



CHAPTER ONE

THE
Sexualization
OF AMERICAN CULTURE

FROM SELF-EXPRESSION TO SEX EXPRESSION

The story of three generations of U.S. women writers who wrote about sexuality from 1860 through 1940 concerns women's investment in sexuality, intimacy, and "sex power" as alternatives to what much of the nineteenth century saw as individual self-expression. Refusing to sentimentalize sexuality any longer and instead claiming sexual desire as a new form of women's power, many writers adopted the rhetoric of free choice to establish their own authority in sexual matters. In doing so, these women writers first had to distinguish sexuality from its previous configuration as a racial or class inheritance or even a Lamarckian characteristic, passed down over generations through acquired traits. For these writers, sex was not in the blood, a racial quality, or even part of social class and character. Sex expression as a discourse had to be liber-

ated from its association with the degeneracy of the working classes, racial and ethnic others, and physical and moral weakness. “Sex power” was once women’s hope for democratizing heterosexual relations; despite some (or even great) ambivalence about sexuality, the writers I discuss forged a new language of sexual expressions, even going so far as to suggest how sex expression and sex power could erase the divisions among women based on racial and ethnic experience or on class and privilege. In an American culture increasingly devoted to choice, these writers crafted a discourse that addressed the imagined emancipatory pleasure of sexuality coupled with the actual limits of women’s sexual self-reliance. Once women imagined sex and power as no longer antithetical but coterminous, the hope was that democratized heterosexual relations would end the economic inequality and instability of traditional gender roles. Once women writers rejected sexuality as a vehicle for equality or even liberation (by my reckoning, shortly after the first waves of the Depression), as many inevitably did, they embraced a desire to forsake sex power as too ambivalent and as a potentially self-destructive strategy. Animating this dramatic process was a willed rejection of earlier versions of sex power, a refusal of sexuality as a viable form of liberation.

Nevertheless, focusing on sexuality itself—or creating it as a category of identity—limited the self-expression that Margaret Fuller and others advanced. Promoting the sexual self relied on its promise of liberation, since the sexual self transcended the boundary between private and public, between self and the social network through which women had to negotiate their power. As narrow as sexual expression might seem in a range of other possible expressions available to women (family, community, politics, work, vocation), it figured—however briefly—as one of the most expansive, most hopeful possibilities for women’s development. My challenge here may be understood as how to write a history of this hope. This study addresses how to see these narratives as discourses of possibility rather than thwarted attempts at expressive culture. Women writers infused sexuality with hope of liberation, hope of power and authority, even as they sometimes doubted sexuality’s possibilities or its compensations for limited economic equality. Even so, the proliferation

of contract relations in the late nineteenth century led women writers to believe that sexual relations could be secularized, codified, and democratized (based on conscious choice between equals in terms of affective and libidinal investments in each other) once sexuality was released from reproductivity and no longer associated with sin or immorality. By creating their own sexual rhetoric, writers as different as Rebecca Harding Davis and Mary McCarthy elaborated on the possibilities of liberation. This feat in itself marked these authors as important historical precursors of the sexual liberationists of the 1960s and 1970s. The period of women's sex expression, in Pamela Haag's terms, the "'first' sexual revolution" (*Consent* 78), occurred in the early years of the twentieth century when sexual privacy and sexual desire were considered the hallmarks of the modern self. I argue that this first sexual revolution started in post-Civil War America.

This hope for sexuality was never naive or unalloyed, however. There were always limits to the possibilities of sex expression. Some who were driven by ambition, others by opposition (bohemians, radicals, free-lovers, feminists, or socialists), were seemingly beyond the sexual pale and thus excluded from the practices of sex power. At the end of the nineteenth century, many minority women and working-class authors rejected sex expression as too bourgeois, apolitical, or quietistic. For these writers, sex power always had to be transformed into some other sort of more literal or material power—economic or social—but was never primarily physical or symbolic, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jane Addams advocated. Women writers' very conceptions of what counted as sex power provoked as much ambivalence as that power did celebration or satisfaction. As Edith Wharton suggested, the danger of sex expression lies in its standardization, in the real possibility that sexuality would become normalized and hence lose whatever individuating and psychologically liberating power it might otherwise have.

