayo's sexuality from the film. One user, t.r. wexler (@LetsTurnDayGlo), writes, "marvel 2015: lgbtq stories will happen when its ~organic. marvel 2017: adapting Ayo but no room for queer story." This user emphasizes Marvel's consistent promises of inclusion, which ultimately hold no true value. Even when LGBTQ+ characters could be integrated organically, as is the case with Valkyrie and Ayo, the filmmakers choose to omit them. Another user, angela (@captaindeadpool), wrote, "'no homo – an ancient marvel studios proverb'" (qtd. in Meyer 236). Although humorous, angela's words have resonance, re-emphasizing Marvel's inability to include LGBTQ+ representation in their films.

In addition to omitting Ayo's sexuality, the filmmakers also relegated her character to a plot device. She was only given two lines in the entirety of the *Black Panther* film, despite already having a presence in the MCU. Her first line being, "Yes, General," in response to Okoye's orders to help Nakia get ready for T'Challa's coronation (00:14:08-00:14:10). This line of dialogue served to show Ayo's role as a Dora Milaje and to emphasize the chain of command in the MCU. During the Killmonger challenge, Ayo says her second and final line of individual dialogue: "Is there anything that can be done?" (00:21:18-00:21:20). The answer to this rhetorical question, of course, is no. This question serves no function beyond solidifying the stakes of the challenge for T'Challa. Although Ayo lacks character development, new characters (such as Nakia and Okoye) were given the space to become fully developed.

Despite Ayo's mere two lines of dialogue that relegate her to a plot device, she still is an important member of the Dora Milaje. When she is first introduced on the screen, she stands next to Queen Ramonda and Shuri. She holds her weapon, and watches as T'Challa, Okoye, and Nakia approach (00:13:39-00:14:17). This is also the scene in which she delivers her first line – "Yes, General." Although Ayo is not a fully developed character, she is still visually understood as an important member of the Dora Milaje. In the first shot where her face is shown, she has equal stature to the queen and Shuri; moreover, the framing of the shot emphasizes that all three women are equally powerful. Simultaneously, she is not able to vocalize her power status, whereas Queen Ramonda and Shuri are able to do so.

Ayo's high-ranking is additionally reflected in the blocking of both challenge scenes between T'Challa and his opponents – M'Baku and Killmonger, respectively. Okoye stands on the highest point above Queen Ramonda and Shuri, watching over the royals to protect them. Ayo stands adjacent to Okoye, slightly lower than her, but she still is above the royals; this

blocking indicates that she is the second highest ranking Dora Milaje in the MCU, just behind Okoye. Furthermore, Ayo's high-ranking position is additionally exhibited by her inclusion in T'Challa and Nakia's visits to the village. She is tasked with protecting the king, which is a high security position. During the first visit to the village, she can be spotted on the edge of the right frame, out of focus (00:33:26-00:33:31). She walks on the edges of T'Challa and Nakia's heterosexual encounters, protecting them from any possible assailants (see Fig. 21). In the second visit to the village at the end of the film, she can only be spotted for a mere three seconds, guarding T'Challa and Nakia (01:59:23-01:59:26). Ayo's blocking and inclusion in these scenes indicates that she is an important character. Regardless of her supposed importance within the Dora Milaje, Ayo is still not given the narrative space to exhibit her strength or sexual identity through dialogue or actions.



Fig. 21. Still from Coogler, *Black Panther* (00:33:20)

This dissonance between her high-ranking position and her lack of importance in the narrative structure of the film is shown most clearly by the lack of close-up reaction shots. In film, close-up shots create an intimate relationship between the viewer and the characters; they reveal insight into a character's emotions and inner thoughts. There are three scenes in the film where Ayo's reactions could be shown in a close-up, but they are not. Moreover, the lack of

close-ups of Ayo works to distance the viewer from her innermost emotions and thoughts – as well as her lesbian sexuality.

The first scene is the first challenge, between T'Challa and M'Baku. When M'Baku is explaining why he is challenging T'Challa, there are two reaction shots: one of Okoye and one of Nakia (00:23:44-00:23:47). Although Ayo is right next to Okoye, her reaction is not shared; she is left out of the frame, and her reaction is rendered unimportant. Throughout the rest of the scene, close up shots are used for all of the other named characters: Okoye, Nakia, Shuri, Queen Ramonda, W'Kabi, and Zuri (00:24:43-00:28:20). These close-up shots allow the audience to understand how each character is reacting to the challenge, and they slow down the pacing of the action. Audiences are forced to pause and become more intimate with each of these characters; they are forced to learn more about each character's relationship to T'Challa. Ayo is excluded from these close-up reactions, despite audiences knowing her by name and having met her in *Civil War* two years prior. She, and her relationship to T'Challa, is rendered unimportant. The other characters get screen time while she exists just beyond the frame of Okoye's reaction shots.

