“A CARNIVAL OF MUSCLE”: POPULAR AMUSEMENTS AND PUBLIC CULTURE IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY SAN FRANCISCO, 1880-1920

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ABSTRACT

(Under the direction of Peter G. Filene)

This dissertation examines prizefighting and other popular amusements in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century San Francisco both to construct a social history of participants, spectators, and consumers and to illuminate the relationship between popular amusements and politics. Turn-of-the-century San Franciscans promoted and challenged class, racial, and gender identities in the spaces of popular amusement, as in controversies over women’s attendance at prizefights. At the same time, these identities were displayed through the production of particular forms of public culture, as in the racialized scripts promoted in the screenings of the film *The Birth of a Nation* and the suppression of the film version of the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries boxing match, in which a black man bested his white opponent.

But while such people as athletes, sports enthusiasts, moviegoers, and dance-hall denizens sought entertainment, self-assertion, and sometimes a livelihood from popular amusements, politicians and social reformers often made these civic pastimes the focus of debates about what constituted a modern and progressive city. Would San Francisco’s vibrant world of prizefighting persist amid politicians’ attempts to sell the city as the modern and progressive choice for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition? Would female dance instructors and prizefighters be able to keep working in San Francisco after a gang of
boxers brutally assaulted two women they met in one of the city’s most popular dance halls and reformers took up the cause? Much more than a study of urban Americans at play, then, this dissertation uses popular amusements to explore the most pressing and controversial issues of the era: women’s rights, race relations, class conflict, ethnic identity, and moral reform.
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Introduction

“The Lively Social Arts of Man”

Life, in San Francisco, is intense, and has marked peculiarities. It is not passive in a single particular. The manners, customs, business, and pleasure of the people are opposed to inactivity, at all seasons and in all things.

—B. E. Lloyd, Lights and Shades in San Francisco, 1876.1

Was there ever a more savage moment in the youthful, but bloodthirsty, history of California politics than that crisp October morning in 1863 when Governor Leland Stanford and Governor-elect F. F. Low agreed to settle their differences—once and for all—in a bare-knuckle prizefight on the beach at San Francisco’s Seal Rock Point? The exalted social standing of the two combatants and a purse of $100,000 wrested the city’s sporting fancy from their Sunday slumbers and propelled them across the wild sandy dunes of westernmost San Francisco, lured by what promised to be a ferocious battle between the political antagonists. By dawn nearly every avenue leading to the coast teemed with carriages filled with bleary-eyed men arguing the relative merits and chances of the belligerents. So ferocious were these arguments, so feverish were the debates, a young field reporter covering the tussle for the Golden Era fretfully remarked, “they kept the minds of the public in such a state of continual vibration that I fear the habit thus acquired is confirmed, and that they will never more cease to oscillate.”

Surrounding the makeshift ring drawn into the sandy shore were San Franciscan men from all walks of life—a masculine gathering that was itself encircled by a colony of curious sea lions captivated with the early-morning revelry. The referee’s sudden command cut through the icy fog and the pugilist-politicians swaggered to the middle of the ring, shook hands as the rules of sportsmanship dictated, and, at the signal, began exchanging ferocious blows. It was an especially brutal affair befitting the political adversaries. The early going clearly belonged to Governor Leland Stanford, and by the fifth round Governor-elect Low’s head was, in the words of the same adventuresome reporter, “crushed in like a dent in a plug hat.” Furious with pain, Low wildly charged Stanford and “mashed his nose so far into his face that a cavity was left in its place the size and shape of an ordinary soup-bowl.” Stanford responded with a particularly vicious attack of his own, tearing away the crown of Low’s educated brow. Low countered with a knifing body shot that sliced straight through Stanford’s rib cage. With butcher-like precision he ripped out one of the Governor’s lungs and, adding insult to injury, smacked Stanford in the face with his own bloody organ. Understandably enraged, the now lung-less Stanford twisted Low’s head loose from its body and vengefully hurled the decapitated torso to the ground. Riveted by the gory scene, our young reporter with aspirations for literary greatness summarized the carnage before him: “At this stage of the game the battle ground was strewn with a sufficiency of human remains to furnish material for the construction of three or four men of ordinary size, and good sound brains enough to stock a whole county like the one I came from in the noble old state of Missouri. So dyed were the combatants in their own gore that they looked like shapeless, mutilated, red-shirted firemen.” With the spectators unable to distinguish the remains of one fighter from the other, the match, mercifully, was declared a draw.
The fight, as the reader has probably guessed, did not actually occur on the beach by Seal Rock, but instead took place in the imagination of a young writer who had recently arrived in San Francisco and had begun calling himself “Mark Twain.”\(^2\) As usual, Twain was on to something when he employed the prizefight as a symbol for the cantankerous world of nineteenth-century California politics. Indeed, over the years, the sport of prizefighting proved to be an apt metaphor for any number of arenas of San Franciscan life. Labor disputes, political partisanship, regional rivalries, cutthroat corporate competition, insurance fraud, even marital strife—prizefighting was such a prominent and recognizable part of San Francisco urban culture that the imagery of two combatants donning the gloves and trading blows was easily employed to outline any of these conflicts.

This dissertation proceeds from Mark Twain’s premise and suggests that prizefighting and other popular amusements provide a unique historical lens through which to view the cosmopolitan and competitive tenor of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century San Franciscan public life. Made possible by the city’s expanding population and an increase in leisure time for its inhabitants, popular pastimes like parades, festivals, and commercial amusements emerged as dynamic gathering spaces of urban sociability and a new cultural democracy, where participation in a mass civic culture enabled a heterogeneous city population to mute class, ethnic, and racial differences and articulate a cohesive regional identity. Indeed, because popular amusements were such accessible urban venues offering up cosmopolitan contact, cultural experimentation, and emotional release—historian John Kasson called them “laboratories of the new mass culture”—they served as vital arenas of civic possibility, where individual San Franciscans might align their own pursuit of pleasure

Fig. Intro. 1: “Time! For the Wind Up.” Prizefighting was such a prominent part of San Franciscan life that it was used as a metaphor to explain any number of civic conflicts. In 1884, *The Wasp* used boxing to depict the sensational divorce trial in San Francisco between Sarah Althea Hill and California Senator William Sharon. (From *The Wasp*, 19 July 1884, used with the permission of the Bancroft Library)
with the promotion of group interests. But these pastimes were also venues of immense cultural conflict, and while some groups used popular amusements as a stage on which to promote the existing social order as positive, natural, and indisputable, other groups used them for the democratic subversion of existing class, gender, and racial hierarchies.

Popular amusements also attracted the attention of reformers, lawmakers, businessmen, labor unionists, journalists, and other San Franciscans who saw such activities as symbolic and integral aspects of their urban society. In this dissertation, then, I explore the history of popular amusements in San Francisco in two complementary ways. First, I use popular amusements as a window into the social history of people we might call “insiders”—that is, I explore the cultural meaning and political significance of popular amusements for the participants, spectators, and consumers of a particular pastime or cultural product. For example, I ask questions such as, who went to prizefights in San Francisco and what was the meaning of their attendance? And, what messages did San Franciscans receive when they went to the moving picture show and how did their understanding of these messages affect their daily lives?

Second, I explore how “outsiders” such as politicians, newspaper editors, and members of civic organizations used popular amusements in order to make larger claims about the public good. These “outsiders” were not usually interested in experiencing what many of the city’s popular amusements had to offer, and instead used these pastimes as a rallying focus for their specific brand of urban reform. Much more than a mere study of urban Americans at play, then, this dissertation uses popular amusements to explore the most pressing and controversial issues of the era—women’s rights, race relations, class conflict,

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ethnic identity, and moral reform. In broader terms still, it illuminates the contested meanings of public space, urban belonging, and democratic citizenship in both San Francisco and the United States.

This dissertation, in other words, is about leisure as serious business. By highlighting how popular amusements served as dynamic arenas of civic interaction and cultural conflict, I use them as the subject matter with which to interrogate turn-of-the-century San Francisco “public culture”—an entity that I define as a spatial and rhetorical arena of urban interaction in which social status and civic values were publicly articulated and negotiated on an ongoing basis. Much like the state laws and civic ordinances that were supposed to govern San Franciscans, the city’s public culture was a conglomeration of rules, standards, prejudices, aspirations, and ideals by which members of a diverse population ordered their daily existence. Competing ideas about race and racial difference; shifting assumptions about men, women, masculinity, and true womanhood; the evolving relationship between labor and capital; the conflicting claims over civic morality and regional identity—these were among the dynamic interactions that together forged the city’s vibrant public culture. While some embraced this culture and the favors it bestowed upon them, others worked to undermine a cultural system that reinforced social stigmas and political inequalities. Sometimes cantankerous, often illicit, usually political, and almost always in flux, San

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Francisco public culture held different meanings and possessed different possibilities for different San Franciscans.

Turn-of-the-century San Francisco, a lively and diverse American city, provides an exceptionally fertile environment in which to examine the links between popular amusements and urban public culture. Before the 1848 discovery of precious metal in the hills to the east, San Francisco was a small trading post of yet-to-be-determined nationality occupied by only a few hundred inhabitants. But gold fever brought in people from all over the world, and by 1852 the city was part of the burgeoning United States and boasted a mostly male population of 36,000. Thirteen years later, at the end of the Civil War, San Francisco held a populace of 100,000, making the city both the center of West Coast life and the fourteenth largest urban area in the United States. By 1880, San Francisco was the nation’s ninth largest city, with almost half of its population foreign born, the largest such ratio in the country. From China and Chile, from Australia and Alsace and Alabama, the world had rushed in and transformed San Francisco from a sleepy Mexican fishing village into a vibrant American

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port city that possessed a diverse and heavily masculine population with a special reputation for barbarism, rascality, rambunctiousness, cosmopolitanism, and perhaps most of all, social, cultural, and political disorder.  

Public amusements were an early staple of this hard-working and transient San Franciscan population, filling emotional voids and providing a basic human sustenance on par with food and drink. Saloons, dance and concert halls, gambling parlors, playhouses, opera houses, melodeons, nickelodeons, shooting ranges, trotting parks, saltwater baths, baseball diamonds, prizefight arenas—from San Francisco’s Gold Rush beginnings through its turn-of-the-century era, visitors and inhabitants alike recognized that the wide availability of popular amusements was one of the city’s most valuable cultural currencies. But there was a rich and significant political currency to these amusements, as well. These were public places that offered an arena for different San Franciscans to bring their private interests, values, and desires to the contest for public power. This dissertation illuminates how popular amusements provided moments and spaces of civic ritual in which San Franciscans could articulate claims about the gendered, racialized, and class-based identities of both themselves and those around them. I explore how turn-of-the-century San Franciscans could promote and challenge these social identities in the spaces of popular amusement—in prizefight

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6 As the Annals of San Francisco, an early chronicle of the city, explained: “The great recognized orders of society were topsy-turvy. Doctors and dentists became draymen, or barbers, or shoe-blacks; lawyers, brokers, and clerks, turned waiters, or auctioneers, or perhaps butchers; merchants tried laboring and lumping, while laborers and lumpers changed to merchants. All things seemed in the utmost disorder.” See Frank Soule, John H. Gibon, and James Nisbet, The Annals of San Francisco (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1999) [originally published in 1855], 246.

arenas, dance halls, and public baths, for example—and also illuminate how these identities could be displayed through the production of particular forms of popular culture—such as in literature, the theater, and especially moving pictures. It is important to remember, however, that the identities forged in these cultural milieus always operated in concert with those enunciated in the city’s legal and political structures. Throughout this dissertation, then, I also highlight the often-tense negotiations that occurred between ordinary people and their political leaders over civic identity and urban belonging.8

This dissertation directly addresses three bodies of historical scholarship. First, while historians have located the sources of American urban identity in both the workplace and political party affiliation, many scholars have begun to highlight how city dwellers used popular amusements as vital arenas of cultural creativity.9 As Elliott J. Gorn suggests, “If historians are to understand working-class people, they must look closely at their folklore and recreations, their pastimes and sports, for it has been in leisure more than in politics or in

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labor that many men and women have found the deepest sense of meaning and wholeness.\textsuperscript{10}

None of the existing historical scholarship on turn-of-the-century San Francisco, however, focuses on the important relationship between popular amusements and public culture.\textsuperscript{11} For example, in their history of the city between the years 1865 and 1932, William Issel and Robert Cherny assert that “the lives of San Franciscans shaped themselves along the two dimensions of work and residence.”\textsuperscript{12} I want to make this a more vivid and three-dimensional picture by highlighting how a San Franciscan citizenry used popular amusements as dynamic sites of civic engagement. Prizefight arenas, movie theaters, fairs and festivals, dance halls, bathhouses, and the popular press—these were the everyday public spaces and discursive arenas in which a population of San Franciscan strangers could rehearse political identities and make claims about public power that, I argue, often were not permissible anywhere else in the city. To give one example, in my first chapter, which uses prizefighting to investigate issues of gender and power in San Francisco, I argue that, more than anywhere else in the city, prizefight arenas provided San Franciscan women with the ideal location in which to fuse modern styles of fashion and female performativity with a critique of a male-dominated public culture.

Second, much of the historical scholarship investigating popular amusements from this era describes these leisure-time spaces as democratic and socially inclusive places of

\textsuperscript{10} Gorn, \textit{The Manly Art}, 13-4.

\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{The Public City}, for example, Philip Ethington’s excellent discussion of San Franciscan “pluralist liberalism,” a process by which various urban groups claimed political rights based on need, the author does not address the specific public spaces—and certainly not the leisure-time public spaces—in which these negotiations occurred. A recent dissertation is a noted exception to this rule. See Barbara Berglund, “Ordering the Disorderly City: Power, Culture, and Nation-Making in San Francisco, 1846-1906 (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2002), esp. ch. 2.

\textsuperscript{12} Issel and Cherny, \textit{San Francisco, 1865-1932}, 53.
public consensus and cultural bonding. In Going Out, his survey of turn-of-the-century commercial recreations, David Nasaw says that public amusements were places “where social solidarities were emphasized and distinctions muted.”13 The evidence from San Francisco suggests that Nasaw’s evaluation is only partially correct. Participation in popular amusements could indeed mute social distinctions and aid in the construction of a cohesive regional identity. But these urban spaces were just as often sites of immense social and cultural conflict—where groups of people who divided themselves by race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, and civic outlook often butted heads in their attempts to meet basic public needs and realize their most fanciful desires. In Chapter Four of this dissertation, for example, I highlight the tensions that revolved around dancing in San Francisco in 1920. While some San Franciscan women’s groups wanted to close the dance halls in the name of safeguarding the moral order, the young women who worked in these establishments attacked these moral reformers as being elitist and out of touch with the everyday concerns of laboring women, and they defended dance halls as important civic spaces providing meaningful and much-need employment. San Francisco dance halls, in other words, were urban spaces that witnessed tremendous class conflict. Not always a harmonious story of urban solidarity and civic consensus, then, the history of the ways San Franciscans participated in and used public amusements is a complex tale of multiple allegiances, shifting and overlapping social identities, and the very public and sometimes cantankerous debates over the distribution of daily resources and political power.

Finally, one of the chief shortcomings of the historiography on popular amusements is what urban historian Timothy Gilfoyle calls its “Gothamcentric” focus.14 Because New York City dominates these narratives, the study of popular amusements needs to be expanded to different locales as a point of comparison for a body of scholarship currently suggesting New York trends as the American rule.15 Turn-of-the-century San Francisco, a cosmopolitan city marked by a relatively embryonic social structure, remarkable racial and ethnic diversity, and a tolerant disposition toward frontier pleasures and life on the wild side, provides the ideal setting in which to examine how different historical actors used the structures and experiences of popular amusements to meaningfully engage with the public life of their city. Inhabiting a place sometimes celebrated as possessing a diverse and dynamic cosmopolitanism and other times accused of being a place of unsettled cultural disorder, San Franciscans used popular amusements to promote their ideal vision of their city’s past, present, and future. For example, as San Franciscans readied themselves to host a 1915 world’s fair, a topic I explore in Chapter Three, they argued over the merits of prizefighting and debated what its celebrated civic existence suggested about their city. These were cantankerous debates that can tell us something about San Francisco, California, and the American West, for while some saw prizefighting as an inculcator of masculine strength and power and argued strenuously for its continued existence, others considered the sport a mark


of frontier barbarism and evidence of intense civic disorder and demanded its immediate abolition.

Indeed, the sport of prizefighting—a passionate pastime that simultaneously invoked attraction and repulsion among San Franciscans—is the popular amusement that best illuminates the layered and competing visions that San Franciscans held about their city. As Mark Twain so colorfully illustrated, the image of two pugilists trading punches in the ring could be easily employed to outline any number of social, cultural, or political disagreements in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. More than merely symbolizing civic conflict, however, prizefighting was such a rich source for questions of public power that the sport itself was often the focus around which many of these significant disagreements coalesced.

Prizefighting was everywhere in San Francisco. Many boxers who cut their competitive teeth in the prize ring later graduated to the equally cantankerous world of city politics, where their love of prizefighting helps to explain the controversial sport’s continued existence in the city. Prizefighting was a lucrative economic endeavor in San Francisco, earning money for individual fighters, boxing promoters, and the urban politicians who controlled the issuance of treasured fight permits. Boxing was a celebrated pastime that forged a diverse population of San Francisco men into a cohesive masculine whole, while also attracting turn-of-the-century San Francisco women who were interested in seizing a more prominent place in the city’s male dominated public culture. Labor advocates celebrated the sport as embodying something fundamental about the dignity of labor. Moral reformers consistently pointed at the sport when decrying all that was wrong with libertine San Francisco. And while white San Franciscans used the sport to make muscular claims of
racial supremacy, black San Franciscans pointed to the successes of African American fighters to counter such assertions.

To understand why prizefighting mattered so much to San Franciscans—that is, to understand why it simultaneously appealed to and alarmed different San Franciscans—is to understand some of the deep assumptions that individual San Franciscans held about themselves and their place in the turn-of-the-century American city. In the words of one San Francisco newspaper reporter, turn-of-the-century prizefights were “Carnivals of Muscle”—immensely popular pastimes where pugilists, spectators, and the press gathered in massive arenas to celebrate a vigorous regional identity. Indeed, like the carnivals of European tradition, prizefights were also shared public events in which different portions of the population could dispute stubborn social hierarchies and articulate opposing cultural values. The study of prizefighting in San Francisco, then, can tell us a great deal about how San Franciscans thought about many things—men and women, race and racial hierarchies, ethnicity, morality, religion, civic belonging, the meaning of labor, and, in the weighty words of those who used them, the very future of civilization itself.

It needs to be firmly stated that, for my purposes, what happened inside the San Francisco prize ring is not especially important. Who won, who lost, and how much blood was shed in each round—these were the concerns of the city’s many colorful turn-of-the-century boxing reporters. Instead, I am interested in the way San Franciscans understood and made sense of the events inside the ring. John Lardner once said of boxing, “As a general rule, prizefight life outside the ring is more entertaining than prizefight life inside it. The fight game has a way of overlapping into many of the lively social arts of man—politics,

drinking, litigation, the stage, the motion pictures, popular fiction, larceny, and propaganda.”

There was, in other words, something so base and fundamental about the spectacle of two bare-chested men fighting each other inside of a roped-off squared ring, that it allowed San Franciscans to use the sport as a canvas upon which to transfer and describe their own emotions, anxieties, outrages, and civic dreams and desires.

In each of this dissertation’s four chapters I examine a set of interpretive moments and closely read primary source materials in order to illuminate the fascinating and complex ways that prizefighting and other popular amusements affected the daily lives of San Franciscans. In Chapter One, “Pugilistic Encounters,” I focus on the different meanings of pugilism for San Franciscan men and women. I describe turn-of-the-century city prizefights as wildly popular and symbolic civic events that witnessed a head-on collision between male prerogative and female desire. Hailing the prize ring as a training ground in which boys became men, male fight fans claimed the sport of boxing as a critical domain of all-male fraternity and privilege. Some San Franciscan women, however, challenged these assumptions and used prizefight pavilions as high-profile civic spaces in which to daringly transgress the supposed boundaries of separate spheres and confront San Franciscan men with an assertive, fashionable, and modern public identity. City prizefight arenas, I argue, were political spaces that both symbolized and influenced the larger debates over gender identities and the meaning of social inclusiveness in the city.

In Chapter Two, “A Swift Succession of Shadows on a Blank Surface,” I use the debates over moving pictures and moving picture censorship to interrogate the tenor of black-white relations in San Francisco. I remain in the realm of prizefighting and examine

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the successful movement to prohibit the showing on film of the black boxer Jack Johnson’s 1910 victory over his white opponent, Jim Jeffries, a championship contest widely hyped as a battle for racial supremacy and whose outcome ignited race riots throughout the nation. I compare this drive with the unsuccessful campaign launched five years later by local black civil rights organizations to enact a similar prohibition of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. Illuminating the links between on-screen racial imagery and the off-screen dynamics of racial power and organized resistance, I argue that movies mattered in San Francisco not only because they offered controversial images for public consideration, but because moving pictures provided a keynote subject around which San Franciscans openly debated the meaning of race and the nature of black-white relations in their city.

In Chapter Three, “Our Boasted Civilization,” I explore how San Franciscans used a world’s fair to promote a distinct and desired civic identity. Specifically, I explore how, as San Franciscans readied themselves to host the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE), they viewed popular amusements as symbolic representations of the city. The games they played, the leisure-time activities they pursued, the vices they imbibed—San Franciscans believed that these pastimes suggested something fundamental about both themselves and their civic character. The imperative of preparing the city to host an international exposition brought to a boiling point long-standing tensions between proponents of clean and wholesome civic amusements and those who opposed all attempts to curb the illicit pleasures of the city’s Barbary Coast redlight district, the manly enthusiasms of its prizefight arenas, or any of the other popular amusements grounded in the city’s exuberant Gold Rush-era libertine ethos. Placing these debates within the context of preparing for a fair that was to announce San Francisco’s preeminent position in the American imperial project, I
argue that San Franciscans understood play, pleasure, and amusement as not just an issue of individual choice, but as endeavors that possessed national, global, and historical significance.

In my final chapter, “A Union of Venality,” I investigate a 1920 crime that shocked San Franciscans when a loose-knit gang of San Francisco boxers and bootleggers sexually assaulted a pair of young women that they met in one of the city’s most popular commercial dance halls. With the outrage over this episode sparking parallel reform crusades against both boxing and dancing, I highlight how boxers and dancers became symbols of class and moral conflict in Jazz Age San Francisco. I illuminate the tensions between reform-minded San Franciscans who wanted to close city prizefight arenas and dance halls in the name of moral rectitude and those working-class San Franciscans who thought of these civic spaces as providing young men and women with opportunities for meaningful labor. Ultimately, these attacks opened up a revealing discussion in San Francisco about the relationship among leisure, labor, amusement, and vice, a discussion that highlights two radically different ways that San Franciscans thought about the meaning of popular amusements in their city.

Throughout these four chapters, then, this dissertation looks to trace the wider contours of San Francisco public culture by focusing on a few of the more everyday, yet elusive, places in the turn-of-the-century urban environment. Prizefight pavilions, moving picture theatres, dance halls, baseball parks, public baths, the opera house, and some of the other places of popular amusement explored in this dissertation—these were the “hidden social spaces that tend to fall between the cracks of political history.”¹⁸ Much like a photographer traveling through one of America’s most picturesque locales and looking for

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civic meaning in some of its less-explored urban spaces, in this dissertation I will zoom in and focus on a handful of important sites and intriguing events, and then zoom out with an eye toward making larger claims about how San Franciscans created social, cultural, and political meaning in a city that, in the words of one California historian, “called Americans to pleasure.”19

Finally, taken together, these chapters point to the links between the San Francisco of the Gold Rush era, turn-of-the-century San Francisco, and the San Francisco of today. While reformers worked hard in San Francisco to clean up public and private life in the city—as they did elsewhere in the United States—the chapters in this dissertation reveal a remarkable public commitment to the pursuit of the types of pleasures often scorned in other American locales. For all the reformers’ attempts to make San Francisco into their image of a clean, modern, and progressive American city, other San Franciscans stoutly defended the rough-and-tumble public amusements that had arisen with the city’s libertine Gold Rush-era origins. In the end, this dissertation argues that the debates over prizefighting and other popular amusements in San Francisco—pursuits alternately described as “civilized” and “retrograde,” “vital” and “vicious,” or, simply, “good” and “bad”—indicate the unsettled cultural state of turn-of-the-century San Francisco. Indeed, turn-of-the-century San Franciscans recognized at the time that they were straddling two eras, with one foot positioned firmly in the roughshod and unbridled terrain of the nineteenth-century Western frontier and the other planted in what many hoped would be the more virtuous, heterosocial, and progressive world of twentieth-century America. This dissertation argues that the turn-of-the-century era was the watershed moment in which different San Franciscans were forced

to put their civic visions and worldviews into precise words and direct actions, providing a rallying focus for the region’s reform-minded citizens while prompting others to dig in their heels and defend San Francisco as a tolerant and “wide-open town”—a cultural stance still very much evident today.  

Chapter One

“Pugilistic Encounters”
Men, Women, and Prizefighting

It was a crowded, ill-lighted hall, barn-like in its proportions, and the smoke-laden air gave a peculiar distortion to everything. She felt as though she would stifle. There were shrill cries of boys selling programmes and soda water, and there was a great bass rumble of masculine voices...Her blood was touched, as by fire, with romance, adventure—the unknown, the mysterious, the terrible—as she penetrated this haunt of men where women came not.

—Jack London, The Game, 1905.1

It was the Friday before Thanksgiving, 1913, and John T. Salas, a millionaire coal merchant from Savannah, Georgia, was visiting San Francisco and headed to the fights. Accompanied by a “youth” dressed in a blue serge suit, a tan raincoat, and a gray crush hat, Mr. Salas purchased two tickets at the box office window and located his seats inside Dreamland Pavilion, a noisy, ramshackle barn of a building where fight fans crowded around an elevated ring and watched the action from hard benches or folding kitchen chairs.2

Known among local prizefight enthusiasts as the “House of Quarrels,” Dreamland was filled that night with the usual San Franciscan boxing crowd—a masculine mix of sailors, industrial laborers, white-collared clerks, “hoodlums,” sporting men, and the city’s business and political elite. Though the dense cloud of cigar smoke hovering in the arena made keen

2 Dreamland was built in 1906 for roller skating, but became San Francisco’s chief boxing arena when the 1906 Earthquake and Fire destroyed Mechanics’ Pavilion and Woodward’s Pavilion, where most of the city’s top boxing events had previously been staged.
observation quite difficult, a buzz of consternation began to grow among the spectators regarding the youthful appearance of the “lad” seated at Mr. Salas’s side. Suddenly aware they had created a stir, Salas and his companion quickly rose and scurried for the exit before being dutifully intercepted by Patrolman H. H. Walsh, who had been detailed to make certain that the evening’s entertainment was conducted according to the law.

Readers of the next morning’s papers learned that the “boy” was actually Mr. Salas’s twenty-four year old wife, Lottie, who had begged her husband to show her the “other side” of San Franciscan life, particularly a prizefight. Appearing in police court under the accusation of masquerading in male costume, a tearful Mrs. Salas—now outfitted in feminine attire—explained that her escapade had been merely a lark, prompting the judge to issue only a reprimand and order her immediate release. But even though all charges against her were dropped, Mrs. Salas had clearly touched a raw nerve among the city’s male boxing crowd. In the gendered ideology of city geographies, boxing arenas were celebrated as masculine sanctuaries where men could gather and affirm their faith in the cardinal values of toughness, courage, and other virile traits that supposedly distinguished them from women. When Lottie Salas arrived at the prizefight arena that evening dressed as a man, she ridiculed these assumptions. Speaking to the press less than one week after the arrest at Dreamland, San Francisco Chief of Police James White responded to Mrs. Salas’s transgression by announcing a temporary order to “prohibit the fair sex from visiting the local pavilions

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3 San Francisco Chronicle and San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 22 November 1913.

4 Among the groundbreaking works of gender and masculinity that discuss sport as a social and cultural ground separate from women, are Peter G. Filene, Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 100-1; Elliott J. Gorn, The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prizefighting in America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 185-94; and E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 239-44.
during the progress of pugilistic encounters."\(^5\) Though Mrs. Salas was free to return to her yacht anchored just inside the Golden Gate, San Franciscan women—even when not dressed as men, but properly attired as ladies—were being forcefully told that they were no longer at liberty to attend exhibitions of the manly art.

Mrs. Salas’s masquerade was an uncommon incident. San Franciscan women did not normally dress in men’s clothing and disguise their way into the prizefight arena—or, if they did, the ruse was incredibly successful. Yet the young woman from Georgia was by no means the first member of the “fair sex” made to feel unwelcome at the San Francisco boxing arena. As this chapter will explain, in the mid-1880s a small but growing number of women began attending city bouts, where male prizefight fans combatively greeted the female fight-goer with boos, hisses, harsh words, and even physical intimidation. This hostile reaction on the part of San Franciscan men has prompted me to reconsider the conclusions of scholars who have studied the interactions between the sexes at turn-of-the-century sporting events and other urban amusements. It is a historical literature that describes, in general, the transformation of illicit nineteenth-century pastimes into modern heterosocial entertainment due to the sanitizing of the surroundings, the steady appearance of female spectators, and the adoption of a middle-class code of disciplined public conduct—what historian Lawrence Levine calls the “taming of the audience.”\(^6\)

According to this story, as soon as respectable women arrived on the scene, once-rowdy working-class men quietly retreated to the theater’s anonymous back rows and the ballpark’s sun-soaked bleachers, or absconded altogether into

\(^5\) *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 November 1913.

the all-male safety of the neighborhood saloon. A second theme highlighted in these works is the emergence of a new form of entertainment in which self-expression, joyous anonymity, and democratic access reigned. In these fantastic places of commercial amusement—from the brightly lit amusement park to the darkened moving picture theatre—almost everyone was welcome. As the historian Mary Ryan put it, popular urban pastimes provided men and women with an opportunity to “enjoy polite and stylized ways of coupling, courting, and fraternizing in public.”

This survey of prizefighting in San Francisco, however, illuminates a much more uneven, undemocratic, and cantankerous cultural process. In this chapter I cut through the layer of smoke suspended over the turn-of-the-century boxing ring and explore both the male world of prizefighting and the attempts by women to carve out a position for themselves within this masculine environment. San Francisco prizefights were wildly popular and symbolic civic events that witnessed a head-on collision between male prerogative and

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female desire. Hailing the prize ring as a training ground in which boys became men—and jealously guarding the prizefight arena as a space of manly self-assertion and a place for adult males to escape the “suffocating feminization” of modern life—male fight fans claimed the prize ring as a critical domain of all-male gathering, fraternity, and privilege. Some San Franciscan women, however, challenged these assumptions, provocatively using prizefight pavilions as high-profile civic venues in which to daringly transgress the supposed boundaries of separate spheres and confront San Franciscan men with a bold, assertive, fashionable, and modern public identity.

My focus in this chapter, then, is on gender relations and the lively public culture created and shared by male and female San Franciscans. Specifically, I examine what I call the “pugilistic public sphere,” a dynamic and often-contentious public realm consisting of the actions of San Francisco boxing audiences and the colorful commentary from the popular press about this increasingly diverse crowd. I treat the behavior of prizefight crowds and media reports as texts to be read in an effort to gain a deeper knowledge of how disparate San Franciscans understood sexual difference and the gendered nature of public space and urban belonging. More generally, then, in this chapter I aim to construct what feminist scholar Nancy Cott calls a “salutary intersection” between men’s and women’s history by linking the seemingly unrelated stories of prizefighting and turn-of-the-century women’s political

That a study of boxing in San Francisco can yield insight into the lives of men and the articulation of masculine identity probably comes as no surprise. That such a study can also uncover how San Franciscan women used prizefight attendance to subvert the firmly entrenched social system of male privilege and present thoroughly modern standards of public womanhood and political belonging, may come as a surprise indeed.

“Picnic of the Primal Blood”

Forged from the westward outflow of the Sierra Gold Rush, nineteenth-century San Francisco was male-dominated in numbers and masculine in temper. In mid-century a woman, in the words of Herbert Asbury, “was almost as rare a sight as an elephant,” and by the 1870s men still outnumbered their opposite sex by a three to two margin. An unusually high percentage of these men were young and single. San Francisco’s thriving seaport hosted more sailors than other port towns like New York or New Orleans, while miners, lumberjacks, and seasonal laborers replenished the restless bachelor population during the winter months and flooded South-of-Market Street boardinghouses to wait for warmer weather. Given the large number of hard-working men entering San Francisco by land and by sea, it is not surprising that vice and roughneck amusements flourished. The city’s Barbary Coast was one of America’s most notorious and wide-open redlight districts, a “hell-

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roaring swirl of crime and debauchery” that offered glamorous depravity in the form of brothels, opium dens, and wharf-side saloons.\footnote{14} Gambling held particular sway in a city erected on the dramatic successes of speculative forty-niners. Betting on two jumping frogs, buggy races to the Cliff House, fire-company pumping contests, and six-day walking contests that “gratified the morbid desire to see others suffer” allowed a diverse population of men to forge bonds in a common culture that considered reckless wagering a masculine virtue. Other popular exhibitions—these not for the faint of heart—included duels of honor between rival politicians, public hangings, and sanguinary scenes like cock and bull fights, bear baitings, and cattle-killing contests in which two butchers raced to see who could slaughter and skin a bullock the fastest.\footnote{15}

But no civic pastime engendered more enthusiasm among male San Franciscans than prizefighting. Intense muscular dramas played out before raucous spectators, San Francisco prizefights both symbolized and glorified the city’s competitive public culture. What made the sport so tremendously popular and alluring was the way it reminded San Franciscan men of their own daily labors and competitive pursuits. Male San Franciscans found meaning in the mayhem in the ring, with pugilism giving expression to their own values, goals, and emotions. Businessmen looked upon the sight of two men locked in competition as akin to their own capitalistic struggles in the wider world, the passionate displays that the sport

\footnote{14} Asbury, *The Barbary Coast*, 82.

evoked among its supporters rivaled the strident partisanship of urban politics, while the muscular achievements of the men inside the ring mirrored both the intense camaraderie of male leisure-time pursuits and the rigors of industrial labor. Indeed, though ostensibly a sport, prizefighting most closely paralleled the world of hard work. Like toiling in one of San Francisco’s building trades, blasting in its hinterland mines, or stevedoring on the bayside docks, it was a muscular body and unwavering stamina that carried both the ordinary laborer through the day and the game pugilist on to the next round. A prizefight, in other words, celebrated and rewarded the same masculine ideals that appealed to and guided the everyday experiences of a wide swath of energetic, hard-working, and ambitious San Franciscan men.

There is a saying that where there is gold you will find two men fighting for it, thus it should come as no surprise that prizefighting was a part of San Francisco’s raucous public culture since the city’s Gold Rush beginnings. In February 1850 the *Alta California* described a bare-knuckle bout on Goat Island where Wooly Kearney of New York and an unnamed “Slasher” from Sydney—perhaps a member of the notorious early-San Francisco street gang, the Sydney Ducks—squared off for a prize of $100 in front of two hundred frenzied spectators. The paper was quite pleased with the action, noting how “both men were hammered in the most agreeable and satisfactory manner.”¹⁶ Later that same year the sport proved its commercial potential when over two thousand San Franciscans paid five dollars apiece for the privilege of watching a pair of pugilists battle for a $500 purse.¹⁷ San

¹⁶ *Alta California*, 18 February 1850. Today Goat Island is known as Yerba Buena, a small island immediately east of San Francisco in the Bay.

Francisco made its mark in the wider boxing world in 1858 when John C. Heenan battled John Morrissey for the American Heavyweight Championship. Heenan, a onetime San Francisco political enforcer and machinist at the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, was known locally as the “Benicia Boy.” Though he lost to Morrissey in eleven rounds, Heenan became the American champion by default when Morrissey refused a rematch.18 Undoubtedly inspiring a generation of local boys to strive for similar pugilistic glory, the “Benicia Boy” helped put San Francisco on the American boxing map, where it would remain in prominent relief for three-quarters of a century.

Taking a wide-angle view, the story of prizefighting in nineteenth-century San Francisco is the tale of a tawdry, disreputable, and clandestine endeavor becoming, as the century progressed, increasingly respectable, popular, and integrated into San Franciscan political and public life. Though clearly a part of male-San Franciscan social life from the beginning, prizefighting was a controversial and illegal activity in the state of California. Opponents of boxing could condemn the bloody sport on a number of grounds—humanitarian (boxing was a sad relic of barbarism and a denial of mankind’s moral progress); evangelical (fighting maimed men who were made in God’s image); republican ideology (the very nature of the brutal sport was antithetical to the virtuous ethos of mutuality); American nationalism (boxing was the ignoble and purposeless pastime favored by the decadent English); class prejudice (success elevated the dim-witted but strong-boned to undeserved social status); and nativism (all the good boxers came from Ireland), to list only a few of the complaints. But what ultimately transformed the sport from merely distasteful to patently illegal was money. Pugilism in the form of amateur sparring was

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18 For the Heenan-Morrissey fight, see Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 114-22.
rarely against the law in the United States. In fact, it was often celebrated as a way to sharpen both mind and body. But the notion of prizefighting—literally, “fighting for a prize”—gave pugilism its onerous meaning. Not only was the specter of base men hammering each other for ill-gained lucre a blow to the cherished American work ethic, but critics noted that the get-rich-quick sport never failed to attract drinking, gambling, mob violence, con men, thieves, women without virtue, and a host of other social ills and pariahs.

In 1850, to bluntly answer such a threat, the first session of the California State Legislature made it a crime for “two people to fight each other for money.” Though state legislators twice amended the law to allow “sparring exhibitions” and “contests in physical culture” of a limited number of rounds under the sponsorship of a licensed athletic club, the ban on prizefighting was never repealed and the sport remained technically illegal in California until 1924.¹⁹

With prizefighting emotionally appealing but against state law, the early San Francisco press seemed to have a difficult time deciding whether to condemn or fete the strenuous sport. Mid-century prizefight coverage was a curious combination of moral revulsion and intense fascination, a mix sometimes found in the same paper on the same date. In the 8 October 1863 edition of the San Francisco Bulletin, for example, a scathing anti-prizefight editorial that railed against the “beastly exhibitions” appealing to the “very lowest and most degraded” of men stood opposite an even longer piece recounting—indeed, celebrating—the “Carnival of Muscle” that took the form of an illegal bare-knuckle prizefight in a Napa County field. The latter article likened local pugilists to Roman

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¹⁹ For a summary of the early history of prizefight legislation in California, see the San Francisco Call, 12 November 1886. For an example of an early San Francisco prizefight that was broken up by police and arrests were made, see the report of the 1876 “sparring contest” at Dashaway Hall in the San Francisco Chronicle, 3 February 1876.
gladiators and Homeric heroes, and even provided a glossary of terms for those uninitiated into the pugilistic subculture. The *Bulletin* explained how a fighter’s clenched hands were not merely fists, but “fins,” “flippers,” or “bunch of fives.” A mouth was a “kisser,” “potato-trap,” or “coal-hole,” while ears were “listeners,” “confession-boxes,” and “ladies’ cabins.” And never call a nose simply a nose when you might call it a “beak,” “nozzle,” or “spectacle-beam.” Finally, to do justice to a man’s spilled blood, the paper instructed their readers to use the terms “claret,” “carmine,” “home brew,” or “any sort of red paint.”

More than just supplying the prizefight novice with the parlance of the sport, the colorful report of the “Carnival of Muscle” north of the city in Napa County highlights how some of the early and more popular contests between San Francisco prizefighters took place outside of city limits. San Mateo County’s Crystal Springs, Richmond’s Point Isabelle, the Mare Island shipyards—these and other remote Bay Area locales were where prizefighters and their spectators could better elude the authorities sometimes interested in upholding the law. A pair of 1889 matches between a couple of young San Francisco heavyweight greats, Jim Corbett and Joe Choynski, demonstrate the great lengths that fighters and fight fans would go to in order to avoid the attention of local officials. Corbett was Irish-Catholic, Choynski a Jew, and the local sporting press fanned their rivalry with headlines like, “Jews and Gentiles Prepare for Battle.” Wanting to engage in a “finish fight” to settle once and for all who was the superior of the two, Corbett and Choynski agreed to fight in a remote barn in Fairfax, Marin County, about fifteen miles northwest of San Francisco. When word of the fight and its “secret” location got out, a parade of male San Franciscans absconded from the city and made their way to the faraway makeshift ring. The *San Francisco Chronicle’s*

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Teams laden with politicians, prize fighters by the wagon-load, saloon-keepers by the dozen, Thespians, with their Kearney-street attire stained by dust and beer; society men disguised as harmless anglers, and every other species of ring-goer, were represented in the procession that wound round the picturesque villages of Sausalito and San Rafael. The alarmed natives rushed out from their farmhouses to inspect what looked like a second Oklahoma invasion, and before long half of Marin County was fully cognizant of the fact that San Francisco was meditating a felonious transfer of its sporting interests to the other side of the bay.

Once at their destination the referee confiscated guns, knives, and flasks of bourbon, gamblers made their wagers, and the battle began. Corbett found himself in early trouble when he dislocated his thumb with a punch that careened off of Choynski’s head. Luckily for Corbett, and those who had their money riding on him, a Marin County sheriff stepped into the ring in the fifth round and informed the belligerents that if they wanted to finish the fight they would have to relocate across the county line.

The rematch, which went off a week later, is one of the fights firmly entrenched in San Francisco pugilism lore. To better avoid the possibility of legal interference, organizers staged the contest for sunrise on the deck of the Excel, a grain barge anchored in the Carquinez Strait, a narrow arm of the San Francisco Bay that divided nearby Solano and Contra Costa Counties. Getting the interested spectators to the barge proved hazardous. Tugboats weighed down with passengers got stuck in the mud. A small fishing boat filled to capacity capsized, spilling scores of bleary-eyed fight fans into the chilly water. By 5:30 a.m. a crowd of 257 was on board the Excel, anxiously awaiting what would soon become known as “the Battle on the Barge.” An hour later, with the crowd drinking whiskey to keep
warm, Corbett and Choynski stripped to the waist, donned the gloves, and the rematch commenced. Choynski wore a pair of leather riding gloves with thick seams along the knuckles that left huge welts on Corbett’s body. Corbett’s jabs were equally dangerous, and as early as the second round the spectators noted that Choynski’s face looked like “a piece of liver.” By the tenth round some of the onlookers were so sickened by the bloody sight they had to turn away. The twenty-eighth round, mercifully, was the fight’s last. Corbett was in agony with blistered feet, a broken thumb, and strained tendons in his hands, but he managed to land a sweeping left hook that crashed into Choynski’s jaw, knocking his opponent momentarily prostrate. After the referee counted Choynski out, the two fighters retired to the Hammam Turkish Baths on DuPont Street, where they spent seven hours together soaking their feet in tubs of hot water and their damaged fists in buckets of ice.  

Between perilous travel, the threat of arrest, and the rough character of many of the men in attendance, attending one of these surreptitious events could be nearly as dangerous as entering the ring itself. One creative member of the San Franciscan “fight fancy” put into song the pitfalls and perils of traveling far and wide to witness one of these covert affairs. Set to the tune, “I Wandered by the Brookside,” the song tells the unfortunate tale of how one man’s earnest attempt to watch a bare-knuckle contest quickly deteriorated into what he called, “The Picnic of the Primal Blood”:

*I went to San Mateo, I wandered by the mill  
The spectacle was a no go, the grand result was nil  
There were jayhawks and stool pigeons, and every kind of bird  
But the cursing of the seconds, was all the sound I heard*

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Not only was tromping through mud to reach a faraway prizefight no picnic, but the seemingly simple act of watching a bout could be a dangerous proposition for even the most brave hearted of men.

Most San Francisco prizefights did not occur outside of city limits, but instead took place in what were known as “slogging dens”—dark and damp cellars, locked back rooms, and other hidden urban spaces that hosted bouts between budding professionals, ascending amateurs, or anyone willing to brawl against another man for the entertainment of the crowd. Part of the underground world of urban vice and felonious amusements that included red-light parlor houses, back alley groggeries, and Chinatown opium dens, these “slogging dens” were places where promoters could put on unpublicized bouts called “black-glove sparring contests” in order to avoid both the one-hundred-dollar “sparring exhibition” application and the city’s prohibition on unlicensed liquor sales. At Harry Maynard’s Saloon, for example, there was a small boxing room located in the rear of the building. Matches were never

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23 San Francisco Call, 13 May 1883.
scheduled in advance, but on Saturday nights Maynard would jump into the ring, pass around
the hat, and offer the collection to any pair of “sloggers” willing to go four rounds for the
entertainment of the crowd. Accepting the challenge and donning the mitts might be young
fighters with professional aspirations, two rival saloonkeepers, or simply a couple of lads
looking to settle their differences over a girl.24 According to the San Francisco Call, in the
case of Geordie Harris and “Klondike” Condon, two sailors working on the San Francisco
waterfront, all it took was a kitchen dispute “over the grub” to get them into the ring with
each other.25 Battling for free beer, to settle a personal dispute, or merely for the thrill of
physical encounter, “sloggers” traded blows in suffocating conditions in front of
rambunctious and hard-drinking fight fans dressed in baggy pants, high heeled boots, low
hats, and other sartorial markers that newspapers claimed identified them as member of the
disreputable “hoodlum” class.26 The San Francisco Chronicle covered an 1878 slogging
match in the basement of the Sutter Street Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and
described the rakish and unrespectable fistic constituency in the following glorious fashion:
“‘The surrounding seats were occupied by about two hundred gentlemen, a running glance at
whom would have suggested that it was an evening session at the Board of Brokers if the
impression had not been corrected by a second glance at certain countenances with noses
abnormally flattened or abnormally askew and other facial indications that the only
brokerage their wearers had ever been engaged in was the breaking of noses.’”27

25 San Francisco Call, 19 March 1898.
26 See, for example, the description of the crowd gathered for a night of boxing at Dashaway Hall in the San
Francisco Chronicle, 3 February 1876.
27 San Francisco Chronicle, 13 April 1878.
Linking the fight crowd with a civic establishment like the Board of Brokers, the *Chronicle* reporter’s first impression was actually a sound one, for more than any other urban sport, prizefighting was closely linked with turn-of-the-century San Franciscan political life—a connection that probably reveals as much about the gritty nature of urban politics as it does about boxing. San Francisco prizefighters and politicians were joined in popular consciousness as early as 1856, when the second coming of the Committee of Vigilance specifically directed their attack against city leaders who “have employed bullies and professional fighters to destroy tally-lists by force, and prevent peaceable citizens from ascertaining, in a lawful manner, the true number of votes polled at our elections.”

One of these “bullies” was a political henchman and prominent heavyweight named Yankee Sullivan. Captured by the citizens-in-uproar, he was charged with “invading the sanctity of our ballot boxes” and sentenced to deportation. Before he could depart, however, Sullivan died in his jail cell, his blood drained from a large gash in his right forearm. Though the Vigilantes dismissed Sullivan’s death as suicide, local Catholic leaders claimed he was murdered.

In more pacific times there existed an established and less-controversial symbiotic relationship between prizefighting and politics. In his study of New York and the rise of modern sport, Melvin Adelman suggests a strong antebellum link between pugilists and politicians, with the latter providing financial backing and coveted jobs in exchange for

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28 “Proclamation of the Vigilance Committee of San Francisco” (9 June 1856), California Historical Society, San Francisco.

publicity and a few “favors” on Election Day.\(^{30}\) The same dynamic existed in San Francisco. City saloons did double time hosting political-party meetings and backroom bare-knuckle bouts, boxing pavilion walls held broadsides announcing political candidacies, while fight promoters held the ears and filled the pockets of local leaders. Local politicians were such loyal members of the San Francisco fight fancy that walking into a boxing arena could be like stepping into a meeting at City Hall. The *Daily Alta California*’s description of the crowd at an 1878 prizefight between Patsy Hogan and the saloonkeeper Harry Maynard, for example, reads like a roll call of civic leaders: “The Board of Brokers was well represented. The Board of Supervisors could have held a meeting there, and even had sufficient votes to pass a resolution over the Mayor’s veto. The number of prominent physicians were only outnumbered by the members of the legislature, and taking in city and county officers, not already alluded to, the balance of power would certainly be in their favor.”\(^{31}\)

So ironclad were the links between politics and pugilism that we might even think of the prizefighter himself as the physical embodiment of the masculine body politic—the working muscle of the political machine. More than a few San Franciscan boxers moonlighted as ballot stuffers and bodyguards, while a few fighters even made the transition from prize ring to City Hall itself. John L. Herget, who was known as “Young Mitchell” during his fighting days, traded the life of the pugilist for the equally combative position of Chairman of the Police Commission on the city’s Board of Supervisors.\(^{32}\) Boxing was also closely linked with the city’s business and industrial life. Local pugilists knew that Patrick


\(^{31}\) *Daily Alta California*, 13 April 1878.

\(^{32}\) Pickelhaupt, “Ball Courts, Boxers, and Boating,” 23-36.
Calhoun, the President of the United Railroads streetcar company, was an avid boxing fan who was more than happy to give an up-and-coming fighter a job in his Turk and Fillmore Street carbarn, a rail yard located directly across from the United Railroads gymnasium that Calhoun himself had organized so his boxer-employees might more easily train.\textsuperscript{33} The San Franciscan who perhaps best personified this confluence of fighter, political henchman, and all things masculine, was Alex Greggains, a man whose \textit{San Francisco Call} obituary reveals stints as a fireman, saloonkeeper, bare-knuckle boxer, and bodyguard for Democratic Party chief Christopher Buckley, as well as credits him with inventing the dice-throwing expression, “Baby wants a new pair of shoes!”\textsuperscript{34}

Indeed, if horseracing was “the sport of kings,” then prizefighting was the sport of the urban political boss; a moneymaking endeavor that swelled the coffers of political henchmen like San Francisco’s Abraham Ruef, the behind-the-scenes puppet master of the powerful Union Labor Party. In control of City Hall during much of the first decade of the twentieth century, Ruef solidified the connections between prizefighting and politics by directing a series of backroom deals in which both he and Mayor Eugene Schmitz received “attorney fees” in exchange for guaranteeing a small number of boxing promoters all of the city-issued prizefight permits. Known as the San Francisco “fight trust,” the insider dealings between politicians and promoters collapsed due to the seismic episode of 1906 and the civic graft trials that began one year later.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{34} See the \textit{San Francisco Call}, 21 November 1934.

As the relationship between boxing and city politics became more established, the once illicit and clandestine sport began to garner civic respectability. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were an era of *de facto* legalization for prizefighting in San Francisco. While the rulings by the California State Legislature placated moral elements by prohibiting prizefighting through stern denunciation, San Francisco authorities satisfied the sporting set with their easy interpretation of the law, dishing out fight permits and allowing “sparring exhibitions” that breached the law prohibiting fighting for a prize more than obeying it. Local athletic clubs also led the way toward cultural legitimacy for the sport by helping to change popular ideas about the place of prizefighting in San Francisco. The surge in popularity of athletic clubs in the city needs to be understood as part of the larger late-nineteenth-century movement in which white bourgeois men immersed themselves into more muscular and “primitive” styles of masculinity. Lawyers, doctors, school board members, and other men of “respectable” professional standing joined elite San Francisco athletic organizations like the California, Montgomery and Olympic Clubs and connected with the “strenuous life” by watching fights—and sometimes participating themselves—in their members-only environs.36 Combining violence and aggressive brutality with an aesthetic of restraint and gentlemanly decorum, the sport’s move into the opulent surroundings of the city’s many gilded athletic organizations was a transition that some early critics of the sport found laudable. “It would seem,” reported the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1889, “that the days of field fights with bare knuckles and spiked boots are rapidly passing away, a fact that no true sport will regret, for it has been abundantly demonstrated that a pugilist can show his

Fig. 1.1: In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, men from the middle and upper class were swept up by a new sporting impulse and joined exclusive athletic clubs. At the California Athletic Club on New Montgomery Street, elite male San Franciscans both watched and participated in boxing matches as a way to link themselves with the “Strenuous Life.” (From Harper’s Weekly, 5 April 1890)
superiority in a cozy clubroom with padded gloves equally as well as on the grass with padded knuckles.”  

Prizefighting’s late-century surge in popularity, however, would mean that the bigger fights needed to be moved out of the smaller athletic clubs and into the city’s larger commercial structures in order to maximize profits for promoters and meet the swelling demands of interested spectators. When a strong wave of moral reform in the East pushed the bulk of the American boxers out West in the mid-1880s, San Francisco leaders gladly enlisted the sport into the larger enterprise of civic promotion and began hosting high-profile and profitable prizefights in places like Mechanic’s Pavilion, Dreamland, and the Orpheum Theater—modern edifices that accommodated a larger crowd and, importantly, added an aura of opulence to the proceedings.  

Boxing entrepreneurs converted these grand civic arenas into fantastic palaces of pugilism, draping colorful bunting from steel-beam supports, hanging woodcuts depicting the glories of prizefighting’s past on newly whitewashed walls, and scheduling brass bands and minstrel shows as pre-fight entertainment.

Attendance became more orderly as police officers stationed themselves outside the arenas to prevent rival gangs of “deadheads” from rushing the gate, while a small army of white-capped ushers emerged to patrol both turnstiles and aisles.  

The adoption of the Queensbury Rules reformed the action inside the ring as well, imposing a strict pugilistic code of conduct by introducing timed rounds and instilling an illusory aura of rationality and

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37 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 February 1889.

38 For a discussion of the prizefighting’s relocation to the West, see Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 12-29.

39 Among the numerous newspaper accounts chronicling this decade-long transformation are the *San Francisco Call*, 22 July 1885; the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 November 1886 and 25 June 1891; and the *San Francisco Examiner*, 25 July 1882 and 14 November 1886. These changes are also briefly discussed in Flamm, *Hometown San Francisco*, 67-73; and Van Court, *The Making of Champions in California*, 11-2.
safety to the sport by mandating gloved fists instead of bare knuckles. All of these changes provided the sport with some trappings of respectability and added an aura of civic legitimacy, helping boxing promoters to argue that their contests were lawful and scientific displays of skill and strength. Incorporated into the city’s business and political structures, and with celebrated San Franciscans like sugar baron Adolph Spreckels, storied bondsman Bat Masterson, and newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst lending the sport additional civic currency by sitting ringside, by the mid-1890s prizefighting had been transformed from a sordid backroom affair into a legitimate and magnificent public event.

Wildly cheering for a favorite fighter in decorated civic venues that glowed with the white blaze of fantastic electric lights, male boxing enthusiasts regarded prizefight attendance as something of a modern and muscular ritual of the turn-of-the-century American cult of masculinity. For male San Franciscans an exciting bout was opening day at the ballpark, Buffalo Bill at the Bush Street Theater, and the Fourth of July all rolled into one. Prizefighting was so prominent in the city’s pantheon of popular amusements that the Chronicle felt compelled to compare (and contrast) the sport to one of San Francisco’s most graceful and glamorous cultural institutions when it explained, “There are but two things in this world which will command $10 a seat—grand opera and a fight—the alpha and omega of human emotion.” Though the opera had been an extremely popular amusement among

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40 I use the term “illusory” because the use of padded gloves actually made it easier for a fighter to hit his opponent in the head without fear of breaking the bones in his hand. It is the multiple shots to the head that have caused so much damage to modern prizefighters. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Sammons, Beyond the Ring, 245-51.

41 San Francisco Chronicle, 3 December 1896.
Fig. 1.2: Both opera and prizefighting were popular entertainments in turn-of-the-century San Francisco, with the city press describing them as the cultural antitheses of each other. In this 1901 drawing from the pages of the *San Francisco Examiner*, the famed political cartoonist Homer Davenport announced his belief that boxing would outdraw opera in the upcoming season. (From the *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 November 1901)
the dirt-stained masculine rabble of the Gold Rush, a trip to the opera house soon became considered a decidedly refined, recherché, and somewhat unmanly pursuit. Yodeling tenors and warbling sopranos apparently were not the stuff of real men, and though some city spaces hosted both operas and prizefights, newspapers often pointed out the antithetical nature of these audiences. “No greater contrast between this assemblage and those which gathered in the same place to hear the Parepa-Rosa concerts could be well imagined,” reported the *Daily Morning Chronicle* about the 1868 fight crowd at Platt’s Hall. “In place of the dainty ladies were broad shoulders and heavy visages, close-cropped heads, and the peculiar black moustache. No glint of jewels and glimmer of silk, or soft hum of sweet voices, but wreaths of smoke and undertones of earnest conversation mingle with oaths and coarse jests.”

But if a night at the opera was a mixed-sex affair meant to mark a high-minded and sophisticated civic culture, late-nineteenth San Francisco prizefights were nearly all-male events that allowed a diverse population of city men to promote and revel in an energetic and masculine civic identity. Turn-of-the-century San Francisco fight fans were a heterogeneous jumble of businessmen and Bowery Boys, politicians and porters, sailors and stumblebums. For wealthy San Franciscans, a prizefight dramatized the ethos of individual competition and validated their own status as winners. For the laboring class, the battles inside the ring were celebrations of brawn and skill, a physical promise that toughness and dedication would be rightfully rewarded with heroic status and a bejeweled championship belt. Married men


43 *San Francisco Daily Morning Chronicle*, 1 September 1868.
attended the fights to reconnect with a male bachelor subculture unspoiled by feminine domesticity, while bachelors went to wed themselves to a sporting family. Camaraderie was a commodity, and as the century progressed, male San Franciscans used the prizefight arena as a place to celebrate the prowess of the autonomous man in a setting that simultaneously conferred status to each as a member of a masculine community.

