Traveling Economies
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Sister Sayer—I think an account of my recent trip will be received with some interest by my sisters in reform, the readers of The Sibyl—if not by the rest of mankind—since I am, perhaps, the first woman who has worn the “American Costume” [bloomers] across that prairie sea which divides the great frontier of the states from the Rocky Mountains . . . I traveled in an ox wagon and on foot upwards of eleven hundred miles during the last three summer months . . . I wore a calico dress, reaching a little below the knee, pants of the same. Indian moccasins on my feet, and on my head a hat. However much of it lacked in taste, I found it to be beyond value in comfort and convenience, as it gave me freedom to roam at pleasure in search of flowers and other curiosities, while the cattle continued their slow and measured pace.¹

—Julia Archibald Holmes, “A Journey to Pikes Peak and New Mexico” (1859)

All of the women travel writers in this study tested the limits of what women should do and where they should go. Frances Wright’s early evaluation of the practices and theories of American democracy certainly laid the foundation for her later Woman’s Rights and suffrage activism; Mary Ann Shadd Cary began to include reprints of Woman’s Rights articles alongside her own arguments for black emigration and black civil rights as the Provincial Freeman’s publication run drew to a close; and Amy Morris Bradley defined herself in terms of mobility and independence rather than marriage and domesticity, and offered her life as a model for her young nieces and female cousins. While none of these authors directly linked their travels to an explicitly feminist agenda, antebellum Woman’s Rights rhetoric with its call for women’s increased physical and social mobility invites a connection between early feminism and women travelers. Julia Archibald Holmes with her account of her ascent of Pikes Peak in 1858 frames her journey in feminist terms and represents herself as a traveling standard-bearer.
for the spread of Woman’s Rights across the frontier. She revises the travel genre to represent herself as a feminist traveler and to convey her political agenda. Her version of traveling nation-building recasts national expansion in service to feminism.

Julia Archibald Holmes begins her travel narrative with what she considers the most salient information, her identity as a dress reformer and feminist and her target audience of “sisters in reform.” Publishing her travel account in the *Sibyl* (1856–64), an antebellum newspaper dedicated to promoting dress reform (bloomers to replace corsets and hoopskirts) and Woman’s Rights, Holmes addresses herself to an audience of like-minded feminists. Her travel narrative directly connects reform dress, feminism, physical fitness, and the participation of women in public civic life. Crafted to encourage her “sisters in reform” to follow in her mountain-climbing and activist footsteps, Holmes’s account features a feminist traveler who revises expectations of the domestic focus of women’s travel writing, and serves as a role model for her audience. Holmes advocates for women’s equal abilities on the wagon train or in the voting booth, pairing action with theory and articulating an equality-focused feminism, in contrast to competing formulations of benevolence or abolitionist feminism, that offers the figure of the strong Western woman as inspiration for Woman’s Rights activists and for the nation itself.

The *Sibyl* published Holmes’s narrative because it fit so closely with the periodical’s own complex formulation of Woman’s Rights and because it shared Holmes’s vision of the frontier and eventually the nation promoting women’s equality. However, the newspaper strictly policed membership in its reform community; therefore, the choice of Holmes as a model of their theories put into practice offers just one example of the impossibly high standards for membership, which I term “exclusive sisterhood.” As a feminist traveler who linked women’s independence and mobility and reinforced the philosophy of the *Sibyl*, Holmes—and the bloomer-wearing figure she cut—inspired readers at the same time she demanded that would-be reformers prove willing to climb mountains in service to the cause and have the resources to conquer peaks. Holmes and the *Sibyl* used feminist travel and travel writing to bridge the gap between the theories and practice of women’s equal participation in public civic life, beginning with an audience of sympathetic reformers, but also circulating images of women travelers and feminists more widely through antebellum culture.
New Traveler, New Politics: A Feminist Traveler Theorizes Women’s Equality

Just as the *Sibyl* proposes bloomers as a practical first step to Woman’s Rights, Holmes represents feminist travel as a practical demonstration of women’s fitness for the rigors of public life. Fashion in Holmes’s text functions as a code for middle-class white femininity; by rejecting hoopskirts in favor of pants, she opts out of it and into independence and expanded social and political participation beyond the scope of what was considered “proper for a woman among so many men” in society and on the largely male wagon train to Pikes Peak (522). Holmes directly connects physical mobility, dress reform, and women’s autonomy, claiming that her bloomer offers her “comfort,” “convenience,” and, most important, “freedom” (522). Her feminist travel demonstrates that bloomers and Woman’s Rights work together. Refusing to limit herself to the expected domestic focus of women’s travel writing and claiming instead the accomplishment and perspective usually attributed only to male travelers and explorers, Holmes portrays her own strength, thereby justifying her claims to gender equality. Her articulation of feminism differs from simultaneous formulations of benevolence or abolitionist feminism, stressing equality and presenting herself as a model of emancipated womanhood.

Holmes’s ascent of Pikes Peak is the culmination of a journey that has tested her physical limits and proved her fitness as a feminist traveler. She begins her trip west on 2 June 1858, as a member of the Lawrence Party, “the first Kansas party of gold-seekers to visit what is now Colorado,” traveling in the group’s wagon train with her husband, James H. Holmes, and her younger brother, Albert W. Archibald. Once at the Peak, she uses the physical strength she has acquired by walking to climb to the summit, a trek that involves a scramble through sandy soil, a near-vertical climb up the mountain’s fourteen-thousand-foot altitude, and even the peril of clinging by her toes to the rocky mountain face.

Her bloomers’ comfort and convenience allow Holmes to follow a program of physical fitness that has prepared her for all of these challenges, eventually enabling her to achieve the summit. She emphasizes her formidable will and her impressive physical accomplishment in her description of the trek from Kansas to Colorado and eventually to
New Mexico: “I commenced the journey with a firm determination to learn to walk. At first I could not walk over three or four miles without feeling quite weary, but by persevering and walking as far as I could every day, my capacity increased gradually, and over the course of a few weeks I could walk ten miles in the most sultry weather without being exhausted” (522). Even as she highlights her impressive daily mileage across the sunbaked prairie, what Holmes offers her readers is not so much an exceptional example, but a model for them to follow. Extensive walking is a learned skill, one that other women, with dedication and perseverance, can develop themselves. The reward for Holmes, and potentially for her readers, is “the liberty to rove at pleasure,” not only a vision of autonomy but also one of joy worth the work of building the necessary stamina (522). The dismal alternative is to be “confined . . . the long days to feminine impotence in the hot covered wagon,” the chosen fate of the only other woman on the wagon train, whom Holmes describes as “unable to appreciate freedom or reform” (522). What is at stake is not whether to walk or ride across the scorched prairie, but whether one makes the journey as an independent traveler or essentially as a piece of baggage. Both options are choices; Holmes effectively shows that the other woman performs appropriate femininity (frail, dependent, conservative), while she casts herself as a feminist traveler who contests and revises stereotypical gender roles.

