

Girl, Fan, Queer

Female Film Reception in the 1910s

We see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant. They are . . . like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from [a] forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, . . . the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces.

—William Faulkner

Pasted inside Kitty Baker's movie scrapbook is a grainy Kodak. It was likely taken in 1916, when the Virginia-born filmgoer was sixteen years of age. The amateur photograph captures Baker sharing a moment of intimacy with one of her movie-loving friends: delicately embraced, the two girls press their mouths together, parted lips breathing each other's air, the unnamed girl on the left tenderly holding Baker's jaw while caressing her chin. Their eyes are closed as the shutter seizes their intertwined profiles, the large bows in their hair smeared by the gossamer motion of leaning in, touching, kissing. A caption is inked under the hazy candid ("Two, too, to, sweet!") in Baker's block handwriting (figure 1).¹

This snapshot, the caption informs, was seen as an image of excess—specifically excess of young female affect, both represented and perceived. Though the final adjective suggests praise, the adverb "too" and its surrounding homophones convey an unruliness that undermines the possibility of acceptance or containment. The kiss—between girls, offering pleasure "to" the "two" of them—is found "too sweet," too erotic, simply "too much" not to be deemed transgressive by the movie scrapbooker. An exclamation mark renders the image and the emotions punching through it all the more prohibitive. Punctuation appears here



FIGURE 1. “Too much”: Kodak of Kitty Baker kissing another girl, safekept in the fan’s movie scrapbook, ca. 1916.

as a visual qualifier and a legible border, the place where same-sex female attachment, no matter how sweet-tasting, gains momentum, swells up, and rushes headfirst into a nebulous territory of unchecked pleasures. The exclamation mark whispers loudly, “caution, danger ahead.” And yet, as hazardous as the kiss and its driving affect might have seemed to Baker at the time, the movie-loving girl still saved their photographic rendition in her personal scrapbook, where the same-sex kiss rests to this day, over a century later, framed by the fan’s handwritten warning.

Kitty Baker is one of several girls coming of age in the United States during World War I (WWI) who used motion pictures to articulate feelings not aligned with dominant views on gender, sexuality, propriety, and well-being. This book proposes that by examining personal materials produced by moviegoing girls during the emergence of Hollywood’s star

system, we recover an unknown history of media reception shaped around homoerotic identification, same-sex desire, and gender nonconformity. I focus on movie scrapbooks, diary entries, fan mail, annotated collages, and amateur photographs authored by the first generation of adolescent girls who harnessed commercial cinema to negotiate proclivities, aspirations, identities, and acts self-described as “queer” or “different from the norm.” Interchanging both expressions in their vernacular writings, adolescent girls deployed the protean syntax of film stardom to forge a foundational language of female nonconformity and kinship. In the context of this book, “queer” is thus used alongside “nonnormative” to characterize deviation and/or questioning of traditionalist binaries that primarily policed gender and sexual behavior during the 1910s.

Following girl fans’ own employment of the term, “queer” here encompasses gender nonconformity (e.g., using fashion and pronouns different from those attributed at birth), same-sex attraction, disdain for marriage and motherhood, and other unconventional responses negotiated through the consumption of film stars. I argue that the fluidity of girls’ fan reactions—their refusal to be readily classified—intersected with attitudes ascribed to “New Women” of the period. “New Woman,” feminist anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons claimed in 1916, “means woman not yet classified, perhaps not classifiable . . . , bent on finding out for herself, unwilling to live longer at second hand, dissatisfied with expressing her own will to power merely through ancient media, through children, servants, and uxorious men. [The New Woman] wants to . . . share in the mastery men arrogate.”² In her ambition and self-reliance, as in her trading of “ancient media” for new, the New Woman archetype championed by professional women in the 1910s *spoke of* the actresses on the screen as well as *to* the girls in the audience. The interplay between female performers and viewers, as between star texts and fan responses, hence coalesced around changing notions of femininity, independence, and divergence, notions Richard Abel theorizes struck a deep cord with “the young unmarried working women who formed a significant part of . . . an emerging fan culture” during WWI.

In privileging personal fan archives, this book supplies experiential evidence of Abel’s speculations, while dilating them to include a slew of identificatory and affective fan responses that went farther afield than treating the athletic “film roles that women played as projective sites of fantasy adventure,” or regarding “the stars . . . as successful role models to emulate.”³ Though professional aspiration and escapism drew unmarried girls in their teens and early twenties to the movies, their

attraction to female stars performing a “‘freedom’ [only] assumed as ‘natural’ for young men” went beyond longing for alternatives to housewifery and motherhood. The queerness of their spectatorship resided in what Parsons identified as a modern female desire to be “not classifiable,” to self-perceive as “new not only to men, but to herself.”⁴

A historiography of film reception cannot be disarticulated from its historical context. The partitioning of the silent era into discrete points of transition typically foregrounds 1917 as the end of an “early” period of industrial decentralization and the onset of a studio era consolidating distinct business and storytelling practices. Following Jennifer Bean’s heed, I find that “contemporary feminism has much to gain by troubling the period break between early cinema and cinematic classicism by refusing to toe the 1917 line.”⁵ Instead of attempting to distinguish “silent” from “early” cinema through technological and commercial transformations, I am more interested in exploring how the overlapping advents of WWI, the influenza pandemic, and an emergent star system influenced sociopolitical reworkings of gender, sexuality, class, and well-being, and how individual moviegoers weathered such historical happenings through affective engagement with a new media marketplace teeming with girl-fronted goods. The years between 1910 and 1920 serve then as loose brackets to a periodization that could be described as the tail end of the Progressive Era—a contentious period feminist historians have described as tugging between social reform and moral crusades, women’s suffrage and white supremacy, anti-immigration legislation and welfare expansion, a love for modern advancement matched by horror at increasing urban vice and deteriorating tradition.⁶ In that period, women also came to dominate domestic movie consumption. In 1918, US film exhibitors estimated that “women make up 60 per cent of the average audience. . . . They study our weekly programs, and it is they who generally are the ones who pick the nights [to] attend our theatre.”⁷

In the last two decades, the quest for highlighting women’s contributions to silent film history has driven a robust body of feminist research to archival sources.⁸ This “historical turn,” as Jane Gaines dubs it, stems from a feminist desire to broaden women’s media histories across the intersectional axes of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, creed, and race.⁹ Characterized by “miscellaneous acts of collection and collections of miscellany,” recent feminist film scholarship contemplates an archive of commonplace objects, forgotten people, and first-person recollection.¹⁰ Addressing her own turn to silent actresses’ cookbooks, marginalia, and scrapbooks, Amelie Hastie argues that women’s film

histories survive in a state of “disarray,” “inevitably dispersed across genres, forms, spaces. . . . The category of ‘miscellany’ [thus] guides the authorship of women’s histories of the silent period, especially as these women reveal themselves as the subjects of their own work.”¹¹ Dispersed through vernacular and institutional spaces, personal film repositories not only pique academic curiosity but promise diversity—that in their motley bowels lie overlooked, misidentified, unseen sources and subjects waiting for their histories to be told. Building upon Hastie’s inventive marriage of women’s personal archives, self-reflection, and silent film stardom, I propose that historical understandings of US cinema are incomplete without accounting for the modes of reception and identification engendered by regular moviegoing girls at the onset of the star system. Borrowing from prosopography, that “powerful analytical tool which literally reduces history to atoms, . . . [to] the indivisible unit of human existence,” this book probes individual fan artifacts and biographies to provide insight into the socioideological underpinnings of an enduring women-driven media culture.¹²

