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Sex in the City of God: Free Love and the American Millennium

Cathy Gutierrez

In 1873, before an audience of the tenth annual American Association of Spiritualists, Victoria Woodhull told her listeners to prepare for the day when their daughters would be dating the dead. The lecture, "The Elixir of Life," brought together two of Woodhull's primary concerns—Spiritualism and the free love movement—in a meta-narrative that is parallel to the thesis of her speech: heaven and earth are about to be literally combined, ushering in a curious and quixotic millennium. She argued that death is caused by disease and that disease is caused by bad sex; eliminating bad sex will eliminate disease, which in turn will eliminate death itself. With death vanquished, the spirits of the dead will return to earth, where all will enjoy eternity in a utopia free from the scourges of illness and all manner of social ills. Against the backdrop of American Spiritualism, Woodhull would tell an extraordinary story in which spiritual advancement healed the body and bodily freedom advanced the spirit.

This millennial vision centered on the perfectability of the human body at the intersection of the discourses of medicine, politics, and religion. Woodhull's utopia would be ushered in by society's embracing of the principles of free love, the reform movement that espoused that emotional and physical romantic relations should be governed by mutual love alone without interference from legal or religious authority. Woodhull defied both normative Christianity and the mainstream of Spiritualist believers by refusing to subordinate the body to the soul. Arguing for a natural immortality of the body, she maintained an essential union and inter-reliance of the body and soul rather than a disjuncture between them.

Born Victoria Claflin in 1838, and ironically named for the queen who would come to represent all that was repressive in the nineteenth century, Woodhull led, by all accounts, an extraordinary life. Beautiful and high-spirited, Woodhull was the daughter of a devout but somewhat mad woman and a one-eyed con man from the very wrong side

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of the tracks in Homer, Ohio. By the age of fourteen, she and her younger sister Tennessee were installed as mediums, with the responsibility of financially supporting their entire family. By fifteen, she married Canning Woodhull, a handsome medical doctor, whom she quickly discovered was a liar, drunk, and philanderer. At sixteen, she gave birth to a mentally retarded son whose defects she soon attributed to his father's drinking. Heartbroken, impoverished because of Canning's shenanigans, and forced once again to be the breadwinner for her family, Woodhull later recounted that it was at that moment that she pledged herself to "wage war against this seething impacted mass of hypocrisy and corruption" that society called the sanctity of marriage.¹

After giving birth to a daughter, Zula, who, along with Tennessee, would be one of her few joys in life, Victoria finally divorced Woodhull and, while retaining his name, married Colonel James Blood, an ardent Spiritualist and intellectual who avowed socialism and land reform. Upon instruction from her spirit guide, Demosthenes, Woodhull moved her family, including her sister Tennie, to New York, where the two sisters set up shop as Spiritualist mediums. Demosthenes had given her very good advice indeed, as one of her clients, Cornelius Vanderbilt, was so impressed by her that he gave the sisters their own financier company, making them the first women stockbrokers in America. In 1870, with the aid of Colonel Blood and his friend the radical reformer Stephen Pearl Andrews, Victoria and Tennessee launched a newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, which would be the mouthpiece of socialism and free love (and which was delightfully subtitled *Upward and Onward*).

Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly touted women's suffrage, marriage reform, and Spiritualism and was the first American forum for an English translation of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. The paper ran for six years, during which time Woodhull went on the lecture circuit to deliver speeches about politics, many of which were penned by her husband and Andrews. In 1871, she became the first woman to speak to the House Judiciary Committee, arguing that women's suffrage was already guaranteed by the Constitution. In 1872, she ran for President of the United States with Frederick Douglass as her running mate. The *Weekly* ran her platform of "the rights of labor and the freedom of woman, free speech and free press, free land and free love."² Mired in various scandals and dubbed "Mrs. Satan" by *Harper's Weekly*, Woodhull's bid for the presidency ended with her being in jail on the day Americans reelected Ulysses S. Grant to the office.

In 1871, the National Association of American Spiritualists had elected Woodhull to be its president; two years later, the association

split over Woodhull's politics. That was the year that she delivered "The Elixir of Life" to the Chicago Convention of Spiritualists. Embattled by lawsuits alleging slander in her newspaper and weakened by ill health, Woodhull had been abandoned by the more reputable branch of the suffrage movement, and the public approbation she had received for years in the press had turned into vicious accusations of immorality. The Spiritualists alone, who overwhelmingly supported women's suffrage and progressive reforms, still welcomed her into their realm. The speech that she delivered that day reflected issues that would consume her thinking for the rest of her remarkable life—a millennium of love, with heaven and earth united. Woodhull's millennium represents a larger movement in nineteenth-century America, an implicit and explicit protest against normative Christianity, where the body is not dispensable at death but rather is a necessary and intimately conjoined vehicle for the soul.

Utopia

Woodhull, who advocated freedom of all religions, repeatedly proclaimed herself to be a Spiritualist, and the religious movement had already provided a template of perfection that she would infuse with free love. Spiritualism began in 1848 with the Fox sisters' "mysterious rappings" in Hydesville, New York. The Fox girls, Kate and Margaret, responded to an apparent poltergeist in the house by attempting to communicate with it through a system called "alphabet raps," one for "a," two for "b," and so forth. The ghost responded with raps of his own, and the sweeping religious movement of Spiritualism was inaugurated. For adherents, the ability to traverse the threshold of death and communicate with those in the afterlife was the logical conclusion of the age of communication: as the century progressed, the telegraph, the telephone, and photography would all demonstrate that instant and invisible communication across space was possible. Bridging the gulf between heaven and earth was merely the next step.