“Vigorously attacking the mountain,” Holmes applies the same commitment and resolve to summiting as she did to her trek across the plains (530). In a climbing party with three men, she presents herself as an equally able member of the group: “The first mile or so was sandy and extremely steep, over which we toiled slowly, as we frequently lost all we gained. But by persevering and every rod laying, or rather falling on our backs to rest, we at last reached the timber where we could obtain better footing” (530). Holmes shares the difficulties of the climb with the men; she is the recipient of neither chivalrous attention nor assistance. Her use of we emphasizes that the men, too, struggle with the incline and the sandy soil, and she as a feminist traveler has undertaken the same difficult journey and kept pace with them. Describing their first campsite “on the east side of the Peak, whose summit looming above our heads at an angle of forty-five degrees, is yet two miles away towards the sky,” (530) she provides still more detail about the arduous nature of the climb, with the steep, vertical two-mile stretch awaiting the climbers. But even with the summit hike “looming,” Holmes does
not focus single-mindedly on the peak; she takes the opportunity to explore the side of the mountain and further prove her mettle as an adventurer. This side trip takes her around the mountain and into considerable danger: “We went in search of a supposed cave about three fourths of a mile along the side of the mountain. We penetrated the canyon with much difficulty, being once obliged to take off our moccasins that we might use the toes and balls of our feet in clinging to the asperities of the sidling [sic] rock” (530). Again, both her drive and her dedication are on display here. She risks her life, clinging by her toes to the cliff face—not for the achievement of the summit, but for the thrill of discovery. Here Holmes casts herself in the mode of explorer, moving beyond travel or even equality.

Holmes’s travel narrative defies generic expectations for women’s travel writing, replacing a focus on domesticity and exceptionalism with her emphasis on feminist politics and an empowerment of her female audience. When women’s travel and exploring was acknowledged, it was often in service of an expansionist agenda that celebrated the spread of domesticity to as-yet-uncivilized territory. Scholar Susan Kollin identifies this “‘first white woman’ trope” as operating in many late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women’s travel texts. Kollin describes the function of the trope in white, middle-class women’s travel writing as “announcing the appearance of a pioneering figure who ventured where no other white female had gone before.” She maintains that “the ‘first white woman’ trope effectively broadened the horizons of the new white womanhood, doing so in service of western expansion.” Representing themselves as carrying the banner of middle-class femininity to the far corners of the globe, the women travel writers Kollin discusses often frame their travels in terms of civilizing missions meant to spread the doctrine of domesticity. The unorthodox nature of their dangerous trips to remote locations is effectively tempered by their performance and celebration of proper domesticity, often in inhospitable and challenging locations. Women travelers’ performance of this domesticity supports and extends the spread of U.S. territorial expansion, couching conquest as the spread of enlightenment and improvement by demonstrating the “proper place” of civilized women and the correct way to run a comfortable home. However, promoting feminism rather than domesticity, Holmes’s account offers a very different spin on the promotion of manifest destiny, as a tool to spread gender equality to the frontier and beyond."
While her contemporaries and even late-twentieth-century scholars frame Holmes in terms of the “first white woman trope,” her insistent promotion of a feminist agenda changes the terms on which women travelers participate in expansion and imperialism. It is important to note that neither Holmes nor the *Sibyl* uses the “first white woman” formulation; both instead emphasize Holmes’s identity as a dress reformer and feminist. Holmes and the editors and publishers of the *Sibyl* do, however, reveal “their yearning to assert agency and authority in nation-building projects,” according to Kollin’s formulation. The crucial difference is that Holmes and the *Sibyl* want to participate in claiming and shaping the West as a land of opportunity for women. They do not want to see status quo gender relations recreated in the United States’ new Western territories; rather, expansion must be predicated on gender equality.

As a feminist traveler, Holmes goes beyond revising stereotypes of women travelers to claim and revise the exclusively male role of explorer. Explorers are often key agents of imperialism and expansion, laying the groundwork by surveying land and resources and in their travel narratives laying claim to land through their assertions of discovery and cultural superiority. Holmes casts herself as an active explorer, a position she sees as asserting power normally reserved for white men: “[I] felt that I possessed an ownership in all that was good or beautiful in nature, and an interest in any curiosities we might find on the journey as much as if I had been one of the favored lords of creation” (522). She usurps the place of the “lords of creation,” effectively adopting what critic Mary Louise Pratt identifies as the masculine “monarch-of-all-I-survey” perspective. Narrating the “peak moments at which geographical ‘discoveries’ were ‘won,’” the white male traveler, according to Pratt, conquers territory merely by viewing it. Holmes similarly declares “ownership” by virtue of her active physical presence in the territory between Kansas and Pikes Peak. Emphasizing the physical fitness she has developed thanks to her bloomer outfit, Holmes replaces Pratt’s “seeing-man . . . whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” with a representation of herself as an active agent. The result is a justification of both her “ownership” of the land she crosses and of her trespass into the masculine territory of travel and adventure. Pratt’s formulation, tied as it is to the explorer’s role in the expansion of patriarchy, does not imagine a woman in the role of seeing-man. However, I
argue that Holmes offers a feminist revision of this model as her travels focus on the expansion of Woman’s Rights.7 Holmes also displays her physical travel competence, which is equal to that of the men who accompany her, as well as her savvy understanding of the way that travel and exploration can be tied to the exercise of individual and national power. Her death-defying risk of clinging by her toes is repaid with a “discovery”:

We found no cave but a tremendous amphitheater shaped space, whose perpendicular walls rose seven or eight hundred feet high. Piled around this vast circle at the foot of the walls, were granite boulders of all sizes and shapes rising against the walls like the terraced seats of a circus or theater. Deep in the center is a circular spot of green grass, with flowers, and a silvery stream winding through it. We called the place Amphitheater Canyon. (530)

Her reward is an exclusive view of this hidden sight, a place she lays claim to through her description. She creates the metaphor that connects her new discovery to her own and her readers’ frame of reference, an amphitheater suggesting importance, culture, and even the theatricality of her own daredevil performance. Her ownership of her accomplishment and of the place she has seen is further cemented by the process of naming, an act that erases any previous knowledge of the canyon and any other name it might have had. Traveling, seeing, and naming reinforce Holmes’s “ownership” of the canyon and her authority to write about it, in much the same way that the westward spread of the Lawrence Party and other settlers effectively claimed Western frontier territory for the expanding nation.