A GIRL IS A GIRL IS A GIRL: INVENTING “THE SCREEN-STRUCK FAN”

Adolescent girlhood played a significant role in instituting a commercial American film culture. Although the phenomenon is apparent in other realms of promotion—including girls-only giveaways, pageants, and advice columns penned by young stars like Anita Stewart and Mary Pickford—movie magazines were among the first to identify female youth as defining a new class of film aficionados: the ardent “screen-struck fans.”¹³ An early facilitator of interactive fandom, *Motion Picture Magazine’s* Answer Man designated being young and female as a prerequisite for entering his exclusive group of regular correspondents. When in 1915 a moviegoer named “Abe, 99” asked to be included in “a contest among [his] ‘public’ for the best communication,” the Answer Man immediately rebuffed the moviegoer on the grounds that Abe was “too old (99) to compete with the fair Olga 17, the erudite Vyrkonya, the witty Gertie, the profound Grace, all of whom are young and handsome.”¹⁴ “Olga 17” and Vyrkonya (two of the most prolific and long-lasting participants in the “Answers Department”), were specifically identified as adolescent girls: Olga’s age is listed as seventeen, and she first introduces herself as “a young . . . innocent, unsophisticated, dear mama’s girl” who had just begun dating, while Vyrkonya echoes Bernardin de St. Pierre’s fictional

Virginie, the maiden heroine from the French children's classic *Paul and Virginie* (1787).¹⁵ An alleged octogenarian, the Answer Man further describes these girls' fan letters as symptomatic of the "follies of youth."¹⁶

Although female adolescence becomes visibly intertwined with film fandom by the mid-1910s, journalists noticed that girls dominated local nickelodeons as early as 1907. "After 4 o'clock the audiences were largely composed of schoolgirls, who came in with books or music rolls under their arms," the *Chicago Tribune* reported. "Around 6 o'clock . . . the character of the audience . . . shifted again. This time they were largely composed of girls [employed at] the big department stores, who came in with bundles under their arms."¹⁷ Regardless of occupation, adolescence defined reportage of passionate moviegoing. The first wave of spectators is identified as being middle-class "schoolgirls," their status signaled by the leisurely way they carried their "books or music rolls" and strolled in for an after-class screening. As the business day drew to an end, this relaxed group was replaced by homebound wage-earners, a young female audience that, though similarly unhindered by wifely or motherly responsibilities, rushed to the movies to find respite after a long day's work. This example shows that the feminization and juvenation of film fandom performed by the Answer Man rose concomitantly with the star system. Adolescent girls attended the pictures in noticeable numbers from the very inception of commercial moviemaking, but only in the mid-1910s did they come to be addressed by industry officials as a distinct target demographic, classifiable and therefore marketable.

The enhanced visibility columnists, admen, and exhibitors bestowed on moviegoing girls during WWI symptomizes the development of a film-fan press that heralded Hollywood's narrowcasting practices, by which gender and age groups direct programming and marketing. The designations "movie enthusiast" and "picture lover" began circulating in newspapers around 1910. However, a gendered definition of affective film consumption only entered periodical vernacular by mid-decade, an effect of the industry's move to a star-fronted economy that prioritized more granular audience distinctions.¹⁸ Kathy Fuller-Seeley explains that before advertisers and editors set their eyes on middle-class female consumers, "the designation *movie fan* was flexible enough to apply to a nationwide audience of enthusiastic men, women, and children, blurring many of the class, ethnic, regional, and gender distinctions that had separated audiences for earlier amusements."¹⁹ In fact, prior to movie publications popularizing the term, "fan" almost exclusively applied to baseball "fanatics," carrying either neutral or masculine connotations.²⁰

A glance at a standard issue of *Motion Picture Story Magazine* prior to 1914 substantiates this claim, with most usages of “fan” referring to a genderless sports enthusiast, a lady’s fashion accessory, or a mechanical appliance. The term seemed so alien in 1912 that the brand-new Answer Man addressed a self-denominated “Moving Picture Fan” with the quip, “Glad to be informed that you are not an electric fan.”²¹

Two years later, however, a gendered differentiation between sport enthusiasts and movie lovers was well underway. In July 1914, *Motion Picture Magazine* ran a cartoon titled “American Favorites,” portraying “Motion Picture” as an anthropomorphized young lady holding hands with “Baseball,” personified by a hunky male player in full striped uniform.²² By 1916, the term “movie fan” had become so naturalized in national parlance as a distinct entity that the same publication referred to it as “just a little American slang,”²³ while dozens of audience members called themselves “The Official Fan,” “An Ardent Movie Fan,” “Cunard-Ford Fan,” or “Miss Movie Fan” in private and published correspondence.²⁴ Value judgments quickly stuck to the compound word, film publications defining “movie fan [as] a person who calls all the players by their first name, criticizes the pictures and is, in general, quite superior to ordinary mortals.”²⁵ By late 1917, emotional volatility characterized the film archetype, reporters returning to the term’s pathological roots by warning that “‘fan’ is short for fanatic.”²⁶ It is at this escalation from expertise to excess, connoisseur to obsessionist, that the “screen-struck fan” came to be culturally engendered as adolescent and female, an extension of magazine editors, admen, and film exhibitors courting middle-class women as “custodians of public mores,” hoping their patronage would legitimize motion pictures as wholesome entertainment.²⁷

Though emotions triggered by the pictures could produce beneficial results, the press often imagined them as provoking reckless solipsism in girls. A touch of hysteria ran through most commercial coverage of what would become a lasting staple of film fandom: “the screen-struck girl.”²⁸ In 1917, *Motion Picture Magazine* painted the typical movie-loving fan as “a young thing, . . . very romantic [and] very foolish. . . . She read sensational best-sellers and the cheapest magazines, [and] always and ever her brain sought far visions, dreamed and moaned over extravagant lovers—people of gilt in a tinsel world.”²⁹ As if lowbrow tastes and a frail grasp on reality were not dire enough flaws, in their adoration of picture personalities screen-struck girls seemed to take leave of their senses. A dangerously mobile patron, she could not be satisfied with “just go[ing] to the theaters. Far be it from such! She just hops on the car,

or the train, or the boat, . . . and goes right to the fountain head” (i.e., the studios), believing herself destined to be transformed from anonymous Jane Doe into renowned Miss Movie if given the chance to audition for a famous director or rub shoulders with an illustrious player.³⁰

Despite being much bandied about in the WWI years, girls’ infatuation with female stars was not a novel phenomenon. Since the mid-nineteenth century columnists had remonstrated female audiences for fawning over stage actresses.³¹ Unlike “matinee girls,” who supposedly lusted after male players, “stage-screen girls” tended to devote their favors to the fairer sex, their dreams of footlight fame perilously collapsing hero-worship with homosexual desire and self-harm.³² Papers described the archetypal stage fan as a “silly young girl,”³³ the “small village would-be Juliet”³⁴ who could not resist the “unaccountable attraction” of mass entertainment and celebrity.³⁵ Like the moniker indicates, the press conceived of stage-loving girls as the predecessor of movie-struck fans. In drawing a direct lineage between theater and film fandoms and in feminizing both, journalists laid the groundwork for a perdurable model of media consumption shaped around same-sex worship that depended on the hallmarks of female adolescence: high susceptibility, leisure time, and emotional intensity.³⁶