The intermediary between heaven and earth was a medium, most often a woman, who would communicate with the dead. As methods of mediumship became more refined in the decade after the Fox sisters' discovery, mediums would generally enter a trance state where the dead could speak through them. Spiritualism provided the alleviation of grief by assuring the living that their kin were thriving in the afterlife surrounded by deceased relatives and wise angels. It also served as a platform for the famous dead to be consulted about contemporary topics, and telling favorites such as Swedenborg, Shakespeare, and Benjamin Franklin were often called upon as commentators

on issues such as abolition and women's equality. Women ascended to public speaking in a paradox of empowerment by being the passive receptacles of the spirits of renowned men.³

The Spiritualist vision of heaven was largely dependent on the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis, the "Poughkeepsie Seer" and the founder of the Harmonial Philosophy. Davis had already authored several books when the Fox sisters communicated with their ghost, Mr. Splitfoot; by allying with the new movement, Davis provided the needed theological backbone that cemented the new appearances of the dead with an established cosmology of the heavens. Relying heavily on Swedenborg's mystical visions of the afterlife, Davis expanded his predecessor's three-tiered heavens to seven tiers that were alive with movement: the dead were not instantly perfected but rather progressed in heaven, climbing the ladder of heavens as they became more knowledgeable and spiritually refined. Heaven was open to all, reflecting the self-identity of the young republic as a meritocracy. As Bret Carroll argues, democratic ideals were working in tandem with religious values as Spiritualism depicted an afterlife that was simultaneously hierarchical and mobile:

Because [Spiritualists] accepted the cultural premium on being "self-made," they joined a growing number of their contemporaries in rejecting the orthodox Calvinist notions of predestination and divine election. In its place, they envisioned a cosmos much like their understanding of how Jacksonian society functioned; hard work and free action resulted in spiritual ascent, status and authority were achieved rather than ascribed, and success (salvation) was within the grasp of all.⁴

The heavens themselves resembled a middle-class American landscape sanitized of commerce and poverty, where the dead enjoyed temples, museums, and schools.⁵ The "Summerland," as Davis called it, was as close to true multiculturalism as the epoch ever saw: completely inclusive of all peoples, there were ethnic neighborhoods in heaven, and different religions continued to be practiced by their adherents.⁶ Since Spiritualism dispensed with the idea of hell, sinners were merely consigned to the lowest realms until their misdeeds had been righted.

This inclusivity would have sat well with Woodhull, who repeatedly called for the freedom to practice all religions unmolested. Her usual roster of religions that she mentioned in her speeches included pagans, Universalists, Jews, Muslims, Quakers, Calvinists, Unitarians, and even Catholics, and she frequently compared the right to freedom of religion with the right to freedom of sexuality.⁷ Generally these comparisons were rhetorical devices to stave off charges of

promiscuity on her own part: by analogy, just because one believed that others should be free to be Muslims does not mean that one herself is a Muslim, and the same goes for free love. However, this clever rhetoric was undercut by her obvious favoritism, after Spiritualism, of one religion in particular—the Oneida Community.

The Oneida Community, founded by John Humphrey Noyes, was a working utopia based on Noyes's conviction that the millennium had indeed already arrived in 70 of the Common Era. Like the Shakers and many of the smaller millennialist movements of the day, the Oneidans tackled what scripture had meant when Jesus responded that, in heaven, "they are neither married nor given in marriage." Noyes's response was a communal equality of love, both spiritual and physical. The Oneidans denied charges that they were free lovers, although they occasionally used the phrase to describe themselves; the distinction between the two movements, however, is boldly drawn by history. The free love movement advocated any form of heterosexual expression that an individual wished to practice, including monogamy and celibacy. The Oneida Community practiced "group marriage," wherein all members of the community could, under certain regulations and with strict birth control prohibitions for the men, have heterosexual relations with each other. Noyes saw monogamy as logically and theologically antithetical to the Christian injunction to love all community members equally.⁸ In direct contrast to the free lovers, members of Oneida expended an extraordinary amount of energy attempting to prevent "exclusive attachments," or the love of one person more than the love of the community as a whole.

While these distinctions were not lost on Woodhull or her ghost writers, she argued that its "enforced promiscuousness is preferable even to our enforced monogamy"⁹ and cited the community's prosperity, honesty, morality, and health as unimpeachable proof of the benefits of free love. Moreover, Woodhull borrowed a central concept from the Oneida Community that became pivotal for her construction of utopia—stirpiculture. Stirpiculture was John Humphrey Noyes's name for his eugenics experiment that the community undertook in 1869; since their birth control method had been so successful, the community needed to renew its population, and Noyes, a fan of both Plato and Darwin, implemented his attempt to breed people for spiritual superiority. Noyes placed so much hope in the success of this experiment that, even after his abdication of leadership in 1879 and his subsequent exile to Canada, he wrote that all members are "to share the endless blessings that are to come from the race-germ produced, and to take an interest and part . . . in the evolution of that germ by future cares and labors."¹⁰

Woodhull was so enamoured of the concept of stirpiculture that she frequently, and erroneously, claimed to be its author. Her dedication to this idea remained long after she had left America for England and her second husband for her third; her writings in England are entirely her own, without the input from Blood and Andrews that many of her American lectures had. In fact, since Woodhull became increasingly strident in her views of utopia after she became separated from her ghost writers, one may conclude that either she learned something profound and lasting from them or else the American lectures contained a good deal of Woodhull's views to begin with. Her experiences mothering the beautiful but "imbecilic" Byron had scarred her deeply, and she argued that human breeding should be brought under the banner of science just as anything else in the call for progress was subject to scientific scrutiny.

