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“Your Whole Effort Has Been to Create Desire”: Reproducing Knowledge and Evading Censorship in the Nineteenth-Century Subscription Press

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SUMMARY: Historians once regarded the passage of the Comstock Laws in 1873 as a death knell for the public discourse on gender, sex, and reproduction that thrived in the early nineteenth-century United States, but this view has given way to a more complex appreciation of the strategies available to actors seeking knowledge about the body. I examine some of these strategies in late-century health and hygiene manuals. Although certain discourses about sex became closed off, others persisted and evolved in the interstices of Comstock’s regulatory state. Readers’ demand for information did not abate in 1873; savvy publishers found different ways to meet it, utilizing suggestion, allusion, and nontextual cues from which active readers could extract useful knowledge. A once-public debate about the morality, effectiveness, and appropriate use of contraception had become coded in the pages of health and hygiene manuals, pointing readers to the burgeoning mass market for contraceptive devices as a locus of reproductive control.

KEYWORDS: reproductive control, Comstock Laws, health and hygiene manuals, censorship, readers and reading

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Sometimes the best way for illicit knowledge to travel is right through the front door in the wholesome sunlight of a midwestern afternoon. Readers in the late nineteenth-century United States, particularly readers seeking information about sex and reproductive control, faced a literary landscape seemingly eviscerated by restrictive social mores and the outright government censorship of the Comstock Laws. During the first half of the century, there was a lively and explicit discourse about gender roles, the meaning of marriage, and the morality of contraception and abortion circulating in popular print, but this discourse was gradually limited by moral reform efforts. In 1873, New York reformer Anthony Comstock succeeded in passing a federal law that banned texts deemed lewd or obscene, and forbidden material was confiscated and destroyed with much moralistic relish.¹ Historians of women's health and reproduction once characterized the post-1873 decades as an uninteresting time for studies of sexuality and reproductive control: purity crusaders succeeded in their purge, exerting a stranglehold on public discourse until the liberalization of the interwar period. In recent years, new scholarship has emerged that explores the complex realities of medicine, technology, and reproductive knowledge in the lives of Americans seeking methods of family limitation.² This essay adds to that literature by examining a set of sources rarely considered in the history of medicine: subscription health and hygiene texts and the sales tactics that put them in the hands of curious readers. The circulation of these texts reveals a complex interplay of gender, class, and forbidden knowledge. By joining a close study of the J. L. Nichols & Co. publishing company with an analysis of the sales material used to promote and distribute books like theirs, I illuminate the complex set of practices whereby sex information and moral prescription were delicately interleaved.

Despite legal restrictions, purchasing a book about sex was a common transaction in late nineteenth-century America, though by no means a straightforward one. Most readers outside of major

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cities obtained literature by mail-order or from subscription agents who sold door-to-door. The sale of such books was meticulously scripted by publishers to tantalize and intrigue while revealing little in the way of content. “The chapter on Reproduction is simply grand,” boasts the sales script for *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty*. “I need only read you some of the headlines to give you an idea of its worth.” At this point, stage directions instruct the agent to flip through the pages of the book while reading the chapter titles aloud: “‘Times when marital relations are wrongful,’ ‘Limitation of offspring,’ ‘Conception,’ ‘How to have beautiful children,’ ‘Can the sexes be produced at will?’ . . .”³ This performance struck a delicate balance between suggesting and withholding information—under no circumstances, according to the script, should the agent pause long enough for a customer to actually read the text. Although agents may not have performed their scripts to the letter, this at least was the publisher’s vision: a sales agent must create desire, hinting at secret knowledge hidden between the covers, or between the lines, of the book.

A book like the 1896 *Search Lights on Health: Light on Dark Corners; a Complete Sexual Science and a Guide to Purity and Physical Manhood, Advice to Maiden, Wife and Mother, Love, Courtship, and Marriage* would seem to demonstrate this point: a representative specimen of the thriving late-century health and hygiene guide genre, it addresses such concerns as the “influence of good character,” “when and whom to marry,” “chastity and purity of character,” and, conversely, “the dangerous vices,” but some of the crucial information it contains about “sexual science” is hidden. On the surface, it hews steadfastly to the tenets of Victorian moral reform rhetoric, mobilizing medical expertise and authority to buttress normative claims about the virtues of middle-class, heterosexual family reproduction. But this book, and others like it, were not necessarily written, distributed, or read simply to recapitulate such a message, particularly in a culture already saturated (as the sheer quantity

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of literature testifies) with similar advice. If we follow *Search Lights* and kindred titles through their lives as material texts, we can glimpse a world of desires and expectations—shaped in the course of interactions among readers, publishers, and sales agents—that in many ways subverted the dominant discourse on display in these manuals’ pages.⁴

Whether or not the Indiana household that purchased a 1902 edition of *Search Lights* intended it for general use, it seems to have become the exclusive province of John A. Hansen, who was a close, if selective, reader of the volume.⁵ His hand appears throughout the book, in dog-eared pages, marginal notes, doodles, and fragments of penmanship. Certain sections of the book are untouched, while others are underlined, fingerprint-smudged, and annotated. These sections of interest share some common characteristics, which is to say that Hansen mostly read the parts about sex. He marked paragraphs on the dangers of “non-completed intercourse” and “the female sexual organs,” and double-underlined the warning that “many of the means to prevent conception are injurious.” His penmanship practice on the book’s end pages suggests that Hansen was a young man entering a phase of life when (he hoped) the scant sexual information that *Search Lights* offered might be of use. As Andrea Tone notes, men as well as women were concerned with reproductive knowledge, and the “broad gender dynamics” of contraception in the late nineteenth century have yet to be studied extensively.⁶

The way that John Hansen read *Search Lights* is suggestive of the meaning that this book held for its audience; indeed, many copies show the same pattern of careful attention to seemingly innocuous sexual advice, a pattern that points to the historical circumstances surrounding the book’s publication and distribution. How typical was Hansen’s use of *Search Lights*? Was he representative of its audience?⁷ Though we can’t generalize about readership based on scattered, incomplete traces left by particular readers, we need to understand when and where people read, how they chose and obtained

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books, what they knew, and what they believed: how did such a book fit within the mundane totality of ordinary life?⁸ Answering such questions for *Search Lights* leads to a slew of similar publications, and to the broader context within which these books circulated in the late nineteenth-century United States.⁹ I begin with a discussion of health and hygiene literature as a genre, review the historiographic context of the Comstock Laws as they related to reproductive control, and then move into the core of my investigation of medical knowledge and subscription book sales.

Search Lights on Health: Circulating Texts, Circulating Knowledge

The literature of nineteenth-century health and hygiene movements suffered no paucity of light/dark oppositions; titular references to shadows and darkness, lights and searchlights, serve as a reliable indicator that a text deals with moral hygiene, temperance, vice, or a related cause. “Shedding light” evoked both scriptural revelation and scientific rationality, a vision of moral improvement through the application of modern expertise.¹⁰ The constellations of organizations and causes devoted to moral purity and to “health and hygiene” are notoriously difficult to tease apart, webbed as they were by overlapping networks of friendship, charity, commerce, and politics, and ranging in scale from the local to the international levels.¹¹ They responded to a perception of moral crisis in American life, to anxieties about urbanization and industrialization, and to the alarmist discourse of miscegenation and degeneration.

In the early nineteenth century, an explosion in self-help, advice, and hygiene literature capitalized upon the mass appeal of reformist rhetoric, which by turns elicited and assuaged the anxieties of a white, middle- and upper-middle-class public.¹² Advocates of reform physiology, women’s equality, freethinkers, utopian socialists, Fourierists, Grahamites all produced volumes on

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healthy living guided by a patchwork of doctrines moral and physical, social and scientific. Some of these were sexually explicit, promoting intercourse for nonreproductive purposes and endorsing birth control or abortion, while others attacked these radical trends and insisted on self-mastery, denial, and regimentation. This raucous literary marketplace, as well as the scope of acceptable public discourse about health and reproduction, would shrink dramatically during the middle decades of the century. Legal prosecution of publishers of so-called obscene texts, which began in earnest in the 1830s with the trials of Charles Knowlton, increased steadily as opposition to radical doctrines moved from the realm of public discourse into the realm of judicial power.¹³

In 1873, notorious antvice crusader Anthony Comstock achieved the defining victory of his career: an act for the “Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use” won passage in the U.S. Congress. This postal act governed the transmission of such materials by mail, but individual states would pass their own, more restrictive laws that allowed prosecution of manufacturers, retailers, and anyone else caught in possession of forbidden “books, pamphlets, leaflets, songs, pictures, and these articles in rubber, wax, and other materials—all designed and cunningly calculated to excite the imagination and inflame the passions.”¹⁴ Often referred to in aggregate as the Comstock Laws, this legislation was fueled by a revival of Christian values among a reform-oriented upper-middle class, epitomized in the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV).

