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"Free Love" in Sectional Debates over Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America

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INTRODUCTION

In February 1861, president-elect Abraham Lincoln left his hometown of Springfield, Illinois, heading for his inauguration in Washington, D.C. The nation was then in the midst of the greatest political crisis since the founding of the republic: shortly after Lincoln was elected the first president from the antislavery Republican Party in 1860, Southern states resolved to withdraw from the federal Union to save their peculiar institution. En route by train for the capital, Lincoln stopped to address crowds and legislatures in cities across the North. In a speech he delivered in Indianapolis on February 12, Lincoln invoked the image of free love to denounce the secession of the slave states. He claimed that these Southern states' idea of the Union represented "no regular marriage, but rather a sort of free-love arrangement, to be maintained on passional attraction" and thus dissoluble at will. In this analogy of a familial and marital relation, secessionists, who gave priority to states' rights over the unity of the nation, were similar to selfish and immoral free lovers who would stay in marriage as long as sexual attraction lasted but were ready to leave it when any undesirable issues arose. By linking the sacred bond of the Union with the indissoluble marital bond, Lincoln equated the secession with "free love" in politics.[1]

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of free love

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stimulated emotions far out of proportion to the small size of the free love movement. Born out of radical strands of antebellum reform culture in the 1850s, free love ideology challenged prevailing norms regarding marriage, gender roles, and sexuality. Free love advocates attacked the institution of marriage, repudiating the intervention of the government and church in private decisions about sexual relationships. They asserted that marriage destroyed affections and perpetuated women's subjection by legally sanctioning men's unchecked access to women's bodies. For these radical men and women, mutual love and consent, not marital law, defined the purity and legitimacy of sexual unions; genuine love between men and women existed only when both parties were completely equal and independent. Free love ideology was an attempt to reshape not only marriage and sexuality but also the meaning of freedom. Free love advocates believed that freedom and bondage stemmed from sexual and domestic relations and viewed sexual autonomy as the most crucial component of individual freedom. Through their sex-radical ideas, free lovers challenged the dichotomy between the public and private, politicized the intimate domain, and infused new meanings into freedom and citizenship.[2]

Public knowledge about free love increased throughout the 1850s, as readers of the popular press learned about free lovers who established small colonies based on their principles. Among the best-publicized communal experiments in free love were Modern Times, founded in Long Island, New York, in 1852, and the Berlin Heights settlement, planned and founded between 1856 and 1857 in a small village in Ohio. Nineteenth-century free lovers professed an anarchistic faith in individual autonomy and rejected the intervention of others in decisions about private relationships, but that does not mean that these radicals endorsed sexual libertarianism. They shared with their middle-class contemporaries the ideal of sexual restraint; in fact, many free lovers believed that Americans had sex too frequently, without mutual consent and love, under the legitimating cover of marriage. The advocates asserted that free love would enhance sexual purity and abate sexual excess by endorsing women's sexual autonomy and thus circumscribing men's unchecked access to their wives' bodies, available in indissoluble marriages. Their idea of free love was in many cases a plan for the future based on a philosophical conviction rather than a desire to engage in unconventional sexual relationships. Many free lovers continued to remain legally married and thus obeyed normative marital and sexual customs.[3]

Compared to the Mormons, who also defied conventional sexual morality by practicing polygamy and counted 40,000 followers by 1860 according to the US Census, the number of self-professed free lovers was quite limited. For instance, the *Social Revolutionist*, one of the leading organs of the free love movement prior to the Civil War, had merely four hundred subscribers.[4] Even when free lovers' concerns for women's subjugation within marriage managed to draw a certain degree of sympathy from divorce reformers and Spiritualists, their solution of dismantling legal marriage rarely obtained approval from contemporary reformers, let alone from the general public. Despite free love's apparent lack of popular support, however, mid-nineteenth-century Americans across the country spoke incessantly about "free love" and its alleged influence on society.

The booming print culture of the mid-nineteenth century was to a large extent responsible for free love's disproportionate influence. As historians like Joanne E. Passet have argued, print culture, particularly readers' networks found in the sex-radical press, was crucial for the development of the free love movement, which lacked formal organizations, dues, and regular meetings.[5] Debates over free love, however, reached beyond the pages of these specialized publications. Heated controversies regarding free love appeared in mass-distributed publications, promulgating the notion of free love far beyond the circulation of the sex-radical press.

Antebellum America saw an expansion of commercial, popular publications designed for mass audiences. The development of new printing technologies and more effective circulation methods by the mid-1830s meant that daily and weekly newspapers, books, and pamphlets began to flood the market at low prices. Newly created penny newspapers attracted the masses by reporting stories on crime and politics with a touch of sensationalism. The expansion of the national postal system allowed these cheap publications to reach readers throughout the country.[6] Free love was a favorite topic in the commercial popular press, which was searching for novelty, and stories about free lovers helped generate sales that sustained these publications.

In this article, I explore "free love" as a political metaphor in sectional debates over racial slavery before and during the Civil War. As public discussions about free love multiplied in the 1850s, the term became one of the crucial components of antebellum political discourse. The return of slavery to the center of US politics in the same decade defined the contours of these discussions. Under intensifying sectional divisions, a wide range of Americans, regardless of partisanship—slavery defenders and abolitionists,

Democrats and Republicans, Northerners and Southerners—used the anathema of free love to condemn the immorality of their adversaries. The usefulness of free love as a rhetorical device lay in its extreme vagueness and plasticity, because the term could be appropriated to attack a variety of people. In some contexts, free love described the particular social theories of socialist communitarians, religious heretics, or radical Spiritualists; in others, the phrase could stand for broad efforts to achieve liberal divorce laws and women's rights, extramarital sexual practices like prostitution or adultery, or disunion for the preservation of slavery. In all these contexts, the phrase represented a serious threat to the institution of lifelong monogamous marriage, which was understood to be a cornerstone of democracy, liberty, civilization, and the stability of the nation.