One famous sexual controversy is especially telling in this context of transforming sex power. In his infamous tract against coeducation, *Sex in Education* (1873), Edward Clarke suggested that women risk becoming "agenes"—thoroughly sterile creatures—if forced to keep up intellectually, let alone compete, with men. Clarke described the closed system

of brain and sex power: women “graduated from school or college excellent scholars, but with undeveloped ovaries. Later they married, and were sterile” (39). Devoid of reproductive power (or what Clarke terms “arrested development of the female reproductive system”), the “agenes” represented what would happen to women whose brain power eradicated their sexual power (93), sex power then referring exclusively to reproduction.

In *Sex and Education* (1874), Julia Ward Howe’s edited collection responding to Clarke’s attack, contributors were careful to defend educated women against the dual, contradictory charges of being “fast” and of being sexless (93). Clarke imputed that “excessive culture” would result in female “degeneracy”; author and reformer Caroline Dall’s rejoinder to Clarke was that such degeneracy was actually “inherited from a vicious father” (104). Dall suggests just how much Lamarckianism influenced notions of cultural decline; neither culture nor coeducation but inheritance altered women’s lives. While Clarke feared that college-educated women might become hermaphroditic as a result of the spinsterhood that, for him, inevitably accompanied a bachelor’s degree (123, 145), his detractors worried more about what would happen to women out in society who were made ill by the grosser contacts of social life and its dissipations: “Sadder even than the bloodless skin and intellectual face of the normal-school girl is the not uncommon spectacle of the bloodless skin and unintellectual face of the girl in our fashionable private schools, whose mind has become so enervated by parental indulgence, so demoralized by social excitement, that, to use her own words, ‘the sight of a book makes her head ache’” (121). As nineteenth-century ethnologists explained, blood will tell: the “bloodless skin” is the mark of an endangered girl, threatened by either intellectual or fashionable pursuits. Women writers like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who contributed to Howe’s volume on Clarke’s folly, had to protect girls—and sex—from such reactionary responses to women’s self-expression. They did so by creating a sexual expression that invested women with a particular kind of sex power. As some writers worried, if girls were endangered, so were middle-aged women, whose sex power would soon “expire” or who

would find themselves needing other compensations than a presumably “free” sexual subjectivity.

This period saw the move from “free” love to sex trade work: that the sexualization of American culture accompanied the rise of commodity capitalism is clear, but whether it increased female power was a question women writers argued even as they sought to reconcile the paradoxes of heterosexual relations in commodity culture. Sex expression promised a transgressive or emancipatory force that could lead to women’s greater health, psychological depth, and subjectivity, but the question was, how could sexual choice and consumerism be analyzed, whether to link these processes or to disentangle them?¹ At the same time, these writers understood sex expression as an illusion of choice or consent in market relations. For David Shumway in *Modern Love*, this greater standardization of culture, especially in the middle classes, created the need to imagine sexuality and intimacy as a refuge from the alienation of consumerism (23–24). Rejecting mass-marketing’s new images of sexual relations, a number of women novelists responded to the standardization of culture in ever more inventive ways, claiming sexuality as a move away from standardization. Advertising helped to cement this standardization even as it made sex more palatable as a subject of cultural debate. And as Jackson Lears argues, the end of the nineteenth century saw an “exuberant outpouring” in the visual imagery associated with the “primitivist, exotic, and erotic” (*Fables* 144). That imagery seldom translated into a language that women writers accepted and promulgated, but it did spark them to pour out exuberantly their own language of sex expression.

SEXUAL PERSONS AND SEXUAL NEEDS

Among the most important pronouncements about sexual health in the late nineteenth century was that sex expression typically begins with the call for women’s physical health before it becomes a demand for psychological help and, eventually, a plea for pleasure and therapeutic relations. According to the doctrine of *Karezza* (1896), an exhortation for male sexual withdrawal during intercourse, “the natural woman

knows that virtue is not sexual repression but rather expression" (48). Dr. Alice B. Stockham wrote *Karezza* to protect women enslaved by outdated ideas about passion and husbands who insisted on unlimited (and unprotected) sexual access to their wives. Stockham proclaimed that "sex life and sex expression are a natural heritage" to both men and women (49)—if only both knew how to reach "equal pleasure" (83). Intercourse without the "flood," as Stockham describes it, is the perfect act of intimacy, occurring "completely under the control of the will" and at the consent of both husband and wife (23).