It is thus indispensable to distinguish between girl and woman audiences, because, as various scholars have shown, from its very beginning the US film industry valorized female youth as a distinct transactional commodity.³⁷ By the second decade of the twentieth century, industry officials shifted from regarding “women” as an undifferentiated class of moviegoers to targeting unmarried girls in their teens and early twenties as a separate consumer demographic. More than habitual patrons, adolescent girls were now addressed as a special league of consumers, a constituency with valuable resources film impresarios spared no efforts to secure.³⁸

This newfound visibility was not without ambivalence. Looking at fan magazines from the 1910s, Shelley Stamp discusses the “movie-struck girl” as a derogatory representation of female spectatorship fabricated by the press to ally mounting “anxieties about women’s filmgoing.” Undisciplined, disruptive, and self-involved, the “movie-struck girl . . . suggest[ed] that women were unsuitable patrons of the cinema and unlikely participants in its visual delights.”³⁹ Though groundbreaking, Stamp’s monograph conflates anxieties relating to a wide range of female reception practices under the umbrella figure of the “woman.” Stamp pays close attention to how social distinctions influenced screen and print portraits of female spectators during WWI. However, class

played a lesser role when US periodicals distinguished between an obsessive movie fan and a casual moviegoer—when figuring female fan investment, pivotal distinctions were made according to age. Case in point: when describing the screen-struck fan, newspapers and movie magazines specifically referred to a white, unmarried, childless female in her teens and early twenties, either gainfully employed or attending school. Both working and moneyed white girls fitted the bill of the “screen-struck girl” type, lest they be perceived as adolescent, which is to say, released from the strictures of wifehood and childrearing. It was that newfangled freedom and immaturity US society ascribed to female adolescence that rendered the screen-struck girl a suitable cypher for affective and insatiable movie consumption.

AN INTERIM PHASE: THE SOCIAL CREATION OF FEMALE ADOLESCENCE

To understand how female adolescence became so relevant to the creation of a commercial movie-fan culture, we must contextualize the valorization and visibility US reformers, lawmakers, reporters, and psychologists attributed to girlhood at the turn of the twentieth century. According to sociologist Viviana Zelizer, the sacralization of childhood emerged in the late 1890s, a time when US culture shifted from seeing pubescent children as “useful wage-earning . . . little work people” to considering them “economically useless but emotionally priceless.”⁴⁰ A shifting interest in the social value of children brought widespread awareness to issues of sexual maturation, underage exploitation, and peer socialization. By interrogating what differentiated a child from an adult, Western psychologists and Progressive reformers delineated adolescence as a unique developmental stage necessitating extensive guidance, leisure, and introspection, conditions absent from most young lives before the twentieth century.

Unmarried girls in their teens caught the eye of turn-of-the-century legislators, activists, and muckrakers, being repeatedly portrayed by them as the most at-risk urban consumers, workers, and sexual subjects.⁴¹ Examples include federal and state laws on age of consent, marriage, parental oversight, and property ownership barring unmarried girls in their teens from making decisions regarding their bodies, livelihoods, and assets. Though mandatory schooling and labor laws were generally gender-neutral, amendments concerned with preserving minors’ sexual purity only addressed adolescent girls.⁴² This legislative enshrinement of

young female vulnerability helped turn adolescent girlhood into a cultural avatar for excessive impressionability and emotionality, the characteristics defining movie-struck fandom in the 1910s.

Key theories on human development sketched in the first decade of the twentieth century built upon already deep-seated beliefs on women's inherent dependence and inferiority. In 1904, eminent US psychologist and pedagogue Granville Stanley Hall published the magnum opus *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. In his groundbreaking monograph, Hall defined adolescence as a distinct life-stage between fourteen and twenty-four years of age.⁴³ Drawing from eugenics and biological essentialism, Hall considered educated boys of Anglo-Saxon ancestry the only "candidate[s] for a highly developed humanity."⁴⁴ "A boy," Hall observed in 1909, "has some self-knowledge; a girl understands very little of herself or of the motives of her conduct, for her life is more ruled by deep unconscious instincts. . . . She is a more generic being . . . [who] *loves to have her feelings stirred because emotionality is her life.*"⁴⁵ Constitutionally inferior and atavistically overemotional, white women and people of color remained stunted at the threshold of adulthood, psychologically trapped in a state historian Crista DeLuzio terms "a quintessential and perpetual adolescence."⁴⁶

Profoundly sentimental and "vulnerable to scores of fads," the "budding girl" outlined by Hall closely resembled the "screen-struck girl" disseminated by moviemakers and reporters.⁴⁷ I propose that such likeness is not a coincidence. Psychologists theorized female adolescence at the same time the film industry began shifting to a star system. The scientific taxonomization of female adolescence, in other words, produced a legible scaffolding for gendered immaturity, imagination, and alterity that the periodical press readily appropriated as the blueprint for affect-driven film acting and consumption. Private archives expose the porous traffic of influence between scientific discourse, popular culture, and audiences happening during the 1910s. For example, in 1919, Helen Edna Davis, a white educated immigrant living in New York City, told her diary: "I am dreadfully unhappy! . . . It may be adolescence . . . that makes me so restless." Already twenty-one years old at the time, the moviegoing girl attributed her disordered moods to the *Sturm und Drang* of adolescence, a self-perception confirming that some audience members internalized Hall's periodization.⁴⁸

Hall's vision of adolescent girlhood as a childlike mind tucked in an erogenous body left an equally deep impression on the renditions of

young femininity circulated by motion pictures and film magazines. In the novelization of Thanhouser studio's *Her New York* (1917), *Photoplay* writer Constance Severance describes the adolescent heroine Phoebe Lester (Gladys Hulette) as "nearing seventeen, a pretty miniature woman still redolent of the charm of childhood."⁴⁹ The novelization of another Thanhouser two-reeler, *The Speed King* (1915), paints its young female protagonist Muriel Randall (Muriel Ostriche) as an eighteen year old whose body showed signs of "the angularity of girlhood" but whose mind lingered in the pubescent "stage of a tomboy."⁵⁰ These literary narrativizations of screen girlhood illustrate the impact psychology had in how the film industry portrayed female youth. Characterized as half-child, half-woman, adolescent protagonists like Phoebe and Muriel embodied onscreen Hall's prototypical "budding girl." "No longer a little girl, but by no means yet a young woman," the adolescent heroine surfaced in 1910s motion pictures as a liminal, lovely vessel, her burgeoning sexuality both delighting and discomfiting audiences.⁵¹ In a way, the "budding girl" of the movies gave shape to Parson's ideal "New Woman"—a being "not to be classifiable."

As female adolescence became social, legal, and clinically construed as a decade-long moratorium between childhood and adulthood, age crystallized as an efficient tool to differentiate youngsters from adults, sexual abuse from lawful consent, and labor exploitation from fair work. Fourteen, Hall proposed, inaugurated the official beginning of female adolescence, while twenty-four marked its end. Statistical studies backed Hall's periodization, forwarding fourteen as the average age white US girls reported experiencing their menarche.⁵² Census data similarly indicated that, for college girls, age of matrimony usually coincided with that of graduation: around twenty-three. Average marrying age also worked as a determinant social code for mapping female development, providing a legible benchmark to track a maiden's deterioration into unviable spinsterhood. As a Radcliffe College valedictorian declared, "Some one [*sic*] has said that graduation and marriage are the two principal events in a girl's life. . . . Red-letter days, . . . [both dates] mark the development from the school girl chrysalis into the full-blown young woman."⁵³ During an era when virginal wedding nights and monogamous reproduction still functioned as the primary vehicle for female subsistence and respectability, age-brackets played a salient cultural role in regulating proper passage from girlhood into adulthood.