Indeed, compared to other male gathering places in San Francisco the prizefight arena was uniquely inclusive. Lodges and fraternal organizations like the Freemasons, the Improved Order of Red Men, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians—to name but a few—as well as private athletic associations such as the California and Olympic Clubs, were also valued as social environments free from womanly influence, but membership was generally restricted and segregated along class and ethno-religious lines. More democratic were any of the numerous San Francisco saloons that offered up a free lunch with a schooner of beer and intimate camaraderie, but a pub’s patrons were generally divided by job, neighborhood, and ethnicity. In contrast to these social spaces where members and customers enjoyed the exclusive company of men with similar backgrounds and experiences, the boxing arena hosted a multiform male mix. City newspapers fondly described the prizefight arena as a place where ordinary mechanics rubbed elbows with business magnates, and the claim was

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44 As Philip Ethington suggests in *The Public City*, his study of turn-of-the-twentieth century San Francisco political culture, as women worked to increase their participation in public life, men responded by rushing “from the home and into all-male lodges to reinforce their masculine solidarity.” See Ethington, *The Public City*, 368. For fraternal orders in America, see Mark C. Carnes, “Middle-Class Men and the Solace of Fraternal Ritual,” in Carnes and Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood*, 37-52. For fraternal orders in San Francisco, see Anthony Fels, “The Square and the Compass: San Francisco’s Freemasons and American Religion, 1870-1900” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1987). According to Anthony Fels, there were 261 fraternal orders and lodges listed in the 1900 San Francisco city directory (I: 65).

often made that “every calling but the ministry” could be found at the bigger bouts.\textsuperscript{46} The report of an accident at a fight in 1898 provides a unique opportunity to reconstruct the diverse social makeup of the men in attendance. Scores of spectators were hurt at a Fourth of July heavyweight bout at Mechanic’s Pavilion when the rickety wood bleacher seats buckled under the weight of the spectators and collapsed. Newspapers provided the names and occupations of the injured, among whom were a doctor, an advertising agent, an engraver, a shoe importer, a butcher, a drayman, a raisin packer, a candy dealer, a baker, a blacksmith, a race track employee, and two saloonkeepers.\textsuperscript{47}

If the shared experience of prizefight attendance enabled a diverse male population to mute their differences and forge masculine cohesiveness out of the glories of strenuous competition, prizefighting provided these same men with a chance to celebrate their own ethnic and racial identities by rooting for fighters from their particular social group. San Franciscans of Italian, Irish, Jewish, Mexican, German, and Scottish ancestry all took immense pride in watching one of their own wear the colors of their ancestral homeland and do battle in the ring. City prizefight arenas were racially integrated venues, as well. At some of the city’s more popular fistic events, newspapers report that Chinese fight fans sat “in common brotherhood with the whites.” Asian fighters were themselves the chief attraction in 1885 when Ah Fat and Jim Bung—billed as the “combative Celestials”—squared off in the “First Chinese Prize Fight in the World” at the Wigwam.\textsuperscript{48} Twenty years later another

\textsuperscript{46} The phrase “every calling but the ministry” comes from a report of the Owen Judge-Pete Lawlor fight, \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 12 March 1881.

\textsuperscript{47} For the report of the accident, see the \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 5 July 1898.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{San Francisco Daily Morning Call}, 27 January 1885. On the attendance of Chinese men at the fights, see, for example, the report of the Robert Fitzsimmons-Tom Sharkey bout, \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 3 December 1896.
Chinese prizefighter, Ah Wing, fought at Woodward’s Pavilion as part of the San Francisco Athletic Club’s monthly pugilism program. In a backhanded compliment at best, the *Chronicle* explained that Ah Wing was “not only a clever boxer and hard hitter,” but the possessor of “a rare gameness, a quality which his race is not generally supposed to exhibit. He takes his beatings without flinching.”

Boxing proved to be particularly popular with Bay Area African Americans, as photographs from the era document a large number of black spectators at city bouts—men who often occupied front-row seats. Many of these fight fans took the short ferry ride over from Oakland to support Peter Jackson, Jack Johnson, Joe Gans, and other black American fighters who found San Francisco relatively tolerant of interracial bouts. Peter Jackson, in fact, became somewhat of an adopted son in San Francisco. A black fighter from St. Croix who came to the United States to vie for the heavyweight championship, Jackson’s confident demeanor and pugilistic prowess prompted blacks to march down Market Street in celebration of his victories and earned him a position as professor of boxing at the exclusive and all-white California Athletic Club, where he taught the sport’s finer points to some of the city’s most powerful citizens. The integrated nature of the San Francisco boxing arena is

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49 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 January 1905.

50 The presence of black fight fans is documented in the description of the Peter Jackson-Jim Jeffries fight, *San Francisco Examiner*, 23 March 1898. Also, I am indebted to Eddie Muller for sharing with me his panoramic photograph of the crowd at the Joe Gans-Jimmy Britt fight at Recreation Park, 9 September 1907. The photograph shows approximately fifty African American men, seven of whom are sitting in the front row, interspersed among the otherwise all-white crowd.

51 David K. Wiggins, “Peter Jackson and the Elusive Heavyweight Championship: A Black Athlete’s Struggle Against the Late-Nineteenth Century Color Line,” *Journal of Sport History* 12 (Summer 1985): 143-68. Beginning in the 1890s, however, members of some San Francisco athletic clubs became concerned with the prominence of black fighters in San Francisco and the growing number of applications for club membership. In 1891, the Pacific Athletic Club became the first of the city athletic clubs to formally draw the color line, prohibiting blacks from joining and removing African American fighters from their membership rosters. These prohibitions, however, never applied to spectatorship, just club membership. See the report in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 December 1891.
significant, as racial inclusiveness was anything but a hallmark of turn-of-the-century American public life. In Going Out, his sweeping survey of the nation’s popular amusements, historian David Nasaw suggests, “there were no restrictions as to gender, ethnicity, religion, residence, or occupation in the new amusement spaces. Only persons of color were excluded or segregated from these audiences.”

San Francisco prizefight crowds seem to have been a marked and significant exception to this rule, with one’s favored status as a man temporarily trumping distinctions based on race.

All of male San Francisco, it seems, loved a good fight, and by the last decade of the nineteenth century, prizefights had become grand urban affairs that lay at the center of the city’s masculine public culture. Indeed, contemporary commentators often used the term “spectacle” to describe these fantastic civic events. The problem with such a description, however, is that the term “spectacle” implies a modicum of passivity on the part of the prizefight audience. The anthropologist John MacAlloon argues that spectacles are large-scale affairs that give primacy to the visual. They are organized for passive spectatorship, not active participation.

Reading newspaper reports of turn-of-the-century San Francisco prizefights, however, it becomes clear that prizefight attendance was not mere spectatorship, as going to a San Francisco prizefight was anything but passive. In these gala-like spaces of masculine sociability, whitewashed walls and white-capped ushers were no check against aggressive and rambunctious behavior. Larger arenas meant bigger crowds and more energy,

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52 Nasaw, Going Out, 2.

and with the pulsing throngs of San Franciscan men extremely eager to reach their seats, going to the fights could be a rigorous, physical endeavor itself.

Consider, for example, the maelstrom prior to a highly anticipated heavyweight bout in Mechanic’s Pavilion. Over the years, the building had hosted such resplendent cultural events as grand operas, masquerade balls, an address from Booker T. Washington, and Goethe-Schiller festivals. On a spring night in 1884, however, prizefighting was the scheduled entertainment, and as the expectant throng gathered early outside the arena’s Larkin Street doors, a near riot ensued as churlish anticipation outpaced gentlemanly decorum:

Even before the hour announced there was a crowd surging in front of the line of policemen drawn up to protect the entrance. From that time the crowd increased until it grew to a mob and from that swelled to a multitude. It surged this way and that, swaying from side to side, reeling back as the policemen made a rush to clear a passage. It was a matter of both danger and difficulty to reach that point, and every now and again some man, weaker than his brothers, would come plunging out of the jam impelled by some rude push, or a white-faced youth would slip fainting down, to find himself on the damp street. Occasionally the pressure on the policemen would become so great that they would draw their clubs for self-protection, when the crowd would fall back for a moment, only to dash in again as soon as the flourish of the locust wood was over.

Once inside the auditorium, the gamblers gathered in their usual corner to proclaim their preferences and exchange their money, while the majority of the crowd rejected the seats and crowded themselves around the ring, drinking soda water and munching on hot peanuts while

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55 San Francisco Chronicle, 7 March 1884.
waiting for the fights to begin.\textsuperscript{56} Whenever some poor soul fainted from the smell and stifling heat, he was discarded to the side or simply hoisted up and passed to the rear. As the main event approached, the hooting, yelling, and stomping of feet became deafening, able to pierce even the thick brume of tobacco smoke that seemed suspended from the rafters. Finally, in keeping with city tradition, the spectators in the upper gallery amused themselves by snatching the hats off the heads of the men in front of them and, literally, attempted to throw their hat into the ring, with any toss reaching the canvas platform being awarded with thunderous approval.\textsuperscript{57} Part muscular competition, part masculine social space, part physical mayhem—it is easy to see why turn-of-the-century San Franciscans considered the rough-and-tumble prizefight arena to be no place for a lady.

\textit{“Equal Suffrage as Far as Prizefights Go”}

Organized sports in America have always been the purview of men, and this was especially true for a muscular pastime like prizefighting. As Joyce Carol Oates recently, and succinctly, put it: “Boxing is for men, and is about men, and is men. A celebration of the lost religion of masculinity all the more trenchant for being lost.”\textsuperscript{58} With this appraisal in

\textsuperscript{56} Gambling was, and always has been, an integral part of prizefighting culture, giving spectators an economic interest to parallel their emotional attachments. Gambling flourished around the turn-of-the-century San Francisco prize ring, with spectators wagering on-site or in any of the city’s numerous “pool rooms” or betting parlors, the most prominent of which was owned by Jim Corbett’s brother, Tom. For a newspaper report more interested in the winnings and losing of the gamblers than the actual outcome of the fight, see the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 9 September 1892. It was rumored in one city newspaper that the sugar baron Adolph Spreckels won anywhere between $10,000 and $20,000 by picking the winner of the 1897 Jim Corbett-Robert Fitzsimmons fight. See the \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 18 March 1897, for the speculation on his winnings.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} and \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 7 March 1884.

mind, it should come as no surprise that the historical literature on prizefighting in America has focused almost exclusively on the meanings of the “manly art” for the American male.\textsuperscript{59} If women appear in these narratives at all, they usually make their entrance during the first World War in the role of moral philanthropists using prizefighting to fundraise for the American war effort, or later in the 1920s, stylishly sitting in “Jenny Wren” sections at the decade’s gala championship bouts and presented as novel symbols of a transformed national gender climate.\textsuperscript{60}

Yet a close reading of the press coverage of San Francisco pugilism reveals that women actually began attending prizefights nearly a half century before these eras, a correction that should certainly prompt an immediate shift in our understanding of the historic identity of the American boxing audience. Much more important, however, is to understand the myriad ways that female prizefight attendance was imbued with considerable civic, social, and political meaning. In the second half of this chapter I explore how the turn-of-the-century San Francisco prizefight arena became an important social space for male-female interaction. The study of this often-contentious dynamic reveals a great deal about the dynamic nature of San Francisco gender identities, the tenor of San Francisco women’s culture and politics, and the creative ways that San Francisco women used popular amusements to contest the meanings of public space and modern womanhood. The prizefight arena, in other words, was a meaningful location for the inscription of San


\textsuperscript{60} Sammons, \textit{Beyond the Ring}, 53-9.
Franciscan public culture. Symbolically, it was the perfect place in which to challenge both sexual discrimination and traditions of political exclusion, for by invading what was perhaps the most combative of all masculine urban spaces, turn-of-the-century San Francisco women accessed all of the power, excitement, and energy of prizefighting and creatively took their own fight for full civic participation straight to the men.

Upon first consideration, slogging dens and prizefight arenas might be the last place one would expect to find the turn-of-the-century woman, as widely held beliefs in sexual difference and gendered propriety positioned the violent sport of prizefighting as the very antithesis of San Francisco womanhood. Indeed, scholars of women’s history have outlined a nineteenth-century women’s culture that was based on the tenets of empathy and compassion, standing in sharp contrast to a male sphere characterized by physical toil and strident competition. Because of the unseemly places many fights occurred, the bloody brutality inside the ring, and the unruly male spectators who attended, the early absence of San Franciscan women at a prizefight was seemingly as certain as the sun setting west of the Golden Gate. As one city reporter put it while surveying the motley crowd gathered in anticipation of bare-knuckle carnage in 1868, “No ladies were present, of course, nor was the audience such as to invite the gentler sex.”

Despite these assumptions, some San Franciscan women did possess limited access to pugilism in the form of private athletic club boxing demonstrations and noncompetitive public sparring exhibitions. The city’s Olympic Club, for example, annually presented an

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61 On the notion of a nineteenth-century women’s culture, see, for example, Ellen Du Bois, Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Politics and Culture in Women’s History: A Symposium,” Feminist Studies 6 (Spring 1980): 26-64.

62 San Francisco Daily Morning Chronicle, 1 September 1868.
evening of fencing, wrestling, and gloved sparring for the enjoyment of members and their female guests. Taking place in the high-class and sanitized environment of the city’s exclusive athletic clubs, however, these demonstrations were a world away from the masculine mayhem of the public boxing halls.63 Female San Franciscans might also catch local boxers performing at public places like The Chutes, a turn-of-the-century amusement park bordering the northern edge of Golden Gate Park in the Richmond District. In the spring of 1890 the future heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries playfully sparred with his brother Jack in front of a mixed-sex, pleasure-seeking crowd of thousands. Commenting on the preponderance of female spectators scattered among the amusement park that afternoon was a San Francisco Call reporter who noted how “the women took a special interest in the event, as it is not often that they can witness a fight without making some sacrifice.”64

Controlled versions of pugilism such as these provided female San Franciscans with a taste of the exciting urban world of professional pugilism, but as the Call article suggested, any woman who wanted to sit ringside at a bona fide blood-and-guts prizefight would, indeed, be forced to make a significant “sacrifice.” Crossing a sharp cultural divide when they stepped into any of the city’s large prizefight arenas, early female fight-goers were unfailingly met with concerted opposition from San Franciscan men. In 1886, for example, San Francisco was electric when heavyweight idol John L. Sullivan arrived for a four-round contest against Paddy Ryan at Mechanics’ Pavilion. The crowd began to gather a full five hours before the fight’s scheduled 11 p.m. start, and by 8 o’clock the clamorous gathering—which included male and female picketers from the San Francisco Society for the Prevention

63 See, for example, coverage of the Olympic Club’s fundraiser in the San Francisco Chronicle, 5 November 1887.

64 San Francisco Call, 26 March 1890.
of Vice—was so immense it stopped Market Street cable cars dead in their tracks. Interspersed among the boisterous that evening were a half-dozen women who defied both social convention and male scorn in order to catch a glimpse of the mighty Sullivan. Conspicuous in such small numbers, they were jeered and jostled when they entered the arena by some of the men in attendance, and a few even had their silk wraps torn from them as they hurriedly navigated the crowded lobby and tried to reach the relative safety of their assigned seats.65

Five years later, when Sullivan returned to the city to perform on stage in *Honest Hearts and Willing Hands*, the champ agreed to a benefit bout against Jim Corbett at the Grand Opera House. Befitting the gilded surroundings, and in accord with Sullivan’s demands, the two strongmen fought a friendly four-round exhibition sporting black-tie attire. Also wearing their best that evening were a few female spectators who arrived “dressed to the last line of the latest fashion plate.” Daring to show up without male escorts, these women disembarked from their carriages and found themselves forced to run a gauntlet of rough-looking men who purposefully blocked the way by crowding the sidewalk and swarming the vestibule.66 The consistently hostile behavior exhibited by San Franciscan men is what distinguished prizefights from the city’s other popular amusements and marked the boxing ring as a uniquely hostile territory. A woman at a prizefight was cultural blasphemy, and though some adventuresome women might want to attend a bout, San Franciscan men loudly let it be known that the prizefight pavilion was not a place where they would doff their

65 *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner*, 14 November 1886.

caps and chivalrously step aside for a passing lady. By physically harassing female patrons and sending belligerent comments and pugnacious stares their way, male fight fans forcefully asserted that women were unwelcome intruders in an environment belonging wholly to men.

Why would a woman put herself through such a harrowing ordeal? Despite deep cultural prescriptions demanding they stay away from the prizefight arena, the female spectator’s desire to witness a bout was no doubt rooted in many of the same reasons a man might attend—an interest in physical competition and displays of bodily stamina, a fascination with the muscular male form, or simply a curiosity to see such a grand sporting and civic event. We need to begin, however, by considering the social and cultural significance of a woman at a turn-of-the-century prizefight. At the very least, the act of invading the pugilistic public sphere placed female San Franciscans squarely within the tradition of what was commonly called the “New Woman,” a broadly applied descriptive term used to signify any bold and ambitious woman seeking economic autonomy, political equality, or cultural and sexual fulfillment.

Later in 1892, when Jim Corbett challenged John L. Sullivan for the heavyweight championship—a fight that took place in New Orleans—San Franciscan women were reportedly as excited about the bout as city men. As one San Francisco publication put it as the fight approached, “The topic of the day is the coming prize-fight between Sullivan and Corbett. The newspapers are full of it. It is talked of in business houses, on the streets, in clubs, at dinner tables. Even the women are curious about the mill between bruisers who will presently try to knock each other into insensibility. The San Francisco lady who shrieks at a mouse, and faints at the sight of blood, calmly discuses the prospect that Corbett will ‘knock Sullivan silly’ by blows in the pit of the stomach.” See The Argonaut, 5 September 1892.

house workers to bicycle riders and sidewalk smokers, the unfettered use of all public space was one of the chief demands of these modern female archetypes.

In the late-nineteenth century many places of commercial amusements, some sporting venues among them, responded to these desires for public pleasure and access to popular amusements and began enthusiastically welcoming female patronage. Baseball, for example, was particularly popular with turn-of-the-century women, and the National Pastime’s stance on female spectatorship provides a telling point of comparison from which to gauge prizefighting’s exclusive and defiantly masculine character. Baseball promoters across the nation actively pursued female fans in hopes that their presence would serve as a check against drinking, gambling, cussing, and other forms of male grandstand rowdyism. At San Francisco’s Haight Street ball grounds, admission was twenty-five cents for reserved seating and ten cents for the bleachers, but female patrons were let in for free. The owners of the Central Park ball field at Eighth and Market Streets enticed female fans by building railed-off reserved seating in order to protect women from “the annoyance to which ladies were often exposed by the action of the hoodlum element.”

Courted at the baseball diamond, female spectators were undeniably taking part in the further sexual integration of the urban environment. Bravely enduring male opposition at the prize ring, however, San Franciscan women were heading straight into the lion’s den—audaciously invading one of the most

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sacred spaces of the masculine urban environment and, through their very presence, forcefully transforming it into an integrated arena of modern heterosociability.

Female prizefight attendance, then, might even be viewed as a means toward political empowerment. Feminist urban geographers like Linda McDowell have illuminated the need to identify alternative public spheres and sites of civic discourse as a way of expanding our notion of political engagement.\textsuperscript{70} Likewise, Elisabeth I. Perry argues that historians need to “broaden the meaning of the term ‘politics’ in the progressive era so as to incorporate the spectrum of women’s activism as part and parcel of their political story.”\textsuperscript{71} Though Perry is most interested in adding the wide spectrum of female reform movements to the generally accepted notion of politics—that is, electoral and party politics—we need to consider the attempts by women to gain access to the gendered and all-male prizefight arena as political, as well. To describe the female fight-goer as a political actor is not to suggest that San Franciscan women entered the boxing arena with the intent of lecturing the crowd on the need for electoral reform or that they forcibly seized the ring and unfurled banners that demanded the right to vote. Rather, sitting ringside was an explicit declaration of public belonging and urban legitimacy. In a city consistently touted as a “manly metropolis,” this was civic reform of a different kind.\textsuperscript{72} As Philip Ethington suggests in his study of the city’s political culture, “San Francisco’s intensely masculine, agonal public life [was] particularly hostile to women.”\textsuperscript{73} A nineteenth-century visitor to San Francisco put it even more

\textsuperscript{70} See, for example, Linda McDowell, \textit{Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).


\textsuperscript{72} See, for example, Bennet, ed., \textit{Annals of the Olympic Club}, 8.

\textsuperscript{73} Ethington, \textit{The Public City}, 211.
succinctly—and colorfully—when he said of the city, “It is the cussedest place for women.” It is within the context of these urban evaluations that the radical political impact of a woman at a prizefight needs to be considered. Though one must be careful not to simply and uncritically equate public appearance with political empowerment, any woman who invaded the intensely masculine stronghold of the boxing arena was not only challenging claims that prizefight attendance was a male prerogative, but, much more broadly, presenting a new and dynamic vision of modern womanhood and refuting the notion that public space itself was a male domain. More than mere sport spectatorship, then, female prizefight attendance was part of a wider effort among San Franciscan women to redefine public power, widen civic possibilities, and lay claim to their city.

There was a keen political logic to using the prizefight arena as democratic public space, for if attendance at American sporting events was not quite an American right, it was certainly seen as an American rite of passage. By the turn of the twentieth century, going to a sporting event was as much a part of the definition of manhood in America as casting a ballot. Supporters of American sports, including proponents of prizefighting, argued that athletics were character-building resources that embodied the nation’s unique democratic ideals of egalitarianism and equality of opportunity. Other than baseball, in fact, no sport was enlisted into the patriotic process with more alacrity than prizefighting. The press treated bouts between American and British fighters as tests of national supremacy, while boxing enthusiasts viewed their sport as a type of “republicanism in the ring”—as a strenuous

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75 For a discussion of the invention of the American athletic tradition in the late-nineteenth century, see Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 3-34.
activity in which every hard-working man had the opportunity to succeed or fail based on his own merit. Of course, turn-of-the-century American athletics were in reality anything but egalitarian. One had to look no further than the “color line” that had been darkly drawn in almost all professional sports, not to mention the vast disparities between men’s and women’s sports on college campuses. Yet, despite the class, racial, and gender discrimination rife in American athletics, the symbolic power of the democratic American sporting ethos remained strong and persuasive. When San Franciscan women went to the fights they were entering a public venue that embodied the nation’s most lofty democratic commitments. What better place was there to promote one’s desire for full civic participation and public equality than the prizefight arena—a venue consistently hailed as the altar of opportunity and meritocracy itself?

Also hinting at the political significance of the female fight-goer is the fact that her opponents based their opposition to a woman at the fights on the very same assumptions used to denounce female political equality. The art of politics was predicated upon the simple belief that voting was a masculine pursuit—an awesome civic responsibility that, it was widely believed, only a man’s broad shoulders could bear. In 1895, for example, The Argonaut, a San Francisco weekly dedicated to provocative social and political editorializing, justified women’s exclusion from voting with the following brief civics lesson: “One of the unanswerable arguments against woman suffrage is this—that in a government by the people the voter must be prepared, in certain contingencies, to back up his ballot by the bullet—that behind a court there must be a power, behind a law there must be a penalty, behind a ballot there must be a man.” In other words, female political equality was doomed to failure for the

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76 In the words of Elliott Gorn, prizefighting was a “meritocracy of violence.” For a discussion of the patriotic meaning of American prizefighting, see Gorn, The Manly Art, 69-97; the quote is from p. 91.
very same reasons women did not enter the prize ring—because they were weak in both body and testament. As the Argonaut once bluntly put it, “Women should not vote, because they cannot fight.”

Just like prizefighting, then, many San Franciscans considered politics to be a civic endeavor predicated on physical force. It was these assumptions that made female prizefight attendance so tremendously symbolic. Though female fight-going lacked the concise and explicit political message of a pro-suffrage parade down Market Street, by entering any of the grand civic edifices that hosted a prizefight, San Franciscan women were directly confronting stereotypes of feminine weakness and female passivity—ideals that were used to bar them from both the boxing arena and the polling place. The provocative public presentation of self was a strategy utilized by many San Franciscan female political activists. Marching in the streets, delivering dignified sidewalk speeches, decorating storefront windows with the emblems of the suffrage cause—these were the ways San Franciscan suffragists skillfully took their political demands into the public domain and transformed the everyday urban environment into a vibrant arena of theatricality and political display.

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77 The Argonaut, 20 May 1895. California suffragists had a difficult time distancing themselves from the assumptions that separated women from electoral politics, and they endured a frustrating loss in 1896 when California’s all-male state electorate defeated a women’s suffrage amendment by a vote of 137,099 to 110,355. Worse still for San Franciscan suffrage leaders, the measure was routed in their own city, with 74% of the San Francisco vote opposed to granting women the franchise. Female activists responded by broadening their base and linking the drive for electoral equality with Progressive Era reform and the demands of the city’s powerful labor unions, as well as distancing themselves from the unpopular social reform issue of prohibition in order to better appeal to the city’s large working-class constituency. In 1911, another state amendment for female suffrage finally passed, though by a slim margin. San Francisco’s female political activists could not have been pleased with the showing in their own city, as again the majority of male San Franciscans expressed their disapproval with women’s suffrage, with the wealthy Pacific Heights and mostly male waterfront districts that included the Barbary Coast casting the bulk of the ballots opposed to female electoral equality. See Rebecca J. Mead, How the Vote Was Won: Woman Suffrage In the Western United States, 1868-1914 (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 73-95, 119-49.

78 For the history of women’s suffrage in San Francisco, see Susan Englander, Class Coalition and Class Conflict in the California Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1907-1912: The San Francisco Wage Earners’ Suffrage League (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992); Gayle Gullett, Becoming
Female prizefight attendance mirrored these strategies, forcefully presenting alternative definitions of modern womanhood for male consideration and challenging assumptions in the city about the relationship between gender, politics, and public power.

Using the boxing arena to make claims of public belonging, a woman sitting ringside directly contradicted the demands of a more familiar turn-of-the-century archetype—the female moral reformer. San Franciscan women’s politics were generally predicated upon a moralistic altruism that manifested itself in organizations like the Civic League of Improvement Clubs and Organizations, the Society for the Prevention of Vice, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), groups that generally considered prizefighting a disgraceful vice in need of immediate eradication. Female reformers derisively referred to boxing as “the noble art of manly disfiguration,” and in the name of social purity they clamored for the prohibition of the sport in which serious injury and even death were not uncommon. The WCTU, in fact, considered boxing so barbaric that it ranked the prohibition of prizefight films as high on its national agenda as the issue of female suffrage itself. Bluntly put, for many of the women’s groups seeking to cure society’s ills, prizefighting was an unadulterated evil, its promoters profiteers in human pain, and the

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79 Two fighters were killed in San Francisco bouts in the 1890s, followed by two more in 1906. I discuss these deaths in Chapter Three of my dissertation.

prizefighter and his cronies the physical embodiment of urban horrors like drinking, gambling, and brutish violence. The conflicting desires of female fight-goers and reformers highlights the difficulties of delineating a cohesive turn-of-the-century women’s culture and limiting our notion of female political activism to the arenas of suffrage and moral reform. Female prizefight attendance, then, must have engendered strong feelings of ambivalence among some San Franciscan women. On one hand, the bloody exhibitions masquerading as contests of skill and sport were in direct contrast to the progressive and humanitarian ideals firmly embraced by many female activists. On the other hand, unfettered access to public space, including participation in new and exciting moments and venues of urban leisure like a championship prizefight, was increasingly being viewed as a requisite for full citizenship.

As San Francisco prizefights grew in both size and popularity, more and more women pressed for the opportunity to freely occupy this pugilistic public sphere. When “Sailor” Tom Sharkey fought “Ruby” Robert Fitzsimmons in December 1896, in what was probably the most celebrated contest in city history—a bout witnessed by nearly 14,000, policed by over one hundred, and refereed by Wyatt Earp—women attended a San Francisco prizefight for the first time with the expressed blessing of city officials. In a nod to the feverish anticipation brought on by the match, the sponsoring National Athletic Club’s board of directors offered a limited number of tickets to female customers and set aside 100 sex-segregated box seats so the women might better enjoy the event. When questioned by the press about the club’s decision, San Francisco Police Captain George Wittman followed the board’s lead and made an immensely symbolic announcement when he told reporters that he too was in favor of “equal suffrage as far as prizefights go.”

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81 San Francisco Chronicle, 2 December 1896.
It was a statement that illuminates how San Franciscans thought of prizefight attendance as a political act. Reading any of the newspaper descriptions of the celebrated bout, it becomes clear that Captain Wittman’s association of prizefighting with politics was not far off the mark. Going to the Sharkey-Fitzsimmons match that chilly December evening was like walking into a political convention itself, with Mechanic’s Pavilion a patriotic and picturesque scene. The arena’s interior was rimmed with red, white, and blue bunting, while an immense canopy of twin forty-foot American flags hung proudly over the ring. Ten-dollar front-row seats meant that the press was moved from ringside to the hanging galleries, where a small army of telegraph operators readied themselves to transmit round-by-round updates to boxing enthusiasts and newspapers across the nation. And, as was usually the case with the more celebrated bouts, the energetic crowd was a menagerie of San Franciscan humanity. According to the Examiner, the audience “began with the man who passes the plate in church and ended with a Justice of the Supreme Court.” The Mayor attended, as did the Chief of Police, Superior Court Judges, members of the Board of Trade, doctors, lawyers, a party of “progressive Chinese merchants,” and a large contingent of women, most of whom came escorted by men, though a few arrived in same-sex pairs. As they did at most prizefights, the majority of the women wore veils—some tucked under brown derby hats so they might better blend in with the masculine crowd—while only a small handful entered the pavilion with their faces openly exposed.82

The veiled female-fight goer is an intriguing vision and deserves greater attention. The expectation that a woman wear a veil when ringside is actually similar to some of the other restrictions placed upon women eager to see a fight in San Francisco. At the original

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82 *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 December 1896.
Fig. 1.3: An artist’s rendition of the scene at Mechanic’s Pavilion for the 2 December 1896 prizefight between Bob Fitzsimmons and “Sailor” Tom Sharkey. In a first in San Francisco history, promoters set aside a special ringside section for 100 female fight fans. These women were among the 14,000 spectators who saw Fitzsimmons knock out Sharkey in the eighth round, but controversy ensued when referee Wyatt Earp disqualified Fitzsimmons for hitting Sharkey below the waist. Earp’s verdict was challenged in San Francisco District Court, but the judge ruled in the former lawman’s favor, saying “Wyatt Earp’s word is good with me.” (From the San Francisco Chronicle, 3 December 1896)
San Francisco Athletic Club, for example, Friday night prizefights were a regular feature during the 1880s. Utilizing a makeshift ring surrounded by two hundred seats pitched up almost to the ceiling, one of the more “innovative” features of the club was a tiny curtained gallery where women were occasionally admitted and forced to watch the bouts hidden from view. Even this arrangement seems more civil than the treatment afforded Rose Fitzsimmons, the wife of heavyweight Robert Fitzsimmons, when she tried to watch one of her husband’s early fights in Mechanic’s Pavilion. Denied entry into the boxing arena because of her sex, Mrs. Fitzsimmons was directed to an adjacent lumber room, where she reportedly sat on a crate and viewed the action through a tiny peephole. The Fitzsimmons incident may have been the basis for Jack London’s 1905 novella, *The Game*. In London’s story, the fair-haired pugilist Jack Fleming dresses his fiancée in men’s clothing and sneaks her into a backroom where, hidden from view, she is able to watch the fight through a small knothole in the wall. At the story’s conclusion, however, the young woman watches with silent horror as Fleming dies in the ring, killed by the savage punches of his opponent, Joe Ponta. London, who was also a celebrated boxing reporter, had killed off his pugilistic hero for committing the unpardonable sin of bringing a woman into the most sacred of masculine spaces.

Placing women behind partitions or removing them from the arena altogether is reminiscent of other modes of sexual segregation in San Francisco at this time. Golden Gate

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Park regulations, for example, reserved the playgrounds and certain lawns for women and children only, while the San Francisco Public Library separated its male and female visitors by providing the latter with their own fenced reading section.  

It is important, however, to note the difference between the provisions offered women at Golden Gate Park and the library versus those at prizefights. In the park and city reading rooms, women were physically segregated from men for their comfort and protection, spared an afternoon of close contact and potential harassment from male strangers. At the San Francisco Athletic Club, club members worried more about their male spectators and situated women behind the screen to prevent them from visually infringing on a traditional all-male pastime.

Clearly a woman at a prizefight posed serious cultural problems for many San Franciscan men, for whether shrouded in veils or hidden in connecting rooms, the physical concealment of the female spectator suggests a deep-rooted anxiety about female patrons becoming a spectacle within the spectacle of the prizefight. Indeed, newspaper reports from the era suggest that women sitting ringside were oddities on display, describing female fight-goers over the years as “conspicuous,” “misplaced,” and even “grotesque.”

To make matters worse, it seemed to many male San Franciscans that some women were deliberately courting public attention through their provocative and stylized display. Surveying the crowd at a prizefight in 1898, for example, the Chronicle explained how “several women braved the stares and comments of the opposite sex and the scorn of their own. A few of

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86 For segregation at Golden Gate Park, see Ryan, Women in Public, 79. For the public library, see Peter Booth Wiley, A Free Library in this City: The Illustrated History of the San Francisco Public Library (San Francisco: Weldon Owen, 1996), 102.

87 Among the numerous examples are the San Francisco Chronicle, 2 June 1891 and 26 July 1902; San Francisco Examiner, 10 September 1905.
them were deeply veiled, but the others were brazen in their cosmetics and finery.”  

The description of “brazen” women at ringside suggests that female attendance was viewed as an act of sensuality, a transgressive personal drama akin to a woman smoking or drinking alcohol in public. At a 1905 lightweight championship bout in Mechanic’s Pavilion, a writer for the *Examiner* went so far as to consider female fight-going as just one more stop on the road to moral dissolution. “Some of the spectators should have been excluded,” he sermonized, “they were women. A few of them looked like decent women, but most gave token of being jaded, jades in search of some new torment for the sagging nerves.”  

Charting a woman’s course from virtue to vice, caustic reports such as these serve as an important reminder that not only was the public sphere widely considered a masculine domain, but that the very idea of a “public woman” suggested questionable moral character and, perhaps, even prostitution.  

Prostitutes could indeed be found at some of the less respectable San Francisco fights—newspapers occasionally noted the presence of “disreputable women” among the nocturnal sporting crowd of rounders, idlers, and gamblers—but the five- to ten-dollar ticket prices demanded at the more fashionable bouts likely kept representatives from that particular trade from attending.  

Significantly, however, even if those women attending high-profile prizefights were not prostitutes, the San Francisco press accused them of using the boxing arena as a public stage for scandalous and prostitute-like displays. Recounting the crowd filing into the giant circus tent erected at 14th and Valencia in the Mission District for

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88 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 May 1898.  
89 *San Francisco Examiner*, 10 September 1905.  
90 See, for example, the *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, 22 July 1885.
the heavyweight title fight between Robert Fitzsimmons and Jim Jeffries, the Chronicle linked female ring-goers with one very particular type of San Franciscan woman:

At least a dozen women came in, one or two alone except for their male escorts, the rest in groups of twos and threes. One tried to make herself less conspicuous by wearing a derby hat and a veil, but for the most part they came with bare faces. This was, perhaps, the largest attendance of women at any San Francisco prize-fight of late years, and undoubtedly the first time that they have dared, at least since the palmy days of the Bella Union, to come unveiled.\textsuperscript{91}

This reference to the era of Bella Union is telling. Built as a gambling parlor in 1849, the Bella Union was the most popular among a slew of Barbary Coast melodeons and variety houses that catered to stag audiences. Advertising itself as the place to be “if you are inclined to be frisky and sporty,” the Bella Union featured provocatively dressed women presenting “songs and dances of licentious and profane character.” All shows guaranteed a “freedom from constrained etiquette,” and between acts the female performers were expected to sell drinks in the curtained boxes, doing whatever it took to get a reluctant customer to spend his money.\textsuperscript{92}

The link between the flamboyant appearance of women at prizefights and the on-stage style of the entertainers at the Bella Union, then, is perhaps apt. Recently, scholars like Susan Glenn, Nan Enstad, and Kathy Peiss have underscored the ways that turn-of-the-century women presented themselves according to norms of style and performativity that they learned from the theatrical stage—even a stage like the Bella Union—creating a dramatic public style by using colorful and provocative dress as a symbol of individual

\textsuperscript{91} San Francisco Chronicle, 26 July 1902.

\textsuperscript{92} All quotes and a description of the Bella Union are found in Asbury, The Barbary Coast, 125-37. Also see Samuel Dickson, Tales of San Francisco (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1947), 40-4.
assertiveness in lives otherwise marked by social, economic, and political limitations. B. E. Lloyd, a nineteenth-century chronicler of San Francisco culture, suggested as much when said that San Francisco women took their fashion cues not only from stage performers, but from other “ladies of the night.” “In the Eastern cities,” explained Lloyd in 1876, “the prostitutes tried to imitate in manner and dress the fashionable respectable ladies, but in San Francisco the rule was reversed—the latter copying the former.” Indeed, while some female fight-goers in San Francisco wore black veils under brown derby hats in order to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible, other women abided no such constraints and used the most popular San Francisco prizefights as a stage for their stylish displays. Walking a thin line between refinement and transgression, opulently dressed women who enacted their stirring scenes within “off-limits” environment of the boxing arena were not only invading a stridently masculine public venue, but were engaging in conspicuous self-display by boldly carving out new channels of gendered activism with their confident and provocative self-presentations.

Forged from the boomtown psychology of the Sierra Gold Rush and notably lacking a moralistic ruling class, San Francisco was a fertile ground for unconventional and flamboyant women, some of whom had very interesting connections with pugilism. The celebrated stage performer Adah Isaacs Mencken found welcome refuge in San Francisco from Eastern critics up in arms over the flesh-covered body suit she donned in *Mazeppa*.

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Described by Mark Twain as “that manly young female” because of her penchant for wearing men’s clothing while visiting the Barbary Coast saloons, Mencken’s connections to pugilism were formalized when she married John Heenan, California’s first champion prizefighter.\(^95\)

Even more famous was San Francisco society matron and firefighter philanthropist, Lillie Hitchcock Coit. Immune from public condemnation because of her great wealth, Coit smoked cigars, played poker, went to cockfights, and possessed a particular fetish for dressing in the fireman’s red shirt and hat. Her transgressive masculine posturing translated into an interest in pugilism as well, once arranging for Jim Corbett and a sparring partner to stage a private boxing exhibition in her permanent residence at the luxurious Palace Hotel.\(^96\)

The woman most famous for these assertive self-spectacles was the flamboyant French actress Sarah Bernhardt, thus it was no coincidence that the worlds of prizefighting and the stage collided in San Francisco in 1891 when Bernhardt was in town for a season at the Grand Opera House.\(^97\) The performer was interested in the seedier side of San Franciscan life, and Sam Davis of the \textit{Examiner} was her chaperone to the underground, a journey that included a visit to the Cremorne Theatre for an unlicensed midnight fight that went off behind padlocked doors. According to Davis, Bernhardt was instantly enraptured with the violent scene. When midway through the bout one of the other women in attendance was supposedly overcome with emotion and fainted to the floor, Bernhardt jumped from her seat


\(^{97}\) My use of the term “assertive self spectacle” comes from Glenn, \textit{Female Spectacle}, 3.
and dramatically demanded, “Take her out, she’s got no nerve!” The actress’s enthusiasm waned, however, when one of the combatants was knocked out of the ring and landed in her lap. A bloody dress was more than Bernhardt had bargained for. The star immediately rose and headed for the exit, but approaching the barricaded doors she apparently became so enamored with the secrecy of the whole affair that she suggested to Davis that they alert the police and allow themselves to be caught in the raid. Uninterested in filing his column from the inside of city jail, the newspaperman persuaded Bernhardt to forgo this particular brand of publicity.98

Male concerns arose not only over women being seen, but also over what these women might themselves see—particularly the alluring and chiseled form of the pugilistic body. Champion fighters cut undeniably impressive physical figures, and in an all-male setting San Franciscan men could safely celebrate the prizefighter’s ferocious behavior and muscular posture. With women present, however, the turn-of-the-century pugilist could become a sinewy figure provoking deep anxiety—a nearly impossible masculine model against which the majority of city men could never hope to compare. As nineteenth-century ideas about the meanings of manhood shifted from a notion of manliness rooted in personal responsibility and the regimented control over one’s body to a much more elemental version of masculinity stressing a muscular form and the aggressive use of the body, the brawny prizefighter was increasingly held up as the apogee of this American masculine ethos.99

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99 Among the works that explore this shift in popular notions of masculinity in the late-nineteenth century are Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Filene, Him/Her/Self; Gorn, The Manly Art; Isenberg, John L. Sullivan and His America; John F. Kasson, Houdini, Tarzan, and the
Of course, few men possessed either the physical prowess or martial spirit to be a successful pugilist, and the average male fight-goer was likely quite uneasy with the idea of allowing women an opportunity to gaze upon these new masculine standard-bearers. Reading the opinion of Clara S. Foltz, an attorney and founder of the California State Woman Suffrage Association, this uneasiness seems well founded. Responding in 1891 to the question of whether prizefighting should be legal in her city, Foltz’s answer was a less-than-ringing endorsement of the average San Franciscan male: “When I go out into the street and meet the numbers of puny, weak, narrow-chested unfortunate creatures in the shape of men, it does strike me that something is urgently needed of a drastic character to counteract this physical depravity, and if prize-fighting will tend toward that end I say let us have plenty of it.”

The great John L. Sullivan kicked even more sand in the face of the average American man when he boasted of the female preference for the fighting sort. Interviewed in 1897, the ex-pugilist-cum-historian explained, “Naturally [ladies] think more of a man who can fight than any other man, because if men did not fight we should all be slaves and the English or somebody else would rule us. George Washington was a fighter, and no man was more admired by the ladies than he was.” Sullivan, however, concluded his lecture with a terse admonition: “But ladies ought not to see fights.”

Faced with the proposition of being held up to the unattainable physical standards of the John L. Sullivans of the world, San Francisco’s puny, weak, and narrow-chested likely agreed.

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100 *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, 23 October 1892.

101 Leo N. Miletich, *Dan Stuart’s Fistic Carnival* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 196.
And if it was muscular brawn that Foltz and other San Francisco women desired, the prize ring was the place to get it. It was common ritual for male fight fans to comment approvingly on the nearly naked fighters who regularly presented their stripped-down physiques for pre-bout public consideration. In contrast to the knee-length trunks favored by today’s fighters, most turn-of-the-century pugilists wore bikini-like bottoms that left the bottom half of their buttocks uncovered, while some boxed in little more than a thin cloth tied around their waist. At the 1885 grudge match between the local fighters Jack Keenan and the original Jack Dempsey,* Keenan stood before the assemblage and removed all of his clothing except his socks and shoes. He next took two silk handkerchief, tying one around his waist and with the second “made a ‘gee’ strap, which he fastened before and behind.”

With everything apparently in place, the fight commenced. Years later at Dreamland Pavilion, Edmund “Spud” Murphy found himself severely hampered by ill-fitting shorts in his contest against Ireland’s “Boy” McCormick. Exposing himself to vicious head and body shots every time he reached down to pull up his cascading trunks, Murphy decided to come out of his corner to start the third round wearing only his jock strap and protective cup. With both hands now free to punch and defend, “Spud” was able to work the fight to a draw.\(^{103}\)

Observing the nearly naked fighter framed inside the ropes of the prize ring immediately placed female spectators into the unfamiliar and conspicuous position of female voyeur, a role that was consistently exploited by the popular press for its value as titillating copy. In the 1890s, San Francisco newspaper editors sent female “sob sister” journalists to

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* Not the famous heavyweight champion of the 1920s.

\(^{102}\) San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 21 July 1885.

\(^{103}\) Flamm, Hometown San Francisco, 84.
places like a prizefight for their dramatic “as only a woman could see it” accounts, articles that were almost always accompanied by drawings of the female reporter closely inspecting the shirtless pugilist. An unnamed newspaperwoman for the Chronicle traveled across the Bay to the Acme Club in Oakland to observe the camp of “Sailor” Tom Sharkey as he trained for his bout against Jim Corbett. At first she seemed fascinated with the tattoo on Sharkey’s chest—a large blue ship under full sail spanning the width of his “mossy breast”—but as the muscular sailor began his strenuous workout, her attention was directed elsewhere and her report became infused with bedroom innuendo. “It was my privilege—lucky woman!—to witness all this from a vantage point on a pile of gymnasium mattresses and to watch the dull red glow creep up from his belt until it suffused the huge knots of muscles behind the fighter’s powerful shoulders.”

Also sent to cover an evening of prizefighting later that year was Helen Dare, the Chronicle’s chief thrill-seeking female reporter. As her name suggests, Dare would go most anywhere. She mined for gold in the Yukon, went big game hunting in India, and covered crime and scandal in the Bay Area. Her editors considered a prizefight an equally exotic subject for a woman, and Dare filed a few intimate reports detailing the powerful physiques of local pugilists for male and female readers alike. Describing the goings-on at the bout between Bob Fitzsimmons and Sailor Tom Sharkey, for example, Dare openly admired the physique of the former mariner as he stripped down to his shorts, noting with particular delight his “magnificent bunches of muscle at the shoulder, white as clumps of meerschaum and strong as galvanized iron.” After the fight began it was the pageantry of perspiring men locked in competition that caught Dare’s eye, and she

104 San Francisco Chronicle, 11 June 1896.

105 See Dare’s obituary in the San Francisco Chronicle, 21 March 1943.
marveled how “at the end of the round there were two sleek, shining bodies, glazed with sweat and shining in the fierce light.”

Here, perhaps, lies the female prizefight spectator’s most subversive potential, as her very presence could transform the boxing arena into a social space of highly charged eroticism. Unlike the endless opportunities for men to view scantily clad female performers in the city’s can-cans, melodeons, and burlesque halls, prizefighting was the only commercial amusement consistently offering the undressed and illicit male body for visual consumption. Indeed, it is within this context that we might reconsider our earlier assumptions about the veiled female fight-goer. Instead of assuming that any woman wearing a veil at a boxing match did so reluctantly, what if we think of the veil as a strategic mask of anonymity, a garb willingly donned in order to conceal a lingering eye and allow wearers to gaze intently at the fighters inside the ring—all without being seen in return.

Whether sitting at ringside while deeply veiled or watching with her visage unguarded, in a stark and sudden role reversal it was now the female spectator who could boldly eye and appraise the male body. By attending a prizefight, then, San Franciscan women were not

106 San Francisco Chronicle, 3 December 1896.

107 There were, on rare occasions, other opportunities for San Franciscan women to gaze upon the disrobed male body. In 1894 the famed bodybuilder and showman, Eugene Sandow, came to San Francisco to display his muscles for male and female San Franciscans alike. While in the city, Sandow was the focus of a lecture given by city portrait artist Solly Walter, titled “The Relation of Muscle to Art.” Standing naked except for a small strip of white silk wrapped around his waist, Sandow moved and flexed while Walters pontificated upon the bones, muscles, and other attributes of “the Perfect Man.” According to a newspaper report of the event, which took place in front of male and female members of the San Francisco Sketch Club, Sandow was “absolutely expressionless of face, except when he exhibited some slight interest in himself and looked down at his own muscles as their long Latin names were pronounced.” For a report of the event, see the San Francisco Chronicle, 17 May 1894.

108 In The Barbary Coast, Herbert Asbury tells the story of Aunt Josie’s Brothel on Mason Street, where a woman could purchase the services of a male prostitute. In order to keep the identity of her female customers a secret, Aunt Josie provided them with silk masks to wear during intercourse, granting them both pleasure and anonymity. Though the story may be apocryphal—Asbury himself admits to being uncertain whether these safeguards were ever actually utilized—the story certainly suggests a different way of viewing the veil. See Asbury, The Barbary Coast, 235-6.
Fig. 1:4: Many turn-of-the-century pugilists fought in little more than a jockstrap or skimpy trunks that left the bottom half of their buttocks uncovered, perhaps adding to the allure of the prizefight for San Franciscan women. This pre-bout photograph shows the meager attire favored by the pugilists before a 1902 bout at “Sunny Jim” Coffroth’s Mission Street Arena. (Photo used with the permission of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library).
only assuming the more predatory and empowering role of the active viewer, but men were being placed in the less-familiar role of alluring object on display.

Equally worrisome for San Franciscan men was what women would see if they shifted their gaze from the muscular bodies inside the ring and instead focused on the ringside manners of the typical male spectator. Despite the referee’s ritualistic speech urging spectators to refrain from overly boisterous behavior, newspapers routinely described the inevitable metamorphosis of “a nineteenth century congregation of solid citizens to a Roman mob howling for the blood of a fallen gladiator.”109 Mabel Craft, a University of California law school graduate and editor for the Sunday Chronicle, covered a championship bout in the summer of 1896 and described a masculine spectacle of nearly demonic proportions:

And the crowd! Say it no more that women are hysterical. Those men stood on their chairs and bellowed like bulls, with bloodshot eyes and hot throats. They waved their hats, cheered madly, and howled for a man they never saw before. Why? Oh, because athletics are the fashion and this is a manly sport, and a big, unwieldy ox of a man lay there, glassy-eyed, dead to the world. It is not a thing to be joyful at.110

For these “howling men” a prizefight was a place to escape the rigid demands of modern society and indulge in wild and unruly conduct. When women were present, not only were men denied the collective comfort of being in an all-male group, but also their long-standing claim as the steadier of the two sexes quickly unraveled. As one male commentator put it while speaking for all those less than thrilled with the prospect of sitting next to a woman at

109 See, for example, the San Francisco Chronicle, 3 November 1889.

110 San Francisco Chronicle, 25 June 1896.
the fights, “Men don’t care to have women see them when they take the bit of morality in their teeth and let their passions run away with them.”¹¹¹

This is not to suggest that the presence of women at prizefights always had to unleash a litany of anxieties. If appearing in the “proper role” of supportive wife, for example, a woman could be a celebrated participant in the fierce competitions. When Bob Fitzsimmons battled Jim Corbett for the heavyweight championship in March 1897, Mrs. Rose Fitzsimmons made history by being the first wife to witness her husband’s struggle for such pugilistic honor. No longer forced to peek through a tiny peephole to watch a fight, Mrs. Fitzsimmons was one of a handful of women who attended the St. Patrick’s Day bout. Dan Stuart, the fight’s promoter, had set aside a special section for ladies and their escorts, promising female ring-goers “absolute immunity from molestation” and “as much comfort and security as is accorded patrons of playhouses.”¹¹² Though the fight took place in Carson City, Nevada, many of the men surrounding the ring that brisk afternoon were of San Francisco stock, having made the train ride east to support their boy Corbett. When the elegantly attired Mrs. Fitzsimmons entered the outdoor arena on the arm of Senator John J. Ingalls, a thunderous cheer went up among the male patrons for “Bob’s wife!,” no matter the object of their bets. “Mrs. Fitz,” as the press adoringly dubbed her that day, was celebrated not as an autonomous woman boldly attending the fights but as the dutiful wife supporting her husband in a sport that most wives likely found odious at best.

If the men in attendance thought that Mrs. Fitz would sit demurely at ringside—as a good wife of the day might be expected—they were dreadfully mistaken. With her husband taking a tremendous beating in the early rounds, “Bob’s wife” stood atop the sappy pine

¹¹¹ San Francisco Examiner, 3 December 1896.

¹¹² Stuart’s statement is reprinted in the San Francisco Chronicle, 1 March 1897.
bleachers, waved the stars-and-stripes, and began barking words of encouragement to her husband, which, newspapers reported, bordered on the profane. Her eyes blazing and her fists clenched, Mrs. Fitzsimmons physically raged and recoiled with every punch her husband absorbed. “The hound! The puppy! The dog! Punch him, Bob! Kill him!” Incensed with her husband’s poor early showing, Mrs. Fitz clutched the ropes and pulled herself to the top of the raised platform, oblivious to the damage being done to her sealskin cloak by the rosin-covered cables. The first recipients of her fury were her husband’s handlers and their seemingly inept strategies. “You idiots,” fumed the female ring general, “you don’t know how to second a man! Do you want to defeat my husband? Do as I tell you now or I’ll make sure you wish you had!” Next to be centered in her crosshairs was Jim Corbett himself. “Hit him in the slats, Bob,” came the legendary cry from Rose Fitzsimmons, “Hit him in the slats!” Recounting the Fitzsimmons fight in his memoir, Jim Corbett tells the story of peering through the ropes between rounds and catching a glimpse of the excitable Mrs. Fitz, her face spattered with her husband’s blood, shouting things that were “not at all flattering to my skill as a fighter or my conduct as a gentleman.” To both “Gentleman Jim” and rest of the male fight fans in attendance, it must have seemed as if the faithful spouse had been instantly transformed into the “New Woman” gone haywire.

Whether it was his wife’s encouragement—or threats—that made the difference is unclear, but Bob Fitzsimmons finally ended the bout by knocking out Jim Corbett in the fourteenth round. Yet the conclusion of the fight did not mean the cessation of violence inside the ring. As Mrs. Fitz climbed into the ring and hugged her bloody husband, a dazed

113 San Francisco Chronicle and San Francisco Examiner, 18 March 1897.

and disappointed Corbett stumbled through the crowd and tried to continue the contest. Mrs. Fitzsimmons was not amused. Beside herself with wrath she struggled to get at the already defeated Corbett. “I’ll kill him,” she screamed. “I’ll kill the coward!” And she likely would have tried if several of her husband’s supporters had not restrained her. According to Charles Wilcox of *Scribner’s* magazine, Mrs. Fitzsimmons’s disorderly behavior “was chronicled in every newspaper in the land, editorialis were written about it, sermons were preached about it, and the country was going to hell.” The *National Police Gazette*, the unofficial fountainhead of the male bachelor subculture, seconded these sentiments by sternly offering the following opinion:

> The defeat of Bob Fitzsimmons would prove a blessing to the ring in that it would remove from pugilism the only woman that has ever figured prominently in the fistic game. Perhaps Mrs. Fitzsimmons acted the part of the loving wife in going to the ringside at Carson City, but her presence there was an eyesore. Home is the place for the wife and babies of a prize fighter. It doesn’t add dignity to the pugilistic game to have members of the gentler sex taking part in its details.

The sporting public may have approved of a prizefighter’s wife standing by her man, but acting every bit the man herself that St. Patrick’s Day afternoon, Mrs. Fitzsimmons had raised the awful specter of women turning pugnacious themselves.

The Corbett-Fitzsimmons bout was the first high-profile prizefight filmed for widespread national release, and a brief examination of the film’s premiere in San Francisco’s Olympia Theater illuminates an interesting distinction in the attitudes over a

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115 *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner*, 18 March 1897.


woman viewing a boxing match at the moving picture theater versus attending a prizefight in person. As film scholar Dan Streible convincingly argues, motion pictures and movie theaters were mediating institutions that provided female spectators with largely unfettered access to the sight of muscled male bodies engaged in sweaty competition. Though women did not come to the Olympia Theater in droves, they certainly still attended in numbers greater than at live fights, in this case the chief attraction likely being the opportunity to view the matinee-idol Corbett in his trademark skimpy trunks. Alice Rix, a society woman from a prominent San Franciscan family, went to the Olympia Theater and filed a report that both highlighted the make-up of the interested crowd and poked fun at the hysterical tone adopted by the sporting press when evaluating the female fight-goer:

Well? Where is she? Where is woman at the prize fight? Where is that fierce, primitive savage thing, that harpy, that bird-of-prey, that worse-than-man who was expected to sit six rows deep before the Veriscope at the Olympia and gloat over the bloody sport of the ring? Where is the brute? Various simple ostriches of my acquaintance assure me there will be a crush of women at the Olympia every night and a bigger crush still at the matinees. That is woman’s first opportunity, you know, to see a prize fight with the blessing of the world upon her head and she would rather lose the head than miss it.

