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Do You Believe in Fairies? Cabbages, Victorian Memes, and the Birth of Cinema: Seeing Sapphic Sexuality in the Silent Era

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Introduction

Famed early filmmaker [Alice Guy](#) is back in the news in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Guy inaugurated the cinematic century with her early work *La fée aux choux/The Cabbage Fairy* (1896), ¹ which many scholars have argued was the first film to tell a story, with others dissenting. Recent attention to Guy runs the gamut from a significant new documentary narrated by Jodie Foster, *Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché* (2018), which is currently in theaters and streaming, to a novelized version of Guy's life that imagines a secret love affair between her and the engineer of the Eiffel Tower. ² On the scholarly front, the award-winning box

set *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers*, curated by Shelley Stamp, includes eleven newly restored films by Guy, while Jane Gaines's latest book, *Pink Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* returns to the scene of *The Cabbage Fairy* with the intensity of a serial crime drama.³ Taken together, this flurry of interest in Guy, her love life, and her famous first film reignite critical questions, not only about her place in film history, but also about the relationships between history, biography, and sexuality onscreen.

Despite all the controversy over *The Cabbage Fairy*, the film's significance as a document of sexual history has been nearly completely neglected. More specifically, the sexual imagery of *The Cabbage Fairy* takes part in the lesbian chic of the Belle Époque (1871-1914). While the terms "lesbian" and "Sapphic,"⁴ originate from the ancient poet Sappho of Lesbos (600 BCE), their association with lesbian sexuality as we understand it is, in the words of literary scholar Yopie Prin, "a particularly Victorian phenomenon."⁵ When understood in the context of its historical milieu, the Sapphic visuality of *The Cabbage Fairy* radically transforms common assumptions about the so-called "birth of cinema." Close attention to Guy's early work reveals the centrality of queer sexualities, not only to her trademark disruptions of gender norms, but to the development of motion picture industries more broadly at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Cabbage Fairy is an ideal starting point for a consideration of Sapphic silent cinema due to its early date, its vaunted place in existing film histories, and the controversy it continues to engender by its very existence. The film engages with core questions of screen and sexuality studies, such as: *Where do we locate lesbianism in film and film history? (Is it in the text, the narrative, the iconography, performance, authorship, and/or reception?) How do we see lesbianism in periods with different sexual norms than our own? Who counts as lesbian and on what evidence?* For our purposes, the film currently identified as *The Cabbage Fairy*—misidentified according to Gaines—does double duty, making visible both the intertextual structures of Sapphic meaning-making in early film and the compulsory heterosexuality that continues to dominate contemporary film scholarship.

The Cabbage Fairy, Take One

At first glance, *The Cabbage Fairy* might not seem particularly Sapphic. There is only one woman in it, she appears to conform to the gender norms of the period, and the content of the film suggests procreative sexuality. Moreover, Guy's biography includes a heterosexual marriage (later divorce notwithstanding) and two children of her own. The dominant heterosexualized reproductive meaning attached to the cabbage patch is indisputable, as the following 1889 postcard advertisement for fertilizer that graces the cover of a recent monograph on *The Cabbage Fairy* clearly illustrates.⁶

Yet, it is precisely in such naturalized iconography that we might expect to find queer resistances to hegemonic norms. The folktale of the cabbage patch is anything but straightforward. It is, after all, a euphemism, supposedly told to children to avoid explaining sexuality and reproduction.

Recent scholarly accounts position *The Cabbage Fairy* correctly in relation to the postcard craze of the *fin de siècle*, yet they mischaracterize it by positioning it “politely” in relation to *our contemporary stereotypes* about Victorian prudery.⁷ In contrast, I highlight the *mise-en-scène* of the cabbage patch, which reveals sexual meanings that the story itself obfuscates. The film’s iconography points us toward the allegorical and elliptical meanings that structure Victorian discourses of representation and constitute Sapphic meaning-making at the turn of the twentieth century.

The cabbage fairy of the film’s title would have evoked the slang term “fairy,” with its queer connotations already in place during this period.⁸ It is significant that the fairy figure has only one traditional accoutrement of fairydom—a magic wand—which she drops in the first seconds of the film.⁹ This easily discarded phallic object emphasizes the fairy’s relationship to fantasy and wish fulfillment. The cabbage fits snugly within the venerable tradition of edible metaphors for (in this case female) genitalia and reproductive organs.¹⁰ The pun is doubled in the French language by the reference to “choux” pastry, which is often split and filled with cream, making it easy to read as a suggestive metaphor for the vulva.¹¹ French audiences would have associated *The Cabbage Fairy* with the popular French nursery rhyme “Savez-vous planter les choux?” (“Do You Know How to Plant Cabbage?”), which taught children the parts of the body with the lyrics “we plant them with the finger, we plant them with the hand,” suggesting the significance of the hand in lesbian sexual play.¹² On top of all this playful lesbianized punning, we can also read the fairy’s performative display of maternal indifference as she all but drops the babies on the ground. *But how can we know if any of these textual associations were intended by Guy, or if they speak more directly to retrospective twenty-first-century lesbian longings?*¹³ *Moreover, how can we possibly know whether these cultural resonances were actually perceived by fin de siècle audiences?*¹⁴

