She Wolves: Feminine Sapphists and Liminal Sociosexual Categories in the US Urban Entertainment Industry, 1920–1940

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In June 1932 editors at the popular New York tabloid *Brevities* reported that one of Broadway's prettiest chorus girls was sporting a black eye.[1] The cause? The dancer, the rag claimed, had made "amorous advances" toward another female performer. When a male stagehand interrupted the romantic overture, the conflict swiftly devolved into a fistfight: the chorus girl slapped the stagehand, only to be slugged back. However racy, the item faded into the gossip column of half-truths and incomplete lies in which it appeared. Responses died away; the city trudged its way into a new week of summer. And the chorus girl—spectacular and mysterious, feminine and predatory—slipped, one presumes, back to her spangled costumes and messy life.

In the following pages, I wish to find a place within the history of sexuality for our cheeky brawling chorus girl. I argue that urban show business circles in the interwar United States nurtured a vast range of lesbian-leaning women whom I call sapphists. As noted by various scholars, most recently and cogently by Susan Lanser, sapphism serves as a convenient stand-in for female homosexuality for eras and social settings in which no central term for female homoeroticism had achieved primacy. I thus employ "sapphist" and "sapphism" as shorthand for the explosion of terms signaling female same-sex intimacy in interwar US urban entertainment circles: it is a term that denotes female homosexuality yet, unlike "lesbianism," does not call to mind a distinct identity or chronology.[2] Interwar sapphists were assuredly

[1] R.J.D., "On the Bandwagon," *Brevities*, June 20, 1932, 3.

[2] Susan Lanser, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565–1830* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 16. For a discussion of naming within lesbian history, see Leila Rupp, *Sapphistries* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1–4; Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianism," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1–2 (2000): 1–24; Anna Clark, "Twilight Moments," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1–2 (2005): 139–60.

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what we would now call queer, but they were not what we might think of as modern lesbians—they were not, in other words, women for whom homosexual object choice was a distinct and visible social sexual identity that tended to eclipse other modes of cultural belonging. Recognized for their homosexual inclinations— that did not necessarily negate heterosexual relationships, dalliances, or desires—these women juggled complex and elastic social and sexual identities.

I argue that the wider milieu of the entertainment industry nurtured a range of urban female homosexual identities that were startlingly rich, surprisingly feminine, and notably racially diverse. During the era, show business insiders used language loosely to signal lesbian-leaning women, especially within industry tabloids, terms such as "Lesbos," "dikes," "tiger lovers," "followers of the divine Sappho," "girlfriends," "third-sexers," "lezzes," "Sapphic ladies," and "queers" coincided and overlapped. Yet despite these entwinements, distinct types emerge. For the most part, the range of sapphic identity types detailed and disseminated by the interwar tabloid press was largely divorced from the language, ideas, and strictures of interwar legal, medical, and political authorities. Terms like "neurosis," "vagrancy," "psychological immaturity," and "social disorganization" appear only fleetingly, if at all, in my survey of the tabloid press. When medical concepts surfaced—particularly "inversion"—they were generally twisted and reappropriated to the point of confusion and reinvention. This essay describes and delineates alternate approaches to female homosexual identities offered by the interwar entertainment industry, particularly in the tabloid press. This is, in part, an imposition on the past: I am coining female homosexual types rather than simply mirroring them. I aim to show, however, that while the terms employed are largely my own, the "types" cited are a clarification rather than an outright imposition. Considered collectively, these types offer proof of a female counterpoint to George Chauncey's catalog of queer male sexualities in *Gay New York*, including "fairies," "wolves," "faggots," and "trade."[3] As they are in Chauncey's work, the "types" delineated in this essay were not synonyms for "lesbian" but "represent a different conceptual mapping" of sexual identities and sex practices distinct from the homosexual-heterosexual binary. Before the distinction between straight and homosexual solidified, interwar urban insiders recognized a range of male *and* female queer types.

[3] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Feminine sapphists within show business circles also serve as something of an addendum to Martha Vicinus's tantalizing suggestion regarding the period before the solidification of a fixed lesbian identity: "Without fixed categories or a fixed biography, desire could and did take many forms, some visible to the public, others known only in private" (*Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], xxv).

This essay focuses particularly on the most womanly of the female homosexual show business types, what I call the "feminine sapphist." Femininity was a strong and enduring constant within show business insiders' understandings of female homosexuality. Indeed, feminine homosexually inclined women in the US urban entertainment industry appeared to attract an outsized share of attention within urban circles. Not precisely either lesbians or "normal" women, feminine sapphists were conspicuous, but they were not necessarily conspicuously homosexual. Subtle iconoclasts and acceptable deviants, interwar feminine sapphists were women whose cultural importance rested on the fact that although neither they nor others defined them according to their lesbian practices and desires, they nevertheless were both recognizably "sapphic" and respected members of the wider US show business community.

Sapphists' incorporation within urban show business circles illustrates the importance of sexually fluid (rather than explicitly lesbian) social milieus and communities in the history of female homosexuality in the interwar United States. Although overtly lesbian dwellings and gathering places were starting to be established during this period, women's meagre earnings and the continuing cultural ambivalence toward female independence meant that lesbian-leaning women were far less able than their male counterparts to establish exclusively lesbian pockets of city life.[4] Lesbian-leaning women instead frequently found belonging and purpose within socially and sexually fluid urban communities—such as the wider enclave of show business.

Bound by lifestyle and shared political and social concerns, such as their antipathy toward mainstream moral watchdogs and conservative critics, show business insiders formed a discernible social group—a group that accepted and nurtured nonnormative sexual expression and identities.[5] Incorporating chorus girls, wealthy producers, theater critics, publicists, makeup artists, genre novelists, opera divas, ushers, and Hollywood starlets, urban show business circles were a racially mixed conglomeration that could be intimidating in its complexity and range. I do not suggest that the entertainment industry enjoyed full and untroubled integration; nor do I imply that homosexual acts and identities carried precisely the same meanings in predominantly white circles and in communities of color, such as Harlem. Industry tabloids illustrate, however, that—somewhat surprisingly—interwar sapphic typologies appeared to transgress racial boundaries within show business circles. Traditionally predicated on acceptance, even celebration, of sexual nonconformity, urban bawdy—or erotically

[4] See, for instance, Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227–67; and Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 68–101.

[5] What *Dinner at Eight* called "those impossible fast people." *Dinner at Eight*, directed by George Cukor (1933; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.

oriented—subcultures were not explicitly or even primarily homosexual.[6] Nonnormative sexual practices and identities—such as female homosexual predilections—functioned as crucial cultural elements, but they were not the sole constitutive factor. Thus, while sapphists played a key role in shaping and disseminating their own desires and identities, their "fellow travelers" within urban bawdy cultures, all of varied sexual appetites and practices, also shaped the range of female sapphic identities.