Holmes conquers the West through her accomplishment of the summit of Pikes Peak—not only for herself but also for the readers and activists who make up her audience. After the dangerous detour into Amphitheater Canyon, her description of the climb to the summit on 5 August 1858 is anticlimactic:

Arriving within a few hundred yards of the top the surface changed into a huge pile of loose angular stones, so steep we found much difficulty in clambering up them. Passing to the right of a drift of snow some three or four hundred yards long, which the sun and wind had
turned into coarse ice, we stood upon a platform of near one hundred acres of feldspathic granite rock and boulders. It was cold and rather cloudy, with squalls of snow, consequently our view was not so extensive as we had anticipated. A portion only of the whitened back-bone ridge of the Rocky Mountains which forms the boundary line of so many territories could be seen, fifty miles to the west. We were now nearly fourteen thousand feet above the sea level. But we could not spend long in contemplating the grandeur of the scene for it was exceedingly cold, and leaving our names on a large rock, we commenced letters to some of our friends, using a broad flat rock for a writing desk. (530–31)

The final rocky stretch to the summit, while difficult, constitutes only several hundred yards, a small portion of the climb. As the final push to the summit lacks drama, Holmes redirects her audience’s attention instead to the total height of the peak, and thus to the enormity of her achievement. Weather limits her feminist-of-all-I-survey view, but she does manage to see as far west as the Rockies, which are significant not because of their beauty but because of their function as boundary markers for frontier territories that her gaze claims for herself and for the readers of the *Sibyl*. She immediately turns from the view to the crucial job of documenting her accomplishment by inscribing her name on the boulder and writing letters that will reach family, friends, and the pages of the feminist magazine. The emphasis on writing, even as she is literally on the snow-squall-whipped mountaintop, recognizes that the written record she is producing is as important as the climb itself, for herself and, in turn, for the readers she would have follow her.

Holmes’s travel writing is carefully crafted to encourage those readers to climb mountains of their own. In comparison to a more-candid version of the climb recorded in a letter to her mother, Holmes downplays the physical challenge in her piece for the *Sibyl* in order to present her climb as arduous but certainly replicable by other dedicated bloomer wearers. Her letter to her mother, on the other hand, emphasizes the transformation in her physical strength during her walking and the difficulty of the climb: “Two days of very hard climbing has [sic] brought me here [to the last campsite before the summit climb]—if you could only know how hard, you would be surprised that I have been able to accomplish it. My strength and capacity for enduring fatigue have been
very much increased by constant exercise in the open air since leaving home, or I never could have succeeded in climbing the rugged sides of this mountain.” Holmes’s own mother might not recognize her physically fit daughter, thanks to her bloomer-aided exercise program, but that increased ability has been put to the test by the mountain, a fact Holmes de-emphasizes for the readers of the *Sibyl*. The description of the first mile-long climb up the sandy soil at the base of the Peak offers the most vivid account of the physical challenge Holmes faced in the version she presents in the *Sibyl*, but for that audience she focuses on her ability to keep up with the men. To inspire the *Sibyl*’s readers, Holmes wants to portray her accomplishment as extraordinary, but also within the reach of all (bloomer-wearing, reform-minded) women. Her ascent was actually repeated two years later, in 1860, by two other white women reportedly wearing bloomer dress, but they apparently had no knowledge of Holmes, believing themselves to be the first women to summit. Although the women were not, in fact, following the trail she had blazed up the peak, Holmes and the *Sibyl* imagine their “sisters in reform” proving themselves by doing no less.

Those high expectations applied to words as well as deeds. Holmes serves as a role model not only of mountain climbing, but also of theorizing and articulating a feminist message through her travel writing. She refuses formulations of gender difference that figure women as weak, vulnerable, and in need of male protection. With her emphasis on mobility and autonomy, Holmes’s feminism differs from simultaneous formulations of benevolence, which justified women’s increasing participation in charity and social service work based on a view of women’s innate moral superiority. Rather than relying on a notion of essential difference to expand women’s sphere from the home outward, Holmes insists on a view of women’s equality that highlights women’s equal competence and skill and their rightful place in public life. Her argument for equal rights and equal responsibilities is what underlies her request to be assigned a watch with the rest of the male guards of the camp: “Believing, as I do,” she writes, “in the right of woman to equal privileges with man, I think that when it is in our power we should, in order to promote our own independence, at least, be willing to share the hardships which commonly fall to the lot of man” (523). The captain of the guard refuses Holmes, saying that “it would be a disgrace to the gentlemen of the company for them to permit a woman
to stand on guard” (523). Recording the vehement reaction of the men on the wagon train to her would-be trespass into the masculine realm of guard duty, Holmes recognizes that masculinity is defined in terms of male roles as protectors and defenders of both property and women. She criticizes the sexism that persists despite her demonstrated physical competence and identifies the workings of social power evident in the guard master’s argument: “He believes that woman is an angel, (without any sense,) needing the legislation of her brothers to keep her in her place; that restraint removed, she would immediately usurp his position, and then not only be no longer an angel but unwomanly” (523). Holmes is well aware that white, middle-class women are supposed to remain “angels of the hearth” confined within the domestic sphere. By both traveling and writing about her journey, however, she demonstrates that she is capable of participating in public life and is intelligent enough (with “sense”) to author her travelogue.

