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Mabel, Marilyn, and Me: writing about Mabel Normand as a feminist film historian

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on archival research, biographical writing, and autobiography, this article explores the life of early film comedienne Mabel Normand to make a case for feminist methodologies in film history. First, it provides a meta-analysis of existing biographies of, and scholarship about, Normand to interrogate the patriarchal narratives that inform theatrical, musical, and cinematic representations of the star. In doing so, the article uses Jane Gaines and Monica Dall'Asta's notion of 'constellating' women to situate the actress's biographical canon in a longer history of tragically framed white women that includes Marilyn Monroe, whose commoditisation by writers is crucial to the propagation of myths about Normand. Second, the article reflects on elements of subjective and personal bias that inform the author's analysis of Mabel Normand's life and career. And finally, the article argues that the conditions under which research is produced must be recognised as method acknowledging the inequalities rife in the academy, the article draws attention to the ongoing gaps and ellipses in feminist historiography.

KEYWORDS

Mabel Normand; biography; Keystone; Marilyn Monroe; feminist film history; intersectional feminism

Content warning

Taking an intersectional feminist approach, this article makes reference to illness and death from respiratory disease, death by suicide, domestic violence, sexual violence perpetrated against children and adults, drug and alcohol use, addiction, and miscarriage.

Introducing the Players

Mabel Normand was a pioneering comedic actress. She was a director, writer, and producer in early Hollywood. According to many accounts, she was a socially aware and generous person. Yet, the more I read about Mabel Normand, the more frustrated I become. Other feminist film historians will surely know the feeling. Writing a short article for the programme of the UK revival of Michael Stewart and Jerry Herman's 1974 musical *Mack and Mabel* in 2015 – my brief was to introduce the audience to the 'real' Mack Sennett and Mabel Normand – I was overwhelmed by scandalised news reports that focused more on Normand's proximity to other people's crimes than her many on- and off-screen achievements.¹ As Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, silent film curator at

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Amsterdam's EYE Film Institute, suggests, 'today Mabel Normand is talked about largely in terms of the [William Taylor Desmond] scandal. This is completely unfair' (qtd. Duckett 2015, 182). Consequently, to compensate for what seemed like an egregious injustice, my article focused on Normand's accomplishments and paid her more attention than the better-known Sennett, who was her colleague and romantic interest. I sympathised with Normand. It felt like the right thing to do.

Over the past decade, a number of historians have produced exciting accounts of women's interventions in early filmmaking that have invited readers to revise how they understand gendered power relations in cinema's nascent industries. Stamp (2015), for example, explores Lois Weber's career as a studio owner and star maker; Hutchinson (2018) positions Louise Brooks as central to the success of *Pandora's Box* (1929). Jane Gaines (2018), meanwhile, examines how women's labour has been effaced from historical narratives by patriarchal record keeping and economic structures that favoured men. Their work is situated in a growing canon of scholarship that not only acknowledges (mostly white) women's presence in film histories, but also reveals that women's work was crucial to the medium's development from barely respectable fad to globally established entertainment industry. Yet while Normand has received some attention from biographers who emphasise her successes (she is credited with inventing the custard-pie-to-the-face gag) and is discussed in scholarship about early film comediennes, her name is associated in popular culture with her troubled personal life.² Thus, my decision to reject salacious narratives in favour of Normand's career-oriented legacy was an attempt to restore balance for a woman whose private life was subjected to so much public scrutiny. Nevertheless, I have since questioned whether centring Normand's work and excluding her personal life might have been a trap, of sorts. For by effacing her personal life from the narrative, I inadvertently suggested that her value resided in her ability to participate in white supremacist and patriarchal capitalism. I overlooked issues of gender and disability justice.³ And, on reflection, my writing said as much about my own career anxieties (which I explore further in the concluding section of this paper) as it did about the star.

Consequently, this article revisits my own and others' writing about Normand to interrogate both the personal subjectivities and cultural stereotypes that have informed her biography. Drawing on Gaines and Monica Dall'Asta's concept of 'constellation' (which they advocate as a feminist perspective that makes women's lives relational across different cultures and temporalities), I argue that accounts of Normand's life rely on two tropes: the biographer's desire to rescue the star from ignominy, and the biographer's reading of Normand as an inevitably tragic figure in the Marilyn Monroe mould.⁴ Furthermore, situating my analysis within the white, patriarchal logics of the neoliberal academy, I contend that our contemporary research context prevents marginalised scholars from moving beyond the two biographical tropes by circumscribing the extent to which writers can safely acknowledge their subjectivity in narratives about gender and disability in particular, and race, sexuality, immigration, and class in general. As such, this article provides the first meta-analysis of Mabel Normand biographies. It also takes an intersectional feminist approach to biographical writing that, by recognising the working conditions that underpin my scholarship, offers film history a self-reflective methodological approach that is cognisant of academic context.⁵ First, I introduce Normand by situating her life and work in a gendered history of modernity. Second, I analyse factual and fictional accounts of Normand's life by locating the star in constellation with Marilyn Monroe,

whose biography informs Normand's in various ways. Referring to Sarah Churchwell's (2004) meta-analysis of the Monroe 'apocrypha', I critique the misogyny that underpins the tragic woman trope in Normand's and other star's cases. Third, I reflect on how my own constellation with the star influences my biographical curation. Contextualising my study using feminist scholarship and a critique of the workplace conditions that undermine marginalised histories, I make visible the methodological challenges that affect my engagement with Mabel Normand's biography.

Mabel

Mabel Normand was a film star and filmmaker whose contemporaries included Lois Weber and Mary Pickford. She was born on Staten Island in around 1893 and christened Amabel Ethelreid Normand.⁶ When she left school, Normand worked for a variety of artists and photographers as a model before appearing in Vitagraph and Biograph films. She moved to Los Angeles and joined Mack Sennett's players at Keystone Films in 1912, where she found fame as one of the Keystone 'Bathing Beauties'. Popular with audiences thanks to her slapstick comedic performances, she was known in trade and fan magazines as 'Madcap Mabel' because she performed her own stunts onscreen, which included diving and flying a plane. According to Simon Joyce and Jennifer Putzi, Normand starred in 167 shorts and 23 features throughout her career and was one of Hollywood's earliest self-directed performers (Joyce and Putzi *no date*). Additionally, she performed a number of production roles, with credits as a writer and producer. She directed up to 26 films between 1912 and 1915 (the exact number is difficult to ascertain owing to issues with record keeping) and listed her main profession as 'director' rather than 'actress' in the LA telephone directory in 1914 (Joyce and Putzi *no date*). Her short-lived production career saw her establish the Mabel Normand Film Company in 1916 (a studio that suffered financial difficulties, likely as a result of Sennett), through which she produced the critically acclaimed box-office success *Mickey* (1918), in which she also had a starring role.⁷

