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The Kiss

Forgetting Film History

ABSTRACT *The Kiss* (1896) is among the most iconic artifacts of American cinema; yet, the film has long puzzled film scholars. At the advent of cinema, why did audiences respond to this seemingly simple kiss with extreme visceral reactions such as hysterical laughter or condemnation of the film as pornography? This paper reconsiders *The Kiss* in light of the recently rediscovered *Something Good—Negro Kiss* (1898) placing both these films in relation to actor-director Olga Nethersole's queer influence on turn-of-the-twentieth-century popular culture. Leaning on foundational texts by Charles Musser, Linda Williams, and Siobhan Somerville and drawing on recent work by Susan Potter, Allyson Nadia Field, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, this paper intervenes in the "presumed innocent" discourse of sexuality during the novelty film period. I argue that *The Kiss* was so controversial because the sex act it stood in for was a queer act, a lesbian kiss. KEYWORDS Olga Nethersole, Sapho/Sappho, intertextuality, queer film history, kiss films

Now I want to smash The Vitascope.
— John Sloan, 1896

You have probably seen the film known as *The Kiss* (Edison, 1896). *The Kiss* was one of the most popular films of projected cinema's first year. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City opened its first film series with *The Kiss* in 1935 and the film was added to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1999.[1] It ranks among the most iconic images of early cinema and it is an official part of our national heritage. This silent, black-and-white, eighteen-second film preserves the heterosexual stage kiss of two rather ordinary looking white actors, May Irwin and John C. Rice. In this essay, I demonstrate that this seemingly simple, self-evident, kiss has been misunderstood and its history perverted; for, despite the short film's unassailably canonical status, scholars remain puzzled by both audience and critical responses to *The Kiss*. What was it about this seemingly innocent artifact that provoked riotous laughter from some nineteenth-century audiences and

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FIGURE 1. May Irwin and John C. Rice in *The Kiss* (1896), Press Photo, c. 1953. Private collection.

shrill denunciation as illicit pornography from others?[2] Linda Williams, who has called the film cinema's first sex act, has asked, "What does it mean that *The May Irwin Kiss* was 'too funny'? Does it necessarily mean that it was also not shocking?"[3] Charles Musser, in turn, has surmised, "perhaps its pleasures and its importance are for reasons that we have not yet adequately understood."[4] In the pages that follow, I argue that *The Kiss* was both funny and shocking because the sex act it stood in for was a queer act, a lesbian kiss.

THE NETHERSOLE KISS: THE FIRST SEX ACT IN CINEMA

The kiss that marks the birth of cinema was a brief excerpt, an outtake of sorts, from May Irwin's popular stage play *The Widow Jones* which opened in Brockton, Massachusetts, in August 1895 and toured the country coast to coast over the year.[5] Musser describes how *The Widow Jones* stage kiss sealed the engagement of the two main characters in an "appropriately American" kiss.[6] He points out, however, that the kiss went unremarked until another kiss "put the kiss on the critical map."[7] On December 24, 1895 British actress Olga Nethersole created a furor with her scandalous *Carmen* kiss. In her theatrical rendition of the well-known story of *Carmen,* which opened at The Empire Theatre in New York City, Nethersole's passionate, apparently heterosexual, kisses of her supporting male actor Ernest Leicester made coast-

to-coast headlines.[8] Popular journalist W.C. Brann described the shocking performance in his Texas newspaper *The Iconoclast*, declaring "the kiss of Miss Nethersole is but a differentiation of those unnatural debaucheries for which Onan was damned and Sodom destroyed."[9] Needless to say, it was a sensation.

Nethersole's "nitro-glycerine" kisses that went on, and on . . . and on, in *Carmen* would be remembered for the next thirty years.[10] Although the kiss immortalized on celluloid between Irwin and Rice the following year is better remembered today, in 1895 it was the Nethersole kiss that was "the sensation of modern times."[11] Film scholars such as Musser and Williams have recognized *The Kiss* as a "spoof" of Nethersole's legendary *Carmen* kiss, but the significance of this intertextual relationship to cinema history has not yet been fully understood.[12] Just what was W.C. Braun so upset about that he declared that Olga Nethersole "might as well commit a homicide or produce an abortion"?[13]

By recognizing the queer meanings produced by Nethersole's *Carmen* kiss we can begin to unravel the popularity and stakes of May Irwin's parody. The *Carmen* kiss quickly became known as the Nethersole kiss, strongly associating it with the actor rather than the role.[14] The uproar over the now iconic film *The Kiss* can be explained by understanding the Nethersole kiss as a queer kiss. The shock, humor, and attraction of *The Kiss* was based on a publicly legible lesbian iconography and common language of double entendre that was deployed both by, and about, Olga Nethersole. The reason *The Kiss* has puzzled scholars is that a queer sexuality has been repressed—a queer sexuality that lies at the heart of cinema's origins and would have been grasped immediately by audiences of the day.

Intermedial discourses circulating between theater, newspaper, and cinema are central to tracing the way audiences would have understood *The Kiss*. The film was sponsored by *The New York World*, where—about three weeks before it was ever projected on the screen—*The Kiss* was published in the newspaper. The "film" was printed as frame enlargements reproduced as line drawings, which was a standard practice for the day.[15] In this period, *The New York World* was in a raging circulation battle with the *New York Journal*.[16] In this turf war, Nethersole was targeted as a sensational figure, a freak figure. I suggest that Nethersole was targeted because she was—correctly—perceived as queer. Musser has persuasively argued that Irwin's parody of Nethersole's kiss produced "a good old-fashioned American kiss" that spoke to the 'filthiness' of 'imported' stage shows "not with sanctimonious

FIGURE 2. Olga Nethersole as *Carmen (1895), Ogden's Guinea Gold Cigarettes Card*, c. 1895–1902. Private collection.

outrage of easily offended critics, but with a distinctly American brand of ribald humor."[17] I am suggesting a queer specificity to the type of 'filthiness' that was in question; the offended critics' and audiences' responses to Irwin's ribald humor were not as distinct as first appears.

There is ample textual evidence that Olga Nethersole's queerness was a part of her public image, not least in the sometimes-hostile scrutiny directed at her by the press. The high-profile media discourses surrounding the *Carmen* kiss help to reveal the stakes of the brouhaha in which Irwin's parody played a role. Musser has demonstrated how the original newspaper illustrations of


THE WORLD: SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 1896. 21

THE ANATOMY OF A KISS.

At the Request of The Sunday World May Irwin and John Rice Posed Before Edison's Kinetoscope---Result: 42 Feet of Kiss in 600 Pictures.

A PERFECT GENTLEMAN SMOOTHS HIS MUSTACHE FIRST.

THIS IS THE COY MOMENT.—MISS IRWIN HESITATES.

WIDOW JONES'S KISS FORTY-TWO FEET LONG

It Was of Fifteen Seconds' Duration, but the Kinetoscope Caught 600 Views of It.

THE FIRST KISS EVER PUBLISHED IN A NEWSPAPER.

PEGGIE AIKE PURTY CAMERA WINDS UP KISS.

THRILLING INCIDENTS IN A DOCTOR'S LIFE.

Coroner's Physician Donlin Writes of His Adventures in the Slums of New York.

IGNORANT PEOPLE FEAR AND RESIST THE OFFICERS.

THE PRELIMINARY SNUGGLE SEEMS TO BE A GOOD THING.

CLIMAX—LONG AND ENTHUSIASTIC AND TOO BLISSFUL FOR ADJECTIVES.

FIGURE 3. "The Anatomy of a Kiss," *New York World* (April 26, 1896), 21. Public domain.

The Kiss invited the "scrutiny" of frame-by-frame analysis, mocking the seriousness of moralizing citizens and "making fun of the possibilities for which these new technologies could be used."[18] I argue that this frame-by-frame dissection exists in direct relation to the scrutiny of Nethersole as a queer figure; the possibilities being lampooned are queer possibilities. At the turn of the twentieth century, new forms of social and technological investigation developed in tandem with Victorian sexology and nineteenth century law. Richard A. Kaye has argued that this new social inquiry functioned through a melodramatic structure of revelation in relation to the 1885

criminalization of male homosexuality in England. Kaye has shown how "the evolving Victorian constitution of the homosexual subject" emphasized a new "commitment to observable, verifiable, exteriorized displays . . . that could be relied on as evidence in a court."[19] Of course, a court of law is exactly where the scrutiny of Nethersole would eventually wind up, but we get ahead of ourselves.