Comstock’s crusade has been interpreted by feminist scholars as actively opposed to women’s rights and particularly to reproductive control; although recent scholarship has sought to modify that view, the Comstock Laws still had an indisputable limiting impact on the lives and freedoms of women.¹⁵ The oppressive atmosphere of the Comstock era forces us to look more carefully at the

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conservative content of health and hygiene books. At a time when any discussion of reproductive control was suspect, some authors dared to weigh its benefits and even described specific methods. They adopted a new, highly allusive, and euphemistic rhetoric to deflect the serious risks incurred by running afoul of Comstock, who enforced the law with a ferocity and indiscriminacy that made him wildly unpopular. Penalties for spreading obscene material by mail included a fine of between one hundred and five thousand dollars or up to ten years of hard labor.¹⁶ In the rhetoric of Comstock's purity coalition, contraceptive information was classed alongside pornography and prostitution as an existential threat to American society.¹⁷

Despite Comstock's zealotry, the laws proved difficult to enforce. Some publishers, either through intentional defiance or failed evasion, were caught in his net, but the cooperation of judges and juries at either the state or federal level was not ensured, and punishments were often negligible.¹⁸ The high-profile convictions of Edward Bliss Foote, Ezra Haywood, and D. M. Bennett in the 1870s set a chilling legal precedent for federal control of "obscene" print material. These defendants were atypical, however, pursuing their cases through the court system and beyond out of moral conviction about the right to freedom of speech and access to sexual knowledge.¹⁹ Many small publishers, ill equipped to take a moral stand, quietly continued their activities with prudent modifications. In what follows, I use subscription health and hygiene books to explore ways in which rivulets of early nineteenth-century reproductive discourse quietly trickled through the fissures in Comstock's censorship.

The kind of texts in question were not exclusively or even predominantly authored by medical professionals; popular literature on sex and reproduction has come from diverse sources and often inhabited a realm of assumed names, dubious credentials, and furtive purchasing.²⁰ However, the increasing authority of the medical profession spurred the growth of a popular health literature that

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combined the “cheap print” tradition of herbals, almanacs, and household guides with an emphasis on the moral and medical authority of experts (often, the object of both criticism and praise).²¹ These texts emphasized the physician’s access to privileged information, listing numerous purported MDs on their title pages, and advertised the very latest in modern scientific knowledge.²² Sales agents for *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty* (1900) boasted that “this is the first opportunity the public has had to buy a book of this nature, for you must surely know doctors, as a rule, keep their medical books in great secrecy.”²³ Asserting that sex and reproduction were medical rather than obscene or lascivious phenomena would become part of the broader effort to legalize birth control by moving it into the domain of medicine and public health, but here it served a sales purpose. Given that many physicians were known to prescribe contraception, and even provide abortions, despite strident opposition by the American Medical Association, promising to reveal the secrets of doctors suggested knowledge of this variety.²⁴

At the same time, publishers packaged sexual knowledge in “plain language” for “people of all classes”; authors frequently portrayed themselves as mavericks betraying the establishment’s conspiracy of silence.²⁵ This ambivalent attitude toward professional medicine allowed readers to access critical information without devaluing vernacular knowledge and home care. It also channeled popular health movements such as those of Sylvester Graham, Samuel Thompson, and the array of homeopaths and reformers who actively contested the medical and social status quo from the 1820s onward. This split identification—with both the authority of professional medicine and the populism of alternative health movements—seems to have posed little difficulty for publishers and readers; as I argue, the practice of producing knowledge from such texts was aided rather than impeded by medical heterodoxy.²⁶

By the 1870s, the Comstock Laws dealt a serious blow to the once-freewheeling health and

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hygiene genre, leading advice texts to adopt a conservative, moralistic tone. Janet Farrell Brodie, in her study of nineteenth-century reproductive control, dismisses advice literature after 1873 as “inferior to that available earlier.”²⁷ Some historians of the period were content to leave the discussion there, depicting the post-Comstock years as a time devoid of useful contraceptive advice and the origin of partisanship and confusion around reproductive health that lingers to this day.²⁸ Closer examinations of the mixed results of Comstock’s crusade have led to a reevaluation of this view, namely, that contraception became a market phenomenon to which many women were able to gain access. Furthermore, the ways in which historians define the effectiveness of contraceptive methods have changed from the 1960s, when the pill was the gold standard, to more context-sensitive accounts of perceived efficacy, the agency of individuals in using multiple methods, and the relative value of something over nothing when seeking to limit pregnancy.²⁹

The Comstock decades did see a constriction of public discourse—conversations that took place in literature, lecture halls, and courts. Private conversations between friends, parents and children, and sexual partners are largely inaccessible to us, although historians working with available diaries and letters have explored such sites of knowledge exchange. They often point to the subversive nature of private discourse, arguing that its ephemerality protected it from moral or legal scrutiny; individuals could adopt attitudes publicly that were not reflected in their private behaviors.³⁰ However, it was precisely this substratum of private discourse to which popular texts like *Search Lights* referred for much of their implied content. Rather than presupposing a clean separation and opposition between what was spoken in private and what circulated in print, we can read moral hygiene literature as evoking, mimicking, and distorting private discourse in various tactical ways.

Advice manuals at the turn of the century offer subtle clues as to how knowledge proliferated

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within and around the regulatory structures created by the Comstock Laws. They hint at what type of information was available, how it circulated, and through what channels. Proceeding to the history of the subscription press that issued *Search Lights*, we will see how mechanisms for producing illicit knowledge were built into a text that epitomized its publisher's commitment to a restrictive Victorian social hygiene.

J. L. Nichols & Co.: The Library, the Gymnasium, and the Douching Apparatus

As an author of self-help literature in late nineteenth-century America, James Lawrence Nichols boasted a fittingly up-by-the-bootstraps biography: an illiterate German orphan raised on charity in rural Illinois, Nichols taught himself to speak and write in English and paid his way through school by selling books door-to-door. By the age of thirty-one, he was a full professor of business at Northwestern College, and by thirty-five he had self-published a book that went on to become, in the perhaps hyperbolic estimation of a local journalist, “the third best selling book in the Midwest besides the Bible and the Farmer’s Almanac.”³¹ Capitalizing upon the success of *The Business Guide; or, Safe Methods of Business*, Nichols set up his own printing outfit to produce *Safe Counsel: Search Lights on Health, The Household Guide, Safe Citizenship, or 500 Lessons in American Politics*, and a small number of other titles; the financial engines of the outfit were the *Search Lights* series and the *Business Guide*, which claimed to be in its fiftieth edition in 1895, the year of Nichols’s death at age forty-five.³²

Nichols’s brief autobiography, dictated on his deathbed, bears a passing resemblance to Horatio Alger’s heroic tales of self-made men, but in its searching tone Nichols’s story resembles more a litany of senseless suffering. All but the last three paragraphs of his ten-page life story deals with the violent abuse he suffered as an orphan at the hands of his caretakers. Decades of determined striving earned the

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self-educated Nichols a teaching post and success as an independent businessman; despite these trappings of success, the reality behind the Alger fable was that the plucky orphan, physically broken down from years of overwork and ill treatment, died too young to enjoy the fruits of his struggle.