Rix described a female audience of sixty “dressed down” women interspersed among a total crowd of one thousand. Modestly dressed wives, mothers escorting their children, and a group of society girls with their sporty male escorts formed the majority of the women who had come to see the fighting shadows projected onto the silent screen. Most probably left the theater wondering what all the fuss was about, for according to Rix it was a less-than thrilling

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Fig. 1.5: The first prizefight filmed for national release was the 1897 bout between Robert Fitzsimmons and the San Franciscan Jim Corbett. Mary Harrison’s illustration, “The Interested and the Disinterested,” depicts the opposing reactions of San Franciscan women who went to see fight film at the Olympia Theater. (From the San Francisco Examiner, 18 July 1897)
affair. At the Olympia that evening there was no roar of the crowd, no lusty oaths, no hurled
invectives, no wildly thrown elbows. In contrast to the vibrant civic cacophony that filled
places like Dreamland and Mechanic’s Pavilion, moviegoers listened to the tepid melodies of
a piano and mandolin duet while a tuxedoed narrator blandly explained the images on the
screen. “Fifth round now.” “Corbett on the offensive.” It was more akin to a lyceum lecture
than a prizefight. Black and white and without sound, the Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight was no
longer a colorful affair at the center of a masculine social space, but a quiet, two-dimensional
display offered in a safe and sanitary setting.\footnote{San Francisco Examiner, 18 July 1897.}

As Rix’s account suggests, prizefighting’s cultural resonance lay less in the sight of
two men in the ring than in the exploits and interaction of the men and women surrounding
the ropes. Prizefight attendance was much more than mere spectatorship—it was a public
performance. Indeed, the prizefight arena itself was something of a public theater, a dynamic
cultural space where one might see evidence of true civic sociability but also feel acute racial
and gendered anxiety. In San Francisco this was never more evident than at the 1908 Fourth
of July bout between the black lightweight champion, Joe Gans, and his white challenger,
Battling Nelson. The Gans-Nelson contest was the first championship fight to be held in San
Francisco since the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire. Touted as an opportunity for the
city to demonstrate its resilient spirit, one newspaper testified to the battle’s symbolic
importance when it explained that the affair was “looked upon more as a spectacle than a
prize fight.”\footnote{San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 4 July 1908.} Descriptions of the holiday throng packed into “Sunny” Jim Coffroth’s open-air Mission Street Arena that day suggest a picturesque and racially diverse crowd, with
women “who had come to look and be looked at” sharing five-dollar seats with black and white men wearing Panama hats and rooting along racial lines.\textsuperscript{121} Recounting the vibrant scene in a style that seems better suited for the society pages than a newspaper’s sport’s section, the \textit{Daily Morning Call} provided a detailed picture that combined social commentary, fashion review, and racial typology. “Many women were present,” explained the paper. “Some were of the unmistakable type. Others seemed out of place. Among the women were many of color. The brightest blue hat was worn by a dusky damsel, but the most gorgeous plumes were sported by a person who cheered for Nelson. Mrs. Gans was somberly clad in some dark stuff and she wore an expensive black hat and a heavy veil. She is a handsome woman, large and graceful, with great dark eyes of her race. Her complexion represented about the same fraction of white blood that the pugilist husband has.”\textsuperscript{122}

By all accounts the audience witnessed a ferocious battle, one that ended in the seventeenth round when Battling Nelson knocked out the black man Gans. Marring the holiday afternoon, however, was the outburst of a white female spectator rooting for Nelson who leapt from her seat in the middle rounds and shouted, “Hit him, Bat! Kill the Coon!”\textsuperscript{123} Though racial epithets were hardly uncommon at bouts between black and white boxers in San Francisco, hurling them was apparently a man’s job, and the sporting press seized on this one woman’s exclamation as fodder for yet another attack against female fight-goers. Leading the charge was Harry B. Smith, the long-time boxing reporter for the \textit{Chronicle}, who called the behavior of women rooting ringside “disgusting in the extreme.”\textsuperscript{124} “By all

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{San Francisco Daily Morning Call}, 4 July 1908; \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 5 July 1908.

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{San Francisco Daily Morning Call}, 5 July 1908.

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 5 July 1908.

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 6 July 1908.
means,” he demanded, “let’s bar the women from the prize fight seats. Whether these women were good, bad or indifferent, they certainly have no place where a fight is being conducted. A few of the women who attended the Fourth of July affair uttered remarks that most men would be ashamed to make. They lost all idea of their sex, and only the passion to see the blood flow was on them.”

According to the sportswriter Smith, bloodthirsty women were both a blight on the displays of carnage inside the ring and a real source of discomfort for San Franciscan men outside the ropes. Here, of course, was an obvious double standard predicated upon sex. For San Francisco men, the fights offered a space to cut loose from exacting social restraints and engage in wild and unruly conduct. For any woman sitting ringside, similar passionate displays were strictly taboo.

Whether hurling invectives while standing atop chairs or attending unveiled and opulently attired, San Franciscan women who went to the fights were breaking all the rules of feminine behavior and boldly challenging notions of womanhood to which most city men were accustomed. Yet despite all their trespasses, no permanent ordinance was ever enacted in San Francisco that prohibited women from going to a prizefight. Even when Lottie Salas shocked male San Franciscans by arriving at Dreamland Pavilion dressed as a man, Police Chief White’s declaration that women should stay away from the boxing arena was more personal warning than legal prohibition. Unfortunately for city boxing fans, prizefighting itself was the target of legal action when Californians passed what was popularly known as the “Anti-Prizefight Act,” one in a series of “redlight abatement” initiatives that aimed to curb vice as San Francisco readied itself to host the 1915 Panama-

125 San Francisco Chronicle, 12 July 1908.

126 San Francisco Chronicle, 11 July 1908.
Pacific International Exposition—a topic I will address in chapter three. Boxing matches were still part of the city’s pantheon of popular amusements, but weakened by the new law limiting bouts to four rounds and capping monetary prizes at thirty-five dollars, the gala championship bouts moved elsewhere. San Francisco could no longer claim the title of “prizefighting capital of the world.”

**Epilogue: “Powdered Noses and Busted Beaks”**

During the World War I era, prizefighting achieved a newfound air of legitimacy across the nation when it was enlisted into the nationalistic endeavors of wartime preparedness and military philanthropy. During the Great War and in its immediate aftermath, San Franciscans hosted a series of boxing exhibitions to fundraise for the American war effort. Promoting fights under the auspices of wartime mobilization—a patriotic endeavor in which women across the nation played a chief role—prizefight organizers extended a special invitation to female San Franciscans for benefit bouts at the new Civic Auditorium. Part prizefight, part society showcase, the World War I fundraisers were the first time male and female San Franciscans had entered the boxing arena on anything close to equal civic footing. Tellingly printed as part of the *Chronicle’s* Society Page weekly review was Helen Dare’s coverage of the May 1918 “Patriotic Championship Bouts,” a benefit that raised over twenty thousand dollars for the purchase of boxing gloves and other athletic gear for American soldiers. Calling earlier invitations to female fight-goers

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127 Officially known as Amendment 20, the “Anti-Prizefight Act” was a state initiative on the November 1914 ballot. Though only 44.2% of San Franciscans voted for it, 52.4% of Californians said “yes” to the law that limited all fights to four rounds, put a $35 cap on the victor’s prize, and prohibited bouts on Memorial Day and Sundays. See the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 November 1914. I discuss the significance of this vote in Chapter Three.
“but a grudging concession,” and reminding her readers that at previous bouts women were “herded apart, as the Sultan does his harem,” Dare cited the widespread attendance of female San Franciscans at the boxing benefit as “proof of the extraordinary leveling power of war.” “Never did I expect to see, in those proper old days when a woman had a sphere and was severely segregated therein, a ‘Welcome’ to my sex elegantly, cordially, and deliberately engrossed upon the doormat of a pugilistic arena.”

Slightly less enthusiastic about the proposition of prizefight attendance was the Chronicle reporter, and future famed photographer, Consuelo Kanaga. Though clearly taken with the “sinewy muscles and splendid physiques” of the “perfect specimens” in the ring, Kanaga admitted to being ultimately overwhelmed by the proceedings. “A prize fight is no bed of roses,” she explained to her female readers. “It is my last fight. A girl wouldn’t dare become a fight fan. But, thank goodness, I can look past pink teas and matinees and know that for once I have really lived.”

Four years later, Mayor James Rolph and a corps of prominent society women co-sponsored the “Society Athletic Carnival,” a night of benefit bouts put on to raise funds for the Disabled American Veterans of the World War. “Powdered Noses and Busted Beaks at Carnival,” read the Chronicle headline that both colorfully summarized the audience and underscored the way many understood these boxing benefits to be an unlikely meeting of rough pugs and respectable women. Though nobody could dispute that the mixed-sex event was a financial success, some San Franciscans seemed less than pleased with the

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128 San Francisco Chronicle, 14 May 1918.
129 San Francisco Chronicle, 12 May 1918.
130 San Francisco Chronicle, 19 May 1922.
integrated gathering. The venerable boxing writer Harry B. Smith grumbled that his paper should have sent a society page reporter to cover an event sapped of its masculine lifeblood, while the *Examiner* hoped most city women would follow Consuelo Kanaga’s lead and make their first prizefight their last. “It was an interesting experiment for San Francisco, this inviting women to a prizefight. But it didn’t work. Women are not really interested in the brutalities of the prize ring.” Then, ending with a statement that tried to close the chapter of female fight attendance once and for all, the paper breathed a sigh of relief and announced, “Somehow one believes San Francisco is glad that her womenfolk do not like prize fights.”

I am tempted to ask whether San Francisco was ahead of the times or lagging behind them when it came to female prizefight attendance, for at the same moment the cultural authorities at the *Examiner* were sounding the death knell of female prizefight attendance in their city, female interest in pugilism across the nation was surging, part of the national post-war acceptance of prizefighting that transformed boxing into an immensely profitable endeavor and helped usher in the “Golden Age” of American sports. The apparent waning interest in prizefighting among San Franciscan women, however, likely had less to do with female opinions of the sport than the status of the fight game in their city. With the great pugilists and high-profile bouts headed east, prizefighting had lost much of its profitability, cultural allure, and civic meaning, spelling the end to both a dynamic era in city history and a lively manifestation of San Franciscan public culture.

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131 *San Francisco Examiner*, 20 May 1922.

As a reporter from the *San Francisco Bulletin* once put it, turn-of-the-century prizefights had been “Carnivals of Muscle,” immensely popular pastimes where pugilists, spectators, and the press gathered in massive arenas to celebrate a vigorous personal and collective regional identity. This was especially true for San Franciscan women. Entering the masculine environs of the prizefight pavilion, female fight-goers were subverting the firmly entrenched social system of male privilege and winning both greater access to urban space and a more visible role in San Franciscan public life. But equally important as documenting the presence of women at prizefights, however, is to understand their public presentations of self. Fashionable declarations of autonomy made from the most masculine of urban environments, the ringside performances of San Franciscan women demand that we broaden our notion of turn-of-the-century female activism and consider how some women used a place as unexpected as the prizefight arena to present thoroughly modern standards of public womanhood and urban sociability.

Yet while some women utilized the prizefight arena as a liminal space in which they might enact new styles of female performativity and critique a male-dominated public culture, many men responded by digging in their heels and drawing a battle line around the boxing ring, hoping to keep their sporting sphere firmly grounded in the patriarchal present. Indeed, just as female fight-goers pushed at the cultural constraints that restricted their access to certain public spaces, so did many men push back, aggressively repelling what they viewed as an alarming intrusion into a vital arena of male privilege and solidarity. Not simply a man’s world, the San Francisco prizefight arena was a dynamic cultural space of male-female interaction—one that not only symbolized larger debates over gender identities and the meaning of social inclusiveness, but also served as a popular canvas upon which
these public contests were fought. Much like the boxing ring itself, the prizefight arena was a contested terrain.
Chapter Two

“A Swift Succession of Shadows on a Blank Surface”
Jack Johnson v. D. W. Griffith

The American public is so hungry for motion pictures and so loyal to a good one when it comes along. They have the good old American faculty of wanting to be “shown” things. It is the ever-present, realistic, actual now that “gets” the American public, and nothing ever devised by man can show it like moving pictures. The time will come, and in less than ten years, when the children in public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again.

—D. W. Griffith, San Francisco Chronicle, 1915.¹

If the combative world of prizefighting was only supposed to appeal to the male half of the population, many San Franciscans believed, by contrast, that the fantastic new medium of moving pictures was a popular amusement to be enjoyed by all. Though the era of American moviegoing had begun only in 1894, when Andrew Holland opened the nation’s premier Kinetoscope parlor in a converted New York City shoe store, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, movies had become such a prominent part of everyday life throughout the country that The Nation was hailing the medium as America’s “first democratic art.”² And here lay the problem. So popular were moving pictures that many turn-of-the-century Americans believed—for promise or for peril—that the silent screen exerted a particular power over its massive audiences that was unrivaled by the other media

¹ San Francisco Chronicle, 28 March 1915.

of the day. The great Progressive-Era social reformer, Jane Addams, announced that moving pictures possessed the “power to forecast life.”\(^3\) *Harper’s Weekly* warned that movies held “a peculiarly hypnotic and narcotic effect” over their audiences, while the *Outlook* ambivalently determined that “the very potency of the motion picture for degrading taste and morals is the measure of its power for enlightenment and education.”\(^4\)

In San Francisco it seemed as if everyone held an opinion about the cultural meaning and power of the movies. Depending on who was doing the talking, moving pictures were either a marvelously modern tool for edifying the masses or a troubling medium that kept young children from church, taught women how to smoke, instructed men to be criminals, assaulted the sanctity of marriage, and promoted a general culture of lewdness, lawlessness, and morbidity.\(^5\) In 1913 the *San Francisco Call* praised moving pictures and expressed the opinion that “everybody likes the movies, or should. Those who do not are certainly not up to date and do not appreciate what is probably the most wonderful opportunity for self-education, next to that afforded by printed books, that the world has yet offered to

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\(^5\) For these and other arguments both for and against moving picture censorship in San Francisco, see “Censorship,” *Transactions of the Commonwealth Club of California* 16 (August 1921): 181-218.
mankind.” An enthusiastic moviegoer writing in the *San Francisco Examiner* prescribed moving pictures as a healthful tonic to the excesses and after-effects of urban vice. “The movie pictures cheer, but they do not inebriate. They lubricate the wheels of existence, rest, refresh, stir the imagination, and bring into play a new set of convolutions. They never give you that dark brown taste the day after, nor a headache and that tired feeling.”7 The chaplain at San Quentin Prison just north of San Francisco was more ambivalent, saying of moving pictures that their “possibilities are unlimited for either good or evil.” No less an authority than a female prisoner residing in the same penitentiary warned of the need to suppress any movie depicting eroticism, abduction, revenge, highway robbery, the use of firearms, the “expensive gowing of women,” and “effeminate men”—with the latter causing growing boys to “ape the lounge-lizard variety.” For one of her remorseful incarcerated colleagues, the chief problem of moving pictures was that they provided San Francisco womanhood with a downhill road to perdition. “It is only one step,” she warned, “from the average motion picture to some curtained booth in one of the roadhouses that twinkle on the western hum of San Francisco like fireflies, where nightly joviality gives way to revel, and revel to debauch; and where penciled eyebrows, scarlet lips and abbreviated gowns are the order of the day.”8

Clearly, moving pictures and the scenes they projected incited both provocative opinions and tremendous ambivalence among a wide variety of San Franciscans. As opposed to the experiences of everyday city life—experiences confined to the San Franciscan here and now—moving pictures could, and seemingly did, offer up every topic and theatrical genre for public consideration. “There is practically no subject matter that escapes

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6 *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, 29 July 1913.

7 *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 February 1912.

production,” explained a report on moving pictures issued by the civic-minded Commonwealth Club. “From science to the Katzenjammer Kids, from Shakespeare to the French farce, all are shown. We may be thankful alone for the absence as yet of the musical comedy.”

No cinematic subject, however, incited more unrest and controversy than the depiction of race and turn-of-the-century American race relations. Since their inception, moving pictures have served as one of the primary mediums through which ideas about race and racial hierarchies have been publicly articulated in the United States. As the film scholar Vincent F. Rocchio explains, the “status of race in mainstream American culture is intimately bound to the process of representation within and through the mass media.” With Rocchio’s contention as a launching point, this chapter uses moving pictures to interrogate the tenor of black-white relations in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. Rather than attempt to survey the overwhelming number of cinematic storylines and racial images, I have decided to focus on the two movies that prompted the greatest amount of public controversy and political hand-wringing in the city. I begin this chapter with a discussion of the history of black-white relations in San Francisco and explore how popular culture transmitted and

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reinforced gross caricatures of “blackness” for the enjoyment of white San Franciscans. I then return to the world of prizefighting and examine the nearly unanimous civic drive to outlaw the film of the black boxer Jack Johnson’s 1910 victory over his white opponent, Jim Jeffries, a championship contest widely hyped as a battle for racial supremacy and whose outcome ignited race riots throughout the nation. Finally, I explore the unsuccessful campaign launched five years later by local black civil rights organizations that demanded a similar public prohibition of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, a moving picture hailed by its numerous supporters as a historical depiction of heroic white men violently vanquishing depraved and predatory black males in defense of both white womanhood and the American nation. It was the large-scale display of racial conflict on the moving picture screen that gave both the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* and *The Birth of a Nation* their immense cultural currency, and debates about these moving pictures provided a high-profile forum for the articulation of racial ideologies and the inscription of San Francisco public culture.\(^{11}\) Indeed, movies mattered in San Francisco not only because they offered controversial images for public consideration, but because moving pictures provided a keynote subject around which San Franciscans openly debated the meaning of race and the nature of black-white relations in their city.

In this chapter, then, I seek to draw connections between on-screen racial imagery and the off-screen dynamics of racial power in San Francisco by examining the intense civic disagreements spawned by movies featuring black-white conflict and interracial violence—violence that many feared would spill off of the screen and into the streets. To use the language of the film scholar, I am interested in moving picture “reception” and “activation.” I look to uncover channels of racialized power and resistance in early-twentieth century San Francisco by exploring how racial identities were, quite literally, projected on to the moving picture screen and then highlighting how different San Franciscans understood, promoted, and challenged these images.

Racism is an intricate process, one that is bolstered through the production of signs, symbols, and other discourses that assign value to real or imagined differences between racial groups. One of the primary mediums through which these values are assigned is film, “the most popular and influential medium of culture” in the first half of the twentieth century, according to the cinema historian Robert Sklar. This chapter’s examination of the debates over whether or not the public should be allowed to see the Johnson-Jeffries Fight and The Birth of a Nation suggests that those in power legitimize beliefs about race not only through the production and promotion of racial images, but by censoring cinematic images, as well. At a time when moving pictures were perhaps the most popular medium for the conveyance of information and knowledge, censorship could be a powerful weapon. To be able to either promote or whitewash specific portrayals of certain groups of people, complete with the

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14 Sklar, Movie-Made America, 3.
value judgments inherent in that process, was to be in a position of immense power—a power wielded in San Francisco by influential men and women who decided which visions of whiteness and blackness that the general public would be permitted to see.

“**A Question of Color**”

The texture of black-white relations in turn-of-the-century San Francisco was uneven. When “the world rushed in” to stake its claim to Gold Rush riches, black Americans—some free, some enslaved—were part of the mad scramble and helped make San Francisco one of the most diverse and culturally dynamic places on the planet.\(^\text{15}\) By the turn-of-the-century, black San Franciscans had made their city the leading center of African-American life on the West Coast, with the cohesive black population boasting three newspapers, numerous businesses, churches, fraternal orders, women’s organizations, benevolent societies, and other markers of a thriving urban community. According to historian Albert Broussard, San Francisco possessed a mystique as an American city that was tolerant toward blacks, and in many respects the facts support this story.\(^\text{16}\) Because African Americans made up such a small percentage of the city population—in 1890 blacks in San Francisco numbered only 1,847, approximately one half of one percent the total population—whites did not believe

\(^{15}\) For a discussion of San Francisco being “born cosmopolitan” during the Gold Rush, see Glenna Matthews, “Forging a Cosmopolitan Civic Culture: The Regional Identity of San Francisco and Northern California,” in David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, eds., *Many Wests: Place, Culture and Regional Identity* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997): 211-34.

that black San Franciscans posed a momentous threat to the social order.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, at the same time lawmakers were codifying Jim Crow culture in the South, officials in San Francisco were striking the city’s segregationist laws from the books. In 1875 the San Francisco Board of Education abolished segregated schools for African-American children, and by the late-nineteenth century black San Franciscans could own property and businesses, vote in elections, and testify against whites in court. Turn-of-the-century California law also mandated—on paper at least—that African Americans be allowed access to all public spaces, including public transportation, parks, beaches, and other recreational areas. The small number of black residents also meant an absence of rigid patterns of domestic segregation, as unlike in most American cities black San Franciscans were allowed to live in any neighborhood that they could afford, officially restricted by neither racial covenants nor civic statutes.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet turn-of-the-century San Francisco was still very much a part of an American nation that worked to deny its black citizens real social equality and respect. Despite its reputation as a “live-and-let-live” city, San Francisco was by no means free from racial discrimination. Race relations were particularly strained in the economic sphere. Though the city’s large Asian population redirected the most vicious antipathies away from black workers—creating what we might think of as a “racial buffer zone”—black San Franciscans


still found it difficult to find a place in the city’s powerful labor unions and secure well-paying industrial jobs because of persistent prejudice and the refusal among many whites to work alongside a group of people they considered inferior.19

Disparaging white attitudes toward African Americans also manifested themselves in the daily interactions of civic life, and black San Franciscans were forced to fight hard for civil rights and equal access to the public sphere.20 Venues of popular amusement were often the public terrain on which black San Franciscans campaigned for full social equality. They were also where white San Franciscans often most darkly drew the color line. Indeed, it was in leisure-time pursuits that some of the most cantankerous battles against rigid segregation and for civic belonging emerged, and a general examination of segregation in San Francisco’s popular amusements demonstrates how theaters, public baths, and other venues of play, leisure, and public entertainment could serve as important spaces of racial contact, exclusion, protest, and negotiation. In the decades immediately following the Gold Rush, for example, white ushers routinely directed African Americans to the upper balcony in the city.


20 The most famous of these battles was led by Mary Ellen “Mammy” Pleasant, a black woman who instigated a successful campaign against discriminatory streetcar service in the 1860s by arguing that access to public transportation was necessary if they were going to reliably fulfill their duties as domestic workers in white households. See Lynn M. Hudson, The Making of “Mammy Pleasant:” A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 44-55.
theaters and opera houses, a section derisively referred to as “nigger heaven.” Charles Green, a black patron, challenged this seating arrangement when the famous Fisk University Singers visited San Francisco’s New Theater in 1876, suing the establishment for violating his civil rights by selling him a ticket but refusing to let him sit in the dress circle. The U. S. Circuit Court denied Green’s claim on the grounds that a private theater could determine its own seating policy.

By the mid-1890s civil rights legislation prohibiting race-based exclusion and guaranteeing equal access to all public amusements and accommodations was on the books, yet black San Franciscans seeking public pleasure could still find themselves on the wrong side of an arbitrarily drawn color line. It was “A Question of Color,” the San Francisco Chronicle reported, when a black San Franciscan named John Harris purchased a ticket at the magnificent Sutro Baths on the Fourth of July, 1897, but was denied access to the mammoth pools by the white attendants. One week later Harris was again denied swimming privileges, and with the assistance of the San Francisco Assembly Club, a social organization comprised of “the better class of colored people,” he brought suit against Sutro’s bathing establishment. Despite the Sutro Baths being popularly celebrated as an amusement “for the people” and a place “where all may bathe,” the baths’ superintendent argued that allowing blacks to swim in the same water as whites was bad business and would not be allowed.

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22 San Francisco Chronicle, 23 August 1948. This incident is also briefly discussed in Broussard, Black San Francisco, 20.

23 Popularly known as the “Dibble Bill,” the 1897 act was the precursor to the Unruh Civil Rights Act, a 1905 law that mandated equal access to inns, restaurants, hotels, bathhouses, barbershops, theaters, skating rinks, and other public accommodations.

24 San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 15 March 1896.
as they are sober and well-behaved are allowed to enter the baths as spectators, but are not permitted to go in the water.” Calling this particular form of segregation “not a matter of personal feeling” but “a business necessity,” the natatorium’s management reasoned that white patrons would refuse to use the baths altogether if “negroes were allowed equal privileges in that way.”

As was often the case, the Bay Area popular press used the incident as an opportunity to publicly admonish the party exhibiting racial prejudice while simultaneously reinforcing timeworn prejudices against African Americans. The Santa Rosa California Blade was sympathetic to Harris’s plight, but reasoned that, “It will be a hard task to secure a jury that will allow damages even though the law allows the black brethren equal rights with other folk. A negro is a negro and his color is his misfortune, not his fault.” Nobody was safe from the caustic commentary of The Wasp, a San Francisco weekly that seemed to take special delight in the controversy. Expressing their support for the “colored gen’lum” who was “denied the luxury of a bath because the place is extensively patronized by white trash,” The Wasp ridiculed white San Francisco’s preference for segregated swimming. “The seals are off color,” they noted, “but who grumbles because they swim in the same water as that of the Sutro Baths? Verily, they strain at a Sambo yet swallow a seal!” As for Adolph Sutro, The Wasp considered him a false philanthropist and judged his decision to turn “a humble blackamoor away from his human laundry most inexcusable.” The aggrieved Harris would eventually win his lawsuit and collect fifty dollars for each of the two episodes of

25 San Francisco Call, 2 August 1897.
26 Santa Rosa California Blade, 5 August 1897.
27 The Wasp, 7 August 1897.
discrimination, but it was a verdict the all-white jury reluctantly rendered only after first asking the judge if they could ignore the law and reward Harris nothing despite being convinced that he had in fact been excluded from the baths because of his color.\footnote{San Francisco Examiner, 17 February 1898.}

Despite public laws prohibiting racial discrimination in public places, a series of clues indicate that the practice not only existed, but was rampant. The experiences of the great black prizefighter, Peter Jackson, in many ways stand as a template for the uneven and ambivalent nature of San Francisco race relations. Briefly mentioned in my first chapter, Jackson was one of the great San Francisco sporting heroes of the late-nineteenth century. Charmed by the black fighter’s gentlemanly demeanor, the Examiner’s W. W. Naughton and other white San Franciscan fight fans launched a crusade to win their adopted fighter an opportunity to compete for the heavyweight crown, only to see their demands go unheeded in an American sporting era marked by an aversion to interracial competition.\footnote{For information on Jackson, see David K. Wiggins, “Peter Jackson and the Elusive Heavyweight Championship: A Black Athlete’s Struggle Against the Late Nineteenth Century Color-Line,” Journal of Sport History 12 (Summer 1985): 143-63.} Despite Jackson’s celebrated status and his reputation as a gentleman, however, he was no match for the San Francisco color line when in 1897 he tried to check into the original Baldwin Hotel and was told he would have to lodge in the establishment’s separate and less-desirable annex. Jackson cried foul and told the dailies that it was the first time in his life that he had been excluded from a place of lodging because of his race. An investigation by the San Francisco Call a few days later suggests that this type of discrimination was not uncommon. Black hotel workers throughout San Francisco attested to the fact that management systematically denied potential black lodgers access to the city’s finer hotels. Repeating the argument of the Sutro Baths superintendent, hotel clerks called racial segregation an unwritten but necessary
rule and revealed that any black man inquiring about the availability of a room was almost always told there were no vacancies.\(^{30}\)

Writing about the city’s somewhat schizophrenic race relations during the Gold Rush Era, historian Roger Lotchin explains that, “the hostility was always ambiguous, and respect and support coexisted with antipathy.”\(^{31}\) This is a fair way to describe black-white relations at the turn-of-the-century, as well. Racial prejudice and public discrimination did exist, but as the chief scholars of San Francisco black life point out, despite all the insults, restrictions, and inconveniences, the city was a relatively safe place for African Americans to make their home. No African American was ever lynched in San Francisco, and there are very few recorded instances of black and white interracial violence in the city. Summarizing the whole of San Francisco black-white relations at the turn-of-the-century, Douglas Henry Daniels says they were marked by “a kind of complacency,” while Albert Broussard defines white attitudes toward blacks as “polite racism.”\(^{32}\)

Complacent, polite, or otherwise, many of the ideas that white San Franciscans held about their African American neighbors were received and reinforced through the popular press, theatrical presentations, and other public entertainments that offered up daily caricatures of black life for mass consumption. American popular amusements simultaneously reflected and fostered racist ideals by presenting derogatory depictions of black life that promoted racial hierarchies and naturalized ideas about white supremacy and

\(^{30}\) San Francisco Call, 28 and 29 September 1897.


\(^{32}\) Broussard, Black San Francisco, 7; Daniels, Pioneer Urbanites, xiv.
power. World’s Fairs annually presented demeaning visions of African human savagery. Major League baseball teams refused to hire African-American ballplayers but employed blacks as team mascots with the expectation that they would entertain the crowd with childish theatrics between innings. Popular literature posited African American difference and inferiority, as well, with the ubiquitous comics of Thomas Nast and the “Darktown” lithographs of Currier and Ives poking fun at black mannerisms, dialect, and bodies. Academia provided a scholarly basis for racial prejudice by producing works like Robert W. Shufeldt’s The Negro: A Menace to Civilization (1907) and Charles Carroll’s wildly popular The Mystery Solved: The Negro a Beast (1900), two works whose titles alone indicate the authors’ rejection of the fundamental humanity of black men and women. Writing about the era when newspapers, literature, and other popular mediums presented devastatingly negative images of African Americans, the historian Eric Foner explains, “In the relentless purveying of racist iconography, popular culture in effect legitimated and ‘naturalized’ the system of economic and political subordination” for blacks. Whether the intent was sinister or not, white-controlled and popularized racial imagery confronted black Americans with a daily

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33 See, for example, Robert W. Rydell. All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).


36 Eric Foner, in the introduction to Logan, The Betrayal of the Negro, xiv. This topic is also covered in Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” 1-20.
reminder of their second-class status and provided white Americans with reassuring messages of their supposed physical and cultural superiority.\textsuperscript{37}

The public presentations of whiteness and blackness did not originate with the advent of moving pictures. The controversial racial imagery inherent in both the \textit{Johnson-Jeffries Fight} and \textit{The Birth of a Nation} needs to be understood within the context of the theatrical representation of race on the San Francisco stage, particularly the imagery presented through blackface minstrelsy. One of the most popular forms of entertainment in the nineteenth century, minstrelsy was, at its most fundamental level, an absurd caricature of black life—where white men blackened their faces with burnt cork and engaged in social satire through the personage of stock characters like “Sambo,” the Southern plantation simpleton, and “Zip Coon,” the farcical and pretentious urban dandy. Though scholars who study minstrelsy disagree over its exact antebellum origins, subversive potential, and precise cultural meaning, white men who put on blackface seized control of the black male body and, in the words of minstrelsy scholar Robert Toll, depicted blacks as “lazy, pretentious, frivolous, improvident, irresponsible, and immature—the very antithesis of what white men liked to believe about themselves.”\textsuperscript{38} Whether minstrelsy was a way to present a black-faced foil against which to project the physical and psychological assets of “whiteness,” a strategy of cultural assimilation for anxious and homesick white working-class immigrants, a means of masking one’s self in order to more safely argue controversial political or philosophical positions, or, as Eric Lott suggests, a complex and ambivalent form of cross-racial desire, when white men blackened their faces and put on “Ethiopian airs,” they entertained millions of Americans.

\textsuperscript{37} My understanding of the role of race-based imagery in the construction of both black and white racial identity comes from Harris, \textit{Colored Pictures}, 1-82.

with a theatrical form that unfailingly presented an unrealistic characterization of black American life.\textsuperscript{39}

Blackface minstrelsy arrived in California during the Gold Rush years, and though its popularity waxed and waned like the fortunes of a peripatetic prospector, it would maintain a monumental presence on the San Francisco stage through the turn-of-the-century. When the touring Philadelphia Minstrels arrived in the city in October of 1849 they instantly found work at the famed Bella Union on the Barbary Coast. By 1855 most minstrel shows had emerged from the rough and rowdy male-dominated melodeons and earned a space in San Francisco’s grandest theaters, where groups like the Buckley Serenaders, Sable Brothers Harmonists, and Christy-Backus Minstrels regularly outdrew Shakespearean drama and grand opera as the city’s most popular theatrical attraction. The end of the Civil War and the completion of the transcontinental railroad opened the way for dozens of minstrel acts to travel west and perform in the entertainment-loving city. Publicizing themselves as “Dandy Negroes,” “Ethiopian Delineators,” and “Happy Plantation Darkies,” these traveling troupes of white entertainers performed skits, songs, dances, and melodrama for San Franciscan audiences of all ages. The most popular troupe of the era, however, was the locally based San Francisco Minstrels, a group of white men who not only “blacked up” but also donned female dress, provocatively linking blackness with femininity and positing white men as the antithesis and master of both.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{40} For early San Francisco minstrelsy, see Misha Berson, “The San Francisco Stage, Part I: From Gold Rush to Golden Spike, 1849-1869,” \textit{San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum Journal} 2 (Fall 1989): 63-7; and Tom Stoddard, \textit{Jazz on the Barbary Coast} (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1998), 179-85. For a list of early
By the 1870s San Francisco was minstrel crazy. “A veritable nigger boom,” was how
*The Wasp* described it with sting in 1881.\(^{41}\) Ironically—indeed, we might say cruelly—it
would be through minstrelsy that most black performers found their way onto the San
Francisco stage. Popularly known as “genuine Negroes” or “real nigs,” African-American
showman put on the burnt cork and played “the part of the slow, shuffling, or happy-go-
lucky black.”\(^{42}\) White audiences reveled in the uncertainty of the racial identity of the
minstrels before them and wondered aloud as to the “authenticity” of the performers. San
Francisco’s black community received minstrels of both races with mixed reviews. When
“Sam Pride’s Original Colored Minstrels” hit the town in April of 1862, the city’s black-
owned newspaper, *The Pacific Appeal*, recommended that the black population make the trip
to see them. “Their performances are amusing and highly ludicrous,” the newspaper
explained, “exaggerated, of course; all such burlesques must necessarily be, whether Yankee,
Irish, or Negro character, but with all calculated to excite the risible faculties. All who like to
enjoy a good hearty laugh should go and see them.”\(^{43}\) Yet not all in the city’s black
population agreed. In a stern response to the *Appeal*’s evaluation, the local black poet James
Madison Bell took to task all minstrels, regardless of the color of their skin. White minstrels
were “pernicious men” who exploited “the poverty and ignorance of an oppressed, long-
outraged, and downtrodden people.” But even worse, argued Bell, were the black performers

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\(^{41}\) *The Wasp*, 25 February 1881.


\(^{43}\) *The Pacific Appeal*, 19 April 1862.
who “have been induced through ignorance, lack of principle, or sheer cupidity, to be a party in representing by public entertainment, their own degradation and that of their unfortunate race.” Such racial betrayal, Bell despaired, “is by far the unkindest cut of all.”

Theatrical opportunities for African Americans, however, were severely curtailed by white expectations that black performers “jump Jim Crow” and play one of the familiar racial characters forged on the minstrel stage. Plantation singing, mock ups of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, cakewalk demonstrations at the Orpheum, comic operas such as Africa!—these were the theatrical parameters within which most blacks could find work in San Francisco. The early career of the famous black showman Bert Williams is a telling example of these constraints. An enormously talented performer born in the West Indies and educated briefly at Stanford University, Williams could find little to do in San Francisco besides blacking up and performing the shuffling routines of the plantation minstrel. Teaming with George Walker, the twosome eventually rejected burnt cork and slave-era costumes and performed a high-energy song-and-dance routine at the bawdy Midway Plaisance on Market Street. The duo would need more work, however, and when the “authentic savages” failed to show up at the African Village exhibit for the start of the 1894 Midwinter Exposition in Golden Gate Park, Williams and Walker reluctantly agreed to don animal skins and parade around the grounds as African “primitives.”

Soon these familiar images of blackness could and would be widely disseminated by the invention of moving pictures. The broad and inexact term “moving pictures” has caused quite a bit of rankling and conflicting claims among film scholars as to when and where the

44 The Pacific Appeal, 24 May 1862. Also, see Stoddard, Jazz on the Barbary Coast, 180-2.

first moving picture was produced and exhibited. According to San Francisco film historian Geoffrey Bell, the very first “public exhibition of motion pictures” occurred in San Francisco in 1880, when Eadweard Muybridge and his zoopraxiscope displayed images of horses running on Leland Stanford’s Bay Area estate. Stanford had commissioned the photographic experiment to help settle a bet over whether or not a galloping horse ever had all four feet off the ground. It did! Muybridge displayed the evidence before a curious high-society audience at the San Francisco Art Association, with the advertisement in the Examiner promising an exhibition of “the various movements of horses, dogs, oxen deer, etc., and of men running, leaping, wrestling, turning summersaults, etc.,” all to “be exhibited by means of the Oxy-Hydrogen Light and the Zoogyroscope.”46 These were not moving pictures as we think of them today, however. Muybridge himself billed the new medium as “Illustrated Photographs in Motion.” Yet, as Rebecca Solnit explains in River of Shadows, her meditation on technology, popular culture, and the American West, “Motion pictures proper were invented by others, but no matter which way the medium’s genealogy is traced, it comes straight back to Muybridge.”47 Muybridge, in other words, had captured time down in Palo Alto and then spun it back into motion up in San Francisco, helping to launch one of the most influential inventions of the modern world.

The date most film historians accept for the true dawn of the moving picture era is 14 April 1894, when Andrew Holland opened the first Kinetoscope parlor in New York City.48

46 San Francisco Examiner, 3 May 1880.


48 See, for example, Gomery, Shared Pleasures, 5.
It did not take long for the new device to make its way across the country. According to one of Holland’s traveling representatives, San Francisco’s John F. Ryan became the first man west of Chicago to view the Edison Kinetoscope on 1 June 1894. Sensing a financial bonanza, a local businessman named Peter Bacigalupi paid $2500 for five of the remarkable machines and set them up inside a sidewalk-level store in the *Chronicle* newspaper building at Market and Kearney. For ten cents one could peer into the Kinetoscope and view what must have been an astonishing two minutes of film. Indeed, in a clear indication that moving pictures were fast becoming one of San Francisco’s most popular amusements, Peter Bacigalupi’s penny arcade machines could soon be found inside the historic Bella Union, competing with scantily clad women as the venue’s chief visual attraction.⁴⁹

The city’s first nickelodeons, where movies were actually projected onto a screen, opened in 1898 and were concentrated in the downtown district alongside the San Francisco Bay. The premier nickelodeon was the Cinegraph on Market Street, owned and operated by A. W. Furst and advertised as “a scientific and refined entertainment for ladies and gentlemen.” Originally an evening’s production at the Cinegraph cost ten cents, a price that admitted you to a short vaudeville show and about 100 feet of moving pictures. The live performance was upstairs, and when the vaudeville routines ended the audience filed down to the ground level and stood while watching assorted moving pictures projected onto a screen sixteen-foot square. Later Furst got rid of the vaudeville altogether, lowered admission to five cents, and provided his patrons with something to sit on. The line-up of moving pictures changed weekly, but a typical series might include a woman belly-dancing, a Mexican bullfight, the strongman Eugene Sandow flexing his muscles, and a silent sermon delivered

by Pope Leo XIII, the latter likely a popular choice among San Francisco’s heavily Catholic population.\(^5\)

The earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed most of San Francisco’s nickel theatres, but entertainment operators capitalized on the weary citizens’ desire for cheap amusements by opening up a slew of movie houses in the Fillmore and Mission districts, residential sections of the city that had been spared cataclysmic destruction. Fillmore Street especially prospered, becoming the city’s cultural epicenter in the immediate post-quake era and filling the role as San Francisco’s primary moving picture district. The construction of grand moving picture theaters soon became part of the larger reconstruction of downtown San Francisco, and within several years of the earthquake and fire, Market Street alone housed fourteen moving picture theaters that boasted a combined ten thousand seats. Moving pictures were again flourishing. According to a report in the film trade journal, *Moving Picture World*, by 1908 there were over one hundred nickelodeons operating in San Francisco with an estimated attendance of fifty thousand patrons per day and box office receipts topping one million dollars annually.\(^5\) By all indications, San Franciscans were movie crazy.

*“It Was a Great Fight, and We’ve All But Seen It”*

The immense popularity of moving pictures would prove problematic to African Americans who soon learned that that the medium of film possessed an especially troubling potential for popularizing black stereotypes and both projecting and influencing the nation’s

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tortuous racial politics. Because nickelodeon presentations were usually documentary shorts known as “living pictures”—the smoldering U.S.S. Maine in Havana Harbor, the view from a train ride up nearby Mount Tamalpais, a walking tour of San Francisco’s Chinatown—early cinematic imagery laid the foundation for the idea that moving pictures were simply undeniable facts on the screen. Into this understanding came one-reel films with titles like *The Gator and the Pickaninny* (1903), *The Chicken Thief* (1904), and *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904), popular and accessible moving pictures that promoted the onerous caricatures of blackness developed on the minstrel stage.\(^{52}\) As Gerald R. Butters explains in his history of black masculinity in cinema, “American popular culture reinforced the mythology of black male inferiority. What was original about the motion picture was not the message it delivered but the means by which the message was conveyed.”\(^{53}\) Moving pictures of black men boxing were a part of this deleterious cinematic canon, as well. Whether it was fictitious cinematic shorts like William Selig’s *Prize Fight in Coontown* (1902), or films of actual interracial sparring in which black fighters played the role of wildly undisciplined and superstitious boxers obsequious of their white opponents, prizefight films regularly posited white supremacy and presented black men as their laughably incompetent inferiors.\(^{54}\)

But moving pictures of Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world, would contradict and challenge this early cinematic racial imagery. As a pugilist, Jack Johnson ranks among the greatest heavyweights of all time. Big and strong with

\(^{52}\) For a discussion of the link between early cinema and the blackface minstrel tradition, see Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 12-8.

\(^{53}\) Butters, Jr., *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*, 41.

\(^{54}\) When Ed Martin became the first black heavyweight to be filmed in a sparring contest against the white fighter Gus Ruhlin, for example, the Edison film catalog reported how the piece ended with a “little piece of comedy” when Ruhlin gave Martin a live chicken, which the black fighter “receives in a joyful manner.” See Streible, “Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Fight Films,” 170-1.
lightning quick hands, once Johnson honed his trademark disciplined and defensive style of fighting he became the world’s best fighter, eventually winning the heavyweight title in 1908 against his hopelessly overmatched white opponent, Tommy Burns. Fighting in an era dominated by Darwinian thought, when the heavyweight champion could plausibly lay claim to being the fittest of them all, every Johnson victory was a momentary yet momentous blow against the longstanding claims of white supremacy. Johnson’s uppercut was a declaration of race pride, his right cross a bold pronouncement of black power. Indeed, much more than just a prizefighter, Johnson was a figure of Messianic proportions for the nation’s black communities. He was hailed as “the Negroes’ Deliverer,” with none other than the black spokesperson Booker T. Washington reportedly calling Jack Johnson’s pugilistic accomplishments “a God-send to the negro race.”

White Americans, however, refused to worship at the altar of Jack Johnson. They despised how Johnson seemed be trying to exact revenge for the entirety of the nation’s racial history every time he entered the ring. They chafed at the way the black fighter verbally taunted his white opponents. They loathed how he refused to deliver the final knockout blow in order to administer a more severe beating, and they grew ill at the way he did it all with a confounding insouciance and contemptuous smile. But for most white Americans, the black champion’s greatest transgression was the way he lived his life in daily defiance of the all-pervasive doctrine of white supremacy. Johnson did all of the things that white Americans believed black men were never supposed to do. He wore expensive suits, drove fancy cars, and he unapologetically spoke his mind. Worst of all for his anxious critics, Johnson ridiculed the nation’s racial divide by not only appearing in public with white

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prostitutes, but by marrying a succession of white women. Johnson embodied what many considered to be a turn-of-the-century epidemic of antagonistic black male sexuality, a social ill that one southern newspaper suggested could only be cured if the transgressive Jack Johnson “be given the hemp.”

White filmmakers recording Johnson’s pre-fight training did their best to temper the champion’s racial power by placing him within stereotypical contexts. Moving pictures of Johnson’s camps often showed the black fighter lazily lying about, chasing and eating chickens, or listening and dancing to music, rather than sparring. The white San Francisco press similarly toiled to counter Johnson’s masculine posture. Reports of his training habits suggested a slack discipline and hedonistic lifestyle, while illustrations in city newspapers depicted him as a primitive and simian-like creature who spoke in nearly unintelligible dialect. San Franciscan columnists, in fact, rarely referred to Johnson by his real name, preferring instead to call him “darkie,” “Big Smoke,” “the Black Peril,” or “the Congo Coon.” Their favorite nickname was “L’il Arthur,” as if Johnson were a character in some “pickanniny” cartoon from the Sunday funny pages and not the almighty heavyweight champion of the world.

For his part, Johnson reveled in his role of pugilism’s Othello. He was fully aware that every one of his victories caught on film was a powerful refutation of the myths and representations of blackness seen before on both stage and silent screen. Johnson, in fact, was what we might today call “media savvy.” Cognizant that a longer fight made for a better fight film, he often toyed with his opponents until the later rounds while skillfully playing to the camera. When Johnson defeated Tommy Burns and seized the heavyweight title in

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56 Roberts, Papa Jack, 146.

57 See, for example, the San Francisco Chronicle, 31 December 1908; San Francisco Examiner, 1 July 1910.
Fig. 2.1: Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion, fought six times in San Francisco and often trained in the city. Before winning the title in 1908, he battled Marvin Hart on 28 March 1905 at Woodward’s Pavilion. Though Johnson was the superior fighter that night, Hart won a controversial twenty-round decision because the fight’s promoter, referee, and sole judge, Alex Greggains—an ex-boxer and onetime bodyguard for the city’s Democratic Party leader Christopher “Blind Boss” Buckley—felt that Johnson had not given his best. (Photo used with the permission of the Bancroft Library)
Australia, for example, ringside observer Jack London explained how Johnson “smiled and
cuffed, and in the clinches whirled his opponent around so as to be able to assume beatific
and angelic facial expressions for the cinematograph machines.”\(^{58}\) Films of the final minutes
of Johnson’s performance were never seen, however. Just before Johnson was set to knock
out Burns the Sydney police stormed the ring and stopped both the fight and moving picture
cameras. Depending on one’s point of view, the world had either been thankfully spared or
unfairly denied the sight of the black fighter’s ascension to the heavyweight throne.

It would be moving pictures of Jack Johnson’s title defense in San Francisco against
the white fighter Stanley Ketchel that first provided American moviegoers with an up-close
display of the new champion’s awesome power. In the twelfth round Ketchel made the
“mistake” of catching Johnson off-guard and knocking him to the canvas. With the San
Francisco crowd roaring in disbelief, Johnson stood tall before the referee could even begin
his knockdown count and floored Ketchel with a punch so powerful that careful examination
of the fight film shows some of the challenger’s front teeth flying across the ring and the
others imbedded in Johnson’s glove. Moving pictures of the Johnson-Ketchel fight were a
popular attraction at San Francisco’s Novelty Theater on Steiner and O’Farrell. Though it
had been Johnson who won the bout, theater management appealed to white pride and
widespread anti-Johnson sentiment by advertising the film with the line, “See Ketchel floor
Johnson.”\(^{59}\) Ketchel’s knockdown of Johnson, however, had been but a momentary
competitive aberration, and taken as a whole the film was an irrefutable document of Jack

\(^{58}\) New York Herald, 27 December 1908, quoted in Streible, “Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Fight
Films,” 173.

\(^{59}\) San Francisco Chronicle, 7 November 1909. Most Bay Area prizefight films were shot and produced by the
Miles Brothers, a San Franciscan trio who established the first motion picture exchange in the United States.
For general information on the Miles Brothers, see Bell, The Golden Gate and the Silver Screen, 100-4.
Fig. 2.2: San Francisco fight fans got to see the newly crowned heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, first hand when he fought Stanley Ketchel at “Sunny Jim” Coffroth’s Mission Street Arena in 1909. Ketchel knocked Johnson down in the twelfth round, but Johnson quickly rose from the canvas and knocked Ketchel unconscious with a punch so powerful that Ketchel’s front teeth were embedded in Johnson’s glove. Despite Johnson’s awesome victory, San Francisco nickelodeons promoted films of the fight with the advertisement, “See Ketchel Floor Johnson,” an indication that most San Franciscans desired to see images demonstrating Johnson’s vulnerability. (Photo used with permission of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)
Johnson’s pugilistic power. As film scholar Dan Streible explains, the *Johnson-Ketchel Fight* “confronted white viewers with an historically unprecedented image of black power. For African American audiences, the same pictures offered a laudable antidote to the pervasive negative stereotypes of black culture.”

White America desperately turned to the nation’s last great white champion, the undefeated and retired Jim Jeffries, in hopes that he would render these images of black power anachronistic. Symbolically speaking, Jeffries was the perfect man to take up the challenge. He was known as “the Boilermaker” and “the Man of Iron,” names that denoted his awesome industrial-era muscularity. San Franciscans preferred to call him the “Grizzly Bear” in a nod to his California roots and mighty physical prowess. As the champion, Jeffries had disparaged Johnson’s abilities and refused the black fighter’s challenges. Now popular sentiment demanded that Jeffries reverse his course, seize the mantle of “Great White Hope,” and redeem his race in the ring. With the hopes of white America pressing firmly on his broad shoulders, Jeffries agreed. The fight’s promoter, Tex Rickard, announced that the contest would be fought for a $100,000 purse on Independence Day, 1910, in a to-be-determined San Francisco Bay Area location. Jeffries immediately set up camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains, desperately trying to lose weight and regain his past fighting form. Johnson and his entourage moved into the Seal Rock House on San Francisco’s Pacific Coast, where the champion divided his time between intense training,

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61 See, for example, the poem, “Will the Grizzly Bear Come Back?” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 December 1908.
giving sparring demonstrations to the public, and driving his expensive cars at top speeds through Golden Gate Park.\footnote{Roberts, \textit{Papa Jack}, 89-92.}

Sensing cinematic paydirt, William T. Rock, the “daddy of the moving picture men,” secured the right to film the fight for his Vitagraph Company of America. Rock agreed to pay Rickard, the fight’s promoter, $250,000 for the exclusive moving picture rights and pledged to film the final day preparations in both camps, the arrival of the crowd and ringside notables, and the momentous battle itself.\footnote{\textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 2 July 1910.} Prizefighting and moving pictures were coming of age at precisely the same time. The two industries, in fact, were engaged in something of a symbiotic relationship, with moving pictures giving prizefighters greater exposure and prizefighting giving theater operators a popular subject to show their audiences. The Johnson-Jeffries contest was to be not only the biggest sporting event in American history, but “a moving picture fight” as well. Film distributors nationwide were clearly counting on Jeffries to come out on top. “It is no exaggeration to say that the entire world will await a pictorial representation of the bout,” explained \textit{Moving Picture World}. “With a good light and a battle of, say, thirty well-fought rounds, and the unmistakable victory of Jeffries, these pictures should prove in the current locution, a ‘gold mine.’ This is the wish that is father to the thoughts of hundreds of millions of white people throughout the world.”\footnote{\textit{Moving Picture World}, 18 June 1910.}

As the above quote suggests, the Johnson-Jeffries fight was understood not as a battle between two men, but as a contest between the races. In a sport given to hyperbole, where seemingly every highly anticipated bout is billed as “the fight of the century,” the Johnson-
Jeffries match can justly lay claim to such a title.\textsuperscript{65} As a cultural symbol of intense racial conflict, the pre-fight posturing and rhetoric reveals a host of disparaging assumptions that white San Franciscans held about their black neighbors. According to the pugilistic authorities in the city’s popular press, the fight of the century would be a one-sided affair, with newspaper writers unanimously assuring their readers that the white man’s victory was a biological certainty. Who could argue, after all, with San Francisco’s resident boxing expert and the ex-heavyweight champion, Jim Corbett, when he forecast certain defeat for the black titleholder? “There is no doubt in my mind that Jeffries will have an easy time defeating Johnson. As I have always said, Johnson—and all negroes, in fact—are imbued with a traditional yellow streak.”\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, for most commentators a Johnson victory was inconceivable. Waldemar Young of the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} believed that Jeffries and Johnson were two men whose differences were defined “by their heritage which is of ancestry ages old.” Young likened the tanned and muscular Jeffries to a Gold Rush prospector, but assured his readers that his bronze skin in no way masked his racial power. “He is still the white man, mothered of a race which has dominated the world.”\textsuperscript{67}

The \textit{San Francisco Examiner} likewise referenced history when it looked back two millennia to confidently predict that, “the spirit of Caesar in Jeff ought to whip the Barbarian.”\textsuperscript{68} Also writing for the \textit{Examiner} was muckraking journalist Alfred Lewis, who explained that just as Jeffries’s whiteness guaranteed his victory, Johnson’s blackness spelled his certain defeat. “Johnson, essentially African, feels no deeper than the moment, sees no

\textsuperscript{65} For the national buildup to the fight, see Gilmore, \textit{Bad Nigger!}, 32-42; and Roberts, \textit{Papa Jack}, 92-104.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, 2 July 1910.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 2 July 1910.

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 3 July 1910.
farther than his nose—which is flat and of the present. The same cheerful indifference to coming events has marked others of the race even while standing in the very shadow of the gallows. They were to be hanged; they knew it. But having no fancy, no imagination—they could not anticipate.\textsuperscript{69} Lewis’s chilling analysis accurately put to words what many whites across America hoped the Fourth of July fight would be—a high-profile and symbolic lynching of the transgressive Jack Johnson inside the ring.

The fight was originally scheduled to occur across the San Francisco Bay at the Emeryville Racetrack, but a platoon of East Bay clergy successfully protested the bout by condemning it as a “brutalizing spectacle” that would attract the “undesirables of both races” for an event “which even frontier and Mormon Utah spurns.”\textsuperscript{70} With the “Divines Against the Big Fight,” as one newspaper headline put it, the Emeryville promoters backed off and San Franciscan civic leaders immediately seized the reins and announced that the fight would take place in their city.\textsuperscript{71} John L. Herget, the one-time pugilist and chairman of the San Francisco Police Committee explained, “As long as San Francisco tolerates prizefights, there is no reason why this, the fight of all fights, should not be decided here.”\textsuperscript{72} As it turned out, however, there was. A mere three weeks before the Fourth of July bout, California Governor James Gillett announced that he would not allow the contest to occur in his state.\textsuperscript{73} The Eastern press, already up in arms over San Francisco’s willingness to host the interracial contest on the most sacred of civic holidays, hailed the move as “California’s Conversion”

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 1 July 1910.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{San Francisco Call}, 9 May 1910.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{San Francisco Call}, 31 March 1910.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{San Francisco Call}, 24 May 1910.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{San Francisco Call}, 16 June 1910.
and preached that Governor Gillett had “seen a sudden light.” Though Gillett insisted he was merely responding to the will of the California people, that “sudden light” was actually the threat of losing the eleventh-hour battle against New Orleans for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition (a topic that I will address in my next chapter). With the Governor standing firm behind his decision to prohibit the bout, Tex Rickard, the fight’s promoter, scurried for an alternate site and quickly announced that he was transferring the bout to Reno, Nevada.

Despite the governor’s decree, San Franciscans lost none of their zeal for the big bout. “No event of political, commercial, educational, or scientific importance ever had so much attention from the San Francisco press, day by day, for three months,” reported the Argonaut with more than a hint of exasperation. “Far less money was spent in collecting the facts about the earthquake. A stranger coming into the State possessed of his mind and his morals would have said that the people here lived and moved and had their being about the prize-ring and that their moral education could only express itself in the sign language of upper-cuts and jabs.” Even the sparsest bit of information about the fight was handled as big news. A reporter for the British magazine, Boxing, was in San Francisco and gauged the city’s collective fascination with the fight like this:

The clergy are preaching the fight, the whole fight, and nothing but the fight—and cannot stop it. The stores have the statuettes of the fighters. Photos of the fighters as they were yesterday, as they are today, and as they will be tomorrow—perhaps—are in every window. Scraps of conversation in the street reach you like this: “Boxed nine rounds yesterday”—“Faster than

74 “California’s Conversion,” The Independent, 23 June 1910.
75 San Francisco Examiner, 18 June 1910.
76 Argonaut, 23 July 1910.
“Can’t get the Black to work hard enough”—“Had his auto out”—
“No training”—“Corbett’ll do it for him”—“Too old”—“Good as ever”—“Bet you!”

Regardless of whether one was for the fight or against it, whether one had money on Johnson or was betting on Jeffries, in the month before the big interracial contest San Franciscans seemed to be talking about nothing else.

San Francisco’s fascination with prizefighting and the Johnson-Jeffries fight was made plain on Independence Day as tremendous crowds gathered throughout the city to find out which race would be able to claim the heavyweight champion as one of its own. Over 16,000 fight fans spent their holiday afternoon inside either Blot’s Arena or Dreamland Rink. Promoters advertised these gatherings as democratic affairs fitting for the Fourth of July. Men, women, and children—regardless of race—were welcome provided they clipped a ticket from that morning’s San Francisco Chronicle. “No matter who you are,” the paper announced, “no matter where you may live, so long as the seats last, if you have a coupon cut from a Chronicle you are entitled to one seat.” Not to be outdone by their rival, the Examiner hosted a trio of gatherings in conjunction with the fight. The paper rented the Valencia Theater, a “regular high-class moving picture palace,” where two thousand fight fans watched a series of silent films as pre-bout entertainment. When news broke that Jack Johnson had entered the ring in Reno, P. N. Teeple seized the megaphone and began verbally recreating the scene for the action-starved San Francisco audience. The people cheered when Teeple announced that Nevada betting commissioners were offering odds of 10 to 6 in favor of Jeffries, though the “two colored men occupying front seats” displayed indifference when

77 Boxing, 18 June 1910.

78 San Francisco Chronicle, 2 July 1910; 5 July 1910.
Fig. 2.3: The *San Francisco Bulletin*’s special fight section attests to the immense anticipation in San Francisco for the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries fight. Held on the Fourth of July in Reno, Nevada, the *Bulletin* billed it as “The Battle of the Century.” (*San Francisco Bulletin*, 2 July 1910)
informed of the white fighter’s favored status. A short cable car ride away, fight fans were treated to an even more realistic re-creation of the affair. Fifteen thousand San Franciscans jammed The Auditorium on the corner of Page and Fillmore, set to receive pugilism expert W. W. Naughton’s wired updates from Reno. To add authenticity to the proceedings, perched on the stage were two men—one black, one white—who mimicked the action based on the sportswriter’s incoming reports. The holiday crowd of five thousand waved their hats and cheered madly whenever news of a particularly well-struck blow from the fists of Jeffries flashed across the wire.