In his persuasive analysis, Kaye has observed that while homosexuality was positioned as an unspeakable secret, it was simultaneously wholly legible. Kaye's analysis of the melodramatic structure of Victorian scrutiny considers one of the first novels to treat homosexuality as a contemporary social problem, a novel written by a British ex-pat named Alan Dale.[20] The full significance of the satirical examination aimed at the Nethersole kiss becomes clear when *The New York World*'s printed publication of *The Kiss* is read in relation to its rival *The New York Journal*'s earlier coverage of the *Carmen* kiss, including a sarcastic critique written by none other than Alan Dale. Dale's "abuse" of Nethersole, to use the language of those who defended her, helped make him one of the first celebrity drama critics.[21]

The New York Journal's copious coverage of the *Carmen* kiss is richly illustrated with images of the scintillating kisses that appeared on stage—line drawings like those in the printed version of *The Kiss*—with a caption that reads "photographs taken expressly for the Journal" (Figure 4).[22] The original newspaper publication of *The Kiss* is in direct dialogue with *The New York Journal*'s *Carmen* coverage, one-upping its hostile, analytic, and photographic scrutiny by bringing in the moving image. Although *The Kiss* was published four months later, Nethersole was still setting America 'on fire' with her torrid kisses at the time *The Kiss* appeared in print. The film was first projected just a week after Nethersole concluded her tumultuous tour.[23] The joke of frame-by-frame analysis plays on H.K. Chambers' article in *The New York Journal*'s coverage, which pokes fun at the idea of trying to analyze Nethersole's kisses: "One can not take notes while Olga Nethersole is kissing."[24]

In Alan Dale's contribution to the coverage, "A Vesuvian Episode," he pens a biting critique of Nethersole, her kisses, *and her audience*. His acerbic attack on Nethersole drips with derision and double entendre that make clear that his objections are to her public performance of queer sexuality that extends beyond the stage. Dale deftly mobilizes strings of association and gossip throughout his discussion, ironically leaving a queer cultural index in the wake of his homophobic tirade. Consider Dale's reference to

FIGURE 4. "Olga Nethersole's Mad Kisses Will Live in Theatrical History/ Photographs Taken Expressly for the Journal," *New York Journal*, December 29, 1895. Public domain.

Mt. Vesuvius, the volcano that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 CE. As is widely known, when Pompeii and Herculaneum were excavated in the mid-eighteenth century a large number of sexually explicit artifacts—including graphic representations of same-sex acts—were discovered and put on

public display.[25] As Chiara Beccalossi has made clear, a long-standing "association between male same-sex practices and Italy persisted in the nineteenth century."[26] The queer association with Vesuvius becomes even more specific in relation to the 1885 criminalization of homosexuality in England. Beccalossi explains that Italy, where homosexuality was not a crime, was "embraced by British homosexuals, some of whom were travelers" while others chose to live there to avoid persecution. This queer association would have been particularly strong in 1896, following the high-profile trials and conviction of Oscar Wilde in England.

Dale quickly doubles down on this queer metaphor by opening his critique of Nethersole's *Carmen* with a stanza from Lord Byron's satirical poem *Don Juan* (1819). Byron's words seem to describe the *Carmen* kiss, beginning with "A long, long kiss, a kiss of youth, and love."[27] The stanza concludes with the phrase "the blood's lava, and the pulse a blaze, each kiss a heart-quake," elegantly tying the kiss back to the Vesuvius metaphor. The reproduced stanza of the poem describes an apparently heterosexual kiss between Don Juan and Haidee. Yet, literary critic Jonathan David Gross has persuasively argued that the narrator of *Don Juan* was "gay;" Byron himself has been positioned as "gay" by both his contemporaries and by subsequent critics such as Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling who suggest he is "fundamentally homosexual."[28] By citing this well-known passage from Byron's most popular poem in his review of Nethersole's stage play, Dale identifies the *Carmen* kiss as a kiss that only looks heterosexual, but actually stands in for queer acts. Dale has thus doubly marked the *Carmen* kiss as queer before he has even begun the substance of his critique. This kind of intertextual marking of Nethersole's queer sexuality was frequent regardless of whether the response was negative or positive. Turn-of-the-century writing about Olga Nethersole is voluminous and is filled with textual and visual evidence of her genius, of her cultural impact, and of her queerness.

Such innuendo and intertextuality constituted a vernacular iconography of queerness that popular audiences well understood. Nethersole was actively engaged with a broad public audience that was paying close attention. This public was buying not only newspapers, where they could read loud condemnations—alongside detailed descriptions—but also tickets. As one of the milder reviews put it, "She willingly permits a certain amount and kind of kissing . . . to be used as the principal argument for attracting audiences."[29] Nethersole's *Carmen* sold out as audiences from New York to Kansas City flocked to the sighs, gasps, and moans of "the most moving kisses ever given

on any stage."[30] This is the context in which, about a month after *Carmen* debuted, May Irwin added the satirical kiss to her own successful run of *The Widow Jones*.[31] Through the iconic onscreen trace of May Irwin's stage parody we see an echo of the queer iconography and performance tradition that sealed Nethersole's fame. *The Kiss* inadvertently preserves Nethersole's deployment of this queer iconography as an important part of American cultural heritage.

FIGURES 5 AND 5.5. John Rice's Mustache Moves in *The Kiss*, 1896. Screenshots, public domain.

MUSTACHE MOVES AND BEARDED LADIES: THE QUEER ICONOGRAPHY OF OLGA'S LABIAL SALUTE

In *The Kiss,* Irwin and Rice appear in a static medium shot. The shot opens with Rice immediately moving in as though to kiss Irwin, but the kiss is delayed as they press their cheeks against each other and . . . talk, murmuring indiscernibly. One can almost feel Rice's mustache tickling the corner of Irwin's lips. Finally, after about fourteen seconds, Rice pulls away from Irwin, again delaying the kiss. He pointedly prepares for the osculation by smoothing his mustache, stroking it twice, before finally swooping in for the kiss of the century. Rice's prominent "Walrus" mustache is one of the most iconic and funny elements of *The Kiss* and, as we shall see, it is central to the parody of Nethersole's queer *Carmen* kiss. The mustache marks the punchline of Irwin's joke.

Critics frequently commented on the facial hair—or lack thereof—of Nethersole's leading men on stage. In one review of Nethersole's tour before *Carmen's* debut, for example, an uncredited critic lamented the clean-shaven face of her co-star Ernest Leicester in her productions of *Denise* and *Camille*.[32] "I do hope that he'll stick on a mustache, or some semblance of a whisker . . . It can be limp for fury and spiked for joy. Oh, Ernest! Oh, Leicester! . . . fear not Olga. She won't tear your hirsutes away from you . . . "[33] In his review of *Carmen*, Alan Dale runs with this joke. He describes Leicester: "He shaves himself tightly, for he knows that Nethersole's kiss is a hair eradicator, more powerful than anything of the sort that is advertised. A packet of Nethersole's kisses labelled 'Rough on Mustaches' would be hailed by thousands of hair-suffering people. She could kiss a bearded lady smooth as a Cupid on a valentine."[34] If the phallic associations of the limp or spiked mustache were not clear enough, Dale's pointed imagination of Nethersole kissing *a bearded lady smooth as a cupid* expresses a clear anxiety about the relationship between gender and queer sexuality.

Dale goes on to invoke the queer figures of Emma Calvé and Sandow the strongman. In 1896 Calvé and Sandow were both at least rumored to be homosexual; today they are both celebrated as queer icons.[35] Calvé's rendition of *Carmen* debuted in Paris in 1894 and was creating a "frenzy" of its own in New York City where it premiered just a month before Nethersole's.[36] Dale writes that Calvé "must be heartbroken . . . *Carmen* is to be wrested from her by the Sandow-like lips of Miss Olga Nethersole."[37] Thus, he once again associates Nethersole's kisses with both "gender

confusion" and deviant sexuality. Irwin's burlesque in *The Widow Jones* uses the same intertextual iconography to center the pointed parody of the queer *Carmen* kiss. The business with Rice's prominent mustache in the filmed version emphasizes the supposed naturalness of gender difference and heterosexuality. In other words, in *The Kiss,* Rice's mustache is a symbol of normative male heterosexuality. The spectacular popularity and controversy of the film, which continue to puzzle film historians, suggests that these meanings were well understood by audiences in 1896.

Scholars have observed that the film of *The Kiss* ignited extensive critical comment out of proportion to the stage kiss in general, and the Irwin-Rice stage kiss in particular.[38] This overblown reaction includes painter John Sloan's famous declaration that *The Kiss* made him want to smash the Vitascope, as well as a one-line description of the film by Harry Tyrell in *The Illustrated American* that some scholars consider to be the first film review (to which we will return shortly).[39] How then, do we account for the lackluster response to the stage kiss compared to the almost riotous response elicited from the filmed version of the same kiss? Scholars including Miriam Hansen and J.A. Sokalski, as well as Musser and Williams, have attempted to account for this clear and inordinate discrepancy through formal means, placing the outsized response in relation to the new pleasures produced by the new medium of cinematic projection.[40] While I agree with the thrust of these arguments, I also insist that the "difference" of the cinematically mediated kiss was related to the "difference" of a *queer* sexuality; the pleasures of scrutiny provided by the new technology existed in direct relation to emerging discourses on *homo*sexuality. Tyrell's film "review" alluded to above describes the film as "a formidable challenge to the legitimate drama, as represented by Olga Nethersole in *Carmen*." While the review itself tells us very little about exactly what Olga Nethersole or the legitimate theater represented for audiences in this moment, the connotation would have been clear to almost everyone at the time.[41] *The Kiss* is a joke that exists in relation to Nethersole's performance of queer sexuality.