There are two structures in his adopted hometown of Naperville, Illinois, that bear Nichols's name: a public library and a gymnasium. In his will, Nichols transformed his publishing fortune into an architectural embodiment of contemporary reformist ideals of moral hygiene, self-regulation, and self-improvement.³³ This legacy ensured his memorialization as a leader of progressive reform efforts in the community; indeed, his activity in Naperville's temperance and suffrage organizations, the Congregational church, and various charities reflects a pattern typical of upper-middle-class nineteenth-century reformers notorious for prolific joining.³⁴ Nichols's ascendancy in Naperville was particularly unlikely given his origins among the town's maligned German agricultural and industrial laborers. The working-class German population and Anglo-Saxon upper class were often at odds over issues like temperance and Sunday observance, but Nichols positioned himself clearly as an example of how education and hard work could enable mobility into the virtuous elite.³⁵

His secure position at the heart of local reform politics would have also improved Nichols's business opportunities and perhaps protected his publishing practices from the scrutiny of government censors.³⁶ Little evidence of Nichols financial transactions survives, most likely because he rarely borrowed money to keep his businesses solvent. Meanwhile, Nichols's charitable activities testified to his principled management of money. By embracing the upwardly mobile value system of the social purity coalition—what Nicola Beisel describes as a program of “family reproduction” that attempted to preserve or enhance social standing amid radical shifts in gender roles and power structures—Nichols signaled his belonging in Naperville's progressive-minded Congregationalist community, as an

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individual and as a producer of books that promised to further advance the cause of middle-class respectability and economic self-betterment.³⁷

For all its high-minded commitments, however, J. L. Nichols & Co. operated according to the rough-and-ready publishing practices typical of small nineteenth-century presses. Both the sourcing and organization of the text and the placement of advertising indicate the kinship of Nichols's hygiene manual with earlier advice texts like *The Married Woman's Private Medical Companion* (1855) and *The Marriage Guide; or, Natural History of Generation* (1850). Nichols's coauthor, Dr. Benjamin Grant Jefferis, left scant traces in the historical record, but appears to have graduated from the Kentucky School of Medicine, which, although associated with reputable programs at Transylvania University and the University of Louisville, was short-lived and shut its doors in 1908.³⁸ A highly variegated landscape of medical practice was giving way to regulation and respectability during this period, and physicians as trusted figures of knowledge and authority were a central feature of health and hygiene guides.³⁹ These two trends—professionalization and sectarianism—achieved a rhetorical symbiosis in many popular hygiene texts, which move seamlessly between poses of staid medical expertise and reformist iconoclasm.⁴⁰ The title page of *Search Lights* promises “Excerpts from Well-Known Authorities”; among them, George Napheys was a notorious advocate of “voluntary motherhood” based on the argument for heredity of acquired characteristics, M. L. Holbrook was a leader of the water cure movement, John Cowan was a vocal opponent of contraception on religious grounds, and Seth Pancoast was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine who gave up medical teaching to study the Hebrew Kabbalah.⁴¹

As discussed earlier, manuals like *Search Lights* adopted a rhetoric of frankness and scientific advancement, scorning “false modesty” and “ignorance in the name of purity.” *Search Lights* contained

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advice for young men and women about courtship and marriage, instructions for family life and the management of a household, and a guide to the causes and treatments of common illnesses, along with sundry commentary on moral issues and social woes. Although present-day readers would not categorize all of these components as medical or scientific, they were united under the nineteenth-century rhetoric of hygiene in which bodily, moral, and domestic economies were closely interrelated. At the same time, writers and publishers had to tread carefully around issues of contraception and abortion.⁴² “In the statements and arguments made in the above,” write Jefferis and Nichols, “we have not relied upon our own opinions and convictions, but have consulted the best authorities.”⁴³ This disclaimer comes in their section on family size and reproductive control. They rehearse a series of arguments against excessive childbearing (some appear in quotes with no attribution, while others are presented as the views of respected medical men). Harm to women, economic hardship to families and society, and the eugenic improvement of the race all suggest that (as the authors quote Dr. Lydia Stockham) “women must learn the laws of life so as to protect themselves, and not be the means of bringing sin-cursed, diseased children into the world. The remedy is in the prevention of pregnancy, not in producing abortion.”⁴⁴ Neither the authors nor the “best authorities,” however, seem to endorse any specific means for “the prevention of pregnancy,” although they roundly condemn common practices such as withdrawal and “the thousands of preventives advertised in papers.”⁴⁵

The reason for this somewhat contradictory condemnation is not left to the reader’s inference. The authors of *Search Lights* actually quote the Comstock Law in their chapter on “Prevention of Conception,” taking the perhaps tongue-in-cheek precaution of redacting the word “lewd” in the passage, “no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, picture, or any article or thing.”⁴⁶ With this small gesture they signal zealous compliance with the (literal) letter of the law. They dutifully announce that

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“the common law punishes the furnishing or advertising of means for the prevention of conception,” and then introduce a workaround: “There is, however, no ban of the civil law on Nature’s law as laid down by Nature’s God and discovered by medical science, which we here make known.”⁴⁷ Recourse to “Nature’s law” was the most obvious means of coping with moral and legal objections to contraception, but the methods that this euphemism entailed—abstinence and the “safe period”—were not adequate to the needs of many Americans seeking to limit family size. Moreover, nature’s law was free, whereas an enterprising businessperson could do well by marketing a more reliable man-made option.⁴⁸ Weaving their way between Comstock’s law, nature’s law, and the law of the marketplace, Jefferis and Nichols would pay homage to the letter of the first two while stealthily embracing the spirit of the last.

As historians including Brodie and Horowitz have clearly established, the literary marketplace of the early nineteenth century featured a wealth of texts that instructed readers in methods of contraception while, often simultaneously, debating the physiological mechanisms of reproduction and the theological and moral grounds for reproductive control.⁴⁹ All of these issues were tied together: varying medical accounts of how reproduction really worked had different implications for the morality and practicality of contraceptive methods, and even medical authorities held opposing views. As Andrea Tone notes, America at midcentury experienced a commercial explosion that made an enormous variety of contraceptive products widely available. We need to examine these products, and their circulation, as part of the system of knowledge production in which popular advice texts also operated, since in many cases books were a direct pathway to obtaining other products.

It was common practice for subscription presses to include paid advertisements in footnotes or the back pages of their books; less frequently these advertisements might appear in the body of the

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text.⁵⁰ Advertisements for vaginal douches appeared in the text of *Search Lights* under a number of different brand names.⁵¹ The 1894 edition bears a generic image of a douche without purchasing information; by 1900 the generic image is accompanied by an equally generic offer: “Above syringe will be sent by publishers, postpaid, for 60c.”⁵² Nichols’s successor at the press, John Hertel, forged agreements with Dr. John A. Bell, a Naperville general practitioner, and later with Elmer E. Hall of Chicago, to promote and sell a product that had special significance to purity and hygiene reformers. Linda Gordon notes that syringes had “respectable uses ... having become medically fashionable in the nineteenth century.”⁵³ Indeed, the anarchist and women’s suffrage advocate Ezra Heywood, although he opposed “unnatural” methods of birth control, would argue when prosecuted by Comstock that the douche was “invaluable, indispensable in the treatment of female diseases and for applying local remedies to preserve personal health and purity.”⁵⁴ This “multiple uses” argument won Heywood an acquittal, setting a precedent for subsequent contraception cases.

Many editions of *Search Lights* contain ordering information for douching apparatus on the back page and offer discounts of 20 or 30 percent on orders placed through the publishing house. An in-text caption promises “New Revelations for Women”; the 1902 *Search Lights* states that Bell’s syringe “thoroughly removes all discharges from the vagina. ... This Syringe is highly recommended by the medical profession,” and directs interested readers to “address THE PUBLISHERS at the foot of title page.”⁵⁵ These indirect formulations—what Tone calls “legal euphemisms”—resembled pre-Comstock advertising enough to be legible to consumers, but avoided naming contraception so that they could claim the multiple uses that constituted Heywood’s legal defense.⁵⁶ Similarly, under the chapter heading “Celebrated Prescriptions for All Diseases,” *Search Lights* lists a remedy for “functional amenorrhea” that would have been recognizable as an abortifacient by the logic, active in many advice

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texts, that the resumption of absent menses also meant the end of a nascent pregnancy.⁵⁷

Figure 1.