Holmes’s articulation of feminist politics through her travel narrative foreshadows later Woman’s Rights discourses that link mobility and independence with liberation, as well as subsequent travel writing that incorporates arguments for suffrage and women’s public participation. Theorizing “women’s writing of travel-as-politics,” critic Mary Suzanne Schriber identifies several approaches taken by women authors toward “deliberately” political subjects in their travel texts. But even though Holmes fits within Schriber’s framework as a woman travel writer for whom “gender politics occup[ies] center stage,” Holmes is ultimately more radical in her re-visioning of gender than the women that Schriber identifies as “aim[ing] to shape the culture’s attitudes toward the sexes and, in this way, to expand the boundaries of domesticity.” Her rhetoric of feminism does not rely on an expansion of domesticity; rather, as we will see, she argues that she has proven her mettle as an abolitionist activist and is therefore fit for citizenship.30

Demanding opportunities to participate in public civic life, Holmes figures herself not only as equally competent, but also as already experienced in public service and reform work. Her own history of dedication to abolition activism has prepared her as a reformer. In her discussion of being refused for guard duty, for instance, Holmes cites her experience and the participation of other women in the Kansas abolitionist movement as proof of fitness for public service and, more important,
the vote: “He [the captain of the guard] would vote against the question of universal franchise, were it to be submitted to the people, although he was a hero in the struggles of Kansas, and must have witnessed the heroic exertions of many of the women of that Territory to secure for their brothers the boon of freedom” (523). Holmes herself moved to Kansas with her family as activists working to end slavery in the territory and see it enter the Union as a “free” state. As her work and that of other abolition activists attests, women were not unfit because they were untested; rather, they had already demonstrated the courage and dedication to the principles of freedom and justice required of American citizens. Her direct reference to suffrage links her theory of women’s equality with her own practical experience as an activist and proposes the specific remedy of votes for women.

While the connection between women’s empowerment through physical fitness, travel, and feminist activism seems logical today, Holmes’s travel writing prefigures the later turn-of-the-century shift in feminist rhetoric identified by Jean Fagan Yellin as foregrounding the liberator figure of the strong white woman. With the rise of eugenic feminism at the turn of the century, white, middle-class feminists stressed their difference from other races rather than comparing the oppression of slavery and patriarchy, as the rhetoric of abolitionist feminism had. According to critic Victoria Lamont, “feminized versions of the western male hero” found in women’s Western fiction in the early twentieth century fit with the feminist movement’s changing rhetoric and racial politics: “The West displaced abolitionism as the origin of American feminism, supporting the desire of Anglo-American feminists to distance themselves from their African American counterparts.” Holmes, however, predates by nearly fifty years the figures and the discourse of Western women as feminist models in popular literature and culture that Lamont proposes. She and the Sibyl were prescient in their vision of the West as a land promising expanded roles for women—Colorado, the state Holmes viewed from the top of Pikes Peak, enfranchised women in 1893, and the territories of Wyoming (1869) and Utah (1891) ratified woman suffrage even earlier. Holmes’s early experiment replacing the rhetoric of abolitionist feminism with the liberator figure of the strong white woman fit with the Sibyl’s view of its readership as a uniquely dedicated and limited group.
Holmes anticipates the later representations of strong, white, Western women, which, Lamont argues, found their fictional expression in portraits highlighting the “female individualism of [Western cowgirl] figures such as Annie Oakley.” Holmes becomes a larger-than-life Western heroine not only because of walking across the prairie or even summiting Pikes Peak, but also because of facing a series of dangers on her journey. For example, at one point she bravely stares down a buffalo: “There within forty yards of me stood a venerable buffalo bull, his eyes in seeming wonder fixed upon me . . . His gaze was returned with equal astonishment and earnestness. Much as I had heard and read of the buffalo, I had never formed an adequate idea of their huge appearance” (522). “The grand emperor of the plain” is no match for the unruffled Holmes, who coolly returns his gaze and then records the successful hunt of her large visitor (522). Trying to feed a buffalo calf orphaned by a subsequent hunt, Holmes does suffer an attack, but is only momentarily rattled: “The savage little animal advanced toward me and gave me such a blow with its head as to destroy the center of gravity” (522). The narrative doesn’t even pause for Holmes to pick herself up before celebrating the strength and valor of another strong Western female, the mother buffalo who sacrificed her life for the ornery calf “and presented a beautiful illustration of the triumph of maternal feeling over fear” (522). Throughout her journey Holmes emulates the fearlessness of the mother buffalo, whether by swimming in the Arkansas River, where “a number of large rattlesnakes were killed” (530), or by dismissing the threat of kidnap by Native Americans: “It was of no use to hide now, for every Indian within a mile knew of my whereabouts” (529). A model of female strength, dedication, and courage equal to, if not surpassing, the men in the Lawrence Party, Holmes replaces formulations of benevolence that figure women as morally superior and fundamentally domestic, as well as formulations of abolitionist feminism that highlight the patriarchal oppression of slaves and women, insisting instead on a vision of gender equality that will be not only liberating but also practical and necessary to settle the untamed frontier. Even though her accomplishment and strength are extraordinary, she is not meant to be a singular example; her “sisters in reform” are meant to follow her daunting example, out West and at home.
Circulating Women, Circulating Texts:
The *Sibyl* as a Context of Publication

The women who would follow Holmes on her literary and literal travels were the readers of the *Sibyl*. Travel writing by reform-minded women fit well within the *Sibyl’s* call for women’s physical and mental autonomy as necessary antidotes to sexism. In the same issue in which the second and final installment of Holmes’s travel account appears, for instance, the *Sibyl*’s outspoken editor, Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, articulates the direct connection between mainstream fashion and women’s subordination. According to Hasbrouck, “the latest fashion,” by diverting women’s minds from reform and exhausting their bodies, stunts women’s moral and intellectual development: “We ask what can woman do towards fitting herself for a higher development, so long as her mind is narrowed to the study of the latest fashion, and her intellectual powers have no higher aim than to construct garments to prostrate the little physical power she has remaining, after lugging and lifting and drabbling her load of dry goods through the streets?” Holmes’s account featured on the issue’s front page suggests exactly what women freed from both corsets and stifling definitions of femininity can accomplish. By traveling, Holmes is able to escape the domineering social conventions that Hasbrouck finds as pervasive as the air women breathe: “Not only her skirts, her whalebones, her stays, but the very atmosphere she breathes, destroys her energies and leaves her only a shadow of what she should be.” According to critic Patricia Smith Butcher, by identifying the operations of sexism and offering new models for women, the *Sibyl* and other women’s reform periodicals served as “relentless catalysts [that] assisted in the evolution, dramatization, and celebration of new roles for women.” Thus, Holmes’s travel account reinforces the goals of the *Sibyl*, and the newspaper’s stories of warning confirm Holmes’s own experience of gender oppression.14

A symbol for its supporters of white, middle-class women’s autonomy, mobility, and competence, the bloomer provided opponents of Woman’s Rights with a potent image of female silliness that they used to undercut and ridicule calls for feminist reform. The bloomer’s emergence in the late 1840s was lampooned for more than a decade, as
historian Gary Bunker catalogs in his discussion of the themes of anti-bloomer cartoons:

Enormous, domineering wives led frail, hen-pecked husbands around by the nose; comely partisans of liberal inclination showed signs of moral decline; “real” men spurned the advances of “strong-minded ladies”; . . . a “model bloomer . . . was in such a darned hurry to get on her rig, that she forgot her pants”; and the inherent inferiority of women was claimed by the failure to produce great paintings, sculpture, poetry, drama, opera, and mechanical inventions.