In "A Vesuvian Episode," Dale expresses concern over the effect of the queer *Carmen* kiss on the broad, popular, newspaper reading audiences. Like latter-day critics, he draws a distinction between the Nethersole kiss and other stage kisses saying, "Nethersole's kiss is quite another affair. It is very dangerous . . . It might have escaped into the audience and exploded." His final remarks turn from Nethersole to her female fans, making clear his concerns about the *contagion* of her kisses. He describes seeing "three arch

damsels walking along Forty-second street . . . with opera glasses" and relates the conversation he overheard. The first says, "I've just read that she's perfectly grand . . . and I think that we are in for a good time." The second replies "It's the kiss . . . that I'm after. I read all about it." Finally, Dale writes, "the third-the horrid, the disgusting third-smacked her lips and said: 'Yum! Yum!' I shall say no more. Saying is a very thankless task." This abrupt conclusion suggests that the story should speak for itself, and, it seems, the only thing left to say is both unsayable and already said. Dale's flippant disgust is an indication that he believed the desire and anticipation being expressed by these three women was directed at Nethersole. In the context of the extended scrutiny surrounding Nethersole and her kisses, I believe him. As we shall soon see, Dale was not the only one noticing Nethersole's effect on her female audiences.[42]

The curious controversy over *The Kiss,* which scholars have struggled to explain, inscribes a repressed queer sexuality at the very birth of cinema. The novelty of queer sexuality is closely connected to the novelty of new media at the turn of the century. Using the new technologies of photographic reproduction and the moving image, the queer *content* of the *Carmen* kiss is made "visible, observable, and external," to use Richard Kaye's words.[43] The "twin" novelties of moving image technology and lesbian sexualized performance sold conspicuous numbers of papers and tickets, suggesting that audiences had a keen interest in both. Audiences laughing at *The Kiss* may not have been Nethersole's audience, but they got the joke: otherwise, Irwin's parody would have fallen flat. Their laughter and disgust left evidence that Nethersole played an important role in public debates about sexuality and the emergence of a new identity known as the homosexual. *The Kiss* inscribes a contentious public dialogue about female-bodied queerness during a period when most scholars argue that the modern conception of homosexuality as an identity was just emerging.[44]

THE DESCENDENT OF SAPPHO

"With the history of her personal life we have nothing to do," writes drama critic H. Gordon Johnson in an 1895 article entitled, "Olga Nethersole and Her Genius."[45] While viewers of *The Kiss* today have probably never heard of Olga Nethersole, in 1895, when Johnson described her work as realizing "the divine insanity of imagination which we call genius," opinions were fraught. It was difficult to deny her the title of genius, but something about

Nethersole's indisputable success was making some people nervous. Johnson explained his decision to focus solely on Nethersole's acting technique by writing, "The morbid curiosity that seeks to know the details of an actress's personal experience is unwholesome, and tends to degrade the stage." To understand audience reactions to *The Kiss* in 1896, however, *we must* concern ourselves with the unwholesome, morbid curiosity, and degradation that came with the undeniable genius of Olga Nethersole—who was clearly a queer person, with a queer public persona. The repression of Olga Nethersole's influence on film history—and cultural history more broadly—is intimately related to the repression of her queer sexuality. In short, with the history of Olga Nethersole's personal life, we have something to do.

Today we might describe Nethersole's smashing success with her scandalous, corset-less, heterosexual stage kisses in *Carmen* as a queer BDSM sensation; in 1896 there was a different vocabulary that spoke queerness.[46] Where H. Gordon Johnson had refused to speculate on Nethersole's personal life, others made free observations in the vernacular of their time. As we have seen, the public discourse surrounding Nethersole's fame buzzed with titillating double entendre that frequently compared her onstage performance to her offstage persona, using provocative associations to create clear queer meaning. Nethersole herself encouraged and participated in this discourse through her own public statements and press releases; for years she teased the public with an ambiguous is-she-or-isn't-she discourse of her own in which she seems to have taken some delight.[47] Nethersole was gleefully described—by friends and foes alike—as Swinburnian, an "'Englishman,'" and a "female impersonator." But the most telling association was made through the figure of Sappho and the color violet. Drama critic Hilary Bell pulled no punches when he penned a satirical lament in 1896 suggesting that Nethersole's next play should be written by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, the "descendent of Sappho."[48] Wilcox was a well-known poet whose work included unabashed celebration of her lesbian lovers.[49] Bell's reference to Wilcox is reinforced by the invocation of the ancient lyric poet Sappho of Lesbos, whose very name was—and is—synonymous with female same-sex desire and activity.[50] This one-two punch of Wilcox and Sappho makes sure that the accusation of lesbianism being leveled against Nethersole will land. As we have seen, this doubling down on referents was a common feature of the marking of Nethersole as a queer person.

That Nethersole was in fact a "descendent of Sappho" is apparent, not only from the popular press's innuendo and the public persona she deliberately

FIGURE 6. Clyde Fitch as Peggy Thrift in *The Country Girl*, c. 1884. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.

fostered, but also from *the work she produced*. Nethersole's repertoire contained and was vehemently condemned for radical queer feminist content and interpretations. Bell's homophobic sarcasm speculating about the extremes to which Nethersole would have to go to out-do herself after her production of *Carmen* underlines for us today that her interpretation had been so queerly scandalous that it would be difficult for her to follow. While Nethersole did not take Bell's tongue-in-cheek suggestion and hire Ella Wheeler Wilcox to write her next

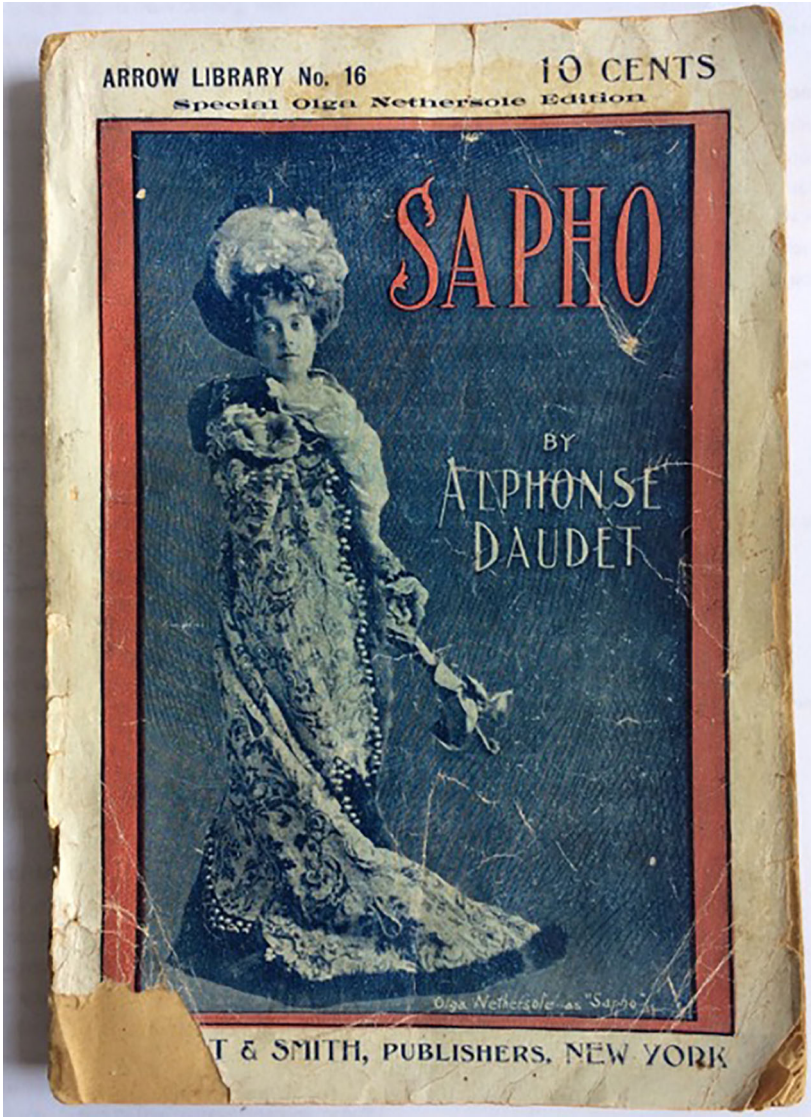

FIGURE 7. Special Olga Nethersole Edition of *Sapho*, c. 1900. Private collection.

production, she did one better. In 1900 Nethersole shocked un-shockable New York by producing her own version of Alphonse Daudet's novel *Sapho*/*Sappho* (1884) for the stage and hiring the flamboyant Clyde Fitch to write it.[51] Thus, Nethersole not only out-did her previous performance, but upstaged—and enraged—the clever critics as well.

FIGURE 8. Olga Nethersole as *Sapho*, c. 1900, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections. Public domain.

