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Reviewed work(s):
Source: Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 12, No. 2, Special Issue: Sexuality and Politics since 1945 (Apr., 2003), pp. 171–204
Published by: University of Texas Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704611
Accessed: 21/01/2013 15:56

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The B-Girl Evil: Bureaucracy, Sexuality, and the Menace of Barroom Vice in Postwar California

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"One serviceman fleeced by a B-girl said it was like having teeth extracted by novocaine." So San Francisco Examiner reporter Ernest Lenn described the experience of being "taken" by a "slick" San Francisco B-girl in January 1953. Posing as a visitor from New York out on the town, Lenn lounged at a Tenderloin bar and asked one of the "quietly dressed" women sitting "demurely on [a] bar stool" if she would like a drink. Employing a common "B-girl subterfuge gimmick," the "brunette in [a] tailored gray suit" accepted a beer and explained that she was a private secretary dropping by for a nightcap before heading home. As the night wore on, her "Death Valley thirst" for drinks paralleled her physical intimacy with Lenn. The woman abandoned the "ensconced romance," however, the moment Lenn's money dried up. Then "the thermostat did an immediate nose dive," the brunette hurried off to meet a friend, and the "fleecing" came to an end.¹

In an interview with Lenn, "Ginger," a former B-girl, provided an inside perspective on the B-girl trade. "In the B-girl racket," she explained, "you think you'll find excitement, meet all sorts of guys, easy money. But brother, you work." By studying the technique of other "Bs," Ginger learned "the approach—how to make a pickup; how to keep the drinks coming; how to keep tab of each drink with a matchbook; what to do when the customer gets too amorous; how to get rid of a customer, when

¹San Francisco Examiner (hereafter Examiner), January 24, 1953, 1, 14.

I would like to thank the following people for their comments, insights, time, and support over the process of writing and/or revising this essay: Mary Ryan, Paula Fass, David Henkin, Chris Agee, Bill Scott, Don Romesburg, Heather McCarty, Rachel Hope Cleves, Laura Steele, Barbara Loomis, and this journal's anonymous readers. Errors and omission, of course, remain my own. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women in June 2002.
he’s broke. . . . We meet a sucker, hit pay dirt, and start digging.” So why, Lenn inquired, did Ginger quit the racket? “It was the sitting there listening to the customers, night after night. Sitting there, taking it. The holding hands, and necking. Drinking all those phony drinks. . . . And besides, honey, the blankety-blank barkeep was shortchanging me on my earnings.”

Throughout the history of saloons and bars, women have lured men into buying them drinks in exchange for the promise or receipt of sexual favors. In their post-Prohibition American form, so-called “B-,” or bar-girls, worked in cities around the country, periodically moving in and out of the public eye according to the machinations of local policing, politics, and reform. In 1953 the perceived problem of B-girls entered political discourse in California and flooded Bay Area newspapers in stories like the ones above. The drive to put San Francisco B-girls out of business was fueled by political figures, including, most prominently, San Francisco District Attorney Thomas Lynch, California Governor Earl Warren, State Attorney General Edmund Brown, and California State Assemblyman Julian Beck. They employed such tactics as increased enforcement of existing liquor laws, shakeups of local police departments and liquor control boards, the passage of new criminal statutes, and, ultimately, the reform of liquor law administration itself. Enforcement authorities in the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) and on the California State Board of Equalization responded to political and media pressure to suppress B-girl activity, shaping the contours of the campaign in the process.

Newspapers exposed and sensationalized tricks of the B-girl trade. Tales of bar raids, vice investigations, and the B-girl “menace” loomed on the front pages of San Francisco’s major newspapers throughout the winter and spring of 1953. Stories involving local urban graft and barroom exploitation had remarkable staying power, though they were occasionally supplanted by national stories reporting the latest victim of HUAC, the execution of the Rosenbergs, and, of course, the birth of Desi Arnaz Junior. The public, however, was curiously quiet. Although the story’s implied associations with organized crime, promiscuous sexuality, consumer fraud, San Francisco’s urban underworld, and cold war subversion held public attention long enough to sell papers, public hysteria did not incite or propel efforts to quell the B-girl “threat.”

Average San Franciscans may have appeared unfazed by the practice of drink solicitation; politicians and newspaper publishers, however, crafted, sensationalized, and utilized the figure of the deceptive, professional, barroom exploiteress for their own ends. Publishers competed with

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2Examiner, January 25, 1953, 1, 20.

3The Board of Equalization regulated and enforced liquor law from the end of Prohibition in 1933 until 1955, when the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control assumed those responsibilities.
one another to capitalize on the B-girl story, hoping both to sell papers and to bolster their own cultural capital by influencing legislative agendas and political rhetoric. For those men on the rise in California politics, outspoken opposition to B-girl practices fit into carefully conceived antivice and anticorruption positions. The B-girl “menace” figured most promi-
nently, though, in the local and statewide campaign to reform the admin-
istration and enforcement of liquor law. The seemingly timeless image of
the sexually devious woman still held political and cultural currency.