By far the biggest crowd gathered at the Examiner’s downtown headquarters at the corner of Third and Market Streets. In an era before radio, San Franciscans often congregated outside the building to receive bulletins on important news days, but the crowd for the Johnson-Jeffries fight was easily the largest in city history. By noon an estimated 80,000 men, women, and children filled the streets and anxiously awaited Naughton’s updates. Just as they had at The Auditorium, the Examiner erected a huge stage two stories above Market Street, where a pair of fighters acted out the Reno battle as accurately as possible. The role of Jack Johnson was filled by Joe Collier, a black fighter of some renown himself, while Oakland’s Lew Taylor played the part of The Great White Hope. The crowd politely cheered as the black man Collier stepped into the ring, but the white man Taylor was met with a thunderous shout of support. Observers reported that the two pugilists were a “living picture” of the proceedings in Reno. The pro-Jeffries crowd hurrahed at every early mention of their fighter. As the bout wore on, and as it became clear to the assemblage that Jeffries was likely going down to defeat, the Examiner reported that “the fairness of the
crowd was shown by constantly increasing cheers for Johnson.” The scene at the culmination of the mimicked bout sounds remarkable:

The crowd was plainly a Jeffries’ crowd at the beginning of the fight, but as Johnson fought his way toward victory his name was received with more and more applause at every new report from the ringside. When the news of the final knockdown was flashed from Reno directly, Collier swung out a blow that sent Taylor to the floor, and when Taylor failed to return, the great throng knew that the battle had been won by Johnson and the applause that was given for the colored champion rang all the way from New Montgomery street to Ellis and Fourth Streets, and from Fourth Street almost to Mission.

When word of Johnson’s victory finally came, and the final round was pantomimed, the crowd seemed stunned but satisfied. “It was a great fight,” one of the slowly departing spectators was heard to say, “and we’ve all but seen it.”

If one’s idea of a great fight was one that was evenly matched, then the Johnson-Jeffries contest was anything but great. Johnson not only defeated Jeffries, he thrashed him. Indeed, if the majority of those who attended the fight in Reno had gathered in anticipation of a symbolic lynching inside the ring, what they got was a hangman of a different color. According to ringside reporter Jack London, the “fistic conversation” that all in attendance had expected to see was instead “a monologue delivered to twenty thousand spectators by a smiling negro who was never in doubt and who was never serious for more than a moment at a time. No blow Jeff ever landed hurt his dusky opponent.” Johnson relentlessly pounded Jeffries, and the bout was stopped in the fifteenth round when Jeffries’s handlers conceded

79 For reports of the scene at The Auditorium, the Valencia Theater, and the Examiner headquarters, see the San Francisco Examiner, 5 July 1910.
and threw in the white towel, sparing the desperate crowd the humiliation of seeing their race hero knocked-out.\footnote{\textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 5 July 1910.}

In a sign of just how culturally problematic a possible Johnson victory was expected to be, on the day of the fight the Hearst newspapers printed a statement from Jim Jeffries addressing rumors that Johnson would not be permitted to leave the ring alive if he won the fight. “It is my honest belief,” intoned the Great White Hope, “that should Johnson be fortunate enough to win that the negro be allowed to walk unmolested from the ring. I want it understood that I want no friend of mine to make a hostile movement toward Johnson.”\footnote{\textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 4 July 1910.}

African-American supporters of Johnson across the nation were not so cordially treated. The black champion’s momentous victory was hard for many white Americans to stomach, and the outcome ignited racial disturbances all over the country. The violence followed a general pattern in which black men boasting of Johnson’s victory were chased down, beaten, and lynched by vengeful white mobs. By the time dawn broke on 5 July, at least eighteen black Americans lay dead, victims of what historian Al-Tony Gilmore calls the first nationwide race riot in American history.\footnote{For accounts of the post-fight riots, see Gilmore, \textit{Bad Nigger!}, 60-72; and Roberts, \textit{Papa Jack}, 108-10.}

San Francisco was notably absent from the list of cities experiencing post-fight turmoil. Blacks and whites had gathered peacefully and received the news of Johnson’s victory together, evidence of both a modicum of racial harmony and their intense interest in the fight itself. San Franciscans, in fact, used this lack of unrest and violence as an opportunity to promote a progressive image of themselves in opposition to “the Bloodthirsty
East.” Still smarting from Eastern moralists who had condemned San Franciscans as outlaws for wanting to host the Johnson-Jeffries bout in the first place, the Chronicle reminded its readers, “In the East and South white mobs killed Negroes because out in Nevada a negro had whipped a white man. There was something of this among the goody-goody Easterners of Los Angeles. But not the least sign of it in wicked San Francisco. Which are the most law-abiding and decent,” the Chronicle proudly and rhetorically asked, “the white men of San Francisco, or the howling mobs of the self-righteous and sniveling East?”

Responding to this editorial was a letter from Nathan S. Russell, a black San Franciscan who seconded the views of the Chronicle. “As one of the negroes residing in this city,” Russell explained, “I voice the sentiments of all of my people in expressing our satisfaction for the chivalrous and politic attitude of the San Francisco whites toward us during these aggravated moments of an alarmingly vexed situation.” Though Russell made it clear that he found race relations in San Francisco far from wholly satisfactory, he concluded with a statement that suggests just how prevalent violence against blacks was in America during this era—actually thanking white San Franciscans for the “favors and courtesies” they extended toward the black community, presumably because they did not lash out in mob violence.

Pointing with pride to Russell’s letter as proof of San Francisco’s moral superiority, a second Chronicle editorial delved even deeper into the realm of self-congratulation. Boasting that San Francisco was a city free from any public manifestation of hatred toward African Americans, the paper then took white superiority for granted and blustered about the

83 San Francisco Chronicle, 6 July 1910.
84 San Francisco Chronicle, 7 July 1910.
civilized manliness of the average San Franciscan male when it explained, “It did not enter
the mind of any one here that the way for the white race to assert its supremacy was to set
howling mobs to murder defenseless and innocent negroes. It is worthwhile to emphasize
this contrast between the manliness and decency of our people and the degeneracy and
barbarity of some Eastern cities.”85 The self-administered pat on the back thus complete, the
message of the Chronicle editorial was clear—whites were indeed better than blacks, but
unlike in the East, they did not need to use terror to solidify their status.

While white San Franciscans did not need to use violence to bolster their claims of
racial superiority, city leaders worked to ensure that no one in the city gained access to the
silent cinematic images that loudly questioned the doctrine of white supremacy. When the
Novelty Theater announced that it would soon premier the Johnson-Jeffries Fight, Mayor
Patrick McCarthy—who had just weeks earlier lobbied for his city’s right to host the big
bout—suddenly turned to the city’s Moving Picture Censorship Board and asked that they
take steps to outlaw all cinematic representations of the contest.86 Following the examples of
municipal moving-picture censorship boards in Chicago and New York, the San Francisco
Board of Censors was a Progressive-Era reform committee organized in May 1909 and made
up of one member each appointed by the Mayor, the Board of Police Commissioners, the
Board of Education, the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and
the Moving Picture Exhibitor’s Association. Charged with the task of fairly balancing the
mandates of city law, the will of the public, and the financial interests of the moving picture
exhibitors and theater operators, the all-white Board sought, in their own words, “to separate

85 San Francisco Chronicle, 8 July 1910.

86 San Francisco Call, 6 July 1910; San Francisco Chronicle, 7 July 1910; San Francisco Examiner, 9 July
1910.
the good from the bad” and promised to condemn any moving picture depicting “morbidity, immorality, and criminality.”87 The film of Johnson’s easy victory apparently embodied all three, and “obedient to Mayor McCarthy’s exhortations” the Board of Censors announced that they would soon review and judge the controversial film.88

The battle to prohibit moving pictures of the Johnson-Jeffries fight was not a suspenseful one—but it was significant. A close examination of this battle highlights both the awesome power of moving pictures and the immense anxieties the medium could provoke. More generally, however, an examination of how San Franciscans responded to the question of censorship illuminates how prejudice, privilege, and power are legitimized through processes of justification. San Franciscans justified censorship a number of ways. Priests and politicians, sporting men and schoolmarm, newspaper editorialists and assorted urban reformers all presented the argument that displaying the Johnson-Jeffries Fight would be an exercise in civic irresponsibility. Some of these arguments referenced race. Others did not. It seems clear, however, that had the outcome been reversed and Jeffries defeated Johnson, the doctrine of white supremacy would have been trumpeted as confirmed, racial anxieties would not have been raised, and no campaign for censorship would have occurred.

The most common justification for censorship in San Francisco was the claim that children needed to be spared the ferocious sight of two men pummeling each other. Mayor


88 San Francisco Examiner, 12 July 1910. It should be noted that the Johnson-Jeffries Fight was not the only film attracting the censors’ attention. In 1910 alone the Board’s members viewed 2,287 moving pictures, condemning fifty-six of them and demanding modifications to thirty-seven. The next year they inspected 3,806 movies, prohibiting eight and demanding cuts in eight. Moving pictures depicting the white slavery trade drew most of their censorious ire, as well as scenes of shooting, hanging, disrobing, erotic dancing, grave digging, the taking of a wax impression of a safe combination, and any depiction offensive to religion, with censors singling out 1910’s The Nun, a moving picture in which a monk attempts “to violate a novice in a nunnery.” See “Report of Board of Censorship,” San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1910-1911, 1180-81.
McCarthy, for example, cautioned of the ease with which “any and every little boy and girl who had a nickel could gain access to and witness the [film].” Thomas R. Bannerman, Chairman of the San Francisco Board of Education, echoed the Mayor’s warning and charged that moving pictures of the fight presented a grave and demoralizing danger to city youth. “It is mighty little use sending children to school in the day time to receive the foundation of education and character if in the evenings they can go see brutalizing pictures displaying the worst element of our civilization.” For Mrs. D. C. Farnham, a member of the Board of Censors and a representative of both the California Club and the Board of Education, it was impressionable young boys in particular who would be harmed by the bellicose imagery. “Pictures of the prize-fights have a demoralizing effect, as boys are so prone to think that to be a man he must be a fighter. Another dangerous fact in these pictures is the ease and artistic finish given to every phase of wrongdoing, making it more alluring and powerful.” The bloody pastime of prizefighting, then, was problematic enough, but for Mrs. Farnham and others it was the projection of the vicious sport on to the moving picture screen that compounded the public danger by erroneously adding to the legitimacy and appeal of the brutal event.

89 San Francisco Chronicle, 7 July 1910.

90 San Francisco Examiner, 9 July 1910.

91 San Francisco Examiner, 9 July 1910 and 10 July 1910.

92 According to reports of audience composition at San Francisco’s movie houses, the sight of unaccompanied children was a common one, with the weekend afternoon shows especially filled with children six to fourteen years of age and with no parent in sight. Indeed, according to the Commonwealth Club study, children in grades three through eight visited the moving picture houses on average of 2.22 times per week. See “Moving Pictures,” Transactions of the Commonwealth Club (1913), 265.
Yet as historian David Nasaw suggests, cries of “save the children” were often the “Trojan Horse” within which reformers hid their true motives.\(^93\) When San Francisco’s civic leaders and reformers spoke of the deleterious effects the fight film might have on young boys and girls, they often had another group of San Franciscans in mind. Film’s non-literate and imagistic base led many reformers to argue that moving pictures were particularly seductive to the city’s more “childlike” and impressionable inhabitants.\(^94\) Speaking on behalf of the Board of Censors, Mrs. James H. Crawford warned that the images from the interracial fight would impest both “the minds of children” and “persons of immature intelligence.” By the latter, Crawford meant her city’s black residents. “The fact that this man Johnson is the champion fighter of this country deludes the colored race into believing that they have made great progress. It gives them a false security, sets up a degrading ideal for them, and immeasurably retards their growth in real intelligence. The Negroes are to some extent a child-like race, needing guidance, schooling and encouragement. We deny them this by encouraging them to believe that they have gained anything by having one of their race as champion fighter. Race riots are inevitable when we, a superior people, allow these people to be deluded and degraded by such false ideals.”\(^95\) It was a statement overrun with notions of black inferiority, racial paternalism, and both white supremacy and anxiety. Supposedly acting to protect her black neighbors, Mrs. Crawford made it clear that the desire for


\(^94\) For this argument, see Roberta A. Pearson and William Uricchio, “‘The Formative and Impressionable Stage’: Discursive Constructions of the Nickelodeon’s Child Audience,” in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: BFI, 1999), 64-76.

\(^95\) *San Francisco Examiner*, 10 July 1910.
censorship was fueled by a fear that black San Franciscans would view the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* and somehow think they were equal to or even better than whites.

These erroneous ideas about social equality, censors argued, would inexorably lead to racial violence. When those San Franciscans in favor of outlawing the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* referenced race, they usually began by warning of the need to prohibit a moving picture that might provoke racial unrest. Edith Hecht, a member of the Board of Censors and the individual in charge of reviewing all movies to be shown in the city’s Mission District, explicitly linked censorship with racial harmony when she said, “I do not think fight pictures are good for young people to see, but more than that, a new factor has entered into the necessity for their suppression, and that is one of race war. I mean a race war between individuals rather than in a general sense, and in relation to the present fight, only more incitement is stirred between black and white in viewing a contest between a white man and a black.” Mrs. Frank Malloye, responsible for moving pictures in the Fillmore District, seconded this sentiment. “The question of the two races in conflict is to be deplored,” she argued.\(^{96}\) Mayor McCarthy put it even more succinctly when he defended censorship by arguing, “The exhibition of these pictures isn’t worth a single life.”\(^{97}\) Certainly civic leaders did not want the Johnson film to spark violence in San Francisco akin to what had occurred throughout the nation. But it is reasonable to wonder why anyone in San Francisco would believe that showing the fight film would incite a race riot? After all, not only was the city free from any racial disturbances, but numerous newspapers had made a point of celebrating this civic harmony via a litany of self-congratulatory editorials. Indeed, even though they too

\(^{96}\) *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 July 1910.

\(^{97}\) *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 July 1910.
were in favor of prohibiting the film of the fight, the San Francisco Call had to admit, “there is no likelihood of any race rioting in San Francisco such as had disgraced many Eastern cities.”

Simply put, the intense civic anxieties prompted by the Johnson-Jeffries Fight film seem to have been about race and the specter of a moving picture with a subject matter that both glorified Johnson and challenged the supposedly concrete claims of white supremacy. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the most powerful motive driving censorious urban reformers was neither the oft-expressed need to save the children nor a humanitarian desire to keep the peace, but instead a powerful psychic need to banish cinematic images of black masculine power. White women, in particular, were to be kept from the incendiary sight. In a remarkably frank passage that lays bare the anxieties the fight provoked among many white men—prizefight enthusiasts among them—a writer for the Examiner explained, “Even those expressing themselves in favor of manly sports like boxing and wrestling and declaring that the American youth should not be mollycoddled could find nothing to say yesterday on behalf of the public exhibition before white woman of a reproduction of the scenes enacted on Independence Day at Reno. Apart from the question of race prejudice, the brutalizing and demoralizing influence of such an exhibition was dwelt upon by leading men in the community.”

Openly confessing to the fact of “race prejudice” and freely admitting a fervent desire to “protect” white women from the offensive image of a black man besting a white, even some of prizefighting’s most ardent supporters joined in the campaign to place the stamp of censorship on the Reno film and interracial fighting in San Francisco more

98 San Francisco Call, 8 July 1910.
99 San Francisco Examiner, 9 July 1910.
generally. Similar to how white men in the South used the threat of lynching to control black men and white women, white men in San Francisco seized on film censorship as a way to discipline both the representation of black bodies on the moving picture screen and the white female spectator in the audience.\textsuperscript{100}

Some white San Franciscans also worked to discredit Johnson’s victory by redefining the fight itself as a competitive farce. Apologists explained that Jeffries had simply been too old, too retired, or too physically incapable of meeting the challenge under the noontime Nevada sun. The \textit{Examiner} complained that the bout had gone off “under conditions of climate and artificial heat that are said to have been greatly in favor of the black man.” Indeed, according to the paper that had trumpeted the bout as a test for racial supremacy and had hosted over 80,000 San Franciscans eager to see the fight’s re-enactment outside of their Market Street headquarters, the fight-of-the-century was not even true sport, but merely an unfair and ill-conceived contest between “a superannuated and retired” white athlete and “a gigantic negro in the prime of life and strength.”\textsuperscript{101}

Ideas about race and masculinity were so malleable in San Francisco that they could be quickly turned on their heads and used to transform Jeffries’s loss into a victorious signal of white superiority. The \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, for example, argued that what had transpired in the Reno ring was merely a timeworn tale retold. Under the headline, “History Repeated Itself When the Jungle Man Won at Reno,” the \textit{Bulletin} authoritatively accessed the whole of athletic history to reassure their white readers that the world was not coming to an

\textsuperscript{100} For lynching as an expression of control over black men and white women, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, \textit{Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 9 July 1910.
Fig. 2.4: The popularity of prizefighting plummeted in 1910 when Jack Johnson defeated his white opponent, Jim Jeffries, in the “Fight of the Century.” Published four days after Johnson’s victory, this San Francisco Chronicle comic depicts the “innocent” sport of baseball calling for his father to leave the seedy “Fight Bar” and its interracial “mixed drinks.” Unlike professional boxing, Major League Baseball during this era was rigidly segregated. (From the San Francisco Chronicle, 8 July 1910)
end. “In the days of the famous Greek games, the man from the hills or the woods vanquished the pride of civilization. The same thing happened in the time of the gladiatorial contests at Rome. The same thing has happened over and over again since man took to the modern form of prize-fighting. And yet it was not a happening at all. It was an inevitable result. Always the man who has lived closest to nature wins the test of strength and nature.”

In other words, according to the Bulletin, Jeffries’s defeat was actually proof of his superior status. The white man was the race of reason and civilization, not abject brutish brawn, and numerous white San Franciscans suddenly derided the notion of a prizefighter serving as the apotheosis of racial supremacy as ludicrous. “The white race is not depending for supremacy on brute force,” chided Mrs. A. P. Black, District President of the San Francisco Federation of Women’s Clubs, “and no man of the caliber of a prizefighter fosters the ideals of our civilization.”

In a final strategic attack against moving pictures of Jack Johnson’s momentous accomplishment, powerful white San Franciscans bent on censorship argued that films of the fight were nothing more than illegitimate cinematic violence. Invoking the habitually ignored law that made prizefighting illegal in California, Mayor McCarthy suddenly claimed that the Johnson-Jeffries Fight was the cinematic representation of a crime in-progress. “I have ever been an advocate of legitimate boxing contests, even as I have of swimming, rowing, light-harness driving and other clean sport,” reasoned the Mayor. “I am not in favor of brutal and demoralizing slugging matches, however, and shall not permit lifelike pictures

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102 San Francisco Bulletin, 6 July 1910.

103 San Francisco Examiner, 10 July 1910.
of any unlawful affair to be exhibited in this city.”

McCarthy’s statement highlights how language can be used to marginalize, even elide, powerful and visual racial messages. By describing both the action inside the ring and the fight film as violent and illegitimate, white San Franciscans like Mayor McCarthy attempted to strip Johnson’s victory of its social significance. Johnson was not the embodiment of black masculine power, went the rhetorical attack. He was a criminal.

Of course, had the white man Jeffries won the bout, McCarthy almost certainly would have praised the contest as a scientific exhibit of skill and strength, and all calls for censorship would have been ignored, as they always had in the past. The Mayor’s sudden switch of opinion did not go unnoticed among the wags in the press, and with its usual no-holds barred candor, *The Argonaut* commented on what its editors derisively called, “The Mayor’s Improving Morals:”

Reno and the negro were all that were needed to put the mayor in proper ethical relations with the fight. As soon as the scrap had been won by the black, to the humiliation of the white race, and the loss of its bets, McCarthy became a new man. Located here, the fight proposition seemed all right. But moving pictures of the ring battle at Reno! Moving pictures of a wooly senegambian mauling “Our Jeff” in another town than this and taking 60 percent of the receipts! Such a sight would impest the whole community and be nothing less than a crime.105

Though the Mayor and supporters of censorship could talk all they wanted about safeguarding morality and keeping order in their city, *The Argonaut*’s editors made it clear that it was Johnson’s victory, and not prizefighting’s criminality, that rendered the fight film objectionable.

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104 *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 July 1910.

105 *The Argonaut*, 16 July 1910, 34.
Other individuals and publications also illuminated the hypocrisy of San Franciscan leaders who were now calling for prizefight censorship. *Moving Picture World* attacked what it considered a double standard and predicted that had Johnson lost “there would have been a chortle of triumph and the picture would have been a success.”\(^{106}\) William K. White, attorney for the San Francisco moving picture combine argued “there would not have been the slightest objection to the pictures if Jeffries had won. It is simply because Johnson knocked Jeffries out that there is objection.”\(^{107}\) Though opposed to the fight film on religious principle, a correspondent for *The Monitor*, a Catholic newspaper under control of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, also knew of the racial imperative for censorship at work and suggested, “There is no doubt that, had the result of the fight been different, no such agitation against showing the pictures would have resulted.”\(^{108}\)

Though their voices were few, some San Franciscans attacked the prohibition of the *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* by lambasting the notion of governmental censorship itself. In a letter to the editor of the *San Francisco Daily News*, a San Franciscan named Mary Hunt wondered what had become of her once liberal-minded city. “Since when has San Francisco become so imbecile that its people cannot be the best judges as to what will injure their morals or not?” Describing the Board of Censors as a committee ruled by “three or four narrow minded prudes” who would not rest until a night on the town was reduced to seeing “a few marionettes bob up and down so that the future generations might hold sway,” Hunt offered

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\(^{106}\) *Moving Picture World*, 13 August 1910.

\(^{107}\) *San Francisco Call*, 11 July 1910.

her own simple solution to the crisis—“those who do not wish to see the pictures do not have to.”

Opinions such as Mary Hunt’s, however, were rare. Though numerous astute critics noted that had Jeffries won the bout the fight films would have been celebrated rather than condemned, very few San Franciscans were actually arguing that moving pictures of Johnson’s victory should be displayed. Indeed, arguments against censoring the Johnson-Jeffries Fight are difficult to find. One reason is that among the mainstream press—the city’s powerful and popular white-owned newspapers—no such opinions were ever voiced. But the controversy over displaying the Johnson-Jeffries Fight also highlights the paucity of black voices in the mainstream press and other arenas of San Franciscan public culture. One of the problems for the historian seeking to document these black voices is the shortage of Bay Area black newspapers surviving from the era. We can speculate, however, how Bay Area blacks must have felt about the censorship of Jack Johnson. Certainly black San Franciscans wanted to see the film. Johnson, after all, was a folk hero among the local black population even before winning the heavyweight title and knocking out the hopes of white America. Black men and women came from all over the Bay Area to see the one they “crowned king of them all” while he trained, sparred, and drove his fast cars up and down the streets of Oakland and San Francisco. Denied the chance to see their race hero at work in city theaters was undoubtedly considered yet another cruel blow delivered by white America.

For the definitive word from the black community about Jack Johnson and movie picture censorship, we need to turn to The Crisis, the official publication of the National

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110 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 December 1903.
Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). “The cause is clear,” declared the organization about the campaign for censorship, “Jack Johnson has out-sparred an Irishman. He did it with little brutality, the utmost fairness and great good nature. Why then this thrill of national disgust? Because Johnson is black. Of course, some pretend to object to Mr. Johnson’s character. But we have yet to hear, in the case of white America, that marital troubles have disqualified prize fighters or ball players or even statesmen. It comes down, then, after all to this unforgivable blackness.”

For most white Americans, blackness was indeed Johnson’s unpardonable sin, and because of his racial transgression the films of his historic victory were publicly held up to scorn and stamped under foot in San Francisco. In fact, the very idea of interracial prizefighting itself was attacked in San Francisco as promoters like Jim Griffin of the Broadway Athletic Club suddenly banned black boxers from their gyms and announced that, “the lid will be down tight against the dusky-skin gladiators.” Censoring the Johnson-Jeffries Fight was but another way to reinforce the color line in San Francisco. Less than one week after the fight’s conclusion, the San Francisco Board of Censors unanimously called on the Chief of Police to prevent any public exhibition of the Johnson film. City Ordinance 761 prohibited the showing of the Johnson fight film—and all future moving pictures of prizefights—by claiming that any cinematic representation of the bout would be “offensive to the moral sense” and amount to the “reproduction in detail of acts of violence.”

111 The Crisis (August 1914): 181.
112 San Francisco Chronicle, 12 July 1910.
113 San Francisco Chronicle, 11 July 1910.
There had been a sudden and remarkable shift in civic opinion. It was a testament to the power of race to erase widespread support for an endeavor as popular as prizefighting in San Francisco. With Jack Johnson firmly positioned at prizefighting’s pinnacle, a torrent of racial anxieties had merged with the pre-existing undercurrents of anti-boxing reform and widespread ambivalence over the new medium of moving pictures to produce an unstoppable deluge of anti-fight film sentiment in the city. Mayor McCarthy, for example, had completely reversed his stance on the place of the sport in his city, while newspapers that had only a week earlier hosted massive events in conjunction with the fight now suddenly favored whitewashing pugilistic history. Boxing films in San Francisco were banished because in the biggest prizefight of them all, it had been a black man who had bested a white.114

“*It is Complained That It Does an Injustice to the Colored People*”

Five years later, in April of 1915, a new and improved (and younger) Great White Hope named Jess Willard knocked out Jack Johnson in Havana, Cuba, one of the few locales still willing to allow the controversial Johnson to ply his pugilistic trade. Reflecting on Willard’s achievement, the *San Francisco Chronicle* feted the occasion and gave heartfelt thanks to the new champion “for having re-established the muscular superiority of the white race.”115 As cinematic contraband, films of Willard’s victory were still subject to prohibition in San Francisco. Yet San Franciscan moviegoers did not need to look very far for visual

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114 Johnson’s victory, in fact, led to the 1912 passage of a national anti-prizefight film act that prohibited the importation and interstate transportation of all prizefight moving pictures. The act was strongly supported by Representative Seaborn A. Roddenberry of Georgia, who later that same year tried to persuade Congress to pass a Constitutional Amendment banning interracial marriage. It was Jack Johnson’s marriage to Lucille Cameron, a white woman, that prompted Roddenberry’s proposal. See Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 88-113.

115 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 April 1915.
representations of white supremacy—D. W. Griffith’s new moving picture, The Birth of a Nation, was in town.

Debates about moving picture censorship and the dynamics of racial power resurfaced in San Francisco when Griffith’s momentous Birth of a Nation premiered in the city in the winter of 1915. Based on Thomas Dixon’s popular play, The Clansman, The Birth of a Nation is the epic story of war and Reconstruction in the American South, a partisan portrayal of black male depravity, white female vulnerability, and heroic white male redemption—the latter coming in the form of the gallant and galloping Ku Klux Klan. If Jack Johnson had been an ominous harbinger of a black equality, Griffith’s cinematic South was supposed to be a reassuring ode to the American tradition of white supremacy. Movie critics, cultural commentators, and even the President of the United States instantly hailed Birth as the greatest movie ever made, a troubling praise for African Americans who cringed at the film’s portrayal of the benevolence of slavery and its thesis of national unity forged from racial violence. Even more problematic for San Francisco’s black community, if the interracial prizefighting in the Johnson-Jeffries Fight was officially dismissed as mere cinematic violence, white San Franciscans hailed the white-on-black violence in Birth as both awe-inspiring art and glorious American history itself.

Thomas Dixon’s play The Clansman, the basis for D. W. Griffith’s film, came to San Francisco in November of 1908 for an engagement at the Van Ness Theater. With electoral updates from the three-way battle for the American Presidency between Taft, Debs, and Bryan announced between acts on opening night, the drama began a two-week run that brought in the biggest theatrical house of the season.\footnote{San Francisco Call, 1 November 1908.} Despite its immense popularity,
however, newspaper reviewers attacked the play for both its shoddy presentation and vituperative content. A writer for the Chronicle suggested that The Clansman was based on “poor material and stupid, old-fashioned construction,” while the review in the Examiner disapproved of the production for possessing a “racial prejudice which seems too completely born of bitterness to deserve a place on the stage.”¹¹⁷ Most provocative was the judgment found in the San Francisco Call. Suggesting that Dixon’s play highlighted the “monstrously obvious truths” of black inferiority and racial miscegenation, the paper nevertheless chided Dixon’s drama for exploiting interracial tensions. “If you feel that you want to hate the fellow that blacks your shoes, or brushes your clothes, or serves you your dinner,” wrote the Call’s critic, “then The Clansman may bring unction to your needlessly perturbed soul.”¹¹⁸ San Francisco’s African American leaders did not need the judgments of local drama critics to tell them that The Clansman would spark ill will toward the city’s black residents. The play was a poison, they believed, and in a precursor to the type of criticism that they would level against The Birth of a Nation, the San Francisco Negro Protective Association condemned Dixon’s drama on the grounds that it fostered “an indelible feeling of hatred against the negro” and would “arouse public feeling to such an extent that violence will follow.”¹¹⁹

Yet when The Clansman returned to San Francisco seven years later in the form of the moving picture, The Birth of a Nation, something had clearly changed. Maybe it was the ill feelings and racial anxieties incited by Jack Johnson and his audacious prizefighting

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¹¹⁷ San Francisco Chronicle, 3 November 1908; San Francisco Examiner, 3 November 1908.

¹¹⁸ San Francisco Call, 3 November 1908.

¹¹⁹ San Francisco Call, 4 November 1908.
victories. Perhaps there was a need for collective remembrance to honor the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War. Or maybe it was because white Americans were desperately seeking stories of national unity with the rest of the world seemingly splitting apart in the early stages of World War I. Certainly it had something to do with the fact that Thomas Dixon’s story was no longer merely being acted on stage but had been transformed into the most technically advanced and artfully constructed moving picture ever made—a film that cemented the status of moving pictures as legitimate art and signaled, in the analysis of cultural critic Michael Rogin, the true birth of American cinema. However, whatever the reason, the criticism that had been leveled against Dixon’s stage drama was now mighty praise being sung in honor of D. W. Griffith and his magisterial cinematic achievement.

After premiering in Los Angeles in early February, Griffith’s much-anticipated twelve-reel epic opened in San Francisco on the first of March 1915 at the Alcazar Theater on O’Farrell Street, a magnificent movie palace complete with exotic smoking rooms and Persian-rugged parlors. Playing to sold-out crowds twice daily—with afternoon shows beginning at two and the evening presentation commencing at eight—the film ran nearly three hours, bisected by only a six-minute intermission that was “assuredly not enough of an interval in which to get a second wind.” Reports of the film’s first few weeks in San Francisco provide a portrait of not just a moving picture, but a remarkable sensory spectacle. Newspapers suggested that for movie-going San Franciscans, watching The Birth of a Nation was akin to taking a trip to the American South itself. So vivid and lifelike was the opening

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120 For the cinematic, national, and global context in which Birth appeared, see Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,’” 227-8.

panorama of an idyllic Southern mansion, some in the audience swore that you could actually smell the dewy fragrance of the roses hanging in the portico. And if it was up to the individual to invoke the sense of smell, theater management furnished the sounds of the South, as San Francisco moviegoers watched the drama unfold to the thunderous accompaniment of a massive orchestra and a chorus of jubilee singers performing “authentic southern hymns and plantation melodies.”

Among the mainstream San Franciscan press, enthusiastic praise for Birth was both immediate and unanimous. On opening night the Chronicle exclaimed that Griffith “has made the history-drama live, move, seethe, thrill, and palpitate in a swift succession of shadows on a blank surface.” The Argonaut was equally impressed and described Birth as “history made glowing and vivid and live; the history of our own nation, of ‘a people one and indivisible,’ that the mighty cataclysm of the ‘sixties could not rend asunder.’” Six weeks after its San Francisco premier, with the film still showing to packed houses, the Examiner pronounced Birth superior to history books themselves and hailed the film as a “pictorial and psychological diagram of the creation of the United States, an educative message that no written history can rival.” The Examiner, in fact, felt compelled to look back to the age of The Iliad to find the film’s equal. “Griffith has written in action without words, has composed for the eye something for this country in pictures akin to what Homer did for Troy, not in hexameters, but in facts that are seen.”

122 See the detailed reports of Birth’s premier in San Francisco in the San Francisco Call, Chronicle, and Examiner, 2 March and 3 March 1915.

123 San Francisco Chronicle, 2 March 1915.

124 The Argonaut, 24 April 1915.

125 San Francisco Examiner, 20 April 1915.
another tedious melodrama, but artfully projected onto the moving picture screen, Dixon’s one-sided story had been converted into more than a magnificent motion picture. It was the sweep of American history incarnate.

Some San Franciscans considered *The Birth of a Nation* as even more than brilliantly rendered history. It was an unflinching and chilling analysis of the state of American race relations itself. Here was one of the mighty powers of *Birth*. The movie seemed to be able to exist in the past, present, and future simultaneously. The film’s deleterious visions of blackness told a damaging story about the history of African-American life at the dawn of freedom. It poisoned the present racial climate of a nation currently remembering the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the bloody Civil War. Most onerous for San Francisco’s black leaders, Griffith’s moving picture pointed toward an ominous future by illuminating and reinforcing a message that many Americans felt they already knew—the incompatibility of the races. Evaluating *Birth* for the *San Francisco Call and Post*, for example, was Rufus Steele, one of the city’s most respected authors and newspaper journalists, who summed up these feelings when he wrote, “You may call this a picture of the Civil War or the birth of a nation, but the plain truth is that it is the most powerful exposition of the race problem that was ever devised. White and black must inevitably understand, in a way and to a degree they have never understood before, that they are oil and water, and that the happiness of both is bound up in the single possible solution—that of eventual separation.”

These are remarkable sentiments that testify to the power of film to instruct and influence cinematic audiences. Again, in Steele’s words, *The Birth of a Nation* was “the most powerful exposition of the race problem that was ever devised,” a strong claim

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126 *San Francisco Call and Post*, 2 March 1915.
considering the long and ignoble history of American racial imagery outlined earlier in this chapter. But Steele did not overstate his case. Contemporary reports suggest that Birth was both persuasive and awe-inspiring. National columnist Dorothea Dix called the movie “history revitalized” and urged her countrymen to go see it immediately, “for it will make better Americans of you.”

So momentous was Birth that it was the first movie ever shown at the White House, at which time President Woodrow Wilson—the former historian and president of Princeton University whose own scholarship appears as visual text in the film—famously remarked in wonder, “it is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” Praise-on-high such as this is what separated Birth from what came before it and helped give the movie its awesome public power. While the Johnson fight film could be easily dismissed on aesthetic grounds—the film of the fight was nothing more that a wide-view shot taken from a single camera—and was consistently defined in San Francisco as the sinister reproduction of a crime-in-progress, The Birth of a Nation was hailed as a cinematic masterpiece. Whereas William T. Rock had merely paid for the rights to record a brutal prizefight, D. W. Griffith had magically created his spectacular epic. Griffith, in fact, expressed his own confidence in the utility and grandeur of his creation with a written declaration at the beginning of the film. Following the production credits in The Birth of a Nation comes the following statement:

A PLEA FOR THE ART OF THE MOTION PICTURE. We do not fear censorship, for we have no wish to find with improprieties or obscenities, but we do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may illuminate the bright side of virtue—the same liberty that is conceded to the art of the written word—that to which we owe the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.

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127 Dorothea Dix quoted in Baker, From Savage to Negro, 133.

128 Woodrow Wilson’s quote comes from Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,’” 192.
The cultural might of Birth, then, lay in the fact that it was promoted and defended as both art and history on par with the writings of Shakespeare and the Word of God.\textsuperscript{129}

The question of whether or not a moving picture deserved the designation “art” or “history,” however, was superfluous to the daily existence of African Americans. What mattered to black San Franciscans was the awful potential of moving pictures to introduce, promote, naturalize, and celebrate damaging visions of black life. The fact that Birth was awash in artistic flourishes and cinematic innovations simply made these messages all the more dangerous. Just as white Americans had cringed at the cinematic sight of Jack Johnson contemptuously besting his white opponents, so too did San Francisco’s black leaders chafe at a film suggesting that interracial sexuality had been both the cause of the Civil War and the downfall of federal Reconstruction. Claims such as these were not original, of course. Birth was a cinematic history lesson that followed a mainstream academic scholarship that argued that the Ku Klux Klan was the valiant savior of a nation threatened by nefarious “negro rule.”\textsuperscript{130} Black critics condemned Birth for following this irresponsible and insulting

\textsuperscript{129} Griffith, in fact, believed that moving pictures would soon surpass books as the primary medium of education in America. He said, “The American public is so hungry for motion pictures and so loyal to a good one when it comes along. They have the good old American faculty of wanting to be ‘shown’ things. It is the ever-present, realistic, actual now that ‘gets’ the American public, and nothing ever devised by man can show it like moving pictures. The time will come, and in less than ten years, when the children in public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again.” See the San Francisco Chronicle, 28 March 1915.

\textsuperscript{130} In his The History of the American People, for example, Woodrow Wilson wrote, “The policy of the congressional leaders wrought a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South in their determination to put the white South under the heel of the black South. The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation, until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.” This quote appears in The Birth of a Nation, as well. See Woodrow Wilson, History of the American People (New York: Harper and Bros., 1902). For a discussion of the promulgation of this storyline, popularly known as the “Dunning School,” see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity” Question and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 72-85.
storyline. They were outraged by the film’s partisan social message, its corruption of fact, and its vicious portrayal of black men. They denounced the final scene in which Griffith used the imagery of Jesus Christ as a way to sanctify the equation of national reunion with racial purity. Finally, they pointed out that the film followed the demeaning precedents of the minstrel stage and did not even use black actors to play the most important black roles, with Griffith opting instead for white actors in blackface as a way of seizing absolute control over the representation of blackness.\textsuperscript{131} For these reasons, black San Franciscans considered \textit{Birth} to be not real history, but true blasphemy.

Vehemently opposed to \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, leaders of the city’s black civil rights organizations were undoubtedly pleased to learn that the San Francisco Board of Censors would scrutinize the film during its opening week at the Alcazar. They would not be satisfied with the Board’s judgment. The Board of Censors announced that Griffith’s film was “offensive in many ways to the colored population” and they publicly questioned “the good taste in exhibiting such a picture in a mixed community,” but after recommending the removal of a few scenes they found particularly offensive, the Board ultimately decided to approve the film. Among the scenes they recommended for removal were those in which an elderly white woman sniffs a “little colored boy and shows plainly that his odor disgusts her,” as well as the depiction of the black-dominated South Carolina State legislature that suggested the “buffoonery of Negroes.” The Board, however, only \textit{recommended} that these segments be cut from the Alcazar’s reels. The following scenes, described below in the

\textsuperscript{131} For general treatments of the outrage \textit{Birth} provoked among the nation’s African-American communities, see Butters, \textit{Black Manhood on the Silent Screen}, 63-90; Cripps, “The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture \textit{Birth of a Nation};” and Philip Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching Of Black America} (New York: Random House, 2002), 200-7.
words of Mary Ashe Miller, Secretary of the Board of Censors, were actually singled out for mandatory removal:

The scene between the Mulatto housekeeper and Stoneman, where he finds her after she has torn her clothes, is offensive through too much lustful detail. That part of the scene where he strokes her naked shoulder and his feelings are seen to be aroused thereby must be eliminated.

Gus’ chase of the girl is far too long drawn out and that part where he overtakes her on the cliff and slavers at the mouth like an animal must be eliminated. This is absolutely offensive to the moral sense.

In the mob scene toward the end just before the K. K. K. arrives, negroes are shown grabbing up white women, fondling and kissing them. This part must be cut out.132

All three of the scenes slated for censorship, then, were those depicting interracial sexuality or the threat of such contact, and it is interesting to compare the Board’s selections with the Johnson-Jeffries Fight, which they dismissed in its entirety. As Jane Gaines suggests in Fire and Desire, it is tempting to note the “similarities between interracial sexuality and interracial fighting on film, analogous visions of racial mixture as attraction and repulsion.”133 Exhibiting little tolerance for the film of a prizefight in which a black fighter gave a white man a tremendous beating, and removing the scenes from Birth that might conjure up the specter of interracial sex, the Board of Censors implicitly linked the two as concomitant images of deviance and illegitimacy and decreed both as unfit for public consumption.134

132 Letter from San Francisco Board of Censors to Mayor Rolph (2 March 1915), “Rolph Papers,” Box 14, Folder 113a, California Historical Society, San Francisco.

133 Gaines, Fire and Desire, 244-5.

134 The cuts ordered by the Board of Censors seem to have been made. Oscar Hudson, attorney for the Negro Welfare League sent Mayor James Rolph a letter and told him “a creditable source” had informed League members that the Alcazar Theater management had indeed made both the mandated and the recommended cuts,
One representation that was particularly offensive to black critics in both San Francisco and across the nation was the “Gus chase scene,” where a blackfaced and foaming-at-the-mouth actor playing the role of Gus pursues Flora, a young white woman, perhaps with the intent to rape. Hunted to the edge of a cliff, and with the Confederate Flag wrapped around her waist, Flora jumps to her death rather than endure violation. In the manic scene that follows, a crazed and frightened Gus is hunted by a legion of hooded Klansmen on horseback, captured, and lynched.\textsuperscript{135} The murder of Gus could have been “read” in many different ways—as a violent moment of Southern redemption, as the dramatic articulation of national reunion, or simply as bloodthirsty racial revenge. The film scholar Cedric Robinson makes the fascinating contention, however, that the chase and murder of Gus might best be understood as a surrogate act of violence that the film’s authors and its white audiences actually wished committed against the transgressive Jack Johnson. “The renegade Gus,” Robinson explains, “in his cowering posture and sneaky simian-like movements, could serve to erase Jack Johnson, the bold, graceful athlete, from the minds of the audience.” Likewise, he adds, “Flora’s suicidal gesture put the lie to the intolerable ruse that white women would willingly submit to black men.”\textsuperscript{136}

Robinson offers no concrete evidence that Gus was used as a cinematic foil to the flesh-and-blood Jack Johnson, but coming on the heels of the national trauma caused by

\textsuperscript{135} According to Philip Dray, the scene caused some members Southern audiences to whoop the rebel yell cheer and fire their six-shooters into the screen. See Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, 204.

Johnson’s rout of Jim Jeffries, the specter of the black prizefighter could not have been far from many white Americans’ minds. Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith, the twin architects of Gus, were certainly aware of Johnson and his exploits both in and outside of the ring. For both of these white Southerners the perceived plague of black sexuality and miscegenation embodied by Johnson was one of momentous proportions. Dixon, in fact, often referred to the NAACP as the “Negro Intermarriage Society,” while D. W. Griffith revealed that one of the purposes of Birth “was to create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men.”137 With such explicit goals presented by both author and director, it is no wonder that black San Franciscans believed The Birth of a Nation to be an invitation to white Americans to sit back and vicariously participate in a lynching. Worse yet, it might even be understood as a cinematic call-to-arms and serve as a spur for real-life racial intimidation and violence. Black men were rapists, the movie suggested, and it was up to white men to exterminate their predatory impulses and protect white women and the nation through the ritualized violence of lynching.

Though Bay Area black leaders and organizations were united in their denunciation of The Birth of the Nation, they originally held different opinions about the proper course of protest and action. Some urged their community to simply pretend that the film did not exist. “I am particularly hopeful,” wrote D. L. Beasly in the black-owned Oakland Sunshine, “that we as a people will try and grit our teeth and ignore [Birth].”138 The Western Outlook, a black newspaper whose byline announced that it was “Devoted to the Interests of the Negro on the Pacific Coast and the Betterment of his Condition,” seconded Beasly’s wishes and

137 Quoted in Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,’” 219.

138 Oakland Sunshine, 26 June 1915. Despite this call to ignore the film, the Oakland Sunshine provided semi-weekly updates on the black community’s fight against Griffith’s film.
optimistically reasoned that white Americans would reject Griffith’s anachronistic and pernicious portrayal of black America. “The Negro of the Reconstruction period is not the Negro of today, and the public knows it. Should *The Clansman* be presented in San Francisco, we believe more good will be accomplished by totally ignoring it.”

*Birth*’s overwhelming popularity and white San Francisco’s near-unanimous appraisal of its storyline as historic fact, however, made Griffith’s creation impossible to ignore. By June of 1915 the local African-American press was urging the region’s black organizations to “take up the fight against *The Clansman*” and join in a united crusade against the insidious film. An organization called the Colored Citizens of San Francisco led the charge by sending a signed petition to Mayor Rolph arguing that the presentation of *Birth* would endanger San Francisco’s relative racial harmony. “In order to foster better relationship between the races which hitherto has been on the best of terms,” petitioned the organization, “and in order to eliminate the pernicious influences at work, we the undersigned citizens of San Francisco do hereby implore the Honorable Mayor to officially unite with us in suppressing the presentation of this infamous slander of the American people.” The San Francisco Negro Welfare League followed suit and likewise sent a resolution of condemnation not only to the Mayor, but to the Board of Supervisors, the Board of Censors, the Chief of Police, and the City and District Attorneys, as well as various white ministerial organizations and civic welfare leagues. Charging that that the primary purpose of *Birth* was

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139 *Western Outlook*, 20 February 1915. I should note how nearly all of the Bay Area black civic organizations pointedly refused to call the film *The Birth of a Nation* and instead insisted on calling the film *The Clansman*, thus using the more ominous name of Dixon’s play rather than accept Griffith’s more magisterial cinematic title.

140 *Oakland Sunshine*, 5 June 1915.

141 Undated petition sent to Mayor Rolph, “Rolph Papers,” Box 27, Folder 301, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
to “discredit the Negro morally, intellectually and physically,” the Negro League warned the Mayor that allowing white San Franciscans access to Griffith’s incendiary imagery would provoke “race hatred as well as revive race hatred otherwise dormant.”142 In the name of preserving the public concord, then, The Birth of a Nation needed to be banned from the city, just as the Johnson-Jeffries Fight had been.

Just as white San Franciscans had feared that black viewers might take undue pride in Jack Johnson’s accomplishments and incite unrest through bombastic pronouncements of racial equality, black San Franciscans now feared that the violent racial imagery in Birth might undo a tenuous racial peace. Once again, the power of film was invoking great social unease. Five years earlier the all-white members of the San Francisco Board of Censors had considered films of the Johnson bout more problematic than the fight itself—having argued that moving pictures added an “ease and artistic finish given to every phase of wrongdoing, making it more alluring and powerful.” Black San Franciscans were now anxious that their white neighbors were being allowed easy access to the larger-than-life imagery of degraded black men and savage white supremacy. We must remember, from the perspective of Americans in 1915, Birth must have felt like more than a movie. To encounter The Birth of a Nation in a grand urban theater was to place one’s self in a deluge of sight, sound, and

142 Resolution of protest sent to Mayor Rolph, “Rolph Papers,” Box 27, Folder 301, California Historical Society, San Francisco. In Black San Francisco, Albert S. Broussard claims that the Bay Area branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created in 1915, the same year that Birth appeared in San Francisco. Additionally, he suggests that the Bay Area played a large role in the 1915 campaign for censorship. This is incorrect. According to “the Constitution of the Northern California Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” the organization was created on 22 May 1913. I was also unable to find any evidence of the NAACP protesting Birth until 1921, when the film returned again in San Francisco and invoked more controversy. At that time, the NAACP expressed the same sentiments that the Colored Citizens of San Francisco and the Negro Welfare League of San Francisco had in 1915, calling Birth a “malicious misrepresentation of the colored people, which tends to create enmity and hatred,” and warning that further showings would be a “breach of public peace and will create disorders and race riots.” See Letter to San Francisco Mayor James Rolph from John Drake, President Northern California NAACP (3 June 1921) Northern California Branch Files, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
emotion. As Michael Rogin explains, watching Birth was a sensory experience that “opened a road to the unconscious. The size of the image and its reproducibility, the close-up and film cut, the magical transformations on-screen and film’s documentary pretense, all these dissolved the boundary that separated audiences in darkened theaters from the screen. To watch and hear Birth as it was originally shown was to enter an immediate, prelogical universe of the primary processes.”

Black San Franciscan leaders keenly sensed this “prelogical” power of film. Just as city censors had characterized the Johnson-Jeffries Fight as a reproduction of violence that was likely to incite violent acts in the real world, black leaders charged that The Birth of a Nation was a distorted portrayal of the past being used to promote a violent future, and they demanded that the state protect blacks by expurgating the incendiary images. In San Francisco, then, most of the attacks on Birth were based neither on claims that the on-screen stereotypes damaged black self-respect nor that blacks had a right not to be offended. Rather, their opposition was steeped in their decades-long resistance to destructive renderings of black life in popular culture and predicated upon the fear that the film might incite examples of racial violence akin to what Griffith had himself created.

As Janet Staiger

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143 Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,’” 228.

144 Certainly black Americans had real reason for concern. Though racial violence against black San Franciscans was uncommon, blacks in San Francisco understood that the contorted images of blackness created by Griffith provided the visual backdrop to one of the most racially antagonistic and violent eras in American history. Six major race riots occurred between 1900 and 1910, while lynching became the unofficial bloodsport of choice among those Americans determined to implement a Jim Crow culture founded on daily intimidation and reinforced by corporeal violence. For race riots and lynching during this era, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown; Kirk W. Fouss, “Lynching Performances, Theaters of Violence.” Text and Performance Quarterly 19 (January 1999): 1-37; Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Amy Louise Wood, “‘Lynching Photography and the ‘Black Beast Rapist’ in the Southern White Masculine Imagination,’” in Peter Lehman, ed., Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture (New York and London: Routledge, 2001): 193-211.
argues in *Perverse Spectators*, the immense power of film lay in the fact that reception was not confined to the moment of moviegoing, but was a prolonged experience that lived in the numerous ways individual receivers reacted to the images after the initial viewing. San Francisco’s black leaders sensed this and feared that moving pictures such as *Birth* would burn mental pictures in white minds that might fester and manifest themselves in racial attacks and civic unrest. And if these mental pictures were not enough, in at least one San Francisco movie palace, audience members were told what to think about *Birth* even before viewing the film. At the Cort Theater, for example, theater management furnished patrons with a printed synopsis of the film when they bought their tickets, explaining that white Southerners were the “victims” in the story while Southern blacks were “superstitious” characters who possessed “insolent power.”

In *Birth of a Nation’s* first year playing in San Francisco, Mayor Rolph offered no official opinion on the controversy. Perhaps he was too busy welcoming the world to his city’s magical Panama-Pacific International Exposition, an event he claimed he attended every one of its 285 days in existence. Whatever the reason for his silence in 1915, as the calendar turned to 1916, Rolph decided to act. With *Birth* returning for yet another lengthy engagement at the Savoy Theater on McAllister, and with attorneys for the Negro Welfare League announcing they would soon propose an ordinance making it illegal to exhibit a picture that “reflects reproach upon any race or tends to incite race hatred,” Mayor Rolph suddenly agreed that *Birth* did indeed incite racial prejudice and he stunned San Franciscans

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146 See the Cort Theater Program for *The Birth of the Nation* (23 August 1915) in Stage Scrapbook # 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
by ordering city theaters to immediately cease showing Griffith’s celebrated film.\textsuperscript{147} Typed and handwritten letters and cabled telegrams from all over the country arrived at the Mayor’s office and congratulated Rolph for his defiant stand against race hatred.\textsuperscript{148} J. S. Caldwell, a bishop at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Philadelphia, sent Mayor Rolph a letter of thanks on behalf of his congregation for suppressing the film that might “stir up strife and bad feelings between the races.”\textsuperscript{149} From Boston arrived a letter from Benjamin Swain, pastor of the Columbus Avenue A. M. E., praising Rolph for the “manly way” in which he stood up for “human justice and fair play to an oppressed people.”\textsuperscript{150} From closer to home came a typed letter from W. J. Wheaton of San Anselmo, a tiny hamlet north of San Francisco in Marin County. Though his small town possessed “only a colored population of two,” Wheaton noted that the “averse influence is felt to a noticeable degree since” the presentation of \textit{Birth} in nearby San Rafael. As evidence he told the story of a young white girl who had grown up in close proximity to an elderly black man in his town. The two had forged a friendship based on a discussion of their favorite books, but this friendship had been irrevocably damaged when the young girl’s teacher took her and her class to see the supposedly historical \textit{Birth}. The young white girl now “fled for shelter like a frightened

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 5 January 1916; 14 January 1916.

\textsuperscript{148} See, for example, the letters to Mayor James Rolph from Washington D. C. and Newburgh, New York (6 January and 28 January 1916) \textit{“Rolph Papers,”} Box 32, Folders 372 and 376, California Historical Society, San Francisco.

\textsuperscript{149} Letter to Mayor James Rolph (4 January 1916) \textit{“Rolph Papers,”} Box 32, Folder 370, California Historical Society, San Francisco.

\textsuperscript{150} Letter to Mayor James Rolph (5 January 1916) \textit{“Rolph Papers,”} Box 32, Folder 371, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
fawn” whenever her elderly black friend came near. Such was the destructive power of Griffith’s seditious film, Wheaton explained, and he praised the Mayor for his action.\footnote{Letter to Mayor James Rolph (4 January 1916) “Rolph Papers,” Box 32, Folder 370, California Historical Society, San Francisco.}

Yet if blacks in the Bay Area and across the nation were thankful for Rolph’s brave stance, white San Franciscans were outraged by their Mayor’s censorious decree. Newspapers that had just five years earlier harped about the urgent necessity for cinematic suppression now defended Birth on merit and described censorship as both civic folly and the despotism of martial law.\footnote{Leading the national charge against censorship was D. W. Griffith himself. Griffith considered his moving picture not mere entertainment, but a history lesson for the masses, a film instructing them that one of the foundational truths of the American nation was a justified and logical white superiority. As Griffith put it in his 1915 pamphlet, “The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America,” movie reels made history real to the masses because they were entertaining. “The truths of history,” Griffith explained, “are restricted to the limited few attending our colleges and universities; the motion picture can carry these truths to the entire world without cost, while at the same time bringing diversion to the masses.” Griffith is quoted in Cindy Patton, “White Racism/Black Signs: Censorship and Images of Race Relations,” Journal of Communication 45 (Spring 1995): 67.}

Under the headline “Movies Menaced by Censorship,” the Examiner acknowledged the arguments and anxieties of black San Franciscans but maintained that the yoke of censorship far outweighed any feelings of discrimination. “It is complained that it does an injustice to the colored people,” the newspaper editorialized. “That is quite true, but for all those defects it is a great and inspiring picture. It is infinitely better that everybody’s prejudices be occasionally offended by some publications, whether in print or in pictures, than have the liberty of either the printed or the pictorial press be subjected to an un-American censorship.”\footnote{San Francisco Examiner, 4 January and 7 January 1916.}

As the Examiner’s evaluation suggests, the issue of race was being written out of the controversy over the censorship of Birth in San Francisco. In other words, among those San Franciscans condemning censorship in the mainstream media, racial anxieties and the specter
of racial violence were never among the primary issues of consideration. It was the question of censorship itself that framed the public debate, and the San Francisco newspapers took turns attacking the Mayor’s decree by invoking the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the sanctities of free speech and publication, and the inalienable rights of every man, woman, child, and theatrical manager in the city. So unyielding were these newly converted opponents of censorship that, at times, their arguments could be absurd. For example, when black leaders disturbed with the popularity of films showing the lynching and immolation of real-life African Americans tried to ban cinematic depictions of “the burning of any human being,” the San Francisco Call, a paper that had demanded the prohibition of the Johnson-Jeffries Fight on moral grounds, now called the threat of censorship “as ridiculous as it is serious.” “To blindly prohibit the showing of any film featuring burning bodies,” despaired the Call, “would be to cancel any film that might picture the most sublime patriotism any age has witnessed, the story of Joan of Arc, whose glory is the greater because her life was ended on the blazing faggots the English piled about her feet in Rouen.”

In their condemnation of censorship, many white San Franciscans turned against the Board of Censors itself. Though five years earlier the mainstream media and other organs of San Franciscan public culture had unfailingly championed the Board as civic protectors, they now turned and derided the same organization as a gathering of anti-progressive dilettantes

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154 See, for example, the San Francisco Call, 7 January 1916; and the San Francisco Examiner, 14 January 1916. The United States Supreme Court did not agree with the Constitutional arguments of the San Francisco newspapers, having decided in their ruling on Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio (1915) that moving picture exhibition was “a business pure and simple” and “not to be regarded as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion.” Indeed, the Supreme Court had trained a wary eye on the movie industry, adding that moving pictures were “capable of evil because of their attractiveness and manner of exhibition.” For a discussion of the Supreme Court’s ruling, see Edward de Grazia and Roger K. Neuman, Banned Films: Movies, Censors and the First Amendment (New York and London: R. R. Bowker, 1982), 3-24.