Following the dominant parameters codifying female development in early twentieth-century United States, when referring to a "girl,"

“young fan,” or “adolescent girl,” I am employing Hall’s definition of adolescence as unmarried and childless individuals between fourteen and twenty-four years of age—a life-phase defined as much by age and sexual inexperience as by financial and social dependence. That means I only examine fan objects whose author, including name and age, is known, generally through handwritten inscriptions. When data is incomplete, I draw on ancestry sites, school records, and census reports to flesh out individual biographies as thoroughly as possible. The few times that age is not evident, I attribute adolescence to girls who signed their names with the prefix “miss” and made clear references to their juvenile status through mentions of school-going, young peers, or dependence on family members.

Despite surveying girls from a variety of means, creeds, and localities, the bulk of my research focuses on movie fans who identified as literate and white. In my extensive probe of published and private fan artifacts, I rarely came across girls who identified as anything but white, of US birth, or of European descent. The lack of self-reported diversity likely results from ingrained cultural segregation and xenophobia running rampant in early twentieth-century United States, signified by the rise of neo-Darwinist doctrines such as eugenics, recapitulation theory, and anti-immigration nativism.⁵⁴

The commanding valorization of whiteness affected the content printed in best-selling film magazines as well, which assumed audiences to be universally white and literate. The egalitarian “ask and you shall receive” ethos early fan publications promised to underline the personalized interactivity between picture personalities and fans was also not all-inclusive but likely operated as a perpetuator of white privilege. Not only was star-fan trading of autographs and missives limited to viewers with the language skills, financial means, and free time to invest in correspondence, but, according to published letters submitted by minority moviegoers, both female stars and magazine editors favored a certain type of (white, educated) fan. Hints of systemic disenfranchisement can be found in *Motion Picture Magazine*’s reply to a patron named Radda, a surname of Italian origin associated at the time with working-class immigrants. Bristly in tone, the Answer Man replies, “Very well. No, I don’t agree with you. I don’t think we neglect the people you mention,” suggesting a certain pique at the fan’s accusation of readership discrimination.⁵⁵ The defensive reaction indicates that the fan indictment must have hit a nerve.

Another “plea”—mailed privately to actress Bessie Barriscale in 1916 and sampled in the comedic publication *Film Fun*—came “from a

little colored correspondent in Columbus, Ohio.” The Black girl confessed to “have the same feelings as a little white girl, and it makes me unhappy not to have things other girls enjoy.”⁵⁶ One of those things were hand-signed photographs of cherished film actresses. Because headshots functioned as a conduit nearing fan to star, deprivation went beyond material lack.⁵⁷ In being denied access to customized movie ephemera, the Black girl fan read Barriscale’s neglect as a personal perpetration of systemic racial discrimination permeating daily life. In tandem with Radda’s, this anonymous fan letter implies that eugenic biases dominant in early twentieth-century United States had already trickled into the newfangled star system and could be felt by individual moviegoers. The absence of fans of color from press contests and interactive columns intimates that film magazines worked in league with institutional practices of social disenfranchisement to suppress the public visibility and voices of nonwhite movie fans.

However, it warrants recalling that, as Hester Blum observes of nineteenth-century nautical ephemera, “scarcity is a function of reception, not of their generation.”⁵⁸ Young people of color, the very poor, foreign-born, or illiterate certainly adored the pictures, even if most surviving fan documents do not belong to them. Money and literacy are required for performing sustained fandom, an activity defined by the purchase, collection, and exchange of trademarked paraphernalia and handmade crafts, which in turn necessitate secondary supplies such as admission tickets, transit fare, stamps, and stationery, among other essentials. I am thus well aware of the audiences still unaccounted for in early Hollywood histories; their absence from this book does not deny their existence or relevance. Reception studies parsing non-English speakers, seniors, and Black children, to name a few underexamined demographics, are left roped-off as significant sites of research, inviting other scholars to start digging.

AFFECTIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY: A METHOD TO RESEARCH PERSONAL FAN ARTIFACTS

My focus on moviegoing girls is quite deliberate. Not only did Progressive debates differentiating deviance from normality frequently deploy adolescent girlhood as the litmus test, but self-identified screen-struck girls composed about 75 percent of all signed fan objects I found in private collections and periodical publications from the 1910s; the remaining 25 percent are left ambiguous (anonymous or initialed) or

are authored by self-identified married women and male fans. The number of individual collections consulted in preparation for this book amounts to a little under seventy. Institutional repositories like women's colleges and municipal historical societies house the majority of personal papers; a few of the scrapbooks examined were obtained from eBay auctions. If we accept the estimate that three-quarters of US cinema produced before 1929 is now lost, then the sheer volume of surviving film ephemera gathered by adolescent girls during the 1910s should evince how pervasive their movie consumption was.⁵⁹

Placing unmarried female audiences in their teens and early twenties at the center of Hollywood's transition from "a bucolic backwater . . . [into] an industry and a place that specialized in shaping people's fantasies and fears about modern times" affords an expansion of intersectional feminist histories proposing that an "even cursory inspection of the era's fan culture reveals [that] American silent film was mostly made for women with very different tastes."⁶⁰ The plurality of "fantasies and fears" Hollywood inspired spurred modes of female reception that questioned homogenous identifications, experiences, and aspirations. As Hilary Hallett heeds, "an origin story about how Hollywood became Hollywood that marginalizes women cannot hope to explain why its first 'social imaginary' lit up imaginations across the world."⁶¹

Hollywood's promotional address of democratic inclusion and upward mobility largely spoke to and depended upon working and educated girls, a storied demographic comprised of mobile individuals whose proclivities at times stepped outside normative lines, being through gender nonconformity, same-sex attraction, or a desire for livelihoods removed from marriage and parenthood. Considering these moviegoing girls from an autobiographical perspective allows their affective differentiation and cultural significance to take up space and foreground the rise of a national film industry. Together with a cadre of women directors, producers, screenwriters, journalists, and players, screen-struck girls pumped life into a mass celebrity culture, both shaping and challenging a developing star system that applauded female independence while warning viewers against straying off the beaten path.

Other media scholars have noted the seminal relationship between movie fandom and female youth.⁶² Jackie Stacey, in particular, pinpointed adolescence as the formative life-stage when British female spectators formed an affective relation of pleasure and identification with classical Hollywood actresses, observing that "many respondents' memories are of a transitional period: their 'teenage' years, [a time] in

which change and self-transformation were central to their desires and aspirations.”⁶³ Stacey innovated feminist film historiography by introducing standardized questionnaires as a means to gain first-hand access to women’s spectatorial experiences. Despite considering the possibility of homoerotic fan attachment, she does not disarticulate female longing to be *like* an actress from wanting to be *with* an actress. This distinction disappears in the homogeneity of Stacey’s statistical method and the restrictedness of her research questions. Blurry and idiosyncratic as such a distinction may seem, its very existence opens a wealth of possibilities that diversify readings of how early female audiences related to a woman-driven commercial film culture and how the Hollywood star system abetted queer modes of looking and feeling at the moment of its inception.