The Cabbage Fairy, Take Two

In two widely reproduced photographs, a cross-dressed Guy stands in a classic pose of sexual fantasy between two corseted young womxn. These images raise historiographic questions about how we read a film in relation to extra-textual material, as Gaines has noted.¹⁵ In both photographs, Guy appears at ease, projecting an air of candid pleasure as though she is enjoying the moment. Her gaze is directed intently to one of the womxn standing beside her. In one of the photographs, a smiling Guy suggestively offers a phallic object (perhaps an edible treat or a cigarette) to the womxn on her left in a manner that seems flirtatious. These images create a sharp contrast with other photos of Guy where her erect corseted figure overdetermines retrospective readings. The two stills here were taken on the set of *Sage-femme de première classe/First-Class Midwife* (1902), a film that reworks the cabbage patch theme.¹⁶ In *First-Class Midwife*, either famously or apocryphally, Guy performs the role of *the lover*, which is often called “the husband.”¹⁷ On the one hand, Gaines points to the *cross-dressing* in the film to suggest that it may yet wind

up in the queer film canon. ¹⁸ On the other hand, Laura Horak productively questions the a priori assumption that cross-dressing was necessarily a sign of lesbianism in her groundbreaking work on cross-dressed womxn in early film. ¹⁹ Yet, the cross-dressed lover is but one among many elements of the film's queer structure, as we shall see. Either way, dressed as the lover in the cabbage patch, Guy projects a free youthful confidence that exudes sexuality.

What are we to make of these images? Queer media scholars have generally agreed that cross-dressing and gender inversion are the predominant mode of queer representation before Stonewall. Shall we therefore read them in relation to Guy's extensive oeuvre, which has long been associated with her penchant for cross-dressing comedies and other forms of gender inversion? For example, her 1912 [gay cowboy film](#) *Algie the Miner* is often cited as the earliest extant film representing male homosexuality onscreen. ²⁰ A string of associations in Guy's memoirs, in which one of the photos above is published, heightens the queer plausibility of *The Cabbage Fairy*. In just a few paragraphs, she moves from gossip about the "odd couple" of Émile Zola and "his wife," to the masculine Princess Bibesco's "lightly shaded lip," to an interaction with René Viviani who asks her flirtatiously when she is going to marry, to which she replies, "I suppose that I love my work too much. If I decide someday to marry it will only be to have children." ²¹

The Cabbage Fairy, Take Three

In *First-Class Midwife*, the proverbial cabbage patch has been replaced by a fantasy baby boutique, a shop filled with dolls representing babies for purchase. The "fairy," now the "midwife" of the title, is represented as the proprietor of the shop. Her magic wand has been replaced by a feather duster—that mundane object of feminized work that doubles as a classic sex toy. The feather duster gives the femme fairy her wings while locating her in a specific class position, which is important to the film's meaning. A lesbian couple enters, with one of the partners dressed almost identically to the cabbage fairy and the other partner cross-dressed. As we have seen, scholars have rightly cautioned against presuming a relationship between cross-dressing and lesbianism, and Alison McMahan has argued that in *First-Class Midwife*, "having a woman play the husband signals that this is a children's story." ²² In this instance, I disagree with McMahan. The film's structure and cultural context point clearly to a lesbian iconography that was a defining part of French culture in this moment. ²³

The mirrored figures of the similarly dressed wife and midwife emphasize lesbian visibility through the trope of the lesbian doppelgänger, reinforcing the lesbian specificity of the cross-dressed figure. The iconography of the lesbian double is generally understood as emerging from pathologized stereotypes about womxn, vanity, and the threat of lesbianism—but it is historically significant nonetheless. ²⁴ Barbara Creed calls this *fin de de siècle* motif of the lesbian look-alike "the narcissistic female double." ²⁵ Mandy Merck points out that "the very doubling that implies a sexual pairing also denies it in a repetition too exact to suggest an encounter rather than a reflection." ²⁶ The cliché of the lesbian double emerges from misogynistic conceptions of female

narcissism, which associate lesbianism with auto-eroticism—i.e., non-reproductive sexuality. ²⁷
So, just what are these figures doing in the cabbage patch?! ²⁸

Alongside the cross-dressing and doubled femme figures, the lesbian couple in *First-Class Midwife* kisses, twice. If we accept Linda Williams's premise that a cinematic kiss stands in for the sex act, we might infer that it is the "overtness" of the *doubled* lesbian kisses within the film's queer structure that makes the femme figure of the fairy with the tell-tale magic wand no longer necessary to sustain the queerness of the scene. ²⁹ In any case, the couple rejects the dolls in the shop before the midwife escorts them through a door into what we might describe as a secret or magical space: a mythical cabbage patch reminiscent of the earlier film. In this iteration, there is an over-abundance of living, wriggling, white babies. In distinction, two of the many babies that the couple dismisses are portrayed by dolls, one black and one seemingly Native American or indigenous. ³⁰ The couple refuses the two dolls with exaggerated gestures, chooses a live white baby instead, pays the midwife, and then leaves.