Stockham advocates will over sexual impulse in order that the young "old lady" should become the regenerated "new woman" (43), once she is saved from her husband's sexual urges. She quotes John Humphrey Noyes's *Male Continence* (1872) to highlight his terms of water imagery and fluidity: "In normal condition, men are entirely competent to choose in sexual intercourse whether they will stop at any point in the voluntary stages of it, and so make it simply an act of communion, or go through to the involuntary stage, and make it an act of propagation. . . . The situation may be compared to a stream in three conditions, viz., 1. a fall; 2. a course of rapids above the fall; and 3. still water above the rapids. The skillful boatman may choose whether he will remain in the still water, or venture more or less down the rapids, or run his boat over the fall" (121). While men could control their sexual fluids by firmly grasping their oar, whether women could control their sexual desires as easily as men was an open question. Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (1898), for instance, depicts women's sexual desire as nothing less than a down-pour. For Chopin, women's—not men's—sexual urgency is so torrential that it constantly threatens to overwhelm social relations.

Stockham's tract was part of the cultural debate over who exerted sexual power. Scholars of U.S. liberal culture have demonstrated the modernization of these new sexual norms, especially through the development of the ideas of consent and choice, and examined the varieties of rhetorical and ideological transformations about intimacy, self-ownership, and free love.² In describing the sexualization of American culture, critics have especially documented how sexuality emerged as a defining quality of modern selfhood with a new language of intimacy to codify

sexual freedom. Sociologist Eva Illouz argues that the contemporary era is one of disembodied love, characterized by disappointment and psychic suffering. Julian Carter also contends that modern intimacy is a disciplinary ideal characterized by impossible principles rather than “an actually existing state” (154). Nevertheless, this fantasy of egalitarian connection galvanized so many novels that it fueled a new kind of sexual hope.

It might seem self-evident to proclaim that American women writers took sexuality as their subject by the turn of the twentieth century, given how ubiquitous the topic became. Yet this assumed openness about sexuality in modern American culture has kept critics from marking the evolution of this new sexualization, especially among nineteenth-century sex-expression precursors like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Harriet Beecher Stowe.³ The sentimental tradition once allowed women writers to register their interests in various social concerns like slavery, temperance, abuse, and deprivation—like Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—even as it codified the authors' physical and psychic pain in emotional terms. While the sentimentalizing of experience never disappeared, many women writers invented a new style of sex expression that found its metaphors and tropes in sexual intimacy so that they might replace sincerity with sexuality as the dominant means of cultural expression for men and women alike. This mixture of sentimentality and sexuality was powerful and remains so today, giving rise to what Lauren Berlant calls “the female complaint” or the genre of women's writing devoted to “disappointment management” (*Female Complaint* 1–2, 230).

Starting in the 1860s and 1870s, U.S. women's writing recorded a major shift in thinking about sentiments and sexual relations. Once part of the realm of sentiments, sexuality became a discourse about rights; private thoughts and acts, once distinct from economic metaphors, now replicated social relations (Haag, *Consent* 79). According to this logic, it is impossible to separate new ways of talking about sexuality from the historical and cultural contexts that first witnessed these expressions. Whether one imagines that sexuality was the trade-off for the “corrosion” or failure of the liberal “fictions of autonomous selfhood” (ibid. 174) or that sexuality was the ultimate prize—promising unconstrained choice and equality—of modern liberal culture, these alternatives tell

only part of the story. Whether compensatory or liberating, therapeutic or repressive, sexuality suddenly betokened women's agency in works of fiction that were reflexive insofar as authors expressed their doubts even as they proselytized for women's sexual freedom.

Many women writers imagined the self as best expressed through the dyad that sex and intimacy promised as its reward; they advised women to be themselves within the intimate coupling that they chose, however narrow the possibilities of object choice or sexual style. Just as personality replaced character as the dominant language of the self, intimacy replaced courtship and companionship as the predominant language of sexuality. Intimacy later signified the heightened sex consciousness of the 1920s and 1930s, even as once-public courtship rituals became ever-more privatized. That is, women writers affirmed their places in modern American culture—from 1860 to 1940—not just by purveying sentiment but also by exploring intimacy and explicitness. In displacing sentimentality, they did not embrace sexology so much as contemplate how to use their sexuality as a social power.⁴ Sex expression in general looked attainable since it seemed to offer a sex equality that could compensate for the social equality not widely or readily available. After all, everyone could “have” sex or be “sexual,” while the means of self-culture was mostly class-specific; self-expression was a luxury of self-ownership, denied to some races and classes.

