Gender in Flux: Queerness and its Implications in the California Gold Rush

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Introduction:

The year 1848 in the United States reflects the coalescence of interconnected events that prompted questions of belonging, territory, and acquisition in various forms. As the conclusion of the Mexican-American war approached, culminating in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the altering of national boundaries, white Americans turned westward for new economic and social opportunities. Debates regarding the expansion of slavery ravaged the national political sphere, complicating the outcomes of the United States’ new territorial exploitations. Abroad, revolutions across Europe fomented radical, republican attitudes and sparked waves of migration westward. These developments all worked to further destabilize the emerging domestic, middle-class tranquility associated with American urbanization and industrialization.

When gold was first discovered in California, these national and international events dominated American consciousness. Many Americans were also skeptical of grand tales from the West, an isolated, supposedly inhabitable place for many of those unfamiliar with its landscape and people. This attitude towards acquiring gold reversed in late 1848, however, when President Polk commented on the abundance of it in his State of the Union speech:

It was known that mines of the precious metals existed to a considerable extent in California at the time of its acquisition. Recent discoveries render it probable that these mines are more extensive and valuable than was anticipated. The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district and derived the facts which they detail from personal observation…When he visited the country there were about 4,000 persons engaged in collecting gold. There is every reason to believe that the number of persons so employed has since been augmented. The explorations already
made warrant the belief that the supply is very large and that gold is found at various places in an extensive district of country.

While people local and international to California, including individuals from Oregon, the Sandwich Islands, Mexico, Chile, and Peru, had already begun their long expedition to the mines, Polk’s address prompted American men from the East Coast to try their luck in the gold mines.

Frustrated with the weight of a lifetime of wage-labor, it was white men in particular who migrated to California in droves. Determined to earn an individual wealth, they also sought to access their visions of white masculinity that were dampened by domestic environments. Finding themselves in hyper-masculine spaces alongside other, nonwhite men, men’s newness in the mines, and their variations in gender norms and performance based on race and ethnicity, altered the Gold Rush communities’ attitude towards sexuality. Secluded in their rural spaces, men were able to access a relaxed sphere of gender that both emphasized queer identity and heteronormative roles. This newfound freedom of expression, however, had larger implications for racial minorities. The effect of gender and sexuality in flux lasted long after the Gold Rush ended, prompting a racialized backlash designed to exclude nonwhite men from masculine labor and ideals. The desire for wealth and a pronounced individual lifestyle unified those who ventured to the mines, but their experiences within them and after them varied greatly, emphasizing racial divides in a moment when barriers towards nonnormative gender and sexuality disintegrated.

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The Composition and Character of the Mines

Integral to understanding the function of gender and sexuality intersected with race in the California gold mines is establishing the conditions to migration, as well as the every-day workings of labor and life in the mines. Beyond the desire for wealth, migrants to the mines had a plethora of reasons to risk their livelihood coming to, and existing in, the Sierra Nevada foothills. Here, the characteristics of who migrated is also useful in surveying gender and sexuality performance. Additionally, as the miners proved to be predominantly male, the seeming absence of women also influenced the day-to-day operations of life in the mines, as well as the queer nature that it produced. In all, who comprised the mine is essential in knowing how and why it operated as a social and political space.

California prior to the Gold Rush appeared and functioned in markedly different ways. Considered a small coastal town then, San Francisco acted as the main settlement and port. As Clare Sears notes in *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, the port city claimed only eight hundred residents in the beginning of 1848, but “Within two years the town’s population had boomed to thirty-five thousand, and within ten years it had surpassed fifty-thousand as the discovery of gold in the Sierra foothills brought thousands of migrants to the port of San Francisco.”\(^2\) Sears also remarks that of these numerous people, more than ninety-five percent of them were young men.\(^3\) Prospective gold miners were also “global but selective,” according to Susan Johnson in *Roaring Camp*.\(^4\) Johnson

\(^3\) Sears, 24.
further expands on the racial and ethnic make-up of the Gold Rush migrants, writing that:

“Chileans went; Argentinians and Brazilians, for the most part, did not. Cantonese speakers from South China went; people from Shanghai and Nanjing did not. African Americans, both enslaved and free, went; Africans did not. France sent many forty-niners; Spain, hardly any. Men immigrated in droves; women, in comparatively small numbers.”