According to Miriam Hansen, female spectatorship in the silent period was mobilized by “long-term psychic investments, in particular ego ideals and primary object substitutes” that found home or echo in the fictional world of moving pictures.⁶⁴ Attending to the queer valences of moviegoing, this book sets to historicize female fan reception as an act of affective expenditure, inherently veined with erotic and identarian investments that resist being hemmed in by social expectations on normative femininity, desire, or propriety. When using the terms “affect” and “affective,” I am informed by Deborah Gould’s sociological work. Gould explains affects as “inchoate, inarticulate . . . but nevertheless registered experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body. . . . Affect, then, is the body’s ongoing and relatively amorphous inventory-taking of coming into contact and interacting with the world.”⁶⁵ Jennifer Bean complements this definition by arguing that “much of what is talked about in affect theory is that which escapes, resists, or exceeds language. . . . [Affect] refers to processes of potentiality and becoming, to vital forces and intensities, to physiological and biological matters that lie outside discursive structures.”⁶⁶ When researching female-assigned filmgoers at the threshold of adulthood, the idea of affect “as something that we do not quite have the language for but is nevertheless in play” is particularly useful.⁶⁷ Private papers reveal that for many early movie-loving girls a difference from the norm was diffusely felt—language faltered to convey experiential sensations of deviation, resulting in a cobbling together of established narrative conventions with new visual technology. Fragmentary artifacts—movie scrapbooks, self-portraits, journal entries, and other first-person writings—capture snapshots of this synaptic otherness: feeling on the

verge of action, a jolt against the grain, self-discovery perceived and expressed dispersedly through multimediated engagement with images of film stars troubling heteronormativity through male-coded behavior, temporary cross-dressing, or romancing other women onscreen.

Put plainly, I define affect as a spectatorial voltage: the electricity that attaches fan to star but also impels fans to retrieve special meaning from a picture, a gesture, a plot, a performance—the emanative force spurring the response “*you made me feel something I want to remember.*” This intensity of meaning/identification/attraction allows for the extension of spectatorial attachment beyond the fleeting act of movie-watching, activating a form of emotional endurance ingrained in embodied modes of same-sex identification: I want to look at the star, the star looks like me, I want to look like the star, I want to touch the star, I want the star to touch me. Queer fan affect, in the context of this book, is hence *of the body* and felt *in the body*, summoning reception performances characterized by sensations of identarian difference and eroticized sameness.

Fan writing, scrapbooking, dressing up—manual, time-consuming, intrinsically subjective and creative activities—are soaked with affect. In their simultaneous engagement of the heart and the hand, commerce and autobiography, presence and absence, film-fan archives comprised of paper, glue, and marginalia sequester interstitial encounters between self and the world. The notion of fandom I use here expands upon what Rosanna Maule and Catherine Russell identify as early female “cinophilia”: an “often obsessive and totalizing, personal relation to film . . . [which is] highly experiential and sensory.”⁶⁸ Maule and Russell claim that in the first decades of filmmaking, “women saw things differently at the silent movies not only because they were preeminently positioned within social and cinematic structures of seeing, but because the cinematic experience was radically destabilizing, exposing new perspectives and unusual views of everyday life.” As a result of their socialized gender difference, early female audiences’ “love for cinema involved a kind of *bodily incorporation*” that mirrored the larger-than-life stunts, outfits, and personalities galvanizing early narrative film.⁶⁹

The haptic physicality of silent spectatorship bled into girls’ modes of reception, saturating their movie-themed juvenilia. For example, on November 2, 1915, fifteen-year-old Constance Margaret Topping from Berkeley, California, wrote in her diary: “It was San Francisco Day at the [World] Fair. . . . Didn’t go to the Fair though. Mommit + I went to see Geraldine Farrar in ‘Carmen’—only a movie!” The despondent

remark “only a movie!” alludes to the upper-middle-class girl preferring live entertainment. It also expresses a filmgoer’s frustrating lack for not having witnessed Farrar perform Bizet’s *Carmen* onstage, where the diva’s famous voice and figure could have been admired in real time instead of disembodied and silenced on the silver screen.⁷⁰ For the next five years, Topping proceeded to scrapbook paper paraphernalia related to her moviegoing exploits (including exhibitors’ programs, ticket stubs, and clipped reviews) in an attempt to make the ephemeral movie-watching experience last.

Topping was not alone. When film fandom flourished during the WWI years, followers of the novel medium sourced from a preexisting infrastructure of consumer desire and preservation—the scrapbook. Popular in US households since the nineteenth century, the scrapbook functioned as a rudimentary technology of informational aggregation, directed and subtended by a compiler’s needs. Print recipes, receipts, color illustrations, mass-produced Valentines, handwritten invitations, doodles, fabric swatches, dried flowers, family photographs, candy wrappers, and celebrity cabinet cards all congregated in personal scrapbooks, providing a visual chronicle of idiosyncratic landmarks and penchants.⁷¹

In the mid-1800s, scrapbooks became a technology to convey theatrical fandom, patrons collecting memorabilia of thespians as a means to express lasting admiration and extend the rarefied experience of theatergoing. Through a manually curated repository of star headshots, autographs, ticket stubs, playbills, and press reviews, a stage fan could elongate their short-lived exposure to a star’s physical presence; they could also manipulate a star’s paper figure in the privacy of their homes. Though male admirers assembled theater scrapbooks, most extant examples not left anonymous were compiled by women.⁷²

Encouraged by a participatory film press, movie-loving girls took up the mantle of scrapbooking amidst a culture of war relief and resource conservation that tasked girls and women with the maintenance of an upcycled home and country.⁷³ A staple of fan reception since Hollywood’s emergence, movie scrapbooks and fan mail are thus as infrastructural to the network of intimacies girl fans established amongst themselves and with stars as to the excavation of “how women saw things differently at the silent movies.”⁷⁴ In describing the practice of scrapbooking and life-writing as critical to female film fandom’s “infrastructure of intimacy,” I draw from Ara Wilson’s view of “infrastructures”—the physical “circuits of pipes and cables” found in computer hardware

or power grids—as “embed[ding] intimate relations in unpredictable junctures of material and symbolic power, . . . [and] in many cases shap[ing] the conditions for relational life.” Hybrid and tactile, both mass-produced and handcrafted, movie scrapbooks, mixed-media diaries, and illustrated fan mail surface as infrastructural pillars of early film fandom that help track how “the concrete force of abstract fields of power . . . enable or hinder intimacy” (figure 2).⁷⁵

In recent years, historians have called attention to the role ephemera plays in LGBTQ+ archiving, theorizing that infrastructures of queer intimacy cannot be disarticulated from vulnerability and precariousness.⁷⁶ Arguing for a centering of negativity when discussing self-produced queer records, Heather Love contextualizes queer history through intermittent testimonies of dissident feeling. Ann Cvetkovich further links lesbian archives to legacies of trauma, positing that accounts of queer hurt found in memoirs, scrapbooks, and personal media-making complicate the registry of nonnormative lived experiences.⁷⁷ In treating silent film fans’ ephemera collections as an understudied repository of vernacular queer feeling, I build on both scholars, echoing their valorization of the negative, not only as lived struggle but as methodology. “Negative” as in negative space—a recognition of the systemic obscuring imposed on marginalized people—but also “negative” as in embracing the uncertainty and incompleteness of first-person sources, especially early movie scrapbooks, artifacts often retrieved third-hand from online auctions, institutional collections, and thrift stores, in tatters or in fragments, and hence troubling researchers’ access to complete provenance details such as time, location, biography, and context.