To combat popular press images of the bloomer in particular and women’s inferiority in general, women themselves founded, edited, and published a number of newspapers dedicated to Woman’s Rights, including Una (1853–55), the Pioneer and Women’s Advocate (1852–53), the Genius of Liberty (1851–53), and the Woman’s Advocate (Jan. 1855–58 or 1860). Amelia Bloomer’s Lily (1849–56) is perhaps the most well-known early feminist reform periodical; however, a consideration of less well-known women’s reform newspapers such as the Sibyl suggests the breadth of participation by women in the public rhetoric surrounding women’s issues in the mid-nineteenth century.15

The Sibyl (1856–64) deserves particular attention among antebellum feminist periodicals for its longevity, its promotion of uncompromising stances on dress and gender reform, and its strict policing of membership among its cadre of dedicated reformers. A growing scholarly conversation about the cultural work performed by nineteenth-century periodicals has begun to assess the central role such publications played in the construction, perpetuation, and dissemination of social and political ideologies. An examination of the Sibyl’s radical message and editorial strategies complements Patricia Okker’s study of Godey’s Lady’s Book, with its focus on that mainstream publication’s formulations of appropriate white, middle-class femininity. Placing the Sibyl’s long editorial life and thriving and geographically diverse distribution in this context suggests both the surprising reach of the early feminist newspaper and the limits of its vision of social and political reform. The paper’s mission statements, editorials, letters, features, and travel writing articulate a sophisticated feminist agenda, create a widely dispersed audience for its message, and ultimately demand an almost impossibly high level of dedication from its readers.
An analysis of the *Sibyl* and Holmes demonstrates that bloomers were part of a complicated and multifaceted feminist agenda that had dress reform at its center, but that also offered critiques of the economic, educational, sexual, and political barriers that white, middle-class women faced. Despite many women’s shared experience of gender oppression, the sisterhood envisioned by the feminist reform press was complex and problematic, demanding uncompromising dedication from its members, and ultimately it may have excluded many more women than it welcomed.

Linking mainstream women’s fashion to impaired physical movement, poor health, and a preoccupation with conspicuous consumption, the *Sibyl* argues for the increased health and physical fitness to be gained from dress reform, a prerequisite for public service and participation for women. The newspaper presents its critique in the form of satiric verse, publishing a poem entitled “Miss Alice” in the column next to Holmes’s travelogue. The poem traces the sad story of Alice, who insists on wearing her finery despite a cold, wet storm and suffers the ensuing negative health effects:

Next day, poor Alice was sick and sore,
   Pain in spots and pain all o’er;
   Pain in the head, and pain in the teeth;
   Pain in the lungs, and stomach beneath;
   Pain in the limbs, above and below;
   Pain in the shoulder, and pain in the hip,
   Pains to pay for the dip, dip, dip.
Yet Alice and all, both young and old,
   Wondered how Alice had caught such a cold!

The humorous account of Alice’s suffering nonetheless conveys the message that women’s dress reform and women’s full and equal social participation are necessary, concomitant changes dictated by common sense. Unlike the mainstream media’s cartoons, it is not the reformers who are silly in the *Sibyl*; rather, fashionable women are ridiculous. A much more dire account of the health effects of women’s fashion appears in “Madge Moody’s Lectures, No. 7”: “But what provoked me most, was, to hear Mrs. Showoph talk about the ‘mysterious ways of providence’ in taking her little girl from her, who died with scarlet
fever not long since. I wanted to ask her if she thought Providence
would advise her to let her child go all winter with cotton stockings
and pantalets that just come to the top of them, and thin shoes.” As
dramatizations of the fashion-conscious attitudes of most women,
“Madge Moody’s Lectures” exaggerate but also illuminate the very
real consequences of white, middle-class women’s and society’s lack
of common sense.¹⁶

According to critic Lori Duin Kelly’s analysis of bloomers in the
popular press, “For Dress Reformers, clothing, far from innocent and
frivolous, was a ‘symbol’ of woman’s inferior position in society.”
Although adoption of reform dress was often a symbolic rejection of
restrictive gender roles for white, middle-class women such as the
readers of the *Sibyl*, dress reform was also more complicated than
a straightforward critique of woman’s sphere. Not merely symbolic,
bloomers constituted a practical and tangible first step toward wide-
ranging social change. Reform would not be limited to Woman’s
Rights; this workable start for women’s activism was intended to lead
to other areas of reform advocated by the *Sibyl*, including temperance,
abolition, and labor reform.¹⁷

Perhaps because of their direct connection to reform work and
potentially revolutionary social change, bloomers generated an imme-
diate and general hostility that was directed toward both reform dress
and women’s activism more generally. Bunker’s analysis of antebellum
caricature identifies dress reform as the catalyst for an unprecedented
reaction: “What whetted the cartoonist’s appetite for misrepresent-
ing women’s themes more than anything else was the introduction of
‘the bloomer.’ Its adoption by the leaders of the movement . . . fixed
an image of contempt for [reform-minded] women . . . that endured
for generations.” The extensive lampooning of bloomers reveals the
threat that dress reform and Woman’s Rights discourses posed to mid-
nineteenth-century American society. Ultimately, bloomers and dress
reformers were jeopardizing the status quo of women’s subordination,
and potentially undermining systems of power based on white male
dominance. Reconsidering bloomers in this light suggests their power,
rather than their laughability.¹⁸

For Holmes on her trip, bloomers facilitated access to the masculine
territory of travel and adventure. For the *Sibyl* and its readers, such
masculine territory included education and suffrage. The newspaper’s
extensive coverage illustrates the various ways in which American soci-
ety was institutionalizing women’s subordinate status. A column titled “Educational Development” locates the solution for women’s subordination in educational reforms that would produce true companionate marriages and true equality for women: “Let man and woman be educated alike in everything . . . [and the result will be] a nobler life in all respects.” Lack of access to education is a frequent subject of letters printed in the Sibyl; correspondents complain of scarce educational opportunities and of the way women’s limited education is used to justify their exclusion from politics and public life. A correspondent identified as “Luna” traces the specious logic of such arguments against woman suffrage: “Such reasoning reminds me of the anxious mother who wished her son to learn to swim, but he must learn before going into the water or he might get drowned. So, if woman is allowed to vote before she is ‘well educated’ and had ‘proper political training,’ she might make a mistake.” It is clear that the Sibyl and its readers were well aware of the circular logic that was often used to exclude women from full citizenship.19