In the culmination of decades of thinking about eugenics, in 1888, she called for governmental interference in procreation to eliminate hereditary disease that she saw as the cause of insanity, enfeeblement, and crime. She charged the government with implementing a somewhat shocking revision of the Decalogue: "Thou shalt not marry when malformed or diseased. Thou shalt not produce His image in ignorance. Thou shalt not defile His Temple. Let it make it a crime against the nation, as it is against God's divine laws, to break these commandments, to thrust the results of their [people's] ignorance on the body social to be supported at the expense of the nation."¹¹ Her utopia was thus cast against the dystopias of industrialized society:

We build institutions to incarcerate the insane, the idiots, the epileptics, the drunkards, the criminals, &c. . . . And in after years, in visiting these buildings, [parents] will see the result in their ignorance in the brutish faces of the inmates with the legible stamp of hereditary sensuality and vice. Every building erected to meet the exigencies of this ignorance will be a reproach to all womanhood. Do people realize, that nowhere on the face of the earth is there a building erected to teach people how to perfect the human body? The sooner mankind awaken to the all-important truth, that you cannot force people into moral conduct, into a better social condition—that you must educate them—the sooner we shall have emptied the buildings erected to contain those monstrosities.¹²

Bad children were the result not of improper parenting but of improper sexuality, and Woodhull repeatedly laid this firmly at women's feet as both the cause and the cure for future generations. At the heart of her argument is the relationship between sex and disease. If either parent is sickly, the progeny will be "puling, weakly, miserable, [and] damned." God condemns such unions, regardless of secular law or

religious injunctions; as a corollary to this, she wrote, in 1874, that “all diseases not to be attributed to so-called accidental causes are the result of improper, or the want of proper, sexual conditions; and this applies to all ages and to both sexes.”¹³

And she was happy to define, in many places, what proper sexual relations are: sex based on mutual love, desire, and gratification, without regard for the laws of religion or law. The free love movement had its precedents as early as the 1830s, and, in the mainstream, free love meant little more than marriage reform. In a century where one married without legal recourse to divorce in many states, women in particular often found themselves, like Woodhull had, legally tied to men who were neglectful, abusive, or otherwise deeply unsatisfactory. Despite some legal changes in the 1850s that lessened the husband’s clear-cut ownership of his wife, society continued to enforce a code of honor that entitled men to extraordinary control over their wives, including the repeated release of men who had murdered their former wives’ lovers.¹⁴

Unrestricted sexual access to one’s wife was generally regarded as both a legal and a moral norm. For free love advocates, and Woodhull in particular, the yoke of marriage, protected by the state and Christianity, was tantamount to the ownership of women and stood as a deplorable crime on par with slavery. The rhetoric of slavery was employed frequently in free love propaganda and, no doubt, gave many pause in the post-Civil War era. However, both in other Spiritualists’ writings and in Woodhull’s platforms, the predominant trope equates marriage with legalized prostitution. She wrote, “The woman who sells her body promiscuously is no more a prostitute than she is who sells herself in a marriage without love. She is only a different kind of prostitute. Nor are either of them any more prostitutes than are the countless wives who nightly yield their unwilling bodies to lecherous husbands, whose aim is sexual gratification without regard to the effect upon the victim.”¹⁵

Nor was it only the legal aspects of marriage that Woodhull criticized. The economic disparity between men and women drove women into loveless marriages, and this fact served as a call for women to become economically independent. *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly* trumpeted, “SHE WHO MARRIES FOR SUPPORT, AND NOT LOVE, IS A LAZY PAUPER, COWARD, AND PROSTITUTE.”¹⁶ As Amanda Frisken has noted, “By equating them with prostitutes, this critique threatened the respectability of even faithful married women.”¹⁷ Indeed, Woodhull went so far as to prefer prostitution over marriage because at least the prostitute has a greater measure of control over how frequently she has sex.

Victoria Woodhull's ideas about utopia were many and varied, but all iterations included sexuality based on love and desire alone; an equal and free distribution of land and wealth; the complete equality of women politically, sexually, and economically; freedom of speech and religion; and the perfection of the body from disease and incapacity. As she once said of herself, "My whole nature is prophetic. I do not and cannot live in the present."¹⁸ The woman who almost no commentator can refrain from saying was a hundred years ahead of her time was in many respects prophetic. I will turn to her prophecies on religion, when she herself turned to the question of the coming millennium, after a brief description of the body and its discontents in the Gilded Age.

Disease and Discord

The practice of medicine in the mid-nineteenth century presented such a cacophony of competing theories and epistemological flux that amateurs and charlatans were frequently indistinguishable from their pedigreed counterparts. The increasing democratization of society on all fronts had brought the process of credentialing professionals into suspicion, since it smacked of elitism and aristocratic leanings.¹⁹ By midcentury, many states had eliminated licensing altogether, thus removing any zone of distinction between the trained doctor and the potential quack. Even among the mainstream professionals, the scientific method had not yet been rigorously applied to the discipline of medicine; Enlightenment rationalism was slowly replaced by empiricism in a self-conscious attempt to garner more respect for the profession.²⁰ Heavily influenced by the Parisian school, this group of well-educated medical professionals would embrace observation and would eventually unite the "regulars," elevating them above the many schools competing for both theoretical and public hegemony.

