More Lurid Than Lucid: The Spiritualist Invention of the Word Sexism

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Nineteenth-century American spiritualists coined the word sexism long before its modern incarnation in order to refer to a complex of ideas about human sexuality and reproduction that were consonant with the general advancement of women’s rights. Among these ideas was the belief that spirit and mind were ascendant over matter and could act directly on it. In their view, a woman’s sensitive spiritual nature gave her the power to join spirit and matter. She could provide a way for exalted spirits to enter the world through her, in the mental character and even the physical form of her offspring, by focusing her own and others’ spirits into the embryo growing within her, as if she were making a photograph. The goal of enhancing this ability would justify changing law and custom to ensure women’s autonomy and freedom, especially to protect their decisions about sexual relations in order to regulate favorable and unfavorable impressions on the embryo. Emphasizing the embryo’s sensitivity to spiritual impressions, however, also led some progressives to the conclusion that women’s autonomy should be restricted. Women had to be kept away from even immaterial influences that would adversely affect them during pregnancy.

The loosely organized movement that called itself “spiritualism” or “modern spiritualism” began in America shortly before 1850 and blossomed in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was based on the belief that the spirits of the deceased had begun to communicate directly with the living, delivering to them, mostly through entranced spiritual “ mediums,” messages of hope, comfort, and uplift.

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Many aspects of spiritualists’ beliefs and speculations tied spiritualism to the social reform movements of the time. Ann Braude, in her groundbreaking work *Radical Spirits*, has shown how spiritualism, by recognizing that the divine could manifest or speak through anyone, entwined itself with the women’s rights movement. The relationship was based on a vision of equality and universality and an appreciation of the freedoms, rights, and powers of all, male and female (Braude: 56–57). Braude has also shown how spiritualism supported the advancement of women’s status by focusing on women’s differences from men. It helped feminize religion, for example, by elevating the religious status of the sensitivities regarded as typically feminine that were needed to be an effective trance medium (Braude: 82–84).

This article examines other links between spiritualism and the women’s rights movement of the time, not only links based on the idea of the equality of the sexes but also links based on the idea of their differences—particularly the notion that women were the superior mediators of the divine on earth, translating spirit into matter through the biological process of human reproduction. Spiritualists commonly held this view, but some saw it as a literal description of human reproduction and some saw it as a less literal but still useful and beautiful vision that would impel a radically reformed world.

Sexism, as defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, is “the assumption that one sex is superior to the other and the resultant discrimination practised against members of the supposed inferior sex, esp. by men against women; also conformity with the traditional stereotyping of social roles on the basis of sex.” Both the *OED* and *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* give the first citation of *sexism* as 1968. But the word had a previous incarnation, with a different meaning, 100 years earlier, when spiritualists coined it during a controversy about sexuality and women’s rights. Uncovering that controversy reveals the links between spiritualism and the women’s rights movement that are the focus of this article.

Spiritualists’ ideas were spread through independent spiritualist newspapers and through itinerant trance lecturers and spirit mediums who answered to no one else for their volatile inspirations. Their speculations were not entirely consistent or internally coherent. Their collection of ideas on the subject of human sexuality and reproduction resembled a loosely shared dream more than a systematic theory. It touched very lightly on everyday observation and science but then extended into improvised flights of extravagant fantasy, guided by visions of a spirit-led revolution.

Spiritualist ranks were filled with prophets, oracles, and seers who spoke in a trance state with a supernormal authority about things otherwise
unseen. They did not hesitate to overstep the bounds of the language in order to express things that were not entirely of this world. They created and used many neologisms (Brittan 1855d).

At the quarterly meeting of the new Massachusetts Spiritualists Association in October 1866, the president of the association, Amasa C. Robinson, formed a committee to revise the organization’s constitution and declaration of principles, which Henry Clarke Wright had drafted earlier that year. Wright was a spiritualist, an ex-Congregationalist minister, an old-line Garrisonian abolitionist, a writer on social reform, and a lecturer on women’s rights (Colby 1866a, 1866b, 1866c, 1866d).

Robinson, a spiritualist medium, lecturer, and shoe manufacturer from Salem, placed himself on the Revision Committee. Edward Smith Wheeler, a well-known trance “improvisator” and lecturer from Boston, was the second member of the committee. The chairman was John Henry Watson Toohey from Boston, an Irish immigrant who had started life as a Catholic but had turned Baptist, then had become a Universalist preacher, and finally had become a spiritualist lecturer and homeopathic physician. In his remarks to the meeting, Toohey talked of spiritualism as far more than contacting the spirits of the dead. “Spiritualism, as I understand it, is the science of life,” he said, “the actual utterance and echo of life itself. It formulates the many phased manifestations of Nature and makes Spirit pivotal to all things that live, move, and have a being.” He believed that spiritual realities were more fundamental than material realities, as he made clear when he spoke about the capacities of spiritual mediums. He distinguished the physical (“organic”) differences between the sexes from their deeper mental or spiritual (“constitutional”) differences: “The medium may be man or woman—woman or man—but in either case the characteristics will be feminine—negative and positive. The qualifications are constitutional, if not organic, and for the time, become fundamental—mere sexism being of secondary significance. Thus nature complements herself—and out of seeming disorder, brings divinist order; out of physical weakness and mental darkness, immortal light!” (Colby 1866d: 2).

Toohey used his word sexism to mean, in part, the physical and outward sexual characteristics that placed one in the category of male or female. The ism suggested that these categories were somewhat superficial and could be at odds with deeper components of a person’s nature. He soon used the word again, with a different and more complex meaning.

At the association’s next Annual State Convention—its second, in Boston in January 1867—the Committee on Revision made its report to the membership. Most of the constitution and the principles in the declaration created little controversy, although the membership debated
whether the preamble should contain language that set spiritualism apart from Christianity—or at least apart from the established churches. Some who spoke were also uneasy with the idea of defining a creed for spiritualism—many of the independent, unconventional minds that found their place in spiritualism chafed at anything that would bind the movement to dogmatic pronouncements. Instead, they suggested, the only point on which spiritualists agreed was the bare fact of spirit–human intercourse. But committee member Wheeler “asserted that Spiritualism was not a mere chaos of phenomena, and had grander uses than the development of merely sympathetic spirit–intercourse” (Colby 1867a).

One of the articles of the declaration, however, created an intense controversy. It stated the principle of “the equality of the sexes, and the moral integrity of sexism” (Colby 1867b; Dixon 1867). Those present debated it at length before they finally passed it. After the convention, Frank L. Wadsworth, the editor of the Chicago-based spiritualist newspaper The Spiritual Republic, received a copy of the proceedings. He wrote that he was confused but—on the alert because of what he saw as the preamble’s objectionable anti-Christian tone—suspicious of what sexism might mean:

“The equality of the sexes,” is understandable, and we find nothing but what accords with Christ in that, but the “moral integrity of sexism,” is a puzzle to us.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Association, what do you mean by it? “Sexism” is a term we can’t find in Webster, and you haven’t defined it. What sort of an ism is it? Is it an ism of theory, or practice? How does it differ from other isms concerning sex?