The cynical, materialistic, and proudly immoral culture that produced the modern sapphists of show business is at its most ribald and revealing in the subculture's tabloids. Interwar theatrical tabloids drew on the established tradition of the nineteenth-century "flash" press, which, through biting satire, guided readers through urban sexual underworlds.[7] Though I will draw on a range of materials in this chapter, including novels, newspaper articles, and personal letters, I make particular use of *Brevities*, a popular New York tabloid enraptured with all things seedy, sexual, and Broadway related. An irreverent mix of bawdy cartoons, mean-spirited gossip, and vaguely fabricated news items, *Brevities* regularly published content that other editors (reasonably) deemed cheap titillation, sordid slander, or grounds for prosecution. As Alison Oram astutely points out, by "creating a shared public language," the popular press served as "a significant vector for ideas about sexual transgression and deviance."[8] Although Oram is referring to the English tabloid press, her larger point is applicable to the American context. Writers and editors at *Brevities* produced a publication that, read as a cohesive body, is at once tawdry, regrettable, and, to the historian of urban sexuality, indispensable.

It is neither advisable nor entirely possible to take the urban tabloids at face value. The very characteristics of the interwar theatrical press—its vulgar sexiness, incisively cruel humor, and revealing deceitfulness—tell us much about the world of show business, but not in precisely factual terms. Do interwar theatrical rags reveal social history: real lives, true tales? Possibly. Insofar as these women were based geographically, they seemed most prevalent in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. But the tabloids are at their richest and most rewarding when mined for fantasies. The sapphists of this article, then, function principally as discursive categories: they exist primarily in the imagination. While they are not precisely real people, the representations of their lives offer us something more evocative than plain

[6] Twentieth-century bawdy cultures are generally positioned as urban in the United States. See Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[7] Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 13.

[8] Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern Popular British Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007), 6.

fact: the aspirational creation of cultural categories. In offering a convoluted approach to truth, tabloids are an artful match for interwar sapphists, who were, we are told, rarely what they seemed.[9] The interwar tabloid press can reveal how representations of social and sexual identities shaped identities and, in turn, lived lives.

Still, *Brevities* is but one example of a source base of surprising richness, depth, and volume. While historians of sexuality sometimes depict lesbian-leaning women as less socially visible than gay-leaning men in the context of interwar show business circles, the tabloid press shows that such women attracted considerable popular attention in their era. Indeed, while "ladylike men" frequently appeared in the pages of the rag, *Brevities* authors were likely to describe them with disdain.[10] Lesbian-leaning women, in contrast, attracted respect, desire, fear, and fascination. Stories about these women proliferated in the pages of *Brevities* and similar publications. Recognized and acknowledged by their show business peers, they were an accepted part of the world of urban sexualities, even as they altered the shape of its borders.

FEMALE INTIMACY, SHOW BUSINESS STYLE

Women were at the very center of the show business circles that bloomed in the country's cities, particularly in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Male patrons had, on the whole, far more money to invest in the delectations urban hotspots had to offer than their female counterparts; the gratification of male desires was, in turn, an integral aspect of the culture of nightlife in these cities.[11] The rules of demand and supply thus dictated the proliferation of dancers, nightclub hostesses, aspiring actresses, and chorus girls crowding cities on any given weekend. While hosts, novelty acts, and genuine stars—pianists, singers, drag queens, comedians, and acrobats—had

[9] Gossip, as Patricia Meyer Spack reminds us, "embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life, and a discourse potentially challenging to public assumptions; it provides language for an alternative culture" (*Gossip* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985], 46).

[10] Unlike sapphists, whose portrayals spanned a broad gendered range, queer men were far more likely to be depicted as inverts—"third sexers"—by the tabloid press (see, for instance, "After 3 am," *Brevities*, April 3, 1933, 6). This is possibly because gender "deviant" queer men were far more visible than their normatively masculine counterparts. Further, as thrillingly conspicuous social and sexual oddities, "pansies" were frequently linked to the urban entertainment industry as popular performers. While few tabloid portrayals of sapphic women were entirely devoid of an erotic frisson, queer men were often depicted as sexually unappealing, even revolting.

[11] For more on the history of urban nightlife, see Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981). For more on the sexual aspects of urban entertainment in the early decades of the twentieth century, see Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 101–275; Mumford, *Interzones*, 53–120.

their place in the hierarchy of the theater world, it was pretty dancing girls who made up the majority of the era's stage performers. As Angela Latham notes, "Theatrical choruses constituted the largest single category of regular employment for women in the entertainment industry in the 1920s."[12] To watch any of the era's movie musical extravaganzas is to be faced with the sheer multitude of female entertainers and, concomitantly, the gender disparity that was, apparently, taken for granted. Films such as *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), and their countless imitators are rife with soprano voices, dainty tapping feet, décolletage, and the ubiquitous kick lines.[13] In these spectacles, and in the period's entertainments more generally, the presence of men, while necessary for aesthetic balance, plot, or audience appeal, was relatively minimal. This proliferation of female bodies facilitated, in the words of scholar Kristin McGee, the "largely masculinist and sexualized male gaze" endemic to the era.[14]

Female performers sought economic gain and fame, both of which were generally predicated on their physical appearance and sex appeal.[15] While there was a division between Broadway performers such as chorus girls and female sex workers in the urban fast life, it was a flexible barrier.[16] In practice, there appeared to be pressure on chorus girls and taxi dancers (female dancers employed by dance halls and other similar establishments who danced with male patrons for a fee) to increase their popularity and earning power through sexual relationships with fans and clients. In 1922, for instance, ten women representing the Chorus Girls' Union complained to the *New York Globe* that it was "next to impossible for a girl to work in the chorus without leading a life of shame."[17] The union claimed that the only women considered for promotion—and potential stardom—were those willing to compromise their virtue. African American chorus girl Bettye Martina was not part of the Chorus Girls' Union, but she certainly would have agreed with the charge. In 1922 she wrote a scathing letter to

[12] Angela Latham, "The Right to Bare: Containing and Encoding American Women in Popular Entertainments of the 1920s," *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 4 (1997): 455–73, 468. See also Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[13] *Footlight Parade*, directed by Lloyd Bacon and Busby Berkeley (1933; Atlanta: Turner Classic Movies, 2010), DVD; and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and Busby Berkeley (1933; Atlanta: Turner Classic Movies, 2010), DVD.

[14] Kristin McGee, "The Feminization of Mass Culture and the Novelty of All-Girl Bands: The Case of the Ingenues," *Popular Music and Society* 31, no. 5 (2008): 629–62, 642.

[15] As Morris Dickstein explains, during the Depression, show business was "more of a way of selling your body than displaying your talent." Gouging male audience members and admirers thus operated as an escape "from hunger and insecurity for those who had only their bodies to offer" (*Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2009], 235).

[16] McGee, "The Feminization of Mass Culture," 642.