In addition to lack of suffrage and education, the Sibyl identified the sexual double standard and limited economic opportunities as other obstacles to women’s autonomy. Publishing a caution to its readers against Lord Napier, who was renowned for his “libertine career,” the Sibyl recognizes that women are often placed in an “equivocal position” when seducers exercise their “peculiar and fascinating power” over vulnerable women. The argument echoes the earlier analysis of the New York Female Moral Reform Society, whose newspaper, the Advocate, published the names of seducers in an effort to ameliorate the sexual double standard. Addressing gendered economic injustice as well, the Sibyl includes an article entitled “Pecuniary Dependence,” suggesting the limited occupations open to women and the hiring discrimination they face by wearing reform dress. The Sibyl offered both theoretical and practical solutions to women’s experiences of economic injustice; for instance, it eventually hired an all-female staff, as this ad for a female printer under the heading “A Chance for a Dress Reformer” emphasizes: “We now have an opening for another apprentice should any thorough reformer be desirous of learning the printer’s trade . . . None but an active, working, dress reformer need apply.” The masthead illustration of the Sibyl also reinforces this view of the necessity of expanding women’s work opportunities by picturing women operating a printing press. With its wide-ranging discussions of the various
factors operating against women’s full and equal social participation and its presentation of practical solutions, the Sibyl presents a complex analysis of gender oppression.²⁰

**Exclusive Sisterhood in the Feminist Reform Press**

So whom did Holmes’s narrative and the feminist analysis of the Sibyl reach? The newspaper’s first issue boldly proclaims, “We circulate Two Thousand copies of our first issue, scattered everywhere throughout the Union.” Although the Sibyl clearly sought to compete with other reform periodicals—intending “to make it the leading reform journal in the country”—Kathleen Endres and Therese Lueck conclude that it “never had a large, national circulation.” For comparison, Frank Luther Mott’s *A History of American Magazines* puts the circulation of Bloomer’s successful women’s reform magazine, the Lily (1849–56), at four thousand at the height of its popularity in 1854. Despite the Sibyl’s lower circulation, Amy Beth Aronson still places the newspaper among an elite group of “national players” that constituted “the first generation of American feminist magazines.” While not as successful as the Lily, the Sibyl did reach a surprisingly wide audience, especially considering its radical feminist content.²¹

The Sibyl succeeded in connecting women in various and often isolated rural locations. Mary Craig writes from Iowa, declaring her intention to found “The Oskaloosa Dress Reform Society,” and documenting her early success. Similar letters from Faribault, Minnesota; Meadville, Pennsylvania; South Bend, Indiana; Willoughby, Ohio; Waterloo, Wisconsin; and Polo, Illinois, offer further evidence of the various communities linked by the newspaper. Guila, writing from Huntley Grove, Illinois, suggests that her town has “many about here who would be reformers if they had a little help; there are some bold ones as it is.” The mission statement of the Sibyl declares an intention to unite a reform community: “Believing there are many scattered up and down the earth, who think with and like us, we call upon them to aid our undertaking, and thereby advance the good cause.” Holmes imagines herself as part of this geographically dispersed reform community and writes with that audience in mind.²²

In contrast to the geographically diverse (but unswervingly dedi-
community of activists and liberal thinkers the *Sibyl* considers its audience stand what Holmes calls “the croakers against reform,” those opposed to gender and social reforms (522). Following the lead of the *Sibyl*, Holmes includes references to the opposition she encounters from conservative men and women. These conservative characters serve, both in Holmes’s travel narrative and in the *Sibyl*, to personify the obstacles to social and political change and to emphasize the need for dedicated reformers to join forces in order to accomplish their common goals. Conservative women in particular caused Holmes and the *Sibyl* the most disappointment and frustration. Particularly because so much of the movement’s rhetoric centered on building a coalition of women supporting their own enfranchisement and autonomy, women dissenters presented a potent threat to images of white, middle-class women allied behind a shared cause.

Strategic representations of antireform women pepper the columns of the *Sibyl*. Frequently, unsympathetic women are rendered as merely backward and powerless. A letter from Miss Fidelia R. Harris, MD, describes the contrast between her own independence and fitness for public life and that of a group of fashionable women gathered at the scene of a fire:

> Among the women who were standing with me on the corner, were hooped ones and hoopless ones, some with skirts held in their hands to an altitude not comporting with popular ideas of decorum, (it was a muddy, sloppy, sleety, night,) and some with robes trailing in the mud, in accordance with the most approved and sensitive ideas of gracefulness, (?) and I stood among them, in the proudly dignified consciousness of being clothed in accordance with the dictates of reason and propriety.

> “Oh, dear, dear!” said my good neighbor Mrs. B. as she stood with both hands full of cumbersome skirts, “Oh dear, dear! Can’t we do something!” “No,” I replied, “you see there is nothing can be done for the burning building, and there are plenty of men at work for the others.” “Oh, dear, well I wish WE could help!” I involuntarily laughed at the idea. Poor, fettered creature! How could you help, be the necessity ever so great. And yet, that is but the echo of the heart-cry that is going up all over our land from thousands of just such fettered women.
Reason, grace, dignity, decorum, and usefulness are all counted on the side of the author and the readers of the Sibyl; Mrs. B., on the other hand, provides a humorous (if not ridiculous) example of women who have not yet awakened to the cause of dress reform and Woman’s Rights. While congratulating the Sibyl’s audience on its good sense and independent spirit, the author’s use of fire also suggests the urgency of the reformer’s mission and the need for increasing dedication. By presenting a foolish woman character who does not support reform, the author and the Sibyl galvanize their existing audience and create an image of prestige and a sense of like-minded community for insiders who support their cause.23