The international nature of the Gold Rush migration reflects the importation of various cultures and identities into a centrally located area, containing racial and ethnic differences in one city and a nearby, localized rural area.

All of these migrants had varying reasons to travel to California. Finding themselves in an expanding global capitalist market enforced through colonialism and imperialism, many international gold miners arrived through a process of economic coercion. Johnson asserts that, as people came to terms with the imperializing nature of capitalism, which attempted to globalize culture and national economies, “Some sought gold to create capital; others, to ward off capital’s dynamism and its definitional habit of turning human energy into labor power.”

Unsatisfied with the prospective of a life of labor, this attempt to escape the emotional and physical burdens of capitalism united American and international migrants alike. Furthermore, colonialism tied into recent global events, prompting mass migrations. In the case of the Mexican-American War, as well as Britain’s relations with China, Johnson writes, “Political liberalism and commercial often colluded…In these cases, the arrogance of colonial power could be stunning. But people came from these places so recently defeated in war, often hoping against hope for a better life in California.”

Additionally, slavery served in a similar manner to colonialism in bringing people

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5 Johnson, 58.
6 Johnson, 58.
7 Johnson, 58.
to the California Gold Rush. While many people came for the prospect of enormous, individual wealth, enslaved people had a vastly different reality. Slave owners migrated with enslaved people in an attempt to secure more capital, displacing families and forcing strenuous labor onto the enslaved folk, who had very little agency throughout the experience. This experience rang true for other racial minorities as well, who sometimes arrived under conditions of debt peonage or contract labor. Just as various as the racial and ethnic composition of the mines was, the miners’ reasons for leaving their homes were just as disparate.

Also important to the arrangement of people within the mines are those individuals who did not have to travel to them. Indigenous populations of the Sierra Nevada foothills grappled with the sudden, mass influx of outsiders into their communities, land, and resources. Primarily Miwoks, the population of Indigenous people drastically changed during the Gold Rush. Christopher Herbert notes in *Gold Rush Manliness: Race and Gender on the Pacific Slope*, that the population dynamics in California during the Gold Rush are startling from an Indigenous perspective. While the total state population had nearly tripled during this time, the Indigenous population faced a massive demographic decline: “from around 120,000 to between 20,000 and 40,000 during the same period.”8 Alongside the general deterioration, Indigenous tribes were displaced, often forced to leave their home territory in search of uncolonized spaces — an increasingly rare achievement during the period of Westward expansion. Those peoples who remained struggled to maintain their home and their culture, but were sometimes able to adapt to the radical changes produced by whiteness and colonization.9 These brutal experiences of the

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9 Johnson, 59.
Indigenous populations in California are ultimately reflective of the role of whiteness, capitalism, and imperialism in the hurried attempt to acquire wealth in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Everyday life inside the mines was profoundly influenced by this diverse array of people comprising them. Though noteworthy for the rough conditions, abundance of grueling physical labor, and pervasion of intense masculinity, the Gold Rush mines were also spaces for destabilized gender roles in connection with labor. Of all the demographic characteristics of those in the gold mines, the near absence of women was the defining element that changed how the men in them operated. This severe gender imbalance was noted among many of the locals within the area during the time. William McCollum, a physician employed by the Panama Railroad Company, traveled to the California gold mines, and recorded his observations there. In them, he passes judgment on the state of San Francisco society, writing that: “One great cause of a loose state of morals in San Francisco, is the absence of female society and female influence. There are not over fifty American women, and but few others in a population of 30,000.”

Within the actual mines, as well, less women could be found. McCollum demonstrates the pervading notion at the time, that women served as a civilizing force designed to humanize and cater for men.

In terms of labor in the mines, this gender imbalance and perception of women translated into queered domestic duties, as well as a longing for a feminine presence. For many Anglo-American men in the Southern mines, groups of miners recreated family-like structures, sharing a cabin, supplies, and responsibilities. Johnson describes this common formation, writing that: “…two to five men constituted an economic unit: they worked together in placer claims held by

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household members, alternating tasks and placing the gold in a common fund from which they purchased food and other necessities. Profits, when there were any, were divided among the partners.”

The frequency of these community formations, and especially how they existed with smaller numbers of people to each one, reflects the desire for a traditional home amongst the Gold Rush miners.