In this article, I bring race into the analysis of these conflicting representations of free love. Previous studies on the nineteenth-century free love movement have paid only fragmented attention to the popular perceptions of free love, and they have rarely dealt with the issue of race.[7] Yet, in order to examine the cultural meanings of free love, it is crucial to engage with the concurrent histories of slavery, emancipation, and the implications of freedom within the broader American culture. I argue that, to those who used "free love" not as a positive self-identification but as a social stigma, the term had racial implications. "Free love" became such an abominable label in nineteenth-century America not just because it supposedly threatened the integrity of marriage and conventional gender norms but also because it might jeopardize the racial purity and dominance of whites. Anti–free love rhetoric was thereby integrated into the antebellum discourse opposing interracial socializing and sex. With intensifying sectional conflicts after the 1850s, the meaning of sexual freedom became inevitably tied to political discussions about slavery and racial equality.

I. WHY "FREE LOVE" MATTERED IN POLITICAL DEBATES ABOUT SLAVERY

From the late 1840s onward, political disputes over the institution of racial slavery divided the nation between the free and slave states. With massive westward expansion, the question of slavery in newly acquired territories made sectional hostilities come to the surface. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 angered Northern public opinion as it repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which forbade the extension of slavery to the Kansas and Nebraska territories. The enactment of the law accelerated

public support for antislavery congressmen in the North and led to the establishment of a new party based on an anti-Nebraska political coalition, namely the Republican Party, in the same year. As the sectional contest over slavery intensified in the late 1850s and eventually led to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the opposing political parties offered distinctive social and cultural worldviews in their appeal for votes. Gender occupied a primal place in these political discourses. As historian Michael D. Pierson has argued, "by politicizing gender, parties hit upon an easily understood shorthand by which less than fully engaged voters could form a sense of shared identity with mass politics."[8] Partisan politics over slavery became inextricably tied to contested ideologies about marriage and gender.

By the late 1850s, "free love" became one of the crucial vocabularies to highlight the partisan divisions on gender and sexuality. The fact that free lovers sprang from a radical faction of Northern reformers made the epithet "free love" an exceptionally useful tool for proslavery Democrats. In the North, social changes brought about by industrialization, a market economy, and evangelical Christianity transformed family formation over the first half of the nineteenth century. The new middle-class ideal of domesticity, with its ideas about the moral superiority and maternal duties of women, increased women's authority over the household and helped facilitate women's activism in the public sphere as well.[9] In contrast, the slave South retained patriarchal practices and an ideology based on male authority and female subservience. Owing to the existence of slavery, Southern social structure remained built on strict hierarchies of age, gender, race, and class; white husbands and fathers rejected any challenges to their patriarchal privileges. Specifically, during sectional conflicts over slavery, patriarchy became the central component of proslavery politics. By drawing an analogy between slavery and marriage, proslavery theorists argued that slaves, like women, were naturally fitted to submit to the control of the male head of the household. They relied on patriarchy as a metaphor to naturalize hierarchy and thus rationalize the institution of racial slavery. The ideal of patriarchal mastery served to strengthen political alliances between wealthy planters and self-employed yeomen in the South, and between Southern and Northern proslavery Democrats. In proslavery discourse, women's nature and social role thereby assumed political significance. The defenders of slavery adhered to male authority over women within the household. They accused Republicans and Northern reformers of allowing women to control the family, participate in public life, and even demand equal rights.[10] In the eyes of Democrats and their constituents, free love ideology symbolically

demonstrated the absurdity of the reformist North. As will be seen, proslavery discourse frequently utilized the image of free love in order to prove the faults of abolitionism, the Republican Party, and the Northern political economy in general.

II. RACE IN ANTI–FREE LOVE RHETORIC

As the free love movement grew increasingly notorious during the 1850s, journalists and writers loosely adopted the phrase "free love" to represent what they perceived as distinctively un-American sexual and marital customs. When anti–free love rhetoric included references to racial others within and outside the nation, it solidified a national identity based on individual autonomy and marital fidelity.

Anti–free love rhetoric emerged in tandem with pervasive anti-Mormon sentiments during the 1850s. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the Mormons, was founded by Prophet Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1830. In 1843, Smith received a revelation commanding polygamy, or "celestial marriage," among the faithful, but the knowledge about the practice remained limited to select members of the church for a decade afterward. Meanwhile, hostility and harassment of neighbors toward this new religious sect culminated in the mob murder of the prophet in 1844, which forced the Mormons to migrate westward to avoid persecution. When Mormons finally settled in the western territory of Utah in the late 1840s, isolated from the rest of the nation, they embarked on the task of implementing a separationist theocracy. In 1852, the church's new leader, Brigham Young, officially authorized the practice of plural marriage. Mormon polygamy, an overt defiance of conventional sexual morality, ignited popular outrage from their contemporaries and became a staple source of dissent against Mormonism.[11]