Representations of conservative women complicate the Sibyl’s version of sisterhood, for not all white, middle-class women are automatically considered allies; rather, the readership of the Sibyl constitutes an elite group of awakened women who understand the need for gender and dress reforms and who dedicate themselves to action. The Sibyl’s standards for membership are, on occasion, impossibly high. A diatribe against Lucy Stone, for instance, one of the most prominent leaders of the Woman’s Rights crusade, penned by editor Hasbrouck, suggests the expectations the newspaper has of its readers. In response to Stone’s abandonment of reform dress in the interest of protecting herself from what she called “the pressing curiosity of the public,” Hasbrouck proclaims: “We have a high regard for Lucy Stone; we respect her talents, we honor the many good things she has done for reform, but we know she has made a grand mistake as regards the reform dress. She has not only injured the cause, but she has caused the mass to look upon her as lacking in the true, strong elements that should constitute a reformer.” According to Hasbrouck, Stone’s return to long skirts overshadows the accomplishments she has made while publicizing the cause of Woman’s Rights. As such a public figure, Stone could have been held to an extreme standard precisely because of her popular influence.24

However, Hasbrouck turns what she sees as Stone’s failure into a lesson for her readers: “Perhaps Lucy can reconcile her conscience to the course she has taken; if so she has a more accommodating one than ourself [sic]. We are sure we could never hold our head up amongst reformers or claim to be one of them, should we do as she has done.” Hasbrouck exhorts her audience to show more dedication than one of the century’s most noted Woman’s Rights campaigners. In order to
remain within the reform community of the newspaper’s readership, they must rise to the occasion. Hasbrouck is clearly concerned that the defection of a celebrity from dress reform may hurt the movement, and she emphatically declares, “We wish the world to know that our strength is not from her.” Rather, Hasbrouck identifies the provenance of her cause’s strength as the cadre of dedicated women reformers who make up the readership of the *Sibyl.*

The *Sibyl’s* version of sisterhood differs sharply from the editorial sisterhood created by mainstream publications like *Godey’s Lady’s Book.* In her analysis of a range of nineteenth-century mainstream women’s periodicals, Patricia Okker identifies “the sisterly editorial voice” as a common rhetorical strategy: “This voice is characterized by a relative informality and an assumed equal and personal relationship between editor and reader” (23). Okker suggests that the sisterly editorial voice “assumes a friendly, even intimate relationship with her readers who share ‘mutual interests.’” Although the *Sibyl* seeks to unite a scattered community of women reformers, as the above discussion of Lucy Stone illustrates, the newspaper carefully outlines criteria for membership among its list of reformers. While the newspaper offers support to readers like O. D. from La Grange, New York, who vows to “continue [to wear reform dress] as long as I can have *The Sibyl* to bear me company,” her inclusion in the community created by the paper is not based solely on her gender or even her sympathy with the cause, but with her commitment to adhering to and promoting reform dress.

An editorial titled “Pecuniary Dependence,” written by “Sister Fannie,” demonstrates the *Sibyl’s* application of exacting standards to all its potential members, regardless of practical concerns. In response to a reader who cannot obtain a lucrative teaching position because she wears reform dress, Sister Fannie counsels steely determination and unwavering dedication to reform dress, encouraging “that genuine martyr spirit that one who would be of the highest service to the world should possess.” Fannie cushions her strict advice by saying, “I cannot tell another’s duty, nor do I know how weak and irresolute I might be in the cause, had I not fully committed myself,” thereby effectively representing any practical concessions to fashionable dress as an indication of a flawed character. Although Fannie superficially employs a sisterly voice similar to the one Okker identifies in mainstream women’s magazines, Fannie does not offer actual sisterly sympathy, instead issuing a
call to moral duty. In order to be worthy of Fannie’s approbation and that of her fellow sisters reading the *Sibyl*, Fannie counsels that the would-be teacher should

persevere in the course her conscience approves. If employment suited to her wishes cannot be obtained, she can perform any labor, however disagreeable under ordinary circumstances, which will enable her to support herself . . . Yet if she can consent to bear the present disappointment, she will do the world quite as much, I think more good, by this act of heroism, by showing the world that she will never surrender a principle for its favor of patronage.

Casting dedication to dress reform as heroism, Fannie honors the readers of the *Sibyl* by aggrandizing their political and social resistance work. Her column suggests the small distance between insiders and outsiders—ideological agreement must be supported with action or women risk rejection. Hence, despite the paper’s often-insightful critiques of the economic pressures their readers face gaining and keeping employment due to their gender, that sophisticated analysis is displaced by the call to reform at any cost.  

Holmes is aware of the *Sibyl*’s version of sisterhood, and because she has proven her mettle as a dedicated reform-dress activist, she can become a spokeswoman. She not only chooses the *Sibyl* as the appropriate venue to publish her travelogue (other local publications were interested in accounts of the Lawrence Party; in fact Holmes’s mother published a letter written by Holmes about the trip in the *Lawrence Republican*), but she also specifically addresses her narrative to “my sisters in reform, the readers of *The Sibyl*” (521). Holmes is not interested in non-reform-minded women; she targets an audience of women committed to the cause she shares, whom she can reach through a periodical that has helped both to create and to connect that community.  

Holmes reinforces her status as an insider in the *Sibyl*’s reform community by means of contrast with the other female member of the wagon train, whom she initially hopes to befriend: “I was much pleased to learn on my arrival, that the company contained a lady, and rejoiced at the prospect of having a female companion on such a long journey” (522). The prospect of shared friendship, however, much less a sympathetic audience for her reform agenda, vanishes in the very next sen-
tence: “But my hopes were disappointed. I soon found that there could be no congeniality between us. She proved to be a woman unable to appreciate freedom or reform, affected that her sphere denied her the liberty to roam at pleasure, and confined herself the long days to feminine impotence in the hot covered wagon” (522). Politics quickly divide the only two female members of the Lawrence Party and just as quickly reveal the limits of the rhetoric of sisterhood among all women.

Holmes does make a final effort to convert her would-be female ally to reform with unsuccessful results. After the woman suggests to Holmes, “If you have a long dress with you, do put it on for the rest of the trip, the men talk so much about you,” it is fairly clear that she is unlikely to change her position on Woman’s Rights (522). Nonetheless, Holmes includes her version of their spirited debate on the reform question:

I then endeavored to explain to her the many advantages which the reform dress possesses over the fashionable one but failed to make her appreciate my views. She had never found her dress to be the least inconvenient, she said; she could walk as much in her dress as she wanted to, or as was proper for a woman among so many men. I rejoiced that I was independent of such little views of propriety. (522)

Holmes fails to add another member to the roster of women reformers, although this “failure” allows her to be the first Woman’s Rights supporter to accomplish and chronicle her Western journey. Instead of presenting a successful conversion of her opponent, Holmes designs this passage to elicit a response from the readers of the Sibyl. By representing the irrationality of this conservative woman (who, after all, fails to appreciate the many logical arguments Holmes presents, which she does not need to rehearse for her proreform audience) and her defiant backwardness in disregarding her own comfort and independence in favor of “propriety,” Holmes demonstrates her insider status with the Sibyl’s audience. The conservative woman effectively highlights Holmes’s dedication to the reform cause as well as the ridiculousness of the opposition.