It is extremely significant that following the vitriolic accusations of lesbianism leveled against her by the press and pulpit, Nethersole boldly responded by embodying the figure of Sappho through which she had been accused. This daring re-appropriation was an in-your-face declaration of lesbian identification that resulted in the first indecency trial of the twentieth century. Although little remembered today, the *Sapho* affair has been

documented by performance scholars including Ann Everal Callis, Joy Reilly, John Houchin, Katie N. Johnson, and Marlis Schweitzer; it even makes an appearance in the PBS documentary series *The American Experience*.[52] Katie Johnson calls it "one of the most scandalous productions in twentieth century American history."[53] Yet, in both the scant scholarly and popular memory, the ostentatious performance of lesbian sexuality at the center of the scandal has been repressed.[54]

Dale's warnings about the dangers of the *Carmen* kiss escaping into the audience and exploding proved prescient. After the hoopla of the *Sapho* trial, Nethersole's scandalous *Carmen* kiss—which inspired May Irwin's iconic burlesque—was tellingly misremembered as the *Sapho* kiss. The Sappho craze that swept the country after Nethersole's acquittal was pejoratively described by one preacher as "the Sapho plague," emphasizing the era's homophobic fears about the contagion of homosexuality, as multiple licensed *Sapho* stage companies brought the play to the American masses.[55] The sensational success of Nethersole's *Sapho* was the spark that set off a series of film adaptations, remakes, parodies, and allusions that recur throughout the silent period and into the early sound era.[56]

Unravelling the intertextual relationship between Nethersole's *Carmen* kiss and the May Irwin-John Rice kiss reveals the beginning of Nethersole's influence on—and exclusion from—film history, demonstrating that Nethersole's queer public persona circulated as part of a popular turn of the century discourse that addressed queer questions and audiences. In other words, the cultural memory of Nethersole's work and life has been disavowed directly in relation to her defiant queer visibility at the turn of the century. I am arguing that in the controversial trial remembered as "the *Sapho* affair," Nethersole was being persecuted for her lesbianism; as such, the *Sapho* trial must be reexamined as a moral panic that cannot be understood without recognizing Nethersole's defiant queer public address and personal life. Simply put, we cannot understand *The Kiss*—let alone the genres of kissing and Sappho films that follow it—without understanding the stakes of the *Sapho* affair.

On February 21, 1900 Olga Nethersole was arrested, technically on a charge of public nuisance, but the text of the indictment against her intentionally obfuscates the exact nature of the accusation being made. Scholars who have studied the *Sapho* affair emphasize that the blown-up charges targeting Nethersole were directed at her *person* as well as her performance of sexuality. The indictment accuses her of being *a person* "of wicked and depraved mind," and of "wickedly intending . . . to . . . corrupt the morals

[of diverse peoples] . . . and *to raise and create in their minds . . . inordinate and lustful desires*" (emphasis mine). I quote at length to convey the weight and tone of the indictment:

> In a lewd, indecent, obscene, filthy, scandalous, lascivious and disgusting manner, [she made] diverse lewd, indecent, obscene, filthy, scandalous, lascivious and disgusting motions, and [assumed] lewd, indecent, obscene, filthy, scandalous, lascivious and disgusting postures and attitudes, and [repeated] and [uttered] lewd, indecent, obscene, filthy, scandalous, lascivious and disgusting words and conversations, all of which said acts then and there grievously offended public decency, and which said motions, postures, attitudes, words and conversations were and are so filthy, nasty, corruptingly obscene and disgusting that a more particular description thereof is not fit to be set down in these allegations or spread upon the records of this honorable court.[57]

The redundant repetition in the indictment creates a vehement condemnation of Nethersole and her performance. But it is the telling conclusion "that a more particular description thereof is not fit to be set down in these allegations or spread upon the records," that emphasizes that we are in the realm of the Victorian unspeakable.[58] *Unspeakability* was a component of Victorian culture, language, and representation, as such, it was legible at the turn of the twentieth century. While Nethersole's crime of Sapphic stardom was configured as unspeakable within the court of law, it nonetheless would have been legible to the press, pulpit, and public as the subject of the trial. The ideology of unspeakability was a form of social control that was intended to limit contagion. The Sapphic stakes of Nethersole's persecution were clearly known to her fans and foes, for at the first performance following her acquittal she received what one critic described as "one of the most remarkable ovations that has ever been accorded to an actress in this city."[59] She was showered "with violets," which Laura Horak calls a "key lesbian signifier," and Andrea Weiss reminds us goes back to the poetry of Sappho "who wrote of the violet tiaras that she and her lovers wore in their hair."[60]

Recognizing Nethersole's clear queer meaning-making—and the subsequent public response—is not dependent on the details of her personal life. It is however, confirmed by them. In theatrical historian Joy Reilly's meticulous documentation of Nethersole's personal history, to which I am deeply indebted, the queer details of Nethersole's life, as well as her work, are made plain although they are not fully acknowledged. Neither the word lesbian nor

homosexual is used. Reilly writes, "Instead of marriage, Nethersole opted for a lasting personal relationship with Kathleen Nora Madge Field . . . Madge Field devoted herself to Nethersole, traveling with her constantly but staying in the background. Occasionally she is mentioned in the American press accompanying the actress to a social engagement."[61] I want to emphasize the public aspect of Nethersole and Field's relationship which needs further investigation, but according to Reilly, by 1897 Nethersole was publicly reported to be traveling with Field.[62] Nethersole and Field lived together until Field's death in 1938. They travelled extensively, collected antiques, summered in the South of France with lesbian power couple Elizabeth Marbury and Elsie de Wolfe, and named each other as beneficiaries in their wills.

When Nethersole's lesbianism is recognized as part and parcel of her stage performances, the reason for both the uproar over *Sapho* and Nethersole's disappearance from the historical record becomes obvious, requiring a different set of historiographic questions and methods. That no contemporary scholarship has yet fully recognized Olga Nethersole's queerness speaks plainly to the continuing inability to see explicit, intense, passionate, sexual, life-long relationships between women as possible, probable, and historically important. Nethersole lived an "unconventional," self-made life that most historical and cultural narratives tell us would have been impossible. Her life-long in-your-face success at upending social norms had enormous cultural impact that still reverberates today. Reconsidered in relation to the *Sapho* affair, the kiss that inspired the first film review and made John Sloan want to smash the vitascope asks us to reconsider the centrality of lesbian sexual performance as a driving force of cinema history.

At the height of the *Sapho* affair, "the Sapho plague" spread to cinema.[63] The social scrutiny of Nethersole's *Carmen* kiss, which so inflamed audiences that May Irwin's parody "brought down the house every time," exploded into a veritable genre of Sapho films which exhibitors could count on to bring in "Money! Money! Money!" into the early 1930s.[64] In the tense weeks in March 1900, when it remained unclear whether Nethersole would be found guilty or not guilty, two major manufacturers put out competing films to capitalize on the controversy of the trial. The swift production and release of Lubin's *Sapho* and its "spicy" stag counterpart *Sapho Kiss* (March 8, 1900) was followed with lightning speed by Edison's own "remake" of *The Kiss*, *The New Kiss* (March 9, 1900). This trio of films underscores the significance of the *Sapho* affair to how audiences would have understood the Nethersole kiss and the early genre of kiss films it inspired. Understanding

the Sapphic context of the Nethersole kiss prompts critical reconsideration of the longstanding misreading of *The Kiss* as illustrative of Victorian quaintness, chasteness, or prudery. Consider the text on the back of the 1953 press photo of *The Kiss* with which I open this essay: "It scandalized audiences back in 1896. From this tepid approach movie kisses developed into long torrid affairs that finally brought industry ban in the 30s."[65] This sticky midcentury cultural narrative, which has too often been repeated by scholars, only obscures the sexual history of the past.

NO SOCIAL PURITY HERE: RETHINKING THE ALL-AMERICAN KISS

When a short kissing film entitled *Something Good—A Negro Kiss* (Selig, 1898) was rediscovered in 2018 the contemporary cultural response was a kind of rapturous historical shock. Its joyous depiction of two African American actors kissing quickly became an internet sensation that delighted audiences around the world—the film was swiftly recognized as historically significant and added to The Library of Congress's National Film Registry. Yet, scholars of early African American cinema such as Allyson Nadia Field and Terri Francis rightly cautioned that contemporary emotional responses to the film tell us little about the film's initial circulation. Field cautioned that the performers may have been "able to get away with this passion on screen because there was a presumption of comedy," and Francis warned that "when it was filmed, the movie may have had racist overtones."[66] Both Field and Francis emphasize the significance of intertextual context to understanding how the films initial audiences might have experienced the film—which was clearly connected to *The Kiss*.[67]

The passionate kisses performed by Gertie Brown and Saint Suttle in *Something Good* stand in contrast to the "tepid" chasteness of *The Kiss*. While the aura of historical innocence also sticks to their performance, it would be difficult to paint these kisses as indicative of Victorian era prudery; these kisses point elsewhere. May Irwin's star persona was closely associated with her whiteness. The stage show *The Widow Jones,* which featured Irwin's iconic pastiche of the Nethersole kiss, had cemented her celebrity status as a "coon shouter." "Coon songs" were ragtime songs that relied heavily on "appallingly unflattering stereotypes of black life."[68] Before the hubbub over the satirical smooch in *The Widow Jones,* the most popular feature of Irwin's show was "The Bully Song," which scholars rate among the most racist

FIGURE 9. Gertie Brown and Saint Suttle in *Something Good—A Negro Kiss*, c. 1898. University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts.

caricatures of the period.[69] In short, May Irwin's star persona was as tightly tied to "coon shouting" as Nethersole's was to violets.