Do you mean by this new term, the use of the sexual functions? If so, do you mean the monogamic marriage of the N[ew] T[estament], or the composite one of the Bible Communists [John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community], or that rather indefinite looseness termed free love? If the authors or author of this luminous phrase, has some recondite meaning concealed in the words, “moral integrity of sexism,” we opine it is one which means nothing at all new, or else it conceals what those who adopted it neither understood nor approved. Gentlemen, please use plain words, which express just what you mean, and what the people can understand. We very much expect to find a cat under this mealy covering, if indeed there be not a toad squat at the ear of Eve, which only needs the point of Thuriel’s spear to develop the skulking fiend in all his ugliness. We are the more inclined to this opinion by finding so much which is susceptible of a double sense. (1867b)\(^1\)

\(^{1}\) The cat in mealy covering refers to Aesop’s story of the cat who disguised herself to catch a mouse by rolling in flour; the “toad squat at Eve’s ear” refers to Satan in disguise, in Paradise Lost.
Lita Barney Sayles was a spiritualist and women’s suffrage activist from Connecticut, but she, like many other spiritualists, was no radical, and she now wrote Wadsworth. She had attended the Massachusetts Spiritualists Association Convention, and she confirmed his suspicions. She wrote that even though she had been present when the convention received and discussed the committee’s report, she was still confused about what the committee had intended by the word sexism. She suspected, however, that they had deliberately coined the word in order to hide their intention to encourage promiscuity. They had turned “sex” into “sexism,” suggesting that it was acceptable to have sex with whomever one wished, whenever one wished, and they had tried to dignify it as a philosophy, an “ism.” She explained her reasons for suspecting this:

A gentleman who was “in the ring,” upon being pressed hard to know if this article did not intend to declare that every man and woman had a right to do as they pleased in regard to their sexual relations, shrugged his shoulders, and smiled, knowingly, and answered, “You don’t want me to say, do you?” and would not deny it. Another reason is that when the explanation of the term was urgently called for, and the Chairman of the Committee, rose to respond, there was nothing expressed by what was replied, except to reiterate the “integrality of sexism,” which was more lurid than lucid. Some pure souls there knew well enough to what the expression pointed, and spoke against it, but the majority had so much confidence in their Committee that it was almost sacrilege to question their immaculateness. (196)

In fact, medium and psychic healer Levi K. Coonley had fiercely objected at the convention to the article about “the integrality of sexism.” He had said, “The phraseology is obscure, but it cloaks the assertion of the moral right of social disorder; of the rectitude of promiscuity and miscellaneous sexual relations, regulated solely by the wayward fancy of those who chose to indulge in such a mode of life.” He had implied that Toohey was a libertine, for he “was the same in public as in private, and was always ready to act in accordance with his public avowals” (Colby 1866b).

The opposition defined the word in one way, but the committee members who created it defined it in another, apparently trying to capture a complex of ideas. These had begun to coalesce during the spread of the free love doctrine among radical reformers, as The Spiritual Republic editor hinted.

Henry Wright, the author of the original Declaration of Principles, was a free lover. Yet what he promoted was not at all crass but, rather, high minded:

The soul of each man or woman is the only manger in which the true savior can be born... The pre-natal life and education of man is being
discussed all over the land. The right of woman to decide for herself, when, how often and under what circumstances she shall assume the responsibilities and be subjected to the sufferings of maternity is to be a settled principle of the coming republic. That it is a crime of blackest hue for husbands to impose maternity on their wives when they know their nature does not call for it. That the husband will see and worship the God in his wife, and not the mere animal. No more “unwelcome children.” That children have a right to demand of their parents healthy bodies and healthy souls, a love origin, and a welcome into life. (1867: 139)

“Sexism,” therefore, involved a new recognition and affirmation of the particular powers of each sex in biological reproduction, especially of the female, whose contribution had sometimes been regarded as merely passive, as providing the bed in which the male’s seed could grow. Now the female was to be seen as the primary agent in reproduction and the male as secondary. The male only “had power over the germ, before the mother [took] charge of it, and by influencing it, through her thoughts and feelings after conception.” The female’s power over the child “must of necessity be all but absolute; inasmuch as under the action of the forces of her organism, the entire process of organization is performed” (Wright 1863: 80–81).

In itself, this elevation of the mother’s role in heredity was not new. Swiss naturalist Charles Bonnet had long before theorized that the female held within her, but only in a general form, the germinal structure of all future generations, that her egg was acted on only in a general way by the male’s semen, and that the individual characteristics of her child were developed as it grew in her womb.

Wright went further and described mental or spiritual influences on the formation of the embryo. He frequently praised the reproductive theory of William Byrd Powell, a phrenologist and irregular physician, “a peripatetic head-reader,” as one of his critics put it, who “declared his ability to discover a man’s religious tenets by the [physical] developments of his head” (Powell: 12). According to Powell, and to many others afterward, the particular temperaments of the man and woman, during the moments of sexual intercourse, determined the well-being of the child they conceived, in a way reminiscent of astrological influences (Keckeler: 72–81; Pancoast: 191–192; Powell: 179). The mental state of the father and mother were imprinted on the mother’s womb as if it were a sensitive photographic plate.

Two years before the Massachusetts Spiritualists Association Convention, spiritualist editor Samuel Byron Brittan had published his own work on “the influence of the mind on the body.” In line with Powell’s idea, Brittan believed that “the singular effects produced on the unborn child, by the sudden mental emotions of the mother, are remarkable examples of
a kind of electrotyping on the sensitive surfaces of living forms. It is doubt-
less true that the mind’s action, in such cases, may increase or diminish the
molecular deposits in the several portions of the system” (Brittan 1873). As
early as 1857, he had written:

The parents fully and completely daguerreotype all their constitutional
characteristics and their conditions and affections upon the spiritual and
natural form and nature of the offspring. The child is the combined mini-
ature type or focal representation of all the faculties, proclivities, habits,
states, ruling affections and conditions of the parents at the time it was
begotten and conceived, and afterward, in its growth and development,
it discloses all these traits and conditions, and retains them through life.
(1857b)

Elizabeth Lyle Saxon, suffragist, temperance activist, and social re-
former, wrote to Brittan that

women are the builders and creators, under Providence, of the human
frame; and until men and women alike learn the laws of Nature and Life—
boldly and freely learn, with reverent hearts and a desire for all good, they
will continue to send forth monstrosities of mind and body and fill pris-
ons and asylums. Every deep abiding grief; every angry emotion, is in a
degree daguerreotyped on the minds of our unborn children. (531–532)

More profoundly, however, many also thought it was daguerreotyped on
their bodies, in a way, one might say, that developed in the midst of wide-
spread interest in homeopathy and that relied on the Doctrine of Signa-
tures. Saxon wrote that after a man of her acquaintance had taken up drink,
all his children were born with physical deformities. Minister, mesmer-
ist, and (later) spiritualist John Bovee Dods wrote that

if a woman were to conceive while wrapped in total darkness, and never
see the man by whom she conceived, nor get the most distant impres-
sion of his image, and could she, at the moment of conception, be con-
signed to a sleep of profound insensibility till the time her delivery came,
she would unquestionably bring forth an offspring exactly in her own
image. It would be as perfect a fac-simile of her own organism, form, and
features as the second bank-plate was of the first from which by galvanic
action it was produced. (239–240)

Tying spirit to matter and, finally, Heaven to Earth occurred through a
materialization of the spirit, by means of a technology of visual reproduc-
tion, through seeing. Women precipitated spirits into the world as pho-
tographers precipitated immaterial images onto a silver plate.