With her fame predating the flapper phenomenon that is now synonymous with the 1920s, Normand's public persona was nevertheless one associated with modernity. She appeared in photographs and films that consumers bought and sold in magazines and nickelodeons, and which situated her in a visual, technological culture predicated on commoditising images. *Mabel at the Wheel* (1914) offers a pertinent example of Normand's modernness: in the film, she appears as the fearless Mabel (a character she reprised in various iterations some seventy or so times), who by accident rather than design is victorious in a men's motorsport race. Racing a car around a track to the bemusement of the spectators, Mabel overcomes obstacles that deter her fellow male drivers – all while wearing a skirt. Her character is not only comfortable at speed but also commands the technology that produces it; she is literally the driver of change. Normand's performance of modernness was further entrenched through her association with advertising off-screen. For example, she was connected throughout her career with the Ghirardelli chocolate brand, which operated a large factory famed for its bright neon lights overlooking the San Francisco Bay. The actress, who spoke about her love for confectionary (claiming chocolate cake was her favourite food because 'people always keep it from me'), was a visitor to the factory as well as the company's 'fantasy' Soda Fountain Pavilion at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915 (qtd. in Lusk

1918, 262). According to biographer and memorabilia collector Slater (2013), the star also appeared 'on a little card tucked into a Ghirardelli chocolate package' as part of a 48-card collection featuring film personalities in 1923.⁸ Thus, her image helped to sell the neon promise of mass-produced goods to the American public while simultaneously the chocolate brand advertised a unique product of the film industry: Mabel Normand's public self. Her gendered negotiation of modern sensibilities was not without challenges, though. On the one hand, as Kristen Anderson Wagner argues, 'early twentieth-century comediennes were broadening the public's understanding of what women were capable of and how they should behave' (2011, 45). On the other, Lucy Fischer points out that critics at the time viewed women film stars and their fans as 'frivolous, juvenile, pathological, amorous naïfs who put their lives and moral stature at risk by leaving home' (2016, 18). Normand's performances, then, took place in a professional space where she could push the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for white women as the character 'Mabel' on screen. Offscreen, patriarchal expectations about decorum sought to circumscribe her appearance as Mabel – herself – in the public realm.

Normand's professional relationships with men were often fraught, too, and in her dealings with male studio bosses and colleagues she was often undermined. Mack Sennett acknowledged her talent as an actress, director, and writer, and credits her with convincing him to cast Charlie Chaplin in film roles. Indeed, he suggests that Normand taught Chaplin how to direct and was instrumental in establishing the comedian's screen career (Sennett and Ship [1954] 2000, 148, 164). Yet despite recognising Normand's talents, Sennett's behaviour impacted her wellbeing. Biographers generally agree that his infidelities during their on-again-off-again romance, as well as a tempestuous working relationship, contributed to her ill health. And biographers also agree that Chaplin was romantically interested in Normand, who rejected his advances (Fussell 1982, 7).⁹ In his autobiography, Chaplin denies claims that Normand had anything to do with his stardom or ability to direct films; given Sennett's claims to the contrary, Chaplin's account reads like a misogynistic disavowal of a woman's work ('charming as Mabel was, I doubted her competence as a director', he writes ([1964] 2003, 157).¹⁰ Simon Louvish's recent account of the Keystone Company suggests that Chaplin was seeking to undermine Normand owing to his anxiety about emasculation, for when she did direct he 'staged an onset rebellion against her instructions, sitting down in the road and refusing to work' (2003, 95). It is worth noting, though, that while Louvish emphasises Normand's directing abilities, in his 300-page book there are just eight short references to the star despite her five-year tenure at Keystone and multifarious credits. Her work was similarly overlooked and undermined in the press. For example, a *Billboard* article in 1916 announced that she was establishing the Mabel Normand Film Company, and the trade magazine anticipated that she would make eight films per year: both the 'dainty' Mabel and her company were 'located in one of the beauty spots of Hollywood', and her new film 'featured a story just as attractive as the little star herself'.¹¹ While the reporter did not question her skill for producing motion pictures, her activities were diminished, both through their small scale – her work was literally belittled – and the feminisation of her work as dainty and beautiful.

Normand's perceived deviance from societal gender norms also affected her public image. Timothy Dean Lefler reports that she taught actress Blanche Sweet to smoke and do card tricks, and that she attracted criticism from her older peers for frequenting

nightclubs without a male chaperone (2016, 31, 42). She was known to enjoy alcohol, even during a period of Prohibition. And she was implicated in a number of scandals. Her friend, actress Olive Thomas, died suddenly from accidental poisoning, friend and colleague Roscoe Arbuckle was accused of rape, she was the last person to see William Desmond Taylor alive before he was fatally shot, she was accused as the conspirator in a society divorce case, and she was present when someone who had been convicted of drug-related offences shot a fellow actor.¹² She also married actor Lew Cody on what biographers suggest was a whim after a night spent drinking heavily. Amid Normand's tribulations – which to me seem stressful, if not traumatising – rumours began circulating in Hollywood about her using drugs. Although no material evidence exists to substantiate the claims (and Normand's nurse, Julia Brew Benson, denied them), the rumours continue to inform representations of the star in biographies, on stage, in novels, and onscreen, from *Mack and Mabel*, through Stevie Nicks's (2014) song 'Mabel Normand' to Cari Beauchamp's *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (1997).

Consequently, despite being guilty of mere proximity rather than any evidenced crime, Normand was lambasted by the press and there were calls from some conservative public figures to ban her films ([2000] 2020, 29). Writing about women and modernity in the 1920s, Liz Conor proposes that the 'visually intensified scene provided new conditions for the feminine subject. To appear within it was literally to make a spectacle of oneself' (2004, 7). She argues that the City Girl, a figure who inhabited urban environments and was associated with modern technologies, was associated in the cultural imaginary with other, historic 'street presences', such as sex workers (2004, 10). Embodying modernity through her screen performances and advertising (in which she sold a mediated self), Normand was already spectacular; her hypervisibility in relation to scandal made her even more visible and excessive. Thus, the press codifying her as immoral reads as both gendered and inevitable given her proximity not only to other people's accidents and crimes, but also to behaviours (appearing in public space; making money) typically associated with men. It is worth noting, though, that while Normand's reputation suffered in the news media, her films remained popular with audiences, and she achieved successes for Goldwyn in 1923 with *Suzanna* (her appearance in the Ghirardelli chocolate card collection was in her *Suzanna* costume) and *The Extra Girl*. In 1926, she signed with Hal Roach to make comedy shorts, and in 1928 she agreed a contract with the William Morris Agency that gave her scope to star in talkies. It was illness, then, rather than the fall-out from her troubled relationship with the press, that seems to have prevented Normand from pursuing her screen career further. With her physical health in decline, in 1929 she checked in to a sanatorium (similar to a contemporary hospice) to help her manage tuberculosis symptoms, and she died there in February 1930 (Normand 1974, 394–395).