For Anthony Giddens, the idea that sexuality is something one “cultivates” or “has”—a quality that can be “reflexively grasped, interrogated and developed”—is a modern creation (14–15), the effect of what he theorizes as “the transformation of intimacy.” This shift makes intimacy less a “natural condition” (although it is uncertain that intimacy was ever truly conceived as natural) and more a cultivated, socialized, and historicized attribute of the self. Giddens describes the transformation of intimacy as a process of the democratization of sex. As he quite optimistically contends, expressing sexuality once seemed to have substantial potential for a democratic expansion of human relations. While work, race, and class relations became increasingly codified and even calcified, sexual relations opened up as the new space of freedom. This sexuality is more “plastic” and mutable than Foucault argues is true of

the discourses that bolster it: “Sexual diversity, although still regarded by many hostile groups as perversion, has moved out of Freud’s case-history notebooks into the everyday social world. Seen in these terms, the decline of perversion can be understood as a partly successful battle over rights of self-expression in the context of the liberal democratic state” (33). Celebrating the potential for change embedded in this “partly successful battle,” Giddens offers the important caution that “sexual permissiveness is not at all the same as liberation” (168), just as writers like Wharton presaged how “sex power” failed her characters (see chapter 4). This expertise in intimacy, Giddens suggests, leads women to develop ever greater variations on sexual narratives or new styles that allow them to escape from domestic subservience and move toward a more equal, democratic envisioning of passion. Even so, as we shall see, self-expression gets channeled into the sometimes strait-jacketed constraints of sexual identity.⁵

My focus on the transformation of intimacy is historical: how did self-expression become fixated on sexuality as the prevailing, even defining quality of the self, the trait with the most potential for cultural change from the 1860s through the 1940s? How did the field of expression from the “self” become solely focused on “sex”? Although the self has always seemed greater than its sexual possibilities, sex expression seemed the strongest place to launch new freedoms. Yet this new emphasis is focused less on the qualities of persons (whether in terms of race or class, sexual object choice, or sexual geography) than on the character of relationships, what Giddens calls “confluent love”: “Women’s capacity and need for sexual expression were kept carefully under wraps until well into the twentieth century” (118). According to Giddens, people saw modern sexuality as both “promise and threat” (78); such a relationship presupposes female autonomy, the freedom and resources to choose (see Giddens 195). Such egalitarianism depends on the notion of contract: the ability of women to contract freely and independently with sexual partners. Women had to come to terms with “a culture organized by sex difference” but without succumbing to opposition and resistance (Haag, *Consent* 44). Women writers’ new configurations of intimacy in these terms are the key to the following chapters.

That is, I wish to bring literary history to bear on Giddens's theory by analyzing how U.S. women's novels explain what the "sexual contract" might mean and how women might use it to their own ends—for equality or pleasure. I begin by explaining how "sexual persons" or American sexual character emerged as a new way of self-styling. While American liberalism touted its support of individual rights, those rights were exercised in ever more regulated and sanctioned ways, albeit through the promise of presumptive freedom and personal consent. Haag charts this move from nineteenth-century classic liberalism to modern liberalism in the twentieth century, a shift marked by "deeper privacy and personal autonomy" that was figured through the image of the single woman or *femme sole*, who became the true test case of new liberal freedoms (*Consent* xix).⁶ These test cases are also to be found in women's fiction (for example, Wharton uses the language of Undine Spragg's "case" in *The Custom of the Country* [1913]), whose nuances allow us to imagine women's concerns about sexual consent. What powers did women imagine to inhere in their sexuality? How could women exert this sex power to achieve some measure of equality in what they projected democratic sexual relations to be? Why did heterosexual "free" choice come to signify the height of liberal freedom in modern America?

In so many ways, women writers found this transition ineluctable at the crucial moment of this literary history: while self-culture was inherently a public demonstration of education, acculturation, and self-representation based primarily on social class, sex expression could appeal to women across classes and races since it spoke to private needs and psychological unfoldings of modern culture. As I see it, the category of "sexual persons" evolved at the same time—neither strictly "private" nor merely "statistical"—along with the rise of mass culture, which presupposed the performance of sexuality as an essential component of the self. American women's fiction provided the link between "sexual persons" and new sexualities, a way to describe and, arguably, to adjudicate sexual behaviors.