If “the stock in trade of the gay and lesbian archive is ephemera,” then it must be recognized that violence shapes its very existence.⁷⁸ The survival of marginal collections, much like their destruction, bears marks of neglect, mishandling, or deaccession perpetrated by private and institutional holders that make little effort to preserve the social biography of personal objects.⁷⁹ To add insult to injury, the building blocks of fan-made caches are brittle, fugacious, embattled. Conceived as throwaways or keepsakes, paper-based movie paraphernalia are precarious materials, their value retrieved or augmented according to a beholder’s contingent eye. Mary Desjardins sees studio-era memorabilia commercialized on eBay as a type of “detritus” that “signifies the ephemeral nature of the mythic rise and fall from fame in American culture.”⁸⁰ A regarding of ephemera as “detritus” underpins the long history of institutions dedicated to film preservation not acquiring scrapbooks and other loose



FIGURE 2. A labor of love: Kitty Baker weaves together movie actresses, female fans, and everyday life in her “Norfolk 1916” scrapbook.

movie items considered too miscellaneous to fall under an easy fileable category.⁸¹ Film fans’ collections, in particular, have only occasionally found a welcoming home in nonprofit institutional repositories, their inherent merit as historical objects often eclipsed by a star’s clout.⁸² Writing the history of early female queer reception, in short, forcefully entails to write *about and around loss*—of youth, repute, memory, physical

integrity. As such, it demands the adoption of what Hastie terms a “historiography writ not large but in the margins, in objects . . . pulled from the cupboards of feminist curiosity.”⁸³

Like Hastie and Paula Amad, I spotlight personal film archives whose collaborative custodians may include at turns auctioneers, archivists, scholars, hobbyists, fans, their relatives, and strangers.⁸⁴ From that irregular corpus I tease forth an “affective historiography”—a form of researching past film experiences that cannot be disarticulated from autobiography, emotion, and loss and thus must embrace indeterminacy and incompleteness as strengths rather than pitfalls of sociohistorical research. As Cvetkovich points out, “In the archive of lesbian feeling, objects are not inherently meaningful but are made so through their significance to an audience.”⁸⁵ In taking “the fan as a model for the archivist,” queer cultural historiographers decide to privilege the signification of “fetishistic, idiosyncratic, or obsessional” feelings instantiated by fan objects, adjoining their interpretations with biographical and social fact.⁸⁶

To delineate infrastructural intimacies as rarefied as those forged by self-identified queer fans in the 1910s is to beget a balancing act: threading the needle of not overvaluing surviving materials while recognizing that scarcity accumulates cultural significance. Centered around a patchworked feminist archive, this book is not invested in finding definitive answers. Instead, it comments upon the uneasy marriage between the unstable emporium of virtual information that is the internet—with its dead links, timed auctions, nominal finding aids, and ever-expanding grassroot archives—and one-of-a-kind fan artifacts from the 1910s.

Impermanent and incomplete in different ways, the internet, institutional archives, and personal ephemera collections are infrastructural to researching early film reception and to expanding LGBTQ+ histories. My affective historiography seeks to harness the three sources. Movie scrapbooks retrieved from online auctions are contextualized with yearbooks, letters, diaries, and memorabilia stored at women’s colleges, university libraries, and sundry nonprofit repositories: from the film-specific Margaret Herrick Library to municipal archives like the Washington State Historical Society and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles. When read in tandem with contemporaneous legislation, medical literature, magazines, and biographic data culled from censuses, school records, and ancestry databases found online, self-crafted fan archives induce researchers to think of feminist historiography as a living thing, able to continuously incorporate diverse sources, methods, and viewpoints, and as a connective tissue, where the “then” and the “now” of

historical research—as the “us” and the “them” Jane Gaines problematizes when discussing feminist research on silent film women—can fluctuate in a state of affective mutuality.⁸⁷

From this perspective, affect approximates the film historian, the eBay bidder, and the queer collector, accounting for their shared attachment to a distant past only brought closer through surviving ephemera. A desire to touch history, to keep history alive through material recollection suffuses them all (collectors, collectibles, collections), much like it propelled early girl fans to assemble personal film records. From keeping moviegoing ledgers, press clippings, and fan mail to journaling and photographing, girl fans’ impetus to retain history intersected with the need to chronicle the mutable young self, to pin down evanescent reactions through the infrastructures of intimacy put in place by a nascent commercial film culture.

Beyond preserving queer history, personal ephemera collections are also perversely gregarious, interpellating onlookers to produce their own readings while extending no fixed answers: after all, timelines and intentions are often left ambiguous. We are once again returned to Kitty Baker’s Kodak. In her scrapbook, the movie-loving girl saved an image of female intimacy devoid of any biographical data or context, only to eroticize same-sex closeness by scribbling a superlative adverb (“too”) next to a coupled numeral (“two”) and an affective adjective (“sweet”). Baker’s snapshot attests that queerness—as a mode of representation, communication, and identification—factored into girls’ silent film reception. Cast as the prototypical screen-struck fan, white adolescent girls may have been portrayed as emotionally unruly in the press, but a side-effect of being so expansively othered is that they also enjoyed unusual leeway in displaying their attachments to picture stars. Considered socially “acceptable in adolescent females, sexual mobility” and self-questioning afforded white literate girls a freer exercise of their wills and wants when expressed under the cover of movie fandom.⁸⁸

Still, female queerness, like female adolescence, remains largely unexamined in silent film history. Scholarship broaching queerness often focuses on popular films, directors, or players, inadvertently perpetuating a narrative of privilege and exception.⁸⁹ Laura Horak, for example, compiles an exceptional rolodex of cross-dressing in silent cinema, but screen representation directs her inquiry on female queerness in early Hollywood, so audiences are ultimately subsumed to film narratives and star texts.⁹⁰ I use first-person fan artifacts to argue that female queerness is at the heart of Hollywood’s star system and its

attendant celebrity culture. The promotion of an industry pronouncedly personified by young capable women emboldened female audiences to devise reception methods that licensed a gamut of same-sex intimacies and identifications not newly desired, but never so openly encouraged. By the mid-1910s, it was widely accepted that when it came to the movies, “Girls Admire Girls.” A popularity contest administered in 1916 by Paramount Pictures at a Washington, DC, high school ascertained as much, reporting how “despite the fact that it was a girls’ institution and there are such men as Jack Barrymore, Dustin Farnum, Jack Pickford, and a host of other handsome men to choose from, the young ladies” selected Mary Pickford and Marguerite Clark as their film favorites.⁹¹ Despite press depictions of screen-struck girlhood pulsating with sexism, they also granted legitimacy to same-sex female closeness. Thus, in spite of its detractors, early film fandom became a rare arena in which admiration, desire, and pursuit of other women was not automatically met with accusations of perversion.

In *Uninvited*, Patricia White introduces the thesis that “female homoerotic desire is in a sense foundational to the star system” and its fan reception, positing that “the same-sex star crush narrative, with its complex negotiation of identification and desire, idealization and recognition, is particularly revelatory for queer subjects.”⁹² Innovative in centering queer spectatorship, White’s work remains tethered to performances and stars that invite a conjectural homoerotic gaze from female audiences.⁹³ Grappling with historicizing queer presence in the silent era, both Mark Lynn Anderson and Susan Potter turn to Rudolph Valentino to find possible queer identificatory practices ignited, not by screen displays of same-sex intimacy, but by the discursive sexual mobility and gender nonconformity cohered in Valentino’s star text.⁹⁴ These three historians present compelling cases of queerness permeating the ether of early Hollywood stardom without providing concrete evidence of the shapes queer spectatorship would have taken in daily life. Testaments of nonnormative audience responsiveness, I propose, can be found in ardent private correspondence propositioning screen actresses, in scrapbook collages depicting moviegoing girls in menswear or caressing one another, in diary entries and poems borrowing a man’s voice to make love to female stars. Such autobiographical materials flesh out the postulations forwarded by White, Horak, and Potter: that past female audiences looked at other women with desire, that they yearned for difference in gender performance, and that they recurrently turned to screen players to negotiate unresolved nodes of difference, attraction, longing, and self-inquiry.