The film is essentially a dirty lesbian joke structured around white Victorian racism. The blackness of the doll marks the punchline of the cinematic joke as the fear of miscegenation. At the *fin de siècle*, Guy's queer cabbage fairies engaged in part of a pop culture cabbage patch craze in which the centuries-old folktale spoke to social anxieties about the declining French birth rate, as other scholars have noted. ³¹ Far from the polite Victorian prudery often attributed to it, the cabbage patch meme spoke to *adult* anxieties and was both a racialized and sexualized phenomenon. ³² The reproductive imaginary of the Victorian cabbage patch was a cultural phenomenon that engaged the pro-natalist French eugenic discourse known as *puericulture*, or "soil and seed." In the sexualized eugenic garden of "soil and seed," the female body is aligned with the natural and fertile French landscape. Within the context of French colonialism, this is certainly a racialized discourse, as we see in the structure of *First-Class Midwife*. ³³ Consider the following postcard, circa 1900, which has recently been described as a typical example of the postcards "politely premised" on the "the folk notion of babies emerging from cabbage patches." ³⁴

It seems a self-evident example, but its meaning is legible only in context. (After all, what would be a typical example of a pop culture meme today?) When compared, for instance, to the likewise typical example of the cabbage patch trend below, this postcard begins to look quite different. The phallic placement of the woman's watering can suddenly comes into relief, as does the ethnic ambiguity of the babies and the woman. ³⁵

In *First-Class Midwife*, racialized humor is produced on the condition that the lesbian couple poses no threat of miscegenation; this is not only because they appear to be of the same race, but because their sexuality is presumed to be non-reproductive. That's the laugh line; the joke only works when the lover is a lesbian. ³⁶ As we have seen, the racialized structure of the film's comedy is organized through doubling: the doubled figures of the wife and midwife mirror the lesbian visibility of the film alongside the *perhaps less obvious* lesbian connotations of the figure in drag.

The doubled racist joke exists in direct relation to the doubled lesbian kisses (sex acts) that produced them. This then is the cultural terrain into which Guy released one of the most debated works of film history. *The Cabbage Fairy* and *First-Class Midwife* queerly intervene in the heterosexual imagination of the cabbage patch and starkly underline the essential racialization of this reproductive imagery. In short, as with any mass cultural phenomenon, the cabbage patch craze of the Belle Époque cannot be understood so easily through a single seemingly self-evident instance. Rather, multiple iterations proliferate in which we should expect to find a diverse range of meanings and possibilities in dialogue with each other.

Possibilities

Taken together, the textual, intertextual, and extratextual discourses surrounding the cabbage fairy series surely suggest what scholars like to call the “possibility of lesbianism.”³⁷ Certainly, if we do not consider the possibility of lesbianism, we are so deeply in the realm of compulsory heterosexuality that we should speak of disavowal rather than invisibility. Put another way, when we watch two womxn cast as a romantic couple kiss each other, yet insist on a heterosexual interpretation, we reveal more about the limits of our own historical moment than about what was going on in the Victorian cabbage patch.³⁸ As Alice Hegan Rice put it in her best-selling 1901 novel *Mrs. Wiggs and the Cabbage Patch*, “It was not a real cabbage patch, but a queer neighborhood...”³⁹ Yet, the playful lesbianized humor that we see in the two existing versions of the cabbage fairy narrative, and in so much of Guy’s early work, has been all but erased from contemporary understandings. It is hardly surprising then, like so much of lesbian history, that its very existence is being called into question. However, my aim here is not to claim an *ex post facto* lesbian identity for Guy. Rather, I am saying that lesbian representations were central to her oeuvre, *because they were central to the representational systems and cultural context in which she produced her work.*⁴⁰

To begin to see early films as they would have been experienced by early audiences, they must be analyzed internationally as well as intertextually. Scholars have emphasized the transnational nature of the early film industries, in which France was the dominant exporter until World War I. This is significant because France has a unique relationship to Sapphic sexual cultures, including what we might call “the lesbian imaginary.”⁴¹ The international development of the moving image was shaped, in part, by what Tami Williams calls “the Sapphist liberty of the Belle Époque.”⁴² In fact, the tension between Guy’s French sensibilities and “American prudishness” became a source of conflict in her later career.⁴³ Those interested in “overt” representations of lesbian sexual acts will note that the kisses between the lovers in *First-Class Midwife* discussed above are by no means the first lesbian kiss in cinema or in Guy’s oeuvre. Film scholar Susan Potter begins her groundbreaking new book, *Queer Timing: The Emergence of Lesbian Sexuality in Early Cinema*, with what she calls the “unruly erotics” of Guy’s 1898 *Gavotte*.⁴⁴ According to McMahan, *Gavotte* is structured around “the eroticism of seeing two women kiss.”⁴⁵ Likewise, the climax of Guy’s *Les Fredaines de Pierrette/Pierrette’s Escapades* (1900) is the kiss that ends

the scene, suggesting that eroticized kisses between womxn were a staple of Guy's trade and early cinema more broadly. ⁴⁶

Early film audiences would have been fluent in the literal punning and visual metaphors that Guy mined as she experimented with the visual language of cinema. Such fluency is necessary to see the intertextual references being mobilized in later periods. Almost a century after Guy's kissing cabbage fairies, queer conservative Florence King lambasted the new positive images of lesbians in the media by sarcastically declaring that "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch was into Cunnilingus." ⁴⁷ In short, early film history was a *cinema of citations* that developed out of nineteenth-century visual, narrative, and sexual cultures. ⁴⁸ It can only be understood intertextually. Throughout most of the silent era, particularly before the end of World War I, intertextual marking, euphemism, and double entendre were among the most common ways that lesbian meanings circulated in popular culture. *This is neither an absence nor an invisibility, it is a specific cultural formation with its own representational conventions.*