Mabel and Marilyn

Having offered my own brief introduction to Normand's biography, I now want to analyse other accounts of her life to uncover the biases underpinning the pervasive rumours about her in popular culture. In doing so, I make – perhaps unlikely – comparisons with narratives about another actress: Marilyn Monroe. My reasons for

constellating the two women are numerous. Both spent childhoods in relatively low-income families before finding work as models and then as comedic actresses. They were both romantically involved with powerful men (incidentally, both were friends with Chaplin). They struggled with their depictions in press coverage and were implicated by others in numerous politically charged scandals. They are also already constellated by other biographers: as Betty Harper Fussell attests in her Normand biography, '[b]efore Clara Bow or Judy Garland or Marilyn Monroe, or any other of those funky angels of fun and sex, there was Mabel' (1982, 1). Yet although Monroe died 32 years after journalists filed their obituaries about the silent film star, I contend that biographies about Monroe since 1962 have significantly contributed to how Normand is represented by mainstream media as a tragic figure. Patriarchal and ableist narratives about the inevitability of Monroe's death at a young age based on her gender, class, and mental and physical health are typical in both biographies and memoirs. Despite her many achievements, she is portrayed as 'Poor Marilyn', whom writers disparage with rumour, supposition, and pity. Biographies about Normand (it is worth noting that all the examples I have found thus far were published post-1962 when the Marilyn apocrypha began in earnest) follow the same pattern, and whether via scandal or sentimentality invite readers to participate in mourning 'Poor Mabel'. It is a marketable trope that is so common in writing about white women who die before older age that the character and career differences between stars like Normand, Monroe, Garland, and Amy Winehouse become obscured by the consistent 'fact' of their inevitable, tragic demise.

One crucial difference between Normand and Monroe's biographical canon is their comparative size; where Marilyn's runs into double figures (Churchwell cites around 50 major texts in her bibliography), Mabel's consists of just four. The first is by Normand's grand-nephew, Stephen Normand, whose article-length work focuses on her pioneering contributions to cinema, as well as her family life and generosity, and denies rumours about drug use (1974, 390). Perhaps the best-known account is Fussell's (1982) book, which from the outset positions Normand as a fast-living, don't-care girl on a path to self-destruction. Fussell includes and amplifies every salacious detail possible, whether it regards Normand or her former employees or the relatives that she never lived to meet. While Fussell does make some salient points about how men treated Normand in the film industry, she reinforces many misogynistic and ableist stereotypes, often by deploying a paralipitical rhetorical device whereby she describes scandal only to casually remark that it may not be true.¹³ Other methodological and ethical issues abound, and it is unclear whether the still-living sources who Fussell interviewed and cited agreed to her publishing their private materials (indeed, she describes fractious relationships with both nurse Julia Brew Benson and Stephen Normand). The biography, which perpetuates myths about the star already on show in *Mack and Mabel*, seems to have entrenched the tragic narrative that later underpinned Stevie Nicks's song 'Mabel Normand' and Cari Beauchamp's fixation on Normand's alleged drug habit in her biography of Francis Marion.

A more subtle account of Normand's life appears in a short essay by William Thomas Sherman in an anthology he compiled of primary sources about her life and films ([2000] 2020). In its ninth edition, the compendium comprises hundreds of press cuttings and other print ephemera that evidence Normand's representation in the press. Valuable to researchers, it nevertheless cites Fussell's ethically troubling material uncritically in the process. The most recent Normand biography was published in 2016 by Thomas Dean

Lefler. Lefler privileges stories about Normand's social work and generosity, as well as her patriotism and socialist politics, over her proximity to scandal.¹⁴ He also draws attention to her acting and film production talents, such as her comedic performances and production of box-office hit *Mickey* (1918) (2016, 38, 48, 104). Yet, while more balanced than Fussell's biography, Lefler's often shifts from nuance to deference. He insists, for example, that 'there was nothing particularly salacious about her private life' based on diary entries that he has not accessed, and the commentary on her depiction in the press overlooks gender and disability justice contexts (82).¹⁵ Moreover, his framing – which begins with his own sexualised vision of Normand in tight clothing and ends with Mack Sennett's inadvertently demeaning words – risks reducing her life to one that existed for and in relation to men. The book opens with her 'voluptuous body' poised to dive in a scene from *The Diving Girl* (1911), in which she '[f]lung herself into the air and into the sea of a thousand men's dreams [...] She exuded all that was scandalous, mischievous and free' (5). Thus, on the very first page, Lefler describes Normand's body before either her personality or talent, and he includes objectifying remarks by admirers including Sennett, Chaplin, Goldwyn, and King Vidor without considering their patriarchal (and cisheteronormative) function within his writing (5, 38, 54–57, 91–92).

Similarities with the Monroe apocrypha appear early in the Normand canon. For, like Monroe, biographical details such as her place and date of birth are inconsistent. While biographers all agree that Normand was born on Staten Island, she told reporters at least two different backstories, one with her born in Boston and another with her born in Providence. Fussell uses Normand's multiple birth places as evidence of duplicity that undermines the star's believability as a witness to her own life, never acknowledging that the altered details might be a form of self-protection, or even journalistic error (1982, 23). The sympathetic Lefler also reports that '[a]s an adult when asked about her childhood, Mabel was a cheerful and dedicated liar' (2016, 14). Like Monroe's biographers, Normand's position her as untrustworthy, which enables them to ignore evidence in her own words in favour of (typically men's) more scandalous stories *about* her. Biographers centre men's voices in both cases: readers learn about the women via male romantic partners, male medical practitioners, actors, male writers and producers, male police officers and politicians, and other male agents of state infrastructures. Meanwhile, the women whose anecdotes about the stars appear in both corpuses are, for the most part, private nurses and cleaners paid by Normand and Monroe to perform domestic duties. Thus, biographers make dubious their testimonies for two reasons. First, the women occupy jobs that are framed within US cultural hierarchies as low-status and low-skilled. Second, the women's proximity to the stars was transactional – and gendered narratives about proximity to capitalism are central to patriarchy's power over women, as well as biographers' scepticism. Brew Benson, for example, is dismissed by Fussell as obsessive in Normand's case: the nurse is presented as a sex-oriented mad woman at the meeting point between Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond.¹⁶ Fussell's work is almost as invested in discrediting Brew Benson – and thus Normand by association with a purportedly untrustworthy gatekeeper – as it is with details about the star's life.

Normand's biographers do acknowledge that she was popular with other women, and some are cited as confidantes with insider knowledge about the star. Constance Talmadge, Minta Durfee, and Adela Rogers St John all make appearances in the Normand canon. However, in Fussell, Sherman, and Lefler's accounts Normand is

a corrupting influence whose profanities and hedonistic lifestyle were liable to lead other, demurer women astray. Sherman suggests that director D W Griffith was so concerned about Normand's potential for troublemaking that he assigned her smaller roles to prevent her gaining cachet among impressionable young actresses. Fussell also cites Blanche Sweet and Hal Roach as witnessing Normand's dirty jokes and language, with Roach allegedly criticising her influence on younger actresses (1982, 113).¹⁷ Like Monroe, whose own propensity for profanity are well-documented (in an infamous anecdote she is alleged to have told an assistant director on the set of *Some Like It Hot* (1959) to 'go fuck himself' (2004, 262)),¹⁸ Normand's biographers equate bad language (that is, masculinised and associated with the working classes) with women's immorality. Vulgar language is the tip of the iceberg, though. Both stars are subject to conspiracy theories that take often dubious or anecdotal evidence about their lifestyles and determine that their early deaths were an inevitable consequence of their own immoral behaviour.