The lack of close-up shots becomes relevant once more in the battle scene near the end of the film. The members of the Border Tribe (of which Zuri is a part) surround Okoye, Nakia, Shuri, and Ayo with their shields. By doing so, they block the most powerful members of the opposing side from attacking them. Zuri demands that the women surrender to the Border Tribe. Before they surrender, the Jabari arrive to help. When the Jabari arrive, the film cuts from a shot of their arrival to three separate close-up shots: the first of Nakia, the second of Shuri, and the last of Okoye (01:51:51-01:52:17). Ayo, while being the only other character caught in the shield circle, is not afforded a close up shot of her reaction. The filmmakers instead focus on the three other women and exclude Ayo's reaction, rendering her reaction unimportant.

This same issue recurs in the post-credits scene of the film, when T'Challa, Okoye, Nakia, and Ayo attend the UN meeting. After T'Challa shares that Wakanda will be, for the first time ever, sharing its resources with the rest of the world, one UN member questions him: "With all due respect, King T'Challa, what might a nation of farmers have to offer the rest of the world?" (02:06:26-02:06:33). The filmmakers then cut to medium and wide-angle reaction shots from the UN members, who are whispering. Amidst their confusion, the film then cuts to close up reaction shots of Okoye, then Nakia, then Agent Ross, and finally T'Challa. Moreover, the filmmakers exclude Ayo's reaction, although she is standing alongside the other Wakandans at the podium. Even the UN members general confusion and Agent Ross's close up reaction are more important than Ayo's.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Ayo does get one close up shot in the film, during the second challenge scene (see Fig. 22). However, this close up shot does not work to bring the viewer closer to Ayo's character. Instead, it is used to focus on her second and final line of dialogue – "Is there anything that can be done?" (00:21:18-00:21:20). The intimacy of the close up shot in this scene is not used to reveal something new about Ayo; it instead works to force the audience to recognize that there is actually nothing that can be done and to foreshadow T'Challa's near "death."



Fig. 22. Still from Coogler, *Black Panther* (01:21:19)

Ayo is not only stripped of her sexuality, but she is also stripped of her power to resist. In the *World of Wakanda* series, she and Aneka break away from the Dora Milaje to form the Midnight Angels because they believe that T'Challa is endangering the city through his involvement with the Avengers. Moreover, the comic version of Ayo resists serving a king who she cannot fully support. In contrast, her film version supports Killmonger, once he is named king. When all of the Dora Milaje salute the new king, Ayo does as well (01:22:17-01:22:19). Alternately, Okoye abstains from showing visual support for the new king. Okoye is given the space to resist, whereas Ayo follows the throne blindly (see Fig. 23). Ayo is not given the power to display her sexuality nor the power to resist corrupt authority like her comic book counterpart. Not only is she erased of her sexuality in the film, but she is also erased of her personality.



Fig. 23. Still from Coogler, *Black Panther* (01:22:19)

Nevertheless, it seemingly appears that Marvel wants Ayo to have a larger role in the MCU. After *Black Panther*, Florence Kasumba reprised her role in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018); however, she did not visibly appear in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Additionally, she made guest appearances in two episodes of *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021), which further illustrates Marvel Studios' intention to include Ayo more. Again, in this series, Ayo's sexuality was not explored, although she had a much more vocal and powerful role in the two

episodes of the series than she did in the entire *Black Panther* film. Marvel Studios is unable to fully include Ayo – the character from *World of Wakanda* and *Black Panther #1* – until they represent her sexuality and her resistive powers on the screen.

By erasing Ayo's sexuality and relegating her to just being a plot device, the filmmakers of *Black Panther* also sent a subconscious message: members of the LGBTQ+ community do not belong in the world of superheroes. This message, transmitted to viewers, was also transmitted to Roxane Gay. When the invites for the *Black Panther* premiere were released, Gay was surprised to not receive one. She, in a since deleted Tweet, wrote, "My feelings are real hurt that I didn't get an invite to the Black Panther premiere. I mean goddamn Marvel. Goddamn" (qtd. in Andersson). Gay quickly cleared up that she just felt "bummed to not be invited," but there was no issue between her and Marvel. Nevertheless, this situation prevented Gay from being a part of the worldwide release of *Black Panther*, despite having worked on a series within the Black Panther universe.