Femme Fairies and the Queer Reproduction of Femininity

Guy's cabbage fairies circulated alongside other femme fairies that are unquestionably among the most popular of early films: the iconic serpentine or butterfly dances were produced by most major filmmakers, including the Lumière Brothers, Thomas Edison, and Guy herself. ⁴⁹ Although these films feature a variety of performers, they are all imitations of Loie Fuller's revolutionary stage performances for which she earned the moniker of *la fée électricité*, or *the electric fairy*. ⁵⁰

Like *The Cabbage Fairy*, at first glance, such films seem to conform to later models of womxn as object of the gaze. But when analyzed intertextually and in their historical context, it becomes clear that something more interesting is happening. In the femme fairies of early cinema, we witness the emergence of the normative hetero-feminine ideal of the twentieth century as it is being produced in imitation of and in relation to racialized lesbian sexualities and performance traditions. ⁵¹ The magical movements of the electric fairy that were so widely imitated in early film were produced by the manipulation of a patented *wand*. ⁵² In performances and films, the wand disappears, reminiscent of Guy's cabbage fairy's discarded wand. But in other ephemera, such as the postcard above, the wand is part of the iconography of the dance, reinforcing the association between the iconic movements and the figure of the femme fairy.

Not surprisingly, Guy's contributions to this genre are infused with a Sapphic eroticism that Potter describes as part of "culturally normative nineteenth-century modes of female homoerotic

spectatorship.”⁵³ Guy made four such films in 1897 alone, beginning with *Ballet Libella*, which McMahan describes as “a beautiful hand colored film showing two women, one in a fairy costume, preparing to dance and then beginning to dance, while the second one watches her with an intense gaze.”⁵⁴ Guy’s intriguing *Danse Serpentine Mme. Bob Walter/Serpentine Dance by Mme. Bob Walter* (1897) is another beautiful example of the genre.⁵⁵

The ubiquity of the femme fairy at the advent of cinema underscores the fact that when kinetoscope parlors and projected cinema were first being commercialized in the 1890s, these lesbian figures, networks, representations, and audiences were central to the development and marketing of the new medium—and they would remain so throughout the silent era. Indeed, this period was so saturated with Sapphic claims to authorship, queer performance trends, and lesbian hyper-visuality more broadly that it could be called the Sapphic era, but that is a story for another time.

The foundational nature of lesbian visuality to early film culture comes clearly into view when we trace the Victorian aesthetic vernacular. While deep intertextual research is often necessary to access, or “see,” the meanings made in early film, these significations would have been obvious to their initial audiences. As is well known, reception studies of early cinema present a unique set of challenges. *The Cabbage Fairy’s* relationship to the postcard craze of the 1890s underscores the potential value of the brief messages often written on postcards to offer us fleeting contact with early film audiences.⁵⁶ The lesbian iconography, which I have argued was central to the popularity of Guy’s famous cabbage patch films, is echoed in the cabbage fairies on the apparently popular postcard below (circa 1910). The doubled femme figures mirror each other, reaching their hands provocatively into the cabbages. An apparently older androgynous figure looks on from behind, recalling the cross-dressed lesbian lover in *First-Class Midwife*. The lover leans in from out of frame, cutting off the figure below the waist so that one cannot be sure of whether they wear pants or a skirt.

Three different hand-written notes sent via this card offer ambiguous messages, each with its own lesbian potential.⁵⁷ The first reads in part: *Don’t be caught by fairies as are on the opposite side of this card, they may be looking for you*. While the message might carry either heterosexualized or queer meanings, it is significant that the three figures on the card are clearly identified as fairies themselves even without their wands or feather dusters. This is important because it underscores the aggressive sexualization of the fairy figure, which is at odds with accounts that situate the discourse in relation to prudery, children, or the folkloric past. Another copy of this card, apparently hand-delivered in Elmira, California, reads: *Take your time and make your choice, B.Y.* The use of initials and the lack of postmark suggest the choice in question might be of an intimate nature that requires some discretion. Granted, this choice may have been about any number of things, from a marriage proposal to an abortion. Yet, the joviality associated with a holiday postcard (the mirthful dangers of Halloween in particular) and the lesbian imagery on the card itself, certainly flirt with the possibility of a queer proposition. Finally, a third copy of this card carries a message that could be read as either the most innocuous or the most telling. This

card, even more than the last, is conspicuously blank. It is dated by hand as *Oct. 31, 1913*, with no postmark, and inscribed only *To Trina* with no other identifying information such as a last name or address. The correspondence section of the card reads only: *From Mother*. While it is certainly conceivable that this was a mundane note passed from actual mother to daughter, given the iconography on the card it seems more plausible that this inscription marks a lesbian relationship in the Victorian tradition of “Mother-love.” As Martha Vicinus and other scholars have demonstrated, during this period, womxn in erotic relationships with each other frequently adopted the idealized language of maternal love as a “highly regarded vocabulary to describe same-sex love.”⁵⁸ Hold this thought.