In both cases, biographers frame the women's public star personas (the onscreen character 'Mabel'/Marilyn Monroe) as being to blame for the tragedies that befell their nominally different and more innocent private selves (Mabel Normand/Norma Jean). Fussell describes Normand's public and private personas in the pathologizing language of mental unwellness, describing her as having a 'split personality', without any evidence to support the claim (Fussell 1982, 186). Sherman separates "'Mabel" [...] the comic creation' from 'Mabel Normand the person'. Although he suggests that they 'overlap', the character Mabel appears to be in conflict with, rather than created by, Mabel Normand ([2000] 2020, 7–8). Lefler also hints at an internal and conflicting doubling when discussing his perceived gap between the real Normand and the one who was 'under increased pressure to be Mabelescent [that is, bubbly and vivacious] for her fans' (2016, 104). The claim follows his assertion that her increasing public notoriety as a model made her 'anxious, conflicted and unhappy' (20). Without citing evidence of Normand's distress, he assumes that celebrity was a burden endured by the star, rather than something enjoyable. Taking the doubling narrative further still, Sherman theorises that there were physically *two* Mabel Normands: the real star, and a double who sometimes acted for her in films advertised under her name. The theory is predicated on Normand's teeth, which appear uneven in some films and not in others. Alongside the existence of another Keystone actress who looked passably like Normand, it is enough to convince Sherman that Normand might not have performed all her credited roles ([2000] 2020, 7–8). Thus, the discourse about her split selves replicates the gendered and ableist logic of the Monroe apocrypha, in that it diagnoses her as broken on the one hand and perpetuates narratives about her duplicity on the other. Sherman concludes, '[i]f there was something unethical in what these purported two [Mabel Normands] did, there can be little doubt that they did ultimately suffer for it, perhaps terribly' ([2000] 2020, 8). He does not articulate how, precisely, the possible use of a stand-in caused Normand to suffer. But the inference is clear: her proximity to scandal – and death – was the result.

Alongside immorality, biographers are grimly fascinated by both women's mental and physical health. The Monroe corpus sets a tone of disbelief, with many writers rejecting her assertion that she experienced child abuse and other instances of sexual and domestic violence throughout her life. Fred Lawrence Guiles writes about 'her inventions and exaggerations about her childhood, which was an emotional desert for her, but not really

peopled by dirty old men with rape on their minds or brutal disciplinarians who would take a strap to her backside at the slightest provocation' (1969, 261). He offers no evidence to disprove Monroe's allegations. Churchwell's meta-analysis also treats Monroe's trauma as suspect, and it criticises Gloria Steinem's belief in Monroe's accounts of her experiences (2004, 170). Of course, not believing survivors is not particular to Monroe; it is a persistent and widespread myth that marginalised people lie about abuse, and it is a myth that serves both abusers and those who rely on them for access to power. It is not surprising, then, that Normand's biographies (excluding Stephen Normand's) disbelieve the star's testimonies about her own reproductive health, among other bodily concerns. Fussell, for instance, disbelieves Brew Benson's claims that Normand never used drugs, yet is willing to believe the nurse's more spectacular account of the star using flu as an excuse to cover up a miscarriage.¹⁹ Central to her belief in Normand's drug use, meanwhile, is a quotation attributed to Hedda Hopper, who apparently visited Normand in a hotel room and found her wraith-like and surrounded by flowers. Yet the quotation itself does *not* suggest that Hopper thought the scene indicated narcotic use – that idea is presented by Fussell as the context for Hopper's words. 'If it was smart to drink gin and talk dirty', she says, 'it was a helluva lot smarter to sniff coke. I felt that Mabel as a rebel would take the stuff on principle' (1982, 126). In neither Monroe nor Normand's case do the facts of their testimonies hold weight with biographers. What matters is what biographers want to believe.

It is the question about drug use that has come to dominate Normand's narrative: did she, speculate biographers, or didn't she? And who can we trust to tell the truth about a century-old rumour? Aside from Stephen Normand, all the star's biographers are adamant that she *did*. In Fussell, Beauchamp, Nicks, and others' accounts, drug use and addiction contribute to Normand's tragedy even though there is no extant evidence to support their assertions.²⁰ However, drug use is not necessarily as significant to someone's life story as Normand's biographers indicate. While it might reveal something about ideology, lifestyle, or disability, it does not stand to reason that it reveals much about a person's character or morality. Consequently, my own question about Normand's alleged cocaine use is rather different: why does it matter? I am not interested in speculating as to whether or not she used drugs either medicinally or recreationally, but rather in understanding the ramifications that the story has for the star's legacy, as well as for her biographers. There are two main issues at stake: first, there is gender and disability justice, and second, there is biographers' spectacularisation of Normand for personal gain – both of which map onto patterns in the Monroe apocrypha.²¹

According to her nurse, the press, and her death certificate, Normand died in 1930 of tuberculosis. Nevertheless, popular culture and biographies alike continue to question whether Normand's illness was fabricated to cover up that she was dying – and indeed died – from cocaine addiction. The musical *Mack and Mabel* explicitly shows Normand having a drug addiction ('MABEL sniffs the powder. She closes her eyes as it starts to affect her') which is implicitly blamed for her early death (Stewart and Herman [1974] 2015). Fussell claims that she 'jazzed herself into oblivion' (Fussell 1982, 7). And Beauchamp's biography of Frances Marion asks, '[w]as Mabel Normand the last person to see Taylor? Was he selling her drugs? Was he killed by dealers because he wanted her to stop using drugs?' (Beauchamp 1997, 140). Her questions go unanswered, and so while not quite accusing Normand of addiction (or murder) Beauchamp plants the idea in the

reader's imagination and allows it to gestate. A still more despairing and tragic Mabel appears in Jerry Stahl's novelisation about Roscoe Arbuckle. Stahl imagines that 'the once-vivacious beauty was so toasted on coke that all she did was babble' (2005, 214). Finally, in her 2014 song about the 'sad' Mabel Normand, which includes the lyrics 'her heart was quietly crying/I guess she even felt guilty/'Bout even dying', singer-songwriter Nicks imagines Normand's final days. In an interview, Nicks describes how Normand 'eventually died of tuberculosis, but it was really her drug addiction that killed her. I saw a documentary of her in 1985 [...] and I really felt a connection with her' (qtd. Cooper 2014).²² Her projecting onto Normand following her own publicly acknowledged drug use has liberating potential for Nicks, and it seems that learning about the silent film star's story – or at least a version of it – contributed to the musician's recovery. However, the Normand narrative is contradictory (she died from tuberculosis but also really from drug use) and ableist (her drug use was shameful, guilt-laden, and by extension immoral).