Bell, the “local inventor” named in the 1902 douche promotion, patented his product in 1899; nearly a hundred variations on the vaginal syringe were patented between 1873 and 1910.⁵⁸ These devices were widely believed to be an effective form of contraception, but by the 1890s many doctors treated the contraceptive douche with derision—some because they believed it to be ineffective, but most because they scorned female attempts at “unnatural” reproductive control and insisted that such attempts would have disastrous health consequences.⁵⁹ However, because douches played a prominent role in the cleansing practices advocated by purity and hygiene reformers, they could be safely and respectably promoted under these auspices rather than as contraceptives.⁶⁰ *Search Lights* seems to engage in just such a suggestive marketing strategy, placing the advertisement immediately after a discussion of birth control and abortion (not socially or morally acceptable) and immediately before a discussion of feminine hygiene (endorsed by physicians and purity groups).⁶¹ Amid a veritable explosion of patent syringes hitting the market, *Search Lights* came to the aid of readers by endorsing a specific product as deserving of their trust and providing a confidential way of procuring the device.⁶²

The *Search Lights* advertisement mobilized not only the local, commercial network of Naperville, but also broader popular health practices and informational networks. Although evasive on the means of “limiting offspring,” the text enclosed a suggestion that would have been legible to readers acquainted with the commercial market for contraceptives. “Medical experts” concurred that family size must be “brought under the control of reason and conscience”; they also concurred that abstention and even withdrawal were “injurious physically and morally.”⁶³ What followed was an image of a douching syringe and purchasing information. Without violating the letter of the Comstock

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Laws, J. L. Nichols & Co. had included all of the ingredients that a reader would need to piece together a forbidden answer to the question of reproductive control.

How to Sell: The Anatomy of an Outfit

In the domain of publishing, we have seen that an intersection of moral reform sentiment, censorship, and the expanding marketplace for consumer goods led to the promotion of a *Search Lights*-brand douching syringe and to similarly coded contraceptive products, ranging from condoms to diaphragms to abortifacient formulas, appearing in a variety of health and hygiene publications.⁶⁴ This intersection was replicated in the door-to-door sale of books like *Search Lights*. The final portion of my study deals with the sales practices associated with subscription health and hygiene manuals, which served as another node in the circulation of illicit knowledge about reproductive control. We might contrast these sales encounters with the public lectures and periodicals of radical reformers like the Owens, Frances Wright, and Charles Knowlton in the 1830s and 1840s.⁶⁵ Rather than taking a bold moral stance on women's right to contraception, the book agent, in the privacy of the customer's home, created desire for a product by strategically suggesting that it might contain forbidden information about reproductive control. This shift in the nature and location of knowledge exchange illustrates what many scholars have characterized as a rechanneling of public discourse into private purchasing decisions during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁶

Upon sending away to the publisher for a canvassing outfit, an aspiring agent would receive a bulky package containing a prospectus copy of the book, sales slips, contracts, "Publisher's Guarantees" or receipts, weekly or daily report forms, an instructional sales pamphlet, and a "Letter to the Agent" containing additional information about the chosen book. Many of these paper items were

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kept nested inside the prospectus, either “tipped in” between the relevant pages or tucked into the inside covers.⁶⁷ The sales outfit was, in many publishers’ formulation, a mobile battle station that provided agents with all the resources they needed for a victorious canvass; correspondingly, agents were to defend the outfit at all costs: “Keep your Prospectus in Your Own Hands,” “Never leave your prospectus unattended, or allow anyone else access to it—keep it ‘under lock and key.’”⁶⁸

The heyday of subscription publishing, roughly between 1830 and 1890, saw book agents fanning out across the nation, knocking on doors from New York to Des Moines. The best market for subscription books, however, proved to be rural towns in the Midwest and South that were underserved by bookstores and libraries.⁶⁹ Many studies have addressed the teeming black market for contraceptive information in New York City, an amorphous entity that survived and thrived despite being the focal point of Anthony Comstock’s personal crusade.⁷⁰ Residents of nineteenth-century New York, however, were extraordinary for their time in terms of access to multiple channels of information and goods. In addressing the circulation of reproductive knowledge and the impact of censorship, we must look to the periphery as well as the center to see what possibilities remained and how they varied across geographic locations.⁷¹

“A book-hungry land” is how Edna Jewett Allen, a homesteader arriving in the Dakota Territory in the 1880s, described her new home.⁷² The expansion of the railroads meant that fewer and fewer Americans found themselves beyond the reach of mail service, but communication was still slow and unreliable in many areas. Books were not the highest priority in Western frontier towns, and though some attempted to organize libraries in churches or parlors, these fledgling efforts suffered from lack of funds and inaccessibility.⁷³ Subscription presses often framed themselves as saviors of the unlettered masses, bringing literary light into the nation’s rural backwaters with book agents as their

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footsoldiers.⁷⁴

Figure 2.

The public's perception of subscription books and agents was not always so messianic; the low quality of the literature and the intrusiveness of agents were common complaints, and the status of the industry declined in the 1890s. Sensational exposés penned by former book agents, such as Elizabeth Lindley and Annie Dumond, documented publishers' exploitative and deceptive practices, particularly toward female workers.⁷⁵ Despite these negative representations, book agents also appealed to the rhetoric of enterprise and self-making that permeated nineteenth-century American culture. The Horatio Alger story *The Young Book Agent* chronicles the rags-to-riches rise of the fictional agent Frank Hardy, while the correspondence of actual agents suggests the hard-won financial independence that such a career could offer for women.⁷⁶

Figure 3.

I base my discussion of the sales encounter on outfits for popular health and hygiene manuals, recruitment advertisements that Nichols placed in North-Western College's student newspaper, and student reports of their employment with Nichols to reveal the ways in which subscription sales enabled the discreet marketing of information about sex and reproduction. The specific population of Nichols's agents to which we have access may not be representative of the type of agent who generally sold *Search Lights* and other health and hygiene guides, particularly those geared toward women, but a comparison between the North-Central College students and the female canvassers deployed by other publishers highlights certain common approaches to the discreet marketing of information about sex and reproduction.

Publishers repeatedly emphasized the need for a systematic sales strategy; E. Hannaford

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implores, “Book Agent, whoever you are, you, too, must ORGANIZE VICTORY.”⁷⁷ Organizational schemas governed all aspects of a canvass, from moving through communities to manipulating the subconscious desires of potential customers. The ideal canvass combined mild social coercion with tantalization—“your whole effort has been to CREATE DESIRE.”⁷⁸ In the case of the health and moral hygiene genre, both influence and desire took very specific forms, often geared toward women and appealing to anxieties about illness, financial stability, and excessive childbearing. Agents had to offer their customers forbidden information about reproductive control without seeming to violate any moral conventions or to cross lines of social propriety. Publishers carefully scripted this delicate interaction: their sales speeches preached the danger of overpopulation and the tragedy of women “driven down to death” by excessive childbearing; they condemned the conspiring doctors who withheld needed information; they trumpeted the happiness of those who took the simple measure of “knowing themselves” and, by implication, ceasing to bear unwanted children. The menu of acceptable contraceptive strategies was fairly stable throughout the late nineteenth century, and the allure of such books was not that they might introduce a new method, but rather that they offered medical counsel as to which methods were most effective and least objectionable.

“The following talk is arranged especially for lady canvassers, who canvass women,” begins the anonymous author of “A Confidential Talk with Our Agents on How to Sell *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty*.”⁷⁹ The “Confidential Talk” contains a script, complete with stage directions, which agents are strongly encouraged to memorize and deliver to their customers verbatim. Playing her role to the letter, a hypothetical agent knocks on the door of a carefully selected middle-class country home, and the lady of the house answers. After talking pleasantly about “some neighborhood topic or generally interesting subject,” the agent begins her pitch: “Mrs. _____, I have called to have a confidential talk with

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you on a matter of importance to every woman.”⁸⁰ Immediately there is a delicate convention at play, as contraception is not the right of “every woman”; most reformers who advocate birth control intend it only for married women, as any application outside of marriage condones sin.⁸¹ The publisher acknowledges, in his comments to the agent, that “everybody buys a book of this kind, not only those who are raising a family but those who contemplate raising one.” The seeker of contraceptive information may be unmarried, but as long as intent to marry, or even contemplation of marriage, is present, the sale is justifiable—and besides, as subscription pamphlets so frantically emphasize, “there will undoubtedly be other agents in your vicinity selling inferior books ... and people are so anxious to get [them] that they will buy the first book that is shown them.”⁸²

Our agent goes on to dramatize the dangers incurred by not owning a copy of *Obstetrics*, first with a vague statistic: “Every community has its victims. In fact, the doctors tell me that over one third of the women in the country are suffering, more or less, from some physical disorder peculiar to their sex.” If the customer is impervious to the findings of medical authorities, the agent goes for the heartstrings, turning to part 3 of *Obstetrics*, “the most important part of our work.” This section begins with an image that had, by the 1880s, become a discreet but loaded symbol for proponents of reproductive control—“The Vacant Chair,” where a loving mother who died in childbirth once sat. “The home is left desolate, and no other can fill her place,” the agent says. “This picture is only a reflection of what may be seen in thousands of homes throughout our land, where men are made widowers and little children motherless simply through a lack, on the part of the mothers, of the proper knowledge of woman’s physical being.” The script has adeptly laid out a justification for divulging illicit knowledge: since the mother is the moral and spiritual center of home life, and home life is the last reserve of virtue in a degenerating world, anything that preserves her health preserves society and

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morality.