The notion that thought and feeling materialized in the embryo, par-
alleled that of spirit photography, of “spirits imprinting their forms” on
a sensitized material substrate—the metal or coated glass plate (Moses).
Back to the very beginnings of photography, some speculated that the objective universe might really be just images and signs that took on form—"for aught we know to the contrary, other worlds of the system may be peopled and conducted with the images of persons and transactions thrown off from this and from each other; the whole universal nature being nothing more than phonetic and photogenic structures" (Blavatsky 1877: 321–322; Willis: 70). Conversely, the womb was "peopled" by means of images and thoughts, or, as the spirits taught Boston trance medium John Murray Spear, "it may be declared that mind impregnates matter and hence then comes what is called birth" (1858b).

Boston engraver William Howard Mumler made the first well-known "spirit photographs" in 1862, but for almost a decade photographers had been trying to capture an image of a spirit (Briggs; Brittan 1854, 1855a, 1855b, 1855c; Buescher). In other new ways, too, the immaterial had been inscribing itself upon the material. Massachusetts mediums received spirit messages as writing or pictures spontaneously appearing in complex red lines or welts upon their bodies (Bartlett: 17, 22–23; Hardinge 1870: 107–108). One medium who had later imitators, Elizabeth J. French, produced nearly instantaneous spirit drawings of flowers on blank paper placed inside light-proof boxes: "The friends of the medium say, that by some unknown process of chemistry, the substance of the lead pencils is suddenly precipitated upon sketches already limned by spirit artists, in such a way as to bring out the pictures by some act similar to that of our ordinary photography" (Hardinge 1871: 55; Howitt: 177).

The parents' emotional and mental states during coition would determine the embryo's own subsequent mental patterning but also whether it would be free of biological defects and disease. Sexual excitement was an electromagnetic charge that built up in the body and coursed into one's sexual partner. This charge would effect the impression onto the mother of the biological pattern of the child. For "every person is continually giving off subtle emanations which partake of his physical, mental, and spiritual characteristics, and which tend to impart the same to all persons and things about him" (Newton 1863). Spiritualists even declared that objects, too, continually radiated all the "scenes" of their history and "daguerreotyped" them on everything surrounding them, reducing the material universe, in a sense, to a collection of images, all of which were mentally retrievable by sensitive mediums (Denton: 276–279).

A pregnant woman's mere viewing of a photographic or lithographic reproduction could directly affect the child growing within her. An unlovely mother might produce a beautiful child, for example, as Britten reported of a particular case: "The boy is doubtless indebted for his fine form to the presence of a beautiful French Lithograph in his mother's
sleeping apartment, and which presented for her contemplation the faultless form of a naked child” (1873).

The profound biological impact the mother’s emotional and mental well-being had on the embryonic child was a significant part of the reason why “the unwanted child” (Wright’s phrase from his popular 1858 book of the same title) had to be so carefully avoided. If the mother was forced to have sex with someone with whom she was not temperamentally attuned—even if just for that moment—if she did not feel deep and pure love and affection for her partner, then she could anticipate dire biological consequences for the resulting child. When a man forced a woman to have sex, it was certain to affect the biological issue—not just because of the terrible emotional and mental state of the woman but also because of the monstrous inner condition of the man.

Whether the woman happened to be married to the man who had forced himself on her made no difference. A marriage license, after all, could not regulate a woman’s affection. Only she could know, in the privacy of her heart, the rightness of any sexual act (Braude: 125–136; Carroll: 40–41). “It is for her nature to decide,” wrote physician and spiritualist Thomas Low Nichols, “both whom she will admit to her embraces, and when; and there is no despotism upon this earth so infernal as that which compels a woman to submit to the embraces of a man she does not love; or to receive even these, where her nature does not require them, and when she can not partake in the sexual embrace without injury to herself, and danger to her offspring” (150).2 The result was the mental and physical degradation of the human race. Dr. Edward Bliss Foote wrote:

The human family is sick; our planet is a huge revolving hospital. . . . What’s the reason? The only answer is, startling as it may appear when given, the children of this world are but the creatures of accident. Comparatively few of them are wanted at the time of their birth. They are the unwelcome product of an amative spasm. Through nine weary months they are borne about in the wombs of wretched-minded mothers, no small number of whom, surrounded by unfortunate circumstances, loathe the act which rendered them pregnant. (4)

Various doctrines and practices that were labeled as “free love” were often espoused by spiritualists. Whatever else “free love” may have en-

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2 About the physical impression on the embryo made by the parents’ thoughts, Nichols seems to have been ambivalent. On the one hand, he wrote that “particular talents, tendencies, tastes, idiosyncracies, and affections of every kind” are impressed on the child’s “body as well as the mind” while it is in the womb (194); on the other hand, he also wrote that “all which makes the basis of the character, mental and physical, must reside in the germ and the spermatazoon” (169).
tailed, its core was the conviction that the touchstone of sexual behavior must be each individual's decision, not the conventional contract regulated by church and state in the institution of marriage (Sears: 8–9, 20–21). Mutual affection and love, freely given and received in pairings of suitably balanced male and female energies implicitly referred to by the term sexism, was the true basis of "marriage."

Was this a call to deepen and "spiritualize" the marriage institution, adding to it love and mutual respect? Or was it a call to cast aside the marriage institution altogether, as an oppressive relic of the past, and for each person to follow, "as the voice of God," her or his sexual yearnings wherever they might lead, to be as angels, as it was said, angels "neither marry nor are given in marriage"? This issue was argued by more conservative spiritualists (such as Sayles) who appear to have constituted the majority of spiritualists and more radical "free love spiritualists."

Free lovers argued that the institution of marriage defined the oppression of women and disregarded the natural exchange of love between men and women. It was to blame for the degradation (even the biological degradation) of the human race. As it came to be expressed in stark, radical terms by Victoria Woodhull in 1872, their claim was that marriage itself is slavery and prostitution, that "the barter and sale of wives stands on the same moral footing as the barter and sale of slaves," and that "the god-implanted human affections cannot, and will not, be any longer subordinated to these external, legal restrictions and conventional engagements" (11).

Most spiritualists opposed any move to sever the connection between sexual relations and the marriage contract. No matter whether one was (relatively) a conservative or a radical, however, spiritualists commonly believed that women had to be given personal power over their "generative function" commensurate with their biological power. Toohey called the reform principle that held that as its goal sexism.

Spiritualists looked to a "natural" law of sex, whereby spiritual feelings of attraction, regarded as manifestations of a subtle form of magnetism or electricity, would determine sexual relations (Guarneri: 360–361). The committee that coined the word sexism meant sexual naturalism and the unhindered flows of mutual attractions, in line with the calculus of "amatory affinities" that French social philosopher Fourier had envisioned (1.161–199). It was a reform philosophy by which women were to be liberated from oppression and arbitrary constraints (Spurlock: 87–98).