Taking a different approach, Lefler does at least offer context for the rumours. He describes how under the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914 it was legal for medical practitioners in the US to prescribe opiates and coca products for patients (Lefler 2016, 104). Doctors accepted cocaine as a relatively safe drug that provided pain relief; if someone happened to experience side effects or addiction the fault was the patient's, not the prescription. Thus, Lefler suggests that Normand's drug use was likely engineered by well-meaning doctors. He acknowledges that while there is no direct evidence of Normand's cocaine use, 'her friends thought she did and said so openly'. Like Fussell, he relies on her changing appearance in photographs to demonstrate addiction, and undermines the thoughtfulness of the disability narrative that frames his discussion with a segue into unsubstantiated rumours about drug parties and other stars battling their 'personal demons' (105). There is no scope for the possibility that she took prescriptive cocaine and used it responsibly, which would not preclude her experiencing side effects from the drug, or that she experienced addiction as disability rather than a dark, demonic possession that was her 'personal' fault.

As a result, Normand's biographical canon, with one exception, follows the same path as Monroe's. The fact that Monroe used drugs is accepted by all biographers, including Churchwell (although the fact of her addiction rests heavily on evidence provided by men whose testimonies about the star are not always reliable), and her death certificate cites an overdose from prescription drugs (2004, 302). She is depicted as a tragic figure in the accounts of Guiles (1969), Mailer (1973), Oates (2001), and John and Taupin (1973). Churchwell, too, opens her analysis at the scene of Monroe's death, rather than at the start of her protagonist's life (2004, 5). With pity but little sympathy, both Normand and Monroe are shamed by biographers and positioned as wild, unhinged, and exhibiting unprofessional behaviour including lateness and unpreparedness that costs studios money.²³ In a capitalist culture that relies on women to consume while simultaneously punishing them for it (especially if they upset profit margins), accounts of women's drug use ultimately serve biographers' interests. Filmmaker Kenneth Anger is a case in point: his *Hollywood Babylon* books discuss both Normand and Monroe almost exclusively as hedonistic drug users.²⁴ Writers transform addiction into a spectacular, if ableist, form of excessive consumption that generates public interest and seeks to transform women stars' lives into book sales. In both cases, I argue that discussions about drug use and addiction matter because so many biographies perpetuate harmful stereotypes about

healthcare, including mental unwellness and pain relief. Moreover, the sensationalised repetition of unevidenced gossip matters because it contributes to biographers' financial exploitation of stars. Unanswered questions about Normand's alleged addiction make for more sensational reading than descriptions about late-stage tuberculosis, while simultaneously glamorising her early death as if it was a great onscreen tragedy.

The Taylor case has similarly dominated both non-fiction and fictional narratives about Normand in conjunction with possible drug use. She was questioned by police but never arrested in relation to his death, and there was no evidence that she shot him. Indeed, District Attorney Thomas Lee Woolwine then asserted that 'I believe that little girl has told me everything she knows about this case', and said that her protestations of innocence were 'sincere'.²⁵ However, her reputation suffered in press reports and the incident looms large in biographies. Rather than consider evidence about the impact that the case had on the star (her business manager morbidly stated that '[i]f they [journalists] don't stop badgering Mabel there'll be crepe hung on the door'), biographers tend to focus on questions about whether Normand did, or did not, commit murder.²⁶ Fussell, for example, writes in the introductory chapter of her Normand biography that Taylor 'fell in love with Mabel, until the bullet ended his quest' (1982, 17). The bullet conveniently does not belong to anyone. But it is *the* bullet, which hovers alongside Mabel in that sentence, rather than *a* bullet that enters the story from somewhere (or someone) else. Fussell does not overtly accuse Normand of the murder because a linguistic trick does the job just as well. Furthermore, in the closing chapter, she suggests that Normand 'would remain as mysterious as the murder of William Desmond Taylor'. By bookending Normand's narrative with the case, Fussell's biography traps her forever within it (239). And by strange coincidence, the same has happened to Monroe. Her death is compared by some biographers to that of Taylor in conspiracy-laden tales about romantic altercations and studio cover-ups that sought to exonerate the murderer and avoid Hollywood scandal (2004, 313). While one star was the alleged murderer and the other was purportedly murdered, commentators make both Normand and Monroe proximate to Taylor's death. The effect is similar to narratives about addiction: it is sensational, spectacular, and salacious. It sells books. As Churchwell argues, 'Marilyn remains a highly desirable – and profitable – piece of merchandise' (83). It does not matter if speculation does not tell the reader much about Normand or Monroe, because informational value is irrelevant to their status as commodities.

The same narrative beats pervade other biographies about tragic white women, too. The 2019 film *Judy* ignored evidence that Garland's ex-husband was abusive and instead positioned the star as an unreliable narrator owing to her drug use and mental unwellness (see also Harrison 2019). Her instability is central to her inevitable decline. Memoirs about Amy Winehouse also follow a similar pattern in a growing number of biographical texts written by and thus financially benefitting men. Chas Newkey-Burden's opening line centres tragedy and death: '[t]he tragic death of Amy Winehouse on 23 July 2011 robbed the world of a unique musical talent' (2011, 1). Charles Moriarty's photobook sells his images of Winehouse; it features a print of Marilyn Monroe in its opening pages which he presented as a gift to the singer (2018, 6–7). The image of the dead film star, complete with cartoon Mickey-Mouse breasts, serves as a stark reminder of the tragedy-industrial complex that commoditises dead women as if they are attractions in a ghoulish theme park. And there is the Asif Kapadia-directed documentary *Amy* (2015), in which

the camera lingers over photographic images of Winehouse's body while simultaneously criticising the press obsession with her image that friends say contributed to her low self-esteem and drug use. Hypocrisies manifest in every biographical medium, with motifs of self-destruction and doom offering continuity in women's narratives from early cinema to the present day. The connections between tragic women stars in biographical writing are so strong that in an article about the 2015 *Mack and Mabel* revival, Normand, Monroe, and Winehouse all feature: journalist Maggie Armstrong writes that Mabel was 'everything we wish and dream a star could be, from Marilyn Monroe to Amy Winehouse. She was worshipped and respected until 1922. Then, her life became a kind of motion picture in the press' (2015, para 11). The women are constellated together in tragedy. Moreover, the comment indicates that the public require tragedy in the lives of women stars by implying that it is everything that we 'wish' and 'dream' for in celebrity figures who died at a young age. Normand and others' actual lived experiences and living conditions are incidental to the more marketable scandals that help sell biography, and their 'motion picture'-like narratives romanticise their status as commodities.

Mabel – and me

So now you know something about Mabel and Marilyn (and Judy and Amy), perhaps you should know a little about me. I appreciate that it is unconventional in a scholarly essay, never mind in biographical writing, to so explicitly write about oneself. However, autoethnography is useful here for two reasons. First, the reader will better understand the context of my curatorial practices in presenting research (an academic euphemism for selling a story) about Normand and Monroe if they are apprised of my biases. After all, nothing, and no one, is neutral. I am paid to write articles and doing so benefits my career. Second, autoethnography is essential to intersectional feminist methodology because it draws attention not only to the researcher's subjectivities, but also to the structures of oppression that dictate who gets to speak, and what they get to speak about, in the academy. In the final section of this article, then, I delve into my intellectual reasons for selecting certain material and prioritising some sources over others, as well as my emotional responses to parts of Normand's narrative that made me feel an affinity with the star. My affective responses to other women's stories are surely as worthy of consideration as any other rationale for studying them. Thus, within the neoliberal academy's constraints on speaking about my experiences from a gendered, classed, and queer perspective, I invite readers to discover where my autobiography emerges and where my sympathies shape my storytelling about Normand. In doing so, I aspire to what Donna Haraway calls 'feminist objectivity', which rejects the 'god trick [...] conquering gaze from nowhere' in favour of an embodied perspective (1988, 581). I anticipate, then, that a relative (never absolute) mode of objectivity emerges as I situate knowledge within myself and both acknowledge and critique my own subjectivity.