Although public purity campaigns enforced and encouraged a normalized sexuality, fiction enabled readers to negotiate freedom in ostensibly private domains of leisure. Many women writers envisioned sexual

persons as fundamentally different from the sexual victims or naïfs that had previously been characterized in terms of seduction, prostitution, purity, and marriage. In doing so, women writers created tropes symbolizing power and pleasure that they hoped would transcend market logic and patriarchal relations.

As individual choice gained support as a value in U.S. culture, the women writers I study increasingly explored the possibility of personal sex power. Sexual rights and contract relations did not spell out what women wanted, just what they could legally expect or be granted. If freedom was predicated on choice, expression was predicated on need.⁷ And while classic liberalism categorized women's new rights to choose and to make contracts, it could not articulate or predict how women would respond. Women writers invested in sexual over market relations, albeit within the modern liberal culture they had inherited.

Thus, in response to the discourse of "rights," women writers created a rhetoric of sexual needs. This new needs discourse made them targets for exploitation as emotional workers, but it did not always seem so when they articulated—quite openly and exuberantly—women's psychological and sexual needs. Consider Dorothy Parker's notorious cynicism in this context, and one can imagine what hopes underlined her satiric disappointments. The absence of a linguistic register—a vocabulary of sexual desires that women could use to articulate their new freedoms—compounded the difficulty of discerning women's sexual needs. Women writers thus confronted the psychology of change, creating narratives of how sexuality could alter personal expression, such as mood and style. Whatever the motive, their achievement was to speak truth to conventional or contractual models of sexual power and to create their own intimate exchanges.

Seeking a retreat from standardized culture, many women writers imagined sexuality as the one place where they weren't categorized as consumers or "statistics." In a culture that addressed women primarily as customers or advertising commodities, a woman's self-expressions were supposed to distinguish her from other women. Yet the new consumer goods became associated with "romance" in the expansion of leisure, cultural events, and goods that could be marketed as part of

courtship (see Illouz, *Consuming* 77). Self-expression grew more difficult when those choices open to the self were ever more homogeneous, mass-produced, or ready-made. In opposition to this mass commodification, women writers dramatized how women invested in sexuality as a salvation from the increase in choices and the decrease in their “personality” or uniqueness. Greater choices in material and personal things amounted to much less than met the eye, so people exercised their choices in realms where they thought the so-called standardizing forces of culture ostensibly could not encroach (though they certainly would in time)—sexuality and style. Sexuality seemed new and different enough—indeed, an individuated quality—to unleash a liberatory discourse. Until sexual debates in the 1920s began to homogenize representations of women’s desires, women writers created newer tropes and narratives to explain themselves as sexual persons. Women never gave up entirely on self-expression, but they began to focus instead on sex power as a means to stylize the self, as we might see clearly in a novel like Gertrude Atherton’s *Black Oxen* (1923) (see chapter 3). Both intricate and intimate, sex-power narratives became increasingly reflexive discussions of romance and sexual empowerment.

Even so, that sexual intimacy could be written from a woman’s perspective made it an irresistible topic for many American women writers. By describing sexual needs within regulated, rationalized, even bureaucratic liberal contract relations, women writers advanced the cause of sex expression, even as their deployment of sex expression always needed to stay one step ahead of the social regulation that followed its appearance. When women attained the rights to bargain as individual sexual persons (as corollaries to their private and statistical selves), they imagined first creating female sex expression as *different* from the male sex expression that coincided with modern liberal contract relations, such as in Mary Austin’s *A Woman of Genius* (1912). That is, attaining even a restricted equality meant that women could assert their sexual needs as different from men’s, most typically in novels by Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. To demonstrate that difference, I chart the process by which intimacy and sex expression came to *seem* synonymous.