Anti-Mormons employed stereotypes of the foreign other to portray Mormon religiosity as backward, anti-Christian, and un-American. The 1856 platform of the Republican Party promised to eliminate Mormon polygamy along with slavery in western territories, calling them the "twin relics of barbarism." The phrase identified slavery and polygamy as anachronistic, savage institutions in which Mormon women as well as slaves were oppressed and sexually violated.[12] In asserting the danger of Mormon theocracy and sexual morality, anti-Mormon writers particularly relied on orientalist images of Eastern sexual lasciviousness and political despotism, calling Mormonism the "American Mohammedanism" and drawing a

parallel between Mormon polygamy and Turkish harems. The prevalence of Islamic motifs in anti-Mormon discourse demonstrated what Timothy Marr calls "domestic orientalism," which is the process of transposing negative images of Islam and Muslims onto communities within the United States. According to Marr, equating domestic groups and actions with those ascribed to alien infidels "excommunicated them from the province of American acceptability," while enabling those employing such rhetoric to "reassure themselves of the righteousness of their own vision of America as a nation with a Christian mission."[13] This logic permitted Mormonism's opponents to portray the Mormons, all of whom were white, as guilty not only of religious and political deviance but also "race treason." Mormonism's critics warned that polygamy naturally belonged to the "Asiatic and African" races, below the advanced white race; Mormon practices would thus produce racial degeneration, physically as well as morally.[14] Until Mormons relinquished polygamy in 1890, orientalist and white-supremacist views that identified monogamy with Christianity and whiteness continued to define the contours of anti-Mormon vocabularies.

Anti-Mormon sentiments significantly influenced popular perceptions of free love, not least because antebellum newspapers often considered Mormon practice to be a variety of free love. For many of their contemporaries, free love and Mormon polygamy were essentially the same thing, in that they presumably shared a (particularly male) desire to strip off the restrictions of civilization and indulge in sensual pleasures. James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, for instance, repeatedly suggested hidden mutual sympathies between Mormons and free lovers. The *New York Herald* was then the world's largest daily newspaper, selling 77,000 copies in 1860. The paper was known for its sensationalism and strident, vituperative editorials. Bennett was politically conservative, vocally anti-Catholic, antiabolitionist, and anti-Republican.[15] The *Herald* claimed, "At bottom, there is no radical difference between the free lovers and the Mormons. Both deny the efficacy of the divine institution of marriage as an outlet for the sensual passions. . . . Both believe in the right of the parties to a marriage contract to dissolve it at will."[16] Some newspaper reports on Mormon communities across the country also had the phrase "free love" in their headings; the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*'s article titled " Free-Loveism" reported on "free-lovers" at a Mormon community in Wallingford, Connecticut, while the *Buffalo Evening Post*'s article "Free Love in New Jersey" told a story about a New Jersey local society of Mormons.[17]

Free love, therefore, faced similar charges of race treason as did

Mormonism. The nineteenth-century free love movement consisted of white men and women, and the general public also acknowledged this as a fact. The press nevertheless denounced free love by connecting the concept, not as a reform ideology but as a set of practices, to marital and sexual customs among non-Christian, nonwhite people. Popular newspapers illustrated various types of marriage and courting in other parts of the world under the heading "free love." As in the case of anti-Mormon discourse, anti–free love journalists and writers most often evoked the popular images of Eastern polygamy.[18]

Unlike Mormon polygamy, however, the notion of free love could describe variant forms of deviant sexuality, as the term encompassed "non-marriage" in all its forms. Mainstream Americans believed that those practices described as free love were at odds with monogamous lifelong Judeo-Christian marriage. After a small group of young evangelical ministers started the foreign mission movement in 1812, Americans sent Protestant missionaries overseas to proselytize pagans in various parts of the globe. Religious periodicals and secular newspapers disseminated excerpts from the foreign missionaries' journals. Their descriptions of local cultures, religions, and peoples significantly influenced the way Americans perceived the world outside the United States.[19] In the missionary discourse, marital and sexual practices were among the most crucial markers dividing Christians and heathens. Take a newspaper article reporting on the practice of trial marriage that missionaries observed in the Congo. According to the report, trial marriage allowed affianced couples to examine their compatibility for one year before the marriage bond became official and indissoluble. Despite Christian missionaries' efforts to abolish it, the local people stuck to their custom. The article called the practice "African free love," as cohabitation and premarital sex were immoral and unacceptable to the sensibility of the middle-class American audience.[20] Other nineteenth-century newspaper reports on "free love" practices likewise focused on the prevalence of informal marriage and concubinage in countries such as Haiti, India, and Mexico.[21] In popular print culture, "free love" thus functioned as a convenient, all-encompassing phrase for any marital or sexual practice outside of idealized Christian marriage.