[17] Boyden R. Sparkes, "Church Riot as Brady and Straton Debate Stage," *New York Tribune*, February 13, 1922.

the *Chicago Defender*, lamenting that a female dancer who opposed the sexual advances of directors, stage managers, producers, or choreographers was labeled an uptight "deity" and could expect to lose her position in short order.[18] It appeared difficult, in other words, for female performers to retain their dignity and agency in a subculture ruled by the dictates of commercialized sexuality. Yoked together by circumstance, the women of show business formed a distinct sexual and labor class. Success and profitability for women involved in the interwar entertainment industry, in other words, was inseparable from their sexual allure.[19]

It was thus hardly surprising that while the press was fond of portraying female performers as male-oriented husband-seekers and gold-diggers, such women found solace and much-cherished affinity in the company of fellow female entertainers. As Morris Dickstein, Angela Latham, and Kristin McGee and others have posited, the display of orderly heterosexual female eroticism that defined interwar entertainment was, at least in part, an attempt to manage womanly sexual and economic agency during an era defined by frightening social flux. But female performers did not passively accept their commodification. The proliferation of female bodies in the entertainment industry resulted, Nadine Wills speculates, in the destabilization of "the primacy of male authority."[20] In other words, women's centrality to the era's spectacles of entertainment hobbled male control. This destabilization was exacerbated by women's homosocial intimacies. Banding together, female performers nurtured pockets of female affection and support in the world of interwar show business, a sexualized and sexist environment. *Variety*, the popular and comprehensive industry rag, ran a regular column detailing the generally mundane activities of chorus girls: who had a fetching new hat for Easter, who might be coming down with a cold, who had gone to visit her mother.[21] "Patricia Persley and Margaret Manners are roommates now," ran a typical item; "they have the cutest apartment."[22] "Anita Banton, the blondest of the blondes, and Mickey Seldan, the darkest of brunets," meanwhile, were "paling [*sic*] around. Quite the picturesque view."[23] To read the dispatches in *Variety* is to face the simple but unavoidable conclu-

[18] "Deity" appeared to signal the dancer's air of superiority and untouchable nature. Letter, Bettye Martina, "Our Profession," *Chicago Defender*, March 10, 1928.

[19] This essay does not focus on sex workers unless they were directly involved with the urban entertainment industry, referring to them only in passing. For surveys of sex work in the era, see Cynthia Blair, *I've Got to Make My Living: Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and Ruth Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[20] Nadine Wills, "Women in Uniform: Costume and the 'Unruly Woman' in the 1930s Hollywood Musical," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2000): 317–33, 323.

[21] The column was entitled "Ladies of the Ensemble."

[22] "Ladies of the Ensemble," *Variety*, September 8, 1926.

[23] "Ladies of the Ensemble," *Variety*, September 1, 1926.

sion that women in the entertainment industry were rarely without each other's company. They shared clothes and vacations, apartments and boyfriends, and they changed from show to show and moved—from apartment to apartment, and from city to city—side by side.

This pattern appeared to encompass women from all arenas of show business, from the aforementioned chorus girls to the most highbrow of stars. Judging from her correspondence, for instance, Eva Le Gallienne—a star in the cultured world of experimental New York theater—appeared to enjoy a staggering range of warm, even flirtatious, relationships with female show business types. Her correspondence is crammed with cards, letters, and telegrams from female admirers, friends, and fellow actresses.[24] Indeed, affection between women in the theater world was hardly a secret. In 1923 the *Baltimore Sun* announced that a local girl, Margaret Jenkins, was to join Irene Castle's national tour as an unpaid secretary simply because Miss Jenkins had, in her own words, the "wildest crush" on the star.[25] These homosocial intimacies suggest that female intimacy was, within show business circles, a common and acceptable phenomenon. Making a living from their own commodification, female performers worked within an environment of performative heterosexuality; in their personal lives, however, men sometimes played a secondary role or were excised entirely.

This vaguely erotic female world is captured in a series of letters between two actresses, one based in New York, the other a budding thespian living with her parents in Connecticut. The correspondence details a romance nurtured in the world of interwar show business.[26] The younger correspondent, Midge Donaldson, was still an adolescent when she began her relationship with the older woman, Ruth, who regularly signed her letters with "your old thing" and "your big mixed up." Ruth was clearly a friend of Midge's family, since she frequently ended her missives with affectionate messages for Midge's parents, especially her father, Norman. She also often extended greetings from her on-and-off lover, Kathleen. The conversation between Midge and her "big mixed up"—in addition to recounting the trials of daily life—flowed easily between processing the women's emotions regarding their ever-changing relationship and sharing gossip about the charged romances and domestic partnerships that defined female same-sex intimacy in the world of Big Apple show business.

Ruth's letters to Midge were filled with chatty accounts of complex female intimacies. In a characteristic missive, Ruth explained that, following a movie date, she had "followed her strongest feeling—desire" and acted upon her

[24] See series 1 and box 1, folder 11, series 2, Eva Le Gallienne Collection, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library.

[25] "Baltimore Girl to Go on Tour of Six Weeks with Irene Castle," *Baltimore Sun*, October 1, 1923.

[26] All text quotes are from these undated letters in folder 15, box 11, Donaldson Family Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

clear "chemistry" with Alixe, apparently a fellow actress (and friend of both Ruth and Midge). Ruth expressed hope that despite the professional and romantic links between Alixe, Midge, Kathleen, and herself, "this thing can be fully enjoyable for both Alixe and me." Neither the new relationship nor its disclosure appeared to cause Ruth much alarm. Had Ruth denied her "strong physical feeling" for Alixe, she commented prosaically, "I don't think it would have been good." Ruth's desire for sexual freedom was not precisely one-sided. In another typical letter, Ruth commented cheerfully that Alixe and Jane, a sapphic-leaning friend from the theater world, "were in fine form last eve at supper—the two of them were more or less flirting with each other—not in a rude way, however, not excluding the third—me—from the conversation—so I didn't mind." Though Ruth admitted that she "[loathed] to think upon" the fact that Midge had other lovers, she advised the younger woman to "just go ahead, darling, and behave as you want too [*sic*] with each one of us without these awful guilt feelings." The world shared by Midge and Ruth was one defined by flux: roles were won or lost to fellow actors, lovers moved in only to relocate upstate for the summer traveling season, pleasure was courted and then dismissed once nights on the town became impossible during professional dry spells.

The romantic relationship between Midge and her "old thing" was at times rife with uncertainty and anxiety, but it was nevertheless representative of a social milieu in which female sexual and romantic intimacy formed a norm. Ruth was forever apologizing for her labile nature and emotional demands. But the tension inherent to the relationship clearly arose from within; there was little evidence of judgment or disapproval from peers, colleagues, or friends. Midge's "big mixed up" seemed bothered by her own jealousy and her younger lover's romantic feelings for Frances, another female friend, rather than by the prospect of condemnation from their colleagues and acquaintances. As Ruth explained in a typical letter, Midge's apparent preference for "Frances as lover or LOVE" made her own relationship with the younger woman difficult. Despite their "nice little bed parties," Ruth worried that Midge might abandon their mutually dependent relationship and "leave [her] for Frances or relegate" her to the role of friend and confidante. "Living and loving together," Ruth wrote, involved "sharing many things," including love, but "close friends and family, too"—with independence. This correspondence shows that women in the New York theater world formed fierce bonds that were permissible, normal, and, to some extent, even expected in their insular community.