Conclusion

The historical context of turn-of-the-century “mother-love” offers an opportunity to rethink the spate of recent headlines blaring declaratives such as “Hollywood Froze Out the Founding Mother of Cinema.”⁵⁹ Such headlines frame reviews of the documentary *Be Natural*, but they also reveal more about the current crisis of gender discrimination in Hollywood than about Guy’s work. After a screening of the documentary at the 2018 New York Film Festival, lesbian experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer raised what may be the most pressing question about Guy’s career for the present moment. Hammer recalled hearing stories in the 1980s that Guy had thrown her negatives into one of the Finger Lakes in Upstate New York. “Did you run across this story?” Hammer asked director Pamela Green, “Maybe it’s a mythology?”⁶⁰

Hammer’s incisive question queerly disrupts the naturalized way Guy’s story is framed as a rescue narrative, with scholars and filmmakers performing a heroic recovery of Guy and her lost films.⁶¹ The problem with the rescue narrative as a framing device is that, however feminist its intentions, it functions by positioning the profoundly successful Guy as a damsel-in-distress.

In the wake of #MeToo and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s findings of systemic discrimination against womxn in the film industry, it is tempting to draw parallels between Guy’s struggles and those of twenty-first-century womxn.⁶² Yet, now more than ever, it is imperative to disrupt the damsel-in-distress narrative and the heterosexist gendered stereotypes that propel it. The “untold,” “lost,” and “forgotten” history of Guy involves more than the insertion of a “forgotten mother of film” into a naturalized and heterosexualized account of film history. The repetition of such rhetoric renders it natural and thus reproduces the status quo, as Patricia White has pointed out in another context.⁶³ Much of Guy’s legacy stems from her persistence in combatting such gender stereotypes in her life and across her prolific body of work. Close attention to the lesbian cultural contexts and visual iconographies of Guy’s influential output reveals a radically different story about the so-called “birth of cinema” than the ones we have been told. From cross-dressed lesbians kissing in the “cabbage patch” to the erotic encounters of femme fairies, Guy’s innovative play with film language presented lesbian pleasures

to cinema's first audiences and preserved them for future fairies. Mother of cinema? Mother-love, indeed!







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Notes:









1. In 1996, the film now circulating under the title *The Cabbage Fairy* was first identified by scholars, although there remains controversy over whether this is indeed Guy's *The Cabbage Fairy*, and if so, which version, the original or a remake. [↪](#)
2. Janelle Dietrick, *Mademoiselle Alice: A Novel* (Portland, OR: BookBaby [self-published], 2017). [↪](#)
3. Jane Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018). [↪](#)
4. Throughout this essay, the terms "lesbian" and "Sapphic" are used interchangeably to denote a variety of sexual desires, activities, relationships, identifications, and embodiments, which today might be called lesbian, bisexual, non-binary, pansexual, queer, trans, intersex, or gender nonconforming, among other terms. I use lesbian and Sapphic because they are era-appropriate, predate the dominance of the sexologists, and retain a gendered meaning that insists on feminist analysis within a patriarchal culture, while remaining capacious enough to include people who may have understood themselves in multiple, variable ways. Additionally, I use the contemporary intersectional feminist term "womxn" to denaturalize racialized and gendered language. [↪](#)
5. Yopie Prin, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 94. [↪](#)
6. Janelle Dietrick with forward by Alice-Guy Blanche Peeters, *La Fée Aux Choux: Alice Guy's Garden of Dreams* (Portland, OR: BookBaby [self-published], 2017). Page numbers refer to the Kindle version. [↪](#)
7. See Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis, "A Machine for Recreating Life': An Introduction to Reproduction on Film," *British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 50, no. 3 (September 2017): 383-409. [↪](#)
8. George Chauncey, "The Fairy as an Intermediate Sex," chap. 2 in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World*,

1890–1940 (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 47-64; on the Sapphic Fairytale as structure, see Elaine Marks, “Lesbian Intertextuality,” in *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts*, eds. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 186.






9. On the wand as slang for penis in this era, see Jonathon Green, *The Vulgar Tongue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20, 191. For an example of contemporary controversy over sexual visual metaphor in public space, see Rachel Kraus, “These Sex Toy Ads Banned from the Subway. Now the Company is Suing,” *Mashable*, June 18, 2019, <https://mashable.com/article/dame-mta-sex-toy-ad-lawsuit/>. 
10. See Jonathon Green, “Cabbage,” *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* (Digital Edition, 2019), <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/bcvjvsq>. 
11. On the prominence of “literal punning” and vulgar humor in Guy’s early work, see Kimberly Tomadjoglou, “Alice Guy’s Great Cinematic Adventure,” in *Doing Women’s Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 105-107. In English, the “cream puff” also carries queer feminized meanings dependent on this vulval imagery. 
12. Thanks to Fabiola Hannah whose linguistic and cultural knowledge of French enabled this reading through our conversations. On the bawdiness of this song, see Yvonne Knibiehler, *De la pucelle à la minette: les jeunes filles, de l’âge classique à nos jours/From the Virgin to the Pussy: Young Girls, from the Classical Age to Today* (Paris: Messidor, 1989), 109. 
13. On longing and “retrospectatorship,” see Patrica White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). 
14. Guy’s own claims to authorship of the Gaumont “series N” films (nude films made as early as 1897) reposition *The Cabbage Fairy* in relation to its own historical moment. See Dietrick, *La Fée Aux Choux*, 867. *But what shall we make of recent claims that Guy did not make this film at all?* As for the possibility that this film is not one of Guy’s cabbage fairy stories, the best we can do at the moment is understand that this film has been *adopted* to stand in for Guy’s claims to authorship. After all, *if* we follow the dominant theories of authorship, it is her *claims* that matter to her author function. 

15. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*, 52-55. See also Jane Gaines, “First Fictions,” *Signs* vol. 30, no. 11 (2004): 1311; Judith Mayne, “Lesbian Detection,” conclusion in *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 173-181. 
16. In the third of Guy’s cabbage series, *Madame a des envies/Madame Has Her Cravings* (1906), a pregnant woman steals and consumes a stick of candy, a glass of absinth, and a smoking pipe before giving birth in the cabbage patch. Although, at first there appears to be no “fairy” in this film, it is present through visual play: absinth was known as “the green fairy,” while the simulated fellatio that Alison McMahan associates with the early use of the close-up also marks the protagonist as the “fairy,” in the slang of the time, suggesting oral sex, an act connected etymologically with “lesbian.” See Alison McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 36-42; Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 282-283. 
17. Dietrick quotes Guy’s own claims that she did not perform in the film but put on the lover’s costume afterwards “for fun.” Dietrick, *La Fée Aux Choux*, 118. In footnote 137, she cites a letter from Guy to Louis Gaumont, dated January 15, 1954, which is held at the Bibliothèque du Film, Cinémathèque Française (Ref no. LG371B50). 
18. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*, 70. 
19. Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 3. 
20. Shane Brown, *Queer Sexualities in Early Film: Cinema and Male-Male Intimacy* (New York: IB Tauris, 2016) 3; David M. Lugowski, “Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood’s Production Code,” *Cinema Journal* vol. 38, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 4. 
21. Alice Guy Blaché, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, ed. Anthony Slide (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1986), 18. What are we to do with the similarity between René Viviani’s name and that of Renée Vivien, one of the most famous lesbians at the time, other than simply to note it? On reading Guy’s memoirs as montage, see Amelie Hastie, *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 77. 

22. McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché*, 212. 
23. Nicole G. Albert, *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siècle France* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016); Francesca Canadé Sautman, “Invisible Women: Lesbian Working-Class Culture in France, 1880-1930,” in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, eds. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179, 187. 
24. The motif of the lesbian double is also connected to lesbian fashion of the Victorian era. It is historically significant in relation to lesbian cultural practice. See Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9-11. 
25. Barbara Creed, “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys, and Tarts,” in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995), 86. 
26. Mandy Merck, “‘Transforming the Suit’: A Century of Lesbian Self-Portraits,” in *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 96. 
27. Olu Jenzen, “Revolting Doubles: Radical Narcissism and the Trope of the Lesbian Doppelgangers,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 17 (2013): 348. 
28. The doubling trope is not confined to the dyad. Especially in its pornographic variants, it frequently evokes triangular relationships through the use of the mirror. This creates an uncanny effect of queer reproduction. For example, consider this erotic stereoview of two naked womxn on a bed. The bedroom setting suggests a sexual encounter between the two, but the standing woman’s narcissistic doubling stages a lesbian *ménage à trois* effect.
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29. Linda Williams, “Of Kisses and Ellipses: The Long Adolescence of American Movies,” chap. 1 in *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 28; On cross-dressed kisses, see Chris Straayer, “The Paradoxical Bivalent Kiss,” in chap. 3 in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 54. 
30. On the racialization in *First-Class Midwife*, see Kim Tomadjoglou, “Wonderment—Seeing the World Through the Eyes of Alice Guy Blaché,” in *Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer*, ed. Joan Simon (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 2009), 109, 101-107; Tomadjoglou, “Alice Guy’s Great Cinematic Adventure,” 105-107. 

31. For instance, see Gina Greene, “In the Garden of Puériculture: Cultivating the Ideal French Infant in Real and Imagined Landscapes of Care (1895–1935),” *Change Over Time*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2016), 192-214. 
32. The idea of a “Victorian meme” is an anachronism, but I hope a productive one, highlighting the ongoing imagined relationship between cultural and biological reproduction. The term “meme” was coined in 1991, and combines the Greek word “mimesis” with “gene” to describe the “evolutionary cultural process by which social symbols are formed, cross-fertilized, and reproduced in new and diverse iterations of an original (or ‘genetic’) idea.” See Eileen Hunt Botting, Christine Carey Wilkerson, and Elizabeth N. Kozlow, “Wollstonecraft as an International Feminist Meme,” *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2014): 13-38. See also Giles Fraser, “Nobody is better at being human, Professor Dawkins, least of all you,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2014/aug/29/nobody-better-at-being-human-richard-dawkins>. 
33. French eugenic thought has been differentiated from US and UK eugenics with the suggestion that French eugenics did not share the racism or classism of the broader movement. See, for example, William H. Schneider, “The Eugenics Movement in France, 1890-1940,” in *Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia*, ed. Mark Adams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 69-109. Yet, although significant differences certainly exist, the rhetoric of differentiation between good and bad (or positive and negative) eugenics suggests the possibility of a seemingly benign “biologically based movement for social reform” (Schneider 69). It is through such thinking that we get to current statements such as, “The old eugenic dream, temporarily discredited by Nazi pursuits of a ‘superior race,’ has been resurrected.” See Calum MacKellar and Christopher Bechtel, eds., *The Ethics of the New Eugenics* (Edinburgh: Berghahn Books, 2014), 2. On the relationship between eugenics, scientific racism, and colonialism in the French context, see Crystal Marie Fleming, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017). 

34. Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis, “A Machine for Recreating Life,” 383-409. On the relationship between postcards and early film more broadly, see Lauren Rabinovitz, “The Miniature and the Giant: Postcards and Early Cinema,” chap. 4 in *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies, and American Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 96-135. On women as consumers of postcards, see Lisa Z. Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands: Postcards and the Expansion of Pornography in Britain and the Atlantic World, 1880-1914,” *Journal of Social History* vol. 33, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 859-885. For the foundational work on the racialization of postcards within the context of colonialism, see Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Marie-Monique Huss, “Pronatalism and the Popular Ideology of the Child in Wartime France: The Evidence of the Picture Postcard,” in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, eds. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 329-368. On the racialization of motherhood, see Ruby Tapia, *American Pietàs: Visions of Race, Death and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). ↩
35. One notices the small Star of David that appears like a logo printed in the bottom right-hand corner. This is a feature of the card and appears on all the copies I have seen. The Star of David has been loosely associated with Judaism for centuries and this association grew during the nineteenth century. In 1897, the symbol was chosen to represent the Zionist movement. See “Star of David,” *The Encyclopædia Britannica* (Online), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Star-of-David>; “The Flag and the Emblem,” *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs* website, April 28, 2003, <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/aboutisrael/israelat50/pages/the%20flag%20and%20the%20emblem.aspx>. ↩
36. I would note that it is possible to read the film as a lampoon of the racism of the white upper class. Such a reading is supported by McMahan’s description of the film as a satire. She writes “*Sage-femme* pokes fun at the way men use romance to coax women into producing children, but also at the way women insist that their babies meet certain class standards”(112). Such a reading would depend partially upon the film’s title which may have been written retrospectively by someone other than Guy. Dietrick argues that this film








was originally titled *La Fée Choux*. See Dietrick, *La Fée Aux Choux*, 404n45-46. [↩](#)


37. Andrea Weiss, “A Queer Feeling When I Look at You’: Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (New York: Routledge, 1991), 286. [↩](#)
38. This is the classic formulation of fetishistic disavowal, “I know very well, but just the same...” in which perceptual evidence is refused (in this case in favor of the heterosexual fetish). See Linda Williams, “Something Else Besides A Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and The Maternal Melodrama,” in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 137-162; Teresa de Lauretis, “The Lure of the Mannish Lesbian: The Fantasy of Castration and the Signification of Desire,” chap. 5 in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 222-229. [↩](#)
39. Alice Hagen Rice, *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1901), 4. Scholars differ on attributing lesbian meaning to words such as “queer,” “gay,” or even “peculiar,” but such words frequently index meanings that are made interstitially. [↩](#)
40. I believe Guy deployed these meanings deftly, with the inexplicable mix of unconscious instinct and intentional gesture frequently called artistic talent or genius. As McMahan and others have documented, in the years between 1900 and 1907, Guy was recognized as a leader and innovator in the field. Although *The Cabbage Fairy* and *First-Class Midwife* are early works in relation to the unusual longevity of her career, her persistent success with vulgar visual punning strongly suggests that we attribute the popularity of her cabbage fairies to her knowing and meaningful play with the Sapphic cultural zeitgeist. [↩](#)
41. See Gretchen Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers: Discourses of Same-Sex Desire from Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). On the visible geographies of lesbian cruising in nineteenth-century Paris, see Lowry Martin, “Nymphomaniacs and Polymorphic Monsters: Imagining Lesbianism in Nineteenth-Century France,” Paper presentation, Queer History Conference, San Francisco State University, June 18, 2019. [↩](#)
42. Tami Williams, *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 89. [↩](#)
43. Tomadjoglou, “Alice Guy’s Great Cinematic Adventure,” 102-103. [↩](#)