Gay was also unable to see her version of Ayo's character on the screen. Ayo's lack of verbal presence in the MCU makes it difficult to compare her to her comic book counterpart. Since *Black Panther #1* was released in the same year as the *Black Panther* series, it is possible that the filmmakers just wanted to boost comic sales by naming a character Ayo. Nevertheless, her name carries the history of the comic book character; the Ayo of the MCU cannot be wholly separated from the Ayo, who loves Aneka, in the comics. As a result, the filmmakers' neglect to address her sexuality is a glaring oversight, and it will remain that way until it is further addressed.

The Vanishing Lesbian and The Closet

All three selected book-to-film adaptations feature the process of lesbian erasure. These adaptations fall within the aforementioned types of lesbian erasure: (1) the absence of lesbian characters, (2) the inclusion of only one-dimensional/stereotyped lesbian representation, and/or (3) the use of subversion and subtextualization to hide lesbian characters from audiences. None of the three adaptations include overt representation, so the second type cannot be identified in these films.⁶ The adaptations of both *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* use subversion and subtextualization to hide their lesbian characters from audiences, while *Black Panther* omits Ayo's sexuality entirely.

It is important to understand how these films fit into a discussion of LGBTQ+ representation on the screen – or lack thereof. GLAAD annually provides a report of the LGBTQ+ representation in major studio films from the year prior. In 2018 (the year in which *Black Panther* was released), there was a “significant increase” with “5.4 percent” of films containing an LGBTQ+ character. 2018 was the first year in GLAAD's reporting history⁷ that there was an equal number of films which included gay and lesbian characters, with 55% (11 films) containing gay character(s) and 55% containing lesbian character(s). *Black Panther* did not contribute to this increase of lesbian representation due to its erasure of Ayo. Furthermore, Walt Disney Studios (owner of Marvel Studios), in comparison with other major studios, had the lowest percentage of representation overall – with zero films containing LGBTQ+ characters in 2018 (“Overview of Findings 2019”).

⁶ There are no declared lesbian characters in any of the films, so stereotyped representations cannot be identified; however, as Jan Whitt points out, Ruth and Idgie can only be read as lesbian with the help of gender performativity stereotypes for lesbian couples. For example, Ruth dresses feminine and Idgie dresses masculine (50). This reading of the film is grounded in a one-dimensional/stereotyped lesbian representation.

⁷ The first GLAAD annual report was released in 1996, then called “Where We Are on TV” (“GLAAD History and Highlights”).

Despite this general increase in representation, the most recent GLAAD annual report (the 2020 report for 2019 films) showcases a decrease in lesbian representation between 2018 and 2019. While overall LGBTQ+ representation increased by a mere 0.4% (2 films) from 2018 to 2019, “lesbian representation...decreased significantly, down to 36 percent (8) of inclusive films from 55 percent.” Simultaneously, gay male representation increased between these two years, showcasing the way that patriarchal standards bolster gay men while casting aside lesbian women (“Overview of Findings 2020”). As argued by Marilyn Frye, a leading queer and feminist theorist, “Gay men can credibly present themselves as men, that is, as beings defined by superiority to women, if there are lesbians in the gay rights movement – given only that men are always or almost always in the visible position of leadership” (“Lesbian Feminism” 139). Moreover, gay men still have male privilege, which is advantageous to their pursuit of equal rights to heterosexual men. However, lesbian rights are not a priority, since they are women. This is reflected by the increase in gay male representation and the “significant” decrease in lesbian representation between 2018 and 2019.

The GLAAD research emphasizes the ways in which lesbians are still being silenced in cinema. Even when there are “progressive” years for lesbian representation, lesbian erasure regains its power and decreases the percentage of representation. The *Rebecca*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Black Panther* franchises exemplify the regression that GLAAD discusses. All three texts have resurfaced in popularity/significance over the past six months. *Rebecca* received another film adaptation directed by Ben Wheatley, which was released in October 2020. Fanny Flag’s characters will be revived on the screen in the upcoming NBC television series, which was announced in October 2020. As for Ayo, she has re-entered the MCU in Marvel’s *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (TFATWS) in April 2021. At the time of writing this project, the

Fried Green Tomatoes show is not yet in production and Ayo (devoid of lesbian sexuality) has only been featured in two episodes of TFATWS. As for Wheatley's *Rebecca*, Mrs. Danvers's sexuality was still subversive in the film, indicating the presence of lesbian erasure in creating her character. Although inconclusive, it currently seems like none of the lesbian characters from any of the three texts will be given a three-dimensional space to explore their sexualities on the screen in the near future.