From the outset, details about Normand's biography draw me into imagined constellation with her. For instance, there are incidental, almost inconsequential, aspects of her appearance and character that I find relatable. We both had or have uneven teeth (I have always disliked my teeth, so knowing this about Normand makes me feel better about them), and when we met in 2015 for a BBC Radio 4 interview about the star's career, Stephen Normand told me that I could 'almost pass for Mabel'.²⁷ Aside from both

having long, dark hair, the jury's out on that one. But it was flattering to think there may be some passing resemblance. With more certainty, I know that we both like (or in Normand's case, liked) chocolate. We were both tomboyish as children, and while I outgrew my love for climbing trees and buildings and risk-taking in a way that Normand did not, I feel a connection there. Also, like Normand, I enjoy having fresh flowers in every room, especially orchids (Lusk 1918, 264). I take an interest in fashion (Squire 1919, 15; see also Normand 1974, 386, 391). We have both altered stories about our childhoods when speaking to the press (it seems to me that distancing your private self from your public one during a period of intense media scrutiny is necessary self-protection). Similar to the star, I am a keen swimmer. I have not won awards like she did, but it is an activity I regularly enjoy – despite, also like Normand, nearly drowning when I was younger. Performing a coastal swimming stunt while on a Keystone shoot in early December 1912, the actress was knocked unconscious against the rocks, with *Variety* reporting that she was 'recovering from shock and exposure after a thrilling experience that came little short of being a tragedy'.²⁸ My own near drowning happened in a pool, and I was too young then to recall the incident now. Yet family legend – the writing of my own biography – offers me another point of connection with Mabel.

Then there are our intellectual pursuits. I have a large collection of books and enjoy reading. In a 1918 *Photoplay* article, Normand is depicted as a keen reader, with reporter Randolph Bartlett assuring fans that she has read her library, which features J M Barrie, Rudyard Kipling, Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg, in its entirety (2006, 209).²⁹ I, too, have read those authors and own some of their works (I cannot, however, claim to have read everything in my own collection). By identifying with Normand's literary interests, I am perhaps experiencing what Mark Lynn Anderson describes as vicarious 'self-improvement' (2006, 219); for a historian with over-flowing shelves and surfaces covered in unread books, there is something aspirational in the assertion that she has read them all. I am reminded of Richard Dyer's 'compensation' theory, by which people identify with stars that demonstrate qualities lacking in their own lives (998, 28), as well as Lucy Fischer's assertion that 'Normand's fans were largely female (and often working class) and that they saw her as a role model on which to pin their aspirations' (2016, 54). Perhaps, then, I am a typical Normand fan. Furthermore, I am intrigued by the selection of authors in the *Photoplay* article and sympathetic to Normand as a result. For in curating titles from her library, the reporter inadvertently emphasises tragic stories that with hindsight underpin narratives about the star. There is the devastating price paid for art, beauty, and immorality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891] 2003, for example, and women who are oppressed, sexually repressed, and die by suicide (such as Nora in *A Doll's House* in Ibsen [1879] 2014 and the eponymous Miss Julie in Strindberg's play [1888] 1998). With the privileged knowledge afforded me in the twenty-first century, I can't help reading the representation of Normand's library as indicative of her status as a victim even prior to her involvement in scandal.

Alongside her love for nineteenth-century literature, Normand seems to have maintained a down-to-earth sensibility that rejected elitism; like Monroe, her intellectualism was unpretentious and incidental to her popularity with audiences. As a researcher and film critic from a working-class background whose interests range from the avant-garde to pop behemoths like Star Wars, and whose love of soap operas and blockbuster franchises has been disparaged by other academics, I admire both women's expansive

tastes. Normand stated her anti-elitism publicly: in a 1920 magazine article she told her readers, 'I am not a highbrow. If I were, I wouldn't be earning my living by being funny – or trying to be'.³⁰ Fischer also describes a 1921 interview with Normand in which she reported that she did not like "Ritzy people", and displayed a "democratic spirit" [...] using "glorious" slang marked by "its absolute freedom from constraint" (2016, 35). No doubt Normand's book reading on the one hand and disavowal of 'highbrow' culture on the other were performances that made her relatable to different fan demographics. But in my experience, the two positions are not incompatible, and as a consequence I read Normand as enjoying what others perceive as high art and canonical literature while at the same time acknowledging that she does not fit cultural stereotypes that disavow the melodrama and comedic excess by which she made a living.

Examining the relationship between comedy and femininity in early film, Kristen Anderson Wagner proposes that when comediennes 'threw punches and pies, they were deliberately choosing excessiveness, visibility, and aggression over modesty, deference, and submissiveness', which 'ultimately excluded [them] from the popular conception of what constituted normative femininity' (2011, 37). As a feminist and activist whose own behaviour within the academy has been viewed askance by management figures for its interventions in discussions about social justice, I find Normand's unruliness alluring. I favour a camp aesthetic and dress accordingly. I am not ashamed to be loud and extrovert, or to assert the rights of myself and others and demand accountability. And, like Normand, I am unafraid of using profanities to make my point; like the star, I, too, have been criticised for doing so. My informal speech is littered with what some would perceive as vulgarity, and providing I am not speaking in a professional environment I enjoy swearing and use it creatively to enhance arguments.

Of course, language has changed, and social justice activists have transformed laws since cinema's emergence as a mass entertainment medium in the early twentieth century. However, cisheteronormative, ableist, and white supremacist patriarchy prevails, both in the modelling and film industries that Normand and later on Monroe worked in, and the academic one that employs me. Moreover, amid ongoing so-called 'culture wars' manufactured by right-wing politicians and journalists in the UK, in which the government is materially reducing people's rights to live free from harm – including people of colour, disabled people, trans people, queer people, young people, people on low incomes, unemployed people, and people who are refugees and immigrants – my politics as a historian matter. My work is informed by a broad range of scholarship, activists, networks, and lived experiences. For example, I embrace Sara Ahmed's calls to 'become more conscious of the world' through the memory work and community in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). I am indebted to work including Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* ([1984] 2019) and Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020) that imagines more equitable worlds by thinking through the lenses of Blackness, gender, and queerness. I have been privileged to learn about the importance of transformative justice and prison abolition thanks to resources created by the Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement, and about climate injustice from Zapatista communities in Mexico. Friends have taught me about trans allyship and disability justice. The editorial team at *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* have included me in their work to make academic publishing more equitable. I cite just some of the many influences on my politics not to expound my own virtues (as a participant in neoliberal capitalism I fail to

enact my ideological beliefs on a daily basis) but rather to acknowledge that my influences are varied, often non-academic, and constellated.