The acceptance of feminine intimacies within urban entertainment circles highlights the importance of the show business culture—especially in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—in the development of homosocial and homosexual intimacies amongst urban women in the interwar United States. As George Chauncey, Chad Heap, and Nan Boyd have shown, gay and lesbian communities and subcultures were taking shape during the interwar

era. These gay and lesbian communities were sometimes loosely affiliated with show business circles.[27] Female performers thus took part in this lesbian subcultural development. Hampered by social norms and economic realities, however, lesbian-leaning women had less independence and fewer financial means than their gay male counterparts. They were thus less able to build exclusively lesbian subcultures and neighborhoods. Their sexual and social identities were accepted and acknowledged, meanwhile, in the milieu of urban show business. Urban show business circles enjoyed a long history of sexual liberalism.[28] If anything, this pattern was exacerbated during the interwar era, when entertainers mounted a staunch, if largely informal, defense against moral watchdogs' barrage of attacks on the lax urban moral code of the theatrical world. Due to this—fluctuating but fierce—standoff, show business insiders proclaimed their sexual leniency through an enduring acceptance, even celebration, of female same-sex intimacy.[29] The queer reputation of the theater world was based in fact, then; it was not simply rumor. As physician and sensationalist writer La Forest Potter sniffed in 1933, "The theatrical and motion picture profession has gone 'queer' to an almost unbelievable extent."[30] Still, homosexuality was an accepted but not dominant aspect of urban bawdy cultures. Thus, while sapphists can be understood as architects of their own social and sexual identities, these categories were also shaped by fellow—nongay or lesbian—members of urban entertainment industry circles.

Sapphic Types

Female same-sex intimacy flourished in the subculture of urban show business, and it was actively represented, discussed, and parsed in the urban tabloid press. These discussions implicitly split lesbian-leaning women affiliated with the entertainment industry into a versatile spectrum of types. I turn now to a definition of three minor types—the mannish sapphist, the wealthy sapphist, and the Hollywood sapphist—while concentrating particularly on the feminine sapphic predator. These types were not clearly delineated in the language of the day. Show business insiders (particularly

[27] See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227–67; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 20–101; Heap, *Slumming*, 231–76.

[28] See Jill Dolan, *Theatre and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–18.

[29] Many of the reviews of sapphic-themed plays in the late 1920s and early 1930s (*The Captive* [1927] and *The Children's Hour* [1937], among less high profile productions) reflected the blasé attitude of entertainment industry insiders to lesbian love. Fighting the aggressive censorship of these theatrical productions raised mainstream journalists to fiery heights of eloquence. See Larry Barretto, "The New Yorker," *Bookman*, December 1926, 64; George Jean Nathan, "George Jean Nathan Looks on the Drama," *Hartford Courant*, October 10, 1926; and Eugene Lohkre, "Book Treats of Homosexuality," *Charleston Gazette*, August 10, 1930.

[30] Potter La Forest, *Strange Loves: A Study in Sexual Abnormality* (1933; reprint, New York: National Library Press, 1938), 44.

tabloid journalists, responsible for much of the available textual evidence) utilized terms loosely. "Dyke" tended to be used to describe a mannish sapphist, while euphemisms such as "a dame like that" were more likely to be used in portrayals of feminine sapphists. But most observers used labels such as "lez" or "lady lover"—or the highly dramatic "tiger lover" and "she wolf"—flexibly; no term referred exclusively to a particular type. Indeed, the types themselves were not tidily delineated; they sometimes overlapped. Still, despite linguistic and categorical messiness, distinctions between different types of lesbian-leaning women emerged clearly from the interwar tabloid press. While I have tidied and clarified the terminology and language for the purposes of historical description, the following discussion of sapphic identities is neither a fabrication nor an imposition: it is based on the loose categorization of lesbian-affiliated types in the interwar urban show business world. How many of these depictions were based on actual facts, actual people? Tabloid articles were, for the most part, written anonymously and contained little information that could link the stories to actual people. While depictions of urban sapphic types were probably not entirely fabricated—and thus reflected, at least to some extent, real women—they served primarily as a reflection of the subculture's aspirations and concerns. The interwar urban tabloid press is thus most accurately approached as a collection of tales that, considered collectively, reveal the character and nature (rather than precisely factual elements) of the urban bawdy world, particularly in New York.

One of the most conspicuous of the urban sapphic types was the mannish sapphist. Writers for the interwar tabloid press generally portrayed mannish sapphists as content with the confines of their narrowly homosexual, bohemian, and bawdy social milieus. Some mannish sapphists attracted renown for their romantic success; popular bawdy blues performer Gladys Bentley, who was said to have married a white woman, is one notable example.[31] For the most part, however, mannish sapphists were depicted as lacking the means and desire to subvert the urban sexual economy. As such, they were dismissible, even laughable figures. Few Greenwich Village "lesbians," reported noted novelist and bohemian Maxwell Bodenheim snidely, appeared to get beyond the stage of "boldly choking over the encouragement of a cigar."[32] Numerous brief passages in the *Quill*, the *Greenwich Village Weekly News*, and *Brevities* mentioned the generally dull activities of various masculine sapphists, especially those residing in the Village. Jane Heap was said to have gone to Paris in search of a "brown corduroy camping suit"; the Bird's Nest on Barrow Street had been established as "the new lesby refuge"; the Village Grove Nut Club had hired the six-foot and two-hundred-pound Olga Schooch, otherwise known as "Hooch," as its

[31] For references to Bentley's romances, see Ted Yates, "Harlem Hot-cha!," *New Journal and Guide*, March 17, 1934; "Out of Billy Rowe's Harlem Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 4, 1938; Malcolm Fulcher, "Believe Me," *Afro-American*, June 3, 1933.

[32] Maxwell Bodenheim, "What I Think of Greenwich Village," *Quill*, July 1926, 16.

"doorman": the unmemorable details proliferated.[33] Only rarely portrayed as economically, professionally, or romantically successful—with a few notable exceptions—the mannish sapphist tended to be treated with amused condescension in the tabloid press.

The wealthy sapphist was yet another sapphic type. Her portrayal in the tabloid press underscores the fraught entwinement of commerce and sex appeal in Depression-era show business circles. There was no stable gender identity affiliated with this type; a wealthy sapphist could be mannish or feminine—or anywhere in between. Able to secure female companionship through their wealth, rich sapphists were generally depicted as affiliated with the interwar theater through their lovers: chorus girls or starlets on the make. And, if the press was to be believed, they were frequently romantically successful. Such women elicited jealousy and, at times, scorn in industry rags for the social freedom their wealth afforded them, as well as for their romantic and sexual success with younger and more attractive women. These womanly trophies supposedly tolerated their slumming lovers for the trappings of luxury they could provide. In 1932, for example, a blind item (one of the usually anonymous stories, common in gossip columns, that revealed key details while shielding the identities of the individuals involved) in *Brevities* described a "tender young woman" whose previously wealthy family had, in the chaos of the Depression, fallen on hard times. "Intent on carving a name for herself in the artistic world," the young woman had secured a wealthy female benefactor who was "mannishly built and possessed of a bull-like countenance." *Brevities* expressed horror that the attractive young woman, "wilted and worn away morally" by submission to her fate, "was [now] the object of this rough woman's passions," "the plaything of a mannish woman of wealth."[34] Flattening the sexual playing field without adhering to the accepted unspoken rules, wealthy lesbians were frequently depicted as false victors by the journalists of the gutter press.

Writers for the urban tabloid press often portrayed feminine women with cash to spare as actively seeking out artistic and impoverished lovers in the seamier neighborhoods of Chicago and New York. In 1932, for instance, *Brevities* highlighted the supposedly discernible trend of wealthy feminine sapphists scouring urban gutters for potential partners. According to (the dubiously named) Connie Lingle, the Depression had caused something of a downturn in "rich dames" securing mannish lovers through the judicious deployment of ready cash: "Husbands can no longer dine the showgirls, and the wives can no longer dine and wine their mannishly attired soulmates."[35] Lingle claimed that the "matrons that keep dikes have fallen in love with

[33] "Society," *Quill*, June 1923, 23; *Brevities,* June 13, 1932, 11; "Broadway Chatter," *Variety*, October 1, 1930, 56; *Brevities*, August 1, 1932, 2.