For those who denied marital reform, lifelong monogamy was, even if not without minor flaws, the best possible way to regulate sexual relations, developed from ages of Christianity and Western civilization. Free love, in contrast, represented an underdeveloped state of society where men who lacked self-restraint and moral integrity dominated and sexually exploited

women. The spread of free love ideology, in turn, would degenerate the white population of America. The *New York Ledger*, the most commercially successful magazine of midcentury America, wrote that free love leaders were "persons dissatisfied with the entire present industrial and social order—persons bent on reconstructing society, by substituting the conceits of their own lusts and egotisms, in lieu of the prevailing, common-sense principles developed by ages." The *New York Ledger* was a family-friendly magazine featuring serialized stories, poems, current events and moral essays, and its weekly circulation reached approximately 400,000. The *Ledger*'s columnist argued that the ancient Greeks practiced free love before the advent of Christ, indulging in sexual mingling according to "passional attraction" and "unrestrained individual sovereignty." As for the present time, the *Ledger* continued:

> In the East, where man is a sickly tyrant and woman a passive slave, Free-Loveism has done its work, and social, political and industrial imbecility, are the legitimate fruits. Out in Utah, Free-Loveism is also doing its perfect, abominable work. Those who are for subjecting the man to the animal, and for making woman the mistress of that animal—picking her up here in sunshine and casting her off there in storm, leaving her brood to scatter as fate wills—will all hasten to the Free-Love feast, and the devilish revel will go on, at first with dainty, mincing step and seemly behavior, but at length with riotous swiftness, to end in a reckless debauch.[22]

In exemplifying the harmful power of free love ideology, anti–free lovers used for analogies pagans and nonwhites, whose "free love" practices demonstrated the uncivilized, animalistic state of their society. Free love was antithetical to Christian marriage, which operated from the premise that it permanently bonded the family with a sense of duty and responsibility as well as affection. By referencing non-Christians and nonwhite people outside the United States, anti–free love rhetoric legitimated the moral supremacy of American, Christian, and white monogamy.

In the popular imagination, the practice of free love was associated not only with nonwhite pagans in foreign places but also with racial others within the country. Journalists and writers employed the phrase "free love" to describe the sexual and family relations of African American slaves. From the colonial period down to the Civil War, enslaved blacks were deprived of the right to make a marriage contract because of their status as property.

Slaves often practiced informal marriage within and across plantations, and some slaveholders even encouraged them to do so. Under severe constraint, many slaves sustained strong marital and family ties. However, nonlegal unions between slaves were vulnerable to slaveholders' arbitrary decisions to sell or give away either of the parties. As Brenda E. Stevenson has emphasized, monogamous marriage, patriarchal privilege, and a nuclear male-headed household made up the foundation of Southern white families across class, cultural, and ethnic lines. Thus, the very fact that slaves had no legal right of marriage made the institution much more essential to whiteness in the South. Up until the collapse of slavery, marriage marked and reinforced the boundary between freedom and slavery, between white and black in Southern society.[23]

In racist discourse in the popular print media, family formations among slaves were sometimes described as "free love," which was meant to signify promiscuity outside monogamy. The *New York Herald* attributed the unavailability of legal marriage among enslaved African Americans to their inclination for free love, or, "the indisposition of one man to be satisfied with one wife." The *Herald* wrote, "Sambo was a promiscuous husband on almost all plantations, and on many a first rate Mormon plantation law was loose, and there were very few planters who ventured to insist upon any morality in slave intercourse."[24] While the economic needs of slaveholders denied marital and parental rights to slaves, whites blamed slaves themselves for the paucity of stable nuclear families on plantations. Unlike whites, enslaved African Americans were supposedly licentious by nature and unfit for normative monogamous relationships. The association between African Americans (particularly in the South) and free love continued well after abolition. An 1877 article in *Pomeroy's Democrat*, published by ex-Copperhead editor Mark M. "Brick" Pomeroy, asserted that Southern blacks "adopted the free love system, which is even worse in its effects upon the whites and blacks than is polygamy, because there is an entailment of offspring that become homeless as the dogs of Constantinople."[25] Discussions about free love took place in the larger discursive space where race and sex constituted one another, shaping the definitions of licit and illicit, normative and non-normative.

III. FREE LOVE AND MISCEGENATION

When Americans invested the term "free love" with expansive meanings, they were expressing their concern about the supposed laxity of morals in

the country. The various types of illicit behaviors that these people labeled as free love included liaisons across racial boundaries. While US laws and customs had always prohibited interracial marriage between whites and blacks, the issue attracted special attention from whites in the 1850s. The mid-nineteenth-century popular press often conflated free love with so-called amalgamation, implying to their readers that free love contained the notions of interracial love and race mixture. For instance, a newspaper article on Brazilian society reported how "miscegenation has full sway" in the area, writing, "The free population is of every shade and hue, propagated by untrammelled 'free love.'"[26] In the midst of heated sectional contests over the destiny of racial slavery, the charge of promoting interracial marriage or sex was one of the most potent political tools by which the defenders of slavery attacked the Northern reform culture that had produced abolitionism as well as free love ideology. The resulting (and often intentional) misperception that free love actively promoted intimacy across the color line aggravated negative responses to the already infamous cause.

From the colonial period onward, white Americans had outlawed sexual unions between whites and blacks for fear of jeopardizing the stability of white dominance, but how strictly they enforced bans on interracial sex depended on social, political, and economic circumstances. Interracial marriage and sex became central political issues when whites perceived challenges to existing racial boundaries. Notably, the emergence of radical abolitionism in the early 1830s caused a storm of anxiety about interracial sex, called "amalgamation," in Northern cities. While those who constituted the earlier generation of antislavery activists were elite white men who envisioned gradual abolition, the new abolitionist movement was a mass coalition of blacks and whites, men and women, determined to end slavery immediately and achieve racial equality. Their opponents portrayed such cooperation as equivalent to amalgamation and vehemently propagandized that the abolitionist movement sprang from the desire of abolitionists to encourage race mixture through interracial marriage. The power of amalgamation discourse to stir white anxiety and hostility was evinced in such violent mob reactions against abolitionists and African American residents as the New York City riots in 1834 and the Philadelphia riots in 1838. As Leslie M. Harris argues, "Amalgamation ideology sexualized all types of black-white interactions, and became a way to attempt to prevent black-white cooperation even on the most basic neighborly levels."[27] Over the next two decades, Southern as well as Northern whites were increasingly preoccupied with regulating "amalgamation" on the streets of economically

booming cities, where working-class whites and blacks closely mingled at workplaces and commercialized leisure venues.