Before the therapeutic revolution of relying on empirical data, American medicine "embodied the remnants of the Enlightenment hope that some unifying medical principle would be found, a law of disease and treatment that would prove as fertile for medicine as the law of gravity had for the physical sciences."²¹ The search for a single cause of disease underlay many of the more prominent schools of medicine and practically all of the more fringe movements. In an epoch when blood-letting and induced vomiting were still commonplace in standard medicine, many sought a cause—and a cure—that was more accessible to the lay person and less brutal in its remedies. Mesmerism, phrenology, hydropathy, and Spiritualism all threw their theoretical hats into the ring, causing and curing disease at a rate perhaps

equal to other hawkers of health. While many other pseudoscientific methods were proposed in this period, this overview will be relegated to these four which would have been the most popular with Woodhull's audience.

From the outset, Mesmerism had been conceived as a medical panacea and began not as a prototype of hypnosis but rather as a single-cause theory called "animal magnetism." Animal magnetism was developed in the eighteenth century by the colorful figure of Franz Anton Mesmer, who posited that the planets had, by reason of universal attraction between objects, an effect on each other, the tides, the earthly atmosphere, and the human body. All parts of the chain of being were subject to the dynamics of a fluid that penetrates the universe and are thus affected in an analogous way to how gravity causes tides in the ocean.²² Mesmer proposed that the attraction between these bodies was properly considered a magnetic one and that the fluid flowed into the human body from the outside.

This fluid can become blocked or misdirected, resulting in disease, since the patient would require an influx of additional fluid from the external world. Being magnetic, however, this fluid can be restored to flowing properly by the use of magnets; moreover, the magnetizer is himself magnetic and can affect the flow by touching the patient.²³ The treatment involved inducing a trancelike state, under which the patient would be consulted for his diagnosis of his own disease and its remedy. Animal magnetism was highly popular in Spiritualist circles throughout the century, while Mesmerism came to denote the production of a trance state that would be instrumental to the birth of Spiritualism as well as the early controversies surrounding psychology.²⁴

Phrenology, brought to America by Johann Gaspar Spurzheim in 1832, was something of a cross between neurological speculation and physiognomy. Originally a map of the human brain that located personality characteristics in specific physical locations, phrenology was transformed in America from being prescriptive to mostly descriptive. Spurzheim departed from his mentor, Franz Josef Gall, the founder of phrenology, and argued that "specific faculties, sentiments, or propensities could be consciously strengthened or inhibited. Not only did this give phrenology a specific psycho-behavioristic dimension, but it paved the way for unlimited human improvement."²⁵ Phrenology's legitimacy in America was quickly eroded by the introduction of "head readings," or the assertion that the physical characteristics of one's head could accurately predict the character of the person. These character determinations were used in assessing the honesty and similar personality traits of others and were used to identify who had criminal tendencies and even to secure marriage matches.²⁶

Hydropony was another single-cause theory of the period, assessed by Marshall Scott Legan as "one of the least harmful, at least in its regimen, of the pseudo-sciences."²⁷ Hydropony proposed that the human body could be cured of practically any ailment through the application of cold water. Ushering in the opening of health spas and bath houses, hydropony undoubtedly contributed to the overall cause of American health by improving hygiene.²⁸ The water cure, as it was called, involved wrapping the patient in a sheet soaked in cold water and then swaddling her with several blankets and placing the patient under a feather mattress. Once the patient started sweating profusely, she would be relieved of the layers and promptly doused with cold water. Along with homeopathy and animal magnetism, hydropony was a favorite cure among the Spiritualists, and Andrew Jackson Davis's own weekly paper, *The Herald of Progress*, frequently printed accounts of its refinement and even serialized entire books by doctors experimenting with such methods.

Davis, however, devised his own system of health, and his model was the closest of the contemporaneous ones to Woodhull's proposition. *The Harbinger of Health*, which went into nineteen editions between 1861 and 1909, succinctly explains his position:

Disease, in the very shortest phrase, is *discord*. . . . When the body is thus besieged with "discord," how can the soul feel harmonious? It cannot; for mind must suffer with the organs by which it exists. This fact, however, is of the highest significance. It teaches that the soul—which is the Fountain of forces out of which the mind rises into entity from an elemental state—contains the conquering and health-giving powers. From these energies, and not from medicines, the sick may expect relief.²⁹

The Harbinger of Health is broken down into sections on theory and practical application. In the former parts, Davis railed against the use of drugs, advocated animal magnetism and the use of clairvoyance to detect the cause of disease, and enumerated a binary nervous system corresponding to the will and the soul. More than half of the book is taken up with answering specific questions from correspondents. These queries ranged from the best cure for a rattlesnake bite to the effects that silk dresses have on the wearer. To this, the usually humorless Davis responded that they tended to cause "pride, approbation, and temporary shallow-mindedness."³⁰ Throughout the book and elsewhere, however, Davis repeatedly made a single point about ill health—its cause is ignorance. Disease as we know it is not an invasive outside force but rather an internal lack in the ill. By shifting the vector of disease from one's bodily health to spiritual knowledge,

Spiritualism affected a sea change in discussions of the body: philosophy, not medicine, had the power to cure.

In *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, Ann Taves has detailed the shift over time from a mechanistic model of mediumship predicated on the telegraph to a trance-based model that more closely resembled a psychological state. Spiritualist ideals of healing followed suit. She writes, "By the late 1850s, the 'medium' had largely subsumed the range of phenomena formerly associated with the clairvoyant. Healing and especially 'trance-speaking' mediums rapidly superseded rapping and writing mediums. . . . As the new image gained in prominence, it precipitated an underlying theoretical shift away from an electrical or fluid-based animal magnetism toward a state or trance-based psychology."³¹ In terms of healing, Davis stood as a linchpin between these paradigms; while he began his career as a mesmeric healer, and many of the cures he prescribed were as tangible as decent nutrition and reasonable exercise, he also advocated a more philosophical Spiritualism than many of his contemporaries and decried the increasing demand for more spectacular physical demonstrations from the spirit world. The health of the body could be regulated with common drugs and common sense, but the health of the soul was a prerequisite.