[34] "Women about Town," *Brevities*, October 17, 1932, 2.

[35] Connie Lingle, "Sapphic Sisters Scram!," *Brevities*, November 16, 1931, 10, 1. Almost all *Brevities* articles appeared anonymously or under pseudonyms. Many pen names took the form of crude sexual jokes. "Connie Lingle" is probably a play on "cunnilingus."

them and never go out on the lam looking for dikes to pick up." Writers at *Brevities* enjoyed weaving elaborate fantasies of slumming. In a typical narrative, a *Brevities* author claimed that a group of "husky-voiced" and "well-to-do" women nocturnally roamed Chicago's South Side, tempting pretty "girls with clothing, marihana [*sic*] and liquor and if successful [they] add their victims to the group."[36] Wealthy sapphists seeking hard-up downtown lovers highlighted tabloid writers' obsession with commercial aspects of urban sexual exchange. In seeking and securing female lovers, wealthy sapphists revealed the possibility of manipulating the expected sociosexual structure, wherein powerful men competed for pretty female bodies. In flipping this standard narrative, wealthy sapphists attracted the attention of the urban tabloid press.

Still other real-life wealthy women with intense but loosely defined intimacies with other women appeared to intrigue various observers of urban social life even as they struggled to achieve personal equilibrium. A'Lelia Walker, the socialite daughter of the African American beauty and hair care business magnate Madame C. J. Walker, for instance, drew sly glances and winks from the popular press for her string of short-lived marriages, as well as for her ambiguous intimacies with other women. A scandal broke after A'Lelia's death when her "one and only true girl friend," Mamie White, was left nothing in the heiress's will.[37] Although beneficiaries claimed that White's role as devoted "companion" was personal and unofficial, White was able to successfully secure a portion of the estate—though not without "a few blushes and not a few regrets" in socialite circles, according to the press.[38] The language surrounding the dramatic break between Elisabeth Marbury, theatrical agent, and Elsie de Wolfe, actress and interior decorator, was equally breathless but more circumspect. Journalists took the moral high road, allowing the somewhat scandalous facts to speak for themselves.[39] *Variety* reported on various occasions that de Wolfe was over sixty when she abandoned the homes in Manhattan and Versailles she had shared with Marbury "for some twenty-odd years" to marry Sir Charles Mendl, a British diplomat.[40] Able to secure liberation from convention through wealth, rich sapphists and their exploits attracted attention from the mainstream press and envy-tinged scorn in tabloid rags.

The Hollywood sapphist was another feminine sapphic type who tested the liminal borders of popular and subcultural acceptance. As *Brevities* observed in 1934, "A walk along Hollywood Boulevard or any choice locale of this mad town will bring any casual observer face to face with the alarming

[36] "Chicago World's Fairies," *Brevities*, December 7, 1931, 12. For more on wealthy sapphists, see *Brevities*, September 26, 1932, 2.

[37] *Brevities*, September 21, 1931, 2.

[38] "Perjury! Says Judge in Mme. Walker Wage Suit," *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1933.

[39] *Brevities*, September 21, 1931, 3.

[40] "Ritzy," *Variety*, October 1, 1930, 60; "Ritzy," *Variety*, November 5, 1930, 52.

percentage of nances and Sapphic ladies."[41] Ripples of gossip surrounded various Hollywood stars, including Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Joan Crawford.[42] Indeed, queerness was generally acknowledged to be prevalent throughout the film industry during the interwar era. Blind items that spanned moviemaking, from the director's chair to dressing rooms, were relatively common. Writers at *Brevities* proved themselves keen to toss out enigmatic hints at regular intervals. A typical entry from 1933 teased readers with the tidbit that a "noted female public relations counsel (press agent to you, you dope) is a lez."[43]

While the tabloid press did not disapprove of Hollywood sapphists, writers and editors noted ever-increasing displeasure within studio circles at the supposed prevalence of lesbianism among their leading ladies. Claiming that many "hicks" were becoming increasingly wise to "the lavender streaks in the make-up of several well-known male and female cinema stars," *Brevities* predicted a higher incidence of the boycotts that they claimed had already troubled some film screenings.[44] A writer for *Brevities* claimed that "lesbian leading ladies who remain as cold as an iceberg when they portray love scenes" were to blame for the waning popularity of American movies.[45] Mere months later, the rag reported that "a noted female comedy star, queer as a bug," had been "punished for her perverted activities by being banned from the screen by Will Hayes."[46] This condemnation was echoed in more mainstream publications, which frequently denounced the predominance of depraved antics on movie sets, casting lots, and private industry parties across Hollywood. In 1933 *Chicago Defender* columnist Harry Levette opined that, for the most part, "the conduct of colored girls and women who work in the movies is above reproach."[47] Still, Levette cautioned readers that such upstanding behavior was the result of daily toil. The sight of two women "disgustingly caressing on the 'Sea Bat' set at MGM two years ago" illustrated, for Levette, "the sordid depths to which some women will stoop."[48]

As depicted by the mainstream and tabloid press, the Hollywood sapphist was an identity category encompassing more than just sexuality. Having given herself over to the unnatural patterns of Tinseltown, where superficiality was prized and morality and constancy denounced, the Hollywood sapphist was defined by her charisma and endless appetite for "kicks."

[41] "Nance" was a word utilized by the tabloid press to indicate a feminine gay man or a "fairy." *Brevities,* April 11, 1932, 4.

[42] See Patricia White, "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms," *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 45 (2000): 227–64.

[43] *Brevities*, October 12, 1933, 3.

[44] *Brevities*, October 19, 1933, 9.

[45] *Brevities*, February 27, 1933.

[46] *Brevities*, August 30, 1933, 2.

[47] Harry Levette, "Coast Codgings," *Chicago Defender*, July 22, 1933.

[48] Ibid.

Lesbianism, here, was not seen as a sexual identity or even as a cohesive mode of desire; it was, rather, merely the tawdry and dangerous outcome of Hollywood depravity. Writers for the tabloid and mainstream press depicted lesbian sex as merely one aspect of the vast urban buffet of risky and risqué nocturnal pleasures, which included alcohol, gambling, fast cars, and drugs. As African American news and gossip columnist I. P. Reynolds explained succinctly in 1932, homosexuality was a habit "acquired for want of new thrills" after the fleeting thrills of fast living pushed an increasingly unfulfilled hedonist to turn to the "unnatural."[49]

The feminine sapphic predator, womanly and cunning, enjoyed considerable levels of prestige in entertainment and bawdy culture circles. Who was she? According to the tabloids, the feminine sapphic predator melded duplicity, control, and social, sexual, and economic success into an identity only partially sexual in deployment and meaning. Feminine sapphists within urban entertainment industry circles frequently nurtured public images predicated on their traditional sexual appeal to male audiences. Yet their homosexual desires were not precisely a secret: known to those familiar with specific social codes, the lesbian predilections of feminine sapphists operated as a complex social bluff.[50] Central to the appeal of the sapphist under the spotlight and public eye were the question marks that trailed, perfume-like, in her wake: Was she or wasn't she? Would she or wouldn't she? Did she or didn't she? Blind items were prevalent in the tabloid press and frequently played upon the presumed sapphism of female performers. Both blind items and more substantive articles that described feminine sapphists frequently relied on chronologies of revelation in which astonished men expressed bewilderment at the queer proclivities of these women. The implication was clear: the traditional sex appeal of such women, who ranged from dainty damsels to vampish bombshells, made their preference for other women confusing and, at times, even shocking. "By the way," ran a typical blind item, "have you heard the one about the husband that came home unexpectedly and found his wife in another woman's arms?"[51] Such women—at least in the imaginations of tabloid writers—were apparently able and willing to fool men on a regular basis. The predatory aspect of their identities was thus directed at both men and women: while primarily attracted to women, they also reportedly pursued romantic relationships

[49] I. P. Reynolds, "What Sam of Auburn Avenue Says," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 20, 1932.