Despite antiabolitionists' claims, only a few abolitionists openly challenged statutory bans on interracial marriage between whites and blacks. Starting from the early 1830s, white and black abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child, went on successive petitioning campaigns to repeal the 1705 Massachusetts law prohibiting interracial marriage. Child argued that "the government ought not to be invested with power to control the affections, any more than the consciences of citizens. A man has at least as good a right to choose his wife, as he has to choose his religion."[28] The participants in the repeal effort rightly acknowledged that antimiscegenation laws were a cornerstone of white supremacy and demanded interracial marriage rights as a perquisite for black equal citizenship. The campaign convinced Massachusetts state legislators to repeal the law in 1843. Faced with antiamalgamation hysteria, however, the majority of antebellum abolitionists evaded the issue of interracial marriage rights, stressing that they had no intention of encouraging interracial relationships.[29]

Rather than the legalization of consensual unions between blacks and whites, abolitionists' interests regarding sexuality centered on the critique of coerced sex between male masters and female slaves in the South. Despite statutes against interracial marriage and fornication, Southern slaveholders could sexually exploit female slaves without any social or legal penalties. The sexual deviance of slaveholders proved to be abolitionists' most effective theme for moral persuasion and mobilization. Abolitionists maintained that slavery's greatest injustices were its three-fold violations of the sanctity of marriage—by denying legal marriage to slaves, by tolerating slaveholders' extramarital coerced sex with their female slaves, and by precluding the efforts of male slaves to protect their partners from sexual aggression.[30] Abolitionists thus countered the accusation of promoting miscegenation by arguing that it was slave masters of the South who actually disgraced the institution of marriage and practiced illicit intercourse across the color line.

The increasing political importance of the antislavery movement and the accompanying anxiety about interracial relationships during the 1850s gave a new dimension to the implications of free love. Some anti–free lovers argued that freedom of affection might erode prohibitions against love across the color line and thereby disrupt the existing racial hierarchy. Since free lovers opposed any form of intervention in private relationships, those

opposing the movement assumed that free love included the abolition of antiamalgamation laws and customs.[31] The *New York Herald* sarcastically wrote of "free love associations," whose scheme was "to embrace in one common bond of union and passional affinity the whole human race." The *Herald* continued, "How far the plan was reduced to practical execution, not having the reports and statistics of their societies before us, we are unable to state. Of course, the negro element was permanently recognized in their operations, and what figures are wanting to substitute we shall no doubt gather from the color of the next generation."[32] The article thereby implied that the free love movement actively encouraged interracial relationships and that the advocates were already acting on this principle. The conservative press, as a way of deflecting popular sympathies from the free love movement, often implied that free love facilitated race mixture.

Associating interracial marriage or sex with free love became a way to attack abolitionism. Defenders of Southern slavery spread the false idea that antislavery reformers actively embraced both amalgamation and free love. The opponents of antislavery and abolitionism argued that political alliances between white and black reformers demonstrated their desire for interracial free love. In its report about a meeting of the city's colored women's association, the *New York Herald* attacked its reformist rivals, Henry J. Raymond of the *New York Times* and Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*. The *Herald* depicted how Raymond and Greeley, whose papers championed the antislavery Republican Party, had behaved toward African American female members at the meeting: "Conspicuous among the happy company were the representative philosophers of the *Times* and *Tribune*, whose polite attention to the ladies were generally commended. The condescension of the ladies in reciprocating their attentions and providing them with sweet mottoes, was amusing to witness. Whether the free love principles of these journals includes the colored race in the social circle, may not hereafter be a doubtful question."[33] The *Herald* article assumed that the *Times* and the *Tribune*, because of their advocacy of antislavery, also supported free love; it also implied that these papers meant to apply the doctrine of free love to interracial intimacy as well. These assumptions were far from the truth, but the *Herald* continued making similar allegations against abolitionists and Republican supporters. By linking antislavery and abolitionism with free love, the antireform popular press demonized both causes, indicating to its readers that the ultimate purpose of opposition to slavery was promiscuous mingling across the color line.

IV. FREE LOVE RHETORIC IN THE 1860 ELECTION AND THE CIVIL WAR

During the 1860 presidential race, the Democratic Party employed the stereotype of a pro–free love Republican Party in their campaign. A satirical lithograph by Louis Maurer depicted the Republican presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln, and his boosters as radicals and eccentrics who demanded all kinds of "rights" (fig. 1). Among them stands a male free lover who proclaims, "I represent the free love element, and expect to have free license to carry out its principles." His untrimmed beard and scholarly air might have reminded nineteenth-century readers of known free lovers such as Stephen Pearl Andrews (fig. 2). The male free lover links arms with an elderly female free lover who has an unflattering masculine face and an exposed shoulder. She looks up to Lincoln and says, "Oh! What a beautiful man he is, I feel a 'passional attraction' every time I see his lovely face." The female figure was based on the prevalent caricature of a female free lover who was devoid of feminine virtues and controlled by her libido yet who was too masculine and ugly to attract men. Free lovers' gender nonconformity as manifested in their appearance repeatedly turned up in

fig. 1 Louis Maurer, "The Great Republican Party Going to the Right House," Currier & Ives, New York, ca. 1860. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