As Swedenborg had articulated before him, Davis posited a body made up of the soul animating the body with disease being the product of discord between the two. His use of rhetoric echoes the strains of American hermeticism to which Spiritualism was so indebted, and his concept of the body was reminiscent of both Plato and the Renaissance system of correspondences in which the body is a microcosm of the universe. Many scholars in the burgeoning field of esotericism have referred to Spiritualism as the "exoteric" branch of a deep, cultural interest in matters pertaining to the occult. Nineteenth-century American articulations of hermetic knowledge, including Spiritualism, were grounded in earlier European lore, frequently conveyed through secret societies like the Freemasons.³²

America, however, had the distinction of showmanship, and the quasi-religious claims and results of the movement were widely publicized. According to Arthur Versluis, Davis was emblematic of coalescing the European folk tradition with Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, and homeopathy.³³ The Renaissance inheritance of correspondences, in which the natural world—including the body—reflected the order of the cosmos writ large, can be heard in Davis's work. In *The Harmonial Philosophy*, he wrote,

The human organism is a world of motions, a solar system, or otherwise a universe in miniature. . . . Disease or discord is the inevitable consequence whenever anything disturbs the circula-

tion of the spiritual principle from the brain. . . . We are thus led to conclude that the mind or spiritual force which inhabits and moves the combination of matter in man's physical economy is a substantial principle. The principles of action, development, refinement and reciprocity are the same everywhere and are unchangeable. Therefore, health consists in the unhindered operation of these laws, firstly, between the spirit and the body, secondly, between both these and universal nature.³⁴

Disease is not the product of an invasive pathogen but rather the product of an error, ignorance, or a spiritual misjudgment that disturbs the harmonious relationship of the body to the soul. Rectifying this discord depends on advancing in spiritual knowledge, bringing the body back into alignment with the soul and, therefore, the cosmos. The body reflects the state of the soul, but the soul is the locus of change, and, concomitantly, that change will result in health. By shifting the parameters of the discussion about health from focusing on the body to improving the soul, Spiritualism provided an alternate articulation of medicine and health. Victoria Woodhull would rely on the discourses of spiritual advancement to promote health, but in a way that very much recuperated the centrality of the body.

A Millennium of Love

"The Elixir of Life" was not only the title of the speech that Woodhull delivered to the Chicago Spiritualists, it had also been the name of the snake oil that her father had had Tennessee peddling when she was a child. The ability to cure disease remained grounded in the body, but, for Victoria Woodhull, disease was not a naturally occurring state that could be remedied with counter measures but rather an unnatural state brought about by improper use of the body. She first marshaled an argument that would have been familiar and agreeable to her Spiritualist audience—health is the product of the congenial flow of magnetic fluid through the body. Animal magnetism was roundly applauded in Spiritualist circles through the turn of the twentieth century and remains covertly with us today in the form of magnetic bracelets, back support, and even the soles of shoes. Andrew Jackson Davis and other important Spiritualists began their careers as mesmeric trance healers, and the two movements shared many foundational beliefs, primarily that each offered worldviews that seamlessly fused the (apparently) scientific progress of the age with ineluctably religious values and meaning.

For Woodhull's purposes, however, the invisible energy that accounts for health had a sexual source: "But what is Animal Magne-

tism? It is Sexual [*sic*] vitality merely; and it is nothing else. A person, whether male or female, cannot be a magnetic healer, except he have sexual vitality; and it will be found that the most successful healers, are those who have the most of this element."³⁵ The fluid that governs health was, thus, brought under the rubric of sexuality, and individual bodies influenced the health of others: "Where a person positive or negative to another, afflicted with disease, is brought into magnetic relations, with this other, and the positive and negative currents are established, that disease, whatever it may be, necessarily departs, since where these currents exist, disease cannot remain."³⁶

Disease is a product of relationships, then, and its cure will be interpersonal. And here Woodhull did not shy away from a blatant critique of who was impeding the flow of sexual vitality in women. She wrote, "I need not explain to any woman the effects of unconsummated intercourse though she may attempt to deceive herself about it; but every man needs to have it thundered in his ears until he wakes to the fact that he is not the only party to the act, and that the other party demands a return for all he receives . . . demands that he shall not, either from ignorance or selfish desire, carry her impulse forward on its mission only to cast it backward with the mission unfulfilled."³⁷ This rather shocking declaration was supported not only medically through equating sexuality and magnetism but also socially, with the dire threat that, if people did not get their sexual acts together, society would encourage homosexuality.³⁸

There is no accurate way of gauging the audience's reaction to what must have been her most scandalous assertion of all, that women were sexually desiring creatures who universally wished to be sexually fulfilled. The Spiritualists' association did split in two after this convention and a similar one in Vineland, New Jersey; clearly the half that advocated Woodhull's views were amenable to some or all of her claims. What is certain is that Woodhull inverted two common assumptions with her speech: she made the domestic public, and she made the trance state subordinate to the waking. Woodhull was not speaking as medium but as a woman and a public figure; she was fully conscious, the speech was prepared in advance, and she claimed that the views expressed in it were supported by the spirits but remained her own. Trance states frequently functioned cross-culturally as a way for marginalized members of society to express their views without fear of public censure.³⁹ And Spiritualism had a long track record of women speaking in public, often criticizing society, politics, and even Christianity, but behind the shield of the trance state.⁴⁰ Woodhull spoke for herself, and, even when Blood was pulling the strings, Woodhull would often fly off extemporaneously, and she had a knack for silencing hecklers with aplomb.⁴¹