[50] The urban interwar sapphist thus engaged in what Terry Castle calls "self-ghosting": "hiding or camouflaging their sexual desires or withdrawing voluntarily from society in order to escape . . . hostility." Still, she is not precisely a traditional "apparitional lesbian": "elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot—even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent." She has not retreated or been elided but, rather, flits tactically between different modes of exposure, some false, others not. See Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7, 3.

[51] What happened next? *Brevities* didn't specify. *Brevities,* November 2, 1933, 2.

with men for economic gain, for public show, and, at times, supposedly, out of pure nefariousness.

The potentially lucrative nature of this trickery was a significant factor behind the respect and even envy that feminine sapphists seemed keen to incite among their coworkers in show business communities. It is no surprise that feminine sapphic predators occupied a position of relative prestige in the tabloid press, a self-consciously, even proudly, amoral universe defined by manipulation, duplicity, and exploitation. This was a world where an individual was not considered a winner unless a triumph had been achieved at another person's expense. Success was thus a competitive game, and one largely sexual in both meaning and practice. In this code, female sexuality garnered women power, but it also rendered them, at times, little more than objects to be traded, collected, and cast off at will. And yet, as authors of their own sexual and social fates, sapphic predators managed to avoid the typical interwar-era trap of sexual subjugation. They thus appeared to both benefit from and subtly change the terms of this social exchange. The typical sapphic vamp wrung a living from her appearance while clandestinely trading in female lovers for her own pleasure. In securing this uneasy triumph, sapphic predators created an alternate destiny, avoiding the supposedly typical feminine paths through the interwar era: prostitution or powerless domesticity. A *Brevities* author described a typically conniving sapphist as a husky-voiced torch singer; she "has everything it takes," the writer winked, "and takes everything she can."[52] Gouging men allowed this wily femme to obtain her true passion: "another girl who waits for her in an uptown apartment." These accounts reflect how the wily scheming of feminine sapphic predators earned them positions of relative prestige in interwar urban culture.

Despite the respect garnered by feminine sapphists' social and sexual machinations, I am not arguing that sapphic trickery reveals a feminist core at the center of urban subcultures, at least not in any clear-cut way.[53] Sapphic predators' disreputable and duplicitous behavior was aimed at women, after all, as well as men. In the tabloid press, the feminine sapphic predator was depicted as retaining loyalty only to herself. Feminine lotharios earned respect at least in part through their ability to attract and retain the quintessential urban status symbol: feminine lovers. They thus adhered to a traditional urban game, even as they subtly altered its rules. Still, in manipulating aspects of urban sexual commodification, the feminine sexual predator was an example of the complexity of the social and moral hierarchies of theatrical circles.

[52] Ibid., 6.

[53] As Joanne Meyerowitz notes in reference to unattached young working women in interwar Chicago, "These women adrift were not 'emancipated' women in the sense that people often use the word today. The subcultures they formed failed to remedy low wages, promoted female economic dependence, and encouraged women to value themselves as sexual objects" (*Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], 141).

Evidence from outside the theater world suggests that tabloid writers did not fabricate the feminine sapphic predator identity from whole cloth. While women who fit this pattern appeared only fleetingly in news items in the mainstream press (as opposed to the questionable "reports" in the tabloid press), appear they did. In 1939, for instance, the *New York Amsterdam News*, an African American newspaper, reported that Catherine Henderson, a resident of Harlem, had been murdered by a former male flame. While Henderson worked as a prostitute and was conventionally feminine, her ongoing romantic involvements with men were apparently an elaborate—and, as it transpired, dangerous—ruse. According to the anonymous writer, Henderson was "a female Oscar Wilde who induced her male lovers to believe that she loved them, while she bestowed her illicit affection on paramours of her own sex." Following a pattern she had employed in the past, Henderson had left her most recent boyfriend for a female lover a month before the attack, informing her boyfriend: "After all, big boy, I don't need you or any other man and there isn't a man in the world who can change my mind."[54] Asserting both her sexual predilections and her duplicitous behavior, Henderson revealed the dangerous stakes in urban sexual negotiations.

Not all stories of African American lesbian predation involved male retribution. While Harlemite Gertrude Gardner's fate was not as final as Henderson's, her tale was not one of triumph. Gardner served thirty days in the workhouse in 1929 for "soliciting school girls for immoral purposes." According to arresting officer Theodore Roderick, twenty-one-year-old Gardner organized "sex circuses, where school girls secretly indulge in sex practices among themselves."[55] Considered collectively, these stories suggest that the sapphic predator "type" was at least partially based on actual people; further, it illustrates that the identity crossed racial lines.

Depictions of "sapphic predators" in the mainstream press were not limited to black sex workers; again, this was an identity that appeared to cross racial and, to some extent, class lines. In 1940 a young artist, Cecil John Mayo, was jailed after shooting and wounding his wife's glamorous urban female lover, Laura Belle Andrews. The *Washington Post* reported that Mayo had fired shots at Andrews after she "got smart and taunted him in his efforts to persuade his wife," Mrs. Joan Vest Mayo, to return to the marital home in Washington, DC. Only married for a short time, Joan Mayo had left her husband for Andrews after the latter—employed at the World's Fair—had written her lover with details of Manhattan's "bright

[54] "Odd Lover Slain by Her Boy Consort," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 18, 1939. Such stories appeared sporadically over the years in the African American press. See "Shoots His 'Wife' in Quarrel," *Chicago Defender*, March 15, 1924; "Attempt to Solve 'Love Pact' Made," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 27, 1925.

[55] "P.S. Girls Figure in 'Sex Circuses,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1929, 1.

lights and good times."[56] Of course, not all real-life dramas ended so violently or so tragically: those without serious repercussions would likely not have attracted the attention of the mainstream press. Still, Laura Andrews exposed the potentially rare but nevertheless real risks of real-life sapphic trickery. Nor were female romantic predators solely at risk of male violence. In 1930 police discovered the bodies of Mrs. Adele Ritchie Post, a former Broadway star, and her friend, socialite Mrs. Doris Murray Palmer, in Post's Laguna Beach bungalow.[57] According to journalists, Post and Palmer had been destroyed by the elder woman's predatory ardor for her pretty and socially ambitious friend.[58] The "infatuation" was said to have changed "light-hearted, laughing, radiantly beautiful" Palmer into an "unhappy, fear-ridden, restless, silent or silently weeping" ghost. Portrayed as manipulative and destructive, Post and Andrews suggested that tabloid writers may have found inspiration for their descriptions of sapphic predators in real life (or at least in the mainstream press).