Tender sympathy is not the only sentiment in the agent's repertoire. Suspicion and mistrust of the medical profession follow immediately, as the agent points out that "this is the first opportunity the public has had to buy a book of this nature, for you must surely know doctors, as a rule, keep their medical books in great secrecy." The implication—that this professional conspiracy serves doctors' wallets rather than the public good—further justifies the book's sexual content and creates an alliance among author, publisher, agent, and customer as parties interested in throwing open the protected bastions of medical knowledge.

At this point, the agent begins turning pages of the prospectus and reading off tantalizing chapter titles like "Times When Marital Relations Are Wrongful," "Limitation of Offspring," and "Conception," to give the customer "an idea of [the book's] worth." The stage directions require the agent to turn the pages rapidly, and to keep the prospectus in her hands at all times so that the customer cannot investigate the book's contents for herself. With anxiety, desire, and obligations to family weighing upon her mind, a potential customer would, the publisher hopes, err on the side of safety. The agent asserts that *Obstetrics* is the "greatest blessing that was ever given to women in the form of a book," but at the point of purchase it is a cipher: the customer, aware of her limited options and desperate for good information, slightly dazed by the agent's glad-handing, takes a gamble on the possibility of controlling future pregnancies.

Real-life sales encounters may not have played out as scripted, but these directions offer a compelling account of what publishers perceived to be at stake in the purchase of health and hygiene guides. Who were the actual agents responsible for mediating such scripts? Many, as the sales material for *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty* suggests, were women selling to women. However, male agents

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would also have sold hygiene texts, particularly more general-interest books like *Search Lights*.

Numerous J. L. Nichols & Co. titles appears to have circulated informally through agents selling the *Business Guide*. From 1870 through the early twentieth century, the student newspaper *North-Western College Chronicle* ran advertisements recruiting canvassers for everything from geographic atlases, anatomical charts, and family Bibles to items like clocks and animal feed. Almost all of North-Western's self-confessed student canvassers were young men, and of these, a majority claimed to be selling "Professor Nichols' *Business Guide*." Selling the *Business Guide*, however, seems to have also entailed selling other Nichols works, at least after 1890 as the press expanded to include more titles. In the testimonials from agents printed in an 1897 recruiting ad, one Emery A. Harrah remarks, "Am well satisfied with my work—39 orders out of 31 showings. The Search Lights lead here." "Got 23 orders for Safe Citizenship," says C. H. Oliver. "Worked all day today; got 20 more."⁸³ These testimonials clearly imply the potential for agents to profit from a larger catalog of titles. "The Search Lights lead here" in particular suggests that *Search Lights* was a reliable brand from which agents could expect steady returns, perhaps, as Harrah's numbers indicate, selling multiple Nichols books at one showing.

Although many household and hygiene books were sold by women, and *Search Lights* is primarily addressed to "maiden, wife, and mother," male North-Western students would likely have offered the book, perhaps as a discreet aside after displaying the *Business Guide*. The status of these fair-weather canvassers—clean-cut college students on their way to a respectable middle-class life—would have lent them legitimacy in the eyes of their often less-educated customers, but forced them to use discretion when discussing their pursuits with others of their status.

Agents could be trustworthy and persuasive figures, and if they did their jobs well, they mobilized the trustworthiness of others in the community. The subscription ledger itself was a form of

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communication and of public display in sparsely populated areas with few venues for social interaction. As a book agent hopscotched around the community, the ledger bound into the back of his prospectus accumulated the names of all his buyers, allowing neighbors to indirectly size each other up. A book promoted as necessary for success, health, and morality actually became necessary only when the leading lights of the community—doctors, clergymen, and educators—had lent their good names to the ledger. At the same time, *Search Lights* promises to deliver its douching products anonymously, suggesting a sensitivity to privacy concerns (as well as to the legal troubles that one could incur when shipping “obscene” merchandise by post). That both delicacy and public display were called for in the sale of a single book indicates the precariousness of the health and hygiene genre, which promised enlightenment while peddling solutions of a decidedly secret nature.

Conclusion: Not under Lock and Key

Having surveyed some of the ground traversed by subscription health and hygiene books, it is perhaps fitting to return to the scene of John Hansen combing through his copy of *Search Lights* for the good parts—that is, the parts about sex. Although in his desire for illicit knowledge Hansen was transgressing the limits imposed by the Comstock Laws, he had plenty of help: the publisher, the sales agent, and the book itself contributed clues as to how a reader might obtain knowledge about sex and reproduction.

Historians have begun to reevaluate post-Comstock health and hygiene literature as reflecting a complex balance between legal and social, public and private demands. My analysis illustrates the multivalent function of these texts as they placated censors, traversed great distances, and connected readers to a growing array of possibilities for birth control and sexual knowledge. Though proficient at

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generating publicity and high-profile arrests, Comstock faced a resilient network of knowledge production that utilized many avenues of communication, and whose messages were often intelligible only to those who knew what they were looking for. *Search Lights*' coy alternation between endorsing and condemning contraception pointed readers to the marketplace as a locus of reproductive control, clothing in medical expertise information that in fact undermined the policies of the medical establishment. Text and marketplace, the gestures of book agents and the trust networks of rural communities, all worked together to reproduce knowledge at different sites under challenging conditions.

Jefferis and Nichols declared that the information in *Search Lights*, frank by the standards of the day, "should not be kept under lock and key" merely out of prudishness. However, a book agent's prospectus must be kept under lock and key, since information has a price. By the 1890s, producing popular knowledge about sex required, more than ever, participation in the market and negotiation among a dizzying array of confidential offers and guarantees. This development did not empower seekers of contraception in the way that subsequent transformations in reproductive discourse would, but it illuminates the alternate channels through which agency might run when blocked by the structures of state and social control. If anything, the career of *Search Lights* points to the multivalence of books as nodes in the production of popular knowledge: always embedded in the wider world, but with bits of the world always embedded between the lines.

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1. For examples of pre-1873 discourse on reproduction and sexuality, see Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002). These works revised the earlier characterization of a prudish and sexless Victorian era in light of Foucault's challenge to the "repressive hypothesis." However, their important recovery of thriving early-century expert and vernacular literatures on sex concludes with the advent of repression and censorship in the 1870s.

2. Andrea Tone's *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002) has been particularly influential to my project. Other scholarship reevaluating this period includes Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873–1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), and Christina Simmons Windsor, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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3. Horace Conger and Caroline Crane, “A Confidential Talk With Our Agents on How to Sell *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty*,” University of Pennsylvania Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Zinman Collection of Canvassing Ephemera, box 1, folder 298.

4. J. L. Nichols and B. G. Jefferis, *Search Lights on Health: Light on Dark Corners; a Complete Sexual Science and a Guide to Purity and Physical Manhood, Advice to Maiden, Wife and Mother, Love, Courtship, and Marriage* (Naperville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1896). Donna I. Dennis discusses subversive strategies available to publishers during the Comstock era in her review “Obscenity Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States,” *Law Soc. Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 369–99. She advocates a legal rather than a cultural history approach to censorship as a way to recover the “strategic agency” of publishers. Although legal accounts do, indeed, reveal a buried history of common-law wrangling, sales practices and the circulation of products can tell us much about how publishers responded to or circumvented the legal system—what Dennis calls the “unintended and often unpredictable consequences of law” (Dennis 2002, 370). I focus on these consequences, but for more on the legal aspect of pre- and post-Comstock publishing, see Donna I. Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009) as well as Horowitz’s *Rereading Sex* (n. 1).