The elimination of loveless unions—particularly marriage—will eliminate disease, and with it the children born to disease and insanity. Love, immediate and mutual, will conquer the final foe, death itself. The millennium of love can be attained either voluntarily or it will be imposed on people by the spirit realm at their return. The usually benign spirits were depicted as angry and full of agency, a departure from their usual status as perfectly happy in heaven and interceding in human affairs only when called upon to do so, and then only by giving advice. Woodhull wrote, “I tell you that the spirits are coming back to tear your damned system of sexual slavery into tatters and consign its blackened remnants to the depths of everlasting hell.”⁴² Spiritualism, which had dispensed with a final judgment, had no real language of the apocalypse, only progress, since its theology lacked a hell, a judging God, and a category of the damned. Woodhull reinvented Spiritualism with the rhetoric of the apocalyptic, but with an inversion of the usual roster of sins—humanity was misusing sexuality, and therefore the spirits were angered.⁴³

Despite her casual relationship to Christianity, Woodhull conscripted its traditional forms in the service of a reversal of what constitutes sinning: “Oh, children of the earth, that you had better put your houses in order and await the coming of the bridegroom or the bride. Accept sexual freedom while it can be attained, by degrees, and not wait until it shall tear up your souls at its sudden coming. . . . I have come to you, in time, to warn you to prepare for what it surely coming, aye, even now is at your very doors, liable to break in upon you and find you like the foolish virgins with your lamps untrimmed.”⁴⁴

The return of the spirits is not common in Spiritualist writings; the dead were busily advancing through the spheres of heaven, and heaven was the destination for the living. In making the claim that the spirits wished to return to earth, Woodhull was relying on her audiences’ knowledge of and belief in some recent developments in mediumship, foremost the increasing number of “materializations” reported at séances. Concrete proof of the presence of the dead at séances was coming into increasing demand; the spirits delivered presents from the afterlife, usually gloves or flowers, and the use of cabinets in seances was on the rise. Cabinets were structures that served as a portal from the spirit world to earth, and the spirits would manifest themselves so that the sitters could see, but generally not touch, their heavenly visitors. A newspaper account from this period extolled the improvements in mediumship witnessed by the temporary embodiment of the dead. The paper provided the reader with a detailed floor plan of the house where the materializations took place and included several drawings of the spirits who made appearances, pre-

sumably to demonstrate how radically different each one looked, thus warding off claims of deception. After detailing how the author had made a thorough search of the room, and had even patted down the medium for traces of trickery, he wrote: "Then, I think, the conviction formed itself that no matter how many 'sceptics' came battering against the granite facts, no matter what array of 'exposers' might blow their tin horns or penny trumpets, that Jericho would stand. . . . [T]he genuine phenomena of this one seance could not be obliterated from my memory."⁴⁵

Instances of the embodiment of the dead were also attested to by the popularity of spirit photographs. In 1861, William Mumler had accidentally provided the first instance of a spirit in a photograph, and when he was taken to court on charges of fraud, in 1869, the prosecution pulled out the big guns for its case, calling in P. T. Barnum, among others, to demonstrate how spirit photographs could be faked with wet-plate photography. The Honorable Justice Dowling was presented with nine different ways a photograph could be manipulated to make a ghostly figure appear, some of them as simple as having an assistant tip-toe behind the sitter for a fraction of the long exposure time. Double exposures and double-plate negatives gave the would-be charlatan his choice of method in ghost photography. After three weeks of trial, Mumler was set free; in his closing argument, Mumler's attorney compared him to Galileo, fighting an uphill battle in the name of science against the blind rigidity of his peers.⁴⁶ From that time forward, spirit photographs proliferated in America and England, with customers paying three times as much for a spirit sitting as for a regular one. The materialization of the dead was common enough that thousands kept proof of it on their mantels.

However, Woodhull is unique in presenting the dead as wishing to return to earth permanently. She alone was sounding the clarion call for the millennium, and she used the return of the spirits to shame her audience into abiding by the principles of free love. She asked rhetorically, "Do any imagine that, when the great and good of spirit life, shall return, and in the flesh abide with us, they will pay tribute or respect to the present order of social things? Will they, who thousands of years have been, as the angels in heaven, neither marrying nor given in marriage, conform to our laws which pretend to control sexual intercourse? will [*sic*] they marry their loves on earth legally?"⁴⁷ Like the Oneida Community before her, Woodhull here argued for an interpretation of Jesus' response to the marital state of the dead not as celibacy but as a celestial denial of monogamy. The angelic dead, who have been practicing free love in heaven, will continue to do so when they return to dwell among the living. At this

apex of time, where the living and the dead collided in a new utopia, Woodhull displayed her more radical version of Spiritualism that differentiated her from the mainstream of believers; whereas most Spiritualists advocated political reform and scientific progress, millennial perfection remained somewhere on the distant horizon. For Woodhull, however, that day was imminent, and its arrival was firmly the responsibility of the current generation of believers.