In Field's initial public analysis of *Something Good,* she forcefully described the performance by Gertie Brown and Saint Suttle as pushing back on the racist stereotypes of the period, "making visible what was only implicit in the Edison film [*The Kiss*]," and, "refuting the racist caricature that May Irwin's presence carries."[70] Field also implicitly referred to Nethersole, describing how Irwin's kiss "*was itself a burlesque* on an earlier play that had featured an actress of Mediterranean ancestry."[71] Nethersole's ethnic ambiguity was a significant part of her star persona and comment upon it recurs frequently—from a disparaging 1897 remark about her real name being "Niederseele" to Henry Ford's inclusion of her in a list of prominent Jewish actresses as part of his anti-Semitic propaganda crusade in 1920.[72] Such references suggest that Nethersole is not who she says she is—an accusation I believe to be true—but that is a story for another time. To return to the recent account of *Something Good* cited above, the unnamed Nethersole's ethnicity is described as making the kissing, which was considered lewd, "permissible, not only for her . . . but by extension for the white actress who would imitate her."[73] Yet, even this radical rethinking does not fully consider what it means to understand *Something Good* as *a burlesque of a burlesque*.[74]

To understand *Something Good's* burlesque of Irwin's burlesque we must return to scholars continued curiosity about why *The Kiss* was both so funny and so shocking, asking how *Something Good* engages with the Sapphic sexual

subject of the Nethersole kiss. I have argued that the unspoken—but nonetheless legible—subject of Irwin's parody was actually Nethersole's lesbianism. How then, would audiences have made meaning of this *burlesque of a burlesque*? On one hand, following Francis and Field's warnings about how *Something Good* might have initially been received, we might wonder whether Brown and Suttle's naturalistic performances and the compositional emphasis on their rhythmically swaying bodies might have reinforced stereotypes that associated African Americans with "primitive" sexuality, the body, and nature, producing an "authentic" exemplar of "natural" *hetero*-sexuality?[75] On the other hand, by placing the film within its Sapphic context, we can begin to more fully consider other ways diverse mass audiences in 1898 might have experienced the film.

Consider this unidentified clipping of Olga Nethersole (figure 10). She looks directly and un-remorsefully into the camera. The caption almost seems as though it were a proclamation of the actress-manager's own thoughts. "'Sapho' is not a disciple of social purity."[76] What do we make of this? How does this provocative caption relate to social politics of the moment and the popular kissing films circulating alongside the Nethersole kiss? The social purity movement began in opposition to the legalization of prostitution, but according to historian Linda Gordon, by the end of the nineteenth century it had merged with "a self-conscious Eugenics movement dedicated to maintaining the supremacy of the Northern European-Americans."[77] Enter Olga Nethersole "who has had columns of free ads., because 'Sapho' is not a disciple of social purity."[78]

During her 1895 production of *Carmen* Nethersole's star persona crystalized to include frequent reference to her Spanish mother.[79] This element of her persona coincided with the already racialized discourse around *Carmen*'s sexuality, which in and of itself, is hardly a deviation from the racial stereotypes long associated with *Carmen*.[80] Yet, Nethersole's many public statements about the role intentionally center and critique the stereotype of the "Spanish type of adventuress" in which she had been typecast for most of her early career. Moreover, as she constructs her persona during this turning point in her career, she simultaneously begins to align herself with Americanness—and "the American woman" in particular.[81] In other words, Nethersole framed her queer persona as an English star in relation to her erotic identification with Americanness and her American fans—and she did so while self-consciously performing what Diane Negra calls an "off-white" ethnicity.[82]

FIGURE 10. Olga Nethersole, c. 1900, Unidentified Clipping, Nethersole Scrapbook MWEZxn.c.6484, NYPL. Reference photo, public domain.

Consider the two illustrations below, in which very different racialized caricatures highlight the intersection of anxieties that Nethersole provoked for some. The anti-Semitic cover of *Life* at the height of the *Sapho* affair highlights the way Nethersole's ethnicity was constructed by her critics as a sexual threat to young Anglo-Saxon women who were among her most ardent fans. Inside the magazine, a review of *The Profligate*, one of the plays Nethersole performed while *Sapho* was banned before the outcome of her trial, asserts that "Nethersole's reckless waste of natural advantages comes

FIGURE 11. *Life*, March 29, 1900, cover, private collection.

from a perversity not mended by criticism."[83] In a similar vein, the ostensibly appreciative figure that describes Nethersole's *Sapho* as "a Grecian goddess with Egyptian movements," points toward Sir Richard Burton's 1885 theory of a "Sotadic Zone." This orientalist notion associates the Mediterranean region, including Greece, Egypt, Italy, and Spain with endemic "vice," and "a blending of the masculine and feminine temperaments." In the Sotadic zone, "the woman [becomes] a tribade, a votary of mascula Sappho, queen of the Frictrices or Rubbers."[84] In other words, Nethersole's performance of her "Spanish" ethnicity is part and parcel of her performance of Sapphic sexuality. If, as Field and Musser suggest, Nethersole's ethnically ambiguous performance licensed "white" women's sexual desire—we must recognize both the threat and the thrill of this desire as specifically and incessantly queer.[85]

At the height of her career, Nethersole's "Spanish" Sapphic star discourse is a politicized discourse. In it, "Americanness" is associated with mixed parentage, feminism and sexual freedom. The British Nethersole was so successful in aligning herself—and her "Spanish" Sapphic sexuality—with "freedom loving" American culture that in 1899 she was included in Lewis Clinton Strang's volume on famous American actresses.[86] In short,

FIGURE 12. "A Grecian Goddess with Egyptian Movements," c. 1900, Unidentified Clipping, NYPL-RLC-vi. Reference photo, public domain.

Nethersole and her queerly performed *Carmen* kiss pushed hard on the boundaries of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century question of what it means to be American. In a lecture presented at The University of Chicago in 1899 Nethersole praises America, asking, "Here, the West is not able to distinguish itself from the East, for are not the East and the West bound by indissoluble ties of blood and kinship, which nothing can sever?"[87] Elsewhere, Nethersole's proclamation that "the New Woman is the American woman"

underscores the Sapphic political promise of the association of newness, novelty, and American identity in this moment.[88]

Nethersole's pushback against the hetero-patriarchal and white supremacist forces of her moment came to a head in the *Sapho* affair. In the face of rising "white" American hysteria about "race suicide," the unmarried and childless Nethersole, daughter of a Spanish mother, traveling with her female companion while performing as Sappho, declared that she was not a disciple of social purity.[89] She was publicly, vehemently, performing a protest against the racialized and gendered status quo of her day—*and it was as wildly successful as it was controversial and condemned.* When we read statements such as, "It was not in England that Miss Nethersole's justly celebrated *Carmen* kiss became an institution. It was in liberal, wide spirited America that it received proper recognition," we must recognize that the genre of kissing films that followed engage in a popular debate about the heart of American values in which race, class and sexuality were indissolubly entwined.[90]

When considered in relation to the Nethersole kiss and the Sapphic discourse it sets in motion, it becomes clear that like *The Kiss*, *Something Good*—and other contemporaneous kissing films with overtly racialized titles—are fruitfully understood in relation to the many Sappho films of the era. We know, for instance, that *Darkies Kiss* (Lubin, undated, possibly a dupe of *Something Good*) was projected alongside Lubin's scenes from *Sapho* just months after Nethersole's acquittal in 1900.[91] *Something Good* was produced in 1898, well before the *Sapho* affair and two years after the initial storm over Nethersole's *Carmen* kiss and its filmed parody *The Kiss*. Yet, it followed Nethersole's highly lucrative third tour of the United States (1896–7) in which *Carmen* remained her biggest drawing card. It was during this tour that Nethersole's partner was first mentioned in the press, in close proximity to the question of whether or not she would ever marry.[92] Nethersole promised she would never let marriage interfere with her career. While this tour was not a critical success, it was a huge financial success, one in which the *Carmen* kiss remained not only the major drawing card for Nethersole, but a significant part of popular American culture. For instance, shortly after the "pin-back" button was patented, the *Carmen* kiss made an intriguing appearance in this new form of modern advertising. The pin has been dated to 1898, the same year that *Something Good* throws shade at the May Irwin-John Rice kiss.

FIGURE 13. "Give me a Carmen Kiss," Advertising button, c. 1898, courtesy of The Busy Beaver Button Museum: https://buttonmuseum.org/buttons/carmen-kiss.

In this longer view, rather than an "impromptu" expression of black love and humanity, or a racist exemplar of the naturalness of heterosexuality, *Something Good* becomes culturally legible as a highly crafted contribution to a racialized, and specifically Sapphic, charged cultural dialogue in which African American authors and performers were actively engaged—from Pauline Hopkins' novel *Contending Forces* with its heroine Sappho Clark (1900) all the way to Roberta Hyson's performance as Sappho Dill in one of the first black talkies, *The Melancholy Dame* (Arvid E. Gillstrom, 1928).[93] In this context, we can see how Brown and Suttle's burlesque of Irwin and Rice displace the older, backward-looking middle-aged white couple whose dowdiness created part of the humor of the scene. In contrast, Brown and Suttle's kiss is a thoroughly modern kiss, emitting the exuberant energy of youth poised for the coming century. Their burlesque performs a forward-looking 'liberal wide spirited' American kiss that lampoons the reactionary and racist humor of *The Kiss* in which racial and sexual purity are inseparable.[94] In the context of *Something Good*, it is clear that when we see classically dehumanizing imagery in relation to the *Sapho* affair (figures 14 and 15), the stakes extend beyond the existing narrative of heterosexual "white" women claiming their sexuality through the appropriation of racialized stereotype. Nethersole's ethnic ambiguity was a politicized part of her Sapphic star persona, which played a significant role in why she was so vehemently targeted by her critics.