This partnership is evident throughout cooking practices, as well. Miners accessed comradery through communal meals, which were performed through rotating, week-long cooking shifts. Individual miners were forced to learn how to wash their clothes, mend them, and clean their spaces, as well. All of this culminated into a noticeably altered division of labor. Miners still “wondered and worried about what it meant, for example, that Anglo men were down on their knees scrubbing their shirts in a stream, that Mexican women were making money hand over first selling tortillas on the streets of Sonora, or that French men seemed so good at creating homey cabins in the diggings.” Without the ready availability of American women to care for them, many miners formed family units and partnerships to split responsibilities and share community and intimacy with one another. The reactions to this development of skewed gender roles diverged in two main ways — some yearned for a woman’s presence, while others were content to exist in their homosocial spheres.

An original print titled “Miner’s Life — Illustrated” depicts the collective want for a white, feminine presence by the Gold Rush diggers. The image features a small collection of songs in the center, using language such as “honest” to characterize their intentions. The two

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1 Johnson, 106.
12 Johnson, 110.
13 Johnson, 101.
songs are divided between the home and the mines, emphasizing their longing for a stable, comfortable home life, as well as a woman to provide for them. Most notably, however, are a series of images surrounding the songs, illustrating the various tasks, locations, and events at the core of the miner’s life. On the left border, captioned “Miner’s Dream,” is an angelic depiction of a white woman. She is modestly dressed, her head titled to the side in interest. This idealization of a white American woman reflects the backlash against gender norms in flux, and how miners valued their masculine heterosexuality above all else. Physically above this picture is a captured moment of a miner sick, laying alone in bed. On the right side of the border are depictions of miners’ evenings spent together, playing games in competition. Contrasted against the illustration of the ideal woman, these moments are emblematic of both the loneliness and homosocial spaces available to men. An insight into Gold Rush miners’ feelings, this image shows viewers how conceptions of women and heterosexuality contrasted against the predominantly male environment of the mines.
Some miners leaned into the intimacy of their environments, adding a queer nature to their experiences in the mines. While learning to perform their own domestic duties, miners would join together to complete their work, relishing in the community bonds they shared. Johnson writes of a local miner, Reverend Woods, using his journal entries to describe these scenes of miners gathered on a rainy day, sewing their clothes: “In our visits to each other these days, like the ladies at home, we often take our sewing with us. Today I took a pair of stockings to darn, one of my shoes to mend, and the ‘Democratic Review’ to read. While we plied our needles, our tongues were equally busy speaking of mutual friends and hopes.”¹⁵Explicitly

¹⁵ Johnson, 123.
comparing himself and the other men to women working at home, Woods emphasizes the queered gender roles and importance of homosocial community in miners’ lives. Outside of their physical labor, they find emotional fulfillment alongside other men, especially through the conversations regarding their hopes for the future. The description of their tongues, as well, mirrors the feminized act of gossip. All these details work to both destabilize gender and illuminate the ways in which miners’ isolated experiences carry a significant meaning in terms of queerness. Whereas some men longed for heterosexual visions of domesticity, others were content to expand their notions of home to one another.

**Actualizing Queer Notions and Behavior**

Without white women to serve as a humanizing force for men, San Francisco and the Sierra Nevada gold mines became sites of sexual, queer communities. As notions of “home” were challenged and destabilized by the severe gender imbalance, many Gold Rush miners adapted their social spheres to reflect the same conditions. As a result, cross-dressing and queer behavior as a whole became prevalent amongst city spheres and Gold Rush communities. Examples of these transgressions from cisgender, heterosexual masculinity help illuminate the way gender and sexuality were treated while in flux, as well as how race informed these moments and developments.

Experiences of queerness in San Francisco and Gold Rush communities were often rooted from the need to redefine what “social” and “home” meant in a space that did not cater to forming white heterosexual relationships. As immigration to the port city steadily increased, the surrounding area gradually industrialized, forming spaces for socialization that reflected queer behavior: “Saloons, gambling dens, and brothels similarly sprang up, providing some of the
social and sexual companionship that could stand in for home.” Saloons and gambling dens acted with a queer, masculine purpose, in the sense that they were homosocial environments for men to spend their free time together in. Though brothels existed to serve as a reinforcement of heterosexuality, the racial composition of them often deterred gold miners from frequenting them. Not willing to view Indigenous, Mexican, or other minority women as “real” women, some gold miners, especially white men, avoided these iterations of heterosexual relationships and found all the companionship they needed within the gold mines. In this sense, on an individual basis, gold miners adapted their perceptions of “home” and “social” to align with the conditions they found themselves in. Often, this meant queer performances of sexuality and gender.