While the latest adaptations of the three texts contain the potential for erasure, the original adaptations of the texts clearly reveal two of the three types of lesbian erasure: the absence of lesbian characters and the use of subversion and subtextualization to hide lesbian characters from audiences. Much scholarship centers discussions on the absence and one-dimensionality of lesbian characters, neglecting the ways in which subversion is a means of erasure. Conversely, I argue that subversion and subtext are also a means of erasure. If only queer audiences can disseminate subtext/subversion, it forces their sexualities to remain secretive.

As Lynda Hart, author of *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, argues, "the 'secret' of lesbianism as a mysterious or esoteric content was produced as a discursive effect, an act performed by the hierarchical structure of a dominant ideology that systematically maintains itself through secret(ing)— setting apart, distinguishing, sifting" (4). Hart explains that the process of becoming a secret is a means of "setting apart, distinguishing, sifting" away from the dominant ideology. For lesbian women in a patriarchal, heteronormative society, they are forced to secret or other themselves. In order to identify subversive lesbianism on the screen, lesbian women must maintain their own sexualities as a secret. Furthermore, in the

process of seeking out representation – which should make otherness overt and accepted – lesbian audiences are forced back into hiding alongside the characters on the screen.

Non-queer audience members are unable to identify these moments of subtext/subversion unless they employ a queer critical lens. A lens that people in the LGBTQ+ community use in their day-to-day lives. Not all non-queer audience members are educated or readily equipped with a queer critical lens, which privileges their ignorance to non-heterosexuality. They are able to ignore subversive representation and maintain the assumption that every character is heterosexual, like them. Ultimately, in order to give lesbians in cinema and lesbians watching cinema the power to voice their identities, they must be given the space in film to fully express them without the use of subtext or subversion.

Both *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* subvert the lesbianism of their characters in their novel and film iterations. Du Maurier and Flagg reveal the lesbianism of their characters through subtext. Through a biographical critical lens, this subtextualization is a means of secreting their own sexualities. They are unable to avoid the secreting process, and they force their characters to undergo the same process as them. However, as revealed by the close readings of both *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the subtextualized lesbianism in the novel versions is further subverted in the film versions. The moments of the novels which make lesbianism most clear are omitted from the film versions. Further, dialogue which revealed sexuality in the novels is altered or removed in the film version, literally silencing the queer characters. For example, the film version of Mrs. Danvers continually ties Rebecca to piety and heterosexuality in the first bedroom scene. The novel version, in contrast, omits Maxim from her discussion. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie is unable to declare her undying love to Ruth, whereas she is able to make this declaration in the novel.

Additionally, queer spaces are undone by authoritative heterosexual male figures in both films. In Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, Portrait Maxim undoes any possible queer readings of the bedroom scenes. It ties the bedroom to Rebecca and Maxim's marriage, rather than Mrs. Danvers and Rebecca's sexualities. Portrait Maxim, as a visual reminder of Mrs. Danvers' employer, has an authority over Mrs. Danvers in the bedroom. Likewise, the "love scene" of Avnet's *Fried Green Tomatoes* is undone by Grady, an authoritative heterosexual man. The café, which is where Ruth and Idgie live in the novel, is no longer queer oriented; Grady enters the space and reminds the viewers that he desires Idgie, and his desire is privileged over any potential queer readings of Ruth and Idgie's relationship. Furthermore, the film versions of both text force lesbian viewers to secret themselves, like du Maurier and Flagg, in order to identify the lesbian characters.

Unlike *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* which use subversion, *Black Panther* has an absence of lesbian characters. Amber Johnson, a professor at Saint Louis University, points out the ways in which *Black Panther* promoted three-dimensional Black representation, while ignoring intersectional blackness: "I could locate my blackness all over the film's narrative and cinematography, but I could not locate my body as a site for gender variance, multiple sexualities, and varying (in)abilities. Simply put, where were the queer folks..." (5). Coogler's film celebrated three-dimensional blackness, while ignoring recognition of queer Black people, both on the screen and in audiences. *Black Panther* does important work in representing three-dimensional blackness. That said, ignoring intersectional blackness disregards the necessity of representing all marginalized Black groups.