It matters that I am sympathetic to reports that Normand supported women's suffrage, and it matters that I respond positively to accounts of her socialist beliefs (and to Monroe's, too, in her dealings with the House Committee on Un-American Activities). It also matters that I am reading her history through the lens of the #MeToo movement as a survivor of gender-based violence, as well as my encounters with men in the workplace who belittle, harass, and attempt to put their name to my work.³¹ When I read biographies that position Sennett, Chaplin, and Goldwyn professing romantic feelings for their colleague as an indication of Normand's sexual magnetism (see Fussell), rather than as a troubling exertion of patriarchal power, I am confronted with people's dismissive attitude toward my own experiences. When I learn that Chaplin refused to acknowledge Normand's vital role in his career development, I am not only angry on her behalf, but also fearful for my own future. Normand knew what happens to 'vamps', recognising that certain women face retribution from society for their excessive behaviour. "'That's why I decided to be good",' she told an interviewer (1918, 264). The problem was that cultural commentators and biographers disagreed with her self-assessment, and recuperating Mabel Normand's narrative has become an exercise in pre-emptively saving myself from the same, patriarchal fate.

Conclusion: marginalised (auto)biographies

There is nothing wrong in the abstract with conducting what sociologist Judy Long calls a feminist 'act of rescue', in which the biographer attempts to 'find' the subject (Normand) in the archive and then 'save' them from it (1999, 103). However, as historian Barbara Caine argues, the biographical form is 'antithetical to some of the basic aims and approaches of women's history', because scholars tend to privilege the lives of so-called 'great' white women as exemplary and unique (1994, 250). Consequently, scholars can unintentionally perpetuate oppression against other marginalised groups and contribute to the white feminist equivalent of the 'great white man' trope. It is so easy a trap to fall into that Judith Zissner asks, '[m]ust it be concluded then that "feminist biography" is indeed a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron?' (2009, 47). I am inclined to agree with Zissner and turn here to sociologist Liz Stanley, who implicitly expands on Haraway's arguments about embodied objectivity. Stanley proposes that "'the biographer" is a socially located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged [...] and so is every bit as much an autobiographer' (1992, 7). Her assertion that feminist biography *necessarily* incorporates autobiography suggests that my identification with Mabel is not contradictory to my aims as a feminist historian. Self-reflection and criticism are not fads but rather methodological necessities in the work of intersectional feminism.

Acknowledging autobiographical elements in scholarship is not possible for everyone, though. Even as a white woman on a relatively secure contract who is located in the UK, there are limits to what I am comfortable sharing about my identification with film stars without risking my professional reputation. Disability and gender-based justice issues cannot be taken too seriously; lifestyle choices are under surveillance and scrutinised by university managers, members of parliament, and journalists, among others. Thus, the precise nature of my constellation with Normand is obscured by the demands of the

neoliberal academy, and other marginalised histories continue to suffer incompleteness as a result. For more marginalised scholars, autobiography carries greater risks: a 2018 report revealed that around 94% of staff in UK university History departments are white and that at least 29% of scholars of colour in the field have experienced racism in the workplace (Royal Historical Society 2018, 7–8). With precarious contracts for researchers on the rise, and with approximately 66% of UK university researchers on fixed-term contracts, it is near impossible for marginalised people to openly discuss their histories without jeopardising their employment prospects (University and College Union 2021, para 3). As Ahmed's (2021) work on complaint processes within higher education demonstrates, managers tend to undermine and dismiss people who call out harmful systems.³² Irrespective of equality statements and diversity hires, university infrastructures do not support feminist endeavours to reclaim the past from patriarchy. Ironically, I was not even invited to write about Mabel Normand for the *Mack and Mabel* theatre programme originally: a senior male colleague was asked and did not have the time or expertise. He passed the assignment on to me.

Drawing again from Gaines's work, I want to emphasise the academy's failure of imagination. In discussing historical enigmas, Gaines proposes that 'Alice Guy's fiction film was unimaginable for the French Academy. Later, Alice Guy's fiction film was unimaginable for feminism' (2016, 25). She notes that 'world feminism' has failed to imagine the possibility of women filmmakers, and implores, 'we must imagine more for women' (25). While I suggest that white feminism more accurately describes the failure than 'world feminism' (feminists of colour, as well as queer and disability justice activists, have long imagined more radical pasts and futures for us all), Gaines is right. Our scholarship is currently created and shared in an academy that refuses to imagine that gender, race, class, disability, trauma, and queerness can meaningfully inform our world-building narratives about the past. The academy-as-institution does not care about Mabel Normand beyond the metrics attached to articles written about her, and the financial costs associated with the paywalls that hide the research from public view. It is up to all of us to support the marginalised scholars whose activism has created space for feminist historiography thus far, and down to everyone invested in uncovering new histories to fight for more equitable conditions for ourselves, as well as the subjects of our research.

Yet despite ongoing challenges arising from the sector's inequalities and the methodological juxtaposition of the self and subject in biographical writing, this article has worked to create a more balanced feminist account of Mabel Normand than my previous attempt. Critiquing narratives about her work in relation to men such as Sennett and Chaplin, as well as the frequently patriarchal accounts of her lifestyle in other biographies, I have endeavoured to position Normand in constellation with women including Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Amy Winehouse – and myself. In doing so, I have uncovered a pattern of self-inflicted catastrophe in biographies about white women stars who die before reaching older age. Taking pop cultural narratives about Monroe as a starting point, my research shows that biographers from the mid-twentieth century onward have rendered very different women performers all the same by reproducing gendered and ableist tropes about work, addiction, and visibility in the public eye. Consequently, Normand, like Monroe, has become the consumable embodiment of inevitable tragedy in factual and fictional histories that suggest the women were asking for it. Furthermore, I have considered the material effects that autobiography has on

biography, and I have deployed self-reflective analysis to reveal some of the many biases that inform my perspective on the star, including the labour conditions in which I produce research. Acknowledging that my own relationship to Normand as a subject is ever shifting and never absolute indicates that the work of constellation is crucial to feminist historiography. Eschewing the patriarchal objective to fixate on a single star, constellation resists the academy's imperative to circle historical subjects as if they are the sun. Through constellation, we see Normand, Monroe, and other marginalised figures as lights that continue to shine on us from the distant past in a far bigger, far broader cosmos of effaced, but not forgotten, lives.