In keeping with their melodramatic and vaguely celebratory depictions of feminine sapphic predators, tabloid journalists frequently portrayed these women as headliners and showstoppers. In some instances, the star power of sapphists was depicted as insufficient to shield them from public scrutiny. One such figure, a "leading Metropolitan Opera star," according to a typically melodramatic *Brevities* article, found that her career had been destroyed by her yen for the intimate company of "nice young ladies with plenty of dainty femininity."[59] Her downfall resulted not from a mere sapphic tryst but from "the eye-popping charge that the luminary had attempted to get

[56] "D.C. Artist Held after His Wife Is Shot," *Washington Post*, June 7, 1940; "Estranged Husband Shoots Wife's Friend," *New York Times*, June 7, 1940. For similar stories, see "Policeman Shoots Wife, Her Woman Friend, and Ends Own Life When Facing Arrest," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1928; "Gay Revels Revealed," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1931.

[57] "Mrs. Guy Bates Post and Hostess Found Shot Dead in Home," *New York Times*, April 25, 1930. See also "Weird Trial Started," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1931; George Shaffer, "Adele Ritchie Kills Hostess," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 25, 1930; "Adele Ritchie in Double Tragedy," *Daily Boston Globe*, April 25, 1930; "A Dead Woman on Trial for Slaying Her Best Friend," *Portsmouth Times*, May 17, 1931. For more stories involving female intimacy and female-perpetrated violence, see "Fulton Woman Kills Another and Ends Own Life," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 8, 1920; "Ex-Showgirl Kills Another in Hotel," *New York Times*, July 31, 1932.

[58] Philip Frederick, "Tragedy of the Dresden China Doll," *Olean Times*, September 30, 1930; "Suicide Pact Note Found in Dual Killing," *Baltimore Sun*, April 27, 1930; "Jury to Reopen Case of Murder-Suicide," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 28, 1930. Post's lawyer, Moresby White, took the unusual step of writing to the *Los Angeles Times* to clarify his position. White claimed that letters between the two women revealed "a state of intimate affection and breathe the reciprocal inspiration of two exquisitely beautiful souls." White believed that it was "apparent that Mrs. Post believed it was her duty in love to save the soul of her friend" ("Letters to the Times," *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1930).

[59] "Woman about Town," *Brevities*, August 5, 1933, 15.

too darned familiar" with none other than her adopted daughter.[60] Giving herself over to the lure of substance abuse and the company of debased companions in Greenwich Village, the anonymous star "is now teaching the merry Villagers the latest forms of sexual degeneracy." It seemed clear that the diva's transgressions of moral prescriptions surrounding family—as well as gender and age—were more than even the morally lax authors of *Brevities* could tolerate.

Feminine lesbian predators were more commonly depicted as successfully balancing the dual demands of their careers and their libidos. In James Huneker's novel *Painted Veils* (1920), for instance, voluptuous prima donna Easter is able to achieve both professional success and the attention of numerous romantic admirers. Wolfishly feminine and egotistical, Easter attracts gentler women "as the luster of an electric lamp attracts the night moth."[61] Easter's lovers are as sweetly nurturing as they are weak-willed; Huneker depicts their submission to the diva as inevitable. Easter is a predator, but hardly a clear-cut villain. Though she possesses few purely positive characteristics, her charisma and talent make her irresistible to audiences and lovers alike. Her popularity is portrayed as unfortunate—because she treats her admirers with unwavering disdain and even cruelty—but also natural and deserved. Masterful, talented, and manipulative, Easter was a fictional creation, but she defined the characteristics of the prototypical feminine sapphic predator.

According to tabloid writers, lesbian desire operated as something of an open secret for feminine performers in the world of interwar show business. Professionally successful female sapphists were supposedly able to keep their lesbianism out of the public eye even as they seduced scores of attractive women. While a romantic or sexual interest in other women did not qualify as a shocking or even troubling revelation in show business circles, it was also not spoken of entirely freely. Blind items in the bawdy tabloid press tended to employ a tone at once blasé and giddy. In 1932, for instance, *Brevities* informed its readers that a "hostess at one of B'way's best ballrooms has a passion for people of her own sex."[62] Similarly, a reporter for the *Afro-American* seemed amused by a reminiscence from one of the Harlem-based Alhambra Theatre's original chorines: "When a certain female star played the theater for a week, all of the chorus girls kept the doors locked! . . . They were deathly afraid of the lesbian, who just chased them all over the stage."[63] The chorus girls' fear was, it appears clear, not entirely genuine; the light-hearted anecdote seems intended to provoke chuckles.

While other women were not always receptive to advances from feminine sapphists, rejections rarely seemed to entail vociferous anger or disgust.

[60] Ibid.
[61] James Huneker, *Painted Veils* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1920), 275.
[62] *Brevities*, November 16, 1932, 6.
[63] "Where Are the Chorus Girls of Yester-Year?," *Afro-American*, July 6, 1935.

Perhaps because feminine sapphists' conquests were depicted as younger and less professionally successful, the tabloids rarely described any retribution for the sapphists' predatory behavior. In a doubtless fabricated diary printed in *Brevities*, Selman Brucet highlighted how and why successful lesbian predators might have maintained veils of silence surrounding their sapphism. In the process, Brucet aimed a wavering spotlight at the eroticization of sapphic predation (and female duplicity and sexual mastery more generally) in show business circles. When hired as a personal maid by a celebrated actress, the guileless Brucet appears ignorant of her new boss's predilections. "She thinks all men are 'brutes' and she doesn't want anything to do with them," Brucet crows. "Looks as though this job'll be easy."[64] The calculating actress pays Brucet well for her negligible work and plies her with a none-too-subtle mixture of bald flattery and veiled threats. "She says I'm the best maid she ever had," Brucet reported, "and wonders why, with my looks, I don't go on the stage. Says if I 'continue to please her' she'll try to get me a part in her next show." Brucet basks in her own naïveté—until the star asks her to slip into a negligee and share a drink after an evening performance, informing her that she "was to be more a companion than a maid." Brucet is not tempted by the "promotion," merely remarking, "Gee, I never knew there were dames like that!" and takes her leave to seek another position. The narrative makes it clear that the actress will suffer no repercussions: she will continue her stage career, assisted, no doubt, by a succession of companion-maids.

Given that it was written under a pseudonym, and considering the titillating and literary nature of the prose, it seems likely that Brucet's narrative was largely a work of fiction: a story. Given *Brevities*' reliance on anagram-driven pseudonyms (and the publication's tradition of sloppy writing), it is possible "Selman Brucet" is a scrambled anagram for "men are brutes." This is fitting; the actress's ruse, in manipulatively toying with attractive young women while making her living as a traditional sex symbol, could be classified as an aspirational fairy tale of interwar theatrical culture. As portrayed by a *Brevities* writer, Brucet's actress boss was a convoluted character. She aped traditional male signifiers of social and professional power, including sexually predatory behavior aimed at female social inferiors, while maintaining the image of female success garnered through traditional sex appeal. In sexually using and discarding vulnerable young women, she appeared to reify traditional power structures undergirding urban commerce. However, the fact that she was a woman changed the meaning and social import of her predatory deeds. She did not challenge the right of male lotharios to victimize young women. However, her own villainous behavior asserted female agency and social power, even as it did not challenge celebratory accounts of sexual commerce in the interwar urban tabloid press. Indeed,

[64] Selman Brucet, "The Forgotten Woman," *Brevities*, December 19, 1932, 13, December 26, 1932, 13.

because the narrative seemed crafted for titillation—in the long tradition of *Fanny Hill*–inspired tales of erotic education—it highlighted the eroticization of female sexual predation that was so central to the respect granted to sapphic lotharios in show business circles.