155 For the popularity of films and pictures of real-life lynchings, see Wood, “Lynching Photography and the ‘Black Beast Rapist’ in the Southern White Masculine Imagination,” 193-211; Everett, Returning the Gaze, 19-20. For the opposition to the call for censorship over these images, see the San Francisco Call, 7 January 1916.
bent on destroying one of modern life’s greatest inventions. “Moving pictures are not only an entertainment and instruction,” the Examiner sermonized, “but also a moral force. We can imagine nothing else so liberalizing, so instructive, so formative of character. To be thus liberalizing, thus uplifting, thus popular, the moving picture must tell the truth and must be ALLOWED TO TELL THE TRUTH. And it will NOT be allowed to tell the truth if it is ever subjected to the restrictions of the narrow-minded and stupid and bigoted and arbitrary censors.”

Gone entirely were the urgent calls of safeguarding city children, and in their place stood the demands for personal choice and parental responsibility. “Just as each one of you has the absolute right to select and to read the newspapers and magazines which best please you,” advocated the Examiner, “so each one of you has the absolute right to choose for yourself what moving pictures you will go to see.”

It is tempting to suggest that what we have here is a blatant hypocrisy—where one film showing a black man besting a white in a fair fight was condemned and censored, while another suggesting the necessity and social utility of lynching a black man was hailed as art and defended as free speech and the prerogative of “the pictorial press.” Without rejecting the mighty influence of race on the public’s perception of both films, we must first consider how attitudes about moving pictures and censorship had changed in the five years between the filming of the Johnson-Jeffries bout and the premier of The Birth of a Nation. It is important to note that arguments against censorship in San Francisco did not suddenly appear in response to the criticism unleashed against Birth. The Argonaut, for example, was

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156 San Francisco Examiner, 26 February 1916. This was an echo of an editorial that appeared two weeks earlier. Titled “Miraculous Movies,” the editorial called moving pictures, “one of the things that is helping to make this old world over into a better place. The moving picture satisfies our desire to know because it shows us. The extent of knowledge which it distributes as to the ways, customs and habits of the people of the world is great, and far-reaching, for good.” See the San Francisco Examiner, 12 February 1915.

157 San Francisco Examiner, 26 February 1916.
attacking the notion of cinematic suppression as early as 1913, describing censorship as an assault against liberal-minded civilization. “Coercive legislation is no more than a thin veneer upon a basis of barbarism,” the San Francisco weekly reasoned. “Compulsive laws and police are but a step from savagery, a slight advance over the aboriginal club so astonishingly like the policeman’s staff. True civilization is mutual agreement, without sanctions and without force.”

Perhaps even more influential than the constitutional calls of safeguarding personal liberty was the fear of losing film-industry riches. Explaining to its readers that California’s sunshine and scenery made it a natural staging ground for the moving picture industry, the Call warned that any attempts to enact “senseless and vicious legislation and censorship” would jeopardize the movie men’s future investments in their state and, specifically, San Francisco. The argument, in fact, took on a distinct gendered aspect as the debate over censorship became a contest between the prerogatives of female moral reform and the dreams of masculine enterprise and moneymaking. Though they too supported the exhibition of Birth, representatives from San Francisco’s women’s clubs and organizations staunchly defended the existence of the Board of Censors as one of the more real venues of moral-minded female civic influence.

Opponents of censorship, however, were adamant that to place power in the hands of San Franciscan clubwomen was to jeopardize a multi-million dollar industry. For Thomas Ince, a booster of the film industry writing in Out West Magazine, the chief problem was that female censors possessed experience in neither the

158 The Argonaut, 6 December 1913.

159 San Francisco Call, 21 January 1916; San Francisco Examiner, 12 September 1916.

160 San Francisco Call, 5 January 1916.
study of drama nor the running of a business. As moving-picture censors, they were simply out of their element, Ince reasoned. “None ever hears of a butcher prescribing Fall styles in feminine attire, or of a modiste attempting to condemn a specific class of meat.”161

Recognizing the influence and legitimacy of the calls to protect precious liberty and safeguard movie investment, the dramatic swing in civic opinion over censorship was primarily due to the fact that The Birth of a Nation meshed with the cherished beliefs and psychological needs of so many white San Franciscans. Birth confirmed and celebrated deeply ingrained ideas about the racial order that the Johnson fight had shockingly challenged. As the film historian Robert Sklar explains, “in theme, form and price [Birth] was meant to appeal to the American elite, to community leaders and opinion makers, to tell them something about their own culture.”162

Indeed, we might ask the following question—would Birth have been celebrated so passionately had the story line been reversed? In other words, what if Griffith had provided a grand depiction of a slave revolt complete with the chase and lynching of a brutish white slaveholder, all filmed with the same technical expertise and cinematic imagination? The answer, obviously, is “no.” White Americans did not canonize Birth solely because of its technical merit, but because Birth presented to them a comforting dramatization of their racial superiority that was wrapped in technical brilliance. Likewise, though critics publicly attacked censorship as unprogressive, undemocratic, and un-American, underlying all of these complaints was an unswerving dedication to Griffith’s message. To censor The Birth


162 Sklar, Movie-Made America, 58.
of a Nation was to bowdlerize the doctrine of white superiority. For the San Francisco power structure, this was culturally unacceptable.

Facing massive resistance to his declaration banning Birth from San Francisco screens, Mayor Rolph quickly reversed field and withdrew his order for censorship, explaining that there was no relevant city ordinance to support the prohibition of the film.\footnote{163 San Francisco Examiner, 15 January 1916.}

Several months later, despite the opposition of San Franciscan clubwomen, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted 14-3 to abolish the Board of Censors entirely, citing personal liberty and declaring that it was the task of parents to keep their children away from movies they deemed objectionable.\footnote{164 San Francisco Examiner, 12 September 1916.} As far as the San Franciscan black population was concerned, historical amnesia had set in and cruel irony had traveled full circle. In 1910, city censors invoked the need to “save the children” and “protect” African Americans and a tenuous racial harmony as the justification to prohibit the exhibition of the Johnson fight film, a visual document of black empowerment. Further, the film was banned because it “reproduced in detail an act of violence.” Now, five years later, white San Franciscans defended a violent film with a plot that pivoted on the chase and murder of a blackfaced brute under the aesthetic claims of cinematic artfulness and the liberal defense of guarding the prerogative of the “pictorial press.” The tyranny of the majority had seized the day. San Franciscan political leaders rejected censoring The Birth of a Nation not because of notions of fair play, social justice, or constitutional liberty, but because the film clearly appealed to a majority of their citizens. The Birth of a Nation would continue to play in San Francisco theaters, when upon its departure entertainment writers unanimously declared it the most popular event in
the history of San Franciscan public amusements. As for censorship, it was now as un-American as “negro rule.”

**Epilogue: “A Monologue”**

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” This was the central idea The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois’s monumental 1903 meditation on black identity at the dawn of the twentieth century. Du Bois maintained that identity is neither biological nor fixed. Instead, identity is social and constructed. More than that, your identity is not how you see yourself. Nor is it what others may think of you. Your identity, Du Bois suggested, is what you believe others think of you. Though Du Bois was not describing the particular sensation of seeing one’s self represented through racial imagery on the moving picture screen, his notion of double consciousness—of being forced to see one’s self through the eyes of others—suggests the mighty significance of cinematic imagery for the understanding of racial identity and American race relations. For if, as Vincent Rocchio contends, “representation is the foundation upon which [racism] stands,” then the awe-inspiring cinematic representations of race broadcast onto the moving picture screen held momentous meaning and consequence for

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165 *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Examiner* 15 January 1916.


167 Du Bois’s ideas about identity would be later developed by Henri LeFebvre in *Critique of Everyday Life* (London and New York: Verso, 1991) [originally published in 1947]. For the ways in which racial identity is influenced in everyday popular culture, see Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History.”
black and white San Franciscans.\footnote{Rocchio, \textit{Reel Racism}, 4.} By making grand and persuasive visual claims about racial difference, race-based cinematic imagery helped naturalize unequal social and political power relations.

Importantly, this includes racial imagery both seen and unseen. This examination of the debates over whether or not the public would be permitted to see the \textit{Johnson-Jeffries Fight} and \textit{Birth of a Nation} highlights how those in power can legitimate racial beliefs and power dynamics through the promotion and the censorship of cinematic images. Moving pictures in early-twentieth century San Francisco were much more than entertainment and popular amusement. They were one of the primary public venues in which San Franciscans received and contested ideas about race and racial hierarchies. It was an uneven contest, to be sure. To borrow a few phrases from the art historian Michael D. Harris, San Franciscan public culture was ruled by a “bias of representation” in which the “noises of whiteness” effectively drowned out the “voices of blackness.”\footnote{Harris, \textit{Colored Pictures}, viii.} Just as Jack London asserted that the interracial fight in Reno had been “a monologue” performed by Jack Johnson upon a prostrate Jim Jeffries, the battles in San Francisco to censor certain racial ideals and promote others were “a monologue” as well. In 1910, with the Great White Hope battered and beaten, the specter of a Jack Johnson victory memorialized in film sent city officials previously in favor of hosting the bout rushing to the camp of those who already opposed prizefights on ideological grounds. Racial anxieties mixed with both moral reform and the threat of violence to brew an elixir of censorship that wiped clean any visual record of Jack Johnson’s accomplishment. When five years later \textit{The Birth of a Nation} came to town and dared to
present violence of a different kind, the outrage over depictions of racial unrest was lost in the din of momentous praise for D. W. Griffith’s film and the head-on attacks against censorship itself.

By defining moving pictures of Jack Johnson’s victory as “illegitimate violence,” while hailing D. W. Griffith’s romanticized depiction of violent white Redemption as both “art” and “history incarnate,” San Franciscan political leaders and cultural commentators decided which visions of interracial conflict and competition were suitable for public consumption. In doing so, they promoted an official civic ideology of race based on the twin assumptions of white power and black inferiority. The history of cinematic exhibition and suppression suggests that to be able to name and define social groups—and to be able to condemn their actions as violent or sanction them as socially redeeming—is to be in a position of immense power, a power wielded in San Francisco by men and women who decided which visions of whiteness and blackness the public would be allowed to see. Indeed, this chapter suggests that we might consider censorship itself as a form of violence. This is in no way to suggest that cinematic censorship was as cruel or vicious as the physical violence committed against black Americans on a daily basis. But by defending some visions of racial conflict as historical, educational, and indispensable, while rendering others irrelevant through their non-presentation, San Francisco leaders wielded censorship in a violent manner, suppressing important visual challenges to a racial hierarchy that was otherwise promoted as natural and indisputable.

The year 1915 was symbolic for black San Franciscans. Booker T. Washington died. Jack Johnson lost his heavyweight crown and white Americans rejoiced. D. W. Griffith wore the crown of magisterial filmmaker for his one-sided portrayal of the history of American race relations and his biased interpretation of black life. Indeed, black leaders would later point out that 1915 witnessed the Southern revival of the Ku Klux Klan and was the year in which the most blacks were murdered by lynch mobs in American history. Closer to home, black San Franciscans visiting the Panama-Pacific International Exposition found themselves confronted, once again, with the demeaning depictions of blackness. One of the fair’s most popular attractions was the Dixieland exhibit. Five massive and distorted blackfaced heads—a caricature straight out of the minstrel tradition—sat atop a giant slice of watermelon with the word “Dixieland” inviting fairgoers over for a look. What they saw was billed as authentic, but was right out of the opening scene of The Birth of a Nation. “Real old plantation melodies and dances, done by real negroes brought here from the plantations of Georgia, Louisiana, and Alabama,” was how the Chronicle began its description of the exhibit. “Dixie Land is not the ordinary minstrel show or black-face entertainment. These negroes are the real thing, and their songs and dances are exactly the songs and dances with which they amuse themselves in their leisure hours, after work in the cotton fields.”

For black San Franciscans coming to the PPIE seeking a day of leisure, pleasure, and amusement, the Dixieland exhibit surely rankled. Bay Area black leaders, in fact, debated whether or not the local black community should even patronize the PPIE because of the

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172 San Francisco Chronicle, 24 February 1915.
Dixieland exhibit and the absence of black San Franciscans among the numerous Exposition committees.\textsuperscript{173} This would be but one of the many controversies provoked by the PPIE. Ostensibly a public celebration of the opening of the Panama Canal and the imperial glory that the waterway was to bring to San Francisco, the planning and running of the Exposition served to crystallize many of the antithetical ideas that San Franciscans held about the past, present, and future of their city. The cantankerous public debates over the meaning of both the PPIE and San Francisco are the subject matter of my next chapter.

\textsuperscript{173} See, for example, editorials in the \textit{Western Outlook}, 20 February 1915; and the Oakland \textit{Sunshine}, 26 June 1915.
Chapter Three

“Our Boasted Civilization”
Play, Pleasure, Prizefighting, and Preparing for the PPIE

_Exhibitions of brutality are no necessary part even of a ‘Paris of America,’ or of a ‘wide-open town.’ A wide-open town means a town in which one can get drunk, gamble, and be robbed with impunity, but it does not necessarily mean a town in which two brutes are allowed to hammer each other for money._

—San Francisco Chronicle, 1910.\(^1\)

The filmmaker D. W. Griffith had another idea for a moving picture. In July 1915, at the same time that his _The Birth of a Nation_ was playing twice daily to sold-out audiences at the Alcazar Theater, Griffith was visiting San Francisco, taking in the sights, and mapping out his next monumental project. Training his director’s eye on the grounds of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE)—the nearly year-long world’s fair celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal as well as San Francisco’s phoenix-like rebuilding from the ruins of the catastrophic 1906 earthquake and fire—Griffith announced that he had found the location and the subject matter for his next cinematic epic. “This exposition,” the film man marveled, “is the grandest thing the world has known. It is like a dream city, a second Carthage. I have seen expositions and expositions—but no exposition like this. Never before has a congress of world’s wonders had so beauteous a setting. Never before have we had as a background the emerald green of the bay and the deep blue haze of the mountains.

\(^1\) _San Francisco Chronicle_, 2 May 1910.
In my mind it would be a crime to let the exposition come and go without perpetuating it in photography. I don’t mean ordinary photography, but something stupendous, something that will be a credit to the original from which it is taken. I mean, in short, a film drama that will mark another forward leap as great as that of The Birth of a Nation.”

Since Griffith never did make a moving picture with the Panama-Pacific International Exposition as either his set or subject matter, we can only wonder what such a film’s storyline might have been. Griffith certainly had many to choose from. According to the growing academic literature on international expositions—there were eleven such events in the United States between the years 1893 and 1915—public extravaganzas like the PPIE can be understood as many things. They are commercial enterprises, educational offerings, patriotic presentations, imperialist pageants, utopian visions, cultural mosaics, architectural wonders, tales of abundance, expressions of moral authority, democratic zones of amusement, and dramatic pronouncements of ethnic and racial hierarchies, to name but a few of their aims and outcomes that have been outlined by scholars. But though they are commonly referred to as world’s fairs—a term denoting both their global scope and international significance—expositions like the PPIE are, first and foremost, local events that can tell us a great deal about the city in which they take place.

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2 San Francisco Chronicle, 4 July 1915.

In this chapter I use the conflict and the consensus that coalesced around the preparation for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in order to further illuminate the contested public culture of early-twentieth century San Francisco. My particular focus is the way different San Franciscans used the impending PPIE to promote a distinct and desired civic identity—that is, to advance very specific versions and visions of their city’s past, present, and future for widespread public consumption. Never in the short history of the city was this civic identity so forcefully promoted and so fervently debated than during the era in which San Franciscans conceived of, bid for, planned, and then presented their 1915 world’s fair. Indeed, perhaps more than in any other people living in any other American city in American history, early-twentieth-century San Franciscans found themselves in a unique position. Between the catastrophic destruction of the 1906 earthquake and fire and the need to promote the 1915 exposition, San Franciscans were living in a decade of open possibilities. With much of the city shaken and burnt to the ground, the slate had been wiped clean, many believed, and a new and ideal picture of San Francisco and its inhabitants could

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now be invented, unveiled, and promoted. Like a D. W. Griffith cinematic epic, then, the
rhetoric revolving around the planning and preparation for the 1915 Panama-Pacific
International Exposition can be considered much like a moving picture—as a projection of
the way San Franciscans thought of both themselves and their city.

The strategy of using the PPIE for the articulation of a civic identity is indicative of
the way San Franciscans promoted the fair as part of a larger, citywide celebration that would
re-introduce their rebuilt city to the world. Though certainly the focal point, the PPIE
fairgrounds were only part of what civic boosters called the larger urban playground of San
Francisco. Fair and city were to combine seamlessly into a site of urban pleasure and
enchantment. This was an idea that set early-twentieth century San Franciscans apart from
their civic predecessors. Parks, promenades, and world’s fairs were usually seen as being
somehow separate from the city—as antidotes to the cacophonous and unhealthful bustle of
the urban environment. Both San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and New York’s Central
Park, for example, were created as a soothing and orderly respite from the rest of the city.\(^6\)
The famed 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was grounded in the urban experience,
but was presented as a distant model to which the modern city should aspire.\(^7\) Though
promoters of the PPIE also heralded their fair as a shimmering dream city, they explicitly
advertised the city of San Francisco itself as the chief attraction, of which the Exposition was
but one part. As PPIE President Charles C. Moore wrote when promoting the fair in 1912,
“At the very threshold of the door, the signs of festivity will greet the honored guest. It will

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Nineteenth Century* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 155-79.

not be necessary to go into an inner room of the house to find the decorations. In other cities there has been a door within a door, or a gate within the gate, beyond which one found the festival. San Francisco has discarded this time-honored arrangement. Her whole house will be open, decorated, lighted, swept and made ready. The city is the site. As the pre-fair rhetoric of Moore suggests, though civic boosters hailed the PPIE as a must-see attraction, they used the fair to celebrate and promote the city of San Francisco as the most wonderful amusement of all.

Just as San Franciscans used the upcoming PPIE as the reason to make larger claims about themselves and their city, in this chapter I use the PPIE as an opening to a wider examination of the relationship between prizefighting, popular amusements, and civic identity. I begin by examining why San Franciscans turned to hosting a world’s fair as a way to promote an idealized vision of their reconstructed city, then highlight the claims they made in order to convince national political leaders that their city was the supreme choice for a fair celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal. A critical aspect of this campaign was the fight both among San Franciscans and between San Francisco and California political leaders over whether or not San Francisco would be allowed to host the Independence Day 1910 prizefight between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries. In order for San Franciscans to win the right to host the Fair, they had to first prove to the rest of the nation that they possessed the required civic discipline and moral fitness by banishing the interracial fight from their city. The bulk of the chapter is then spent exploring how, in the immediate pre-PPIE era, San Franciscans viewed popular amusements as symbolic representations of the city itself. The games they played, the leisure-time activities they pursued, the vices they imbibed—San

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Franciscans believed that these pastimes suggested something important about both their present civic character and the future of San Francisco. But exactly what these pursuits portended was a topic of rancorous public debate. The imperative of preparing the city to host an international exposition brought to a boiling point long-standing tensions between proponents of clean and wholesome civic amusements and the supporters of city’s libertine masculine entertainments—the illicit pleasures of the city’s Barbary Coast redlight district, the manly enthusiasms of its prizefight arenas, or any of the other popular amusements grounded in the city’s exuberant Gold Rush-era “anything goes” ethos.9 As the opening day of the PPIE approached, the city’s popular amusements—particularly prizefighting—became controversial and contested cultural activities that different San Franciscans felt compelled to reform, abolish, or defend, all in name of promoting their city

“The Merit Kid”

Perched on the far western edge of the American continent and the national imagination, San Francisco seemed to possess limitless possibilities. And this is what made the reality of San Francisco so troublesome. Many turn-of-the-century San Franciscans saw an alarming incongruity between their city’s utopian potential and its dystopian tendencies. As California historian Kevin Starr suggests, “In San Francisco’s ugly and huddled lanes,

critics had always beheld a symbol of lost California opportunities. Here should have been built the city beautiful, paradigm of the cultural order that time would bring to the Pacific Slope."¹⁰ This does not mean that utopian-minded San Franciscans had not been trying to convert their visions of an urban paradise into earthly reality. Though the Panama-Pacific International Exposition would become San Franciscans’ most dramatic presentation of their idealized selves, the 1915 Fair was but one of the many creative endeavors that sought to harmonize the region’s ideal climate and breathtaking topography with a progressive-minded urban outlook. From the poet Joaquin Miller’s experimental dream city that tried to foster social accord through meticulous environmental planning in the Oakland hills, to Phoebe Hearst’s desire to design a University of California campus commensurate with the institution’s coming greatness, the idea that there could be a particularly Northern Californian way of urban development and domestic living—where landscape and architecture would meet in rugged and rationalistic splendor—was always present in the minds of the region’s most imaginative designers and promoters.¹¹

Most noteworthy among these turn-of-the-century civic imaginings were the dramatic “City Beautiful” plans devised by Daniel Burnham, architect of the famed 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the celebrated urban planner of the nation’s capitol. Enlisted in

¹⁰ Starr, Americans and the California Dream, 288. In Imperial San Francisco, his political history of turn-of-the-century San Francisco, the historian Judd Kahn echoes this idea, writing, “Instead of taking advantage of its remarkable natural beauty, San Francisco was a homely city, dirty, cramped, with few broad avenues, public places, or handsome buildings.” See Judd Kahn, Imperial San Francisco: Politics and Planning in an American City, 1897-1906 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 58.

1904 by Mayor James D. Phelan and the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco—a civic organization transfixed by the progressive potential of the well-ordered urban environment—Burnham looked to foreshadow San Francisco’s glorious future by drawing inspiration from imperialism’s past.\footnote{According to a report filed by Daniel Burnham, the goal of the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco was “to promote in every practical way the beautifying of the streets, public buildings, parks, squares, and places of San Francisco; to bring to the attention of the officials and the people of the city the best methods for instituting artistic municipal betterments; to stimulate the sentiment of civic pride in the improvement and care of private property; to suggest quasi-public enterprises, and, in short, to make San Francisco a more agreeable city in which to live.” See Daniel Hudson Burnham, \textit{Report on a Plan for San Francisco} (San Francisco: Sunset Press, 1905).} Using urban design in hopes of fostering social harmony and trumpeting political power, the Burnham Plan called for the creation of a monumental civic center at the intersection of Market and Van Ness Streets, as well as series of broad boulevards radiating outward from this midtown cynosure like rays from the sun. There was to be a web of narrow greenbelts linking massive urban parks, giant reservoirs fueling cascading aqueducts and filling inner-city lakes, as well as a legion of statues, acropolises, and palaces meant to recall the historical splendors of Greece, Paris, and Rome. Burnham’s dramatic design was a scheme so radical that it was unlikely to be approved and acted upon during even the best of times, but in the immediate aftermath of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire, the ideas went immediately lifeless. “The crying need of San Francisco today,” editorialized the \textit{Chronicle} in a moment of post-catastrophe practicality, “is not more parks and boulevards; it is business.”\footnote{\textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 6 May 1906.} Though nature had razed old San Francisco and provided something of a blank urban canvas upon which the Burnham Plan might be
realized, the economic and psychological imperatives of rebuilding the city as quickly as possible won the day and rendered the imperial designs impractical.14

If the disasters of 1906 meant that San Francisco’s self-proclaimed position of global importance would not be evidenced through a grandiose architectural scheme, the city’s business and political leaders would instead turn to a world’s fair to make claims of civic greatness. This had been tried before. In 1894 the California Midwinter International Exposition was a six-month showcase for the region’s industry, agriculture, and mild winter climate. Michael de Young, the publisher of the San Francisco Chronicle, came up with the idea while serving as Commissioner of the California Exhibits at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. De Young’s scheme was to transfer the best of the Chicago Exposition’s exhibits to San Francisco, situate them on some of the vast unimproved land in Golden Gate Park, and then use the event to sell newspapers, create jobs for San Francisco’s seasonal laborers, stimulate the local economy during a time of national recession, and spike the value of nearby land that, not coincidentally, he owned. Expressing ideas that would be echoed by celebrants of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, chroniclers of the 1894 Midwinter’s Fair event described the event as a testimony to San Francisco’s ascent to imperial glory. In a speech on opening day, the banker and civic booster James Duval Phelan announced, “We celebrate to-day this great fact—a history-making fact in the annals of the world—that the American people have reached the Pacific Ocean, and that civilization,

14 For the Burnham Plan and civic beautification in San Francisco, see Brechin, Imperial San Francisco, 151-4; Issel and Cherny, San Francisco, 109-10; and Starr, Americans and the California Dream, 290-4.
having sprung in the remote east and pursued its destined course, has reached the western edge of the American continent in California.”

In 1904 a local businessman named Reuben Brooks Hale believed it was time for another international exposition in the city. Hale proposed that San Francisco hold a world’s fair to both commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of Vasco de Nunez Balboa’s discovery of the Pacific Ocean and to symbolically link the port of San Francisco with the soon-to-be completed Panama Canal. When the earthquake and fire destroyed much of San Francisco in April 1906, the idea of the fair did not crumble and melt away with the majority of the downtown area. Instead, civic boosters promoted the proposed international exposition as part and parcel of their city’s inevitable rebirth—as an opportunity for San Franciscans to renounce their city’s past sins, to celebrate and assist their renaissance-in-

15 For Phelan’s speech, see The Official History of the California Midwinter International Exposition: A Descriptive Record of the Origin, Development and Success of the Great Industrial Expositional Enterprise held in San Francisco from January to July 1894 (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Co., 1895): 74-5. For the most comprehensive examination of the California Midwinter International Exposition, see Barbara Berglund, Ordering the Disorderly City: Power, Culture, and Nation-Making in San Francisco, 1846-1906 (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2002): 311-97. For more general treatments, see Brechin, Imperial San Francisco, 180-2; Issel and Cherny, San Francisco, 111-2; Oscar Lewis, Bay Window Bohemia: An Account of the Brilliant Artistic World of Gaslit San Francisco (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), 45-8; and Young, Building San Francisco’s Parks, 149-56.

16 Addressing the Directors of San Francisco’s Merchants’ Association in a January 1904 letter, Hale suggested that the fair could both advertise San Francisco as the center of trade for the Pacific Ocean and celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal. For Hale, San Francisco was positioned at the epicenter of a new system of political and economic networks, and he quoted the famous exhortations of a nineteenth-century newspaperman to highlight this fact: “Horace Greeley said, ‘Go West, young man’; but when he goes west from San Francisco he goes east. It is the beginning of the east, and the ending of the west. We are at the center around which trade revolves between the United States and all European countries that are looking for trade with the Orient and other Pacific Ocean points.” Hale’s letter is reprinted in Frank Morton Todd, The Story of the Exposition, Being the Official History of the International Celebration Held at San Francisco in 1915 to Commemorate the Discovery of the Pacific Ocean and the Construction of the Panama Canal (New York, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1921), 35-7.

17 Promoters of both San Francisco and the PPIE insisted that the events of 1906 be remembered as the Great Fire rather than the Great Earthquake. As Philip Fradkin writes, “Fire is visible, seemingly controllable, and fairly predictable; earthquakes are invisible, uncontrollable rogue events.” See Philip L. Fradkin, The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), 7.
progress, and to trumpet their inevitably glorious future. At a December 1909 mass meeting at the Merchants Exchange (later called the Chamber of Commerce), Democratic Party boss Gavin McNab dramatically announced to his fellow San Franciscans that they were owed the fair, linking San Francisco to imperial Rome, England, and even the Garden of Eden. “We claim [the fair] as a right,” McNab insisted. “The greatest physical work of any nation is the cutting of the Panama Canal; but the greatest physical achievement of any city in History has been the rehabilitation of San Francisco. In three years we have swept away the vestiges of calamity greater than befell Rome under Nero, or London under Charles. Since Adam stood alone on the morning of the sixth day, confronted with destinies of his race, there has been no grander spectacle than the San Franciscan the day after the great fire; and we now ask recognition for our services to American fame and name in rebuilding this City with our own hands.”

The golden moment in which San Franciscan businessmen officially made the proposed fair a centerpiece of civic reconstruction came at a 28 April 1910 meeting on the floor of the Merchant’s Exchange. There, in two hours of cajoling, auctioneering, and appealing to both individual reputations and San Franciscan civic pride, Charles C. Moore, Chairman of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition Corporation, directed the fundraising of more than four million dollars—“two million an hour!” they boasted—from

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18 The first fair used by San Franciscans to celebrate San Francisco’s rise from the ashes was actually the Portola Festival, a five-day, citywide festival that officially celebrated the Spanish discovery of San Francisco. Running from October 19-23, 1909, one newspaper described the event as a “bannered and bejeweled joy ride.” See the San Francisco Examiner, 19 October 1909. The success of the Portola Festival gave San Franciscan businessmen the confidence to bid for the 1915 world’s fair. Historians have written little on the significance of the Portola Festival. For a brief discussion that places the Portola Festival in the context of the same “business brotherhood” that made the PPIE possible, see Issel and Cherny, San Francisco, 39-40.

19 San Francisco Examiner, 8 December 1908. Quoted in Fradkin, The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906, 342.
Fig. 3.1: In December 1910, *Sunset* magazine used an image from imperialism’s past to make the case that San Francisco should be selected to host the world’s fair celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal. San Francisco, depicted here as a Roman centurion, straddles the Golden Gate and points its sword westward toward the Pacific. The shield reads, “San Francisco-1915,” the year of the proposed fair. (*Sunset, December 1910*)
the meeting’s 125 attendees. It was a staggering display of civic unity and purpose. “No parallel exists in exposition history for the performance of that day,” wrote Frank Morton Todd, the official chronicler of the PPIE who wrote a yeoman’s five-volume account of the fair. “San Francisco never had a day just like it. It electrified the community. People talked of it in every shop and office, on every block of the down-town streets, in every home. The moral effect was tremendous. It was as though a giant had suddenly become conscious of his strength and knew he was fit for battle.”

Fitness would be required, for as San Franciscans bid for right to host an exposition celebrating events both local and international, they had to first fight off national challengers and demonstrate that their city was the logical choice for the fair. After preliminary posturing in which Baltimore, Boston, San Diego, and Washington D.C. all made noise about bidding for the Fair, the battle boiled down to a contest between San Francisco and New Orleans, with Congress in charge of selecting the winner. As was often the case when outlining civic conflicts, San Franciscans employed the metaphor of the prizefight to make sense of the battle for the fair. In July 1910, while the debate raged over whether to allow moving pictures of the interracial Johnson-Jeffries bout to be shown in the city, an illustration in the *San Francisco Examiner* used the imagery of the fight film to highlight a number of the prominent social, cultural, and political battles in the city. Under the heading, “Some Fight Pictures That We Would Permit,” the newspaper presented a series of frames

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20 Todd, *The Story of the Exposition*, 76.

21 Members of San Francisco’s Panama-Pacific International Exposition Corporation were especially dismayed to learn that business leaders in San Diego were going to stake their claim before Congress and also bid for the exposition. Sensing a divided California, and thus divided votes, New Orleans and Deep South business interests also threw their hat into the ring. In May 1910, under pressure from other California business leaders, San Diego boosters withdrew their candidacy and agreed to support the San Francisco bid in return for San Francisco’s support for a smaller exposition in San Diego that would focus on United States-Latin American relations. See Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 214-7.
depicting desired knockout blows delivered to an assorted cast of villains. “Kid Consumer” soaked up praise for administering a beating to “The High Cost of Living.” A California Golden Bear delivered a powerful right cross to the specter of “Oriental Immigration.” Also depicted was the battle for the “World’s Fair purse.” It was “The New Orleans Pretender” versus “The Merit Kid,” with a badly beaten boxer representing the Crescent City draped unconscious over the ropes after being dispatched by the fighting San Franciscan, the latter’s right arm raised by referee Uncle Sam as a signal of his convincing victory.22

The actual contest for the fair between San Francisco and New Orleans was no less cantankerous. Although much of the cajoling and convincing took place behind closed doors as politicians and boosters from both cities and their respective states visited Washington and provided entertainment, hospitality, and their economic portfolios, supporters of the San Francisco and New Orleans bids also waged a spirited public campaign in the local and national media trumpeting their own assets and highlighting their opponent’s weaknesses. Relative to the rest of the nation, San Francisco and New Orleans actually had much in common. Both were cosmopolitan port cities that boasted storied redlight districts and a predilection for masculine indulgences like prizefighting and prostitution.23 The two city’s similarities, however, were ignored during a war of words that seemed much like a prizefight itself, complete with punch, counter-punch, and cruelly placed low blows. Boosters of New Orleans began by arguing that their city was the democratic choice for the fair because it was more convenient to the large population centers of the eastern United States. “An Exposition

22 San Francisco Examiner, 12 July 1910.

Fig. 3.2: “Some Fight Pictures That We Would Permit.” In January 1910, as San Franciscan debated whether to censor moving pictures of the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries prizefight, the San Francisco Examiner printed a series of fight films that they would like to see. In the upper right is San Francisco, known as the “Merit Kid,” defeating the city of New Orleans for the right to host the 1915 world’s fair. (San Francisco Examiner, 12 July 1910).
in New Orleans will be of and for the people,” explained the New Orleans organizing committee. “An Exposition in San Francisco will be a rich man’s show.” A pamphlet issued by San Francisco’s Panama-Pacific International Exposition Company (PPIEC) countered this claim by pointing out that the regional population of New Orleans was overwhelmingly black and poor and thus should be excluded from any calculation of potential fairgoers. San Francisco, the organization pointed out, boasted over one million white inhabitants within a twenty-five mile radius of the city. “Bear in mind,” wrote the PPIEC in their appropriately named propaganda, *A Cold Blooded Business Proposition*, “that in this fair competition color counts. Not because of a difference in skins, but as an indication of poverty and inability to keep up the local support of an exposition.”

And then things got really nasty. San Franciscans warned that a world’s fair in New Orleans would be an exposition swamped in heat, stick, stink, and malarial bugs. One San Francisco newspaper described New Orleans as a notoriously “dilapidated city, unkempt, and unsanitary, with an abominable climate,” while another suggested, “If New Orleans gets the fair, the first thing she should build is a sunstroke hospital.” New Orleans boosters replied that if San Francisco were awarded the fair the whole event might seismically shake loose from its foundation and slip into the sea. At least New Orleans fair-goers could “retire at midnight with the thought that the next morning will find them safe in bed,” explained the Natchez *Democrat and Courier*, “in San Francisco it is different.” The *San Francisco Chronicle* recommended that New Orleans increase the value of her Exposition Stock by

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throwing in a mosquito net with every ticket sold. New Orleans charged that bubonic plague was a constant menace in San Francisco. Back and forth the argument went, with each side charging the other of issuing “false, scurrilous, foul-mouthed billingsgate.”

Summarizing the case for San Francisco and against New Orleans was Robert E. Connelly, head of publicity for the California campaign. Writing in *Sunset* magazine, Connelly described the proposed San Francisco fair as a wondrous event that would take place in “rich, undeveloped country, possessing in abundance the charms of nature that appeal to all mankind.” New Orleans, by contrast, had already held a World’s Fair in 1884, and they still had not repaid the federal loan used to finance the operation. If history were a lesson, Connelly declared, a New Orleans fair would be “a dismal failure given by a dismal city in a dismal state.”

If the San Francisco press relished illuminating the downside to New Orleans, it was left to the politicians to trumpet the Golden Gate City’s unparalleled assets. In a speech before Congress on 18 April 1910, the Honorable Julius Kahn, the first Jewish congressman from San Francisco and the Chair of the powerful Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States House of Representatives, presented the chief argument for why his city was the logical choice for a world’s fair meant to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal. Kahn explicitly linked the city of San Francisco to the Panama Canal by reminding Congress that scores of intrepid Argonauts making their way to the California gold fields had lost their lives while traversing the very isthmus that the inter-oceanic waterway would soon occupy. He likened San Francisco’s current recovery from the 1906 conflagrations to the building of the canal itself, celebrating both feats as testaments to the ability of mankind to triumph over

26 For these and other arguments, see the excerpts in “Rival Claimants for the Panama Fair,” *Literary Digest* 41 (July 2, 1910); and “The Logical Point,” 25.

the awesome forces of nature. Finally, looking ahead, he declared that San Francisco was the city that would most benefit in the future from the canal’s linking of the Atlantic and the Pacific—a mighty event that Kahn described as “the wedding of the two great oceans.” A San Francisco world’s fair, then, would be a bridge between the city’s past rugged achievements, its muscular present, and its energetic and enterprising future. Noting that he was speaking on the fourth anniversary of the 1906 Earthquake—the day “the demons of destruction took possession of and entrenched themselves in that fair Western metropolis”—Kahn concluded his speech by positioning San Francisco’s bid for the fair as a much-deserved opportunity to demonstrate that his city had risen from the ashes and was now ready to retake her rightful place in the pantheon of the world’s most magnificent cities. Just four years earlier San Franciscans had watched their city melt away in the great fire, but they had rebuilt, proving themselves “worthy successors of the hardy pioneers of 1848 and 1849.” Now, gazing four years into the future, “light-hearted and pleasure-loving” San Franciscans wanted the opportunity to thank those who had poured out so much sympathy and invite them to come and revel in their reconstructed city’s great delights.28

It was a rousing address that elicited multiple bursts of applause from the members of Congress, but before even considering granting San Francisco the fair, some Congressional leaders wanted to see evidence that the physically reconstructed San Francisco was morally rehabilitated, as well. As San Franciscans made the case that it was they who possessed the civic muscle necessary to build the Fair meant to celebrate the energetic excavation of the Panamanian isthmus, they would need to first rid their city of its reputation as a wide-open town that embraced the bloody sport of boxing in order to demonstrate that they also

possessed the requisite moral character. Coincidentally, the contest between San Francisco and New Orleans to secure the 1915 exposition was heating up at precisely the same moment that San Franciscans were preparing for the 1910 Independence Day “battle of the century,” the massively hyped interracial prizefight between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries.

The conflict over whether or not San Francisco would host the Johnson-Jeffries fight highlights contested visions of the city and the state of California, as well as the power dynamics that existed not only within San Francisco, but also between city, state, and national forces. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, promoters originally scheduled the fight for across the San Francisco Bay at the Emeryville Racetrack, but a platoon of East Bay clergy led a successful public relations onslaught against the fight, condemning it as a “brutalizing spectacle which even frontier and Mormon Utah spurns.”

With the “Divines Against the Big Fight,” as one newspaper headline put it, the Emeryville promoters backed off and San Franciscan civic leaders immediately seized the reins and announced that the fight would take place in their city. John L. Herget, the one-time pugilist and chairman of the San Francisco Police Committee explained, “As long as San Francisco tolerates prizefights, there is no reason why this, the fight of all fights, should not be decided here.”

Had the city not been bidding for the right to host a world’s fair, the big fight likely would have occurred in San Francisco. But with San Franciscans now looking upon the

29 *San Francisco Call*, 9 May 1910. Two hundred Oakland churchmen combined forces and sent a petition of protest to Alameda County and California state officials, imploring them to prohibit the Fourth of July fight from taking place in Emeryville in the name of both national honor and public safety. “The holding of the fight on the anniversary of the nation’s natal day would be an insult to the patriotic sentiments of our people and would attract to this community an undesirable element among which there would be criminals of both races, whose presence would be a menace to good order.” The Oakland ministers’ petition is reprinted in the *San Francisco Examiner*, 10 May 1910.

30 *San Francisco Call*, 31 March 1910.

31 *San Francisco Call*, 24 May 1910.
proposed exposition as an opportunity to showcase a clean, wholesome, and forward-thinking locale—and with Fair promoters faced with necessity of convincing Congress that the city was the embodiment of these traits—the celebration of prizefighting in San Francisco was both a cultural blight and political disaster. The city’s religious leaders had long excoriated professional pugilism, and now they led the local charge against the match. Reverend E. R. Dille, pastor at the Central Methodist Episcopal Church at Franklin and O’Farrell, railed against the interracial contest and the public-relations damage it would inflict in a sermon titled, “The Prize Fight—California’s Disgrace; San Francisco’s Infamy.” Placing the Johnson-Jeffries fight in direct opposition to the civic drive for the much-desired Panama Fair, and praising San Franciscans for their noble efforts to raise more than four million dollars in their drive for the Fair, Dille wondered why that same civic spirit could not be employed elsewhere. “Surely,” the pastor reasoned, “a people who can do that splendid thing can top the prize fight, which will do more harm to San Francisco than the exposition can counteract.”

California Governor James Gillett responded to the protests by declaring that his hands were tied in the matter. “So far as I can see it is not up to me to do anything,” the Governor explained. “Since the law of California, which represents the deliberately expressed will of the people of the state, permits such a contest, why should I even consider putting a stop to it?” But stop the fight he did. Under June 16 headlines that read, “Governor Signs Knockout for Fighters,” and “Governor Insists that Big Go be Stopped,” the local dailies reported that Gillett took the “startling and unlooked for action” of ordering the

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32 For the complete text of Dille’s sermon, see the San Francisco Call, 9 May 1910.

State Attorney general, U. S. Webb, to prevent the interracial fight from occurring in San Francisco. In an about-face to his earlier pronouncements that endorsed the bout’s legality, Gillett looked again at the contest and suddenly decided that regardless of what the affair was being called—a scientific exhibition, a sparring contest, a prizefight—such an event had no place in his state, explaining, “If ‘sparring exhibitions,’ as permitted by our laws, make fights where men are killed, beaten into insensibility, and their faces ‘but into ribbons’ lawful acts, then it is time that the legislature should interfere and make such exhibitions and contests a felony. The whole business is demoralizing to the youth of our state, corrupts public morals, is offensive to the senses of the great majority of our citizens and should be abated as a public nuisance.”34 With regard to the big bout, the Governor had suddenly got religion. The eastern press called it “California’s Conversion” and compared Gillett to the apostle Paul when suggesting that the Governor had “seen a sudden light, as sudden and convincing as that once shown when a man was on a bad errand on his way to Damascus.”35

That sudden light, however, had not come from above, but from Washington D.C. It was the very real threat of losing the San Francisco bid for the fair. New York Congressman William S. Bennet, a delegate to the Presbyterian General Assembly and a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, wired a telegram to his friend William R. Wheeler, president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, informing Wheeler that moral sentiment in the country was decidedly against the fight. If the bout was not banned from San Francisco, Bennet suggested, there was a grave danger that Congress would take an unfavorable position against San Francisco in its eleventh-hour battle against

34 Gillett’s announcement is reprinted in the San Francisco Call, 16 June 1910.

New Orleans for the cherished exposition. At first Wheeler tried to assure Congressman Bennet and his fellow committee-members that the vast majority of San Franciscans opposed the interracial prizefight, doing his best to separate the fight from the fair by arguing that one had nothing to do with the other. “Please urge on your committee,” pled Wheeler in a telegram to Bennet, “that the public-spirited San Franciscans promoting the San Francisco exposition and the people generally interested therein are not favorable to the Jeffries-Johnson fight. Undoubtedly the majority of our people are opposed to the fight. It would be decidedly unjust to consider the latter proposition in connection with the former and to punish the many for the sins of the few.” But faced with the resolve of Bennet’s committee, Wheeler brought the wire to the attention of members of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition Company as well as to Governor Gillett. Relaying Bennet’s claim that hosting the fight would likely spoil San Francisco’s chance for winning the fair, Wheeler urged the Governor to take action—and though the Gillett denied bowing to political blackmail, instead claiming he merely responded to the will of the people, his reversal on the question of prizefighting suggests the immediate power of Bennett’s telegram.36

The governor’s sudden enjoiner against the Johnson-Jeffries fight set off a brief and confusing power struggle between himself, San Francisco Mayor Patrick McCarthy, and San Franciscan prizefight promoters. McCarthy was on a westbound train, returning from Washington D. C. where he had been promoting his city’s bid for the fair, when he heard about Gillett’s decision. City newspapermen quoted the mayor as being initially defiant. “I am running San Francisco,” he reportedly blustered. “I am taking no orders from Gillett nor his attorney general. You can bet your last dollar that the big fight will be held in my town

36 San Francisco Chronicle, 15 June 1910.
as advertised. We know what we want and we get what we want when we want it.”

That McCarthy, a mayor closely linked to vice interests in San Francisco, would declare his position in the form of a wager surprised no one, except McCarthy himself, who the next day denied that he had ever issued the statement. “I never said such a thing,” he explained. “And what is more, with the Governor holding the whip hand just now I would have to be an idiot to talk that way.”

By “the whip hand,” McCarthy was referring to the state militia, which Governor Gillett was now threatening to employ in order to prevent future prizefights from taking place in San Francisco. With nine companies of the state artillery corps stationed at the Presidio military base put on notice by the Governor, all eyes now turned to the upcoming Sam Langford-Al Kaufman contest, another interracial prizefight scheduled for 18 June at the Metropolitan Athletic Club at Eighth and Howard. Louis Blot, the club’s President and the fight’s promoter, believed he was well within his rights to host the contest and promised to have his fighters in the ring by 2:30 in the afternoon. If interfered with, Blot threatened legal action. But under orders from both Mayor McCarthy and Governor Gillett, San Francisco Chief of Police John Martin announced that he would not allow either fighter to enter the ring. As insurance in case the San Francisco police chief wavered, Gillett vowed to call in the state militia and surround the ring with pointed bayonets. “These fighters will have to lick the whole state of California before they will be allowed to lick one another,” threatened the Governor, who was not about to let a boxing promoter ruin his state’s chance

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37 San Francisco Call, 16 June 1910.

38 San Francisco Call, 17 June 1910.
to secure the lucrative exposition. “Should the chief of police be enjoined from interfering I will proclaim martial law and occupy the arena with state troops.”

In the face of such threatened force, Blot lost his nerve and cancelled the bout. “What’s the use, anyways?” was the promoter’s conclusion. Tex Rickard, the promoter of the Johnson-Jeffries contest, ultimately agreed with Blot’s sentiment. He halted construction on the thirty-thousand-seat wooden arena his men were building at the corner of Eighth and Market Streets and quickly transferred his fight eastward over the Sierras to the even more libertine locale of Reno, Nevada. Supporters of prizefighting in San Francisco were incensed. The San Francisco Labor Council claimed that “a very serious blow has been struck at the liberty of the citizens of San Francisco,” while over 2500 hotel managers and business leaders signed a petition asking the Governor to recede from his position so they might profit from the intense interest being generated by the fight. Nevertheless, Gillett’s decision stood. Bemoaning the effectiveness of the anti-prizefight crusade was the city’s beloved ex-champion, Jim Corbett, who likely spoke for all wounded San Francisco fight fans when he colorfully declared, “If this is religion, I prefer a gaspipe thug.”

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39 San Francisco Call, 18 June 1910.

40 San Francisco Call, 20 June 1910.

41 For the Labor Council’s response, see the San Francisco Call, 21 June 1910. For the business leaders’ petition, see the San Francisco Call 22 June 1910. For a report on the construction of the temporary arena, see the San Francisco Call, 17 June 1910.

42 San Francisco Call, 21 June 1910; San Francisco Examiner, 18 June 1910.
“Man is a Play Animal”

When San Franciscans learned they had won the Congressional vote and secured the Fair on 31 January 1911, the city erupted in military bombast and democratic celebration. One San Francisco newspaper described the instant-carnival in the following fashion: “The vision of white battlements, ships of the world at anchor in the bay, fetes and pageants, and a year-long wonder fired the thoughts of the thousands on the streets and in their homes as the flags and bombs and the tumult told the story of the day. Bankers, brokers and shopkeepers left their desks and joined the crowds on the streets. Children rushed shouting to the street, schools closed. Courts closed because judges found lawyers had left suddenly and lawyers found clients had deserted them. The only thing they did not do was to release the prisoners in the jails.”

But by the next morning, as street sweepers cleared the mountains of confetti left by the all-night revelers, the realization sank in that it was now time to get to work. There were promissory notes to be collected, insurance policies to be purchased, and exposition planning committees to be formed. Streets needed to be paved, hotels expanded, harbor facilities upgraded, transportation lines linked, and, of course, the entire exposition needed to be designed and built.

The privilege of hosting the exposition created to celebrate the completion of the canal that would link two great oceans was seen by many San Franciscans as an opportunity to similarly join themselves in common cause. In 1909, at the first mass meeting to raise funds for the Fair, Gavin McNab had argued that the Exposition would not only serve as a

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showcase for his reconstructed city, but would cause “all differences among our people to pass away. In its place will rise the genius of municipality. We shall be only San Franciscans—one for all and all for one, and for San Francisco.”\textsuperscript{44} Such claims fit nicely with the rhetoric of Mayor James Rolph, who was fond of declaring that he was the mayor of all the people, the man who would unite the city’s conglomerate of diverse individuals into a San Franciscan whole. Rolph also celebrated the PPIE as the moment of necessity that could accomplish the monumental task of directing the individualistic energies of San Franciscans toward a single civic purpose. “It is hard for these strong wills to row in the same boat,” Rolph declared in a \textit{Sunset} magazine interview, but “we are going to be united. We are going to work for the common weal. We are pulling together.”\textsuperscript{45}

Though civic leaders endlessly promoted the PPIE as proof of an emergent civic consensus, the fair proved just as often to be the spark and focus of long-standing political, economic, and cultural conflict. Heated competition arose over who would get the choice contracts to build a suitable public transportation system, a disagreement magnified in an era of high-profile graft accusations and trials. Unions and business leaders contested the implementation of closed-shop labor policies on PPIE grounds.\textsuperscript{46} There was also a great debate over the precise location of the fair. Most San Franciscans supported an easy-to-access Exposition adjacent to the eastern edge of Golden Gate Park in the geographic center

\textsuperscript{44} Todd, \textit{Story of the Exposition}, (vol.1), 54.


\textsuperscript{46} For an article on the controversy over public transportation contracts, see the \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 8 February 1913. For the construction of the PPIE in the context of the graft trials and the negotiations between labor and capital, see Issel and Cherny, \textit{San Francisco}, 167-8.
of the city, while others insisted upon the Harbor View site that bordered the Presidio along San Francisco’s northern rim, the Exposition’s eventual location.\footnote{Indeed, perhaps the most impressive physical fact about the Exposition was that it occurred on 635 acres of invented land. As they had with much of San Francisco’s waterfront eastern perimeter, engineers would create land where there was none before, dredging and filling in the marshy bay with dirt and rubble left over from the 1906 earthquake and fire in order to extend the northern edge of the city into the water and toward the Golden Gate. The PPIE, then, would literally—and poetically—be built upon the ruins of the 1906 earthquake and fire. For the complete story of the conflict over the placement of the PPIE, see Todd, \textit{The Story of the Exposition} (vol. 1), 129-33; 165-9. In a sign that his multi-volume account of the PPIE is one part civic history and one part celebratory propaganda, Todd went on to describe the healthy disagreement over where to hold the PPIE as evidence that San Franciscans maintained their rugged western spirit, suggesting “had San Franciscans been able to unite in meek agreement on a site for the Exposition they would not have been the hardy breed that they are” (129).}

But as San Franciscans readied themselves to host the 1915 exposition, the most cantankerous public disagreement that emerged was the conflict over how the city of San Francisco itself would both appear and behave by the time the PPIE opened its gates. Faced with the imperative of not only building an exposition, but of preparing the city to “welcome the world,” a congeries of civic reformers tried to clean up San Francisco and the rid the city of its reputation as a vice-ridden and wicked urban locale. In an attempt to give San Francisco a thorough “civic housekeeping” in preparation of the Fair, moral reformers unleashed an organized legal and rhetorical attack against the civic spaces of libertine masculinity—saloons, brothels, dance halls, boxing arenas, and other urban environments in which a tolerant ethos for how individuals used their bodies for pleasure and profit historically held sway. Such an assault was part of a larger movement in which urban Americans across the nation were heatedly debating the meaning of pleasure in their cities.\footnote{The Progressive Era witnessed the widespread rise of moral reform movements in which middle class men and women worked together to rid urban society of such social evils as drinking, gambling, and prostitution. See Paul Boyer, \textit{Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye, eds., \textit{Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991); and Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” \textit{Reviews in American History} 10 (December 1982): 113-32. For Progressivism in California, see George E. Mowry, \textit{The California Progressives} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951); and Spencer C. Olin Jr., \textit{California’s Prodigal Sons: Hiram Johnson and the Progressives, 1911-1917} (Berkeley: University of}
In 1915, the Progressive-era theorist Benjamin Parke DeWitt explained, “If the American city fails, it will not fail because of the work its people do or the places in which they live, but because of the pleasures which they seek. It is vice, high living, and deterioration of moral fiber more than anything else that destroys cities and democracies.”\textsuperscript{49} San Franciscan reformers believed that the moral fiber of their city was indeed suspect. For critics, turn-of-the-century San Francisco was a city that made a mockery of modern visions of moral order and progress, where behavior they considered deviant or even abhorrent was the lifeblood of a pleasure industry that was not only tolerated, but celebrated, institutionalized, profitably packaged, and consumed.

Indeed, from the beginning, visitors and inhabitants of San Francisco described the city as a “wide-open town,” where behavior deemed deviant, scandalous, and criminal in other urban locales was celebrated by many in San Francisco as a unique aspect of the city’s heritage of tolerance. The liberal air of turn-of-the-century San Francisco was a by-product of the city’s Gold Rush beginnings, where, as Glenna Matthews suggests, a “free market of beliefs in conjunction with the dearth of women—the carriers and enforcers of middle-class norms—to say nothing of the risk taking that was central to what brought men to the region in the first place, combined to foster a remarkable spirit of openness.”\textsuperscript{50} Waves of pleasure-seeking men continued to fill the city even after the initial euphoria of the Gold Rush had run dry. As a major port city luring in sailors and attracting the world’s fortune seekers, the region was ripe with those who placed a premium on pecuniary gain over moral rectitude.


\textsuperscript{50} See Matthews, “Forging a Cosmopolitan Civic Culture,” 211-34.
The city’s toleration of disreputable pleasures was also an offshoot of its ethno-religious makeup. San Francisco was a city dominated by Irish and German Catholics, two ethnic groups who historically opposed restrictions on personal behavior and possessed the political influence and electoral numbers in San Francisco to see that their cultural beliefs translated into urban reality. Additionally, as the center of commerce and industry on the Pacific Coast, the demands of rapid urban development consistently took precedence over the politics of Christian reform. As the explorer and journalist George Kennan wrote succinctly about San Francisco in 1907, the hedonistic city by the bay emphasized “material achievement and business prosperity, rather than civic virtue and moral integrity.”

Michael de Young, the owner of the San Francisco Chronicle, put it much the same way during a series of highly publicized graft trials in 1907, dismissing the calls for civic reform by exclaiming, “Moral issues be damned. What we want is prosperity.”

And the vice industry was certainly prosperous. It was big business in San Francisco, one of the city’s most lucrative commercial endeavors that made mountains of money for saloonkeepers, brothel owners, and urban politicians alike. In 1880, San Francisco supported an estimated two thousand saloons and brothels, most located in the Barbary Coast, Chinatown, and tenderloin districts. By 1913, when the campaigns to clean up San Francisco in preparation for the PPIE commenced in earnest, there were an estimated 5300 saloons in the city, with just over half of them legal. Vice was so closely linked with the civic


53 San Francisco Call, 25 November 1907.
government that it took a natural disaster to shut down the houses of ill repute—and even then, only temporarily. The 1906 earthquake razed an enormous brothel that housed 133 prostitutes, but it was quickly reconstructed and, with a wink, given the nickname “the municipal crib” when the press discovered that half of the profits went to City Hall. Perhaps most symbolic of the cozy relationship between vice and city government was the fact that, between 1913 and 1917, Mayor “Sunny Jim” Rolph and Madam Tessie Wall, the city’s most notorious madam, rode together through the wharfside vice districts at the head of an annual parade organized by the liquor kings, brothel madams, and the other entrepreneurs of masculine pleasure.54

The authors of San Franciscan fictions, memoirs, journalistic investigations and popular histories have, with great ambivalence, illuminated the masculine theatricalities of libertine San Francisco. Some have celebrated these pleasures as evidence of a unique public culture of personal freedom and toleration. Others have described the city’s illicit amusements as little more than a swirl of sin. Frank Norris’s novel, *Vandover and the Brute*, published posthumously in 1914, best explores the subterranean world of urban amusements—and their effects—that the city’s moral critics found so problematic. Along with Jack London, Norris was San Francisco’s preeminent early-twentieth-century novelist. He is better known for his gruesome story *McTeague*—based on the 1893 stabbing murder of a San Franciscan woman by her husband—but *Vandover* is the book that best highlights why many San Franciscans thought of their city as a site of dramatic moral regression and physical degeneration. Norris’s title character, Vandover, is a young San Franciscan, newly

graduated from Harvard, who dreams of traveling to Paris and becoming an artist, but who ultimately falls prey to the hedonism of his hometown and becomes entrapped in the mire of its many vices. In the following passage, the description of Vandover’s energetic pursuit of nocturnal pleasure reads like a catalogue of the sights, sounds, and smells of the turn-of-the-century San Francisco underworld:

All at once Vandover rushed into a career of dissipation, consumed with the desire of vice, the perverse, blind, and reckless desire of the male. Drunkenness, sensuality, gambling, debauchery, he knew them all. He rubbed elbows with street walkers, with bookmakers, with saloonkeepers, with the exploiters of lost women…At one time and another he was associated with all the different types of people in the low “sporting set,” acquaintances of an evening, whose names grew faint to his recollection amidst the jingle of glasses and the popping of corks, whose faces faded from his memory in the haze of tobacco smoke and the fumes of whiskey; young men of the city, rich without apparent means of livelihood, women and girls “recently from the East” with rooms over the fast restaurants; owners of trotting horses, actresses without engagements, billiard-markers, pool-sellers and the sons of proprietors of halfway houses and “resorts.” With all these Vandover kept the pace…at the race-track, at the gambling tables in the saloons and bars along Kearney and Market streets, and in the disreputable houses amid the strong odours of musk and the rustle of heavy silk dresses.