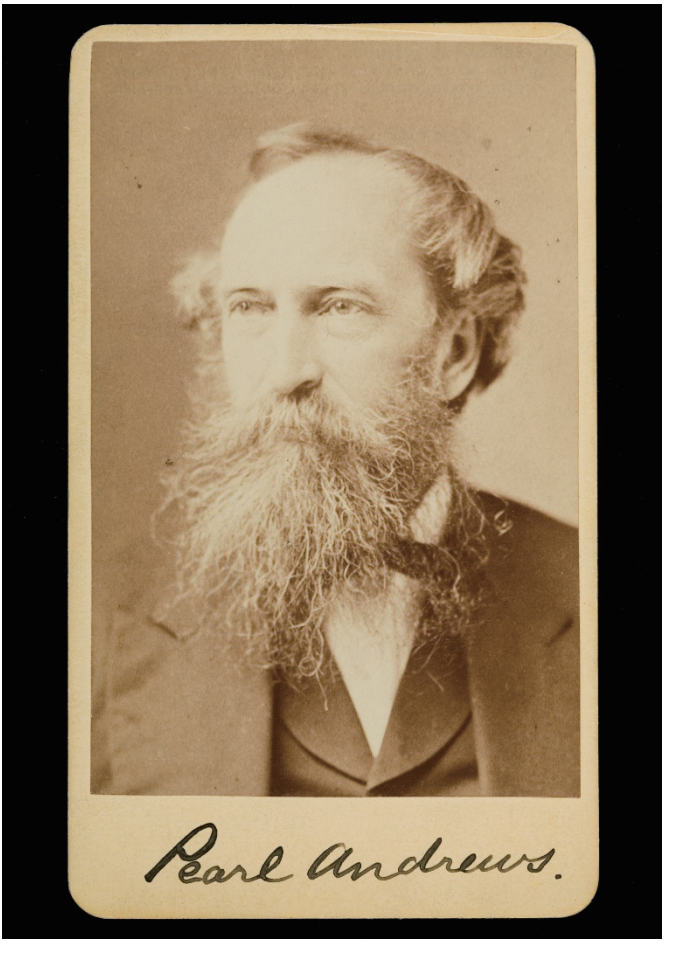

fig. 2 Stephen Pearl Andrews. Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library.

anti–free love rhetoric. Taking the other arm of the male free lover is a Mormon, who asserts that he wants "religion abolished and the book of Mormon made the standard of morality." These three figures—the two free lovers and the male Mormon polygamist—as a group represented the supposed sexual immorality of Republicans. The cartoon also depicted a fierce women's rights activist who wishes to subject men to the authority of women and who is as manly and unattractive as the female free lover. The free lovers and the women's rights reformer thus threaten to overturn the

conventional gender order. The remaining Lincoln supporters in the print include a male black abolitionist and many other shady men who simply claim their rights to property and free access to food and housing. Lincoln, who rides on a rail carried by the Republican publicist Horace Greeley, leads this erratic band of people toward a lunatic asylum. The 1860 Democratic campaign tried to tarnish the Republican Party by associating its policies and constituents with sexual licentiousness as well as racial and gender subversion.

When Lincoln won the 1860 election, the association of Northern culture with the destruction of religion and family offered Southern secessionists symbolic justification for their withdrawal from the Union. They were convinced that secession was the only means to repel the invaders at the threshold; as patriarchs and Christians, they vowed to defend their property and household from the Northern power.[34] The ideological link between the dismantling of slavery and marriage among Southerners appeared in William Mumford Baker's novel *Inside: A Chronicle of Secession*. Born in Washington, D.C., Baker was a Presbyterian clergyman who ministered in Austin, Texas, between 1850 and 1865. He experienced the Civil War as a Unionist in the South. In the wake of the war, Baker serialized *Inside* in *Harper's Weekly* under the pseudonym of George F. Harrington, fashioning himself as a native Southerner with a Union allegiance. Although the story was a work of fiction, Baker intended to present *Inside* as documentation of wartime Southern society under the Confederacy. In the novel, during a discussion about the legitimacy of secession, a Southern matron, Mrs. Juggins, mentions a rumor that in the previous week "marriage has been altogether abolished" among the Yankees. According to Mrs. Juggins, "Up there the women all wear pants like men, make speeches, vote, and, I *do* suppose, carry their revolvers, curse and swear, drink and gamble, just like men! When any man and woman happen to meet any where and take a likin' to each other they just consider themselves married—free love, they call it!"[35] In Confederate discourse, this distorted image of "free love" incited fears that Northern rule would blur the gender boundary, destroy Christian morality, and result in rampant sexuality.