Toohey, when asked at the convention to explain "the integrality of sexism," called it a radical article
that was a flat denial of the saying of [Alexander] Pope, that “every woman was at heart a rake”; or “man was always a damned rascal,” whenever there was “a lady in the case,” as ran the thought of those who had formed their ideas upon the precepts of the church, which taught the total depravity of humanity; whose Christian fathers had sullied the character of woman by vile aspersions; whose maxims taught the essential immorality of marriage—asserting that it was incompatible with a saintly life. We must rescue woman from this degradation and assert the natural, normal life of manhood and womanhood: the integrality of sexism. (Colby 1867b)

Sex was both natural and good, not inherently evil. “Often, years ago,” Toohey said, “men were arrested for teaching physiology. The demand now is for the truth, the whole truth, and, if possible, nothing but the truth. To make that truth manifest is our labor.” The very fact that people assumed that “the integrality of sexism” was an invitation to immoral behavior, Toohey said, demonstrated how badly the idea needed to be promoted. Sexism meant the natural goodness of the sexual processes, including the sex act. He denied that the article “favored the idea of immorality or disorder.” It “had nothing to do with promiscuity.” It was “universal, and simply meant that love was not a thing to blush for, as was quite commonly thought” (Colby 1867b).

Committee member Edward Wheeler also endorsed the article and said it was not meant to elevate “the looseness of an immoral life” or to disparage “a permanent monogamic marriage.” He said that he “recognized the truth of marriage, and knew that in its nature it was sacramental.” But, he added, “the mere assertion of marriage was not entitled to respect, unless the relation was vital and true.” Attorney Isaiah Coffin Ray, from Nantucket, in support of the article at the convention, replied to an objection that the article “struck at marriage.” “What was marriage?” he asked and then answered his own question: “That which passes for the thing in law and society is not altogether lovely; it makes man and woman one, and man is the one. I care not how much of that sort of thing comes to an end. Make marriage slavery, and I care not who destroys it.”

The influence of the Protestant dissenting tradition is evident here, in the willingness to “come out” of the worldly institution of marriage, once it had been perceived as a power contrary to God’s “true” law of marriage. But the emphasis here on the natural law of sexuality—as distinct from the mundane laws governing it—was also influenced by the earlier writings of Charles Fourier and those of Swedish visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg. Fourier sharply distinguished between what he saw as the natural law of “passional attraction,” which brought disparate things and isolated people into harmonic combinations, and what he described as the arbi-
trary and whimsical duties and conventions that human society set up to regulate behavior.

Swedenborg believed that all things, inanimate and animate, had correspondences in the spiritual world and that they all evolved, from the lowest elements to the highest beings, through sexual relationships in one form or another. Boston physician Harriot Kezia Hunt, although not a Swedenborgian, and expressed the belief in this way: “My profession assumed a magical power over me, just as in proportion as I recognized the material body as a type only of the spiritual” (Hunt: 197). Indeed, it was not just a “type” but, in the words of John Dods, a “visible daguerreotype” of God’s spirit (223).

The spirit guides that spoke through Boston spiritualist medium John Spear had discoursed on such an idea in 1858 (the year before the publication of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species), calling it not “sexism” but “sexualism”: “Sexualism is universal. Planets are male and female. They copulate, cohabit, conceive, pass through gestational conditions, give birth to offspring with as much regularity and precision as the lower and grosser orders of animate life” (1858a). The Massachusetts Committee, when it coined sexism, would have invoked this idea of evolutionary progress. It was a philosophy that looked to the natural laws of physics and biology as a future basis of society and rejected the manmade laws that currently defined sexual relations. Spear’s spirit guides asked rhetorically, “Think you that thru any legislative bull capacitated to frame personal laws or civil codes, that will repress or govern the sexual relations of the planetary world; in other words, can man institute laws that should jostle the mechanism of the infinite?” The spirits had good reason to ask this through Spear: He had decided that his true spiritual affinity was not his wife of thirty years, but Caroline Hinckley, who was visibly pregnant at the time this discourse was given to him in trance. Hinckley acted as his amanuensis, writing down the words uttered through him.

In the year of the Massachusetts spiritualist convention in Boston, Elizabeth Osgood Goodrich Willard, a physician from Chicago, gave the name “sexology” to her attempt to describe a society that ensured individual freedom and equality of the sexes from a scientific study of the natural laws governing sex. Her laws of genetic inheritance, however, included the notion of “transmission by impression,” essentially the idea that spirit informed the flesh, that mind controlled matter (184–185). This mechanism could be described, in the end, only through the assertion of sympathetic magic, but Spear’s Boston associate Alonzo Eliot Newton had dignified it the year before as the workings of the Holy Spirit. “These magnetic emanations moving from one sexual partner to the other,” Newton wrote, “possess all the distinctive personal qualities of the persons from
whom they proceed—in fact, are in some sense *the persons themselves*, projected into contact with others*” (1866).

If sex could liberate people from artificial constraints, so might its unabashed outing, with a kind of scientific equanimity, beyond embarrassment about body parts or functions, making it possible to investigate the laws of nature regarding “sexual hygiene” without squeamishness. Humans could use their improved understanding to reorder human society and to create better human beings. “Sexism,” therefore, involved a commitment to science (at least in theory) and to human control of the biological future of the race.

This was a point of contention between those who looked to a future in which humans would breed according to natural laws in order to produce the best offspring and those who saw the idea of evolution—especially human-directed evolution—as an affront to the Creator. Some among the conservative wing of spiritualists rejected this application of science to human sexual relations, saying that Henry Wright was “wrong for declaring that God does not make man, that man makes man” (Wright 1863: 24–28). Despite that, most spiritualists, even if not ultraradical, believed that a rational reform of sexual relations would improve society.

*Sexism*, therefore, also carried the meaning of a scheme of social engineering, a supposedly scientific system of human reproduction. In 1869 John Humphrey Noyes introduced a system of breeding he named “stirpiculture” into the Oneida community (Andrews 1870b).³ He believed his system had heavenly warrant. He distanced himself from the spiritualists of the time, but they, too, believed that heaven, through the spirits, was communicating to many the broad principles on which ennobling sexual combinations could be made. The spirit of Isaac Newton announced to medium and radical free lover John Spear that there was a precise calculus to these combinations. Through it, humans could be manufactured, automatically, with the same precision as one might manufacture “a hoe or a spade” (Spear 1873: 10). At least one spiritualist experimenter in sexual science and utopian social reconstruction tried to go farther down this road toward decoding biological inheritance. Orson Squire Fowler, perhaps best known as a phrenologist, regarded the intentional improvement of the human stock as the golden key for all the various societal reforms of the Age (275–277). His nephew, Samuel Theron Fowler, believed that angels had dictated to him the specific code by which elementary spiritual qualities combined and recombined in matrices that expressed themselves in the material form of the human being (81–146).