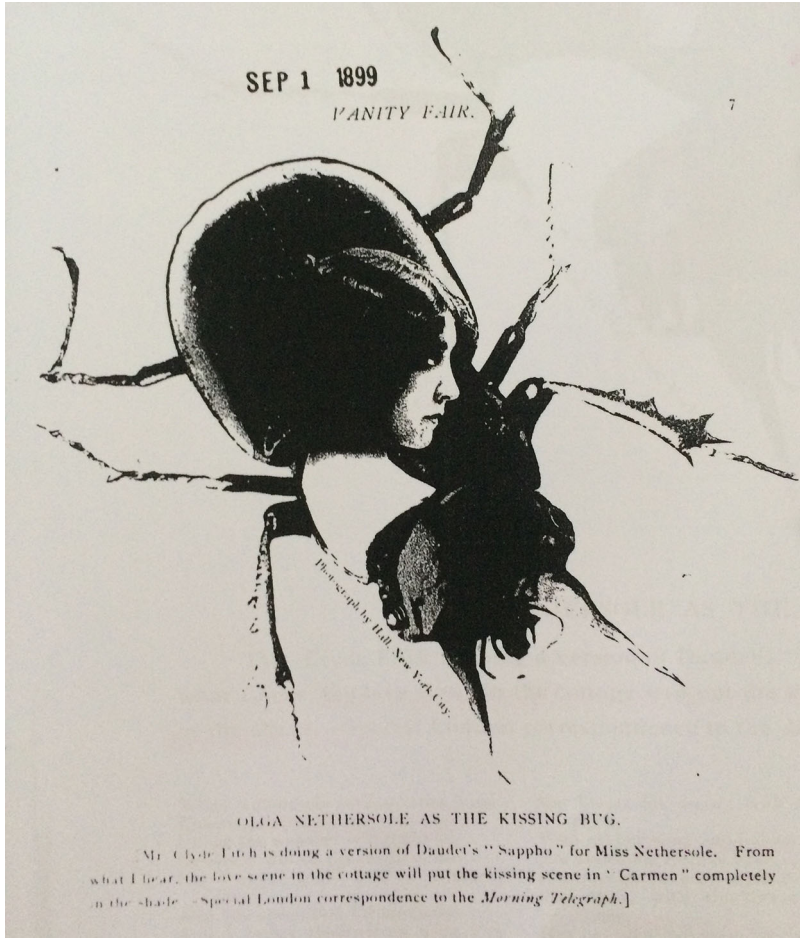

FIGURE 14. "Olga Nethersole as The Kissing Bug," *Vanity Fair,* c. 1899, NYPL-RLC-vi. Reference photo, public domain.

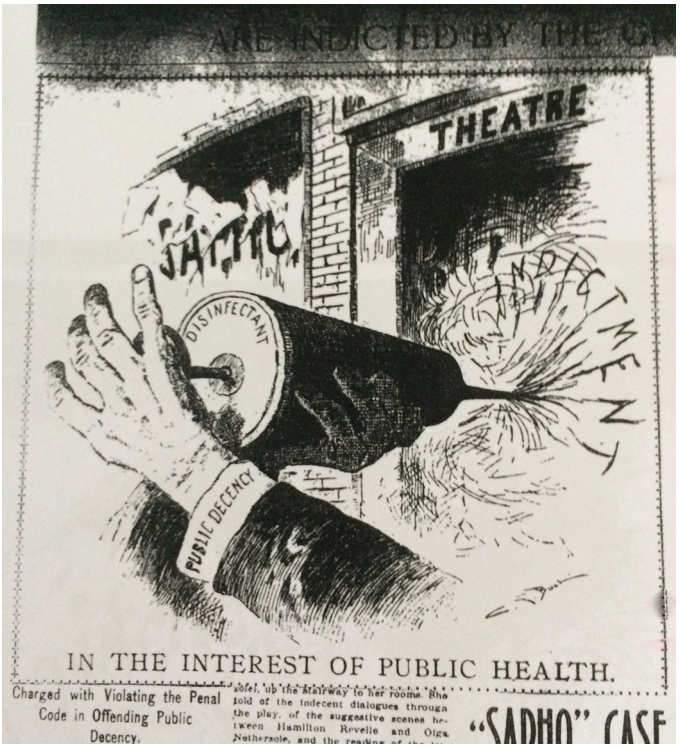

FIGURE 15. "In the Interest of Public Health," *New York World*, March 23, 1900, NYPL-RLC-v2. Reference photo, public domain.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING FILM HISTORY

Following Nethersole's acquittal, cinematic versions of *Sapho/Sappho* proliferated. Recent scholarship has noted that "more than a dozen" films were made about Sappho during the silent period.[95] My count is north of twenty, making it one of the most ubiquitous titles of the era. No wonder then, that when Terry Ramsaye wrote what many consider the first definitive history of film in 1926, he listed Sappho among the classical "personified desires" through which "an art is born before our eyes."[96] But, what does it tell us that with versions of *Sappho* starring major actresses at the height of their fame, such as Theda Bara (*The Eternal Sapho*, 1916), Pauline Frederick (*Sapho*, 1917) and Pola Negri (*Sapho/Mad Love*, 1921), only Nethersole's stage version is specifically mentioned in Ramsaye's foundational text? Why is it that major volumes on remakes and adaptation do not even seem to know that these early *Sapho* films exist?[97]

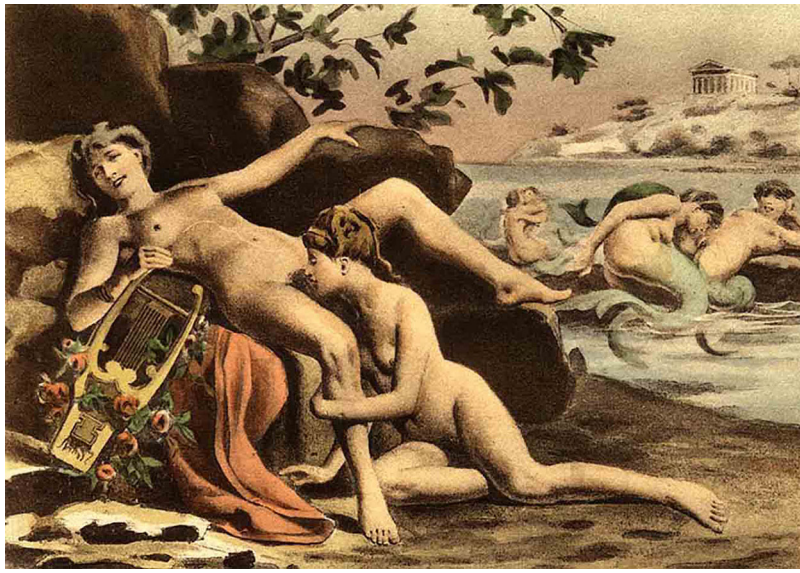

FIGURE 16. *Sappho*, Paul Avril (Édouard-Henri Avril), c. 1884, *De Figuris Veneris, 1906*. Public domain.

While Nethersole and her queer kisses shocked and delighted turn-of-the-twentieth-century audiences, this essay is as concerned with why they continue to shock us today as it is with the facts of the past. Scholars of sexual history have excavated a strong connection between the Sapphic and the Modern, beginning in the 1850s with Baudelaire's conception of the lesbian as an icon of feminized modernity.[98] This discourse was at its peak at the turn of the twentieth century. It should come as no surprise then, that an industry born at the height of Sapphic Modernism would engage foundationally with this popular and era-defining discourse. The "shock" of the Sapphic past in the present, underscores the success of the suppression of Sapphic culture that took place during the mid-twentieth century when cinema's history was first being written. Mid-twentieth century accounts thought this history better off forgotten, but today we can recognize that *The Kiss* was part of a racist and reactionary nostalgia in its own time—it was anything but 'innocent.' The celebrated 'quaintness' of *The Kiss* was part of a backlash against a sexual modernism that offered a very different vision for the coming century than the future that would come to unfold.