Both the editors of and contributors to the Sibyl, as well as Holmes’s unconventional travel writing, spoke to women’s increasing participa-
tion in traditionally masculine aspects of public life. As women readers traveled across the pages of the *Sibyl*, travel writing with a feminist agenda reinforced a view of white, middle-class women as capable of moving about in the public world. Although the newspaper and Holmes each suggested the possibilities of women’s increased autonomy, they also problematically limited membership in the feminist reform community. Ideological fervor at times eclipsed practical discussions of negotiations women may have been forced to make—negotiations stemming from the subordinate social status of women that the *Sibyl* so cogently analyzed. Despite its rural audience and its occasionally insightful critique of economic injustice, the *Sibyl* demanded a level of commitment and dedication that may have been possible only for privileged middle-class women. Alliances across class and race lines were unlikely with this exclusionary notion of reform community membership. In fact, the *Sibyl*’s exclusive sisterhood foreshadowed the later exclusion of African-American women from suffrage activism. The *Sibyl* staunchly supported abolition, and features called for emancipation from the beginning to the end of its publication run. However, a closer inspection of the newspaper’s limited view of appropriately reform-minded readers presages later conflicts between black and white women over suffrage, and suggests the problematic nature of sisterhood and alliance defined in such narrow and exclusive terms.

**Conclusions: Travel Writing and the Feminist Press**

Two months later the *Sibyl* published another travel account, although much briefer and not featured as prominently as Holmes’s narrative. Titled “Our Visit Home,” Louisa T. Whittier’s letter to the *Sibyl* describes her relocation to teach, her adoption of “Bloomer Dress as our universal dress, having only worn it to work in before,” and finally her trip by “the cars” and omnibus from Palmyra, Wisconsin, to Brandon, Wisconsin. Whittier’s letter offers a condensed version of many of the themes raised by Holmes, including women’s travel as liberating, the utility of reform dress, the link between bloomers and Woman’s Rights, and encounters with those unfamiliar with and potentially hostile to dress reform and feminism. The letter focuses on bloomers as a means to white, middle-class women’s autonomy and mobility: “With perfect confidence in our ability to travel alone and un molested in our favorite costume, we bid good-bye to loved friends, for a few weeks, stepped
aboard the cars at Palmyra—our home by adoption—and with no fearful encounters to break the monotonous ride, soon found ourselves at our great western emporium, Milwaukee.” Whittier and her fellow female companion gain a spirit of independence and self-assuredness from their practical dress, which also provides practical benefits, since they are unencumbered, “holding in [their] hands a shawl and book, instead of, as formerly, dress, crinoline and skirts.” Without elaborate hoops and skirts, Whittier and company are able to act on their “disposition to help themselves,” and they decline offers of aid and extra attention from both the omnibus driver and the male innkeeper. Like Holmes, Whittier constructs herself as a woman without need of assistance while at the same time revealing the sexism underlying notions of chivalry. In response to the innkeeper, who wants to know “whether we were man or woman” because “it was customary to pay a little more attention to ladies,” Whittier declines the innkeeper’s pampering while critiquing gender inequity: “We told him wherever he saw this style of dress, there he would find that little gallantries were not needed or desired, and might have added, that they could not atone for rights denied and unjust power usurped.” Despite this opportunity to educate the antireform innkeeper, Whittier’s journey is largely uneventful, marked by competence and self-assuredness rather than by a series of difficulties. What her letter suggests is that with the proper attire and an acceptance of female competence, travel by women alone can eventually become a nonevent, even boring and commonplace (like the train ride to Milwaukee).29

Nevertheless, Whittier’s local travel and Holmes’s more-adventurous climb up Pikes Peak both speak to women’s increasing participation in public life. The Sibyl’s vision of reform does not stop at women living more-comfortable and healthier lives at home. Wearing reform dress and reading the Sibyl will fit women for public participation and ultimately full and active citizenship. Travel writing with a feminist agenda reinforces this view of white, middle-class women as capable of moving about in the public world. Both accounts look toward the day when women’s travel will be mundane, and when Woman’s Rights will be fully claimed.

The Sibyl finds in Holmes an exemplar of its feminism put into practice, and the partnership of travel writer and feminist press suggests travel writing as a suitable and useful genre for reform periodicals. Travel writing is often thought of as closely related to journalism (although Traveling Economies demonstrates how many literary strate-
gies and techniques women authors use to color their presentations of the “facts” of the places they visit), and it is not surprising that many of the authors studied so far continued their public writing in newspapers. Anne Royall founded and edited *Paul Pry* and the *Huntress*; Mary Ann Shadd Cary published her travel editorials in the pages of her own newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman* (the first newspaper in North America to be owned and edited by an African-American woman); and Frances Wright owned and edited the *Free Enquirer*. All of these women began their careers with travel writing and sought the expanded audience and greater voice in public debates that newspapers offered. Woman’s Rights activists also recognized the power of the press to spread their messages and founded numerous feminist newspapers at midcentury. Holmes specifically chose one such newspaper to print her travelogue, and as a result she offers us a fascinating case study of an explicitly feminist traveler and of the audience for travel writing with a Woman’s Rights agenda. In her analysis of Holmes’s feminist rhetoric, historian Margaret Solomon finds a vision of “the feminist as lonely outcast,” an argument that does not take into account Holmes’s sense of the community to which she was connecting through the pages of the *Sibyl*. The columns that appeared alongside Holmes’s narrative offer unique insight into the close-knit reform community that newspapers like the *Sibyl* linked across a wide geographic area. As Ellen Gruber Garvey argues, it is the role of periodical editors to be “generators of community, inviting readers to see themselves as gathered around the magazine.” Garvey goes on to suggest that “membership in theses imagined readerly communities was often active and contested,” and the *Sibyl*, with its strict policing of reform membership, offers an example of just how contested readerly communities could be, with the surprising twist that the limitations of audience could come from the publication itself. Unfortunately, the vision of both Holmes and the *Sibyl* did not extend beyond the privileged middle class. Holmes’s and the *Sibyl*’s “sisters in reform” were a small group indeed and, while dedicated, may have found themselves alone on mountain peaks, rather than leading mainstream America toward fully realized Woman’s Rights.