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³ Around this time Noyes read Francis Galton’s 1869 *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences*, but Galton invented the word *eugenics* only in 1883.
The conceptual link between a revolution in sexual relations and spiritualism consisted in the belief that the development of people's powers as spiritualist mediums made them more sensitive to higher, divine influences. When their minds were thus uplifted and opened to spiritual influxes (in the manner of Swedenborg), the children they would give birth to would be similarly uplifted in mind and body. Spiritualism, under this belief, was a spirit-directed program of human evolution. In religious terms, it would eliminate the need for a separate "regeneration" by involving and expressing the Spirit directly in "generation," bypassing original sin, one might say, and, in its most radical formulation, achieving the millennium. The spirits were coming, and they would carry out a sexual revolution with flaming swords, as Victoria Claflin Woodhull told the 1873 convention of the American Association of Spiritualists, of which she was the president:

They will laugh at your professed ownership in sex, and tell you to enforce it if you can. They will snap their fingers at your officers and spit upon laws as I have been taught by them, to do. Nor will they wait for divorces either. They will love whom they will; and in their loving, lift us of earth, to their level. I know there are thousands who have been sexually inspired of spirits; and many more whom spirits control and through whom they receive the benedictions of love. Once and for all I tell you, Oh, children of earth, that you had better put your houses in order and await the coming of the bridegroom or the bride. Accept sexual freedom while yet it can be attained, by degrees, and not wait until it shall tear your souls at its sudden coming. (1873: 12)4

The excitement within the spiritualist community was enhanced by the conviction that a concentrated and purified revolutionary mind or spirit could imprint itself as a pattern on the physical organism. At the "pivotal moment" of the sexual climax, Heaven's Gate would open on Earth, and the highest spirit would find a way to inscribe itself on matter. The best that the man could do at that moment, in the photographic metaphor, was to be "pure," to avoid acting as a distorting lens or filter, so that the clear spiritual light could flow into his partner.

Some believed that the noble spirits of the past were preparing to condense their energies and reenter the world by impregnating sensitive and cooperative women, who would produce a new, elevated human-spirit hybrid race. The Communion of Saints would then occur on Earth. Spear's associate Newton explained in 1856 that the spirits "contemplate the introduction of a higher order of existences, through a divine marriage and

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4 Correspondents to The Religio-Philosophical Journal, an important anti-Woodhull and anti-free love spiritualist newspaper, believed that Stephen Pearl Andrews had actually written this speech.
holy association of persons; who shall bring forth offspring corresponding to their improved, elevated, and spiritualized conditions” (Spear 1857: iv). Thaddeus Spencer Sheldon, another associate of Spear, gave a speech at a spiritualist convention that he attended with Newton and Wright in which he “discharged a whole broadside of ideas novel and startling to conservative minds.” He explained that “it is possible for advanced minds in finer conditions (spirits) to associate, concentrate their psychological powers, and by acting upon receptive mothers, without miracle, to reproduce their present combined characteristics in a human child,” eventually making it “possible to introduce into the world astronomers, mathematicians, poets, artists, metaphysicians, moralists, organizers and better types of humanity generally, as they may be desired, as it now is to improve the stock of animals on the farm” (Newton 1858).

During the 1860s and 1870s, when the spiritualist community widely embraced the notion that mind informed, if not actually conjured, matter, in the sense that thoughts during sex imprinted themselves on the child, spiritualists came to regard the “full body materializations” of spirits as the highest achievement of the spirit medium. These demonstrated that spirit would organize itself, embody itself, in a palpable substance. Spirit would give birth to a human form. The “cabinet materialization” of the spiritualist séance that developed at that time would seem to have been an unselfconscious and unconscious performance in which the closeted female medium materialized (or, one might say, gave birth to) spiritual beings who emerged from the cabinet and embodied themselves in glorified forms. The medium herself as well, one might say, was both liberated and reborn in a glorified form from the cabinet, the darkroom where her new self had been developed and where her old self was yet enclosed (Hawken: 37).

By the early 1870s some spiritualists even used the spiritualizing of sex to anticipate the elimination of purely human sex altogether. The believers called themselves “Alphites” (or “Alphaiists”)—and published their ideas in The Alpha, a journal that more generally advocated sexual abstinence and was edited by physician Caroline Brown Winslow. Women in an ennobled or spiritualized condition, they suggested, would ultimately be able to reproduce merely through the visitation of the Spirit(s)—repeating Mary’s immaculate conception and “divine” (because uncorrupted) maternity. Spiritualist trance lecturer Addie Lucia Ballou developed this vision (she wrote that it came to her in a trance state) in a series of articles in 1872–73 on what she called “spiritathesis” in the nationally distributed spiritualist newspaper The Religio-Philosophical Journal. How many of even the most radical regarded this as a literal possibility, as opposed to a beautiful dream, is impossible to say.
This gave a particular meaning to the widespread, potent, but only vaguely articulated notion of “generation separate from sexual conditions,” an idea perhaps first explained as the basis of social reform by Charles Fourier, who divided the “passion of love” into material and spiritual functions (1.184, 2.69–83). The idea found its way, in contradictory forms, into such diverse theories as John Humphrey Noyes’s “male continence” system at Oneida, which separated the “amative” function from the “propagative” function of sex, and Mary Baker Eddy’s tentative speculations on the possibility of asexual reproduction in humans.

The radical spiritualist interpretation was that spirit, mind, or feeling (even sexual arousal or orgasm) could become so much the master instead of the slave of matter, that it could cause conception, whether or not the physical act of sex occurred. This meant that women might imagine a time when sex with men would be obviated, even in order to have children (Waisbrooker: 1–3). As Newton put it, whoever a child’s earthly father is, the real paternity for every conception is accomplished through an “overshadowing of the Most High” (1879: 6). Women—and the spirits—might therefore become ascendant or even all sufficient, an idea that, after changing the literal reference to “spirits” to the more general “spirit,” found an echo within the early New Thought movement (Satter: 12, 148–149).

At a minimum, even if men were not to be cast out of the temple of sex altogether, men and women’s sexual energies and “magnetisms” had to be equalized during the sexual “exchange”; otherwise, the imbalance would distort the divine imprint on the embryo. For this reason, both Woodhull and another Spear associate, Paschal Beverly Randolph, repeatedly stressed that men, through what they called “equilibration,” had to take care to bring their women partners to sexual climax and not simply stop after their own climaxes, leaving their partners unfulfilled. In every sense, women had to be given the freedom to find their own fulfillment.

At the time of the Massachusetts Spiritualist Convention in 1867, Randolph was in Boston running a clinic where he taught “sexual hygiene.” He explained that a woman was entranced during orgasm and that, during those moments, she was completely open to impression from her partner’s mind, who acted, in turn, as a channel for high (or low) spirits to enter her (45). The mother, as the true agent of reproduction, was a

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5 Here was a point on which “sexual hygienists” differed widely among themselves—some taught that male and female had opposite magnetic “charges,” positive and negative, and therefore could “attract” each other as “affinities.” Others, however, regarded the force of attraction as something like gravity or regarded specific attractions between two individuals as lock-and-key relationships. Others regarded male and female “affinities” almost in a taxonomic sense, as two individuals who had a large number of essential similarities.
kind of aperture for Heaven to appear on Earth, a gate through which the spirits of the race would pass into the future generation. For the spiritualists’ reproductive theory, the mother’s body was, in fact, the place where Heaven and Earth were joined, where spirit and matter were reconciled, where the contradictions between religious and scientific discourse were resolved (Taves: 166–167).