Southern supporters of the Confederacy attacked the Northern free labor society with the charge of promoting "free love," yet the ambiguity and malleability of the phrase allowed Lincoln and supporters of the Union to appropriate it to attack Southern slave power. *Harper's Weekly*, a popular journal that promulgated Republican propaganda during the war, used the rhetoric of free love to attack the Confederate States for withdrawing from

the Union. *Harper's* wrote, "The principles of the Confederacy is . . . the free-love principle. When a State is tired it goes off. Its whim is the constitutional justification of its course."[36] The War Democrat Daniel S. Dickinson compared the secessionists, who seemed to consider that "a nation may at pleasure withdraw from its treaty obligations without previous provision or consent of the other side," to an unfaithful partner who would repudiate the marriage covenant just as he or she liked. Dickinson claimed that "the right thus to secede must rest upon a political free love, where States unequally united, may on discovering their true affinities, dissolve the first condition and become sealed in confederate wedlock to their chosen companions during pleasure, and the authors of the discovery should go down to posterity as the Brigham Youngs of modern confederacies."[37] By using the metaphor of free love, Dickinson intended to address Confederates' neglect of the indissolubility of the Union to form other political alliances. As an example of those who practiced free love, however, he referred to Brigham Young, the leader of the Mormons, who was simultaneously married to multiple women. Mormon polygamy did not exactly make sense in Dickinson's context, which referred to serial monogamy. The confusion surrounding "free love" in Dickinson's speech demonstrates how nineteenth-century Americans like him conflated different kinds of nonlifelong monogamy under the term "free love."

Some Union supporters turned to the phrase "free love" specifically to accuse Confederate slaveholders of practicing miscegenation. At the celebration of Emancipation Day on August 1, 1862, the abolitionist John S. Rock described his view of interracial "free love" in the slave South, where slaves' domestic work within white households and forced sex between male slaveholders and female slaves destroyed both white and black families. Rock spoke to the audience: "The white child cries after the black wet nurse, and refuses to be comforted by its mother . . . and the mulatto child is dandled on the knee of its white father until he gets 'hard up,' then he sells it. . . . Emancipation will entirely revolutionize society. This system of free love must be abolished."[38] To Rock "free love" meant white men's exercise of unauthorized power to satisfy their sexual desire regardless of the color line. In Republican discourse that equated the federal union with marriage, the Union, which strove to hold the country together, was the true defender of the sacred bond of marriage. The Confederacy, on the contrary, represented free lovers, un-American infidel destroyers of marriage and licentious practitioners of miscegenation.

Not all Northerners were convinced by Republican ideology. In the North,

growing fears of interracial sex since the antebellum period culminated in the invention of the term "miscegenation" during the Civil War years. During the 1864 presidential campaign, the Democratic pamphleteers David Croly and George Wakeman anonymously published a seventy-two-page tract entitled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*. Croly and Wakeman coined the term "miscegenation" from the Latin *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race) to refer to interracial marriage, replacing the older term "amalgamation," a less specific word that originally referred to the "union of metals with quicksilver, and was . . . only borrowed for an emergency." The tract argued that the "blending of blood" from various races, particularly between white and black through intermarriage, was necessary for human progress and that it was the ultimate purpose of the Republican Party.[39] Pretending to be a work by pro-Republican abolitionists, the tract was in fact an elaborate parody to warn readers of the possible consequences of abolition and to deflect public support away from Abraham Lincoln's reelection. While the authors' hoax was soon debunked, the term "miscegenation" continued to appear in political debates about race and sexuality.[40] This new word was not created *ex nihilo* but rather grew out of decades of political discourse that equated the abolition of slavery with race mixture,[41] and in this context free love functioned as extremely potent rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

As Americans underwent intensifying sectional conflict and then the bloody Civil War, the notion of free love appeared in every corner of political debates. Just as marriage and gender roles became political issues that highlighted partisan divisions in the decades preceding the war, their imagined antithesis, free love, provided a vocabulary by which Americans articulated their worldviews. The vagueness and plasticity of "free love" permitted various groups of Americans to define the phrase in different ways and employ it to stigmatize their political foes as immoral, un-American, and anti-Christian. While Southern proslavery commentators emphasized the Northern origin of free love ideology to attack the socioeconomic system and reformist culture of the North, Northern Union supporters used the metaphor of free love to chastise slaveholders' sexual exploitation of female slaves as well as the Southern states' secession from the federal union. The ubiquity of free love rhetoric in political contests over the abolition of slavery demonstrates how ideas about marriage, gender, and sexuality

shaped American political discourses in crucial ways.

The use of the notion of free love by Americans across a wide spectrum of political allegiances strengthened the social stigma of free love. The Civil War halted the momentum of free lovers, and the movement remained virtually inert until a younger generation of advocates rekindled the cause in the early 1870s. Nonetheless, by the late 1860s, the term "free love," the enemy of marriage, was fixed in American common usage.

Notes

[1] "The Presidential Elect," *North American and United States Gazette*, February 12, 1861, 2; "Domestic Intelligence," *Harper's Weekly*, February 23, 1861, 119.

[2] For important studies on the nineteenth-century free love movement, see Hal D. Sears, *Free Love in High-Victorian America* (Lawrence: Regent Press of Kansas, 1977); Taylor Stoehr, *Free Love in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Ams Press, 1979); John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825–1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Jesse F. Battan, "'The Word Made Flesh': Language, Authority, and Sexual Desire in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 2 (October 1992): 223–44; Jesse F. Battan, "'You Cannot Fix the Scarlet Letter on My Breast!': Women Reading, Writing, and Reshaping the Sexual Culture of Victorian America," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 601–24; Joanne E. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

[3] Satomi Minowa, "The Multiplicity of 'Free Love' Discourses," in "The Limit of Freedom: Free Love Controversies in the Nineteenth-Century United States," (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2017), 67–119.

[4] Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 72; Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, 6.

[5] Passet, *Sex Radicals*, chap. 2.

[6] James L. Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), chaps. 2–3.