5. J. L. Nichols and B. G. Jefferis, *Search Lights on Health: Light on Dark Corners; A Complete Sexual Science and A Guide to Purity and Physical Manhood* (Atlanta: J. L. Nichols, 1902). This copy is held in the archives of the Naper Settlement Museum in Naperville. My thanks to Bryan Ogg, the museum’s archivist, for his generous assistance in searching the collection.

6. Andrea Tone, “Making Room for Rubbers: Gender, Technology, and Birth Control Before

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the Pill,” *Hist. Technol.* 18, no. 1 (March 2002): 52–53, 63.

7. For a summary of reader-response issues in the American context, see the introduction to Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 1–18, and Christine Pawley’s “Seeking ‘Significance’: Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities,” *Book Hist.* 5 (2002): 143–60, esp. 143–46. My approach follows Pawley in emphasizing the spaces and contexts of reading, but also reaches out to histories of knowledge and practice, extending and modifying de Certeau’s conception of reading as a process of remaking.

8. Another personal copy of *Search Lights*, from 1920, contains similar margin notes and bracketing of sex topics and the bookplate of Dr. Harvey D. Lynn, a Michigan gynecologist born in 1912, suggesting that he read it as a boy or young man. Most copies with such patterns of note taking cannot be traced to an individual reader; the Lynn copy is in the J. Bay Jacobs, M.D., Library for the History of Obstetrics and Gynecology in America of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, along with an 1896 edition whose reader highlighted sections on “The Practice of Abortion” and “Sexual Exhaustion.” See Pawley, “Seeking ‘Significance’” (n. 7); and “Beyond Market Models and Resistance: Organizations as a Middle Layer in the History of Reading,” *Libr. Quart.* 79 (2009): 73–93.

9. These texts range from Frederick Hollick’s *The Marriage Guide; or, Natural History of Generation* (1850) to Alice B. Stockham’s *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman* (1883) to Lydia E. Pinkham’s *Private Textbook upon Ailments Peculiar to Women* (1920). The vast quantity of this literature can only be hinted at here; many representative health and hygiene texts that would have been sold by subscription, as *Search Lights* was, are listed in the Zinman Collection catalog, Keith Arbour,

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ed., *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers' Ephemera, 1833–1951, in the Collection of Michael Zinman* (Ardsley, N.Y.: Haydn Foundation for the Cultural Arts, 1996).

10. For a review of literature on urban space, street lighting, moral policing, and metaphors of vice and degeneracy, see Mark J. Bouman, “The ‘Good Lamp Is the Best Police’: Metaphor and Ideologies of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Landscape,” *Amer. Stud.* 32, no. 2 (1991): 63–78.

11. The organizations and individuals that made up this coalition included the urban antivice societies, temperance groups, religious organizations, public hygiene advocates, and moral reformers. Paul Boyer’s *Purity in Print: The Vice-Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Scribner, 1968) provided an important reevaluation of Comstock-era antivice movements, which prior historiography tended to characterize as marginalized, fanatical enemies of free speech and sexuality. Donna Dennis provides a review of this literature in “Obscenity Law” (n. 4), 369–99. See also John Burnham’s characterization of the “purity movement” in the entry “Comstock, Anthony; Comstockery” in *Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough (New York: Garland, 2014) 137–39.

12. This antebellum literature is discussed in Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1); Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1); Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2); and Dennis (2009).

13. This is the central component of Horowitz’s argument in *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), which has influenced my thinking about the role of illicit knowledge production and the black market in disseminating forbidden information.

14. New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, *Third Annual Report* (New York, 1877), 6.

15. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 217–44; Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1). This

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perspective on the antifeminist agenda of the NYSSV was first presented in 1916 (Leta Stetter Hollingworth, “Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children,” *Amer. J. Sociol.* 22 [1916]: 19–29). Nicola Beisel and more recent scholars have, while acknowledging the setbacks to women’s rights caused by antivice legislation, examined this movement in relation to ideas about family and gender roles rather than solely in terms of reproductive rights.

16. Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 46–47; Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), 358–82. For a thorough and hagiographic account of Comstock’s law enforcement career, see Charles Gallaudet Trumbull, *Anthony Comstock, Fighter: Some Impressions of a Lifetime Adventure in Conflict with the Powers of Evil* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1913).

17. For a taste of this rhetoric, see Trumbull, *Anthony Comstock* (n. 16); Andrea Tone, “From Naughty Goods to Nicole Miller: Medicine and the Marketing of American Contraceptives,” *Cult. Med. Psychiatry* 30, no. 2 (June 2006): 252–53.

18. Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), 387–90; Tone, *Devices and Desires* (n. 2), 435–36.

19. Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), 404–19.

20. See Charles Rosenberg, ed., *Right Living: An Anglo-American Tradition of Self-Help Medicine and Hygiene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) for analyses of the genre of popular medical writing in the nineteenth century; Ronald Numbers and Jean Silver-Isenstadt contribute chapters on sex and Victorian morality that highlight the important but multivalent role of medicine in the dissemination of knowledge about the body. See also Mary Fissell’s definition of “Popular Medical Writing,” in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture: Volume One: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, ed. Joad Raymond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 418–31.

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Fissell considers popular medical writing “quite broadly—anything on health and healing that offers readers some kind of advice about their bodies, from recipe books to herbals to distilling manuals” and which states that it is “intended for use by people who were not medical practitioners” (418).

21. Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 42–45 and 87–88. For foundational work on the professionalization of medicine in the nineteenth century, see John Harley Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820–1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Charles Rosenberg, “The Therapeutic Revolution: Medicine, Meaning, and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *The Therapeutic Revolution: Essays in the Social History of American Medicine*, ed. Morris J. Vogel and Charles E. Rosenberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 3–25. The explosion of nineteenth-century health and hygiene literature also stemmed from advancements in print technology that made mass production of illustrated texts more economical.

22. Etienne van de Walle and Virginie De Luca, “Birth Prevention in the American and French Fertility Transitions: Contrasts in Knowledge and Practice,” *Popul. & Dev. Rev.* 32, no. 3 (2006): 529–56, 529.

23. Conger and Crane, “Confidential Talk” (n. 3). All ephemera held in the Zinman Collection are noted by box and folder numbers, as publication information is often absent or incomplete. This sales pamphlet accompanied Horace O. Conger and Caroline P. Crane, *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty, a Treatise on the Physical Life of Woman, Embracing Full Information on All Important Matters for Both Mothers and Maidens ...* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900), in Zinman Collection Ephemera, box 1, folder 298.

24. See Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2), 112–13, 175.

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25. “Dr. Davis’ Latest and Greatest Work ...,” full-page advertisement, *Der Christliche Botschafter*, Evangelical Association of Cleveland, Ohio, January 18, 1892 (English language version in the *Evangelical Messenger*).

26. The field of nineteenth-century medical practice was further complicated by the fact that what historians often class as “irregular” or “allopathic” movements sometimes adopted the trappings of professionalization—for instance, chiropractors, homeopaths, and osteopaths—while others emphasized lay empowerment or social reform.

27. Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 282–83.

28. This position, linked to the “Victorian repression hypothesis,” is described in Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (n. 15), 222–23; and Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 100–101.

29. For these new attitudes toward the efficacy question, see Tone, *Devices and Desires* (n. 2), 71–77; and Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 73. Brodie evaluates the possible success rates of contraceptive douching, citing a study that found that women who douched may have experienced about half as many pregnancies as women who did not: Deborah A. Dawson, Denise J. Meny, and Jeanne Clare Ridley, “Fertility Control in the United States before the Contraceptive Revolution,” *Fam. Planning Perspect.* 12, no. 2 (March 1, 1980): 76–86. See also Dorothy Bocker’s 1924 clinical study, the first of its kind, produced under the auspices of Sanger’s Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau: *Birth Control Methods* (New York: Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, 1924), and Marie Kopp, *Birth Control in Practice* (New York: Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, 1933). It should be emphasized that exact efficacy rates are not obtainable from nineteenth-century sources, and many historians prefer to use evidence that offers insight into women’s behaviors and decision-making

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processes, arguing that quantification is not necessarily useful when studying a historical period that did not understand contraception on our terms or evaluate it using percentages of success or failure.