The portrayal of feminine sapphists' professional success and sapphic predation appeared to cross racial lines—and it made its way, too, into the popular press. Ralph Williams's provocatively titled short story "She-Wolf," for instance, narrated the trials and adventures of Pert Fleason, a headlining performer at Harlem's wildly popular (though fictional) palace of African American entertainment, the Bronze Club. In the tale, pretty Pert, fond of diamond-studded cigarette holders and the aphrodisiac qualities of a good pepper steak, drops fellow dancer Eloise for a comely new find, Ruby Roberts. At first, naive Ruby fails to grasp the nature of slick Pert's affection and is innocently "proud that an actress of recognized ability should prove so friendly to a novice." Eventually, however, when Pert escorts her would-be paramour to a lesbian club in Harlem called Lilith's, Ruby undergoes a hallucinatory revelation, recognizing Pert and her fellow revelers, all African American, for the dangerous predators they are. "As she stared from one to another, their charm vanished. . . . [S]miling white teeth in even rows, jutted out from the corner of curled lips like—yes, that's what they were—fangs!" Pert is apparently a predatory beast masquerading as an attractive and feminine woman. "She was in a den of she-wolves," Ruby realizes, and her beguiling companion—"God curse her soul—had led her there!"[65]

While Pert's play for Ruby is unsuccessful, she had, Williams notes, previously enjoyed an unbroken record of romantic and sexual success. No man, observes another dancer with finality, stands much of a chance "against Pert when she really sets her cap for a wren."[66] Moreover, Pert is depicted as an accepted, even celebrated, member of her social and professional milieu. As she reflects, it was only in theater where "you can be yourself, love as you like." While Williams's depiction was fictional, it provides evidence that the trope of predatory yet respected sapphic women was common in show business culture. Having avoided male sharks by becoming predators themselves, having achieved fame and fortune and landed attractive lovers, feminine sapphists were celebrated, even as they were quietly feared. Their representation in the tabloid press of interwar America illustrates the entwinement of sexual and social categories and the ways in which femininity subtly altered interwar sociosexual categories.

[65] Ralph Williams, "She Wolf, Part Two," *Afro-American*, November 24, 1934. Wolves, as George Chauncey has noted, were also a recognized "type" in male homosexual culture. On the latter usage, see "8 'Wolves' in Love Cult Are Convicted," *Afro-American*, November 27, 1937.

[66] Ralph Matthews, "She Wolf," *Afro-American*, November 17, 1934.

Conclusion

The astoundingly active interwar urban tabloid press provides rich evidence of alternate discourses of social and sexual categorization. In the pages of its various rags, denizens of the urban bawdy world would have found forms of female homosexuality at once secretive, performative, fluid, and purposeful. For lesbian-leaning women affiliated with interwar urban bawdy cultures, it seems likely that their sexual identities were at least partially constructed within urban bawdy culture itself, using the distinctive language, typologies, and promulgation patterns of the tabloid press. Neither pathologized nor repressed but, rather, scrutinized, prodded, and, in some cases, celebrated, this was a deeply urban and modern form of female homosexuality.

The sexual typologies both nurtured and probed by the tabloid press highlight the intricacies of twentieth-century homosexual identity formation. Alison Oram, Martha Vicinus, and John Howard, among countless others, have detailed the range of queer identities and types that were recognized in Anglo-American popular cultures even as—and, indeed, after—the homosexual-heterosexual binary solidified.[67] This work has complicated scholarship that stresses the monolithic solidification of homosexual identity in the early years of the twentieth century. Within this historiographical current, sexual modernity was secured when doctors (and, later, legislators) rejected theories of gender inversion—in which an inborn reversal of gendered characteristics resulted in homosexual desires—in favor of sexual object choice—in which homosexual desires were no longer marked on the queer body nor linked to gender transgression.[68] Interwar culture offers an observable crucible of this social overlap. The complex range of sapphic types that proliferated in urban show business circles functioned alongside an elaborate and active range of homosexual classification systems, including those used by the legal, medical, and scientific establishment.[69] The

[67] For work historically problematizing chronologies of queer identity formation, see George Chauncey, "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War One Era," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), 294–317; Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*; Joanne Meyerowitz, "Thinking Sex with an Androgyne," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 97–105; John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Alison Oram, "'Love off the Rails' or 'Over the Teacups'? Lesbian Desire and Female Sexualities in the 1950s British Popular Press," in *Queer 1950s: Reshaping Sexuality in the Postwar Years*, ed. Heike Bauer and Matt Cook (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 41–57.

[68] Most accounts utilizing this chronology are indebted to the path-breaking work of Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, an Introduction* (1978; New York: Random House, 1990).

[69] Erin Carlston, "'A Finer Differentiation': Female Homosexuality and the American Medical Community, 1926–1940," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon Rosario

interwar tabloid press thus offers concrete proof that multiple—competing and seemingly incompatible—models of female homosexuality flourished side by side at precisely the same cultural moment. The wily and canny sapphists of urban bawdy worlds add further evidentiary weight, then, to the collective historiographical intervention stressing generative overlaps and blurred categories over precise chronologies.

In exploring the ways in which feminine sapphists embodied and enacted their cultural moment, I echo recent scholarly calls to, as Matt Houlbrook puts it, "think queer" in delineating chronologies within the history of sexuality.[70] According to Houlbrook, historians of sexuality need to push beyond the sexual in explicating the social import and position of homosexually inclined historical subjects. Interwar feminine sapphists have much to tell us about the history of sexuality. But the intricate social position of these women is not fully encompassed by now familiar sexual categories and their formation. Theirs was a complex social identity woven through a web of sexual agency, professional and economic success, and female intimacy, all bounded by the connective skein of duplicity. Utilizing Laura Doan's concept of "queer genealogies," I seek to embrace "conceptual messiness" in pushing beyond our reliance on modern sexual taxonomies in explicating queer history.[71] In Doan's reading, historians of sexuality should fully explore—rather than avoid—the aspects of subjects' identities and desires that challenge modern understandings of sexual and sexuality. Lesbian-inclined women in the American interwar urban entertainment industry do not fit into modern sexual or social categories. Fittingly, feminine sapphists tell us as much about Depression-era entertainment, femininity, and urban bawdy cultures as they do about the history of the modern lesbian. The convoluted social roles of feminine sapphists, in other words, can only partially be contained by sexual taxonomies. In challenging the primacy of sexual-based social categories, feminine sapphists illustrate alternate modes of approaching the homosexual aspects of show business circles in the interwar United States.

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(New York: Routledge, 1997), 177–96; and Jennifer Terry, *American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 120–219.

[70] Matt Houlbrook, "Thinking Queer: The Social and the Sexual in Interwar Britain," in *British Queer History: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Brian Lewis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 134.

[71] Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 104.

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