One last caveat from Giddens about the mistake of reading sexual

activity as sexual liberation: “No viewpoint which pits the energy of sexuality against the disciplinary characteristics of the modern social order is likely to be of much value. Nor is one that looks to the more eccentric or non-conventional forms of sexuality as avant-garde. . . . Finally, if sexual pluralism is to be embraced, it has to offer more than just a sort of casual cosmopolitanism, particularly if other issues intrinsic to sexuality, including gender difference and the ethics of the pure relationship, are not addressed” (180). Echoing this warning in *Sex, Literature, and Censorship*, Jonathan Dollimore argues that sexual subversiveness alone—“pleasure, sex and shock” themselves—“are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for radical political effect” (10). Desire itself is so unruly and unpredictable that demystifying human sexuality does not immediately yield sexual liberation or sexual democracy (17). Dollimore shows just how little truth there is to the notion that “sex is both the inner dynamic of the individual and the means of his or her liberation” (19).⁸ While women’s sexual ownership might be seen as resistance against male sex power, it is not true that sex power effectively challenges modern sexual liberalism and its insistence on free-market contractual relations. As I will show, for many women writers, these sexual exchanges inevitably result in alienation and exhaustion. Their disagreements about what sexuality and intimacy could actually do for women reveal a literary history whose contours we have not seen clearly enough.

FROM SEX POWER TO SEXUAL STYLE

The emerging discussion about modern women’s sex power finds an important impetus in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Pink and White Tyranny* (1871) and in Angela Fiducia Tilton Heywood’s columns for *The Word* in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Stowe was as much against sex power as Heywood was for it: granted, Stowe was the wife of a Presbyterian professor of religion and sacred literature, and Tilton was the wife of Ezra Heywood, who was jailed for obscenity as the editor of the free love paper, *The Word*, which was published from 1872 to 1893. While the 1870s and 1880s saw the contest over the language of sexuality made

public, it is also clear that Stowe imagined how women internalized the discussion of sex power, putting into practice the very ideas of sexual power emerging from those public debates (see chapter 4). Angela and Ezra Heywood staked their lives on externalizing the discussion of sex power; they theorized that publicizing words such as “penis,” “fuck,” and “cock” could balance the sexual equation between men and women. Stowe, by contrast, maintained that women’s best hope lay in domestic influence and Christian millennialism.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this conversation about sexuality, Helen Horowitz suggests, was that “a new sensibility that placed sex at the center of life came into being” (5). Thus, sex expression gestured toward a social dimension, within which the call for free and liberal expression became paramount. In fact, the general calls for self-expression took root in the debates about sexual appetite. Contending that sexual contact was healthy for both men and women, some doctors urged women to eschew abstinence and to explore their sexual natures, an exhortation that was not so much an argument for the right to pleasure as an argument for the right to sexual health. Satisfying one’s “sexual appetite” was likened to feeding the body and necessary for homeopathic balance.⁹ Along with the growth of what Horowitz calls “sexual culture” came a vigorous outpouring of American women’s writing that pursued women’s own views of sexuality (9). In short, vernacular sexuality—including the sources that historians have amply documented—had its print-culture corollary in women’s emerging postsentimental writings, stories, and novels that helped to expand the range of women’s expertise from the domestic to the sexual and thus led to making modern sexuality a female topic.

By the 1880s, “sex power” was not so much an impulse or affect as a democratic symbol of women’s right to seek sexual freedom and to express social aspirations for equality. Often women’s claim to sex power was a symbolic freedom measured not in actions but in the words women could claim to express in a previously unavailable register. Writing for *The Word*, Angela Heywood argued that sex was an offshoot of free self-expression, a proposition that violated the idea of specifically female social and sexual self-control. Her columns promoted female

sexual pleasure but only after women achieved the freedom to use explicit sexual language: she may well have spoken for all women when she declaimed that “little girls wish to know, young and middle aged women wish to know, old and experienced wish to know” what she knew about humans’ “Sexed Being” (“Grace and Use of Sex Life” 3). The 1873 Comstock Law tried to suppress such publications as the *Heywoods*’, but a new generation of women writers was already developing tropes and figures of sexuality that dodged the charge of sexual obscenity and explicitness. As Heywood contends, “What mother can look in the face of her welcome child and not religiously respect the rigid, erect, ready-for-service, persistent male-organ . . . ? Penis is a smooth, magical, almost feminine word” (“Sex Nomenclature” 2).