30. Carl N. Degler, “What Ought to Be and What Was: Women’s Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *Amer. Hist. Rev.* 79 (December 1974): 1467–90.

31. Genevieve Towsley, “The Books of Nichols Publishing Company,” *Naperville Sun*, October 26, 1961, sec. 3. Nichols’s alma mater was founded in Plainville, Illinois, as Plainville College in 1861; in 1864 it was renamed North-Western College, and in 1870 it relocated to Naperville. In 1926 it was renamed North Central College (Clarence N. Roberts, *North Central College: A Century of Liberal Education 1861–1961* [Naperville: North Central College, 1960]). I refer to it as North-Western College, since this was its name during Nichols’s involvement with the school.

32. Nichols’s biographical information comes from J. L. Nichols, *The Autobiography of James L. Nichols* (manuscript, n.d.), in the holdings of the Naperville Public Library. Unfortunately, I have not located Nichols’s financial records or business inventories, and cannot speak to the precise number of his books in circulation aside from noting their ubiquity in public and college libraries and personal collections around the country.

33. Roberta J. Park, “Biological Thought, Athletics, and the Formation of a ‘Man of Character’: 1830–1900,” in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940*, ed. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 7–34, describes the scientific underpinnings of the physical education movement.

34. Ronald Walters discusses the sociable aspects of reform and the sense of respectability and upward mobility fostered within communities of the reform-minded. Ronald Walters, *American Reformers 1815–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1997), xiii, 13–15, 145–46.

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35. Megan Kelzer, “The Temperance Movement in Naperville in the 19th Century” (B.A. thesis, North Central College, 2007), 4. See also Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800–1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 33.

36. Other tactics for evading enforcement included operating presses outside of U.S. borders; J. L. Nichols & Co. had “branch businesses” in Toronto and Halifax that printed many of its *Search Lights* editions (see Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* [n. 1], 283, although she groups the press’s headquarters in Naperville with these “out-of-the-way” satellite presses). After Nichols’s death, and perhaps as fears of enforcement declined at the turn of the century, the press shifted its operations to Atlanta and became a publisher of eugenics texts and African American interest books—a chapter in its history that deserves further examination.

37. Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents* (n. 16), 5–7.

38. Jefferis, a Canadian, received his M.D. from the Kentucky School of Medicine in 1887 and practiced in Chicago, as indicated in Christopher Hoolihan, *An Annotated Catalogue of the Edward C. Atwater Collection of American Popular Medicine and Health Reform* (University of Rochester Press, 2008), 336. For the status of medical education and popular views on doctors at this time, see Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 104–5, 116.

39. Major work on the professionalization of American medical education and practice includes William Rothstein, *American Medical Schools and the Practice of Medicine: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1987); John S. Haller, *American Medicine in Transition, 1840–1910* (University of Illinois Press, 1981) and Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (Basic Books, 1982).

40. A standard professionalization narrative might suggest that such practitioners would be

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considered “irregular” and excluded from the medical mainstream. However, histories of reform health movements suggest that mainstream and “irregular” practices were less strongly differentiated than this, both in the sphere of practice and in popular awareness (see Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* [n. 2]).

41. Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2), 77; Hoolihan, *Annotated Catalogue* (n. 38), 146–52; Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 196.

42. Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents* (n. 16), 36–42. For Nichols other publications, see J. L. Nichols, *The Business Guide, or Safe Methods of Business* (Naperville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1895); Nichols and B. G. Jefferis, *The Household Guide, or, Domestic Cyclopaedia*... (Toronto: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1894); Nichols, *Safe Citizenship, or, Issues of the Day*... (Naperville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols & Co., 1896).

43. *Search Lights* (1902), 230.

44. *Ibid.*, 230. The use of eugenic terms and concepts increased with each new edition of *Search Lights* after 1900, and, although I have not focused on this aspect of the publication, it certainly corresponds with the growing popularity of eugenic rationales for contraception in the United States and the working relationship between Margaret Sanger’s birth control movement and the eugenics movement (see Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* [n. 2], 177–79).

45. *Search Lights* (1902), 233.

46. *Ibid.*, 244.

47. *Ibid.*, 244.

48. For the business aspect of contraceptive sales, see Andrea Tone, “Black Market Birth Control: Contraceptive Entrepreneurship and Criminality in the Gilded Age,” *J. Amer. Hist.* 87, no. 2 (September 1, 2000): 435–59.

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49. Figures such as Robert Dale Owen, Thomas Low Nichols, and Mary Gove Nichols (no relation to James L. Nichols) led long and controversial public campaigns for health reform, advocating widespread implementation of reproductive control (see Jean Silver-Isenstadt, “Passions and Perversions: The Radical Ambitions of Dr. Thomas Low Nichols,” in Rosenberg, *Right Living* [n. 20], 186–205).

50. Even before the 1870s, placement of advertising was used as a tactic to circumvent local or state-level censorship, as in the case of the abortionist Ann Lohman’s *Married Woman’s Private Medical Companion* (New York, 1847); for more on this episode see Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), 207–9.

51. These significant advertising cues occur in many popular health and hygiene guides published or reprinted after 1873, including the anonymously authored *Cottage Physician for Individual and Family Use* (Springfield, Mass.: King-Richardson, 1895); many publications of Frederick Hollick, including the *Matron’s Manual of Midwifery* (1849), *The Marriage Guide* (New York, 1850), and *The Nerves and the Nervous* (New York: American News Company, 1873); and Edward Bliss Foote’s *Plain Home Talk* (New York: Murray Hill, 1892).

52. *Search Lights* (1900), 202.

53. Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2), 32–34.

54. Ezra H. Heywood, *Free Speech: Report of Ezra H. Heywood’s Defense before the United States Court in Boston, April 10, 11 and 12, 1883; Together with Judge Nelson’s Charge to the Jury ...* (Princeton, Mass.: Co-operative Publishing Company, 1883), quoted in Tone, “Black Market Birth Control” (n. 48), 452. Tone cites the jury’s ruling in the Heywood case as indicative of the widespread medical and popular acceptance of therapeutic douching throughout the nineteenth century. By the turn

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of the twentieth century it gained additional medical currency as an antigerms measure, as ideas about antiseptics became increasingly central to physicians and health reformers (for which, see Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999]).

55. *Search Lights* (1902), 246.

56. Tone, “Naughty Goods” (n. 17), 254; Gordon comments on the euphemistic language of post-Comstock advertisement in *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2), 33–34.

57. *Search Lights* (1902), 355.

58. Based on a survey of patents filed during this interval with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, archived at the USPTO Patent Full-Text and Image Database (PatFT), <http://patft.uspto.gov/netahtml/PTO/pating.htm>. My criteria for this survey were informal; I counted patents for whole devices rather than for parts or improvements to parts of a device (i.e., new designs for tubes, nozzles, syringes, etc.), simply to get a sense for the level of interest on the part of industry and entrepreneurs in developing these devices. Not all patents issued necessarily lead to a new device entering the market; however, closer study of patent records may yield valuable information about trends in contraceptive design and marketing.

59. These health consequences ranged from cancer to insanity, and both women and men could suffer such misfortune as a result of defying the “natural consequences” of sex. See Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 78–81; Tone, *Devices and Desires* (n. 2), 16–19.

60. For the hygienic significance of bathing, evacuation, and “cleansing the parts,” see Susan Cayleff, *Wash and Be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women’s Health* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). See Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 57–58 and 68–71 for a

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discussion of the Mosher survey of Victorian women's sexual practices. Among Mosher's forty-seven respondents, douching was the most common contraceptive method. Horowitz notes that this method was endorsed by Charles Knowlton's best-selling *Fruits of Philosophy* and suggested in Lohman's *Married Woman's Guide* (n. 50) and Hollick's *Marriage Guide*, among many others.