The discourse of "unspeakability" through which homosexuality was configured in fin de siècle culture has resulted in a form of what Patricia White calls *retrospectatorship* in which the furor produced by Nethersole's public

FIGURE 17. *Der Küss* (*The Kiss*), 1898, Peter Behrens. Public domain.

flouting of sexual norms has become not only unspeakable, but illegible, unimaginable. Recognizing Olga Nethersole's impact on film history—from *The Kiss* (1896) to the swan song of Sapphic cinema, a retitled adaptation of *Sapho* starring Greta Garbo (*Inspiration*, 1931)—reveals a Sapphic sexuality that so saturated the foundational period of film history that it could be called the Sapphic era. If *we* refuse to recognize Nethersole's publicly declared Sapphic sexuality we cannot *see,* let alone understand, the cultural significance of this contentious public dialogue which produced some of the most controversial—and wildly popular—films of cinema's coming of age. As scholars we must raise and create in our minds "the inordinate and lustful desires" that Olga Nethersole raised in the minds of her audiences and critics. Thus, in closing, I would like to ask you to imagine the "lewd, indecent, obscene,

filthy, scandalous, lascivious and nasty" acts, motions, postures, attitudes, words and conversations that Olga Nethersole performed, not only on the stage but in her private life with her chosen mate, Madge Field. ■

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NOTES

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1. Charles Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," in *Visual Delights Two,* eds. Vanessa Toulmin and Simon Popple (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2005), 104; Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 148; Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 132. *The Kiss* is at the Library of Congress (*May Irwin Kiss, 1896):* https://www.loc.gov/item/00694131/.

2. Musser, 103; Ralph Dengler, "The First Screen Kiss and 'The Cry of Censorship,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 7 no. 3, (1979): 267–72; National Film Preservation Board, "The Kiss (1896)," in "Brief Descriptions and Expanded Essays of National Film Registry Titles," Library of Congress website, https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/descriptions-and-essays/.

3. Linda Williams, "of kisses and ellipses," in *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 28.

4. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," 97.

5. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," 97.

6. Charles Musser, "A Cornucopia of Images," in Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Moving Pictures* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 32.

7. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," 100.

8. For instance: "Olga Nethersole's *Carmen*," *Louisville Courier Journal* (KY), Dec. 27, 1895, 8; *The Washington Post,* Dec. 30, 1895, 6; *Birmingham State Herald* (AL), Jan. 2, 1896, 4; *The Anaconda Standard* (MT), Jan. 12, 1896, 8; *The Los Angeles Herald*, Jan. 12, 1896, 14; *The Guthrie Daily Leader* (OK), Jan 14, 1896, 2.

9. William Cowper Brann, "Olga Nethersole's Osculation," *The Complete Works of Brann The Iconoclast* (Brann publishers, 1919), 119.

10. "Nitro-glycerine:" Alan Dale, "A Vesuvian Episode," *The New York Journal*, December 29, 1895, 29; reprinted elsewhere: "A Versuvian Episode," (sic) *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1896, 4.

11. "The Nethersole Kiss," *The Indianapolis Journal,* December 27, 1895, 3.

12. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," 100; Musser, "Cornucopia," 5–37; Williams, "of kisses and ellipses," 330.

13. Brann, "Olga Nethersole's Osculation," 119.

14. "The Nethersole Kiss."

15. R. Smith Schuneman, "Art or Photography," *Journalism Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1965).

16. Shirley Biagi, *Media Impact* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2012), 52.

17. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," 100, 'Filthiness' and 'imported' from *The Chapbook* July 15, 1896.

18. Musser, "Cornucopia," 32–3.

19. Richard A. Kaye, "The Return of Damon and Pythias," *College Literature* 29, no. 2 (Spring, 2002): 53.

20. Alan Dale, *A Marriage Below Zero* (1889), ed. Richard Kaye (New York: Broadview Press, 2018).

21. Tice L. Miller, "Alan Dale," *Educational Theatre Journal* 26, no. 1 (1974): 69–80.

22. Dale, "Vesuvian."

23. On chronology see Joy Reilly, "From Wicked Woman of the Stage to New Woman," Dissertation (Ohio State, 1984), 52–53.

24. "Passion Crystalized," in Robinson Locke Scrapbook, "Olga Nethersole," volume 1, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York City (hereafter, RLC, volume 1 unless otherwise specified, page numbers given when available). Handwritten notes by Nethersole and Leicester accompany the coverage and highlight the "difference" between the "real, reckless kisses" onstage and Nethersole's "cold" off-stage indifference to her co-star, inviting just the kind of "scrutiny" Kaye suggests.

25. Alison Mairi Syme, "Love among the Ruins" *Art Journal* 63, no. 4 (2004): 80–95.

26. Chiara Beccalossi, "The 'Italian Vice'" *Italian Sexualities Uncovered 1789–1914* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 185.

27. All quotations Dale, "Vesuvian," unless otherwise noted.

28. Jonathan David Gross, "One Half What I Should Say: Byron's Gay Narrator in Don Juan," *Byron: The Erotic Liberal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 131.

29. Review of *Carmen*, Hooley's Theatre, March 1896, RLC, 34.

30. "Passion Crystalized."

31. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss," 97–102.

32. Unidentified clipping—maybe Dale, RLC.

33. Ibid.

34. Dale, "Vesuvian."

35. Elizabeth Wood, "Sapphonics," in *Queering the Pitch*, ed. Phillip Brett, et al., (Routledge, 1994), 29–42, 47; Thomas Waugh, "Strength and Stealth" *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2, no. 1 (1992): 1–20.

36. A. Gallus, *Emma Calvé* (New York: R.H. Russell, 1902).

37. Dale, "Vesuvian."

38. Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss,"; Williams, "of kisses and ellipses"; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 35; JA Sokalski, "Performed Affection" in *Allegories of Communication*, eds. John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2005); Jacob Smith, "Kissing as Telling," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 3 (2012):123–8.

39. John Sloan, "The Vitascope," *The Chap-Book*, July 1896, Delaware Art Museum, Sloan Manuscript Collection; Harry Tyrell, *The Illustrated American*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 11, 1896), 76, (reprinted: Anthony Slide, *Selected Film Criticism*, 1982, 54); Hugo J. Rios-Cordero, *Permutations of Cinephilia* (Dissertation, Rutgers, 2014), 35.

40. Musser, 2005; Williams, 2008; Hansen, 1994; Sokalski, 2005; Smith 2012.

41. "Everyone" is, of course, almost certainly an overstatement. Yet, my point here is that Nethersole's queerly transgressive public persona was circulating in United States popular culture well beyond those who attended premiere performances in major cultural hubs. For instance, two weeks before the hub-bub over *Carmen*, the *Mexico Weekly Ledger* joked "That the "Olga Nethersole stare" is the newest fashionable expression to assume." The city had a population of under five thousand. "Mrs. Grundy Says," *Mexico Weekly Ledger* (Mexico, MO), Dec. 12, 1895, 1. *The Nashville American* described the "fever" produced by Nethersole's kiss, lamenting the "deplorable" fact "that all the leading ladies in New York are said to be adopting this style." "Some Notes for the Fair Sex," *The Nashville American* (TN), Jan. 27, 1896, 4. *The American Jewess* warned that plays like "Miss Olga Nethersole's putrid, festering "Carmen," to which our young ladies flocked in battalions, are "mighty powerful boosts" down the black, slippery, slimy abyss." "The Woman Who Talks," *The American Jewess*, 2, no. 12, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Sep., 1896, 647. The clearly coordinated national press campaign was not limited to theater columns; rather, the Nethersole kiss was talked about in fashion and gossip columns and in the "funny pages." Nethersole's picture and endorsement also appeared in advertisements for *Hoff's Malt Extract* (a "patent medicine" and "table beverage," read: beer) which ran in cities from San Francisco to Savannah Georgia, including at least one German language paper. *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 8, 1896, 12; *The Morning News* (Savannah GA), March 13, 1896, 6; *Der Deutsche Correspondent* (Baltimore, MD), July 1, 1896, 4.

42. All quotes: Dale, "Vesuvian." On contagion and imitation: Patricia White, *Uninvited* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Diana Anselmo, "Made in Movieland," *Camera Obscura* 32, no. 1 (2007) 129–65.

43. Kaye, "The Return of Damon and Pythias," 53.

44. Susan Potter, *Queer Timing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 6–7; Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 95–6.

45. H. Gordon Johnson, "Olga Nethersole and Her Genius," *The Looker-On*, New York, December 1895, 230–42, RLC.

46. The Carmen kisses were sensationalized as corsetless kisses, but the fact that Nethersole did not wear a corset in her daily life was an already established part of her public persona. "Miss Olga Nethersole," *The Advocate* (Topeka, KS), November 7, 1894, 10.

47. Consider her widely reproduced statement "These kisses are not my kisses but *Carmen's*. Mine are quite different, I can assure you." Scholars have misread this as reassurance of her own chasteness, but the "difference" she alludes to is legible as object choice. "Olga Nethersole's Kiss," *The Kansas City Star*, January 1, 1896, 8.

48. Unidentified clipping, May 1896, RLC, 39.

49. Ella Wheeler, "Delilah," *Poems of Passion* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co, 1883).

50. Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 94; Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29–40.

51. Sapho is the French spelling of Sappho; I use the spelling of individual titles where possible.

52. Ann Callis, "Olga Nethersole and the *Sapho* Scandal," Masters Thesis (Ohio State, 1974); Joy Reilly, "From Wicked Woman of the Stage to New Woman," Dissertation (Ohio State, 1984); John Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Katie Johnson, *Sisters in Sin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Judy Crichton and David Grubin, *The American Experience: America 1900,* ep.1, November, 18, 1998.

53. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin*, 45.

54. Johnson dismisses the possibility of a "lesbian reading of Sappho" in one line, 46. Schweitzer recognizes the Sapphic nature of Nethersole's female-fan base, but her analysis remains organized around changing heterosexual norms, 176.