By the end of the novel, Vandover’s descent into degeneracy is so complete that he becomes cursed by fits of lycanthropy—pacing the floor naked on all fours while snarling and howling like a wolf. The sensual impulses of the city had turned him into a primitive and brutish animal. Whereas writers like Jack London—whom I will discuss later in this chapter—believed that the turn-of-the-century American metropolis was breeding effete and over-civilized men, Norris was suggesting that the modern city was a transformative place that, literally, caused men to devolve into violent, depraved, atavistic brutes. In *Vandover*, the chief tormenter of man is the city of San Francisco itself, a profligate place of sordid pleasures and liberal licentiousness that pulsed into the night. “It was like the breathing of
some infinitely great monster,” Norris ominously wrote about the nocturnal city, “alive and palpitting, the systole and diastole of some gigantic heart.”

For civic reformers this was an ominous beat, and with the PPIE rapidly approaching they now proclaimed that it was time to clean up San Francisco and better align the city’s public culture with the progressive and imperial vision of the upcoming exposition. William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper, the San Francisco Examiner, was one of the loudest and most prominent voices calling for urban reform in the immediate pre-PPIE era. The Examiner had been a gift given to the young Hearst in 1887 by his mining-magnate and politician father, George Hearst, who bought the paper in 1880 to use as a mouthpiece for the city’s Democratic Party politics and his own campaign for the U.S. Senate. The younger Hearst took control shortly after graduating from Harvard and immediately adopted a sensational stance for his newspaper. Hearst seemed to think of his newspaper as one-part information source and one-part popular amusement, printing hues and cries over graft, vice, and the other manifestations of civic malfeasance—reports that undoubtedly served the dual purpose of rallying concerned citizens while attracting readers fascinated with the descriptions of the city’s lurid urban spaces. Bold proclamations issued in boldfaced print was the chief strategy of the Examiner, a paper that touted itself as “the Monarch of the Dailies.”

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56 It seems to have been a strategy that Hearst learned from another San Francisco newspaper editor, Fremont Older of the San Francisco Bulletin. Older gained notoriety when he took on the political machine of Abe “Boss” Ruef and San Francisco Mayor Eugene Schmitz, which led to the sensationalistic and controversial graft trials after the 1906 earthquake and fire. At one point during the trial, Older was kidnapped and threatened with murder by henchman supposedly working for the grafters. In 1918, Older left the Bulletin and went to work for the Hearst Newspaper Company. For Older’s reform crusade against Ruef and Schmitz, see Bean, Boss Ruef’s San Francisco, 40-66.

57 It was a journalistic style that proved to be controversial and evoked disparate responses. Arthur McKewen, the chief editorialist under Hearst, once explained the Examiner’s strategy by saying, “What we’re after is the gee-whiz emotion.” The San Francisco political insider Franklin K. Lane believed that the Examiner had its finger on the pulse of the city, suggesting that Hearst “knows public sentiment and how to develop it very well.”
The Examiner’s call for a thorough civic housekeeping in San Francisco commenced in earnest in September of 1913 when the paper printed a dramatic full-page editorial calling the city’s reform-minded citizens to arms. Titled, “Make San Francisco Clean City for Clean People: Let Healthy Gayety and Pleasure Abound, but no Vulgarity!” the newspaper’s missive against the Barbary Coast redlight district and the city’s other sinful pleasures mirrors arguments presented by other civic reformers in the wider campaign to clean up the city in preparation for the PPIE. More than just a hard-nosed attack against the degenerative amusements of masculine liberalism, the Examiner editorial was a meditation on the meaning of pleasure in the city. “Assuredly,” the Examiner began, “San Francisco is a city appointed for pleasure, for fun-making, for vivid enjoyment, and assuredly a pleasure city it should always remain, [but] the fundamental error in the attitude of our public servants has always been and is now the assumption that pleasure means indulgence in dissipation and debauchery; that entertainment means visiting vile slums; that amusement is to be found in dives and amid the sordid and shameful surroundings of commercialized vice.” According to the Examiner, the key to reforming the city was not to overreact and make San Francisco a city entirely absent of adult pleasures. San Franciscans needed to strike a balance, as “no one possessed of common sense desires to see San Francisco a city painfully good, chemically

Critics, however, decried the Examiner’s sensationalism. One of its former writers likened the paper to “a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut.” Less complimentary still was the perpetually caustic writer Ambrose Bierce, a one-time employee of the Examiner, who once said that the “Hearst method has all of the reality of masturbation.” Regardless of one’s own opinion, the Examiner’s large circulation among different classes of San Franciscans suggested that William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper possessed the awesome power to shape public thought. For a discussion of the role of Hearst’s Examiner in the San Francisco public sphere, see Ethington, The Public City, 312-9. The quotes I have used about Hearst are from pp. 315 and 317. For histories of Hearst, San Francisco, and the Examiner, see Brechin, Imperial San Francisco, 200-41; and David Nasaw, The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), esp. ch. 4.
purified or puritanically reconstructed, with public resorts closed at midnight, or with sad Sabbaths succeeding to a routine of dull work days.”

Indeed, with San Francisco’s world’s fair rapidly approaching, now was the golden opportunity to raze the city’s wicked habitats and clear a path “for sane and healthy and sweet and charming pleasures and amusements; for entertainment in which decent women can join decent men; for resorts in which merriment is without meanness, eating and drinking are without debauchery, dancing is without disgusting vulgarity, and mirth and fun are as clean as they are delightful.” Much more than merely reforming San Francisco in order to better promote the PPIE, then, the Examiner believed that the PPIE could be the spark needed to radically reform San Francisco once and for all. In other words, if the calamities of 1906 had failed to provide the impetus for San Franciscans to reform their city, surely the imperatives of promoting the upcoming PPIE could. “Let us resolve,” concluded the editorial with great ambition, “that we will make this city so clean, so inviting, so full of constant entertainment and wholesome sport and fun that thousands upon thousands of visitors will crowd to play in it. Let us build here, at the farthest outpost of the Republic, the most brilliant, the most charming, the most gracious, the most artistic and the loveliest city in America. Let us strive to win for San Francisco the renown of a great pleasure city, wherein gayety abounds without vulgarity.”

But what type of “clean” and “wholesome” amusements did San Francisco have to offer? Rather than merely list the non-offending pleasures in the city, I turn to an article that

58 San Francisco Examiner, 12 September 1913.
appeared in *Sunset* magazine—the publication that was the voice of the Southern Pacific Railroad and endlessly advertised San Francisco, California, and the 1915 Panama Exposition. Among the scores of pieces promoting both the region and the PPIE in *Sunset*’s pages was a 1910 essay by the budding novelist Sinclair Lewis. In “A San Francisco Pleasure Cure: Being Echoes of the New City’s Laughter,” Lewis tells the story of “the Master Builder,” an overworked construction overseer fatigued from the monumental task of rebuilding earthquake-ravaged San Francisco. His doctor suggests a vacation as a tonic to tune down his nerves and reinvigorate both his tired muscles and sagging spirit, but the Master Builder disagrees. “If I must be a child again,” he declares, “I’ll stay right here in San Francisco.” The article serves as a colorful catalogue of the “rejuvenating merriments” that San Francisco had to offer. Commencing their “pleasure cure” on a Friday night, the Master Builder and his wife sampled the many playhouses, dance shows, and restaurants along the New White Way—the recently rebuilt and electrified downtown segment of Market Street. The weekend was a whirlwind tour of the city’s many energetic pursuits and outdoor amusements. The couple began with a drive to the beach, then visited the terrace of the Pacific-perched Cliff House for a view of the sea lions waltzing in the waves, picnicked with the proletariat on the beach below, rowed on Stow Lake, sipped tea in the Japanese Gardens, and finally conducted an auto tour through Golden Gate Park, a trip that ended at the stadium where “strong young manhood” trained itself around the Grecian oval. “Great Saints!” marveled the Master Builder. “Is it good to be out of the office? Is this a pleasure city?”

But their escapade had only begun. Monday meant a trip south to the suburbs of San Mateo for horseback riding. Tuesday was fishing in nearby Sausalito. When it rained on Wednesday the couple made a cosmopolitan visit to the Italian restaurants for lunchtime
pasta, the Parisian salons for steamy hot chocolate, and then into reconstructed Chinatown for dinner, where the Master Builder suggested that, like the young Chinese girls around him, he too might soon wear silk lavender trousers in public. Good food meant the need for more exercise, so on the final day of their escapade the couple hiked up the city’s Twin Peaks trails, played tennis in Golden Gate Park, golfed at the Presidio, and then soothed their muscles with swims in both the seaside Sutro Baths and the large tank of the Lurline in downtown. A week’s worth of energetic pleasure seeking and their journey was now complete. The Master Builder’s wife was exhausted, but her husband was reinvigorated in both body and temper. “Guess I’m ready for a diploma in the course of getting young,” said Sinclair Lewis’s reborn character. “Weren’t the Spaniards chumps to think the Fountain of Youth was in the tropics? For it’s by the Golden Gate, and we’ve found it, eh?”

Of all the urban pleasures enjoyed by the Master Builder and his wife, it was the city’s saltwater baths and natatoriums that best symbolize the desire of some turn-of-the-century San Franciscans for clean, energetic, rejuvenating amusement. San Franciscans called them “pools,” “baths,” and “plunges,” and like the city’s opulent theaters, grand hotels, and gaudy Nob Hill mansions, turn-of-the-century San Francisco bathhouses stood testament to the grandiose visions of the region’s pioneer forefathers.

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61 The exception to this rule were the Lick Baths, a spare and utilitarian establishment located at Tenth and Howard Streets and named for their benefactor, the eccentric San Francisco tycoon James Lick, who at his death left $150,000 for the construction and maintenance of a free bathhouse. “Give it to the poor,” he
spectacular of the city’s bathhouses and natatoriums was the decorative Turkish Hammam on
Dupont Street, a palace of a building festooned with Persian carpets, marble Greek statues,
and flowing bronze fountains. There was the technologically innovative Crystal Baths in
North Beach, a modern edifice boasting ten 23,000-gallon saltwater tanks that were heated
by the dismissed steam of a neighboring winery. And in downtown, at the corner of Larkin
and Bush Streets, there was the elegant Lurline Baths, an especially popular bathing
establishment that attracted working-class men and women in need of their weekly washing
and city children who just wanted to splash around in the water for fun.

Two things are significant about the Lurline. First, the bathhouse was as much a
space of amusement as it was a place to get clean. During the winter months, for example,
ablutions took a backseat to entertainment as management raised the price of admission to
twenty-five cents, offered live music, and treated spectators to such athletic spectacles as
underwater wrestling, tiki canoe races, and ethnic tug-of-war contests. Second—and this is a

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62 According to “The Pacific Tourist,” an early tourist guide to San Francisco created by the Union and Central
Pacific Railroads, so recuperative were these Turkish baths that the very first thing a weary transcontinental
traveler was to do once arriving in San Francisco was head straight to the Hammam. “Perhaps the luxury of a
Turkish Bath should be had at the earliest moment to refresh the traveler. The Hammam is an ornament to the
city, and in it dusty travelers will experience mingled wonder and delight as its Mohammedan architecture,
perfect appointments, and complete adaptation to restore a sense of cleanliness and give solid refreshment to
Railroad to California, A Complete Traveler’s Guide of the Union and Pacific Railroads, Omaha to San
Francisco” (New York: 1879).

63 For a detailed description of the Crystal Baths, see the San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 25 June 1893.

64 The Lurline Baths were the 1893 brainchild of a group of businessmen led by San Franciscan John D.
Spreckels, who formed the Olympic Salt Water Company. Under the guidance of the mining engineer Henry L.
Shannon, the company utilized a technology first used for water-strip mining in the Sierra Nevadas, pumping
water from the Pacific eight miles across the width of San Francisco to their Lurline Baths and other customers
in the downtown section of the city. The establishment offered individual tubs and showers, a Russian steam
bath, parlors for men and women, a barbershop, a café, and even a boxing and fencing room.
phenomenon that I will discuss in greater detail below—the Lurline was an homage to Greek and Roman bathing. The exterior of the square concrete building was decorated with twelve Roman columns on all four sides, while inside the two-story structure a Doric colonnade framed the main swimming pool floor made of terrazzo marble and red and cream-colored tiles. After the Lurline was damaged in the 1906 earthquake and fire and then rebuilt in 1909 to even more lavish specifications, the Examiner used the bathhouse’s opulence as part of the publicity campaign to highlight the city’s post-catastrophe rehabilitation, celebrate its pleasure-loving culture, and justify the claim that San Francisco should be awarded the opportunity to host the 1915 world’s fair. “At no spot in the world,” trumpeted Hearst’s paper, “not at the most famous bathing resorts of the largest cities, is there a bathhouse approaching this one in beauty. It is superior to many of the buildings in old Pompeii.”

The most celebrated and culturally significant of the San Francisco bathhouses was the Sutro Baths—billed, when completed in 1896, as the largest saltwater natatorium in the world. The baths were the dream of Adolph Sutro, a Gold Rush-era Prussian immigrant who made a fortune in quartz and silver mining and then used his riches to invest in Northern California real estate, at one point owning one-twelfth of all the land in the city of San Francisco. The jewel of his holdings were the thousand acres that came to be known as

65 Quote is from San Francisco Examiner, 1 April 1909. For information on the Lurline and the entertainments they offered, see the San Francisco Examiner, 18 June 1893; The Daily Report, 16 October 1894, located in Adolph Sutro Scrapbooks (vol. 46), California Historical Society, San Francisco; and Jerry Flamm, Good Life in Hard Times: San Francisco in the ’20s & ’30s (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1978): 103-4.


Sutro Heights, the rocky cliffs right where the Pacific coastline juts eastward and unfolds into the Golden Gate. It was there, in a horseshoe-shaped cove at Point Lobos, near Seal Rock on the westernmost edge of the city, that Sutro built his bathing establishment—a massive three-acre natatorium framed in corrugated steel and canopied by 100,000 square feet of stained glass. The rugged grandeur of the location inspired Sutro to construct an edifice that was its equal. “A small place would not satisfy me,” he once explained. “I must have it large, pretentious, in keeping with the environment and with the great ocean itself.”

Since the Sutro Baths were located on the opposite end of the city from the downtown hotels and densely populated bayside neighborhoods, most city residents and visitors reached the establishment by railcar. Boarding any of the five “Cliff Cars” that linked the Ferry Building on the city’s eastern shore with the baths on its western cliffs, passengers first rode through the inhabited section of the city and then finished by winding two miles along the empty and abrupt cliffs overlooking the Golden Gate. According to a publicity brochure put out in conjunction with the PPIE, the journey was “the most picturesque street car ride in the world—a wonder ride!” Arriving at Sutro Heights, passengers disembarked and entered the massive glass enclosure through a classical Greek portal and then walked by Sutro’s glass-encased collection of natural curiosities and cultural artifacts from Africa, Europe, and the Orient. Swimmers then made their way to one of the 500 dressing rooms, each finished with

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68 In the first half of 1890s, San Franciscans looked on in wonder as the bathhouse took form, receiving weekly reports of the project’s progress in the city newspapers. The construction of the Sutro Baths was a national story, as well. In 1894, Harper’s Weekly provided a detailed account and photographs of the baths as they took shape, as well as some perspective of their grandeur, exclaiming that, “No baths so large, so expensive, or so perfect in every detail have ever been built in America, or perhaps in the world. Imagine Madison Square Garden filled with sea-water to a depth of from four to ten feet, and you can have a conception of the main tank.” Harper’s Weekly, 8 September 1894.

69 San Francisco Evening Bulletin, 7 April 1894.
natural wood and white porcelain, where they donned one of the establishment’s 20,000 bathing suits—black wool outfits infamous for their scratchiness.

Next it was a zig-zag descent down a cascade of stairs toward the choice of any of the seven separate pools that together held 1.7 million gallons of salt water and could be filled in less than one hour during high tide. The largest of the pools was the unheated L-shaped swimming tank measuring 150 x 275 feet, where “the swimmers are those of vigorous physique who gain the necessary heat of body by the strong exercise of swimming in the salt water.” Bathers uninterested in the authentic temperature of the Pacific could instead plunge into any of the six smaller tanks, heated at various temperatures, that filled in the ninety-degree angle cut by the main tank’s L-shaped configuration and sported seven slides, three trapezes, ten spring diving boards, thirty rope swings, and a high dive. Bathhouse management reserved one of the pools for women and children, but the other six tanks were sexually integrated, a fact that caused discussion and consternation among some city bathers. San Franciscan women expressed concerns about bathing in front of the male public, while San Franciscan men “over their sportive days” reportedly flinched at the idea of wearing one of the tight black bathing suits in front of the opposite sex. The fact that men and women swam together in the large pools provided titillating subject matter for readers of the *National Police Gazette*—a national publication that sniffed out male cuckoldry and female impropriety like a bloodhound. In 1897 the *Gazette* ran an article and illustration suggesting that the Sutro Baths was a space of lurid sexual intermingling and even marital infidelity. Under the title, “Found His Wife In a Bath,” the *Gazette* told the tale of a newspaperman from Topeka, Kansas, who went to San Francisco to surprise his wife at the 1897 Christian

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Endeavor Convention. After unsuccessfully searching for her for two days, the man from Kansas decided to take in the sights and visit the famous Sutro Baths. “Great was his surprise,” the bachelor newspaper revealed, “upon plunging into the water to literally swim into the arms of his missing spouse, who was enjoying a swim with another man.” But despite the objections fueled by both modesty and ideas of sexual propriety, men, women, boys, and girls jumped, swam, waded, and frolicked in the Sutro pools together.

The original name of the bathhouse was actually “Sutro’s Coney Island,” a designation linking the establishment to the famous New York amusement park. It was also a nod to the fact that the Sutro Baths was one-part bathing palace and one-part vaudeville-in-water—indeed, by 1897 the Sutro Baths was listed in city directories under “amusement” instead of “baths.” Musical accompaniment was always to be had during peak swimming hours, so the sounds of joyful screams and splashes mingled with the output of brass bands and string orchestras. This was on Sutro’s insistence. He believed that swimming, like dancing, should be rhythmic, so the balmy natatorium air was filled with “water waltzes,” swimming schottisches,” and “marine minuets.” There was also an amphitheater that could accommodate nearly four-thousand spectators, allowing them to look down onto the pools and watch the swimmers or any of the colorful acts and competitions booked by Sutro to entertain his customers—events that included prizefights, light opera, world championship

71 See the National Police Gazette, 31 July 1897. For the suggestion that the Sutro Baths was also a place of frequent sexual encounters between men, see Allan Berube, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” Coming Up! (December 1984): 16; and Les Wright, “San Francisco,” in David Higgs ed., Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600 (New York: Routledge, 1999): 169-70.

72 For the public debate over mixed-sex swimming at the Sutro Baths, see the San Francisco Daily Report, 25 September 1897.

73 For a description of the musical entertainment at Sutro’s Baths, see the San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 25 December 1893.
Fig. 3.3: When formally opened in March 1896, San Franciscans hailed the Sutro Baths as a monument to “San Franciscan imagination and enterprise” and a structure of “strength, tenacity, manhood and power.” (Image from author’s collection)
swimming races, “sham naval battles,” water polo contests, bathtub regattas, Olympic Club trapeze diving exhibitions, as well as a pair of San Franciscan favorites, Professor M. H. Gray and his wonderdog “Jack,” billed as “the highest diving pooch in the world.”

In short, the Sutro Baths offered something for everyone. “As a building and as a bath house and as a home of entertainment,” the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* grandly declared, “it has no equal in America, and some say no equal in the world.”

When the Sutro Baths formally opened on 14 March 1896, nearly seven thousand spectators came and cheered a series of speeches that described the massive natatorium as a shrine to the energetic impulses and muscular vigor of all San Franciscans. One by one, public officials rose to speak from the temporary platform anchored in the main tank. Politicians celebrated the baths as a symbol of “genius and conspicuous public spirit.” Businessmen hailed the building as a “monument of San Franciscan imagination and enterprise.” Retired military men called it a structure of “strength, tenacity, manhood and power.” Adolph Sutro, himself, was feted as the embodiment of San Francisco manhood—as representative of men who made nature bend to their will, men who literally moved mountains and rerouted rivers, men who believed they could accomplish anything.

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74 For examples of the numerous entertainments and athletic exhibitions that took place at the Sutro Baths, see the *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, 2 January 1895; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 February 1896; and the *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 March 1896.

75 *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, 7 April 1894. Not everyone, however, was enamored with the Sutro Baths. *The Argonaut* was a constant critic of Adolph Sutro and his establishment, pointing to the bric-a-brac in the baths as evidence that Sutro possessed “the soul of a pawnbroker.” After Sutro purchased many of the exhibits left over for the 1894 Midwinter Fair to decorate the grounds around his baths, the *Argonaut* complained that Sutro “is defiling the face of nature out on Point Lobos with all kinds of freak shows, merry-go-rounds, revolving lavatories, mirror mazes, and magic swings to offend old Neptune as he dashes against the gray cliffs on the shore. We wish that a tidal wave would come and wash the Sutro freak shows off the rocks and into the sea.” See *The Argonaut*, 13 April 1896.
The final speaker, fittingly, was Sutro. By building the baths—as well as aggressively attacking Collis Huntington’s San Francisco streetcar monopoly—Sutro had earned the goodwill of the people and recently won election as Mayor of San Francisco on the Populist ticket. In good populist form he now told the crowd that he built the baths for them, for the “amusement, delectation, and instruction of the people of San Francisco.” These baths also possessed civic and a social purpose. Not only would they extend the reputation and fame of San Francisco, Sutro declared, but they would be “a source of health-giving amusement” and fit San Franciscans “for the struggles of life.” Majestically carved into the rocky Pacific coastline, built with the most modern materials and innovative engineering techniques, filled with artifacts and relics meant to teach San Franciscans of their place in the westward march of the master race, and providing city dwellers with an unparalleled pleasure palace in which to reinvigorate their muscles and spirit—the Sutro Baths were a monument to powerful American manhood.

But like both the abandoned Burnham Plan and the PPIE itself, these baths were also a civic invention that pointed to San Francisco’s imperialist future by reminding San Franciscans of imperialism’s past. As one of the early visitors to the Sutro Baths explained, visiting the massive natatorium on the Pacific was like returning to the days of Caesar’s Rome. “You almost fancy that you are in a Roman balneæ,” imagined a reporter for the Evening Bulletin, “carried back two thousand years in history. You cannot resist the temptation, but descend yourself and strip off these straight-drawn garments of modern civilization, slip on the simple tunic-like bathing suit and become as full a Roman as you

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76 For reports of the opening day speeches and festivities, see the San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Daily Morning Call, and San Francisco Examiner, 15 March 1896.
Indeed, visions of imperial Rome habitually danced through the heads of San Franciscan urban planners and civic architects. Adolph Sutro quite consciously thought of his bathhouse as a link between his San Francisco, the Roman Empire, and the other great civilizations of the past. As he declared proudly from his floating podium on Opening Day, “From a sanitary standpoint, as well as from that of luxury and comfort, bathing has always been held in high esteem among civilized races. Cleanliness is next to godliness. The Roman people, in many respects the greatest nation that ever ruled the world, have in the ruins of a thousand baths left us their testimony to the value in which they were held, and I think I may honestly say that our baths here need fear no comparison.”

By describing his bathhouse as a place where San Franciscans could better prepare “for the struggles of life,” and by linking his baths with the civilized majesty of imperial Rome, Sutro hinted at the way turn-of-the-century Americans thought of play and leisure-time amusements as phenomena that not only possessed immediate civic significance, but held national, international, and imperial significance, as well. Beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, ideas about play, pleasure, and leisure became closely linked to notions of national identity. The era witnessed the emergence of a national “gospel of play” in which urban reformers stressed the need for wholesome recreations and strenuous exercise to keep both mind and body fit in the increasingly unhealthy American city. But more than merely stressing the healthful aspects of play, physical educators argued that recreation and

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77 San Francisco Evening Bulletin, 7 April 1884.
78 San Francisco Examiner, 15 March 1896.
exercise possessed immense social, cultural, and, above all, civic value. In his 1904 article titled, “Muscle and Morals,” Luther Gulick—perhaps America’s chief turn-of-the-century philosopher of play—made the case for wholesome energetic amusements being able to curb juvenile delinquency, increase industrial efficiency, and promote cooperative citizenship. “Democracy,” Gulick concluded, “rests on the most firm basis when a community has formed the habit of playing together.”

But play and the pursuit of pleasure were not just a means for individual rejuvenation and a tonic to the moral, spiritual, and physical decline to be found in the congested urban arena—they were also the stuff of empire. The nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were an era of imperialist expansion for the United States. Following the national dreams of Manifest Destiny, the United States consolidated its continental empire and then, perched on the shores of the Pacific, looked even further west toward Asia. It was during this era of turn-of-the-century imperialism that notions of physical fitness and national identity became increasingly interlinked. With the muscular male citizen seen as the symbol of a strong and capable national body politic, American political commentators warned that white men needed to be morally alert and physically fit in order to rejuvenate national vitality at home and prepare the nation for its imperialist pursuits abroad.

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80 Luther Gulick, quoted in Cavallo, Muscles and Morals, 37.


82 For works interrogating the connections between American sport, physical culture, nationalism, and imperialism, see Bederman, Manliness and Civilization; Michael Budd, The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Mark Dryerson, “Regulating the Body and the Body Politic: American Sport, Bourgeois Culture and the Language of
Strenuous physicality and the politics of American imperialism, then, were directly linked. According to James Edward Rogers, Secretary of the San Francisco Recreation League, the games a nation’s citizens played and the pleasures they pursued directly affected that nation’s degree of imperial power. “Man is a play animal,” claimed Rogers in his 1915 article, “Lest We Forget to Play,” a fast-paced discussion of the historical links between play, amusement, imperialism, and the reasons civilizations either prosper or decline. Rogers traced the rise of ancient Athens and Sparta to their dedication to the wholesome pleasures of sport, theater, and vigorous exercise, just as he blamed their fall on the loss of interest in the gymnasia and the peoples’ enslavement to the “passive sensual pleasures” of the Orient. Imperial Rome followed the same sad pattern, with its decline symbolized by the sensual excesses of Nero, the decadent desire for hot water over cold, and the Roman people’s preference of watching slaves perform gladiatorial combat rather than competing themselves. Finally, the ascension of tiny England as a world dominator was due as much to the sports her people played as her superior navy. “The English are a nation of sportsmen,” wrote Rogers while thinking of the Britain of Tom Brown’s Schooldays, “and it is their sports that have saved them from early decay.”

Football, baseball, boxing, rowing, golf—these were the pastimes that Rogers believed allowed the “Teutonic races” of the world to master the martial ethic and dominate the globe. The playing of these sports in the United States also signaled the coming greatness of America. “There are many signs that the Star of Empire will settle on the United

States,” Rogers wrote, “for the American people are young, active, and strong.” Indeed, according to Rogers, this star shined most bright out West, and especially on California, where he and other leisure theorists had been safeguarding the region’s collective health through the construction of parks, playgrounds, and athletic fields, as well as the vigilant regulation of pool rooms, motion picture houses, dance halls, and skating rinks. “It looks as if the law of nations, which says that the Star of Empire shall rest upon that nation that plays long, hard, and well, will hold true in California, and that the future upon these Pacific shores will rise up the people who are destined to rule the world unless they forget, and like others before them, seek decadent pleasures that lead on to vice, disease, crime and other civic disorders.”

San Franciscans understood play, pleasure, and amusement, then, to be more than matters of individual choice. Rather, how people played and the pleasures they pursued possessed both global and historical significance. And now, with the sudden completion of the Panama Canal, San Franciscans believed that they were positioned at the cynosure of the new imperial moment. As Homer S. King, President of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition Company, said of the meaning of the canal in 1910: “To the western United States 1915 will be the year of prophesy. It will mean the culmination of a decade the events of which have flowed toward a preparation for this dawn of greater burdens and glories. It will present long-sought opportunity to the West—opportunity for world-wide power and prominence. It will witness the promise of the West fulfilled.”

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition was to be the formal declaration of this fulfillment. More than just a

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fair, then, the PPIE was to be the coronation ceremony for San Francisco’s ascension into the throne of imperial leader. It was in this context that San Franciscans debated the legality and civic appropriateness of prizefighting.

“Smiter and Smitten Sighed”

Of all the cultural activities attacked and defended as the PPIE approached, the rhetorical and legal battle over prizefighting best illuminates the competing ideas that different San Franciscans held about the relationship between play, pleasure and San Franciscan civic identity. As they prepared to host a world’s fair that would announce their imperial position to the rest of the world, some San Franciscans hailed prizefighting as precisely the type of muscular and martial endeavor that could best prepare American men for national and imperial glory. For other San Franciscans, however, prizefighting was little more than a retrograde pursuit that, if allowed to flourish, would immediately disqualify the city from attaining a preeminent position in the modern and civilized world. Discourses of race, physicality, manhood, and empire converged in the debates over the place of prizefighting in the city. Indeed, as the 1915 PPIE neared, the prizefighter’s body itself became the public image around which these cantankerous civic disagreements coalesced, with both camps utilizing the discourses of civilization, progress, and evolutionary thought to justify their clashing claims. The debates over the legitimacy of the prizefighter’s body and the meaning of prizefighting in San Francisco, then, were much more than just differences of opinion about pugilism. They reflected larger disagreements over the meaning of manhood and the very future of San Francisco and American civilization.
The celebration of, and fervent support for, prizefighting in San Francisco need to be understood within the context of growing anxieties over the future of “the race” and the dynamics of racial power. Recent works by Gail Bederman, John Kasson, and Kristin Hoganson have explored turn-of-the-century notions of racial masculinity, arguing that as white men faced the emasculating challenges of modern life—changing work patterns, the “feminization” of American culture, the “closing” of the frontier, and the ascendancy of the “colored races”—there emerged an ideology of strenuous physicality that looked to the white male body as a symbolic source of power. Linking physical vitality to cultural and political superiority, many Americans considered the vigorous sport of prizefighting to be a critical component in safeguarding the white man’s political primacy and ensuring both national and global dominance. Indeed, as a physical endeavor that provided lessons in regimentation, self-discipline, aggressiveness, and courage, boxing was understood as providing precisely the type of physical, intellectual, and moral training needed to prepare the modern American man for the international challenges he would soon face. Prizefighting, in other words, was viewed as a racialized and gendered expression of geopolitical and imperial authority, with the white, male, American prizefighting body serving as one of the preeminent symbols of militaristic power, martial might, and abject physical domination.

The prizefighter who first, and most popularly, embodied the connections between muscular physicality and international power was John L. Sullivan—a man who would become an early, thick-muscled symbol of virile American manhood. An Irish-American

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86 For the links between boxing and American military preparedness, see Pope, Patriotic Games, 121-55.
Fig. 3.4: In 1914, the *San Francisco Examiner* used this cartoon to attack the hypocrisy of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and their practice of speaking out against professional prizefights—which were illegal in California—while sanctioning “boxing contests” and “sparring exhibitions.” As this cartoon suggests, the *Examiner* considered prizefights and boxing contests to be one and the same. (*San Francisco Examiner*, 14 May 1914)
boxer from Boston, Sullivan was the nation’s greatest sport hero of the nineteenth century, famous for boasting “I can lick any man alive,” though he consistently refused to fight any black challengers. Though some Americans—and as we shall see, some San Franciscans—found him to be a repugnant symbol of uncouth cultural disorder, many held up the late-nineteenth century heavyweight idol as an example of the transformative power of prizefighting. Popular boxing manuals form the era hailed Sullivan as an exemplar of the rejuvenated man. *Modern Gladiator* claimed that Sullivan had been a dissipated wreck before undergoing intense pugilistic training. “Whiskey, champagne, gin, brandy, beer, late hours, long sprees, irregular habits, saturnalias of passion and typhoid fever” had all combined to make young Sullivan “weak in will, unsteady in pluck, short of wind and flabby of muscle.” Boxing, however, had turned Sullivan into a more perfect physical specimen. It was “more than a transformation, it was the production of a new man.”

National commentators liked to point to Sullivan and other American heavyweight title-holders as proof that the master race had left England, jumped the Atlantic, and nestled in the United States. It was as if the United States now combined the spirit of Anglo-Saxon dominance with a brand of muscularity and emotional vigor found only on the western frontier. Even some English observers had to recognize this American masculine dominance. In 1887, when John L. Sullivan traveled to England, he came face-to-face with the Prince of Wales. Observing the two men together one British commentator explained, “As I looked at the little, round, fat, pot bellied, flabby, wall-eyed Price in his fine linen and purple and gems, and at the straight, simple, and manly lad who had crossed an ocean to find his peer in manhood, I could easily decide in my own mind who would be the prince and who would be
the commoner. The whole scene could have been transferred back a thousand years to the days when manhood meant might and the hero had to conquer the eye as well as the man.”

The man most interested in the connections between race, boxing, and imperialism was Jack London, a San Francisco writer who considered prizefighting a vital means for men to resist listlessness, effeminacy, mawkish sentimentality, and the other symptoms of an over-civilized world. Whether describing fighting dogs or doglike fighters, London’s fiction and prizefight journalism are odes to the violent and the savage—masculine assets that he believed offered a healthy tonic to the emasculating drudgeries of modern life. In *The Abysmal Brute* (1913), one of his two boxing novellas, London tells the story of young Pat Glendon, a Northern Californian mountain man who hunts deer, reads poetry, eschews tobacco and women, and, in a fair fight, can whip any challenger. As London put it, Glendon is “a creature of the wild, more a night-roaming figure from some old fairy story or folk tale than a twentieth-century youth.” In an inversion of Frank Norris’s idea of the “brute” being an undesirable figure of cultural disorder, London’s fictitious brute is the ideal masculine mold from which the truly impressive modern man might be formed. Like another literary character from the era—Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914)—the “Abysmal Brute” was the perfect combination of Anglo-Saxon intellect and muscular savagery. It was an almost paradoxical notion of masculinity in which one had to *regress* in order to *progress*. Atavistic and barbaric—but blessed with Anglo-Saxon blood—both Tarzan and London’s

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87 Modern Gladiator: Being an account of the exploits and experiences of the world’s greatest fighter, John Lawrence Sullivan (St. Louis: Athletic Publishing Company, 1889), 81-2.
89 London had earlier used the term “abysmal brute” to compliment the real-life prizefighter, Battling Nelson, who mistook it for an insult.
Pat Glendon possessed the requisite mind, body, and temper to gallantly lead the white race into the perilous twentieth century.\textsuperscript{90}

Jack London’s intense interest in what he called “elemental masculinity” translated to his real-life prizefight coverage, as well. London was a celebrated boxing reporter most famous for his 1908 exhortations to the white ex-champion, Jim Jeffries, to come out of retirement and try to defeat the new black champion, Jack Johnson.\textsuperscript{91} For London, the prize ring was a space of immense racial importance—a primordial proving ground where Anglo-Saxon men could carve out and demonstrate their race-based physical dominance.\textsuperscript{92} When Jim Jeffries fought Gus Ruhlin in San Francisco’s Mechanics’ Pavilion in November 1901, London was writing for Hearst’s \textit{Examiner} and detailed not just the action in the ring, but the effect that the action had on him. The spectacle of two muscular white men locked in physical combat awoke London’s own primordial emotions, an awakening that he found alluring: “Under this veneer of a thousand years of culture, I, for one, found that the endless savage centuries still lived. When man smote man and the body blows smacked loud, and smiter and smitten sighed—why then I would find myself lifting up from my seat, breath suspended, myself and the world forgotten, utterly merged in the struggle before me.”

\textsuperscript{90} See Edgar Rice Burroughs, \textit{Tarzan of the Apes} (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1914). For a discussion of \textit{Tarzan} in the context of the turn-of-the-century challenges posed to white male dominance, see John Kasson, \textit{Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man}, 157-218; and John Pettegrew, \textit{Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 77-81. As Pettegrew points out, Burroughs uses the term “brute” much like Frank Norris—that is, as a negative description used to distinguish the character of Tarzan from the apes.

\textsuperscript{91} After watching Jack Johnson defeat Tommy Burns for the heavyweight title, London wrote from ringside in Sydney, “Jeff must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson’s face. Jeff it’s up to you. The White Man must be rescued.” \textit{New York Herald}, 27 December 1908.

\textsuperscript{92} London, in fact, believed that the love of boxing was a specific Anglo-Saxon trait, explaining that the sport “belongs unequivocally to the English speaking race. It is as deep as our consciousness and is woven in to the fibres of our being. It grew as our very language grew. It is an instinctive passion in our race.” See Jack London, \textit{Jack London Reports: War Correspondences, Sports Articles, and Miscellaneous Writings}, ed. King Hendricks and Irving Shepard (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 264.
than a source of personal inspiration for London, it was displays such as these that would lead to the longevity of the white race. “The prize fighter,” London continued, “big muscled and brutish and barbarous is a finer thing than a decadent. There is promise in the one; it is excessive, elemental masculinity, but from it noble strength can be refined. But in the other, there is no hope; nothing but disease and insanity and death can proceed from the weak-kneed and emasculated.”

The argument that prizefighting needed to be preserved in order to guarantee the production of strenuous San Franciscan men did not begin with Jack London. More than any of the other popular amusements available, city prizefights had always been vigorous public dramas used by male San Franciscans to trumpet a particularly masculine regional identity. When two fighters squared off between the ropes, Northern California pride—as much as individual glory—was often at stake. Such was the context, for example, at the 1884 bout in Mechanics’ Pavilion between the heavyweight legend John L. Sullivan and a San Francisco pugilist named George Robinson. Sullivan regularly barnstormed the nation and dared any fighter to last four rounds in the ring with him, and Robinson, one of the top fighters at the San Francisco Olympic Athletic Club, took the challenge. Representing the Olympic Club that evening, Robinson was very much a stand-in for San Francisco masculinity itself. According to its Annals, the Olympic Club stood as the heightened example of respectable manhood in the city, a social establishment integral in transforming San Francisco from an “uncouth village” into “an elegant, patriotic, and manly metropolis.” Unfortunately for both club members, and male San Franciscans more generally, Robinson failed to live up to

93 For London’s account of the November 1901 Jeffries-Ruhlin fight, see the San Francisco Examiner, 16 November 1901.

these lofty standards. Though he lasted the required four rounds, Robinson’s strategy was to scurry about the ring and fall every time Sullivan—who reportedly was drunk—got close enough to hit him. The *Chronicle* claimed that Robinson dropped an incredible sixty-six times, an average of once every ten seconds. The San Francisco fight community was mortified. Patsy Hogan, a local boxing insider, described it as “the most disgusting fiasco ever witnessed in this city,” while the press unanimously denounced the man they now called “Peekaboo” Robinson for “showing the white feather” and ran him out of town.  

Cleansing the cowardly stain left by Robinson were the fistic deeds of a number of local pugilists, especially Jim Corbett, San Francisco’s number one prizefighting son. An Irish-American from the working-class Hayes Valley neighborhood, Corbett has been credited with “changing the public image of boxing from a pure savage, brawling spectacle to one that included skill and maneuverability.” He attended college, worked for a while as a bank clerk, honed his skills in a gym as opposed to the streets, and built a reputation based solely on gloved fights. Dubbed by the press “Gentleman Jim,” Corbett was a one-man prizefighting public relations campaign, as his image of temperance and sophistication increased the sport’s popularity in San Francisco by suggesting that a boxer could be a beacon of civic excellence.  

Corbett’s hometown rejoiced, then, when he won the world’s heavyweight title in a monumental 1892 bout against John L. Sullivan in New Orleans—a victory that many San Franciscans insisted upon seeing as the triumph of muscular skill and strategy over base, abject brutishness. *The Argonaut*, for example, praised Corbett for

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96 Flamm, *Hometown San Francisco*, 73.

defeating a “drunken bully, debauchee, and spendthrift, whose only semblance of virtue is the mad wastefulness of a roistering sailor on shore-leave.”

The Examiner fondly noted that the San Franciscan toasted his victory with wholesome sophistication, drinking milk instead of whiskey, and they celebrated the Golden State’s role in ridding the nation of a man many considered a tempestuous lout. “Sullivan is done for,” the paper rejoiced. “No brute ever needed whipping more. He has been a savage in the midst of civilization and made himself a national bully and nuisance. California has the honor of abating him.”

The Call celebrated the fight’s outcome by printing a cartoon of a massive California golden bear patting Corbett on the head and thanking him for a job well done, while the Chronicle presented a picture of a giant Jim Corbett, his legs spanning the Yosemite Valley floor, with the caption announcing, “A Reconstructed Scale of the Wonders of California.”

Like Half Dome itself, then, Jim Corbett was a marvel.

The key idea here is that Corbett was understood as embodying two masculine halves. The turn-of-the-twentieth century was an era when white American men crafted and an ideology of powerful manhood that merged notions of what Gail Bederman calls “civilized manliness” and “primitive masculinity.” Prizefighting, its San Franciscan supporters argued, was the cultural activity that most perfectly represented the blending of the two. The successful prizefighter needed to be temperate, austere, disciplined, and scientifically skilled. But he also had to possess formidable strength. For his San Franciscan critics, John L. Sullivan tipped too far toward one end of the scale, possessing brute strength but no civilized

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98 *The Argonaut*, 19 September 1892.

99 *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 September 1892.

100 *San Francisco Call*, 8 September 1892; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 September 1892.

101 See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 1-44.
discipline. San Franciscans hailed their man Corbett, by contrast, as the ideal mix of these two masculine models. In the eyes of many, the new champion was the supreme reconciliation of physical strength and gentlemanly decorum, proof that the nation’s most masculine specimens hailed from the Golden State. Thinking of Corbett and other successful Bay Area pugilists, by 1903 the *Chronicle* could crow: “As a training ground for producing fighters, California is in a class strictly by itself. There is scarcely a budding genius in the world of fistiana that did not receive his first lesson in the art of self-defense within a few hundred miles of San Francisco. There is hardly a rising boxer with any pretensions to class hailing from any other State in the Union.”102 Not only were prizefighters forceful articulations of a strenuous regional identity, but in the context of San Franciscans thinking about their place in the larger story of American expansion, prizefighting itself was now being promoted as a vital endeavor that could protect and keep alive the city’s energetic impulses, its martial attitude, and, ultimately, its imperial dreams.

But for the city’s anti-prizefight activists, to differentiate between Sullivan and Corbett was akin to arguing there was a significant distinction between whiskey and rye. Prizefighters were anachronistically brutish figures, reformers argued, and in the name of a civil and progressive body politic, their sport needed to be eradicated from the city. Anti-prizefight activists in San Francisco had long been using the rhetoric of civilization, progress, and evolution in their attacks against professional pugilism. Some critics considered the activity of prizefighting the chief problem. In 1892, the famed University of California historian Hubert Howe Bancroft was asked his opinion on the question of whether or not prizefighting should be legal. Bancroft unhesitatingly called for prohibition by arguing that

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102 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 October 1903.
Fig. 3.5: When Jim Corbett defeated John L. Sullivan for the heavyweight championship in 1892, many San Franciscans saw the victory as proof of Californian masculine supremacy. The San Francisco Chronicle printed a cartoon of a giant Jim Corbett, his legs spanning the Yosemite Valley floor, with the caption, “A Reconstructed Scale of the Wonders of California.” The San Francisco Call celebrated the victory by printing a cartoon of a massive California grizzly bear patting Corbett on the head and thanking him for a job well done. (San Francisco Chronicle, 9 September 1892 and San Francisco Call, 8 September 1892)
prizefighting impeded the development of the race. “Intellectual supremacy is the measure of civilization,” Bancroft lectured. “As long as brute force is the ultimate appeal there can be no very high civilization; hence the suppression of prize-fighting would tend to the moral, intellectual, and social advancement of the race.”103

Other critics expounded their belief that prizefighters themselves were retrograde and anachronistic figures. “It is to be hoped,” went a typical late-nineteenth century missive against the San Francisco prizefighter, “that the present existence of such a class of men is due to the revival of some phase of human nature and not the result of the development of any new and original degeneracy, for if some new Darwin were to pronounce such a development as new, there would indeed be no hope for human nature anywhere this side of total depravity.”104 An 1893 editorial that appeared in the Daily Morning Call painted a picture of prizefighters and their sidekicks as not only morally debased, but bodily deformed: “Wherever pugilists are it is certain that drinking, foul language, coarse habits, and depraved associations will prevail. A glance at the faces which are to be seen in the haunts of the prize-fighters raises grave questions as to our boasted civilization. The faces are more akin to the physiognomy of the brute than to the countenance of men.”105 The fact that critics used the rhetoric of evolution and civilization illuminates just how potent a symbol of savage primitiveness prizefighting could be. This was, after all, the era of eugenics, phrenology, Darwinian and Spensarian thought, and biological hierarchies—a time when differences of race, sex, ethnicity, and class were often explained as various stages of human evolutionary

103 San Francisco Morning Call, 23 October 1892.

104 San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 13 May 1883.

105 San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 1 March 1893.
progress. To suggest that prizefighters occupied a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder was to cast them as creatures unfit for progressive and civilized society.

More than just degenerative, however, the sport could kill, placing it alongside dueling, bullfighting, cockfighting, and other sanguinary pastimes in which spectators cheered for the destruction of man or animal. Fueling the anti-prizefight fire was a series of deaths that occurred inside the turn-of-the-century San Francisco prize ring. At least two local boxers died from injuries sustained while fighting in the city in the 1890s. In February 1906, Thomas Doven was killed in an amateur bout in Colma when his handlers put him up against a much stronger and more skilled opponent. Three weeks later another pugilist died, and the anti-prizefight backlash compounded. Harry Simon Tennybaum, known by the local fight crowd as Harry Tenny, died after battling Frankie Neil on 28 February in Mechanics Pavilion. The bout featured many of the traits reformers found deplorable in the sport. Ringside observers reported that the badly beaten Tenny tried to quit in the tenth round, but his cornermen, who allegedly had $700 riding on the outcome, forced him to continue. Eventually knocked unconscious in the fourteenth round, Tenny died the following day from a brain hemorrhage, “despite” being injected with both strychnine and whiskey by the attending physician. At the fighter’s funeral, Rabbi M. S. Levy argued that Tenny’s death was the moral equivalent of murder. Tenny had died for the profit and pleasure of a


107 *San Francisco Examiner*, 4 February 1906; *San Francisco Examiner*, 6 February 1906.

108 *San Francisco Examiner*, 1 March 1906; *San Francisco Call*, 2 March 1906.
howling mob—he was “a victim of avarice,” Rabbi Levy said—and anti-prizefight reformers once again renewed their call for the bloody activity’s abolition.\footnote{San Francisco Call, 3 March 1906.}

In the wake of Jack Johnson’s victory over Jim Jeffries in 1910, many San Franciscans believed that the time had come to ban professional boxing entirely. But once the trauma of the moment had dissipated, prizefight promoters again began hosting big-time bouts in the city, though they carefully avoided hosting controversial interracial contests. In November 1910, “Battling” Nelson and Owen Moran fought at Jim Coffroth’s Mission Street Arena in what was clearly a prizefight. It was the first twenty-round bout since Governor Gillett has cancelled the Johnson-Jeffries fight in June, and over 8,000 shouting spectators made it clear that the sport could still flourish in San Francisco.\footnote{For reports of the fight, see the San Francisco Examiner, 27 November 1910.} The popularity of the fight prompted officials in other California cities to charge that the San Franciscan authorities had turned a blind eye to an obvious crime. The grand jury of Alameda County convened and reaffirmed the law that made fighting for a prize illegal in Oakland, Emeryville, and other towns that had openly hosted prizefighting in the past. In the place of prizefighting, Oakland Mayor Frank K. Mott approved boxing permits for fights with a six-round limit; a cap that he believed would temper the abuses of professional pugilism in his city.\footnote{For the response of Alameda County officials, see the San Francisco Call, 30 November 1910 and 1 December 1910.}

But with prizefighting so closely linked to San Franciscan political leaders and business interests, reformers knew that the sport would continue in San Francisco if city officials were left to their own devices. As a result, anti-prizefight forces in California turned to the capital, Sacramento, and the possibility of enacting anti-boxing legislation at the state
Fig. 3.6: Anti-prizefight reformers pointed to the number of deaths that occurred in San Francisco prize rings when arguing that the violent sport needed to be outlawed. Here Frankie Neil and Harry Tenny shake gloves before their fight on 28 February 1906 at Mechanics’ Pavilion. Tenny (right) was knocked unconscious in the fourteenth round and died the next morning from a brain hemorrhage, sparking renewed calls for prizefighting’s abolition. (Photo used with the permission of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)
level. In 1911 the Public Morals Committee in the California State Assembly considered a
trio of anti-prizefight bills bent on ridding the state of the plague of pugilism. But according
to legislative chronicler Franklin Hichborn—a noted political reformer and member of the
California Progressive Party—the Public Morals Committee was the wrong unit for the task.
Hichborn charged that the committee was controlled by the “tenderloin element” and
described its membership as an unholy trinity of “brothel keeper, saloon keeper, and
gambler.” Not surprisingly, then, none of the three bills were reported out of committee.

Hichborn and other reform-minded Californians saw new hope for the 1913 session.
State Senator William “Golden Rule” Brown—derisively given the moniker because he liked
to start off his speeches by announcing that he was his brother’s keeper—introduced a bill
that made prizefight attendance a misdemeanor but protected legitimate sparring matches and
exhibitions by prohibiting admission charges, limiting the victor’s award, and mandating a
four-round limit. Under the headline, “San Francisco Delegation Stands Solid in Defeat of
Freak Measure,” the Chronicle explained how “Golden Rule” Brown stood nearly alone in
his attempt to abolish professional pugilism from the state. Among the numerous
opponents of the legislation was L. W. Juilliard, a State Senator who hailed from San
Francisco. After first boasting to his colleagues that he once had been a rather good boxer
who had learned the manly art from none other than “Gentleman” Jim Corbett, Juilliard
outflanked the Brown bill by adding a slew of amendments that rendered the proposed anti-

112 Franklin Hichborn, Story of the Session of the California Legislature of 1913 (San Francisco: James H. Barry
Co., 1913), 284. For a study that places the anti-prizefight campaign in the context of California moral reform,

113 When his detractors argued that it was unconstitutional to prohibit admission charges, Brown unsuccessfully
attempted to make the bill more palatable by permitting a twenty-five cent entrance fee to all bouts and
doubling the allowable number of rounds to eight. See the San Francisco Chronicle, 26 April 1913.
prizefight legislation inconsequential. As the *Chronicle* put it, using a good boxing phrase, the “Brown bill took the count of ten and out” and the status quo was secured.\textsuperscript{114}

Undeterred by this legislative defeat, Hearst’s *Examiner* launched a spirited public campaign of its own against San Francisco prizefighting in October 1913. Calling California the “sole State in the Union, of any considerable importance” in which prizefighters and promoters were still profiting from their brutish activities, a page-wide headline in the paper rhetorically wondered in despair, “Can California Afford Any Longer To Legalize Prize Fighting?” “We live in a time,” the *Examiner* reasoned, “in which all the world is moving forward and upward to better things; in which the ethics and the moralities are daily more regarded; in which brain, and not brawn, is the god in the machine. Shall we any longer notify the world that our conception of the nobler man is one who approximates nearest, in powers and performance, to the gorilla?”\textsuperscript{115} Indeed, when pushing for the abolition of professional boxing in San Francisco, the *Examiner*’s editors explicitly juxtaposed prizefighting and the PPIE as antithetical cultural productions. The former needed to be eradicated. “San Francisco,” they wrote, “playing host to the world in 1915, does not wish to include slaughtering matches among her public attractions.”\textsuperscript{116}

Adding fuel to the reformers’ fire was yet another highly publicized death in the ring. Sparked by the death of John “Bull” Young at the hands of Jess Willard in an August 1913 prizefight in Southern California, the Los Angeles Church Federation commenced a signature drive in hopes of placing an anti-prizefight initiative on the 1914 state ballot. De Witt Van


\textsuperscript{115} *San Francisco Examiner*, 30 October 1913.

\textsuperscript{116} *San Francisco Examiner*, 14 May 1914.
Court, a longstanding member of the San Francisco boxing scene and then the boxing beat writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, attempted to head off regulatory legislation by explaining that Young’s death was merely an unfortunate occurrence incidental to all physical contests. “Accidents of all kinds happen in connection with athletic sports,” Van Court reasoned. “No sport is a sport unless there is some danger or chance for it. There have been people killed playing croquet, when a mallet broke and the hammer flew off, and hit a player in the head. Baseball players are killed every year, and between twenty and thirty football players die each year from accidents. But let an accident happen in the boxing game and there is immediately a great uproar against it.” Not surprisingly, Van Court’s suggestion that boxing was as dangerous as croquet proved unpersuasive. Using Young’s death as their rallying point, the Los Angeles Church Federation and other California organizations gathered enough signatures to place the future of prizefighting in the hands of California voters in November. Amendment 20, better known as the “Anti-Prizefight Act,” allowed only amateur bouts up to a maximum of four rounds, capped prizes for the victor at an unattractive thirty-five dollars, and prohibited all boxing on Sundays and Memorial Day.

It was the immediacy of the upcoming PPIE that ultimately forced the Western-style showdown between the defenders of professional boxing and the supporters of civic reform. Nathan Newby, the author of Amendment 20, rolled out all of the usual arguments against prizefighting. It was “brutalizing,” “demoralizing,” and an activity of “barbarous character,” while the “attendant evils of intoxication and gambling” turned good men into bad. Of more urgent concern, however, was the need to rid San Francisco of prizefighting before visitors

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117 *Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 1913.

118 For the full text of the law, see “Initiative Anti-Prize Fight-Law,” *Out West* (August 1914): 204-5.
arrived to revel in the wondrous pleasures of the PPIE. “California cannot afford, when, in 1915, it shall be entertaining the world at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, to advertise that it is out of harmony with enlightened sentiment of the civilized world that condemns, in unmistakable terms, prize-fighting and its attendant evils. Vote for this proposed law,” Newby urged his readers, “and thereby exhibit not only the highest patriotism but also the most approved common sense.”

Responding to Newby’s initiative in the official Voter’s Arguments literature was State Senator Dan P. Regan from San Francisco, who promoted prizefighting as both a means to manhood and a pleasurable civic amusement. “Boxing is not brutal,” Regan responded, unwilling to employ Jack London’s notion of brutishness as a desired masculine trait. “The sport is conducive to maintaining manliness and good health among the participants. Rigid rules call for the best of condition from a boxer, and to obtain this, cleanliness and abstinence from all forms of vice must be observed.” One by one Regan worked to pick off the arguments presented against the sport. He dismissed Nathan Newby’s charge that prizefighters and prizefight spectators were of the lowest moral element and countered that California prizefight crowds were “composed of the highest class of professional and business men,” while the “character of the men who have made good in the sport is above reproach.” Indeed, for Regan, opposition to the sport was not the result of enlightened opinion and progressive beliefs, but was the fictitious creation of the uninformed reformer and the professional agitator.

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120 Ibid., 97.
The week of the November 1914 election, the city newspapers made one last push to sway voters to their particular position. Declaring that “all decent people are agreed that prize fighting has become a nuisance and a menace to good civic reputation,” the Examiner's editors enthusiastically endorsed the proposed amendment to the state constitution. The San Francisco Chronicle did not take a hard position on the amendment. “If in doubt,” they advised, “vote no.” The San Francisco Bulletin proved to be the fight game’s most vocal public supporter. As the day to vote approached, the Bulletin made one last effort to persuade voters to reject the anti-prizefight amendment by appealing to masculine and regional pride. The newspaper wondered if the state that produced such great fighters as Corbett and Jeffries would “continue to produce champions or assume its position among those States which place no premium upon physical manhood or athletic prowess?” Admitting that the fight game possessed its share of problems, in exchange for a vote against prizefight prohibition the paper’s sportswriters pledged to commence a crusade of their own, a crusade to reform prizefighting by establishing a State Boxing Commission that would monitor the activities of unscrupulous boxing promoters. “Governor [Hiram] Johnson kicked the Southern Pacific out of politics,” explained the Bulletin. “Now, we’re not presumptuous enough to claim class with the Governor as a kicker. But we will say this. We have a No. 9 shoe which we’re fairly dying to use on a few of these dinky promoters who continually bring boxing into disrepute.”

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121 See the San Francisco Examiner, 2 November 1914. Echoing the Examiner’s stance was The Leader, a San Francisco weekly devoted to Irish freedom, culture, and Catholicism. An editorial from Reverend Patrick C. McCarthy condemned boxing as “a sad relic of barbarism” and equated the American pugilist with the “Roman gladiator, Spanish toreador, [and] the ubiquitous duelist.” See The Leader, 7 November 1914.

122 San Francisco Chronicle, 31 October 1914

123 San Francisco Bulletin, 1 November 1914.
Despite this pediform threat, California voters approved Amendment 20 and the “Anti-Prizefight Act” passed statewide. Beginning on 18 December, all California boxing matches had to obey a strict four-round limit and fighters could not receive more than thirty-five dollars for their efforts. The vote was fairly close in the state. According to the numbers reported in the *Official Statement of Votes*, 156,230 Californians cast their ballots in favor of prizefight restriction, while only 136,122 cast votes in favor of keeping the pugilistic status quo. The anti-prizefight vote was strongest in the rural areas of California, but even in San Francisco, the pro-boxing sentiment was tepid. 57,808 San Franciscans voted against the Anti-Prizefight Act, while 52,577 in its favor. It was a statement that the majority of city voters favored protecting the sport from statewide regulation, but compared to San Franciscan voters’ nearly 2-1 decision against redlight abatement and the 4-1 margin of voting against the prohibition of alcohol on the same ballot, prizefighting was easily the least favored of the libertine masculine amusements up for appeal.