Ayo's intersectional identity as a Black woman and a lesbian means that her erasure is a result of both her race and her sexual identity. In the GLAAD annual reports from 2019 and

2020, they noted decreases in the racial diversity of LGBTQ+ characters. Between 2017 to 2018, “42 percent of LGBTQ characters being people of color, compared to 57 percent in 2017” (“Overview of Findings 2019”). Between 2018 and 2019, “The racial diversity of LGBTQ characters saw another significant decrease this year, with only 34 percent of LGBTQ characters being people of color, compared to 42 percent in 2018, and 57 percent in 2017” (“Overview of Findings 2020”). Queer representation on the screen has largely ignored intersectionality; it centers the stories of white queer characters, and the stories of queer people of color are hidden away.

The *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* series also has a critical difference from the other two texts: it features overt lesbian representation. Roxane Gay does not subvert the sexualities of Aneka or Ayo; instead, she includes panels of them kissing, going on dates, and saying “I love you” to one another. Despite the overt presence of a lesbian relationship in the comics, the film contains no lesbian, or queer, characters at all. As evidenced by Joanna Robinson’s article about the since-deleted scene between Ayo and Okoye, the film originally included Ayo’s sexuality – although it would have been subversive. *Black Panther* reveals a key trait about lesbian erasure in film: it is used to hide, or secret, lesbian characters from heteronormative society. Since the comic features explicit lesbian representation, it would have been more difficult for film audiences to deny Ayo’s sexuality, even with the subversion in the now-deleted scene. By erasing Ayo’s sexuality and relegating her to a plot device, Marvel Studios protected film audiences from ever making the connection between the Ayo of the comics and the Ayo of the films. She drifts under the radar, undetected by non-queer audiences. They are unable to connect her to the comics, since her role in the films is not important enough to warrant further investigation.

The patterns of lesbian erasure in film poses a critical question: why can three-dimensional, complex lesbian characters not exist on the screen? In the cases of these three films, the answer relates to coming out of the closet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the founders of queer theory, uncovers the function of the closet in her book entitled *The Epistemology of the Closet*, originally published in 1990. Sedgwick notes the centrality of the closet:

The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (68)

People within the LGBTQ+ community are bound to the closet. Coming out is a central component in revealing identity to social circles. The lesbian characters of *Rebecca*, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café*, and the *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* series never formally come out of the closet in their source texts. Lesbianism is subtextual in both *Rebecca* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, so a formal coming-out scene is not necessitated – or desired by the authors. In *Black Panther*, Aneka and Ayo are able to exist without a formal coming out. They ultimately need to cut ties from the Dora Milaje, and Wakanda, in order to avoid secreting their sexualities.

In major studio films, queer representation usually centers around the closet. Coming-out narratives are a staple in LGBTQ+ film representation, simply because the coming out process is exclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. However, the necessity of centering the closet in film emphasizes an argument that Sedgwick makes: “The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (78). By limiting queer stories to coming-out narratives, films inform audiences that the only queer stories worth telling are those centered around the closet. Rachel

Giese, a queer journalist specializing in gender studies, criticized the film industry's use of the coming-out narrative in film: "The coming-out story, while meant to signal a new beginning, has become a dead end for cinematic storytelling. It's the go-to plot line in mainstream films about queer life...This preoccupation feels as stifling as the closet itself...Coming out is a profound and dramatic moment, but what about all the other moments in our lives?" ("Lose the Plot").

All three of the chosen films were produced by major studios, which relates to their exclusion of queer characters. Since *Rebecca*, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café*, and the *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* series do not include formal coming-out scenes, filmmakers are able to excuse their employment of lesbian erasure. The absence of the closet in the source texts becomes a means for filmmakers to oppress the LGBTQ+ community in their adaptations. If these filmmakers cannot identify a coming-out scene, the characters' sexualities are no longer rendered important. The filmmakers of the three films were unable to separate the LGBTQ+ characters from the closet. As a result, they rendered their stories inconsequential to queer representation.

Unlike these filmmakers, I identify the importance of these characters to LGBTQ+ representation. The erasure of the characters in *Rebecca*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and the *Black Panther* reveals how U.S. cinema – over the course of almost eighty years – has repeatedly erased lesbianism and valued coming-out narratives over any other queer representation. Through close readings of these texts and their original film adaptations, the lesbian characters vanish from corporeality and become spectral figures. However, through my scholarship on these texts, no longer are these characters or texts a part of Adrienne Rich's "engulfed continent." Instead, I bring these characters back into corporeality, making their sexualities a "haunting secret" no more.

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