55. "Rev. Dr. Newell Hillis Scores the *Sapho* Plague," *New York World*, February 19, 1900.

56. The historical arc of the Sapho films of early cinema is the subject of my broader research and doctoral dissertation. See: Kiki Loveday, "Sister Acts: Victorian Porn, Lesbian Drag and Queer Reproduction," *Framework* 60, no. 2 (2019): 201–26; Kiki Loveday, "Do You Believe in Fairies? Cabbages, Victorian Memes, and the Birth of Cinema: Seeing Sapphic Sexuality in the Silent Era," in *Women Film Pioneers Project,* ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2019); Kiki Loveday, "*Sapho Kiss*: Queer Reproduction in Early Cinema," *Early Popular Visual Culture*, special issue edited by Andrew Shail, forthcoming. See also: Maggie Hennefeld, "Queer Laughter in the Archives of Silent Film Comedy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema,* ed. Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 93–121.

57. "Olga Nethersole Indicted . . . Full Text Of The Indictment," *New York World*, March 23, 1900, RLC, 8.

58. Ibid.

59. "'Sapho' Gets an Ovation," *New York Times*, April 8, 1900, 7.

60. Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets* (Penguin, 1992), 1–2; Horak, 146.

61. Reilly, 274.

62. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 17, 1897, cited in Reilly, 58.

63. "Sapho Plague", see fn 55: "Rev. Dr. Newell Hillis Scores the *Sapho* Plague," *New York World*, February 19, 1900.

64. "Brought down the house": Edison Catalogs, see: Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures 1890–1900* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 197–9; "Money! Money! Money!": Ad, *Sapho* (Majestic, 1913), *Moving Picture World*, January 31, 1914, 626. The title *Sapho/Sappho* fell out of favor in the U.S. following actress Maud Allen's 1917 libel trial in which she was accused of "the lesbianism," yet, retitled Sapho films such as *Mad Love* (1923) and *Inspiration* (1931) remained popular. While I do not wish to suggest an a priori continuity from the earliest Sapho films to the last, I do wish to insist on the importance of reading these texts as a historically specific body of films associated with Olga Nethersole and the Sapho affair—a popular cultural discourse—which concludes in the U.S. with the Production Code Administration's ban on "Sex perversion *or any inference to it . . .* " (italics mine).

65. For this photo or ones similar to it in print, see: Bob Thomas, "Much Has Changed in 56 Years," *The Nashville Tennessean*, December 10, 1956, 7-B; John Springer, *Screen Lovers: A Pleasant Pictorial History of Hollywood's Kisses & Clinches 1896–1956* (New York: Bartholomew House Inc.), 67. Other examples of this pervasive myth: National Film Preservation Board, "Brief Descriptions," (cited above); Kristin Hunt, "The First Movie Kiss," *Jstor Daily,* May 7, 2020. On feminist film history's project of re-writing the dominant narratives of cinema see: Maggie Hennefeld, "Film History," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (April 2018): 77–83. The narrative of Victorian prudery has been long debunked by scholars.

66. Lolly Bowean, "Tracing Chicago origins of 'Something Good,'" *Chicago Tribune*, December 22, 2018.

67. Pre-"discovery" considerations of *Something Goo*d: Monica White Ndounou, *Shaping the Future of African American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 31; Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 188; Musser, "The Exhibitor Plays a Creative Role," *The Emergence of Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 292; Adam Selzer and Michael Glover Smith, *Flickering Empire* (Wallflower Press, 2015), 48. On the rediscovery of *Something Good* see: Allyson Nadia Field, "Archival Rediscovery and the Production of History: Solving the Mystery of *Something Good-Negro Kiss* (1898)," *Film History* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 1–33; and Allyson Nadia Field, "The Cinema of Racialized Attraction(s): *The John C. Rice-May Irwin Kiss* and *Something Good-Negro Kiss*," *Discourse*, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 3–41.

68. Sharon Ammen, "The Profoundly Troubling History of the Coon Song," *May Irwin* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 71.

69. Ibid.

70. Allyson Nadia Field, "No blackface . . . just #BlackLove," *Snapshots* (*Domitor* blog), October 7, 2019, https://domitor.org/no-blackface-just-blacklove/.

71. Field quoted in: Lila MacLellan, "The story behind the first depiction of African-American love on screen," *Quartz*, January 12, 2019. Musser also uses the phrase "Mediterranean blood," but "Spanish blood" was more common. On Nethersole's "alleged Spanish blood," see: Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz, *Carmen and the Staging of Spain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 180–7.

72. "Niederseele:" "The Plays the Thing," *The Musical Courier*, August 4, 1897, iii; Henry Ford, *Jewish Activities in the United States: Volume II of The International Jew* (Dearborn MI: Dearborn Publishing, 1921), 110. For more on Ford's anti-Semitism: Hilary Hallett, *Go West Young Women!* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2012), 279.

73. Field quoted in MacLellan.

74. Field has also revisited this question, although along a different line of inquiry. See "The Cinema of Racialized Attractions(s): The *John C. Rice-May Irwin Kiss* and *Something Good-Negro Kiss*.

75. For a critique of the tendency to read early films of African-American's in terms of "authenticity" see: Jacqueline Stewart, "Discovering Black Film History," *Film History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 147–8.

76. Unidentified Clipping, Reference photo, Nethersole Scrapbook, "Portfolio of clippings and miscellaneous material about Olga Nethersole," NYPL.

77. Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 76.

78. Unidentified Clipping, cited above. Nethersole later took-up the language of eugenics and in 1915 helped organized a screening of the racist film *Birth of a Nation*. "Nethersole suggests compulsory insurance," *St. Louis Star*, January 4, 1908, RLC, volume 3; on "royalty" see "Birth of Nation," *Motography*, April 29, 1916, 991.

79. This "Spanishness" was later displaced to more remote relatives: Olga Nethersole, "Matter of Education," March 29, 1896, RLC; Lavania Heart, "Olga Nethersole," *The Cosmopolitan,* May, 1901, 18.

80. Neda Atanasoski, "Cold War *Carmen* in US Racial Modernity," *Cinema Journal* 54, no.1 (Fall 2014): 88–111.

81. Nethersole, "Matter of Education."

82. Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

83. Metcalfe, "A Charming and Wholesome Play," *Life*, March 29, 1900, 252, private collection.

84. Sir Richard Burton, "Pederasty," in the "Terminal Essay" of *The Book of a Thousand Nights and One Night* (1885) reprinted in Kaye's edition of *A Marriage Below Zero* cited above.

85. While my interest is in Nethersole's authorial claiming of the Sapphic, Nethersole's "Spanish blood" marks her sexuality as "inborn." During this period in the U.S., "Spanish" was also a common euphemism through which mixed race people "passed" as "white." See: Nell Kimball, "Gone Are the Days," in *Fille de Joie* (New York: Grove

Press, 1967), 20; Sarah Elbert, ed., *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), xxxv.

86. Lewis Clinton Strang, *Famous Actresses of the Day in America* (Boston: L.C. Page, 1899), 217.

87. Olga Nethersole, "Miss Olga Nethersole's Address Before the Graduate Club," March 3, 1899, *University of Chicago Weekly*, 223, RLC. Nethersole may mean England and the U.S., but, the proximity of discussion of "grandfathers and grandmothers" associates it with her "Spanish" ancestry.

88. Nethersole, "Matter of Education."

89. On "race suicide": Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

90. "Nethersole Talks: Sniffs Violets and Declares She Likes Americans," November 14, 1898, RLC. On the imbrication of race and sexuality in this era see: Siobhan Somerville, "The Queer Career of Jim Crow," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 251–69. The October 1896 onstage lesbian kisses in *A Florida Enchantment* come in the wake of the Nethersole kiss. On the kissing films as a cycle, see: Amanda Ann Klein, "The Kissing Cycle, Mashers, and (White) Women in the American City," in *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-offs, Remakes, and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, ed. Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 22–40.

91. Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 153.

92. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 17, 1897,13, cited in Reilly, 57.

93. Siobhan Somerville "Passing through the closet in Pauline E. Hopkins's Contending Forces," *American Literature* 69, no. 1 (1997): 139–66; Seth Slark Silberman, "Youse Awful Queer Chappie," Dissertation (University of Maryland, 2005), 365, 405, 412 n339. See also: Jacqueline Stewart, "What Happened in the Transition? Reading Race, Gender, and Labor between the Shots," in *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 103–23. In a broader discussion of interracial kissing comedies, Stewart points out that one of the later films of the cycle, *Under the Old Apple Tree* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1907), includes the "disapproving" character of "the Widow Jones," 115.

94. No doubt, as more becomes known about *Something Good's* other intertexts its meanings will become clearer. On the intersection of race and sexuality: Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

95. Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Whke, *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

96. Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights,* (Binghamton, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1926), xii. 339. Nethersole's "*Sappho"* is related to Annabelle-the-dancer, whose butterfly dances imitating Loie Fuller were among the most popular early films.

97. For instance: Robert A. Nowlan and Gwendolyn Wright Nowlan, *Cinema Sequels and Remakes, 1903–1987*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1989).

98. Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, eds. *Sapphic Modernities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2006.