**Epilogue: “It Was a Draw, With Kid Law Winning at Midnight”**

As the debate over prizefighting in the city illuminates, San Franciscans used the imperative of preparing for a world’s fair to promote, reform, and defend their own distinct civic identity. For most PPIE promoters, however, it would be on the fairground itself where these visions would be most dramatically articulated. The shape, size, and color of the exposition’s buildings; the harmonious interplay between nature and fair architecture; the edifying messages of the hundreds of exhibits—these were all going to tell visitors and city

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124 *The Official Statement of Votes, General Election* (3 November 1914). Document on microfilm at *San Francisco State Library*.  

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dwellers something important about San Francisco. But we need to remember that the PPIE was both temporary and consistently referred to as a “dream city.” For the real-life, more permanent articulation of San Francisco civic identity, we need to turn to the way the city itself was changed—or not changed—in preparation for the fair. It is here that we can find something lasting about the way San Franciscans thought about both themselves and their city. To again quote PPIE President Charles C. Moore, “the city is the site.”

Many San Franciscans considered popular amusements as symbolic representations of the city itself. The games they played and the pleasures they pursued—these suggested something fundamental about their city’s past, present, and future. Prizefighting was often the critical cultural activity around which these competing urban visions came into conflict. The sport was both immensely symbolic and possessed immense civic significance. For its many opponents, prizefighting was a bloody and anachronistic pursuit in which abject strength of sinew ruled over rationality and reason. In the name of a civil and progressive body politic, reformers argued, the sport needed to be eradicated. Seen through the eyes of the city’s many anxious boxing enthusiasts, however, prizefighting was a necessity. It bred virile San Franciscan men. It safeguarded national virility. It guaranteed international and imperial supremacy. Indeed, for prizefighting’s most ardent supporters, nothing less than civilization itself was being threatened when effeminate reformers called for the elimination of the “manly art.” The fact that both of these sides had such numerous and vocal supporters highlights just how divided and cantankerous San Francisco public culture could be.

125 For contemporary reports emphasizing fair architecture and exhibits as embodying the soul of the PPIE, see “Panama-Pacific Exposition: Most Beautiful of Dream Cities,” Overland Monthly 65 (April 1915): 365-73; and “Exposition Architecture,” Transactions of the Commonwealth Club 10 (August 1915): 475-93. For a recent work on the symbolic significance of the PPIE architecture, see Brechin, “Sailing to Byzantium.”
On 6 November 1914, San Francisco hosted its last championship bout of the era when George Chip and Jimmy Clabby fought for the middleweight title at Jim Coffroth’s Mission Street arena. One month later, the last professional fight to legally occur in San Francisco for over a decade took place on 17 December at Dreamland, when “Red” Watson and Eddie Moy fought twenty brutal rounds before saddened San Francisco fight fans who saved their ticket stubs as souvenirs rather than use them to litter the fight pavilion’s floor. The fight itself was a draw, but “Kid Law” won at midnight, the sportswriters explained. Newspapers report an event that sounded more like a wake than a boxing match. The end of the fight was greeted not with cheers for the combatants but with silence for the dying fight game. Billy Jordan, the rotund, walrus-mustached man who for sixty years had been bellowing out the names of the participating pugilists from inside the ring before every big city fight, announced to the assemblage that he too was retiring. The crowd stayed and milled around until midnight, when the new law was set to take effect. It was then that the old-timers in attendance noted a poetic irony. For decoration, hovering high above the canvas ring, was a huge metallic star studded with several dozen large electric lights. Set among the hot white globes—no one seemed to know how it got there—was a single red bulb that momentarily flickered and then went out. If boxing was indeed a vice, as so many Californians thought it was, this particular redlight era was now suddenly extinguished. As Harry B. Smith, the longtime boxing reporter from the Chronicle eulogized, “The rule of fistiana is over.”

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126 For a report of the fight that places the bout in context of the impending illegalization of prizefighting in California, see the San Francisco Bulletin, 6 November 1914.

127 For reports both before and after the fight, see the San Francisco Chronicle 17 December 1914 and 20 December 1914.
But not everyone connected to the fight game was so funereal. When Marion T. Salazar, the boxing writer for the San Francisco Bulletin, tried to explain how the fight game had lost to the state’s anti-boxing forces, he likened the contest to—what else?—a prizefight. “It was a fair, stand-up fight,” Salazar proclaimed, “with both sides playing the game as best they knew how, and the stronger side won. We’re sorry that the anti-fight bill passes. The game could have been purified in a less drastic manner. But let us now be like the little girl who was glad that it was dolly’s and not her head which broke.” Salazar was taking solace in the fact that though prizefighting had been killed, four-round amateur bouts were still legal. Though it was the end of one era, it was the beginning of another, and Salazar believed that the four-round fights could be a “ray of sunshine for fans.” Rather than see Amendment 20 as being the death knell of pugilism in San Francisco, then, Salazar believed that the abolition of rank professionalism and the institution of four-round amateur bouts could still breed successful fighters, provide city boxing fans with suitable pugilistic entertainment, and actually lead to a more wholesome pugilistic culture. “Boxing can be a clean sport,” Salazar explained. “The abolishment of the longer bouts will result in an automatic clearing out of the comparatively few undesirables who have helped to bring the game into repute.”

Salazar would be proven both right and wrong. What became known as the “Four-Round Game Era” was a colorful and exciting time in San Francisco boxing history. Shorter fights seemed to only make for more exciting contests, and though the championship bouts were now held elsewhere, great fighters still flooded the city and gave San Francisco fight fans a four-round thrill. But Salazar was wrong when he predicted that Amendment 20 would somehow clean up boxing and reform the San Francisco prizefighter. This became clear in the early hours of Thanksgiving morning, 1920, when the violence that was so

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128 San Francisco Bulletin, 6 November 1914.
common between the ropes suddenly spilled out of the ring and into a small shanty cottage on Howard Street.
Chapter Four

“A Union of Venality”
Dancing Girls and Fighting Men in Jazz Age San Francisco

DANCE, v. i. To leap about to the sound of tittering music, preferably with arms about your neighbor's wife or daughter. There are many kinds of dances, but all those requiring the participation of the two sexes have two characteristics in common: they are conspicuously innocent, and warmly loved by the vicious.

—Ambrose Bierce, The Devil’s Dictionary (1911).

When California voters passed the “Anti-Prizefight Act” in 1914—a state ordinance that placed a cap on possible prize money and limited the lengths of bouts to four rounds—anti-prizefight reformers believed that the new law would weaken the sport and cause it to lose much of its masculine popularity. They were mistaken. Prizefighting continued to flourish in San Francisco. The decade from 1914 to 1924, known as the “Four-Round Game Era,” was one of the busiest and most exciting times in city boxing history. Limiting contests to four rounds—a restriction enacted to make fights less brutal—actually had the opposite effect of making bouts more furious and action-packed, as fighters tried to cram twenty rounds of violence into only four. With promoters finding it easy to circumvent the law that limited fight purses to a maximum of thirty-five dollars, world champions and top

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2 The “four-round era” ended in 1924 when Californians approved the Morrison Bill, which allowed for ten-round bouts to a decision and no-decision fights up to twelve rounds. I discuss the Morrison Bill in this dissertation’s conclusion.
contenders from all over the country poured into San Francisco looking to earn easy money in events that lasted little longer than their average training sessions. Fight clubs sprang up throughout the city, and large crowds swarmed Dreamland Rink, the San Francisco Civic Auditorium, and the Mission District’s National Hall—known among locals as “the Bucket of Blood” because of the fast-paced fights it hosted most Wednesday nights.3

Prizefighting was especially popular during the Great War. With boxing celebrated as part of the culture of societal militarism, national wartime preparation, and the general Bay Area war effort, city boxing promoters sold prizefight attendance as a patriotic duty. Fights in the Civic Auditorium, for example, raised money to outfit the American “doughboys” in Europe and to assist disabled veterans coming home. “Sunny Jim” Coffroth’s Mission Street Arena hosted benefit bouts to earn money for the purchase of athletic equipment for Army and Navy personnel training in the city. Especially popular were the lunchtime contests promoted by the San Francisco Bulletin and staged between shipyard employees working in San Francisco’s Union Iron Works, the Union Construction Company in Oakland, and the Mare Island and Bay Point Shipyards in nearby Suisun Bay—fights that gave men laboring at home, rather than fighting abroad, a surrogate opportunity to demonstrate their combat mettle.4

But the Four-Round Game soon found itself the target of an impassioned reform crusade due to an incident that occurred in the early hours of Thanksgiving morning, 1920,

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3 For a colorful treatment of the “Four-Round Game Era,” see Jerry Flamm, Hometown San Francisco (San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1994), 67-123.

4 For fights promoted as part of the Bay Area war effort, see, for example, the San Francisco Chronicle, 14 May 1918 and 20 May 1922. For the links between boxing and wartime preparedness throughout the nation, see S. W. Pope, Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121-55; and Jeffrey T. Sammons, Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 48-51.
when members of the “Howard Street Gang”—a loose-knit group of bootleggers and petty thieves that included two of San Francisco’s most prominent prizefighters—beat and sexually assaulted two young women they met earlier in the evening at the Winter Garden, the city’s most popular commercial dance hall. Public outrage exploded the following week when two San Francisco police detectives and a local sheriff were killed in a shootout in nearby Santa Rosa while questioning other suspected gang members. This time vengeance would be quick. Four days after the shootings, a posse of masked citizens stormed the Santa Rosa jail holding the accused gangsters. Facing minimal resistance, the vigilantes seized the three men accused of murdering the lawmen, drove them to a nearby cemetery, and hung them from the sturdy limb of a massive oak tree.

The violent events, which I will examine in greater detail below, touched a raw nerve in San Francisco and prompted individual San Franciscans to harangue whatever they considered to be the city’s most menacing social evil. Absentee parents, perverse on-stage melodrama, and a paucity of legitimate recreational opportunities were all offered as factors contributing to the Howard Street outrages. A dress reformer employed by the San Francisco Department of Health suggested that the trend toward shorter hemlines was likely the primary cause of the attacks. One San Franciscan suggested that the gangsters had learned their wicked ways from modern movies that featured the machinations of crooks, thieves, and cigarette-smoking harlots. Another blamed the whole thing on “grappo”—his term for the slew of illegal saloons and speakeasies that were being systematically ignored by both

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5 For reports of the events at the Howard Street cottage and their immediate aftermath, see the San Francisco Bulletin, San Francisco Chronicle, and San Francisco Examiner, 27 November 1920.


police and prohibition officers. A Republican pinned it all on the Democrats, who had held their Presidential nominating convention in San Francisco only a few weeks prior, suggesting that the organization’s opposition to the prohibition of alcohol was to blame. Many of the city’s religious leaders, meanwhile, preached that San Franciscans had somehow lost their way and immediately called for a remedy of quiet contemplation and prayer.8

But because two of the men accused in the Howard Street attacks were prominent city prizefighters, and because the two young victims had first met their attackers at a popular San Francisco dance hall, it would be boxing and dancing that took the brunt of the blame for the Howard Street violence. Boxing and dancing were two energetic and physical activities that San Francisco moral reformers now linked in parallel crusades against urban disorder. Though the twin attacks against these pursuits can certainly tell us much about the rhetoric, tactics, and power of civic reform in San Francisco, these campaigns also reveal something important about the way San Franciscans thought about the relationship between leisure and labor in the early twentieth-century city.

Too often popular amusements are viewed simply as places of escape from the thorny problems of everyday laboring life.9 But we need to remember that popular amusement in San Francisco—places like prizefight arenas and dance halls—were also important spaces of

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8 See, for example, the letters published in the San Francisco Bulletin, 15 December, 16 December, and 18 December 1920.

labor themselves. In this chapter, then, I consider San Francisco boxers and dancers as symbols of both class and moral conflict in Jazz Age San Francisco. I begin by exploring the crusade that reformers launched in the immediate aftermath of the Howard Street attacks not only to abolish boxing in San Francisco, but to physically remove every prizefighter from the city. This campaign against prizefighting took on a decidedly class-based posture in which professional pugilism was derided as a crude and illegitimate money-making proposition. Describing city prizefighters as immoral and unproductive—and describing prizefighting itself as dishonest and illegitimate—San Francisco reformers used the furor over the Howard Street incident to provocatively and successfully link prizefighters with the more serious urban specters of unemployment, vagrancy, and gangsterism.

At the same time, reformers attacked dance halls and “dance hall girls”—young women who earned a living by dancing with unfamiliar men in the city’s “closed” dancing establishments. San Franciscans who were already uneasy with the sexual expressiveness of the working class were especially concerned that so many young working women dressed themselves in their finest fashions and flooded the city’s salubrious dance halls in search of nocturnal pleasure, excitement, and romance. Particularly problematic for reformers were the city’s many “closed” dance halls, where young women earned ten cents a dance as “instructors.” Because it was a form of labor in which young women needed to win male attention and use their bodies in an energetic and sensual manner, San Franciscan moral reformers branded dance halls as pernicious sources of civic disorder in which young women were forced to commit prostitute-like acts. But when reformers attempted to shut down the dance halls in the name of safeguarding civic morality, the young women who worked in

\[^{10}\text{Gareth Stedman Jones reminds us that leisure needs to be studied in relation to, and not isolation from work. See Gareth Stedman Jones, “Class Expression Versus Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the History of ‘Leisure,’” }\textit{History Workshop} \textit{4} (Autumn 1977): 162-170.\]
these establishments defended the dance halls in terms never used about boxing rings, describing them as meaningful places of employment where they worked to support themselves and their families. San Francisco dance halls, in other words, were sites of immense class conflict.¹¹

Throughout this chapter, I link boxers with dancers because both engaged in “body work”—a type of labor that, in the words of Carlo Rotella, “may well engage the intellect but turns on physical adeptness and strength.”¹² Both boxing and dancing were deceptively unsimple physical endeavors. Though it may have appeared as if boxers and dancers were merely engaging in the base display of wild energy, both of these pursuits required adept footwork, hand-eye coordination, speed, agility, timing, and perhaps most important of all, acute mental and physical stamina. In other words, I consider the boxer who did battle in the ring and the dancer who danced all night to be skilled laborers—energetic and strenuous young men and women who used their bodies to ply their trade and make artful claims of industrial-era autonomy. Punching for a cash prize or shimmying for wages, boxers and dancers skillfully used their bodies to earn higher wages than they could have in ordinary factory or domestic labor, and they did so in an exciting urban setting that merged passion and pleasure with economic imperatives.

For civic reformers, however, both boxing and dancing existed far outside the legitimate political economy. Indeed, living in an industrial system that was supposed to be


measured and defined through the production of goods, reformers argued that dancers and boxers produced little except sensual pleasure for their partners and atavistic thrills for spectators. Ultimately, then, the Howard Street assaults opened up a revealing discussion about the relationship between leisure, labor, amusement, and vice, a discussion that highlights the radically different ways that San Franciscans thought about what was occurring inside the spaces of popular amusement in their city.

“The Boxers’ Rebellion”

What the San Francisco press called “The Howard Street Horrors” began on Wednesday evening, November 25, when Jean Stanley and Jessie Montgomery attended a holiday dance at the Winter Garden’s Roseland Ballroom on Pierce Street. Stanley, twenty-two years old, was a former dancer and circus performer on the West Coast Pantages circuit. Montgomery was seventeen and, like Stanley, worked days as a telephone operator. Just before midnight they left the dance hall and were waiting for a streetcar at 16th and Mission when a large sedan pulled up. The passenger, a handsome young man with whom both young women had danced with just hours before, offered to give them a ride. First they drove to one of the Mission District’s “resort” clubs for some illegal, but widely available, Prohibition-era drinking. Next they stopped for more drinks at a pool hall run by Edmund “Spud” Murphy, one of the better and more popular San Francisco middleweights. When they left the pool hall, Murphy and six other men—including Edward “KO” Kruvosky, another prominent San Francisco prizefighter—crowded themselves into the car with Stanley and Montgomery and took them to a small cottage at 1256 1/2 Howard Street. After several more drinks the conversation turned abusive. Stanley and Montgomery tried to get up and
leave, but the men blocked their way and separated them into different rooms, where the women were beaten and raped.

Later that morning, after some of her attackers had left the cottage and others had fallen asleep, Stanley escaped from the Howard Street lair by smashing and jumping out of a backroom window. With her dress in tatters and her nose badly broken, she ran to a nearby apartment, frantically pled for help, and with the assistance of the startled apartment occupant, called the police. When the officers arrived and entered the dilapidated Howard Street dwelling they found a damning crime scene consisting of scores of empty whiskey bottles, a smashed table and shattered backroom window, several drunken men asleep on the front-room floor, and the naked and badly beaten Miss Montgomery locked in a bedroom. The officers made their arrests, and two days later San Franciscans were reading in the newspapers about both the “Howard Street horrors” and the nefarious existence of the “Howard Street Gang”—a loose-knit group of bootleggers, bank robbers, petty thieves, and prizefighters that congregated in the Mission District speakeasies and pool halls and used the Howard Street cottage for after-hours drinking and partying.¹³

If the heinous nature of the crimes committed by men the newspapers were calling the “Prizefight Gangsters” was not gruesome enough, the situation intensified the following week when two San Francisco police detectives, Miles Jackson and Lester Dorman, traveled to nearby Santa Rosa to question George Boyd, Charles Valento, and Terry Fitts, three San Francisco men with long criminal records who were suspected of being part of the Howard Street attacks. Accompanied by Santa Rosa Sheriff James Petray, the three lawmen entered the small bungalow of Pete Guidotti, a local bootlegger, and came face to face with the three

men they were seeking. After trading insults back and forth, Detective Jackson told the suspects that they were under arrest. Valento and Fitts dutifully rose, but George Boyd pulled out the revolver he had stashed under the cushion of the sofa he was sitting on and emptied the gun into the three officers. By the time deputies stationed outside made it into the front parlor, Detective Jackson was already dead and Detective Dorman and Sheriff Petray were mortally wounded. Boyd, Valento, and Fitts were arrested in the blood-spattered room where the shootout occurred and were quickly hustled to the local county jail, where armed guards surrounded the concrete and steel building and protected the accused from the threats of the nearly one thousand San Francisco and Santa Rosa citizens who surrounded the building that night and called for vigilante justice. Three different times a group of men stormed the jail’s steps and tried to batter down the heavy front door, but each time the armed guards rebuffed their advances. Finally, just before midnight, a heavy storm broke and scattered the mob. The downtown area was temporarily peaceful.\textsuperscript{14}

Over the next few days, as the slain San Francisco police detectives lay in state under the great rotunda of City Hall, San Franciscans loudly clamored for justice, though they could not agree on the specific form that this justice should take. An editorial in the \textit{San Francisco Bulletin} pled for patience and proper legal retribution rather than vigilantism in order to demonstrate that San Francisco was a civilized city where frontier retribution was an anachronism. “We must uphold the law at all costs,” warned the \textit{Bulletin}. “Rough justice is very apt to become injustice. It caters to a spirit of violence that later on may have its outcropping of crime even among those by whom it is administered. The more we respect the law, provided we insist upon rigid and instant enforcement of justice, the more it will be

\textsuperscript{14} For the shootout in Santa Rosa, see the \textit{San Francisco Bulletin} and the \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 6 December and 7 December 1920.
feared by the criminal element.”\textsuperscript{15} If the editorialists at the \textit{Bulletin} believed that a trip through the courts was the prescription, others suggested that what was needed was a swift bout of hangman’s vengeance. In what would soon be proved a prescient letter-to-the-editor, one San Franciscan called for a return to the efficient ways of Gold Rush-era vigilantism as a way to put an end to the recent outbreak of urban crime.\textsuperscript{16} “Mob law, driven crazy by wild rumors, does not meet my sanction,” wrote this anonymous San Franciscan, “but a well organized body of vigilantes is not mob law. The guilty are at least given a chance to tell their story. Had such a body caught the gang, its guilt would have been determined and its life ended.”\textsuperscript{17}

On the night of 9 December, this one San Franciscan got his or her wish. Just before midnight a group of armed and masked citizens stormed the Santa Rosa jail that held the men accused of murdering the two San Francisco police officers and the Santa Rosa sheriff. The mob was well organized and worked quickly. Members blocked the streets and surrounded the downtown jail, cut the police station’s phone wires, loaded their prisoners into waiting cars with license plates removed, and then drove to the old town cemetery positioned on an nearby hill.\textsuperscript{18} With car headlights directed so that everyone might better witness the punishment, the vigilantes tied their victims’ hands and feet and slipped thick-roped nooses

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 7 December 1920.


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 9 December 1920.

\textsuperscript{18} According to Jim Kline’s thorough reconstruction of the Santa Rosa lynching, newly appointed Santa Rosa Sheriff John Boyes was likely in on the scheme. Boyes had gone home with the keys to the cell that housed the accused, but then inexplicably returned with the keys only moments before the vigilantes stormed the jail. See Jim Kline, “Desperate Days, Violent Men: The Finish of the Howard Street Gang,” \textit{The Californians} 3 (July/August 1985): 9-21.
around their necks. The condemned cried for mercy, but the mob allowed little time for last words, as members immediately yanked on the ropes and hung the three men from the large oak tree that loomed in the cemetery center. After the avengers fled in their automobiles, scores of Santa Rosa citizens congregated in the cemetery to view the mob’s handiwork. The onlookers jeered the county coroner when he arrived to cut the dead men down, but once the corpses had been cut free and removed from the scene, the crowd clamored for pieces of the lynching rope as souvenirs.  

The judicial proceedings against “Spud” Murphy and “KO” Kruvosky advanced almost as swiftly as the episode in the Santa Rosa cemetery. When Police Judge John J. Sullivan first heard the charges against the two men, he immediately announced that it was the most “hideous case” that had ever entered his court. “Such outrages as this,” announced the judge from his bench, “are to be read about in the history of the old feudal days. It scarcely seems possible that in these days there could exist men who would commit such a revolting crime.” When more women came forward and revealed that they also had been assaulted at the Howard Street cottage in previous episodes of violence—and with the San Francisco press giving the episode bold headlines and daily sensational treatment—a guilty

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19 For the most complete report of the lynching, see the *San Francisco Examiner*, 11 December 1920. The Santa Rosa cemetery would become a site of both instruction and celebration for the town’s citizens. For years, parents brought their young children to see the tree from which the dead gangsters had been hung. Santa Rosa citizens, in fact, later raised funds for the preservation of the hanging tree, though the brass plaque warning criminals to stay out of Santa Rosa that some proposed be placed at the base of the giant oak never materialized. For an article remembering the events in the Santa Rosa cemetery, see the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 March 1950.

20 Most San Franciscans would later say that the three men got what they deserved, but not everyone approved of the vigilantism in Santa Rosa. Though they had consistently called for swift justice, the editors of the *San Francisco Bulletin* called the extralegal treatment of the accused gang members both barbaric and anachronistic. “That such atrocities,” they despaired, “could have been carried out by a gang of white men in this putatively civilized city of San Francisco, indicates reversion to a type that might well seek uplift in the purlieus of Sodom and Gomorrah.” See the *San Francisco Bulletin*, 6 December 1920.

21 *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 November 1920.
The speedy trials were completed before Christmas and the juries condemned five members of the Howard Street Gang to prison. Murphy and Kruvosky, the two best-known figures because of their prominence in the boxing game, were sentenced to maximum fifty-year terms and ordered to serve their time in nearby San Quentin Penitentiary.

The Howard Street outrage sparked a litany of anxieties and created a list of targets for the city’s self-appointed moral guardians. Reformers demanded the immediate closing of the illicit poolrooms and cafes that everyone knew served illegal booze, as well as the “Greek coffeehouses” in which hard drugs were being sold. They insisted upon the eradication of the oyster houses, “French cafes,” and other eating establishments in which the quality of the food was less important than the sexual availability of the waitresses. Of particular worry was the “gangster menace” made plain by the Howard Street attacks. Brandishing the motto “Santa Rosa knows how,” reformers called for capital punishment for men convicted of rape and an end to “misguided humanitarianism” on behalf of accused criminals. Noting that most of the Howard Street Gang members had been jailed previously but released early due to good behavior, critics excoriated the culture of lax sentencing in the city as the entire parole system came under attack. Also singled out for condemnation was the Southern Station of the San Francisco Police Department, in whose jurisdiction the Howard Street

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22 To make certain that every sensational charge be given maximum exposure, the city’s newspaper editors all pledged their leadership in ridding the city of the gangster menace. William Randolph Hearst wrote from New York and promised that his Examiner would be a leading voice in the upcoming crusade, while the San Francisco Bulletin reported that, “All of San Francisco bows in sorrow at the untimely death of its faithful servitors, who, in the protection of virtue of womanhood were shot down and killed in the prime of manhood.” On 17 December, the Bulletin organized a musical benefit for Montgomery, Stanley, and the other “victims of the Howard Street Gangsters.” See the San Francisco Bulletin, 17 December 1920; and the San Francisco Examiner, 19 December 1920.

23 For the sentencing of Murphy and Kruvosky, see the San Francisco Examiner, 21 December 1920 and 29 December 1920.
cottage fell. It was their lack of vigilance, reformers argued, that had allowed the heinous acts to occur. Indeed, when it was revealed that Spud Murphy was actually high on the waiting list to become a member of the San Francisco police force, the entire department and its longtime connections to the city’s more unsavory elements were loudly questioned.  

But the chief targets of those outraged by the Howard Street events were prizefighting, prizefighters, and prizefight promoters. For the civic forces still angered by the fact that prizefighting had managed to survive, even flourish, after the passage of the 1914 “Anti-Prizefight Act,” the publicity surrounding Murphy, Kruvosky, and the Howard Street crimes provided the opportunity to explicitly link prizefighting with the more serious sins of murder, sexual deviance, and urban gangsterism. Newspaper editors began referring to members of the Howard Street gang as “the Prizefight Gangsters,” suggesting that there was something especially base about prizefighting that had somehow led to the attacks. William Randolph Hearst’s *San Francisco Examiner*—a newspaper that over the previous three decades had alternated between publishing stern denunciations of the sport and providing sensational front-page coverage of the more highly anticipated prizefights—now launched a rough attack against professional boxing by calling prizefighters and their hangers-on, “the very scum of the earth.” The *San Francisco Bulletin* piled on and compared the average prizefighter to a race of people many San Franciscans had historically considered devil-dogs and subhuman. “If it were not an insult to the Chinese,” the *Bulletin* provocatively wrote,

24 For the reports of the attacks against this litany of civic vices, see, the *San Francisco Bulletin*, 13 December 1920; and the *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 December 1920; 9 December 1920; 11 December 1920; 13 December 1920; and 14 December 1920. Reformers also targeted some of the more lenient Police Court judges, particularly John O’ Sullivan, who found himself the subject of a recall election being orchestrated by leaders of the San Francisco women’s clubs. For the campaign to recall O’Sullivan, see “Recall the Police Judges,” in *Civic League of Improvement Clubs and Associations of San Francisco* 7 (February 1921): 1-4.

25 *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 December 1920.
“we might speak of the boxers’ rebellion in San Francisco. Barbarous as were the crimes perpetrated by the uncivilized Orientals, they were humane in comparison to the unspeakable atrocities that have been committed against women and children by the boxer gangs now being rounded up in our city.”26

Not everyone agreed with the suggestion that prizefighting had something to do with the Howard Street attacks. An early defense of the sport came from the editorial page of the *San Francisco Daily News*: “It’s a bit unfair to hang all the odium of the recent gangster outrages on the boxing game. Just because some of the gangsters have been pugilists and because a number of others have been in ill-repute, the entire boxing game is damned. This is no more fair than it would be to close up the Southern Pacific yards because a yard clerk was connected with the gang.”27 In the immediate aftermath of the Howard Street attacks, however, tepid words of support like these were rare. The crimes committed by Murphy and Kruvosky were so shocking that even prizefighting’s most ardent supporters had to conclude that their beloved sport had careened into disrespectability. Marion T. Salazar of the *San Francisco Bulletin*, the longtime sportswriter who covered boxing, wrestling, and all contests that saw men grapple, sighed that it took a gang rape and triple homicide to accomplish what boxing promoters should have done long ago. Speaking of the unruly crowds that regularly thronged the San Francisco prizefight pavilions, Salazar opined that there was no other city in the world “where the dirty, filthy talk that has been heard from the gallery, and sometimes from the main floor, would be tolerated for one moment.”28 Tired of the vicious and

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revolting antics displayed by many of the fight game’s fans and participants, Salazar now announced that the sport needed to be temporarily suspended in the name of public order.  

The argument against prizefighting in San Francisco had historically been that the sport’s celebrated existence suggested to the rest of the nation that San Francisco was not in step with the enlightened sentiments of the modern world. Now the anxieties were much more concrete. The sport had proven itself to be a germ for grosser evils as the unchecked violence in the ring had spilled out into the streets and victimized San Franciscan womanhood—itself seen as the most precious possession of any civilized community. Mrs. May Barry, head of the municipal committee that oversaw playgrounds, juvenile courts, and probation departments, was one of many San Franciscans making the somewhat unspecific argument that there was something in the daily experiences of the professional fighter that had taught these particular pugilists how to brutally victimize young women. “The environment of the prize fighter,” Barry diagnosed, “plays an important part in creating minds that could conceive atrocities of the sort enacted at the Howard Street dive.”

Prizefighting, in other words, led to crime. The urgent question for reformers, then, was how to immediately eradicate the prizefight menace from the city. Noting that the problem at hand was not just the “superficial one” of punishing the men convicted of rape and murder, but that of digging down deep and going to the root of the problem, the Examiner proposed the following blunt remedy: “The way to prevent further development of this hideous degeneracy is to wipe out the breeding place of the brutes. These are the

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29 To press his case, he skewered those California cities that still allowed prizefighting to continue unchecked—Sacramento, Vernon, San Diego, Bakersfield, and Santa Barbara—by printing the names of the offending locales in a “list-of-shame” ending his every column. See, for example, the San Francisco Bulletin, 28 December 1920.

30 San Francisco Examiner, 7 December 1920.
‘boxing clubs,’ operated for a profit by a species of buccaneer who sit in the background gathering in the coin at the expense of unleashing upon society a gang of idlers and panderers who live by being mauled in public for the amusement of a crowd.”

To call prizefighters “brutes,” “panderers” and “idlers,” of course, is to use the words of class prejudice. In 1920, the campaign against prizefighting took on a decidedly class-based posture in which prizefighting was scorned as a crude and illegitimate money-making proposition and prizefighters attacked as members of an unproductive class of men who contributed little to society other than vicious thrills for gamblers and the inebriated. The class-based argument against prizefighting was not original—though it had rarely been issued in San Francisco, a city with a proud working-class culture and very strong labor movement. Growing out of the British preoccupation with amateurism in sport, in which cultural leaders tried to forbid professionalism by arguing that the social utility of athletics resided in its ability to teach the values of discipline, hard work, and communal responsibility, there was a longstanding resistance to men indulging in sport as a means for quick and easy economic gain. Though strident objections to professionalism in sport were beginning to wane slightly by the 1920s, prizefighting continued to hold the wary eye of San Francisco.

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31 San Francisco Examiner, 9 December 1920.

Fig. 4.1: The Howard Street attacks launched a crusade against the “prizefight gangsters.” This cartoon from the San Francisco Examiner is urging the San Francisco Police Department to prizefighters, gangsters, panderers, and loafers—groups of men that civic reformers branded as “unproductive.” (San Francisco Examiner, 10 December 1920)
Franciscans uneasy with the idea of brawny men making an ill-gotten fortune by physically punishing other human beings.\textsuperscript{33}

For William F. Humphrey, president of the city’s exclusive Olympic Athletic Club, the “manly art” of amateur pugilism had been corrupted by the anything-but-amateur, four-round bouts so popular in San Francisco. Though his Olympic Club had been one of the organizations leading the prizefighting charge in the late-nineteenth century by hosting world-class professional bouts under the dubious claim that they were “sparring exhibitions,” the club’s Athletic Committee now distanced itself from professional pugilism by condemning the entire four-round system as a corrupting influence on both city youth and good clean sport. “There are many instances,” warned the clubman Humphrey, “where young men in good positions who indulged in boxing as a means of recreation have been lured away from manly vocations by the glitter of gold to engage in prize fights, which only occupy a small portion of their time. The money reward has been far in excess of what their ordinary occupations would give them and the idleness permitted has tended to destroy their moral and physical character.”\textsuperscript{34}

Humphrey’s warning concisely illuminates the critique that many San Franciscans applied to the professional side of the sport. According to these critics, there was a significant difference between the amateur boxer and the professional prizefighter. The former used boxing as a legitimate form of exercise and character development. Professional prizefighters, by contrast, were viewed as hard-nosed, thick-skinned loafers—undesirable

\textsuperscript{33} For a discussion of the early class-based argument against prizefighting, see Elliott J, Gorn, \textit{The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prizefighting in America} (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), passim. For the American athletic ethos in which amateurism was celebrated and professionalism denigrated, see Pope, \textit{Patriotic Games}, 18-58.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 9 December 1920.
members of the civic body who, having never done an honest day’s work, respected neither themselves nor those around them. In a typical attack against professional boxing in the immediate post-Howard Street era, an editorial in the *San Francisco Bulletin* explained:

There is a big difference between the amateur boxer and the professional pug. The ‘manly art of self defense’ or the ‘science of boxing’ is a legitimate exercise in which many of our most reputable citizens have indulged. [Theodore] Roosevelt was fond of boxing, and for many a worker it is a pleasant and harmless recreation. But the men who live on the game—the professional pugs—are undesirable members of society. Before developing the proficiency that enables them to live by boxing, they may have been useful and industrious citizens, but they soon fall into devious ways and often fail to work even when they get into the ring. Publicity turns their heads and corrupts the little brains with which they usually set out on their pugilistic careers. Flushed with money and insolence, they treat women with brutality, and are as often in the police courts as in the prize ring.35

Indeed, for the many critics of professional boxing in the city, the prizefighter’s earning prowess was seen as a parody—a perversion, even—of the bourgeois standards of hard work, moral piety, and economic self-sufficiency.

Prizefighting was, undeniably, the favorite sport of the working-class. Though prizefight attendance could forge a cross-class collection of men into a cohesive sporting fraternity, boxing really belonged to the bands of hard-working, physical laborers who proudly looked to the prizefighter as a muscular symbol of the dignity of labor. When prizefighters entered the ring, they relied on the same traits valued in any laboring profession. Strength, dexterity, skill, stamina—these were the attributes common to both the successful pugilist and the productive workingman. Because of these links, prizefighting was a cherished activity for the members of organized labor. For example, when union men and women gathered at the Civic Auditorium in 1920 to celebrate Labor Day—just three months

before the Howard Street attacks—the holiday festivities revolved around a boxing carnival sponsored by the San Francisco Bulletin. In an indication of the way members of organized labor thought of using the sport to both hone and celebrate the muscular working-class body in times of leisure, young men from a variety of San Francisco trades squared off in thirty-one exhibition bouts conducted for the pleasure of male and female spectators alike.

Opening the proceedings was P. H. McCarthy, the former San Francisco Mayor and current head of the Building Trades Council. McCarthy climbed into the ring and delivered a speech in which he employed the metaphor of the prizefight as a way to highlight the competitive, but fair, relations between San Francisco workers and their employers. “The fight between capital and labor,” McCarthy announced, “is as clean a fight as any ever staged in a prize ring.” Taking this simile even further, two shirtless lads—one representing capital and the other labor—climbed into the ring, knocked each other down one time each in mock battle, then retired their antagonisms and shook hands. Next it was on to the real thing, and when Sam Compagno, a chicken peeler, knocked out Milton Paton, a printer, in the afternoon’s first contest, the event was off and running. Flyweights, bantamweights, lightweights, and welterweights squared off under the Auditorium’s bright lights, as wives and sweethearts rooted for their men and co-workers cheered on their colleagues. By evening, blacksmiths had done battle with boilermakers, steel workers had exchanged fisticuffs with ship fitters, cooks had fought carpenters, and railroad clerks had tested their fistic mettle against rugged teamsters.  

Laboring San Franciscans had long celebrated those prizefighters that seemed to embody their own particular working-class identity. During the famous 1889 Jim Corbett-

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36 Labor Clarion, 10 September 1920.
Joe Choynski grudge matches, for example, allegiances were drawn not only along ethno-religious lines—Corbett was Catholic and Choynski was Jewish—but along class lines, as well. Corbett, a bank clerk, had the backing of San Francisco businessmen and his clients at the recherché Olympic Club, while Choynski, a laborer in a candy factory, had the support of the working class. Indeed, class and cultural identification often outranked regional loyalties. Though the local boy, Jim Corbett, was the favorite son of those San Franciscans who belonged to the gentlemanly athletic clubs, other San Franciscans looked elsewhere in search for their pugilistic hero. In 1897, when the Englishman, Robert Fitzsimmons, defeated the homegrown Corbett for the world heavyweight championship, the Examiner needed to explain why some San Franciscans rejoiced. It was a colorful explanation that was itself indicative of class prejudice. “The proletariat had its inning,” the Examiner explained, “the element which does not like this ‘Gentleman Jim’ business. The unwashed want a hero who brawls in the saloons, forces cripples to drink with him, beats women and fights ‘at the drop o’ the hat.’ Corbett, who had a notion of associating with gentlemen of a sportive turn, who inclined to be petted in the clubs rather than in the alleys, who had a certain notion of tailoring and haberdashery, albeit not the highest one, this Corbett was altogether too ‘exclusive’ to be the pet of the people.”

Indeed, if boxing appealed to the laboring class because it reminded them of their daily industrial rigors, the sport also belonged to the class of San Franciscan men who rejected both industrial-era labor and middle-class standards of propriety and trafficked in the prurient, subterranean criminal districts of the city. These were the men who craved intense,

37 See the report of the crowd’s allegiances in the San Francisco Chronicle, 6 June 1889.

38 San Francisco Examiner, 18 March 1897.
physical experience and felt right at home in an urban milieu in which drinking, gambling, physical violence, and sexual adventurism flourished. The membership of these two groups often overlapped, but for men in both camps it was in the after-hours realm of leisure and raucous amusement, rather than in the world of regimented industrial work, where they found passion, excitement, emotional fulfillment, and meaningful moments of all-male fraternity.39

It was these links between prizefighting and the flourishing subculture of the masculine underworld that provided city reformers with the launching point for their attacks against prizefighters, a group of men they considered both morally dissolute and socially unproductive. Like the bootlegger and the petty thief, the prizefighter might be able to earn a living plying his chosen trade, but his income was ill-gained lucre. Equally problematic for reformers were the unscrupulous prizefight promoters—men whom the newspapers were now excoriating as callous profiteers who daily speculated in the currency of human pain. Since boxing promoters were the monetary lifeblood of the fight game, anti-prizefight forces charged them with providing the financial support for the atrocities wrought by the “prizefight gangsters.” The Examiner’s editorial board, for example, singled out prizefight promoters as the enablers of the Howard Street attacks, using capital letters to condemn them as “THE MEN RESPONSIBLE FOR TURNING LOOSE UPON SOCIETY THE BRUTES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CRIMES OF THIS ‘VICE GANG’ AND THE MURDERS AT SANTA ROSA.”40


40 San Francisco Examiner, 7 December 1920.
Many San Franciscans also resented the longstanding connections between prizefighters, the entrepreneurs of prizefight promotion, and members of the city government—links that served to lend the brutal sport both legal protection and civic legitimacy. These sordid associations were made even more clear when it was revealed that on the night that the police apprehended Murphy and Kruvosky, Mr. Frank Lawler, the Secretary of the San Francisco Playground Commission, had marched down to police headquarters and demanded that their bail be immediately fixed and the two men released. Reporters soon learned that Lawler, the man responsible for providing recreational activities and facilities for San Francisco children, was also a city boxing promoter, with Murphy and Kruvosky two of the bigger draws for his weekly fight cards at Dreamland Rink. 41

*The Argonaut* called the links between Murphy, Kruvosky, and the Playground Commissioner a “union of venality in high places and criminality in low places.” “The criminals were protected,” the paper reported with outrage, “everyone knows that; and they were protected because they belonged to the prize-ring business, which, itself, is a violation of the law, and because the prize-ring business was in control of votes.” 42 Members of the California Civic League sent Mayor Rolph a letter demanding that Lawler be immediately released from his post, expressing “indignation that a man having direction over the playgrounds of the city should engage in promotion of prize fights and associate with men of such character as those involved in the Howard Street outrages.” 43 The dexterity with which Lawler had plied his amazingly opposite trades of playground leader and prizefight promoter

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41 *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 December 1920.

42 *The Argonaut*, 18 December 1920.

43 Letter from San Francisco Center of the California Civic League to Mayor James Rolph, 8 December 1920, James Rolph Papers, Folder # 689, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
was particularly too much to bear for the *Examiner’s* Annie Laurie, a fifty-seven year old, white-haired San Francisco newspaperwoman whose matronly photograph graced her daily column and added an aura of grandmotherly concern to a career of hardnosed journalism that for decades had been investigating sex scandals and civic fraud for the papers of William Randolph Hearst. Laurie—whose real name was Martha Winifred—called Lawler “a constant companion of the toughs crooks and professional criminals,” and wondered in writing of the Playground Commissioner’s troubling blend of professions, “Wouldn’t it be odd if he should mix his right hand with his left and start promoting prizefights among our children in the public playgrounds?”

Under this immense public pressure, Lawler quit his position on 10 December, explaining in a typed letter to Mayor Rolph that he was innocent of the accusation of trying to fix bail for Murphy and Kruvosky, but was resigning to save the San Francisco Playground Commission and the city of San Francisco further embarrassment.

Mayor Rolph accepted Lawler’s resignation and then proceeded to call an emergency meeting with members of the San Francisco Police Commission, a meeting that launched City Hall’s sudden and official attack against professional boxing. Noting that “professional prizefights and their collateral activities have formed breeding places for vicious violations of the law, for men of evil intent, and have been injurious to the general public welfare,” the Police Commission issued a resolution that immediately revoked all existing permits for boxing exhibitions and announced that, until further notice, no additional permits would be

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44 *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 December 1920; 12 December 1920.

45 Lawler wrote, “My only fault has been, if it be a fault, that I have been connected with one of the clubs in San Francisco under whose auspices boxing matches have been conducted.” See letter from Frank A. Lawler to Mayor James Rolph, 10 December 1920, Folder # 689, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
issued.\textsuperscript{46} The San Francisco Boxing Commission—an organization consisting of members of the city Board of Supervisors, athletic club owners, and prizefight promoters—issued a parallel statement that simultaneously aligned the athletic organization with the spirit of urban reform while also assuring fans of pugilism that their beloved sport would eventually return. “The boxing commission wishes the sport loving public to know that we are not acting in an arbitrary manner at all and that we deeply regret the necessity for denying the sport-loving public the opportunity to follow the splendid game of boxing. Since the commission desires to function as an efficient body and keep boxing on a high plane and so clean that no opponent of boxing can find objection, we have taken the drastic step of suspending all boxing until such time as all of the discordant elements will adjust themselves to the commission’s rules.”\textsuperscript{47}

Making the claim that the sport of prizefighting itself was not to blame, but rather the aberrant actions of a few unusually abhorrent men, the Boxing Commission confidently predicted that it would be only a short time before the paying public could witness even better pugilistic performances than in the past. Yet despite the commission’s optimistic assurance, in the immediate wake of the Howard Street scandal the local boxing gyms quickly took on the air of—as one newspaper headline put it—“Houses of Mourning.” “The boxers disappeared as if by magic,” explained a reporter for the \textit{Daily News} after his tour of the ghostlike Turk Street Gymnasium, Garibaldi Hall, and the Parkside Club (where Murphy and Kruvosky had been employed as boxing “professors”)—three once-thriving boxing gyms that now stood deserted. In a poetic ode to the training regimen of the fighters now

\textsuperscript{46} The Police Commission resolution is reprinted in the \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, 7 December 1920.

\textsuperscript{47} The Boxing Commission’s statement is reprinted in the \textit{San Francisco Daily News}, 7 December 1920.
vanquished, this same reporter wrote, “The merry thumping of the bag, the tap-tap-tap of the skipping rope, the squeak of the weight machines were missing for the first time in years, [while] the evanescent ‘shadow’ that the boys were wont to fight with greater showiness and viciousness than ever they did their real flesh and blood opponents took a well earned holiday.”

The prizefighters were gone because they had been chased out. In the immediate aftermath of the Howard Street attacks, anxieties over the wild and profligate “prizefight gangster” were so acute that they sparked a civic crusade to remove all professional boxers from the city. In one of the many editorials that portrayed professional boxers as prurient and unproductive characters lacking both lawful occupation and morals, the Examiner said bluntly of the San Francisco prizefighter, “These men are vagrants. They should be dealt with as such.” The newspaper’s proposal was for the authorities to clean house and jail any man who could not prove that he possessed legitimate work.

But, significantly, this would be much more than just an attack against professional pugilism. The linking of prizefighters with vagrancy and delinquency coincided with a larger preoccupation in San Francisco with “idle men.” Reformers used the specter of the “prizefight gangster” to unleash a wider attack against the “unproductive” class. On 6 December 1920 the crackdown began in earnest when the San Francisco police launched raids into the boxing gyms, poolrooms, and other masculine gathering places. Anyone with a prior police record or known gang affiliation was immediately jailed; while any man who could not prove gainful employment was given a choice by Chief of Police Dan O’Brien—

48 San Francisco Daily News, 8 December 1920.

49 San Francisco Examiner, 7 December 1920.
“get honest work or get out of town.”  

Ten days after commencing the raids, a spokesperson for the San Francisco Police Department announced that officers had arrested 530 men and charged them with violating the civic ordinance against vagrancy.  

Separating the criminal element from the large number of merely temporarily unemployed men in the city proved difficult, however, and some San Franciscans complained about the incarceration of scores of men whose only offense was that they were temporarily jobless.  

In a letter sent to Mayor Rolph, Edward Backus, a San Francisco advertising distributor, protested what he saw as the unfair treatment of the honest but temporarily unemployed workingman:  

As an employer of unskilled men, I wish to protest against the actions of the police in making wholesale arrests of men whose only offense is that of being out of employment. No one is more anxious than myself to have crime and gangsters suppress (sic); but to terrorize an entire population of poor men, is not accomplishing that end. There are in this city, hundreds of Alaskan fishermen and cannery workers; other hundreds of agricultural workers, who can expect to find no employment at this time of the year; but most of whom have enuf (sic) money to enable them to live until Spring, in the cheapest rooming-houses and restaurants at Howard Street and vicinity. To raid these men, manhandle them and throw them into prison, and then attempt to drive or scare them out of the city is sheer brutality and can serve no end of Justice.  

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50 See the San Francisco Daily News, 7 December 1920. The first mention of this type of police roundup comes from the original articles detailing the Howard Street attacks. Immediately after the arrests of Murphy and Kruvosky, Captain John J. O’Meara of the Mission police district led a posse of patrolmen and rounded up ten men from Murphy’s neighborhood poolroom at Twenty-second and Mission and lined them up in the San Francisco hospital where the two young victims were recuperating. None of the ten were identified as having taken part in the attack, though their patronage of Murphy’s poolroom was enough to earn them a charge of vagrancy. See the San Francisco Bulletin, 27 November 1920.


52 The San Francisco Daily News estimated that there were over 13,000 unemployed men in the city. See the San Francisco Daily News, 5 February 1921.

53 Letter from Edward Backus to Mayor James Rolph, 7 December 1920, Folder #689, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
Indeed, for Backus and others, the problem was neither prizefighting nor the temporarily unemployed worker. The problem was unemployment itself. “We do not like to appear pessimists,” confided the *San Francisco Bulletin*, “but we cannot hide our heads ostrich-like and deny that a condition exists. Every day there comes word that this plant or that plant has let out men; that production is being cut down; that wages are being slashed. If things continue as they are we shall see a steadily increasing group of workless men on our side streets. From there it is but a short step to crime.”  

For other San Franciscans, however, the report of 530 fewer vagrants on the street was something to celebrate, especially as the city prepared for the early-winter arrival of the thousands of seasonal laborers who annually flooded the South-of-Market boardinghouses to wait for their hinterland jobs to reopen. This was a transient population that many saw as a source of civic and moral disorder. “We are just at the commencement of a winter season,” warned one member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, “when there comes to communities like ours the wave of crooks that are swarming throughout the state.” The *San Francisco Bulletin* was also anxious about the impending influx of men, remarking, “Such is the sole unfortunate reality of San Francisco’s perfect winter climate. It is the Mecca of vagrants and other undesirables that have a hard time wintering in eastern cities.”

Anxieties about the prizefight menace spread into the Oakland populace as well. Afraid that San Francisco prizefighters, vagrants, and other outcasts would hop on the ferry and make the East Bay city their new home, Oakland citizens formed an *ad hoc* Vigilance

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55 “Journal of Proceedings: Board of Supervisors, City and County of San Francisco,” 13 December 1920, located at San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco.

Committee and began patrolling the streets in order to protect their women and children. The city’s Police Department joined the crusade and organized a new group called “The Strong Arm Squad,” a plain-clothes unit that patrolled boxing gyms, poolrooms, railroad stations, and ferry terminals under the order of giving “fiends” and “undesirables” the boot. “The police department will not permit Oakland to become the dumping place for San Francisco scum,” announced the Oakland City Council.\footnote{San Francisco Bulletin, 6 December 1920.} Anyone deemed unproductive was suspect. In the first week of its existence, the “Strong Arm Squad” arrested over a dozen men and charged them all with vagrancy. Though these men complained to the Oakland judge that they had been unfairly chased from San Francisco, where they were waiting for their seasonal labor opportunities to reopen, they were each given a sentence of thirty days.\footnote{San Francisco Examiner, 9 December 1920.}

As in San Francisco, Oakland boxing promoters and city leaders announced that they were also placing the fight game under temporary suspension. Many Oaklanders thought of prizefighting as anathema to the progressive vision that they held for their city. Especially insulting to figures like Reverend Francis J. Horn, leader of the First Congregational Church, was the fact that prizefights were held in the downtown Oakland Civic Auditorium, thus making a mockery of the venue whose front façade bore the inscription: “Dedicated by the citizens to the intellectual and industrial progress of the people.”\footnote{For Horn’s attack against prizefighting in Oakland, see the Oakland Tribune, 12 December 1920; and the San Francisco Examiner, 13 December 1920.} With public outcry at fever pitch, the Auditorium’s co-promoters, Tommy Simpson and Gordon Glidden, announced that they were temporarily suspending their popular Wednesday night fight cards—events that regularly drew actors like Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and
Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, Hollywood celebrities who held stakes in some of the local pugilists and often enjoyed a vicarious thrill by working as seconds in their fighter’s corner. The Oakland City Council followed suit and announced plans to severely curtail the issuance of future boxing permits in the name of public safety. More immediately, all pugilists who wanted to fight in the city were now required to submit an affidavit of good character and fill out a thirteen-question application that might earn them the designation “morally fit” by the Oakland Police Department. A few wags in the Oakland City Council confidently predicted that this would spell the end of all boxing in their city, calling the term “boxers of good character” an obvious oxymoron.

But in San Francisco, after the initial hysteria subsided and the order suspending all boxing permits had run a two-month course, the fight game slowly got back on its feet. Ten weeks after the previous boxing contest in the city, the management at Dreamland Rink—the establishment that fight fans alternately called the “House of Quarrels” and the “Palace of Punches”—proceeded cautiously with a series of four-round bouts that they made sure everyone knew was being staged to benefit the Golden Gate Post of the American Legion. Promoters vowed that every state law would be strictly obeyed and that the boxers would receive only a laudatory medal for their participation. Weekly fight cards at Dreamland soon became the norm, with promoters staging four-round contests that pitted San Francisco locals against soldiers stationed in the city. To add an aura of civic responsibility to the proceedings, most of the fights benefited local organizations like the city’s disabled soldiers’

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60 *Oakland Tribune*, 10 December 1920. For the boxing career of Tommy Simpson, see his obituary in the *Oakland Tribune*, 6 February 1947.


fund or the Bernal Heights Boy’s Club, a neighborhood recreation center where the lads of today were to be prevented from becoming the gangsters of tomorrow.63

Boxing, then, was allowed to continue in San Francisco, but only on a strict amateur basis. San Francisco men would not be allowed to profit from their punches and make a living as prizefighters. Indeed, though the San Francisco Police Commission permitted the resumption of bouts in February 1921, it now required all potential pugilists to report to police offices at the Hall of Justice and be registered, fingerprinted, and photographed from front and side—exactly like a traditional mug shot found in a rogues gallery. The police department assigned all registering boxers a number and placed their photographs into a police department “mug book,” which they stored in their files for quick and easy reference. Additionally on fight night all boxers were required to present a police-issued, bronze identification proving their police-approved eligibility.64 The implication was clear—all boxers belonged to the criminal element.

“The Dance Hall Girls”

Once the “prizefight gangsters” were either locked up in jail, chased out of town, or swinging from a tree, San Francisco civic reformers redirected their attention toward what they considered to be another of the city’s most pressing social problems—dancing, dance halls, and, most specifically, the hundreds of young women employed by the city dance halls in the role of dance “instructors.” Dancing and prizefighting were two physical activities described by San Francisco reformers as similar sources of moral decay. In fact, as San

63 See, for example, the reports of the fights in the San Francisco Daily News, 16 February 1921; and the San Francisco Chronicle, 9 September 1921.

64 San Francisco Bulletin, 19 February 1921.
Franciscans were still reeling from the Howard Street attacks, dancing and fighting again violently converged when over 400 servicemen and civilians rioted in a Barbary Coast dance hall owned by James A. Soldavini and frequented by the district’s Italian population. Dance hall windows and bottles of Prohibition-era “near beer” shattered in the scrum that began when over three hundred sailors, soldiers, and marines stormed the dance hall in revenge for the stabbing of two marines the night before. Responding to public concerns, the San Francisco Chief of Police ordered a curfew to go into immediate effect. Unless accompanied by an adult, all children under the age of sixteen were now required to be off the streets by 8:00 p.m.65

It was in this tense atmosphere that reformers linked dance halls and prizefight arenas as like places of immoral activity. Led by Reverend Creed W. Gawthorp, pastor of the Hamilton Square Baptist Church at the corner of Post and Steiner Streets, a group of Mission District clergymen petitioned the San Francisco Police Commission and urged them to close both Dreamland Rink, the chief site of professional boxing in the city, and the Winter Garden Dance Hall, where Jean Stanley and Jessie Montgomery had first met some of their Howard Street attackers. “The Hamilton Square Baptist Church,” the petition read, “is heartily behind the movement to bring about the closing of Dreamland Rink where prizefights are held, and the Winter Garden, a public dance hall, which is a menace.”66

It was not difficult to make a link between dance halls and prizefight arenas in San Francisco. In a city possessing a limited number of large, multi-use buildings, dance halls and prizefight arenas were often one and the same. Dreamland, for example, was constructed

65 See the *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 December 1920.

in 1906 as a skating rink, but was used over the years as both a dance hall and a place to host large civic gatherings such as political party meetings and fundraisers for organized labor. In the immediate aftermath of the 1906 earthquake and fire, it was also pressed into service as a prizefight arena when Mechanics’ Pavilion and Woodward’s Pavilion, the two large buildings that had previously hosted most big prizefights, burned down. Winter Garden, though used mostly as a skating rink and dance hall pavilion, also sometimes hosted Friday night fights, especially when Dreamland was closed for repairs. Linking dancing with prizefighting, then, took less than a leap of imagination, and moral reformers painted a picture of twin activities of civic deviance occurring at different times, but under the same roof.

Most problematic for reformers were the “closed” dance halls—sometimes called “taxi dance halls”—that were spread throughout the city. “Closed” dance halls were a San Francisco invention. In the early Barbary Coast dance halls, female employees danced with male patrons and earned wages based on a commission system. The more drinks they could encourage male patrons to purchase, the more money the women received. In 1913 members of the San Francisco Commonwealth Club’s toured these establishments. In their final report, William S. Wollner, Chairman of the Commonwealth Club’s Committee on Dance Halls, said of the young women who plied their trade in these places, “The girls who are

Anxieties over young women dancing with men had a long history in San Francisco. During the Gold Rush-era, saloons, dance halls, and brothels were often the same institution. Because of these connections, “dancing girls” held a position in the illicit economy that many feared too closely approached the status of the prostitute. An 1857 article in the *Alta California* highlighted the situation of the Barbary Coast’s “German Dance Girls”—a group of young women imported from Germany for the pleasure and amusement of a transient and uprooted population of San Francisco men. The newspaper reporter called it “a system of peonage of Saxon flesh,” and wrote, “We are informed that as a class, they are virtuous, though how the fact can be reconciled with their employment, we are at a loss to know. Notions of propriety forbid that a female can be fondled and clasped by every comer, be he drunk or sober, uncouth or comely, and still be chaste.” See the *Alta California*, 19 October 1857.
employed in the dance halls are not prostitutes in the generally accepted sense of the term, [but] they are apprentices in the school of vice.”