A woman, sensitive to the spirits, could deliver a heavenly being into the world, a material being formed entirely by mind or spirit and undiluted by the physical constraints and laws of the mere present:

The thoughts, or rather, the elements of the being . . . have been influenced & absorbed to her being from various sources, from various persons, and let her cohabit with whom she will, that offspring is legitimately and naturally hers & no one human being is the author or sustains the relation of father to it in any true sense . . . It may be declared that mind impregnates matter and hence then comes what is called birth. If two persons could be brought into the copulative condition destitute of mind, there could be no birth. It is mind which passes to the sexual organs, which originates birth. (Spear 1858b)

It seemed possible, then, in a utopian world, to render men entirely beside the point, either to the question of heredity or even to the bare fact of reproduction. Women and spirit (or spirits) would do the whole work. It would be an era of women’s dominion, not men’s.

Spiritualist and women’s rights activist Eliza Woodson Burhans Farnham captured the idea. She wrote that, through women, “the race is destined to rise to a more exalted position than ever before it has held, and for the first time to form its dominant ties of relationship to that world of purer action and diviner motion, which lies above the material one of intellectual struggle and selfish purpose wherein man has held and exercised his long sovereignty” (311).

The spiritualists’ sexual revolution led in contradictory directions simultaneously—toward unhampered individual freedom in sexual choice but also toward reforming and regulating individual sexual activity under a plan of social engineering. It also led simultaneously to license as well as asceticism.

The revolution led some toward an appreciation of the immanence of the divine in earthly ecstasy and toward uninhibited sexuality and the acceptance of pleasure, regarded as angelic or as the working of the spirit. Frank Wadsworth, the editor of The Spiritual Republic, like many others in and out of the spiritualist community, parodied this “free love” as “free lust” (1867a).

The revolution also led some toward transcendence and toward an ascetic ideal of thoroughly eliminating “animal passion” in the human
organism. Women would no longer need protection from men’s sexual predation, even if they were to walk around in the nude, like Eve in Paradise. Actual sexual intercourse would be hedged about with so many preconditions for bringing the minds and bodies of the man and woman into the very highest sacramental purity that it might occur, like some grand conjunction of planets, only on the rarest of occasions and then only for the purpose of conceiving a child.

The language of the one group of sexual reformers was sometimes indistinguishable from that of the other. Groups and individuals sometimes vacillated, passing from license to asceticism and back again. Theorists at the time who intended to reform sexual relations saw indulgence and denial as variations on a single theme of continence (Gordon: 159–185). The common goal was to live “as angels,” to recapture the innocence of Eden. This was why Wheeler’s explanation that “the integrality of sexism” meant “the morality of sacramental marriage” did not satisfy those who suspected that its real meaning was the morality of extramarital sex (Wadsworth 1867c). For free lovers commonly distinguished between false marriage—that which was merely sanctioned by church or state—and true marriage—a natural and profound spiritual bond of love (Brown 1861: 7–9).

Both the libertines and the ascetics sounded much the same on this subject. For both, a woman “in the highest condition” was clothed “only in her aura” (Spear 1857: 307). Farnham, on the platform at a spiritualist conference in May 1857, quoted Spear’s spirit messages on this: “Spiritualism comes, then, to call out a few persons who shall be divinities, or goddesses in human form; who shall know no shame; who shall seek no fig-leaf coverings; who shall be so pure that garments shall not be used for purposes of concealment, but only for comfort and convenience” (Spear 1857: 621). Then she added her own comment: “It is expected that the low, lascivious, will treat efforts of this sort with contempt. It is expected that persons undertaking to reach this high position will be misinterpreted; but the end to be reached is of higher moment than all the sacrifices which may be required” (Brittan 1857a).

The attempts to “reach this high position” included experiments “to elevate, to holyize, to divinize and spiritualize woman,” to “bring her into a condition where low thoughts cannot be generated in her mind,” and “to so live, be so pure, so holy, that evil can find no place in her bosom, and by a law of necessity she cannot attract evil.” Part of what that meant was revealed in the autumn of 1857 when newspapers reported that “spirits” had directed the residents of Spear’s utopian community at Kiantone, New York, to do without clothing.

Spear’s radical free love associates apparently practiced a group training to desensitize the participants to frank sexual language and perhaps
other sexual behavior and then to resensitize them to it as sacramental. In this training each woman was to “be brought into that condition where conversations can be free on subjects of this character, so that blush shall not matte her cheek.” The point was that

persons must be so educated, purified, and spiritualized, that they will cease to think of the sexual organs with other than high and holy feelings; the false modesty which is startled at conversation on vital subjects must be eradicated from the mind. Man must come to that state wherein he will feel that the human form is divine, that every organ is holy, that all the functions are pure. (Spear 1857: 257)

Woodhull’s 1873 speech to the American Association of Spiritualists also recommended the therapeutic use of blunt sexual language, to draw what had been hidden into the light of public discourse, and configuring “free love” as “free speech.”

“Sexism,” as the “scientific” practice of sex, also included a philosophy of ecstatic experience. Some considered that this was to be achieved through coitus reservatus—what today would be called Tantric sex—a practice that appears to have been fairly well known within the utopian spiritualist and radical communities of the time. It was not undertaken simply as a method of birth control but as a way to exercise and increase one’s magnetic and electrical attractive power. Newton wrote that the man’s retention of his semen had the effect, through an inner alchemy, of transmuting it, “the concentrated essence of all the life-forces of your being,” as he told his readers, “distilled and compounded with marvelous chemistry in the most wonderful of laboratories,” into ecstasy and enlightenment:

This element when retained in the system—the mental powers being properly directed—is in some way absorbed and diffused throughout the whole organism, replacing waste, and imparting a peculiar vigor in every part. It is taken up by the brain, and may be coined into new thoughts—perhaps new inventions—grand conceptions of the true, the beautiful, the useful—or into fresh emotions of joy, and impulses of kindness and blessing to all around. (1875: 30)

A name for the philosopher’s stone of transmuted sexual energy of either sex was “the elixir of life,” as in the title of Woodhull’s keynote

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6 Noyes’s followers at Oneida called the technique “male continence,” but spiritualist physician Alice Bunker Stockham later called it “karezza,” and it was also known as “magnetation” (Sears: 209–213). Not all the sexual theorists in the spiritualist movement recommended coitus reservatus; P. B. Randolph, for example, did not, although he, like other spiritualist healers, surveyed equipment meant to help men guard against “spermatorrhea” or loss of semen outside of sexual intercourse.
address to the spiritualists' convention. This energy was supposed to maintain the body's youth and to make it possible, after death, to materialize at will back on Earth (Waisbrooker: 3–4). As Woodhull declared to the convention, "The law of life! The law of love! These are what we need to discover, advocate and practice; and when we shall have done all this, and not until then, farewell all human misery. Not till then can the millennium be ushered in—death banished the earth, and the resurrection accomplished" (American Association of Spiritualists: 45). This would be accomplished either by the spirit's taking on a glorified form—suggestive to some of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection—or, during the especially "sensitive" period of pregnancy, by the spirit inhabiting a growing human embryo.

Some spiritualists who might have been expected to acknowledge themselves as unabashed free lovers (at least in theory) also wrote against promiscuity—and not just as found in the "degraded prostitution of loveless marriages." One reason for this was perhaps the desire to deflect conservative criticism (or even, perhaps, legal prosecution), but another may have been the wish not to cast pearls before swine, not to teach free love to those who were impure and who would therefore misunderstand and abuse it. Those within the spiritualist community who wished to identify the libertines among them found the true positions of the various writers and proponents of sexual reform difficult to divine and equally difficult to describe frankly and publicly.