The political and media tumult over what was known variously as the
“sordid” B-girl “racket” or the “boobytrap sisterhood” contrasts sharply
with the banality of B-girl work. The pairing of newspaper accounts with
other types of sources suggests that B-girls participated in a barroom sub-
culture that existed independently of its representation. Women who
worked soliciting drinks used their own lingo, relied on professional net-
works, tracked and protected their earnings through creative accounting,
and shielded themselves from prosecution by cooperating with bartenders
to disguise their compensation. They devised methods of attracting cus-
tomers—including presenting themselves as career women—as well as ways
of encouraging those customers to keep the profits coming, particularly
by promising and performing sexual favors. On a daily basis they negoti-
ated the difficulties inherent in commercial sexual exchanges that usually
stopped short of prostitution. Though some women enjoyed the play in-
volved in their work, most felt they had little choice. At the end of the day,
they needed the pay.

To overstate the quotidian nature of B-girl work, however, is to miss
the threat it posed to cultural categories of sexuality and status. Burea-
ocratic appeals boards and judicial authorities discerned these subtle
insecurities in the socioeconomic relationship between B-girls and their
customers, buttressing the responsibility of government institutions to pro-
tect male consumers from sexualized fraud in sites of urban leisure.

During a decade in which representatives of the middle class struggled
to uphold standards of social and sexual behavior, anti-B-girl rhetoric
motivated political and bureaucratic change. B-girls’ exploitation of male
customers aroused the protective impulses of administrative and judicial
institutions and stimulated zealous, if temporary, enforcement efforts by

\[^4\text{Examiner, January 23, 1953, 1, January 22, 1953, 1.}\]

\[^5\text{On changing norms of gender and sexuality, see Estelle Freedman and John D’Emilio, }\]
\textit{Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America} (New York, 1988). In the decade be-
fore the collapse of what Freedman and D’Emilio have described as “American sexual liber-
alism,” average men and women and cultural “experts” attempted to stabilize, to romanticize,
and to protect middle-class standards of social and sexual behavior. As members of middle-
class society confronted the increasing visibility of nonmarital sexuality, they stridently main-
tained rigid sexual boundaries. According to Freedman and D’Emilio, “[t]he sexual liberalism
of midcentury perpetuated notions of good and bad, and drew a sharp line between what
was judged acceptable and what was labeled deviant” (277).\]
police and liquor control agents. In response, women working as B-girls devised ways to evade entrapment, shifting their practices according to fluctuations in political, police, military, and media pressure. Carefully and profitably navigating the terrain between prostitution and freely available sex, they jeopardized familiar delineations of gendered and sexual behavior. Their labor also suggests that women in postwar economies had illicit as well as legitimate roles and calls into question current academic definitions of sex work. Finally, the history of B-girls and their critics in mid-twentieth-century San Francisco exposes subtle fissures in the edifice of the cold war state and society.

The first part of this study considers the role of newspapers in the anti-B-girl flurry of 1953. The second part situates B-girls in the geography of criminalized women in wartime and cold war society generally and in San Francisco specifically. The third part interrogates the discourses surrounding the B-girl controversy. It asks why the careers of these barroom working women were so useful to the men who guided legal and political discourse in the mid- and late-1950s and what specifically about B-girls they found disturbing. Despite heightened media, political, and judicial attention to their livelihood during the mid-1950s, San Francisco’s B-girls persisted in negotiating the daily stresses and rewards of their work. The fourth part extracts from newspaper, administrative, and legal sources the social history of B-girl practice. Their experiences provide a glimpse into what may be seen as the shadowy underside of women, gender, and sexual practice during the 1950s.

PART 1: NEWSPAPERS AND THE GENEALOGY OF A B-GIRL

_The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang_ defines a B-girl as “a woman employed by a bar, nightclub or the like, to act as a companion to male customers and to induce them to buy drinks, and usually paid a percentage of what the customers spend.”6 Understood in these terms, B-girls existed in California long before the 1952 San Francisco County grand jury called attention to their trade. Evidence suggests that they accompanied gold miners and prostitutes in the Barbary Coast taverns as early as the 1850s. In that period, many so-called “percentage girls” also hired themselves out for sex after hours, suggesting a continuity between prostitution and drink solicitation that would continue through World War II.7 B-girls