Notes

1. For the finished article see Harrison (2015).
2. Normand's great-grand-nephew, Stephen Normand, recounts her invention of the slapstick staple joke in Normand (1974). Scholarship attentive to Mabel Normand's career includes Anderson Wagner (2011) and Fischer (2016).
3. Jina B Kim describes disability justice as a 'coalitional' movement that advocates for disabled people's rights and 'orients its politics around the most marginalized within disability communities – the queer, trans, gender-nonconforming/noncompliant, undocumented, incarcerated, houseless, black, brown, indigenous, working-class, and working poor members for whom legal rights are inaccessible' (2020, 267).
4. Together with Monica Dall'Asta, Gaines advocates thinking about the historical present co-existing with the historical past by way of 'constellations'. For example, Beeban Kidron is constellated with Alice Guy-Blaché through comparisons between the filmmakers, and researchers today are 'constellated' with Louis Weber, Marion E Wong, and, presumably, Mabel Normand (see Gaines 2016, 21–22).
5. Intersectional feminism draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that structural oppression occurs along multiple and intersecting axes such as race, gender and class. See Crenshaw (1989).
6. Accounts of Normand's birthdate differ. Stephen Normand cites 1892 (1974, 388). Betty Harper Fussell claims that it was 1893 (1982, 23).
7. Sennett financed Normand's studio but his issues with money were well known in Hollywood, and he filed for bankruptcy in 1933 – see 'Sennett in Receivership', *Billboard*, 11 November 1933, 18.
8. Slater collates biographical materials and ephemera related to Normand's life on her website.
9. Fussell tells a similar story about Samuel Goldwyn, Normand's boss at Goldwyn Studios. See also Lefler (2016), 54–57.
10. Further tarnishing Normand's professional reputation is the 1992 film *Chaplin*, which was based on the comedian's autobiography. In it, Normand is portrayed as a talentless wannabe director who attempts to have Chaplin fired from Keystone.
11. 'Miss Normand Begins Work', *Billboard*, 27 May 1916, 57.
12. The incidents are described in most Normand biographies, including Fussell's (1982), Lefler (2016) and Sherman ([2000] 2020).
13. On pages 14–15, for example, Fussell introduces rumours about Normand's involvement in William Taylor Desmond's murder by having Stephen Normand deny them. Churchwell notes that many of Monroe's biographers, such as Norman Mailer, use paralipsis as a tactic to amplify rumours about the star that are not justified by evidence. (See Churchwell's 2004, 173).
14. Lefler describes Normand offering kisses in exchange for war bonds to help the US military cause during the First World War and says that she supported the Socialist Party and Women's Suffrage Movement (2016, 9–10, 43).

15. For example, he repeats as fact a press report that Normand was essentially stalking a rival actress on a Goldwyn set, without considering the gendered and misogynist ways in which patriarchal media devise competition between women (108).
16. Fussell relates personal correspondence with Stephen Normand that undermines Brew as a witness in significant ways despite her behaviour being unrelated to memory, truth-telling or her personal relationship with Mabel Normand (1982, 5–10). Churchwell is far less condemnatory of the women who worked for Monroe. Nevertheless, she describes maid Lena Pepitone's published account of Monroe's life as a 'clean-and-tell', which positions the work in a canon of 'kiss-and-tell' literature that is generally perceived in patriarchal culture as feminised, exploitative, money-oriented, and demeaning to both the writer and subject. (See Churchwell's 2004, 95).
17. Fussell does not provide any citations in footnotes or endnotes in the book, and does not usually describe the document, interview or other source material from which she draws so much information. As such, there is no means of fact-checking her evidence.
18. Incidentally, the anecdote is cited by Guiles differently, with the anecdote also being repeated with the less contentious phrasing, "Go Screw!" (1969, 285). Churchwell reports only the harder language.
19. Among other instances, Fussell has Normand give what she believes to be a false account of a pulmonary complaint, and also publishes 'before and after' photos that she cites as evidence that Normand was on drugs (rather than, say, tired or in general ill-health). (See Fussell's 1982, 127–131).
20. Stephen Normand believes Julia Brew Benson as a witness. She is adamant that while Mabel Normand drank alcohol, she did not take drugs (1974, 390).
21. Bunn (2019) describes how people living with addiction are often stigmatised as immoral and face challenges accessing equality in various national legal contexts. She frames addiction as a disability issue while recognising that for many legislators the definition is controversial.
22. I have as yet been unable to trace a documentary about Normand to 1985, though it is possible that Nicks is referring to an earlier film that was being re-broadcast.
23. Lefler cites both Sennett and Goldwyn's accounts of Normand disappearing on set, being late, and costing the studio huge sums of money as a result (2016, 92). It is hard to not to read criticism from two men who had romantic interest in Normand in the context of the 'difficult woman' trope that seeks to curtail actresses' careers. For example, director Peter Jackson admitted blacklisting Ashley Judd and Mira Sorvino because Harvey Weinstein's production company said they were "a nightmare to work with". The two women had rejected Weinstein's sexual advances. See Redden (2017).
24. In an unevidenced account that emphasises scandal with queerphobic and racist tropes, Anger describes Normand attending parties where 'marijuana, opium and morphine' were served by cross-dressing attendants in kimonos (Anger 1975). In the second volume, he refers to Monroe's drug use and death by suicide, and also includes images of her body being removed from her home by police (Anger 1984).
25. 'Star Talks Freely to Prosecutor', *Los Angeles Examiner*, 11 February 1922. Reproduced in (Sherman [2000] 2020, 218).
26. Adela Rogers St John, *Boston Advertiser*, 20 February 1922, and Walter Vodges, 'Mabel Seriously Ill Over Grief of Tragedy', *Los Angeles Examiner*, 15 February 1922. Both reproduced in (Sherman ([2000] 2020, 223).
27. The anecdote about Normand's teeth can be found in (Sherman [2000] 2020, 7).
28. Anon., 'Actress Faces Death', *Variety*, 6 December 1912, 15.
29. Normand would meet literary figures including H G Wells and Barrie on her trips to England. (See Fussell's 1982, 180–181).
30. Mabel Normand, 'How to Be a Comedienne', *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 19 June 1920. Reproduced in (Sherman [2000] 2020, 141–42).
31. The #MeToo movement was begun by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 as a means for Black survivors to share their experiences of sexual violence. It was appropriated by actress Alyssa

Milano in 2017 in light of revelations about Weinstein, and it has since become synonymous with anti-sexual violence activism on social media platforms like Twitter. See Gurminder Gill and Imran Rahman-Jones, 'Me Too Founder Tarana Burke: Movement is Not Over', *BBC News*, 9 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-53269751>.

32. Thornham (2017) also discusses concerns about equity from a subject-specific perspective.

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Notes on contributor

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Filmography

Amy (Asif Kapadia, Film 4 Productions, UK, 2015)
Chaplin (Richard Attenborough, Carolco Pictures and Canal+, UK, 1992)
Judy (Rupert Goold, 20th Century Fox, UK Lorde [1984] 2019)
Mabel at the Wheel (Mabel Normand and Mack Sennett, Keystone, USA, 1914)
Mickey (F Richard Jones and James Young, Mabel Normand Film Company, USA, 1918)
Pandora's Box (Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Nero-Film A.G., Germany, 1929)
Some Like it Hot (Billy Wilder, Mirisch Company, USA, 1959)
Something's Got to Give (George Cukor, 20th Century Fox, USA, 1962)
Suzanna (F Richard Jones, Mack Sennett Comedies Corporation/Allied Producers and Exhibitors, USA, 1923)
The Diving Girl (Mack Sennett, Biograph, USA, 1911)
The Extra Girl (F Richard Jones, Mack Sennett Comedies Corporation/Allied Producers and Exhibitors, USA, 1923)

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