A project on queer spectatorship, nonetheless, must acknowledge that dissident reception practices do not exist apart from governing cultural scripts but develop within them. As Sharon Marcus reminds us, until the turn of the century “female homoeroticism did not subvert the dominant codes of femininity because [it] was one of those codes.”⁹⁵ In the 1910s, scrapbooking and autobiographical writing were accepted as part of literate women’s culture of sentimentality, leisure, and kinship, operating as venues for first-person storytelling where homoeroticism could flourish. Rather than attributing current gender and sexual denominations to past girl fans, I propose that their archives confirm what feminist film historians have long speculated: that possibility, idiosyncrasy, and fantasy activated female spectatorship in the silent period and that queerness blossomed in the half-light between presence and absence, masculinity and femininity, convention and transgression, the lived and the imagined.

Lastly, a focus on personal fan materials may seem narrow, an inflated privileging of the innuendo, the ellipsis, the outlier. And yet, current conversations on queer media representation continue to operate within those same parameters: the blink-and-you-will-miss-it lesbian kiss in a major film franchise, the insinuated reference in a television show or talent interview.⁹⁶ In Hollywood cinema, female queer desire has been continuously relegated to what Terry Castle terms an “apparitional” existence—flickers of potential visibility lurking on the heteronormative threshold of plausible deniability, haunting the fringes of the mainstream, its surfacing depending on a beholder’s knowing eye.⁹⁷ Tactile signs of a “serial intimacy” with mass media, fan ephemera collections hold a parallel potentiality: they offer themselves up as fertile ground for interrogating apparitional moments of queer reception as crafted by individual female viewers, while availing access to audience responses whose immanent nonconformity found affinity with the transient, the sentimental, the token.⁹⁸

“A REVERSED MANNER”: HISTORICIZING THE DEFINITION OF “QUEER”

Fundamental to my historiographical method, the term “queer” demands further clarification. Like “movie fan” and “adolescent girl,” “queer” is a polymorphous vocable that gained currency in early twentieth-century US culture. As both noun and adjective, it held a long lineage in English language, forging an alliance with deviation and curiosity as early as the

seventeenth century. According to historian Barbara Benedict, “queers” have long been seen as those who “inquired into forbidden topics, [including] physical generation and sex, . . . social customs and human nature, . . . history and hierarchy.” Women and collectors fell under this template, “their ambition to know, to know the hidden, and/or to know more than they were told, condemn[ing] them as traitors to their own species.”⁹⁹ The thrust to go off the trodden path and question the unknown othered the first generations of culturally appointed “queers.” Their self-probing curiosity turned them into curiosities—to others, but more importantly to themselves.

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, “queer” became what Benedict calls “a colloquial intensive,” being repeatedly deployed in the US periodical press to characterize deviations from normative expectations, including social, behavioral, and sexual attitudes.¹⁰⁰ Achieving traction as an adjective in the 1900s, “queer” also became gendered in newspapers and women’s magazines. Often coupled with “girl,” the qualifier signified “peculiar, different from the norm” in an incisive gesture towards gender nonconformity and psychological divergence. “A queer girl,” according to countless stories published in dailies, “is not like other girls.”¹⁰¹ “Ever so nice but very quiet, . . . she won’t dress like a wax lady in a show window”; she goes about in plain, “loose-fitting, short-skirted linen gowns and tennis shoes,” her nose in a book, her thoughts errant and concealed behind a “grave smile.” Girls her age tended to find her “plain daffy,” because “she won’t play cards” or say “more than a dozen words,” though “she’s on speaking terms with bobolinks, and knows all about the woods.”¹⁰² Protagonists in fiction frequently felt attracted to the “queer girl” due to her unconventionality, ambiguity, and secretiveness. “Sometimes I like her, and sometimes I do not,” Stella Reeves muses in S.H. James’s syndicated story “A Queer Girl.” “She is not good company, I am afraid, and yet I want to invite her for that very reason.”¹⁰³

Together with her refractory personality and gender-nonconforming behavior, the queer girl’s “reversed manner” set her apart from “the other girls cutting up their lives in fashionable patterns.”¹⁰⁴ The adjective “reversed” reverberates with “inverted,” the dominant term in turn-of-century jargons to define homosexuality and gender nonconformity.¹⁰⁵ Defined as “reversed,” adolescent female queerness is connected with contrariness and deviation long before it had become academically reclaimed as a term of heteronormative resistance. Foreshadowing the term’s future meaning, early twentieth-century “queer girls” showed no interest in domesticated femininity, nor did they value conventional het-

erosexual romance. In a 1915 newspaper column, Mollie is introduced as “a queer sort of girl” because “she is in love with her independence and successful ability to turn her brain into money. . . . She is not at all desirous of marrying any man.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, a head for business and distaste for male courtship are interpreted as telltale signs of female queerness as early as 1904. Presented with “a little romance with a college fellow . . . who got soaked in a thunderstorm,” a shy country maiden is given an ultimatum: “If you don’t make the best of it, you’re a queer girl.” “That Miss Sadie Davis was not a queer girl was proved a year later,” when she wooed and wedded the male “tourist with a rich dad.”¹⁰⁷ In periodical publications, a girl’s “queerness” was thus repeatedly associated with a “reversal” of heteronormative femininity or with a knowingness beyond her years, either seen as unnerving or in need of correction. It is that self-awareness of innate difference that makes a “queer girl” stand out while also alienating her from peers and society at large. At times praised as a mark of strong character, such female noncompliance typically found itself chastised as affectation, orneriness, or pathology.

By the 1910s, physicians diagnosed female sexual inversion by employing heuristics similar to those rendering the “queer girl” legible to literate audiences at the turn of the century. Like Mollie, “the average inverted women will be very independent . . . and very likely will engage in business. Being endowed with the assertive force and characteristics of the masculine, the invert [shuns] the frills and delicate accoutrements so dear to the heart of the normal woman,” much like James’s “queer girl” heroine did. Like her literary forerunners, the female invert of clinical textbooks also experienced a “peculiar” sense of mental alienation, “believing she is different from everyone else and that she is the only person in the world with similar feelings.”¹⁰⁸ In short, the “queer girl” of sentimental fiction shares many characteristics with the female invert of medical literature. Symptomatic of a transitional period when sexologists struggled to create a stable taxonomy of deviance that accounted for myriad manifestations of psychological, social, and sexual nonconformity, the queer girl operated in the same vein as “the screen-struck girl” or the mannish “New Woman”: as a cypher for female alterity, an embodiment of diffuse patriarchal anxieties tussling with attachments, desires, and identities that strained heteronormative standards of feeling and being.¹⁰⁹

Girls growing up in early twentieth-century United States would have been familiar with, and likely internalized, such a pervasive template to

spot nonconforming female subjectivities among the human mass. When a tenth-grader from Minnesota wrote a short story about “a queer girl,” she introduced female queerness as identifiable through aberrant behavior and public witnessing. “Elsie was a queer girl,” the omniscient narrator states. “Everyone said so. She was always thinking hard and saying such strange things.”¹¹⁰ “Over thinking” continually features as a telltale sign of deviance, a skip and a hop away from “over feeling,” the hallmark of screen-struck girlhood and feminized pathologies. Excess tethers the three together—female adolescents, film fans, and queer girls—ultimately othering them all. That some movie devotees described themselves as “queer girls” in personal documents indicates, then, a recognition and voluntary alignment with a dominant model of gendered divergence made recognizable by refusal to comply with heteronormative requirements of feminine conduct. Such self-characterization ripens when disclosure is enacted in private letters to female stars, commonly couched in sentimental idioms and eroticized identifications.