Cross-dressing, and cross-gendering as a result, proves to be one of the most prevalent instances of queer behavior in Gold Rush society. Cross-dressing existed both informally and formally, manifesting in either relaxed dress or features of official, predominantly male dances. Johnson writes of a diary entry from miner Timothy Osborn, who recorded that his Mexican neighbors’ “…peculiar dress always excites my attention. The loose bottomed underpants of snow white, and the gay woolen outside, open at the sides with long rows of brass buttons, and their black velvet tunic so short…as unable to reach the top of their pants.” This white American perspective of Mexican men’s clothing represents the racialized way white men perceived gender, as well as how clothing that did not immediately fit work-man like status was rendered queer and peculiar. Explicit examples of cross-dressing in informal settings also destabilize gender in similar ways. A print from the Gold Rush era titled “The miners pioneer ten

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16 Sears, 26.
17 Johnson, 169.
18 Johnson, 170.
commandments of 1849 — Scenes when crossing the plains in 1849” depicts various instances of the miner lifestyle. These include encountering bears, meeting Indigenous people, and establishing camps, as well as one image of cross-dressing. In the upper right-hand corner of the image, a square features a group of men dancing in a building signed the “Liquor Store.” While other men drink and dance, one man is wearing a cage skirt around his waist, obviously impersonating a woman’s presence and role. By donning this skirt, the man in the picture is practicing a nonnormative performance of masculine gender. This instance of queered gender reflects the way gold mining men mimicked heterosexual relationships in homosocial environments.

Formal dances were also spaces of queer dress similar to the man wearing a cage skirt in the “Miners’ Ten Commandments.” Attempting to recreate heterosexual standards, gold mining

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men attended dances where a certain amount of the miners there would adopt feminine clothing to signify a temporary, new gender. Although these dances were predominantly male, these moments of cross-dressing attempted to equalize the gender balance, ironically creating a queer environment. J. D. Borthwick, a transitory miner who arrived in California in 1851, expands upon these moments of cross-dressing, recounting the dances he attended in his book, *Three Years in California [1851-1854]*. Borthwick describes the use of clothing to queer gender, saying that:

The absence of ladies was a difficulty which was very easily overcome, by a simple arrangement whereby it was understood that every gentleman who had a patch on a certain part of his inexpressibles should be considered a lady for the time being. These patches were rather fashionable, and were usually large squares of canvass, showing brightly on a dark ground, so that the "ladies" of the party were as conspicuous as if they had been surrounded by the usual quantity of white muslin.20

Borthwick describes the adopted gender roles further, noting that the fiddler performing the music for the dance would call out directions such as “Lady’s chain,” and “Set to your partner,” though no women were present at this particular dance. The fiddler would then end the dance, announcing “in a louder voice than usual, the supplementary finale of ‘Promenade to the bar, and treat your partners.’ This injunction, as may be supposed, was most rigorously obeyed…”21 This depiction of dancing at a ball illuminates the complex gender relations prevalent in Gold Rush society. In an attempt to access heterosexual roles and traditional masculinity, the men at the dance instead adopted queer notions of gender and dress. Though this moment of cross-dressing

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21 Borthwick, 320.
only lasted for the night, the illustration of gender in flux represents larger perspectives of the Gold Rush society.

Featured alongside Borthwick’s written account of cross-dressing at gold mining balls is an image illustrating his perspective. Titled “A Ball in the Mines,” the drawing showcases a crowd of men dancing with one another. All physically large, burly men, they wear similar working-style clothes, including long shirts, pants, and boots. Most of them wear hats, have facial hair of some sort, and are smoking, creating a hazy effect on the image that reflects the social standards of the ball. In the center features a pair of dancers, both male, swinging each other joyfully to the tempo of the music. Other miners in the back of the image grin widely, clearly enjoying the camaraderie, music, and relaxation from strenuous physical labor. This illustration of a dance full of miners is significant in that it departs from the usual depictions of grim work and social isolation. Though the miners are not surrounded by white women eligible to pursue sexual or romantic relationships with, they still clearly enjoy their environment and the adaptations they have made to their social spheres. In this sense, homosocial spheres and cross-dressing were not the final resort of the Gold Rush miners — instead, they are sources of social entertainment that fulfills them in the absence of stricter notions of sexuality and gender. Enjoying their moments away from the physical act of mining, the miners leaned into queer behavior in order to enhance their lives.