The spiritualist newspapers, for example, merely criticized the free love members of John Spear's "Sacred Order of Unionists" for quoting Paul's letter to Titus—"To the pure, all things were pure" (Hardinge 1870: 237–238)—without saying unequivocally that they were using it to justify their sexual practices. Spear associate Newton recommended that "in God's name, then, give [woman] her freedom to move in such orbit as she will—gathering honey from any and every opening flower, and lovingly bringing the same to the domestic hive" (Spear 1857: 611–612). Newton also compared the healthy benefits of secrecy (as in the group's esoteric practices) to those that a man received from maintaining his "reserve" of se-

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7 The term elixir of life had a more general usage too: As a young woman married to Canning Woodhull, for example, Victoria was a part of his traveling mesmerist and patent medicine show. The medicine they sold was called "The Elixir of Life."

8 Around the same time Newton used his metaphor of the bee, Samuel Brittan, then editing The Spiritual Age, published an article by zoologist Rufus Browne about the new findings of Carl Theodor Ernst von Siebold on parthenogenesis in bees. This consisted in "the deposition of fertile ova by true virgin females, that is, by individuals whose complete development renders them fully competent to perform the sexual act in the ordinary way, but which are kept from doing so by exclusion from the males" (Browne). One presumes the Alphites would have welcomed human cloning.
men (Newton 1862: 2; 1875: 41). "Reserve," he wrote, "is the grand secret of power everywhere." On the other hand, in the early 1870s when Woodhull, as both spiritualist and free lover, became a lightning rod for public criticism against her free love views, Newton also discoursed at length in the Boston spiritualist newspaper, The Banner of Light, against what seemed to him to be her philosophy of unreserved licentiousness (Jones 1873a, 1873b; Newton 1872).

Spiritualist lecturers James Martin Peebles and Joseph Osgood Barrett, who both (at least at first) supported Woodhull as a pure soul, also wrote a condemnation of free love: "Virile qualities were never more degraded than in those . . . masterful licentiates who mistake a slop of animal sentiment for a well of water springing up into everlasting life, and sink in the bottomless bog of demoralized passion with cries of glory unto the rock on which their feet are planted" (Barrett: 100). Woodhull herself would later declare that she had never meant what she had been thought to mean.

The same confusions had been present in the Massachusetts Spiritualists Association's debate over the word sexism. Revision Committee member Edward Wheeler, for example, criticized Levi Coonley, who had accused Toohey of encouraging promiscuous behavior, for a statement Coonley had made that "if we elevated hell itself high enough it would become the golden floor of heaven" (Colby 1867b: 3).

Sexism meant, in part, recognizing the biological distinction between the sexes. Recognizing the distinction was meant to free women and to protect their particular rights as women, particularly their reproductive rights. Women, according to Henry Wright, exercised a special dominion of power. They had an "empire over the character and development" of their children and, so, over the entire race. Recognizing and protecting that dominion was supposed to be the key to the liberation of women (Hardinge 1867; Stanton: 861). It was meant to change maternity from being a burden and a bond, an instrument of women's oppression, to an instrument of women's liberation, for it would require social changes that would give each woman the power to produce the best offspring possible.

Emphasizing a mother's power over the child's embryonic development, however, could not, in itself, justify her liberation. The science of human sexuality had, at first, seemed to be a partner with (and provide a plan for) schemes of rapid reform and social engineering (Laqueur: 16–24), in which the woman came into her own as the true artist in control of creating her offspring. This "science" of human sexuality developed in the nineteenth century in various ways, often through mere speculation, that were not conducive to women's rights (Tuana: 35–38). Some conceptual models of human reproduction, having considerable weight in the
spiritualist community, imagined the biological processes in a way that
the woman became the passive victim of external influences, not the ac-
tive agent in an "artistic maternity." They provided a rationale to restrict
her freedom and movement and associations, to closet her, in order
to ensure that unhealthy psychic influences would not be transmitted
through her to her offspring. Emphasizing that a woman had a special
power and sensitivity ironically made her the slave of what she was ex-
posed to, in her metaphorical role of camera, as if her shutter were stuck
open and had to be manually covered over.

This made her helplessly vulnerable to sexual impressions and influ-
ences (Braude: 177, 190; Moore: 119–121). To continue the photographic
metaphor, she needed to be kept in the dark so that she would not auto-
matically reproduce the image that impinged on her. Portraying women
as especially powerful "sensitives" or mediums—as if they were photo-
graphic plates—ultimately made them dependent on men to protect and
guard them (Wright 1863: 76–79). Where this led was evident in Levi
Coonley's declaration that mediums were not responsible for their im-
moral (that is, sexual) behavior because, at least in trance, they were help-
less to resist impressions:

He believed that there was no class of society who were more upright and
pure than they; but the very fact of their being mediums signified that they
were the subjects of influences which were of the earth as well as of the
heavens; it was true that mediums reflected the conditions around them,
externalizing the spiritual state of the social life of the age, as well as the life
in the [heavenly] spheres, and, as they were not considered as they should
be, they suffered in consequence, not so much, perhaps, because of any
special fault of their own, as of the elements which were thrown upon them,
and of which they became the victims. (Colby 1867b)

The consequences for women's freedom and autonomy were retro-
grade. Under this regime individual rights became less important as a goal
in human sexual relationships, and the social and biological engineering
of the race became more important. Under this model of sexuality a young
woman might not even be allowed to read a novel that stirred the pas-
sions or allowed into a theater to see an exciting play. California spiritu-
alist newspaper editor Julia Schlesinger left a San Francisco theater one
night appalled at the graphic representation of murder and mayhem she
had witnessed. She wrote that she was ready to try to prevent other im-
pressionable women from seeing it:

The result was depressingly in the extreme; and the thought came what must
be the effects of witnessing such plays upon a delicate, sensitive, preg-
nant woman? Surely the mental picture engraved upon the impressionable
mother's mind must result disastrously upon the embryo child. It is well
known that a momentary fright or sight of some repulsive object will leave
an indelible impression upon the unborn babe, thus disfigured for life.
Is it not probable that the impress of some horrible crime thus stamped
upon the unborn, may, in years to come, yield the fruit of murder? (256)

It was a line of thought that spiritualists had long pursued. In 1875, for
example, Addie Ballou had led a petition drive asking Massachusetts Governor
William Gaston to commute the death sentence of young serial murderer
Jesse Pomeroy to life imprisonment. She argued that Pomeroy was less than
fully culpable because he had been made prone to butchery and murder
when his mother, while he was still in her womb, repeatedly visited the
slaughterhouse where his father was employed and watched his work
(Schlesinger: 146–147).

The fear about uncontrolled and wanton influence on "the race," however, was wider still. The anxiety among whites after the Civil War
about the large numbers of free blacks and non-Anglo immigrants in the
country had its particular effect on the complex of ideas about sexual in-
heritance and the elevation of the race. This was reflected in spiritualists' notions about "the real reason why spirits have come to Earth," as one
spiritualist put it (Henry Brown). That reason, it seemed, was to coun-
teract "downward" pressures on the race, and the spirits would accom-
plish that through mixing their ethereal essences into the reproductive
pool (Chase: 81–84). For some spiritualists, the "race" that the spirits were
going to protect was the human race as a whole, but for some other spiri-
tualists, it was plainly the white race (Andrews 1870a). The other races
might progress to become white or might simply fade away, as it were.
Some spiritualists who had been ardent antislavery activists, such as War-
ren Chase and Stephen Pearl Andrews, who might have been expected to
resist theories of racial superiority, were instead their eager proponents.