Stories of sexual rejuvenation abound in the years following the *Heywoods*’ once-scandalous pronouncements. Consider the vision of change portrayed in one of Gertrude Atherton’s earliest novels, *Hermia Suydam* (1889), the story of an ugly, drab, ambitious young woman who inherits her grandfather’s money. Before his death, Hermia lives “a double life” with her sister, abhorring the life of competency that her brother-in-law offers her sister. Daydreaming of a romantic setting with “all the instincts of a beautiful woman” and forgetting her “unseductive frame” (24–25), she begins to write impassioned, unpublishable poetry, which she hawks from editor to editor, until one eventually commits it to print. Once she inherits a million dollars, however, she is better able to realize her passionate fantasies. Soon, Hermia engages a fashionable physician and a “trained and athletic nurse” to rejuvenate her (48). With diet and exercise and a good colorist, she attains an eccentric beauty (52). Atherton’s novel is obsessed with surfaces—with the appearance of youth and vigor but also with clothing as self-expression—and treats ugliness as a condition that can be transcended through hard work. Atherton calls it “style,” thereby anticipating the next generation of women novelists who defined sex style for American readers.

Rather than continue writing, Hermia makes herself, not her poetry, into a seductive work of art by conducting a salon and conversing with the most famous dialect-author of her day. Smitten with this author’s cosmopolitanism, Hermia sleeps with him, an act represented in the

novel by seven asterisks across the page since sex itself was unrepresentable for Atherton. After her first night with the novelist, Hermia knows she has made “a horrible mistake” (110) but goes on with the affair, violating conventional respectability. Their scandalous liaison causes Hermia pain after she falls in love with another intellectual who wants to marry her and take her to Europe. When she confesses her sexual experience to her new fiancé, he abruptly leaves her, but only for an hour: just as she is about to drink poison to punish herself for her indiscretion, he returns and evokes a promise that she will not commit suicide. At this point, he dies of a heart condition and the novel ends.

This is a bad novel, certainly not up to the level of Atherton’s best-selling fictions (see chapter 3) that are waiting to be recovered.¹⁰ Linked at the time with the “erotic” or “sensational” school of women writers—including Laura Jean Libbey and Laura Daintrey—Atherton was skewered for her treatment of female passion.¹¹ Nevertheless, even in this early work, Atherton contributes a key perspective in the conversation among American women novelists about sexual freedom. That Hermia’s fiancé—Grettan Quintard—dies at the end does not negate Hermia’s newfound sexual expression, fostered in part by her New Woman friend, Helen Simms—a “New York girl” who “had no beauty, but . . . had the clean, clear, smooth, red-and-ivory complexion” and perfect teeth (55). What distinguishes Helen from Hermia is the latter’s intellectual commitment. Helen advocates these sexual adventures and helps Hermia procure her first lover, to whom she pretends a deeper attachment than she feels. One mistake is forgivable; two (or more), sensationalistic.

Instead of killing off the heroine, Atherton kills off her fiancé, who has a heart attack on the last page. Quintard’s acceptance of her sexual experience leads to his immediate death as soon as he knocks the poison cup from her lips. His history is more dangerous than Hermia’s, for he has been involved with a married woman who committed suicide after her husband discovered their affair. “Everybody cut Mrs. Maitland, and she felt so horrible that she killed herself. Quintard was fearfully upset. He went abroad at once and staid five years” (125). In courting Hermia, he admits to wanting a woman “indifferent to public opinion” (132), someone “companionable” rather than fashionable. Atherton kills him

off for professing his unconventionality; the heroine lives for acting on hers. In enjoining her “to let [her] past go” (204), Quintard means to erase centuries of traditional sexual morality, and for that acceptance he must be killed off. Here *Hermia Suydam* introduces the equation of sexuality with youth and beauty (and wealth) and distances sexuality from ugliness. Sexuality begins the move toward standardization: bodies must be exercised and styled, hair bleached so that sexual passion can move from fantasy to reality. Atherton again and again calls this facing “the actualities” of life (132), but the “face” that meets these actualities must be standardly pretty. Otherwise, sex is out of the picture.

Beyond its challenge to sexual morality, Atherton’s novel is significant because it inaugurates the equating of sexuality with a new somatic standard of beauty. Atherton is less concerned with the fate of expressive individualism or with the idea of sexuality as democratization than with rejuvenation and sexual power, as we see in her phenomenal best seller of 1923, *Black Oxen*. While Stockham’s *Karezza* might have been the salvation of women overwhelmed by sequential childbirths, Atherton celebrates a power of rejuvenation that makes clear her conviction that sexuality was not or should not be available only to young, rich, and beautiful women. Such stories of rejuvenation insist on the potential for a greater democratization of sex, in which women would be free, sexual citizens.