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22 Borthwick, 320.
Sears expands upon the cross-dressing practices, noting that other forms of clothing were adopted in order to mirror heterosexual dynamics in predominantly male environments. In Nevada City, located near the northern mines, balls were held where “numerous men compensated for the gender imbalance of twelve women to three hundred men by tying a handkerchief around their arm and assuming the woman’s part…Women’s clothing was also sometimes worn to indicate a man’s temporary new gender.”23 Even in the presence of women, men were still willing to adopt a queer gender performance, temporarily equalizing themselves with the scarce population of women. The author continues, highlighting how women sometimes had an active role in queering men’s gender: “…several women who attended a ball at Marysville in Yuba County persuaded a miner’s son from Boston to supplement their number by wearing a woman’s gown, shawl, and fan.”24 This more explicit version of cross-dressing, in

23 Sears, 30.
24 Sears, 30.
connection with the women directly encouraging the man to wear feminine clothing, illustrates the ways that queer gender were rendered acceptable in the pursuit of recreating heterosexual dynamics. Additionally, through Sears’ depiction, there appears to be an air of good-natured humor when men chose to engage in cross-dressing. This performance of queerness is important to understanding how cross-dressing and queer gender operated even when not isolated. A tactic used by women in addition to men, cross-dressing proved to be a well-known, acceptable practice throughout the Gold Rush mines.

Cross-dressing in Gold Rush society was not only a useful means of adopting heteronormative standards, but a queer presentation of gender that both men and women readily encouraged at mining balls. Leaning into the idea of a temporary gender, the men who were women for the night allowed themselves to be treated as a typical woman would, accepting drinks, attention, and compliments from their male counterparts. Giving up their hyper-masculine spaces and appearance for a queered gender, these men curated a homosocial community underscored by queer behavior and notions. In both formal and informal settings, cross-dressing was also a site of queer interest and racial divisions; cross-dressing ultimately had larger implications for nonwhite and non-immigrant men. Across the Gold Rush mines, queer life existed in conjunction with race and gender imbalances, influencing the everyday lifestyle that Gold Rush miners embraced.

**Racialization as a Product of Queerness**

The practice of cross-dressing and the prevalence of queer behavior throughout the gold mines resulted in a starkly different reality for many nonwhite men. While white men were able to access queerness to inform their social communities, the nonnormative presentations they
engaged in resulted in a backlash against other forms of perceived non-masculinity. Cross-dressing allowed for explicitly racist practices, as well as an increasingly hostile perception of nonwhite men’s masculinity. By queering themselves, white men’s behavior became a conduit for racism as a means of compensation. Gender roles and appearance in flux called for a reorientation of heteronormative, white, masculine values that severely impacted nonwhite men’s experiences during the California Gold Rush.

Cross-dressing in Gold Rush California was occasionally a means to engage in racist tropes and practices. The destabilization of gender allowed white people to believe they could also “queer” their race, adopting racist characteristics to mirror their changed gender. Sears notes this union of queer dress and racial mockery, writing how this occurred within San Francisco masquerade balls. Attending one of these balls in 1851, a “Mexican-American war veteran and leading city merchant attended a masked ball at the city’s Cairo Coffee House, wearing blackface, petticoats, and a woman’s dress.” Integral to this description, alongside the adoption of blackface, is the importance of noting this particular man’s prominence in society. As a veteran and noted merchant, this recorded moment combines notions of queer gender, racism, war, capitalism, and masculinity together. Using a racist practice as a means of reinforcing these hypermasculine values, in compensation for queerness, this instance reflects the racialized backlash of cross-dressing.

Queered dress also worked to exoticize racial minorities. In 1850, a group of shipwrecked Japanese sailors were rescued and delivered to the port of San Francisco by a U.S. ship. There, they were put on public display as an example of queer presentation. Hikozō Hamada, one of the rescued men, recalled being forced to change into “native dress” by the American ship captain.