44. Susan Potter, *Queer Timing: The Emergence of Lesbian Sexuality in Early Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 43. [↩](#)
45. McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché*, 212. [↩](#)
46. McMahan connects *First-Class Midwife* to *Pierrette's Escapades* when she describes the costumes of the couple in the cabbage patch: “Guy’s costume resembles a Pierrot costume, and Germaine Serrand, who plays the wife, is dressed like Columbine” (112). For a description of a relevant intertext, the 1898 “Pierrot in Lesbos” by Lucien Merlet, see Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, 51-52. [↩](#)
47. Florence King, “Democracy,” chap. 8 in *Reflections in a Jaundiced Eye* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1990), 95. [↩](#)
48. The concept of a *cinema of citations* underscores the way that film form functions through *conventions: it is citational*. This reading inverts Charles Musser’s productive conception of early cinema’s “aesthetics of discernment,” which is oriented toward spectatorship. In distinction, what I call the *cinema of citations* emphasizes authorship, following Judith Mayne’s assertion that “lesbian and gay readings take citation and replacement as central strategies.” See Charles Musser, “A Cornucopia of Images: Comparison and Judgement Across Theatre, Film, and the Visual Arts During the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film*, ed. Nancy Mowll Mathews (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 6; Judith Mayne, “A Parallax View of Lesbian Authorship,” chap. 8 in *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 155. [↩](#)
49. My formulation of the femme fairy follows Patricia White’s paradigm of the “femme film” as “women’s pictures that sustain lesbian inference.” White, *Uninvited*, xviii. [↩](#)
50. See Rhonda, K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller’s Performance of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Bud Coleman, “The Electric Fairy: The Woman Behind the Apparition of Loie Fuller,” in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theatre History*, eds. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 311-337; Tom Gunning, “Loie Fuller and the Art of Motion: Body, Light, Electricity, and the Origins of Cinema,” in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucinda: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, eds. Richard Allen and

Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 75-89.



51. As case in point, the dancer most closely associated with the genre, “Annabelle the Dancer,” was the first Gibson Girl of the Ziegfield Follies. On the Gibson Girl in relation to the New Woman, see Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfield Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 76-78. On Annabelle the Dancer, see Paul C. Spehr, “1890-1895: Movies and the Kinetoscope,” in *American Cinema 1890-1909: Themes and Variations*, ed. André Gaudreault (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 35-36. On the racialization and “Imperial Gaze” of Fuller’s work, see Garelick, *Electric Salome*, 63-117. 
52. For more on Fuller’s patent, see Garelick, *Electric Salome*, 41. 
53. Potter, *Queer Timing*, 102. Potter argues that Fuller’s erotic identity and performances are not intelligible in terms of contemporary concepts of sexuality including lesbianism, gender inversion, or Sapphic communities. This is important to her larger argument about the emergence of modern sexual identities and the sexuality effects of cinema. See pages 110-111. 
54. McMahan, *Alice Guy Blaché*, 51, 211-212. *Ballet Libella* begins this video compilation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGjZB9bJQJQ>. 
55. Mme. Bob Walter’s chosen name in the title/listings suggests the significance of her star persona to any reading of the film. I have found little material on her in English. See “Madame Bob Walter-A Notorious Arranger of Elopements,” *The Old Motor*, June 14, 2014, <http://theoldmotor.com/?p=121472>. 
56. This methodology follows feminist and queer work on scrapbooks by Leslie Midkiff DeBauche and Diana W. Anselmo. See Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, “Memory Books, the Movies, and Aspiring Vamps,” *Observations on Film Art*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2015/02/08/memory-books-the-movies-and-aspiring-vamps/>; Diana W. Anselmo, “Made in Movieland: Imitation, Agency, and Girl Movie Fandom in the 1910s,” *Camera Obscura* 94, vol. 32, no. 1 (2017): 129-165. 
57. All three of the cards discussed are from my personal collection. 
58. Vicinus, “‘A Strenuous Pleasure’: Daughter-Mother Love,” chap. 5 in *Intimate Friends*, 113. See also Carolyn Tate, “Lesbian Incest as Queer Kinship: Michael Field and the Erotic Middle-Class Victorian Family,”

Victorian Review vol. 39, no. 2, Special Issue: Extending Families (Fall 2013): 181-199. My own archival findings corroborate the discourse of “Mother-love,” but suggest a more diverse and ironic interpretation than that of Vicinus or Tate. 

59. Matthew Wills, “Hollywood Froze Out the Founding Mother of Cinema,” *JStor Daily*, March 13, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/hollywood-froze-out-the-founding-mother-of-cinema/>. See also Toniann Fernandez, “The Forgotten Mother of Cinema,” *The Paris Review*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/12/07/the-forgotten-mother-of-cinema/>; Marcia G. Yerman, “The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché, the Mother of Cinema,” *NextTribe*, May 3, 2019, <https://nexttribe.com/alice-guy-blache/>. 
60. Jodie Foster and Pamela B. Green, *The Close-Up*, Film at Lincoln Center Podcast #223, April 17, 2019, <https://www.filmlinc.org/daily/the-close-up-pamela-b-green-and-jodie-foster-talk-be-natural/>. 
61. The rescue narrative has been the dominant framing of Guy’s career from Francis Lacassin, “Out of Oblivion: Alice Guy- Blaché,” *Sight & Sound* vol. 40, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 151-54, to A.O. Scott, “‘Be Natural’ Review: Rescuing Alice Guy Blaché, a Film Pioneer, From Oblivion,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2019, C10, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/movies/be-natural-untold-story-alice-guy-blache-review.html>. 
62. See, for example, Elena Nicolaou, “This Fact Will Make You View the Cannes Film Festival Differently,” *Refinery29*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/05/198577/lack-of-women-representation-cannes-film-festival>; Foster and Green, *The Close-Up*. For an overview of recent statistics and the EEOC investigation, see Martha Lauzen, “Gender Ratios Are Improving in Indie Films, but Visibility’s a Greater Goal,” *Variety*, July 11, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/voices/columns/gender-ratios-indie-films-improving-1203263005/>. 
63. White, *Uninvited*, xii. 

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