To make this claim stick, women writers had to show that sexual desire was a self-conscious act of will not to be dismissed or diminished as impulsive or unconscious. But women who acted on sexual desire often were accused of being sexual adventurers or opportunists. Creating heroines who were neither gold diggers nor free lovers but true lovers, women writers invented a middle ground between the unconscious and the conscious, a discourse of choice that gave their imagination of sexual desire cultural legitimacy (see Haag, *Consent* 137). Negotiating the idea of sexual choice and freedom, the authors I study developed a language of sexual expression that was not completely dependent either on the will or on impulse. Women writers often defined sex by style (what women wore, how they talked, whom they met) and sexual subjectivity (including the emotional work they did to reconcile sexuality with character and

personality). In response to the various discourses, these sexual metaphors were condensed—made compact, economic, even evocative—distant as they were from explicitness or literalness. (Not even in Mary McCarthy's raw *The Company She Keeps* [1942] is there a direct rendering of sex, only the marks upon the body that signify intercourse.)

Repeatedly, these tropes signaled abrupt shifts in how women envisioned sexuality. Some American women writers still maintained that sexuality was repressive; others saw sexuality as liberating; many wrote about sexuality's threat to women's economic and psychological security. The early twentieth-century claims of sexual liberation, like those of female sentimentality and sympathy in the nineteenth century, enabled American women writers to explore the complications and ramifications of their new circumstances, launching their own scenarios about what women actually did or didn't *do* or count as sexual and *how* they came to rationalize or justify their desires. Thus, I examine their means of persuading readers that sexuality might be positive or freeing, destructive or degenerate, or oppositional and corrupt.

THE RHETORIC OF SEX EXPRESSION

Although American culture was open to greater frankness in the 1890s about sex than ever before and the 1920s have been read as the era of proliferating sexual freedoms,¹² many women writers were suspicious about what this freedom really meant: was sexuality a liberating force or psychologically debilitating and even—as Charlotte Perkins Gilman had it—economically disempowering? In *Women and Economics* (1898), Gilman rejected outright sex power—the newly emancipated sexual norms of modern America. On the contrary, Wharton compared France's "sex-conventions" to those in America, which is "supposedly the country of the greatest sex-freedom" (*French Ways* 114). Wharton specifically challenged the rhetorical question many Americans proposed about social equality (not sexual congress): "But where is there so much freedom of intercourse between men and women as in America?"¹³ She condemned the culture that celebrated women's newly emancipated sexuality without specifying what sex power could do for them.

What might seem a literal frankness about sex still had to be configured rhetorically, most often in metaphorical terms. As Nina Miller argues, “Popular sexology was peppered with calls for ‘frankness’ and scientific candor yet so often proceeded from the contrary discursive register of metaphor and even euphemism” (49). These metaphors and euphemisms (or even the dysphemisms that the Heywoods favored) were critical in American women writers’ development of sexual literary style. In the end, these sexualities were part of the endlessly developing rhetoric about “sexual personae” and sexual possibilities, the “official and unofficial sexualities” of the American sexual citizen (Lindemann 11). These women writers challenged scientific theories of sexuality through literary forms and, in doing so, invented new ways of seeing intimacy and sex expression that rejected so-called scientific accuracy in favor of their sexual fantasies and tropes. American women writers gave a rhetorical spin to what social scientists described as women’s unconscious response to sexual stimuli. Instead of seeing women’s desire as coerced or involuntary, they invented a way of representing women’s new interiority as thoroughly sexualized, invested as it was in their libidinal desires.

The sexualization of American culture—from its hope for gender democracy to the exhaustion of its potential for liberation—leads me to a conclusion about the sexual frankness of the subsequent generation of writers. The search for a new counterintimacy might have started in the 1930s, when metaphors for erotic experience seemed to disappear from American women’s writing and researchers and reformers turned to the more problematic notions of sexual visibility and performance (Berlant and Warner 561).¹⁴ Once sex expression was identified as women’s work in a relationship, once it replaced self-expression as women’s exclusive equitable form of public being, then sex became women’s obligation rather than their right. Predicated on excluding homosexuality, interracial sex, and anything but sex between the young and the beautiful, sex expression was hardly a liberation, as it once had seemed.