25 Sears, 31.
While they witnessed “some females put on men’s clothes, while some men arrayed themselves women’s garments,” they were quickly “forced on stage in front of a large crows that eagerly awaited their display. City newspapers had advertised the sailors’ exhibition…” Alongside cross-dressing spectacles performed by white people, this group of Japanese men were reduced by the perceived oddity of their race. Examples such as these complicate the notion of cross-dressing, demonstrating how temporary, queer gender performances helped foster a racist culture surrounding appearance. The fluidity of gender during the Gold Rush allowed white people to equate race and gender, putting nonwhite people on display to fulfill their desire to witness something “other.”

This example of racist treatment informs how queer gender specifically racialized and impacted Asian men during the Gold Rush. As a result of the severe gender imbalance and queer division of labor, Chinese immigrants from the Guangdong Providence engaged in domestic work alongside gold mining. Additionally, the influx of non-European immigrants into California caused a racist backlash that enforced taxes on foreign miners, as American gold miners felt that the riches they found from the ground belonged solely to them. Displaced from the mines, Chinese men relied even more heavily upon domestic labor, especially laundry, as a source of income. By working in an area designated as “womanly,” despite copious amounts of white men performing the same labor, white men projected queer gender onto these Chinese immigrants. Johnson discusses the intersection of this racial and gender prejudice, citing Hinton Helper’s *The Land of Gold: Reality versus Fiction*. Johnson notes that

That such race trouble, actual or potential, was also by definition gender trouble is suggested by the fact that Helper’s reflections on Chinese laundries immediately follow

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26 Sears, 32.
27 Sears, 34.
his discussion of the preponderance of men among Chinese immigrants, the lack of virtue among the few Chinese women in California, and the difficulty whites have in “reading” Chinese gender: ‘You would be puzzled to distinguish the women from the men, so inconsiderable are the differences in dress and figure.’

Inspiring racial and gender anxiety from white men who could not control others’ “queer” gender performance, Asian men became the site of racist feminization. Combining the effects of war and colonialism, American men believed they had a right to their newly acquired land, displacing minorities and specifically targeting Asian men for the ability to gain wealth outside of the mining conditions.

Asian men continued to be racially feminized based on gender and labor performance. As mining taxes persisted, Chinese men found themselves increasingly enveloped in domestic work. Because of their economic position and “unreadable” gender, white people convinced themselves that Chinese men were internally women, gifted with an unnatural ability to tape into maternal instincts. In Albert D. Richardson’s book *Beyond the Mississippi*, he described the prevalence of Chinese men performing “women’s” work: “Perfect in imitation, where female labor is scarce he proves unrivaled at nursing, cooking, washing and ironing. Babies intrusted to him he dandles with so much caution and tenderness, that all the maternal instinct must lurk somewhere: under his long pig-tail, in his yellow face, or moony eyes.” In this description, Richardson essentially equates Chinese men to substitutes for white women. Invoking racist characteristics, white men concentrated their economic and gender anxiety on nonwhite men successfully making a living in San Francisco. Using the relaxed notions of gender that surrounded them, white people projected the fears and uncertainties onto iterations of gender they could not understand. By

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28 Johnson, 126.
describing the men with phrases like “long hair,” especially, queer gender distinctly evokes racist perceptions of Asian people and their abilities to perform gender that did not align with white, American views of masculinity.

These fears of a “wrongly queered” gender had greater political effects for Chinese men in San Francisco. As anti-immigrant sentiments swept the nation, the stereotypes of feminine Chinese men were invoked to advocate for a larger Chinese removal. The Workingmen’s Party of California, a labor organization formed in response to mass unemployment, specifically targeted the Chinese immigrants of California who worked in domestic spheres or on the construction of railroads. In their book The Labor Agitators; or, The Battle for Bread, the Party writes of male Chinese works:

You cannot discern that he is a man…He has no tell-tale blush for indelicate sights or sounds. He cleanses the baby with the same indifference that he washes the dishes. He can lace Madam’s corsets, or arrange the girls’ petticoats, smooth their pillows, or tuck in their feet as calmly as he can set the table for breakfast. In an emergency he is called into the bedroom, or the bathroom without a thought. Why, bless you, he is not a man!