That same year, in order to reform the Barbary Coast in preparation for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors enacted new laws that prohibited dancing in any establishment where alcohol was served. Dance hall entrepreneurs responded to the closing of the Barbary Coast dance halls with a new type of pay-to-dance scheme—the “closed dance hall,” or what they preferred to call “dancing academies.” As opposed to “open” dance halls, which were democratic amusements that all men and women could freely attend provided they pay a nominal entrance fee, the “closed” halls allowed paying male customers to enter, but only allowed admittance to women who were employed by the establishment in the capacity of “dance instructor.” The meaning of “dance instructor” varied from dance hall to dance hall. In some establishments, dance instructors did exactly that—they instructed men how to dance, tutoring them in the most modern steps. In other dance halls these instructors might be expected to dance especially close or provocatively with their clients. And in others, still, it was rumored that dancing served as foreplay to a more illicit physical performance.

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68 The 1913 Commonwealth Club report actually graded the city’s playgrounds, theaters, and moving-picture palaces along with the dance halls. But it was the latter that they considered a special plague. “Parks and playgrounds create a desire for open-air exercise and recreation which benefits the individual directly and the race indirectly,” they reported. “Motion pictures have a very direct relation to the mental attitude of the observer, particularly of children during the formative stage of their development. But of all recreations, public dance halls bear the most direct and immediate relation to the morals of their patrons, and it is very much to be regretted that this influence, as at present exerted, is extremely destructive” See “Public Reaction,” Transactions of the Commonwealth (1913): 273-5.

Indeed, reformers were anxious about the specific type of dancing that occurred in these establishments. What was known as “tough dancing” flourished in the San Francisco dance halls. Also known as rag, animal, and muscle dances, tough dances like the turkey trot, the bunny hug, and the grizzly bear had their origins in the interracial Barbary Coast dance halls and melodeons. As opposed to earlier forms of dancing like the waltz or the “two step”—in which controlled and skillful partners clasped hands and held each other loosely around the waist but otherwise kept their legs and torsos respectably separate—tough dancing seemed to celebrate wild, ribald, physical—indeed, sexual—contact.70

In the “closed” dance halls, the dance instructors performed these dances for hours with little rest. Male patrons bought “dance tickets,” usually priced at ten cents, with each ticket buying a two-minute dance with the partner of his choice. The dancing instructor’s income was a function of how many tickets she had at the end of the night. In most closed dance halls, for each ten-cent ticket she possessed, dance hall management awarded her a nickel.71 It was a laboring existence that was later described in a 1930 song titled, “Ten Cents a Dance.” Written by Lorenz Hart, the lyrics colorfully—and accurately—depict the typical working evening of a “dance hall girl:”

\[
I \text{ work at the Palace Ballroom,} \\
\text{but, gee that Palace is cheap;} \\
\text{when I get back to my chilly hall room} \\
\text{I'm much to tired to sleep.} \\
\text{I'm one of those lady teachers,} \\
\text{a beautiful hostess, you know,} \\
\text{the kind the Palace features}
\]

70 For “tough dancing” and the Barbary Coast, see Asbury, *The Barbary Coast*, 278-98; McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 62-4; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 101-2; and Stoddard, *Jazz on the Barbary Coast*, 28-45.

71 “Report of the Public Dance Hall Committee of the San Francisco Center of the California Civic League of Women Voters” (1924). Document located at the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco.
for only a dime a throw.

Ten cents a dance
that's what they pay me,
gosh, how they weigh me down!
Ten cents a dance
pansies and rough guys
tough guys who tear my gown!
Seven to midnight I hear drums.
Loudly the saxophone blows.
Trumpets are tearing my eardrums.
Customers crush my toes.
Sometime I think
I've found my hero,
but it's a queer romance.
All that you need is a ticket
Come on, big boy, ten cents a dance.

Fighters and sailors and bowlegged tailors
can pay for their ticket and rent me!
Butchers and barbers and rats from the harbors
are sweethearts my good luck has sent me.
Though I've a chorus of elderly beaux,
stockings are porous with hole at the toes.
I'm here till closing time.
Dance and be merry, it's only a dime.\footnote{Dorothy Hart and Robert Kimball, eds., \textit{The Complete Lyrics of Lorenz Hart} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 1995), 181.}

As the song’s lyrics suggest, in the “closed” dance halls young women needed to work hard to “sell” themselves and attract male patronage of all kinds. It was this prostitute-like dynamic, where one was encouraged to be physically and sexually expressive, that reformers found so problematic. Reporting before the San Francisco Police Commission on 10 December, Miss Florence Calderwood of the United States Social Hygiene Board called the “closed” San Francisco dance halls “breeding places of vice and assignation” and argued that they were serving as substitutes for the former segregated sex-districts of the city. “The conversation indulged in by women instructors to male patrons,” warned Calderwood, “is
low, vulgar, and rude. Young girls cannot go straight in these places. They are expected to be bad.”

While the public nature of the dance halls somewhat protected women from undesired intimacy on the dance floor, there was no such protection off of the floor. Now reformers could point to the menace of the “prizefight gangsters” and the Howard Street horrors as examples of the specific evils that awaited young women who not only worked at “closed” dance halls, but who frequented the licentious “open” dance halls, as well. Provocatively leading the public campaign against gullible young women, brutish beasts masquerading as men, and the dangerous anonymity of the public dance halls in which these two social types might meet, was the Examiner’s Annie Laurie. “It is all very well to bring up a girl to sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam and feed upon strawberries and cream,” rhymed Laurie, “but hasn’t the hour arrived when somebody ought at least to try to beat it into the head of a foolish, well-meaning, honest girl that a man’s ability to do a good two-step is no certificate of character?” For Laurie, the problem was the same one that had bedeviled Americans for decades—the anonymity of the city. San Francisco swelled with an influx of men and women hailing from the four corners of the nation, and young women were falling prey to dangerous young men exhibiting the mask of fine manners and a charming smile. “Good girls,” warned Laurie, “need to be advised “of the thin crust that is between them and the hideous seething cauldron of the underworld.”

Taking up the task of guaranteeing the leisure-time safety of young women were a slew of civic organizations that joined forces in hope of eradicating vice from the city. Chief

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73 San Francisco Examiner, 11 December 1920.

74 San Francisco Examiner, 1 December 1920.
among the reform-minded were the San Francisco Civic League of Improvement Clubs and Organizations and, especially, the Women’s Vigilance Committee (WVC), a hastily convened organization formed in direct response to the Howard Street attacks and the accompanying avalanche of outrages. Made up of leaders from fourteen federated women’s clubs in San Francisco, the WVC was led by Mrs. W. B. Hamilton, President of the City Federation of Women’s Clubs—an organization boasting over 12,000 female San Franciscan members.75 Attacking everything from immoral moving pictures to young women who smoked in public to the dangerous conditions found inside city dance halls, members of the WVC used the Howard Street incident as the launching point for a broad campaign against the wider degeneration of cultural standards and proper social relations in the city.76 The ladies of the WVC stated their determination to arrest this tide of licentiousness in a letter sent to Mayor James Rolph on 17 December 1920, in which they pledged support for the Mayor, but made it clear that much was expected from his administration, as well: “Honoring you as our Mayor and entrusting to your directing care the governing of this municipality, we extend to you our services to aid in restoring to its rightful heritage the fair name of our city and the sanctity and protection of our homes. We will support you and stand squarely back of you—but the laws must and shall be enforced!”77

Since the Winter Garden was the dance hall where Jean Stanley and Jessie Montgomery had first met some of their attackers, it was the establishment that bore the early brunt of the WVC and other reformers’ attentions. The Winter Garden occupied the entire

75 San Francisco Examiner, 10 December 1920.


77 Letter from WVC to Mayor James Rolph, 17 December 1920, Folder # 691, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
frontage of the block on Pierce Street between Sutter and Post. Built decades earlier, the building had been refurbished and reopened in 1916 as San Francisco’s newest pleasure palace, doing double duty as an ice skating rink and dance hall. It soon became San Francisco’s premier dancing establishment. Under an arched ceiling dangling two massive crystal chandeliers and hundreds of multi-colored lights, over one thousand dancers at a time could demonstrate their steps on a polished floor 210-feet long by 90-feet wide. The fatigued planted themselves and socialized on any of the rows of benches that rose up at a convex angle from the dance floor. A better view of the swirling humanity could be found from the larger of the two carpeted balconies bookending the establishment, while from the other balcony Casasa’s Military Band, a twenty-piece brass orchestra, performed fast-paced and energetic music for the dancers below.\(^78\)

On 13 December the San Francisco Police Commission began three days of hearings in order to listen to the public’s complaints about the city dance halls and to provide dance hall operators with an opportunity to defend their places of amusement. The WVC argued that the Winter Garden bred “loose standards of modesty that have grown out of disgusting fashion” and demanded that in the name of public decency and virtuous San Francisco womanhood all city dance halls be immediately closed.\(^79\) Neighbors of the Winter Garden presented the Police Board with a petition of two thousand signatures attesting to both the


\(^{79}\) Other dance halls were attacked as well. A federal investigation launched by the United States Public Health Service and moral officers from the Army and Navy suddenly charged that immoral conditions flourished at the large Arcadia Dance Hall at Eddy and Joes Streets, as well as inside the Ripperdan and Volograph Dance Halls on Market Street. The Metropolitan Dance Hall, better known as the Moose Dance Hall, was accused of graft and placing local beat policemen on the payroll when the heading “paid to cops” was discovered in its ledgers. For these and other accusations against San Francisco dance halls, see the San Francisco Examiner, 17 December 1920 and 18 December 1920; and the San Francisco Chronicle, 18 December 1920.
immoral conditions inside the Winter Garden dance hall and the “disgusting scenes” that occurred outside their homes when the dance hall closed its doors in the early morning, claiming that young men and women drank alcohol on their stoops and engaged in sexual intercourse in their doorways. Speaking on behalf of the neighborhood protesters was Attorney Daniel A. Ryan, who began by assuring the Police Commission that the proposal to shut down the Winter Garden was not a thoughtless Puritanical crusade. Ryan argued that he was “speaking for men and women who are big and liberal in their views. They do not object to harmless pleasures, but promiscuous gatherings at which young girls meet unintroduced men from nowhere and which permit the association of young girls with older and every class of men.”

Protesters also pointed out that Charles “Tiv” Kreling, the sergeant-at-arms of the Board of Supervisors, was one of the chief investors in the Winter Garden complex and was thus likely to use his influence to squelch complaints and forcefully renew the dance hall’s operational permit. For his part, Kreling denied that his position meant a conflict of interest and vouched for the moral standards at the dance hall in which he was an investor, noting that, “even babies are brought to the Winter Garden, and there’s a special room there to check baby carriages.”

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80 “Official Journal: Board of Police Commissioners, 13 December 1920, located at San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

81 San Francisco Examiner, 14 December 1920.

82 San Francisco Examiner, 15 December 1920. Also at the meeting was Commander R. C. Gidden, stationed in San Francisco and serving as morale officer for the Twelfth District of the United States Navy. Gidden argued that it was imperative that the Winter Garden and the city’s other large dance halls remain open as a source of amusement for the thousands of sailors who annually visited San Francisco on shore leave. As for the suggestion that the women’s clubs be allowed to manage the dance halls, the navy man questioned the ladies’ resolve. “How long would the women want to run the dance halls? All so-called reformers are willing to start something when public interest is at white heat, but after a few weeks they want to try their hand at something else.” See the San Francisco Chronicle, 18 December 1920.
On 20 December, after hearing complaints and defenses from both sides, Theodore Roche, the Chairman of the San Francisco Board of Police Commissioners, announced his organization’s decision: “Resolved, that after December 31, 1920, no female shall be permitted to be employed in any dance hall, operating under a permit from this board, for the purpose of dancing with male patrons of such dance halls, excepting that this resolution shall not apply to bona fide instructors of dancing employed for the exclusive purpose of giving bona fide instruction in dancing.” It was a compromise order in which city dance halls would be allowed to remain open provided that they no longer employed women for purposes of dancing. In other words, beginning New Year’s Day 1921, the “closed” dance halls would be abolished and the nearly one thousand female “dancing instructors” employed by these establishments put out of work.

Though they had wanted the abolition of all commercial dance halls, it was a partial victory for the WVC and the other organizations of civic reform. But for the hundreds of young women employed as dance instructors in the city’s many “closed” dance halls, the decision to keep the “open” dance halls operational but deny young women employment as dancing instructors was an issue not of moral reform but of economic livelihood. Most historians who have investigated dancing and dance halls during this era in American history have focused on the conflicts over dancing as they related to oppositional ideas about

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83 See the “Official Journal: Board of Police Commissioners,” 20 December 1920, located at San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

84 The specific protests against the Winter Garden were also considered and then shelved when Meyer Lowenthal, President of the Pavilion Skating Rink Company and the manager of the Winter Garden Dance Hall, pledged to prohibit both minors and unescorted women from entering the premises. See the San Francisco Examiner, 28 December 1920.
pleasure, autonomy, and leisure-time morality. Indeed, I have been exploring the conflict over dancing in precisely these terms, thus far. But in San Francisco, a city with a strong labor movement, the reaction to the decision to close the dance halls quickly became an issue that many working-class San Franciscans viewed through the lens of labor consciousness.

Popular amusements were one of the many civic arenas in which organized labor worked to cultivate its vision of a just and enriching society and make claims about the dignity of labor. The chief mouthpiece for this vision was the Labor Clarion, the official weekly journal of the San Francisco Labor Council—an organization chartered in 1893 to coordinate cooperation and foster unity between the region’s many labor unions. Alongside the weekly articles and editorials discussing such topics as the minimum wage, the implementation of closed-shop policy, and the right to strike—as well as weekly literary recommendations for something “Red to Read”—the Labor Clarion vigilantly politicized commercial amusements and public recreations. Certainly, working-class San Franciscans and members and leaders of organized labor looked at the places of popular amusement as vital civic spaces in which workers could find both solace and energetic release from an industrial system in which daily labor had become less satisfying and more anonymous, monotonous, and dangerous. In a 1912 article titled, “Labor and Enjoyment,” the Labor Clarion spelled out this ideology when it argued, “That the man, or the woman, who works for wages has as just a right to recreation and enjoyment as has the millionaire there can be no question. As to the right of every human being brought into the world to a certain amount

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85 For works that focus on dancing as a realm of self-expression for working-class women, but do not explore women’s work itself in these places, see, for example, Lewis A. Erenberg, Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 60-91; McBee, Dance Hall Days, 82-114; David Nasaw, Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 104-19; and Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 88-114.
of leisure time to do with as he or see may see fit there can be no room for difference of opinion between honest men."\(^{86}\)

But labor leaders also looked at the city’s many commercial amusements as another arena in the eternal struggle between labor and capital. For example, as moving pictures came of age and became immensely popular attractions in the San Francisco, organized labor did its best to make sure that working-class moviegoers thought of the moving picture theater as not merely a realm of carefree amusement, but as a place in which class identities needed to be remembered and promoted. Moving picture theaters—what the Labor Clarion called “the poor man’s playhouse”—were civic spaces that witnessed multiple episodes of class conflict. For example, when the San Francisco Labor Council announced its opposition to film censorship during the Birth of a Nation debates, it did so not on grounds of safeguarding personal liberty, but because censorship imperiled the livelihood of members of the Moving Picture Operators’ Union.\(^{87}\) The Labor Council politicized film spectatorship, as well. The Labor Clarion printed a weekly “We Don’t Patronize List,” identifying for working-class San Franciscans the non-union moving picture theatres to avoid, while weekly advertisements paid for by the San Francisco Moving Picture Operator’s Union—a union organized in 1904 and the first of its kind in the nation—reminded readers to patronize only those nickelodeons and movie houses displaying the “Union Operator” label in their storefront window.\(^{88}\) Indeed, for nine months in 1910 and 1911, the San Francisco Labor Council organized daily picketing against the Hippodrome Theater on Market Street because

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\(^{86}\) Labor Clarion, 17 May 1912.

\(^{87}\) Labor Clarion, 11 February 1916.

\(^{88}\) See, for example, the Labor Clarion, 7 February 1911 and 1 March 1912.
the establishment refused to institute a closed-shop policy that would force theater management to only hire unionized theatre operators. Despite the opposition of the San Francisco Citizens’ Alliance, a pro-business organization that fought for the citywide acceptance of open-shop policies, organized labor won a victory in June of 1911 when Hippodrome managers relented and agreed to only hire union operators.\(^8^9\)

Music was also a weapon in the battle between labor and management. In 1885, San Francisco musicians organized themselves into the Musicians’ Mutual Protective Union, an organization founded with the purpose of protecting musicians from the “gentry” of dishonest theater managers who left town without paying their employees, as well as to agitate for a unionized municipal band to perform in the various parks and playgrounds of the city.\(^9^0\) In 1916, the Musicians’ Union launched an attack in the industrial-era conflict of man versus machine by urging working-class San Franciscans to demand live music in the San Francisco movie theaters when they went to watch their favorite Buster Keaton and Fatty Arbuckle films. “Human intelligence demands human hands,” the *Labor Clarion* reasoned, and only live musicians could truly capture the “gaiety, grief, and deepest sentiment of life” that patrons demanded with their silent pictures.\(^9^1\) During the dance hall craze of the early 1920s, members of the Musicians’ Union would similarly call upon working men and women to patronize only dance halls that hired union musicians. “Don’t Dance to Scab Music” was the Musicians’ Union’s mantra.\(^9^2\)

\(^8^9\) For the report of the successful picketing, see the *Labor Clarion*, 23 June 1911.

\(^9^0\) *Labor Clarion*, 1 March 1912.

\(^9^1\) See, for example, the advertisement in the *Labor Clarion*, 19 May 1916.

\(^9^2\) *Labor Clarion*, 20 February 1920.
Indeed, labor leaders liked to claim that the “problem” with popular amusements in San Francisco was that they had been subsumed and poisoned by the demands of capitalism. Writing in the *Labor Clarion*, James Edward Rogers, President of the Recreation League of San Francisco, spied a perverse situation in which the desire for profits outpaced the demands for wholesome recreation and social betterment. “The commercialization of the amusements of the people,” Rogers explained, “has meant the prostitution of the people’s leisure time, for usually the owners of the places of amusement have had but one desire and aim—to make money.” Rogers could have pointed to any number of situations in which the well being of working people was sacrificed in the name of maximizing profits. Organized labor had long been critical of the management at moving picture theaters like the Hippodrome, the Portola, and the Tivoli—establishments that catered primarily to working-class families—and their dangerous practice of selling more tickets than seats available. They frequently attacked the owners of city dance halls and skating rinks who, in the name of cutting costs, ignored fundamental issues of sanitation and safety. Labor leaders were particularly outraged by what happened in 1916 when a conglomeration of San Francisco theater operators used their influence to defeat an attempt by labor to secure cheap entertainment for the masses. The San Francisco Labor Council requested that the city open up the doors of the Civic Auditorium to working people and fund a short season of grand opera at popular prices in order to “advance popular education, art and recreation.”

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93 *Labor Clarion*, 4 September 1914.

94 *Labor Clarion*, 31 March 1914.

95 See, for example, the *Labor Clarion*, 4 September 1914.
overcrowding and public safety. Despite any legitimate argument that the Civic Auditorium could not safely hold a season of inexpensive opera, the Board of Supervisors favored the “hyper-suave but logically inconsistent” arguments of the theatre managers over the will of the working people. It was, sighed the Labor Clarion, a victory for the “continued commercialization and monopolization of the higher forms of musical art.”

These tensions that I have outlined over the last several pages remind us not only of the importance of leisure and recreation to working people, but of the malleable distinction between leisure and labor. Simply put, one person’s leisure was quite often another person’s labor. So while many San Franciscans may have thought of dance halls and moving picture theaters as places of blithesome fun—as places to momentarily escape their daily concerns—for many working-class San Franciscans these were the spaces of their daily labor. It is in this context that we need to consider organized labor’s opposition to the closing of the dance halls. For many of the young men and women employed by the dance halls in a variety of capacities, these and other commercial amusements provided much-needed jobs. So while civic reformers and political leaders now argued that the “closed” dance halls needed to be abolished in the name of safeguarding civic morality, labor advocates countered that to summarily close these establishments would be to deny hundreds of honest working men and women meaningful labor opportunities.

Organized labor adamantly opposed the dramatic demands being made by moral reformers to close the dance halls in the name of public decency. John A. O’Connell, Secretary of the San Francisco Labor Council, and P. H. McCarthy, the one-time San Francisco Mayor now serving as President of the powerful State Building Trades Council,

96 Labor Clarion, 11 February 1916.
both argued that the rash proposal to close the dance halls would not make saints from sinners—as the dance hall reformers hoped—but would instead unfairly punish the city’s many hard-working dance instructors, musicians, and dance hall managers who eked out a living in these resorts.97 Offering a similar argument was Sam Davis, the Business Representative of the San Francisco Musicians’ Union. Writing in *Organized Labor*, the official organ of the San Francisco Building Trades Council, Davis referred to the movement to shut down the city’s commercial dancing venues as “Dance Hall Hysteria.” He argued that closing the dance halls because of the anomalous acts of a couple of gangsters was both inherently illogical and would be deleterious to the six hundred law-abiding union musicians who entertained the crowds nightly with their swinging sounds. “Let us be fair and reasonable and sane, and we will be safe,” Davis wrote. “Dancing is legitimate, and mothers send their young children to learn it, and the dance halls, ‘closed’ or ‘open,’ are perfectly safe and should not, in justice, be interfered with.”98

The San Francisco Labor Council also condemned the movement to close down the dance halls. Indeed, what this organization found particularly problematic was the fact that the Police Commission’s edict ignored the high-society dances being held in the city’s opulent cafes and classy hotels like the Palace and the St. Francis. “The unfairness of such a stand,” exclaimed a writer for the *Labor Clarion*, “is appalling.”99 The opposition of San Francisco labor organizations to the abolition of the dance halls was similar to their stance against the prohibition of alcohol. In both cases their opposition was predicated not on

97 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 December 1920.

98 *Organized Labor*, 11 January 1921; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 January 1921.

abstract claims of safeguarding personal liberties, but by arguing that both Prohibition and the order to abolish the “closed” dance halls were pieces of legislation under which only the working class would suffer. As an article in the *Labor Clarion* suggested about the prohibition of alcohol, “the preacher could still get his wine, the doctor his ‘medicine,’ and the capitalist “enough bonded whiskey to last a lifetime,” though the average worker could only get a drink by risking a reputation as a lawbreaker and a degenerate.\(^{100}\) Now dancing, labor leaders feared, was going the same way. In the hopes of further safeguarding the rights of working-class San Franciscans to earn a living in the dance halls, the Labor Council created an *ad hoc* organization called the Social and Recreation Association. Members of the Native Sons of the Golden West, the Knights of Columbus, the Young Men’s Institute, the Musician’s Union, and the Women’s Civic Welfare Club combined their numbers and, in the name of working-class solidarity, pledged to oppose any future restrictive legislation that the Board of Supervisors might consider.\(^{101}\)

In December 1920, faced with the impending order that would throw them out of work, the female instructors from the “closed” dance halls took their protests straight to the Women’s Vigilance Committee itself.\(^{102}\) Seventy-five young women representing the nearly

\(^{100}\) *Labor Clarion*, 3 November 1922.

\(^{101}\) *Labor Clarion*, 6 May 1921.

\(^{102}\) Organized labor had long reserved special umbrage for the San Francisco women’s groups, organizations that they considered to be elitist and out of touch with the pragmatic concerns of young working-class San Franciscan women. Back in 1912, as San Francisco clubwomen were calling for an end to the seedy Barbary Coast establishments that employed young women, the *Labor Clarion* defended the young workingwomen against the forces of misguided philanthropy and described the women’s clubs as places where “snobdom rules supreme.” This particular manifestation of moral reform, the newspaper argued, was every bit as pernicious as strikebreaking and wage lowering. Speaking of the typical clubwoman, Caroline Nelson of the *Labor Clarion*, wrote, “The little, old lady [has] a good heart but a very poor head. The club women as a class are the wives and sisters of the fellows that gather wealth by low wages paid to their workers. The lower the wages the richer the field of profit, and the more silks and satins and jewelry and club parades that come down the pike.” Indeed, for critics like Nelson, clubwoman philanthropy was a type of conspicuous consumption, providing the wives of the wealthy with a chance to pose as an “uplifter” and distance themselves from the economic
one thousand San Francisco dance hall instructors aired their grievances at the WVC’s weekly meeting on 30 December. The WVC granted a half-dozen young women the opportunity to speak, and the chosen six regaled the committee with their tales of familial duties and warnings of the financial hardships that the closing of the dance halls would provoke. Ranging in ages from eighteen to thirty-years old, the dance instructors insisted that they lived clean lives and declared that their reputations had been unfairly besmirched by the irresponsible accusations that they were little more than prostitutes in high-heeled dancing shoes. Articulate young women like Mrs. Bessie Voick, from the Pacific Dance Hall, and Mrs. Madge Emmick, representing the young women at the California Dancing Academy, told the clubwomen that dance hall employment provided wages far superior to what they might earn working as a domestic or in a department store. More importantly for the many young women who were also young mothers, the dance halls offered nighttime hours that allowed them to care daily for their young children, sick siblings, and elderly parents.  

The dance instructors continued their march and demanded audiences with civic leaders so they might further plead their case. They swarmed the office of the San Francisco Police Commission and invoked a worst-case scenario by suggesting that the closing of the dance halls would leave both an idle crew of military personnel looking for pleasure and a large group of young women willing to do just about anything to make financial ends meet. “What will happen,” the young women asked, “when the men—especially sea-faring men—

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103 For reports of the meeting, see the San Francisco Bulletin and San Francisco Examiner, 31 December 1920; and the San Francisco Daily News, 1 January 1921.

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who frequent the dance halls, arrive in the city looking for amusement, and the girls, being unable to find employment, are forced to make a living as they may?”

Next came a visit to City Hall. The *Daily News* reported that “Jazz time steppers became militant marchers” when over two hundred dance hall instructors stormed the civic center and demanded a meeting with Mayor Rolph. When they learned that the Mayor was out of town, the young women about-faced and paraded to the nearby Metropolitan Dance Hall, where they immediately organized themselves into the “Associated Dancing Teachers of San Francisco.” “We only demand our constitutional rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” announced Madge Emmick, the chosen chairperson of the new organization. “We have been denied fair play by civic organizations, by the clergy of San Francisco, and by the Police Commission. We must organize for self protection.”

The dance hall instructors were treated with a mix of pity, amusement, and contempt by the San Francisco press. It is important to note that the popular press never referred to these young women as “dancing instructors,” instead preferring to call them the “dance hall girls,” a term denoting their age, sex, and class status. Perhaps predictably, the newspapers described the protestations of these dance hall girls as “hysterical” and reported, implausibly, that the young women “swooned” and “fainted” while pleading for their right to continue to earn money while dancing. Even less complimentary was a female reporter for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, 3 January 1921.

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104 *San Francisco Bulletin*, 3 January 1921.

105 The girls’ protests won the sympathy of at least one member of the Women’s Civic Welfare League, who suggested that not only had the young dance instructors been treated unfairly but that fairness dictated that if the public halls were under examination then the high-class and fashionable dancing rooms in the Palace and St. Francis Hotels needed to be investigated as well. See the *San Francisco Daily News*, 3 January 1921; and the *San Francisco Bulletin*, 3 January 1921.
Francisco Bulletin, who called the dance hall girls “a motley crew with their ridiculous clothes, their stilted high heels, their blonde hair and weary smiles.”¹⁰⁶

For The Argonaut, even more problematic than the dance hall girls’ sense of fashion were their loud and theatrical protests and, above all, their simple claim that they possessed a Constitutional right to dance for a living. “Day and day we read of their raids upon public offices, their noisy pleas on behalf of families and dependents and even the display of babies supposed to be threatened with imminent starvation. That the closing of the dance halls means the unemployment of these girls is supposed to be an unanswerable argument against the restrictive measures that have been adopted. It is no argument at all. They have no vested right to their employment.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, though they had been critics of the indiscriminate calls to close the dance halls, the editors at the The Argonaut announced that they possessed little sympathy for the claims being made by labor that the dance halls needed to remain open at all costs because they employed union laborers. “The inference is obvious,” mocked The Argonaut. “The interests of a few musicians were to outweigh all other considerations. No matter though a dance hall were a nuisance and a pest, a centre of disorder and a breeder of crime, a place of assignation for gangsters and their victims. No matter how unbearable or how shameful the evil, it must be allowed to continue because it gave employment to a few protected men. There is no need to comment upon such a plea. It was either stupid or it was malignly disgraceful.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ San Francisco Bulletin, 3 January 1921.
¹⁰⁷ The Argonaut, 8 January 1921.
¹⁰⁸ The Argonaut, 1 January 1921.
Other San Franciscans were more sympathetic, however. Whether it was a benevolent attempt to aid young women in need, a means of weaning girls from employment that the newspaper’s editors found pernicious, or merely a promotional move to insert themselves into the story and sell more papers, the Bulletin sent Mrs. Agnes O’Connor to one of the mass meetings of the Associated Dancing Teachers of San Francisco. O’Connor offered the young women temporary newspaper employment while the Police Commission waited to make a ruling on dance hall closures, prompting the girls to roust a thankful cheer for the Bulletin, “much after the fashion of lost children who had at last found a protector.”

The Bulletin’s editors, in fact, made the dance hall controversy the centerpiece of their January 1921 circulation. On January 4 they began publishing a series of daily profiles titled, “The Story of a Dance Hall Girl”—brief biographic tales illuminating why young women worked in the dance halls. “In publishing these stories,” the newspaper explained, “the Bulletin attempts no defense of the dance halls or their owners, but seeks rather to present the ‘other side of the case,’ and to secure, if possible, permanent employment for those who need it and are seriously seeking it.”

Most of the profiles paint a picture of young, determined, and independent women forced to work long hours because of wayward husbands and hungry children. The profile of Madge Emmick, the spokeswoman for the “dance hall girls,” was the story of a young woman abandoned by her husband the prior year. Emmick now worked seven days a week, from seven a.m. to six p.m., in a downtown restaurant, then danced at the California Dance Hall from seven in the evening until one a.m. in order to support herself and her five-year old

109 San Francisco Bulletin, 4 January 1921.
child.\textsuperscript{110} Bobbette Nebbins—described by the \textit{Bulletin} as “a slip of a girl who, like some queer exotic plant, thrives on artificial lights and syncopated music”—had also been recently deserted by her husband. She danced nights so she could make enough money to buy her young son birthday and Christmas presents.\textsuperscript{111} The profile of Agnes, a single woman forced to quit her position at the Pacific Dance Hall because she was pregnant, provides a sense of the physical and psychological demands facing the young women who danced seven nights a week in the establishments overrun with soldiers and sailors seeking as much merriment as possible during their short on-shore stay. For the “dance hall girls,” it was often an unrelenting six hours of continual movement, shuffling from the arms of one man directly into the grasp of another, with the dance hall supervisors patrolling the floor and enforcing what Agnes described as a “mock dignity” between partners.\textsuperscript{112}

Coverage in the San Francisco newspapers suggests that the question of whether or not city officials should close the dance halls resonated with a wide swath of San Franciscans. The \textit{Bulletin}’s “Letter Box,” the “People’s Safety Valve” in the \textit{Chronicle}, and the “Pulse of the Public” in the \textit{Daily News}—the letter-to-the-editor sections of the local dailies were filled with a varied mix of outrage, support, cynicism, tolerance, and pompous pronouncements of moral superiority on the subject. For the historian attempting to recreate the world of Jazz Age San Francisco, these letters both paint a picture of the conditions inside the dance halls and provide a panoramic view of the way ordinary San Franciscans thought about the connections between class, gender, leisure, and morality.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 5 January 1921.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 6 January 1921.

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 10 January 1921.
Many of the letters focused on issues of gender and civic morality and argued that the dance halls needed to be closed in the name of protecting San Francisco womanhood. A San Franciscan who identified himself as “a young rounder” criticized the conditions in which young women were forced to solicit themselves for every dance and, despite the ubiquitous signs that warned, “No Shimmying Allowed,” would “go the limit” to earn a few extra pennies per dance. Another letter writer ridiculed the rage of transplanting the dance steps invented in the lowest Barbary Coast dens and dives into the public halls, warning, “you can’t handle charcoal without getting some black on you.” Particularly troubling for this concerned citizen was the conduct of the male patrons in these places of amusement. He believed that most men attended because it gave them “a license to hug”—another letter called these dances “hugging bees”—and treat another man’s sister in a way he would never allow another man to treat his own.

Some of the letters illuminate class-based assumptions about the proper form of labor for young working-class women. San Francisco’s Jeanne Mansfield wrote that the dance hall girls should stop their complaining and take up a useful occupation like housecleaning. Noting that, “I, myself have taught fully twenty maids to make a bed correctly and dust a room properly,” Mansfield assured the dance hall girls that “the wage is good and surely a clean, fine home is better than working in a miserable dance hall.” Still, for every suggestion that the girls trade in their dance shoes for some honest toil with mop and broom, there was the opposing letter-writer who argued that even though dancing was hard work, “it

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113 San Francisco Bulletin, 7 January 1921.

114 San Francisco Bulletin, 18 December 1920; 11 January 1921.

115 San Francisco Bulletin, 4 January 1921.
is better paid and there is more respect shown than in the kitchens of the parvenu and the new rich.”\textsuperscript{116}

Some wrote letters that highlight a civic conflict between the forces of moral reform and those San Franciscans interested in safeguarding the interests and amusements of the working class. One letter defended the dance halls as “palaces of pleasure” for the poor.\textsuperscript{117} Another called the drive to suppress the dance halls “an injustice to the pleasure loving working people who represent the very life of our city.”\textsuperscript{118} Others, still, complained that commercial dance halls like the Winter Garden were the only type of dancing that they could afford. A married man told the \textit{Bulletin} that he and his wife frequented the Winter Garden at least twice weekly and had found nothing to complain about. What’s more, he pointed out, the gilded downtown hotels and cafes—nightspots that offered dancing but were not under official investigation—were much too expensive for a common couple to enjoy.\textsuperscript{119} Likewise, a thirty-five year old man wrote to the \textit{Bulletin} and defended the Winter Garden as a place for clean and decent couples who could not afford to dance at the opulent Fairmont and St. Francis Hotel ballrooms. Signing his letter simply, “One Who Enjoys Dancing,” the man’s populist sentiments showed their limit, however, when he ended by suggesting that the authorities should investigate a dance hall on the Pacific shore just below the Cliff House, “where the floor is crowded on a Sunday afternoon to the music of niggers.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 12 January 1921.

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 21 December 1920.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 24 December 1920.

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 30 December 1920.

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 21 December 1920.
Finally, many of the letters rhapsodized about the meaning of liberty and scourged what they considered to be a group of hysterical and hypocritical reformers—the “long-haired fiddle-faced custodians of our actions” who were looking to squelch the civic freedoms of the average San Franciscan. San Francisco’s Al Clifton attacked the reformers for their holier-than-thou attitude and argued that a modicum of tolerance for others was the mark of real cultivation. “To live and let live stamps the true lady and gentleman,” he wrote. “I would suggest to all bone-headed fanatics and web-footed idealists who are reforming public affairs from bad to worse to wear a pair of wings to establish their heavenly purity.”

“A Sailor” from the Pacific Fleet—presumably anchored just off shore—wrote to explain that for many servicemen the dance hall was the only place they felt at home. The clubwomen were trying to take all of the joy out of life, he argued. “Just because some older women who don’t attend these dances and turn in early in the night think it is a disgrace to see young people enjoying themselves” was no reason to deny others their fun, he explained. Then he closed with the question: “Why didn’t they close all the theatres when Lincoln was killed?”

Another sailor stationed in the Bay Area suggested that sea-faring men made up half of the male dance hall patronage and argued that they had a right to enjoy themselves and young women certainly had the right to make a living. “This is America,” the seaman enjoined, “not Bolshevik Russia.”

In early January 1921, amid this new year’s flurry of letter writing, the San Francisco Police Commission made its final ruling. Deciding against issuing a common order that

121 San Francisco Bulletin, 24 December 1920 and 5 January 1921.
122 San Francisco Bulletin, 4 January 1921.
123 San Francisco Bulletin, 8 January 1921.
would shut down all the dance halls, the Police Commission instead ordered that each dance hall be investigated individually. But in the meantime, in order to immediately discipline these places of commercial amusement, it also issued a series of stopgap resolutions and restrictions. The Police Commission called for brighter lighting and more attendants inside the dance halls. It ordered floor supervisors to enforce a strict, but unspecific, rule of “no familiarity” on the dance floor at all times. It mandated that all dance halls now had to close by 12:30 a.m., two hours earlier than before.\textsuperscript{124} And it insisted that doormen be hired to refuse entrance to minors, intoxicated men, and unescorted women—a ruling that illuminates how civic leaders considered independent women and inebriated men to be like sources of moral disorder. Finally, the Police Commission announced that the 20 December ruling against the “closed” dance halls would stand. The “dance hall girls” had lost their jobs and, like the San Francisco prizefighters, would no longer be able to use their bodies in places of popular amusement and ply their preferred trade.

Rather than annihilate all dance halls, then, San Francisco leaders had decided to abolish only the most pernicious of the establishments and more diligently regulate the others. Clearly, civic leaders recognized that many young, hard-working San Franciscans were increasingly dependent on the dance halls. Dancing provided a profound relief for tired nerves and overstrained attention. It was a muscular exercise significantly different from their monotonous daily labors. And dancing filled a psychic need for individual San Franciscans desperate to connect in some way with a civic whole. In the end, then, San Francisco municipal leaders had followed the advice given by the \textit{San Francisco Bulletin} when it editorialized on Christmas Eve 1920: “The fiendishness of certain dance-hall

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 4 January 1921; the Police Commission resolution is reprinted in the \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, 4 January 1921.
habitués is no warrant for suppressing a form of entertainment so ardently craved by young people. Decency may be had without paying the price of a rigid Puritanism, from which there always comes a violent reaction. Dancing is an instinct and therefore a necessity.”


In their investigation into the dance hall “problem” of 1920, the Public Dance Hall Committee of the California Civic League of Women Voters came to the conclusion that “all of the social problems of modern life” could be found in the San Francisco dance halls—“sickness, marital difficulties, unmarried motherhood, vocational maladjustment, desertion, feeble-mindedness, poverty, ignorance of social hygiene, of American manners and customs, lack of sex education. All are represented in the crowds that troop into the halls night after night.” It is interesting to note that unemployment was not included as one of the “social problems of modern life.” In the parallel crusades against boxing and dancing in the immediate aftermath of the Howard Street attacks, nearly one thousand “dancing girls” and an untold number of “fighting men” lost their jobs and, in the case of the latter, allowed themselves to be chased from the city rather than stay and face charges of vagrancy.

In the campaigns against boxing and dancing, reformers emphasized the inherent immorality of both of these physical pursuits. Building upon longstanding suspicions, lingering from earlier eras, in which the non-productive use of the body connoted profligacy, immorality, and sin, the dominant moral argument against boxing was that the sport attracted


a vicious type of man whose already-immoral character was only exacerbated by his participation in the brutal sport. In the campaign against dancing, reformers argued that it was the style of “tough dances” that were so popular in the city, as well as the dark and anonymous spaces in which public dancing occurred, that inevitably turned good girls into bad. When boxers and dancers used their bodies to make money—immediately transforming them into prizefighters and “dance hall girls”—the activities became even more suspect. For civic reformers, boxing and dancing existed far outside the realm of legitimate work. Fighting for money was brutal, perverse, and anachronistic, reformers argued, while dancing for money in a setting in which one needed to attract men with sensual physicality was a form of labor that too closely resembled the trade of the prostitute.

In the aftermath of the Howard Street attacks, San Francisco boxers and dancers became symbols of both class and moral conflict in Jazz Age San Francisco. Indeed, these episodes speak to the way in which issues of class and morality were often inextricably linked—in which the body work of the laboring class was often described as a source of moral and physical danger. In both cases, it was the laboring aspect of the enterprise that was ultimately abolished. Civic leaders allowed amateur boxing to continue in their city, but professional boxing—that is, prizefighting—was to be suppressed once and for all. The San Francisco Police Commission ruled that the “open” dance halls could remain in business, but the “closed” dance halls—the place of employment of the “dance hall girls”—were to be immediately shut down. These episodes, then, speak to more than just the anxieties over boxers and dancers. The attacks against prizefighters and “dance hall girls” emphasize how some San Franciscans thought of popular amusements as civic realms in which working people might seek exercise, diversion, or uplift, but they were not supposed to be places in
Fig. 4.2: In January 1921, the San Francisco Police Commission ruled that the city’s “open” dance halls could remain in business, subject to regulation. An advertisement for the Arcadia Dancing Pavilion in the *Labor Clarion* highlights how dance hall management emphasized their establishment’s “refined” and wholesome character and tried to appeal to San Francisco workers by only employing unionized musicians. (*Labor Clarion, 2 September 1921*)
which to earn a living. Men could fight and women could dance, in other words, but they could not do so for money.

Finally, these episodes illuminate both the possibilities and the limitations of working-class resistance. Fighting for a cash prize or working for “ten cents a dance,” boxers and dancers could theoretically defend their labors by arguing that they allowed them to earn wages higher than in the spaces of ordinary industrial labor. Indeed, when reformers and municipal leaders tried to impose their moral visions on the dance halls, the young women who worked in these places did not quietly retreat into the corner and let these forces simply have their way. Instead they marched, they protested, and they organized. Indeed, the “dance hall girls” had the support of organized labor in their opposition to the San Francisco reformers. With dancing seen as part of the wider spectrum of pursuits in which organized labor sought a more just and enriching society, labor leaders came to the defense of the dance hall girls and supported their dancing in terms of the fundamental right to work.

But there was no such passionate defense made on the behalf of city prizefighters. Certainly, the nature of the crimes committed by “Spud” Murphy and “KO” Kruvosky was so indefensible, that whether or not boxing was to blame, the supporters of professional boxing were effectively silenced. But it is also important to note that even though prizefighting was the favorite sport of the working-class San Francisco man, professional boxing had never been incorporated into the union movement—even today prizefighting remains outside of the spectrum of organized labor.\footnote{For an article on a recent attempt to organize a labor union for professional boxers, see Jack Newfield, “The Shame of Boxing,” \textit{The Nation} (12 November 2001): 9.} Though boxing was indeed a working-class pursuit—one that closely paralleled the rigors of industrial-era labor and provided industrial workers with a muscular symbol of the profound dignity of labor—the
professional side of the sport could never shake the accusation that it was both unproductive and more brutal than heroic. In a society that valued the productivity of male labor, the prizefighter’s decision to reject industrial work and instead earn a living by punishing other male bodies, was a stark choice that struck too many San Franciscans as the ultimate betrayal of the American work ethic.
Conclusion

“A Pleasure Loving People”

Everywhere about the City are pleasure resorts. The military reservations, the shooting ranges and picnic gardens, the salt water swimming baths at the heart of the City, the two admirably conducted trotting parks, the numerous handsome theaters whose constant prosperity has given San Francisco the reputation of being the “great show town,” the cable and electric roads penetrating picturesque sections of the City, the numerous pleasure resorts—all these have their crowds, and the wonder is when the people find time for conducting the serious affairs of life.

—San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 1896.

“It is easy for a pleasure-loving people to find amusement in San Francisco,” wrote the French traveler Albert Benard de Russailh when he arrived in the city in 1851, “absolutely nothing is lacking, and a perpetual carnival reigns.” Eighty years after de Russailh’s visit, Amelia Ransome Neville used precisely the same words to describe San Franciscan life at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. “We were a pleasure loving people in the old city,” was how she remembered her hometown before the 1906 earthquake and fire laid much of it to ruin. An 1896 editorial in the San Francisco Daily Morning Call put it much the same way when its title identified San Franciscans as “Lovers of Pleasure,” declaring that it was the region’s remarkable ethnic diversity and its pastiche of Old World

1 San Francisco Daily Morning Call, 12 April 1896.
inspirations, customs, and leisure-time traditions that forged “one of the surest foundations upon which to rest the coming greatness of the City.”

As these civic evaluations suggest, the notion of a “pleasure-loving people”—of a diverse population of individuals fused into a cohesive San Franciscan whole by their like thirst for fun and merriment—was a prominent theme in the urban texts of the city.

Take a stroll today through a used bookstore in San Francisco and you will find a collection of popular histories and colorful memoirs that describe turn-of-the-century San Franciscan life in much the same way—as an endless bonanza of carefree pleasures, fraternal festivity, and blithesome fun. A quick glance at the titles of these books tells us that San Francisco was *The Fantastic City*, *The Magic City*, *The City at the End of the Rainbow*, or simply *San Francisco: A Pageant.*

The turn-of-the-century years were, wondrously, both *The Gala Days* and the *Champagne Days of San Francisco.* In these works of nostalgia, everything in the city is celebrated. San Francisco’s constant chilly fog is not a simple meteorological event, but in the words of Arnold Genthe, “a luminous drift, conferring a magic patina” on city structures, while in the title phrase used by Monica Sutherland, the 1906 earthquake and fire did not actually destroy San Francisco but instead created *The Damndest Finest Ruins.*

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4 *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, 12 April 1896.


What is missing from these celebratory accounts, however, is the important story of the very real struggles that occurred in San Francisco over the meanings of play, pleasure, leisure, and civic amusement. Not every city inhabitant was privileged enough to exercise what Amelia Neville called San Franciscans’ inherent “love for the lightness and sparkle of life.” There were the stark realities of racism, ethnic chauvinism, class oppression, and sexual discrimination, as well as intense and sometimes violent moral disagreements. Real life, in other words, could greatly temper the city’s romantic allure. My goal in this dissertation has not been to rewrite the history of the “grand old days” and in a negative fit of historical revisionism suddenly announce that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century San Franciscan life was little more than a cruel litany of callous oppression and endless struggle. Instead, I have complicated this turn-of-the-century story. By exploring how popular amusements served as public arenas of both joyous civic celebration and tremendous social, cultural, and political struggle, this dissertation demonstrates that the history of leisure-time San Francisco and its “pleasure-loving people” is a less fantastic, but ultimately much more significant, than Neville and others suggested.

This dissertation argues that turn-of-the-century San Franciscans, through words and actions, imbued popular amusements with immense political significance. Whether it was building a bathhouse to make grand pronouncements of imperial fitness, condemning pernicious racial imagery in a moving picture in hopes of weakening racial hierarchies, standing up to the forces of moral reform by defining public dancing as a working-class necessity, or using prizefight spectatorship as a bold statement of urban belonging, San Franciscans used their popular amusements to make claims to public power. Indeed, by exploring how San Franciscans buttressed and challenged social hierarchies and civic

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identities within these public realms, this dissertation illuminates different ways of understanding the contests over the most important and controversial issues of the era—women’s rights, race relations, class conflict, and moral reform, as well as the meanings of public space and democratic citizenship.

Each of this dissertation’s four chapters showed that San Franciscans’ love of pleasure had political consequences. Chapter One investigated the relationship between gender and power in San Francisco. In this chapter I focused on the different meanings of prizefight attendance for San Franciscan men and women. Turn-of-the-century city prizefights were important civic events that witnessed a collision between male prerogative and female desire. Celebrating boxing as a muscular training ground, male San Franciscans tried to claim the prize ring as an exclusive space of all-male fraternity and privilege. San Franciscan women challenged these assumptions, however, and used the prizefight arena as a public space in which to present thoroughly modern standards of public womanhood and urban sociability. Ultimately, this chapter argues that historians need to broaden their notion of female activism—to look beyond the world of suffrage speeches and the female-led campaigns for moral reform during the era—and seriously consider how women could use an activity like sport spectatorship to make claims to civic belonging and public power.

Chapter Two used moving pictures to explore the relationship between race and power in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. By examining the intense civic disagreements over whether or not the public would be allowed to see the Johnson-Jeffries Fight in 1910 and The Birth of a Nation in 1915, I drew connections between on-screen racial imagery and the off-screen dynamics of white supremacy. I illuminated the ways that those in power can legitimize beliefs about race not only through the production and promotion of racial images,
but by censoring cinematic images, as well. At a time when moving pictures were perhaps the most popular medium for the conveyance of information and knowledge, San Franciscans used the promotion and censorship of racial images to buttress social hierarchies and repel challenges to the racial status quo.

Indeed, this chapter suggests that, with regard to race relations, we need to reconsider San Francisco’s popular reputation as an especially tolerant locale. White San Franciscans may well have been more tolerant than their counterparts in the cities of the American South, but this chapter tells us that it would be a mistake to interpret the lack of Jim Crow laws in the West Coast city as an indication of racial equality. By defining moving pictures of Jack Johnson’s real-life interracial victory as mere “cinematic violence,” while hailing D. W. Griffith’s romanticized and fictitious depiction of violent white Redemption as “history incarnate,” San Franciscan political leaders and cultural commentators promoted an official civic ideology of race based on the twin assumptions of white power and black inferiority.

Chapter Three told the story of how turn-of-the-century San Franciscans used popular amusements to make heady claims of impending imperial power. The imperative of preparing the city to host a 1915 world’s fair—a fair that was to announce to the rest of the world that San Francisco had risen from its 1906 ashes and was now ready to reclaim its position as a leader in the American imperial project—brought to a boiling point the long-standing tensions in the city between moral reformers and supporters of the libertine popular amusements forged in the city’s exuberant Gold Rush era. The swirling and interconnected discourses of race, morality, manhood, and empire converged particularly in the debates over

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the place of prizefighting in the city. Indeed, as the first day of the fair approached, it was
the image of the white prizefighting body that emerged as the public symbol around which
these cultural disagreements coalesced, with both camps using the weighty discourses of
progress, civilization, and evolutionary thought to justify their clashing claims.

Of my four chapters, this is the one that best highlights the tensions in civic discourse
over the meaning of modernity in the western masculine city. Some San Franciscans
considered the prizefighter as the preeminent source of masculine strength and imperial
power and strenuously argued for prizefighting’s continued existence as a way of
safeguarding twentieth-century national vitality. Others branded prizefighting as a retrograde
pursuit leftover from the era of frontier barbarism and, in the name of transforming San
Francisco into a progressive and modern locale, called for the sport’s immediate abolition.

Chapter Four explored the campaigns to close prizefight arenas and dance halls in
Jazz Age San Francisco, and the opposition to these campaigns, as a way of charting the
possibilities and limitations of working-class power and resistance in the city. Though the
twin attacks against boxing and dancing reveal much about the rhetoric and tactics of civic
reform in San Francisco, these campaigns, more interestingly I think, also reveal something
important about the way San Franciscans then, and Americans today, think about leisure,
labor, and class. They speak to the ways in which issues of class and morality are often
inextricably linked—in which the pleasures and amusements of the working class are
described as sources of moral and physical danger. These episodes also highlight the
immense significance of leisure to working people and serve as an important reminder of the
malleable distinction between leisure and labor—that is, the way one person’s leisure is quite
often another person’s labor. Finally, by highlighting the largely unsuccessful campaigns of
resistance on the part of workers against the powerful forces of moral reform, this chapter demonstrates how, in the words of Stuart Hall, “popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged; it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle.”

Of all the sites of popular amusement and public struggle that I have explored in this dissertation, boxing has been my particular focus. The spectacle of prizefighting in San Francisco symbolized a host of tensions in the turn-of-the-century American city. More than merely symbolizing urban conflict, however, prizefighting was such a rich source for questions of public power that the sport itself was often the focus around which many of these conflicts coalesced. My decision to use prizefighting as the primary lens through which to view civic discord and social identity in San Francisco is in no way meant to be an echo of Jacques Barzun and a strident assertion that whoever wants to truly understand turn-of-the-century San Francisco must study boxing. It certainly wouldn’t hurt, however, for the sport has not been my interest alone. Prizefighting captured the emotions of turn-of-the-century San Franciscans as diverse as priests and prostitutes, sailors and stenographers, Irish laborers and Chinese merchants, homegrown media moguls like William Randolph Hearst and visiting foreign celebrities like Sarah Bernhardt. Indeed, prizefighting was the intense focus of both the men and women who loved it and the reformers who loathed it.

Prizefighting was everywhere in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. In this dissertation I have explored how men used the prizefight arena to forge a masculine

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11 In 1954 Barzun wrote, “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.” See Jacques Barzun, God’s Country and Mine: A Declaration of Love Spiced with a Few Harsh Words (Boston: Little Brown, 1954), 159.
solidarity and illuminated how women used prizefight spectatorship to critique and challenge the city’s male dominated public culture. I investigated how ideas about race were transmitted through boxing—both in live contests and through the presentation and censorship of interracial prizefight films. I argued that the debates about prizefighting were surrogates for larger disagreements about American masculinity, modernity, and San Franciscan civic character. And I explained why when reformers in the 1920s wanted to describe someone as dangerous, immoral, or unproductive—or all three—they simply linked them with prizefighting.

Throughout this project I have charted the rise and fall of the sport’s popularity and civic status. Because of police prosecution, early prizefights took place down in the city’s hidden subterranean slogging dens or outside city limits altogether—perhaps in a faraway field or on a barge in the middle of the Bay. When the sport became linked with city’s business and political structures, prizefights became grand civic affairs attracting thousands of passionate spectators at a time. They were dynamic public events in which mechanics were said to rub elbows with millionaires—though I doubt they did in reality—and between 1890 and 1910, San Franciscans could honestly proclaim their city the “Prizefight Capital of the World.” Jack Johnson’s monumental interracial victory tempered some of the widespread passion for the sport—especially among those who celebrated prizefighting as a symbol of Anglo-Saxon dominance—but it was the imperative of preparing for a 1915 world’s fair that ultimately caused California state voters to pass an anti-Prizefight Act that made professional pugilism illegal in the city of San Francisco. Still, prizefighting remained popular due to the illegal practices of fighters and promoters. The professional side of the sport continued to operate under a cloak of amateurism and thrived during the Great War, but
finally, in 1920, the virulent reaction to a hideous crime committed by a pair of “prizefight gangsters” chased many of the professional pugs from the city, crippling what was known as the “Four Round Game Era.”

This is where I ended my story of professional boxing in San Francisco. In November 1924, however, California voters redeemed prizefighting when they approved Amendment 7—popularly known as the Morrison Bill. Authored by a San Francisco Assemblyman named Henry Morrison, the new law traded internal discipline for legalization. The Morrison Bill permitted professional matches of up to ten rounds to a decision, and no-decision bouts of up to twelve rounds. Boxers, managers, promoters, referees, and ring doctors all had to be licensed, while provisions were made to create a boxing commission that would oversee and regulate all pugilism in the state. Finally, in order to appeal to some elements of the population that might have otherwise voted against the bill, the new law authorized a five percent tax on gate receipts from all boxing and wrestling matches in California, with the money to be sent to the California Veterans Home in nearby Yountville. The first major fight to occur in San Francisco after the passage of the Morrison Bill took place on 22 February 1925 in Recreation Park. In a sign that city fight fans had missed their favorite sport, the professional contest drew over 24,000 fans to the outdoor arena, with gate receipts topping $42,000.\(^{12}\)

San Francisco sportswriters had been the ones to lead the public relations campaign for the passage of the Morrison Bill. On the day of the election, the *San Francisco Chronicle’s* Harry B. Smith urged voters to pass the act that would put “cleverness” back in the fight game. As it stood now, Smith explained, the short four-round bouts were “little

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\(^{12}\) For descriptions of the events, see the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner*, 23 February 1925.
more than slugging affrays from start to finish.”\textsuperscript{13} Smith’s words may have been persuasive, though the statewide passage of the Morrison Bill had something to with the fact that the rest of the nation now seemed entranced with both boxing and the sport’s whirling dervish of a champion, Jack Dempsey, a man who helped lead the national post-war acceptance of prizefighting and was the main attraction for pugilism’s first “million dollar gate” in 1921.\textsuperscript{14}

But during the turn-of-the-century era, it was San Franciscans who had nurtured and celebrated prizefighting while most American locales rejected it out of hand. Prizefighting was a roughshod and strenuous sport that mirrored the social, cultural, and political rambunctiousness of turn-of-the-century San Francisco—and this was precisely the reason that some embraced the sport and others desperately wanted to see it abolished or reformed. Throughout this dissertation I have done my best to avoid the easy use of boxing metaphors. But I opened this dissertation with Mark Twain’s story that used boxing as a metaphor for competitive California politics, so I now conclude with a boxing metaphor that evokes the two dominant and sharply opposed views that turn-of-the-century San Franciscans held about prizefighting and their city: Two warring camps squared off in San Francisco in a contest of words, ideas, actions, and power. In one corner stood reform-minded San Franciscans who saw prizefighting as a brutal and anachronistic activity that embodied all of the urban ills they hoped to ameliorate. In the other corner were the sport’s vigorous supporters, individuals who promoted prizefighting as a tremendous regional asset and a vital tonic to the emasculating tendencies of modern life. Perhaps more than any other longstanding civic dispute, these debates over prizefighting illuminated the unsettled state of a turn-of-the-

\textsuperscript{13} San Francisco Chronicle, 4 November 1924.

\textsuperscript{14} For the 1920s and the “golden age” of boxing, see Jeffrey T. Sammons, Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 53-9.
century city simultaneously occupying the libertine and unbridled masculine terrain of the
nineteenth-century Western frontier and the more orderly and disciplined—some might say
prosaic—world of the modern twentieth century. Though it is now the turn of another
century, these two dueling civic visions still inform San Francisco public culture today.
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