Through the proper use of sexuality, humans will throw off disease and conquer death. At the same time, the dead will return to earth and live among the immortal living. The two will interact in a utopia based on free love, with the centerpiece of this theology based on the perfectability of the human body: "It will be readily understood that when the final union has occurred, when Spirits become materialized, that the bodies in which both [the dead and the living] shall appear will be of the same etherialized material."⁴⁸ Salvation itself depended on the body, and heaven and earth will unite when human bodies are made perfect and dead bodies are resurrected. "Then shall we be able to bridge over the gloomy chasm of death, and to build for ourselves a Jacob's ladder, reaching from earth to heaven, on which spirits and mortals will be perpetually engaged ascending and descending in unending harmony and felicity."⁴⁹

Conclusions

At the historical juncture when the Civil War had wrenched the country open, when abolition had not proved the universal palliative some had hoped for, and the social reform movements of the middle decades of the century had failed to eradicate poverty, prostitution, and intemperance, American postmillennial rhetoric was losing ground. Victoria Woodhull changed the topography of the concept of progress from being centered on the soul to being centered on the body. By shifting the parameters of progress from society to the individual body, Woodhull reintroduced the possibility of a utopia, one merged with the preexisting utopian landscape of the Spiritualist heavens. By foregrounding the body as naturally immortal and subject to disease only as a consequence of improper use, she subordinated all other social ills to the treatment of the corpus, presumably giving some measure of control back to her audience in an epoch of great social distress.

While Spiritualism had a long history of being involved in matters of health and recommending consultation of the spirit realm for medical advice,⁵⁰ Woodhull departed from that model by placing the responsibility for health firmly in the hands of the individual. Two years after Woodhull delivered "The Elixir of Life," Mary Baker Eddy

would also posit that the body was naturally immortal and that disease was caused by a lack of faith. However, Woodhull reversed the definition of sin just as she reversed the status of the body over the spirit—sin is normative sexuality. The freedom from sin was the freedom from coercive sexuality, and the freedom from disease followed. Among increasing materializations of the dead in Spiritualist circles, photographs of the dead as spirits, memorializing the dead by photographing them, and the popularizing of embalming following the Civil War, the dead were seemingly brought back to life in a variety of new ways.⁵¹ Woodhull exploited these appearances of the dead to further underscore the centrality of the body; the spirits of the dead no longer wished to reside in heaven but, in fact, demanded the perfection of humanity and the conjoining of heaven and earth. The coming millennium was not a strictly earthly affair—the spirits, not made perfect at the moment of death, wanted a utopia as well, a more concrete one than their existence in heaven. The interrelationship of the living and the dead had to be made explicit, and just as humans rely on interaction for health, so too did the dead rely on the living to inaugurate the millennium.

Woodhull preached a radical articulation of equality among the sexes, religions, and economic strata, forcefully pointing out the fissure between the lip service the culture paid to this ideal and the stark reality that fell far short of utopia. Using the vehicle of religion to critique contemporaneous cultural norms, she espoused dramatic reversals in normative society—what was private became public, the physical was more valuable than the spiritual. By taking the topic of sex out of the bedroom and bringing it into the lecture hall, Woodhull exposed the deeply ingrained cultural and political notions about the place of women that had been masquerading as a “natural” state of marriage. Draining the religious approval that most people would have assumed accrued to matrimony, she reassigned marriage to be a merely arbitrary cultural phenomenon and, therefore, subject to social change much as slavery had recently undergone.

Moreover, Woodhull contributed to the landscape of millennialist thought by fusing an unrelenting individualism with a communitarian utopia. The individual was the focus of religious reform and bore the responsibility for personal salvation and for the inauguration of the future by the proper use of the body. In the same decade that the Oneida Community would collapse and that Shaker conversion was already in a steep decline, sexual experimentation in a communal setting was suffering from the strict compromises required by communal living. With her amalgamation of millennial rhetoric and sexual politics, Woodhull provided Spiritualism with a much clearer vision of the end point to progress; her utopia was demanding and

insistent, but it did not require submission to communal laws and governance. The return of the dead would create heaven on earth quite literally, not by squelching individual impulses but rather by magnifying them.

As Wouter Hanegraaff has so elegantly pointed out, all new religious movements are de facto protests against existing ones.⁵² Woodhull's utopia was a protest against the dispensability of the body and the elevation of the soul. Both mainstream Christianity and mainstream Spiritualism exalted the soul at the expense of the body, and the division of the two is the locus of criticism in Woodhull's writings. Her perfect society would have the body/soul distinction reunited through the intersection of sex, where both the body and its animating force were inextricably bound up together and with others. It was only by maintaining the union of body and soul that the union of heaven and earth could be accomplished, ushering in a utopia with the immortal living and the embodied dead, enmeshed and entwined on the ladder of love.

Notes

1. There are several engaging, if popularizing, recent biographies of Woodhull's life. See, for example, Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Knopf, 1998). See also Lois Beachy Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran for President: The Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995). Here I am using Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull, Uncensored* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1998), 14.

2. Madeleine B. Stern, ed., *The Victoria Woodhull Reader* (Weston, Mass.: M & S Press, 1974), 6.

3. Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 82–90.

4. Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 74–75.

5. Andrew Jackson Davis, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (Rochester, N.Y.: Austin Publishing Co., [1867] 1910).

6. Andrew Jackson Davis, *Death and the After-Life: Eight Evening Lectures on the Summerland* (Rochester, N.Y.: Austin Publishing Co., [1877] 1911).

7. Victoria Woodhull, *Tried as by Fire; or, The True and the False, Socially* (New York: Woodhull and Claflin, 1874), 17.

