

SEX RADICALS IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND: REDEFINING GENDER AND
SEXUALITY, 1880-1910

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rise of sex radicalism in Kansas and the larger Midwest as men and women sought to redefine the ways in which they thought about gender and sexuality. Specifically, it follows the career of Moses Harman, his journal *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, and the conversation of its many correspondents. Sex radicals based their ideas of free love on the tradition of American freethought and were rooted in the class struggle that marked the economic inequalities of the gilded age.

While previous studies of free love consider the way in which the movement empowered women, a complete gendered analysis is lacking in the historiography. Examining the movement's male leaders, I argue that free love served to empower men at a time when they were experiencing a crisis in their own male identities. Through the promotion of women's emancipation from "sex slavery" and the abolishment of marriage, sex radical men sought to throw off church and state oppression, defend against gilded-age capitalism, and recreate a form of individualism that they believed had been lost since the early nineteenth century. In making these arguments, I address several key aspects of the movement that have not received adequate attention, including manhood and masculinity, class dynamics, freethought, eugenics, and the region of the Midwestern United States. Only a thorough investigation of all these factors together can bring a complete gendered analysis of the free love movement and the men and women who were involved in it.