[7] Amanda Frisken's work on free lover and suffragist Victoria Woodhull is a rare study that deals with the racial implications of free love. Frisken argues that the newspaper coverage of Woodhull's demand for free love and universal suffrage in the early 1870s reflected postbellum anxiety about miscegenation between white women and African American men. Amanda Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Radical Theater and the Political Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[8] Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 116.

[9] Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[10] Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Christine Leigh

Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1997); Pierson, *Free Hearts*, 95–114.

[11] Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19–29.

[12] Ibid., 55–57, 63–65.

[13] Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 185–218, quotation at 136.

[14] Martha Ertman, "Race Treason: The Untold Story of America's Ban on Polygamy," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law 19*, no. 2 (2010): 287–366. On orientalism and racism in anti-Mormon discourse, see also Tammy Heise, "Marking Mormon Difference: How Western Perceptions of Islam Defined the 'Mormon Menace,'" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 82–97; Margaret Denike, "The Racialization of White Man's Polygamy," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 852–74; Christine Talbot, "'Turkey Is in Our Midst': Orientalism and Contagion in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Mormonism," *Journal of Law and Family Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 363–88; Bruce Burgett, "On the Mormon Question: Race, Sex, and Polygamy in the 1850s and the 1990s," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 75–102.

[15] Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690–1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 303; Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald*, 24–25.

[16] "The Mormons and the Fourierites," *New York Herald*, March 17, 1858, 4.

[17] "Free-Loveism," *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, May 26, 1867, 1; "Free Love in New Jersey," *Buffalo Evening Post*, August 22, 1856, 2.

[18] See, e. g., "Free Love in the East," *New York Times*, October 23, 1855, 4.

[19] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *American Apostles: When Evangelicals Entered the World of Islam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 8–10, 20–22.

[20] "African Free Love," *Columbus Tri-Weekly Enquirer*, December 29, 1855, 2. See also "African Free Love," *Columbian Register*, December 22, 1855, 1.

[21] J. M. Hawks, "Letter from Hayti," *The Liberator*, May 10, 1861, 4; "Hayti," *Charleston Mercury*, April 28, 1859, 4; "The Experiment of Free Negroism," *Semi-Weekly Mississippian*, May 6, 1859, 2; "Free Love," *Semi-Weekly Mississippian*, May 6, 1859, 4; "British India: Its Disloyalties, Free Love and Religion—The Russian Advance," *New York Herald*, January 2, 1870, 6; "Marriage in Mexico," *Freeman*, April 13, 1889, 3.

[22] "Free-Loveism," *New York Ledger*, August 7, 1858, 4. On the *New York Ledger* and its immense popularity in the midcentury, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 356–63.

[23] Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Emily West, "Surviving Separation: Cross-Plantation Marriages and the Slave Trade in Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Family History* 24, no. 2 (April 1999): 212–31; Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*.

[24] "Free Love among the Niggers," *New York Herald*, August 27, 1865, 4.

[25] "Let Peace Prevail," *Pomeroy's Democrat*, October 13, 1877, 1.

[26] "Brazil," *Daily Age*, January 2, 1865, 4.

[27] Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Leslie M. Harris, "From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rulers of the Five Points': The Discourse of Interracial Sex and Reform in Antebellum New York City," in Martha Hodes ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 191–212, quotation at 207; Lemire, "*Miscegenation*," chaps. 3 and 4; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*

(New York: Verso, 1991), 108–9; Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 113–29.

[28] Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833), 196.

[29] Lemire, "*Miscegenation*"; Harris, "From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rulers of the Five Points,'" 194–95.

[30] Ronald G. Walters, "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," *American Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (May 1973): 177–201.

[31] In my dissertation, I discuss that few free lovers explicitly questioned the legitimacy of antimiscegenation laws. Free lovers' silence on the issue of interracial relationships indicates their insensitivity or indifference to marital regulations that contributed to the maintenance of racial hierarchy. Most probably, free lovers presumed that affections were naturally intraracial. Minowa, "Limit of Freedom," 166–69.

[32] "Progress and Prospects of Human Freedom," *New York Herald*, November 19, 1858, 4.

[33] "Meeting of Citizens of All Colors," *New York Herald*, February 22, 1857, 5.

[34] McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 288–92, 302–4.

[35] George F. Harrington (William Mumford Baker), "Inside: A Chronicle of Secession," *Harper's Weekly*, February 3, 1866, 69. The novel was later reprinted as a book. By illustrating the tragedy of the Civil War from the perspective of a Southern Unionist, Baker's novel sought to help restore unity to the divided nation after the war. George F. Harrington (William Mumford Baker), *Inside: A Chronicle of Secession* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866); "William Mumford Baker" in Thomas William Herringshaw, *Herringshaw's Encyclopedia of American Biography of the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: American Publishers' Association, 1898), 71. On the novel *Inside*, see also Patricia Okker, *Social Stories: The Magazine Novel in Nineteenth-Century America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 110–12.

[36] "The Lounger," *Harper's Weekly*, August 10, 1861, 499.

[37] "The Union—It Must and Shall Be Preserved!" *New York Tribune*, July 11, 1861, 6.

[38] "Celebration of the First of August," *The Liberator*, August 15, 1862.

[39] *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro* (New York: H. Dexter, Hamilton and Co., 1864), 7.

[40] Sidney Kaplan, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864," *Journal of Negro History* 34, no. 3 (July 1, 1949): 274–343; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 155–56; Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28.

[41] Harris, "From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rules of the Five Points'"; Lemire, *Miscegenation*.