In marshaling the early twentieth-century valances of the term “queer,” my aim is not to uniform nonnormative spectatorship under a transparent rubric where “all objects” or “all girls” may import same-sex desire or cross-gender identification in a tabular fashion. Rather, I seek to expand histories of silent female audiences that proliferated contiguous to those promoted as “standard” in the periodical press.¹¹¹ Throughout the 1910s, film publications tended to homogenize movie-loving girlhood as lustful over male idols and covetous of actresses’ wares, columnists declaring that “a woman’s idea of a poor picture [hinges on if] he was not good-looking and her dresses were too short.”¹¹² First-person fan objects demonstrate that queerness can function, then and now, as “a horizon of experience shaping film reception for some spectators.” Certain stars, performances, and images triggered “a structure of queer feeling,” a scaffolding moviegoing girls who felt different from the norm used to pin and drape their sensations of divergence and belonging, pleasure and prejudice, aspiration and anxiety.¹¹³ Although material-studies historians like Susan Pearce recognize that “most collections have an element of gendering” and “collecting obstinately remains embodied in traditional erotic experience,” they also claim “there is not much evidence that people collect in order to subvert the gender roles available to them,” a conclusion movie ephemera gathered by cross-dressed and male-identified girl fans pointedly challenges.¹¹⁴

Invariably, research on queer histories will meet with questions of how to ascertain the queerness of a past object, performer, or creator

when self-identification is lacking. My heuristics loop back to the notion of affect previously proffered—the discrete propulsive charge attaching a fan to a specific star, a performance, an image. Their queerness is rendered legible as a combination of subject matter, affective intensity, and social biography, as well as by the kinship stirred in me as a queer researcher. Compilers’ insistent penchant for the divergent (the male poetic voice, the cross-dressed actress, the pathologized language) guided me through the process of piecing together the multiplicity of sources comprising this archive of early female fan feeling—a lived and leaky repository where queerness, like paper ephemera, persists as a sort of defiance against expected dissipation and compliance, and whose leakage stimulates beholders to question themselves. In the end, if fan affect is *of the body* and felt *in the body*, so is the affect motivating queer historians. It takes guts and is felt in the gut, the drive to go fondling around the past, fingering for tender spots amongst sharp holes and brittle folds, little more than a hunger and a hunch for what “there-theres” might have been.¹¹⁵

AT SIXES AND SEVENS: CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Building upon research on intimate relations between turn-of-the-century women, lesbian spectatorship, and ephemera as queer historical traces, chapter 1 traces the seminal homoerotic language of female fan mail.¹¹⁶ I draw on nineteenth-century sentimental conventions and emergent sexology literature to historicize how accepted models of schoolgirl crushes and romantic friendships became the blueprint for mediated engagement between early screen actresses and their girl fans. Chapter 2 focuses on private correspondence girl fans sent to actress Florence Lawrence in the early 1910s, while chapter 3 surveys male-voiced love poems girls dedicated to female stars, most of them found in movie magazines and newspapers.

Throughout these chapters, I argue that the sentimental codes of female relationality and homoeroticism popularized in turn-of-the-century fiction, medicine, and everyday life came to undergird the feminization of Hollywood’s star system, saturating its main modes of reception: fan-letter writing, movie scrapbooking, and playing dress-up. Fan mail and poetry, by definition stagings of superlative feeling and selfhood, cultivated the homoerotic and the sentimental; published fan poetry, in particular, provides a vivid snapshot of the rhetorical modes of sentimental self-expression that popular imagination naturalized as “feminine.” Reading these artifacts alongside biographical data enables

a sussing out of the queer codes and identifications a dawning commercial film culture afforded nonnormative girl spectators, while showing how adolescent female audiences drafted an infrastructural dialect of star-fan intimacy that homoeroticized film consumption.

Chapters 4 through 6 tackle a different material corpus: movie scrapbooks and diaries assembled by girls who used film ephemera to negotiate gender play and nonconformity. A study of personal collages of cross-dressed actresses, male-voiced journal entries, and photographic portraits in male drag reveals an everyday queer experience shaped around movie fandom. Chapter 4 traces the “movie scrap book” fad as it was first advertised in the periodical press at the onset of WWI, contextualizing the fan practice as an austerity measure targeting young female film lovers. Advertised in newspapers and fan magazine as a “useful” mode of female-oriented reception, movie scrapbooking became a privileged site for girls to rehearse divergent affinities under the cover of paper conservation and domestic craftwork. Engendering a visual language of media adoration, extant fan collages register the subcultural presence of a queer spectatorship that clustered around embodied erotics, expressed through the manipulation of stars’ paper likenesses. This included gathering images of male stars engaged in physical intimacy with other men or known for their dandyism and sentimentality, like Jack W. Kerrigan. Though queer female spectatorship in the 1910s centered around movie actresses, I propose that the relationship some girl fans forged with “emotional” male players allowed for explorations of gender nonconformity, same-sex attraction, and erotic fluidity in a manner complementary to that instantiated by female stars.

Chapter 5 explores early twentieth-century medical literature, film magazines, and newspaper coverage of gender-nonconforming public figures (including criminals and stars) in order to historicize a spreading discourse associating female cross-dressing with pathology. I claim that as women achieved greater agency onscreen playing resourceful serial queens and flirtatious madcaps, pressmen labored to reinforce traditional femininity among film audiences, extolling actresses’ gender-conforming lived behaviors and fashion choices across multiple outlets. Analyzing movie scrapbooks and photo albums from both affluent and working girls, chapter 6 examines the predominance of fan collages featuring actresses in menswear next to photographs of movie-loving girls cross-dressing in their day-to-day. This material juxtaposition discloses an undocumented history of queer life centered around moviegoing and gender performance, while also paving the way for a discussion

of juridical, scientific, and cultural conceptions of gender and sexual deviance soaring in the early twentieth century. I propose that prior to the creation of the “woman’s picture,” a subgenre that permitted an identifiable venue for narratives of female desire and emotionality, moviegoing girls flocked to images of actresses in menswear. Like the woman’s picture of the 1930s, female cross-dressing in the silent era both coaxed alternative readings and reinscribed heteronormative binaries. Still, from homoerotic desire to longing for liberties only allowed to men, girl fans’ play with gender suggests an implicit understanding of femininity and masculinity as constructed social performances they enjoyed testing. The epilogue looks forward to the 1920s, tracing dis/continuities in both industry address and girl-fan practices, especially as they pertained to handicrafts and movie scrapbooking.

In the end, by exhuming the material archive of the first generation of self-identified screen-struck girls, I reach for what William Faulkner hauntingly described as “the living blood and seed [in which] we ourselves lay dormant”—we the historians, the fans, the female-identified and queer audiences, we the descendants of those “volatile and sentient forces” that, like Kitty Baker, may seem to have “faded to . . . just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy [and] inscrutable against that turgid background of a . . . mischancing of human affairs” but whose affective investment in early filmmaking remains “meaningful” to an understanding of cultural memory and media history.¹¹⁷ Movie-loving girls of the silent period matter because they helped implement one of the most influential institutions in the world: Hollywood cinema and its enduring offshoot, celebrity culture. By giving them a long-delayed spotlight, this is also a book about queer ghosts—that is, if we regard what is present but unremarked a form of apparitionality, if we consider “queer” that which refuses to be fenced in by societal norms or historical periodization and continues to burst through an imposed negative space into a conjuring of possibilities.