During and after the Civil War, spiritualists, working from flawed
notions of biological inheritance, advocated "progressive" public policies
that would protect and promote "blood purity." They opposed the prac-
tice of vaccination (because it involved injecting the blood products, i.e.,
cowpox antibodies, from another, lower species into humans, thereby
"contaminating" their blood). They supported antimiscegenation laws.

Many of them opposed Darwinian evolution, even as they embraced a
"spirit-inspired" form of Social Darwinism. Although most spiritualists were
progressives and held that the Earth and its creatures evolved and de-
veloped, they—like evolutionists influenced by Jean Baptist Lamarck—also
believed that this process was purposeful. Spiritualists believed it was ulti-
mately guided by an immaterial, spiritual intelligence. In this they were
encouraged by Alfred Russel Wallace, codiscoverer with Darwin of the
modern theory of evolution, who was finally at odds with Darwin on the question of whether it was a teleological process. Wallace had become a spiritualist.

One challenge of the materialism that appeared to be implicit in Darwinian theory arose from the question of whether the human "spirit" might simply be a product of biological evolution, an epiphenomenon of the physical organism. Spiritualism could not accept that, for it had described a universe full of intelligent, active spirits that had detached themselves from their bodies. Not surprisingly, some spiritualists proposed explanations for how the human spirit or soul had been implanted into physically evolved apes: Spiritual beings from other planets—or angels—had originally seeded the intelligent spirits of the human race onto the Earth and had recently begun doing so again in order to rejuvenate the race, essentially to insure that the human species would not "bolt" and revert to the degraded animal state it occupied before it had become an animal—spirit hybrid (Blavatsky 1888: 81–86; Newton 1857).

Shortly after the turn of the century, the modern understanding of the mechanisms of genetic inheritance had overcome ideas about female biology that had restricted women's social roles. It demonstrated that hereditary characteristics had a comprehensive material basis and that they were derived equally from both parents. It also undercut the idea that spiritual states and immaterial characteristics were translated into the womb and inherited by the child. Such of these as might influence the child were shifted to the category of "nurture" rather than "nature" and located in the period after birth.

The earlier reproductive notions nevertheless lingered on past the turn of the century. In her 1920 book Woman and the New Race, Margaret Sanger hinted that "weighty medical authorities" still accepted that "through the female alone comes those modifications of form, capacity and ability which constitute evolutionary progress" (228).

The spirits had instructed John Spear in 1858 that a sensitive woman could channel (as we would say today) the actual spirit of Reubens, Archimedes, or Galileo into the unborn child growing within her by constantly looking at Reubens's paintings or by studying astronomy or mathematics (Spear 1858). Similar language appeared in the closing words of Sanger's book. By that time, however, it would seem to have lost the force

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9 Spear's associate P. B. Randolph wrote of "living pictures" (116) and referred the origin of the practice to Hermes Trismegistus, but the provenance of this "translated" text of Randolph is unclear (Deveney: 364). The spirits consecrated Spear's and Hinckley's son as "The Mathematician," perhaps because Hinckley had to devote considerable energy during her pregnancy to keeping track of the finances of Spear's little utopian settlement.
of a literal description of the biological mechanics by which spirit animates matter and by which the actual spirits of the exalted dead might rehabit the world. Despite her rearguard defense of the earlier reproductive model placing the responsibility for heredity only with the mother, Sanger’s language here would seem to have been more rhetorical:

When the womb becomes fruitful through the desire of an aspiring love, another Newton will come forth to unlock further the secrets of the earth and the stars. There will come a Plato who will be understood, a Socrates who will drink no hemlock, and a Jesus who will not die upon the cross. These and the race that is to be in America await upon a motherhood that is to be sacred because it is free. (234)

The newer science of genetics, however, as it took shape toward the beginning of the twentieth century, with the insights of August Weismann and Gregor Mendel, rejected the inheritance of “acquired characteristics,” including momentary, mental, or spiritual ones. Its consequence was to allow women a basis on which to regard themselves as independent agents of heredity, equal with men, with the right to control their own reproductive activity.

By the time the word sexism came along again in 1968, its new usage referred to an inappropriate discrimination between the sexes, not to an appropriate discrimination between them. If the word sexism in its first meaning was meant to help elevate women, then, in the meaning it would have one hundred years later, in its second incarnation, it was meant to uncover, and help to remove, false limits on their rights.

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<tr>
<td>Fowler, Orson Squire</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td><em>Hereditary Descent; Its Laws and Facts Illustrated and Applied to the Improvement of Mankind; with Hints to Woman; Including Directions for Forming Matrimonial Alliances So as to Produce in Offspring Whatever Physical, Mental or Moral Qualities Are Desired; Together with Preventives of Hereditary Tendencies</em>. New York: O. S. and L. N. Fowler.</td>
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Hunt, Harriot Kesia 1856 *Glances and Glimpses: or, Fifty Years Social, Including Twenty Years Professional Life.* Boston: John P. Jewitt and Co.


Keckeler, Temperance Hartman Kinsey 1869 *Thaleia: Woman, Her Physiology and Pathology, in Connection with Maternity; with Hygienic and Medical Directions.* Cincinnati: Keckeler.


Nichols, Thomas Low


Pancoat, Seth


Powell, William Byrd


Randolph, Paschal Beverly


Sanger, Margaret


Satter, Beryl


Saxon, Elizabeth Lyle


Sayles, Lita Barney


Schlesinger, Julia


Sears, Hal D.


Spear, John Murray

The Educator: Being Suggestions, Theoretical and Practical, Designed to Promote Man-Culture and Integral Reform, with a View to the Ultimate Establishment of a Divine Social State on Earth; Comprised in a Series of
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Buescher</td>
<td>More Lurid Than Lucid</td>
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Woodhull (Martin), Victoria Claflin

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td><em>The Elixir of Life; or, Why Do We Die? An Oration Delivered before</em></td>
<td><em>The Elixir of Life; or, Why Do We Die? An Oration Delivered before the Tenth Annual Convention of the American Association of Spiritualists, at Grow's Opera House, Chicago, Ills., by Victoria C. Woodhull, September 18, 1873. New York: Woodhull and Claflin.</em></td>
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<td><em>the Tenth Annual Convention of the American Association of</em></td>
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<td><em>Spiritualists, at Grow's Opera House, Chicago, Ills.,</em></td>
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<td><em>by Victoria C. Woodhull, September 18, 1873.</em></td>
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<td><em>New York: Woodhull and Claflin.</em></td>
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Wright, Henry Clarke

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td><em>The Empire of the Mother over the Character and Destiny of the Race.</em></td>
<td><em>The Empire of the Mother over the Character and Destiny of the Race.</em> Boston: Bela Marsh.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>&quot;From H. C. Wright.&quot;</td>
<td><em>Chicago Spiritual Republic</em>, 2 March: 139.</td>
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