61. Nichols, *Search Lights on Health* (1902), 245–47.

62. This sort of direct connection between book publishers and device manufacturers and distributors (sometimes all the same individual) was typical; Tone notes that the production of rubber contraceptive devices had relatively low overhead costs and could be entered upon by small entrepreneurs ("Making Room for Rubbers" [n. 6], 59–62). A similar offer appears in the anonymous pre-Comstock text by "An American Physician," *Reproductive Control; or, A Rational Guide to Matrimonial Happiness: The Right and Duty of Parents to Limit the Number of Their Offspring ...* (Cincinnati, 1855), in which the syringe "can be had of the agent selling the work" (quoted in Michelle Ferranti, "From Birth Control to That 'Fresh Feeling': A Historical Perspective on Feminine Hygiene in Medicine and Media," *Women Health* 49, no. 8 [December 1, 2009]: 592–607, 595).

63. *Search Lights* (1902), 242–43.

64. For examples, see advertisements for "French Menstrual Regulators" in Jefferson B. Fancher, *Medical, Matrimonial, and Scientific Expositor ...* (New York: Dr. Jefferson B. Fancher, 1869) (Fancher suggests that "those who wish to economize may club in with one or more friends in ordering several, thereby making a saving in proportion to the number ordered"); for hot water bags and syringes in Alice B. Stockham, *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman* (Chicago: Stockham, 1902); for "L.E.P.'s Sanitative Wash for Leucorrhoea and Inflammation" in Lydia E. Pinkham's *Private Textbook upon Ailments Peculiar to Women* (Lynn, Mass.: Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co., 1920).

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65. Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2), 45–51; Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), 45–85.

66. See, for instance, arguments made by Tone, *Devices and Desires* (n. 2), xvii, 66; Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion* (n. 1), 204–52; Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1), 273–74, 409–10, 442–43; Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* (n. 2), 32.

67. Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing: A Manual of Practical Hints and Instructions*, 8. Zinman Collection Ephemera, box 1, folder 309.

68. *Ibid.*, 9.

69. Michael Hackenberg, “The Subscription Publishing Network in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Getting the Books Out: Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Hackenberg (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1987), 59–63.

70. See Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (n. 1) and Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Recently, studies have begun to address the subscription trade in different geographical and economic contexts; on the need for more such research, see Amy M. Thomas, “‘There Is Nothing So Effective as a Personal Canvass’: Revaluing Nineteenth-Century American Subscription Books,” *Book Hist.* 1 (1998): 140–55, esp. 141–42, and 152.

71. See Lisa Lindell’s “Bringing Books to a ‘Book-Hungry Land’: Print Culture on the Dakota Prairie,” *Book Hist.* 4 (2007): 215–38.

72. Edna Jewett Allen, Brown County, Pioneer Daughters Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre (quoted in *ibid.*, 222).

73. Lindell, “Bringing Books,” 218–20.

74. See, for instance, the encyclopedia publisher F. E. Compton’s “Subscription Books,” in

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Bowker Lectures on Book Publishing (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1957), 69.

75. Elizabeth Lindley, *The Diary of a Book-Agent* (New York: Broadway, 1913); Annie Nelles (Dumond), *Annie Nelles; or, The Life of a Book Agent: An Autobiography* (Cincinnati: Published by the Author, 1868). For a beleaguered male book agent protagonist, see Ellis Parker Butler, *Kilo: Being the Love Story of Eliph' Hewlitt, Book Agent* (New York: McClure, 1907).

76. Horatio Alger, Jr. [pen name of Edward Stratemeyer], *The Young Book Agent; or, Frank Hardy's Road to Success* (New York: Stitt, 1905); Lindell, "Bringing Books," 219–22.

77. Hannaford, *Success in Canvassing: A Manual of Practical Hints and Instructions*, 2. Zinman Collection Ephemera, box 1, folder 309.

78. *Ibid.*, 5.

79. Conger and Crane, *Obstetrics and Womanly Beauty* (n. 23). It is unclear who was responsible for the production of sales material, as subscription presses varied widely in size and structure.

80. Conger and Crane, "Confidential Talk" (n. 3). Unless specified, all subsequent dialogue in this section is taken from this pamphlet.

81. Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents* (n. 16), 25–27 and 38–39.

82. "Letter to New Agents," Percival Supply Company, publishers of *Finding the North Pole*, Zinman Collection Ephemera, box 1, folder 309.

83. "921 Active, Ambitious Students Wanted to Sell THE NEW BUSINESS GUIDE," advertisement, *North-Western College Chronicle*, May 1, 1897, p. 16.

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Figures



Figure 1. Hall's syringe. *Search Lights on Health* (1904), 246.

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Figure 2. Transportation in rural areas was among the challenges of life as a book agent. From Annie Nelles (Dumond), *Annie Nelles; or, The Life of a Book Agent: An Autobiography* (Cincinnati: Published by the Author, 1868), 84–85.

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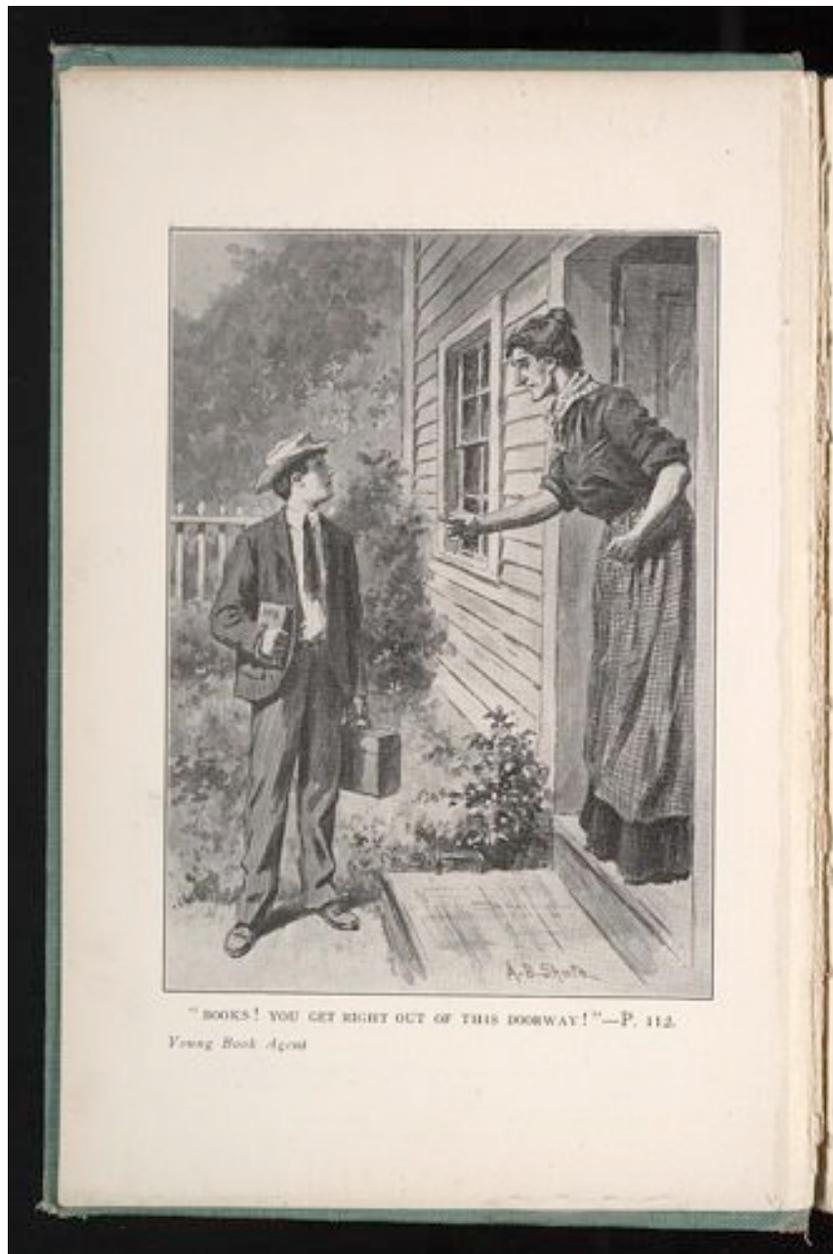


Figure 3. The Frank Hardy character in Stratemeyer's *The Young Book Agent* achieves success after many tribulations in door-to-door sales. Horatio Alger, Jr. [pen name of Edward Stratemeyer], *The Young Book Agent; or, Frank Hardy's Road to Success* (New York: Stitt, 1905), frontispiece.