Using imagery of domestic work and female-centered spaces, the Workingmen’s Party contributed racialized perceptions of labor to debates on immigration policy. This description also locates gender trouble into a feminized, racialized “other,” positioning Chinese men once again as replacements for white women. Additionally, by connecting Chinese immigrant’s “innate” feminine gender with their ability to perform well at domestic labor, white men assert their belief that Chinese men had a competitive edge in the labor market. Given that this particular text was published in response to high rates of unemployment for white men, this

30 Workingman’s Party of California, The Chinese Must Go: The Labor Agitators; or, the Battle for Bread (San Francisco: Greene, 1879), 25.
linkage serves to blame Chinese immigrants for white men’s economic woes. This intersection of queer gender, domestic labor, and access to work reflects how white men projected their anxieties as a whole onto bodies who did not match their particular brand of masculinity. For nonwhite men, the implications of this extended much farther beyond the California Gold Rush and temporary unemployment.

Though cross-dressing and queerness was prevalent in Gold Rush societies, this experience of nonnormative performance varied based on racial boundaries. White men, who were able to don traditionally feminine clothing with acceptance, and even encouragement, did not endure the racialization that nonwhite men did during this period of changing gender norms. Upset with performances of gender that they could not understand, control, or subjugate, white men viewed nonwhite men’s gender as too divergent to their understanding of white, hetero masculinity. The fluidity of gender during the Gold Rush enabled white people to project this fluidity onto other characteristics, as well, most notably including race. Adopting racist practices, exploiting nonwhite people, and feminizing Asian men are just some of the outcomes of this instability. Capitalizing off of this translation of gender trouble to racial conflicts and economic worries, white men were able to channel their queer gender performance into reasonings of why they had the right to exclude nonwhite people from Californian land and jobs. The impact of these racist views ultimately foreshadowed the future treatment of Asian immigrants within California, especially regarding labor and ideas of belonging.

Conclusion

Thirty years after the Gold Rush, after many white American miners had long departed, the culture of the gold mines remained. Still known as a city for its queer vibrancy, San
Francisco endured as a large port city with a bustling economic and social life. The myths of the mines and the pervasion of masculinity characterized the state for years to come. Gold Rush culture rooted itself into California, and produced copious amounts of lore, interest, and exploration.

Yet the qualities that the Gold Rush created were markedly different for nonwhite men thirty years later. In the throes of extreme contestation, immigration policy shaped the every-day experiences of Asian, particularly Chinese, men who had come to California, either freely or under coercion, to find work. The construction of national railroads, combined with recent economic depressions, rendered Chinese laborers even more vulnerable than they already were. The legacy of the Gold Rush underscored these experiences, especially as violence and harassment came to a peak.

Featured in an 1887 edition of the *Wasp*, a national, satiric magazine operated from San Francisco, a cartoon caricaturizing Chinese men reflects the combined anxieties regarding gender and the economy that white people held at the time. The image features a group of Chinese men dressed in women’s attire and makeup, holding painted dolls and fans, and attempting to pass immigration security in California. At the center of the print is a Chinese man on his knees in front of a white, American man, and a sign behind them both that reads “Admit Nurses and Servants.” Beyond the explicit feminization shown, this image calls upon recent political developments pertaining to Chinese immigrants. The federal Alien Contracts Act, passed in 1885, prevented companies and individuals from importing unskilled foreign workers, except for domestic servants. Clearly reflecting their displeasure of the stipulations of this Act, the *Wasp*’s cartoon channels white perceptions of gender and labor. Combining notions of “sneaking into”

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31 “Another Bar Down,” the *Wasp*. 1887. Collection of Chinese in California, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library
the United States with feminine labor, the picture asserts Chinese men’s threat to white masculinity.

This political cartoon and the general sentiments of white people in the post-Gold Rush era had a similar objective — to demonstrate that those people not capable of normative masculinity were not worthy of national inclusion. Culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, experiences of queer gender and sexuality amidst the Sierra Nevada foothills and San Francisco legitimized racialized perspectives, violence, and laws. Transformed from a small, coastal settlement to a bustling, supposed queer utopia, San Francisco and the larger sites of the Gold Rush acted as a conduit for the combination of a gender in flux and racial exclusion. Committed to upholding their specific brand of white, American masculinity, white Gold Miners ultimately paved the way for gender and race to be centrally located in the American political landscape throughout the latter half, and into, the nineteenth century.
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