8. See Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 154–58.
9. Woodhull, *Tried as by Fire*, 18.
10. John Humphrey Noyes, unpublished letter to Tirzah Miller, 1881, Syracuse University Archives.
11. Victoria Woodhull Martin, "Stirpiculture; or, The Scientific Propagation of the Human Race," in *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, ed. Stern, 10.
12. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
13. Woodhull, *Tried as by Fire*, 15.
14. Hendrik Hartog, "Lawyering, Husbands' Rights, and the 'Unwritten Law' in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 6 (1997): 67–96.
15. Woodhull, *Tried as by Fire*, 19.
16. Amanda Frisken, "Sex in Politics: Victoria Woodhull as an American Public Woman, 1870–1876," *Journal of Women's History* 12 (2000): 94.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Victoria Woodhull, "A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom," in *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, ed. Stern, 42.
19. John S. Haller, *Kindly Medicine: Physio-Medicalism in America, 1836–1911* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 3.
20. John Harley Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820–1885* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 37–40.
21. *Ibid.*, 40.
22. George J. Bloch, *Mesmerism: A Translation of the Original Medical and Scientific Writing of F. A. Mesmer, M.D.* (Los Altos, Calif.: William Kaufman, 1980), 46.
23. Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3–11.
24. Cathy Gutierrez, "From Electricity to Ectoplasm: Hysteria and American Spiritualism," *Aries* 3 (2003): 60–63.
25. Arthur Wrobel, "Phrenology as Political Science," in *Pseudo-Science and Society in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Arthur Wrobel (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 124.

26. Nelson Sizer, *Forty Years in Phrenology; Embracing Recollections of History, Anecdote, and Experience* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1888), 20, 61.

27. Marshall Scott Legan, "Hydrophathy, or the Water-Cure," in *Pseudo-Science and Society in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Wrobel, 74.

28. *Ibid.*, 81.

29. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Harbinger of Health; Containing Medical Prescriptions for the Body and Mind* (Rochester, N.Y.: Austin Publishing Co., 1909), 41–42.

30. *Ibid.*, 219.

31. Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 178.

32. For the transmission of esoteric beliefs from Europe to America, see Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 4. For his discussion of Davis in particular as fusing the medical and the cosmological, see 58–59. For a related discussion of Spiritualism as the "exoteric" branch of the occult "church" in America, see Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), chap. 10, esp. 188. Both Versluis and Godwin give some credence to the later claims by more hard-line occultists that Spiritualism was seeded or perhaps even masterminded by occult adepts to prepare society for future hermetic truths. See Godwin, 197–200.

33. The theory behind homeopathy remains somewhat obscure despite many heroic attempts by scholars to elucidate it. Nonetheless, it was a popular medical movement of the day in which patients were given minute amounts of drugs designed to promote the symptoms of the disease in question, as if the body could be nudged toward curing itself before it became truly ill. For a very brief overview of the movement, see Eugene Taylor, *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), 101–5.

34. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Harmonial Philosophy* (Chicago: Advanced Thought Publishing, n.d.), 353–54.

35. Victoria Woodhull, *The Elixir of Life; or, Why Do We Die?* (New York: Woodhull and Claflin, 1873), 5.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 7.

38. *Ibid.*, 10.

39. Nicholas P. Spanos, *Multiple Identities and False Memories: A Sociocognitive Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1996).

40. See, for example, Emma Hardinge, *Six Lectures on Theology and Nature* (n.p. [1860]); and Cora L. V. Hatch, *Discourses on Religion, Morals, Philosophy, and Metaphysics* (New York: B. F. Hatch, 1858).

41. It is worth noting that, while no doubt Blood had a serious influence on this speech, I suspect that Woodhull penned *The Elixir of Life* herself, since many of her other lectures are marked as “presented by Victoria Woodhull,” and this one gives her as the author. While in later life Woodhull denied that she had ever personally advocated free love, her interest in designing utopias continued, and, at any rate, the much later retraction is immaterial for the speech’s effect on the audience at the time.

42. Woodhull, *Elixir of Life*, 16.

43. This use of apocalyptic rhetoric even after it has been drained of its biblical content remains with us today in myriad forms. For an excellent overview of contemporary uses of millennial forms in secular as well as sacred society, see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 1–18.

44. Woodhull, *Elixir of Life*, 16.

45. Henry Olcott, “People from the Other World,” *Daily Graphic: An Illustrated Evening Newspaper*, 6: 536 (1874), 182.

46. “Mumler Trial,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1869.

47. Woodhull, *Elixir of Life*, 15.

48. *Ibid.*, 17.

49. *Ibid.*, 23.

50. Davis, *Harbinger of Health*.

51. See Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), for the most extensive discussion of death and images of resurrection in the century, particularly chap. 6

52. Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 515–17.

ABSTRACT This article examines several millennialist claims made in speeches and writings by Victoria Woodhull, the alternately celebrated and scandalous proponent of Spiritualism, Free Love, and women's suffrage in the nineteenth century. It focuses particularly on a utopian vision detailed in a speech, "The Elixir of Life," that Woodhull addressed to the tenth annual meeting of the American Association of Spiritualists, in which Woodhull predicted a swiftly arriving millennium that would unite heaven and earth, bringing eternal life to the living and restoring the dead to an earthly but perfect existence. This millennial vision centered on the perfectability of the human body at the intersection of the discourses of medicine, politics, and religion. This utopia would be ushered in by society's embracing of the principles of Free Love, the reform movement that espoused that emotional and physical romantic relations should be governed by mutual love alone without interference from legal or religious authority.

This speech is read against the backdrop of contemporaneous social movements in Spiritualism, Free Love, and alternative forms of medicine. The article argues that Woodhull defied both normative Christianity and the mainstream of Spiritualist believers by refusing to subordinate the body to the soul. The millennial impulse toward progress, seen so keenly in Spiritualist circles, was transformed here to refer to the individual rather than society at large. Social perfection would follow corporeal perfection. Arguing for a natural immortality of the body, Woodhull maintained an essential union and interreliance between the body and soul rather than a disjuncture between them.