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7According to _Examiner_ reporter Ernest Lenn, “percentage girls” exposed black-stockingged legs and bowed garters to eager patrons, who would be permitted a certain amount of petting and kissing in exchange for a series of drinks. As in the mid–twentieth century, the women earned a percentage of the money made from the often watered-down or nonalcoholic drinks purchased for them by their male customers. Whether or not these percentage
reappeared after Prohibition and became standard features of popular San Francisco bars during the Depression, wartime, and postwar years.8

The source of the specific term “B-girl” remains unclear. Reporters from different papers suggested a variety of derivations, ranging from the obvious “bar-girl” to “beer-girl” or “bee-girl” (as in busy bee).9 Though opinions abounded, a San Franciscan by the name of Peter Tamony published the most thorough genealogy of the term: he claimed that “b-girl” was national in use and superseded other phrases such as mixer, bar girl, taxi drinker, house girl, and drink hustler as well as early forms such as beer slinger, waiter girl, and wine-room girl. Colloquial usage in San Francisco in the early 1930s, Tamony continued, “readily evoked conjectures that the b . . . derived from . . . bar, beer, bourbon, to buzz, and to put the bee on.” The correct derivation, he claimed, came from “beading oil,” which was a concoction used to falsely produce in low-quality whiskey the bead or bubble that pure forms of whiskey apparently produced when poured. Bartenders reportedly used this oil “to deceive buyers as to the soundness of goods being consumed when such people accepted an invitation to a treat” by B-girls so that the women could avoid the “chief occupational hazard” of intoxication. The bottle from which the diluted whiskey was poured was called the “b-bottle,” and the B-girl’s “B” drinks came from that bottle.10

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8As Lenn put it, B-girls “prey[ed] on the unwary in the spots frequented by the city’s floating population”: the Tenderloin, along Market Street, the Fillmore area, and in some spots in the International Settlement (Examiner, January 22, 1953, 1). Addresses of bars identified by the San Francisco Chronicle (hereafter Chronicle) as targets of crackdowns and license revocations corroborate this topography. They included the Tux at 1204 Market Street; the Arabian Nights, House of Blue Lights, and Kelock Catering Company, all located in the 500 block of Pacific in the International Settlement; the Crystal Bowl at 1032 Market Street; Buddy Clarke’s Roundup at 120 Mason Street; and the Midtown at 103 Third Street (Chronicle, April 3, 1953, 1; June 19, 1953, 8; March 20, 1954, 1).

9In 1938 a member of the California Board of Equalization suggested: “The bee girl is one who works in a barroom on a percentage of the business she promotes. When the bartender asks her what she’ll have, she says, ‘I’ll take B.’ The customer thinks she means bourbon, but the bartender pours her out tea in a whiskey glass. She gets the two bits” (Chronicle, February 26, 1938, H5).

10Tamony had already written an editorial on the term in 1938 (Chronicle, March 1, 1938, 10). See also Peter Tamony, “B-Girl,” Americanismus, no. 6 (1965): 1–4. Thanks to Lance Steele for retrieving this article for me at an opportune time.
In the midst of the flurry of media attention in 1953, the terminology of B-girls themselves attracted interest. One of the San Francisco Chronicle’s series on “Tenderloin: The Secret City” exposing the “Inside Story of Life as [a] B-Girl” included a sidebar on “B-Girl Lingo.” Reporters explained that “B” is used both as a noun and a verb, and is used as a prefix to nouns and verb-forms. A ‘B’ is a drink on which a house employee gets a percentage. A B-girl is such an employee; B-ing is the act of working as a B-girl.11 In interviews with current or former B-girls in both major local papers, reporters claimed to convey B-girls’ inside terminology. “Peggy,” for example, referred to successfully solicited drinks as “B’s” and revealed that “Scotch” was actually diluted tea, “crème de menthe” sugar water with vegetable coloring, and “champagne” ginger ale in disguise.12 “Ginger” paraphrased an Examiner reporter’s question by responding, “You mean, in the parlance of the profession, why did I turn B?” Applying the adjectival use of the phrase, she said that women get jobs “through a girl you know, who’s already ‘B.’” Ginger also referred to bars where B-girls worked as “B-spots.”13 Ultimately, whether “B” referred to a specific type of alcohol ostensibly consumed or to the process of drink solicitation itself, the connection between liquor, financial exploitation, and sexy women stuck. By the end of 1953, San Francisco newspaper reporters used the phrase regularly and without explanation, and their readers could hardly have failed to grasp its meaning.

In investigating, interpreting, revealing, and sensationalizing one dimension of urban vice, San Francisco’s newspapers continued in the national tradition of crime reporting dating back to the Jacksonian period.14 Crusading exposés of the B-girl problem adopted the penny press’s attractive formula of “humor, sensation, and crime reporting” and mixed in a healthy dose of mid-twentieth-century muckraking. With its narrative style, shocking revelations, and, often, its blatant prescriptions, the exposé—which Thomas Leonard defines as the “dramatic revelation of hidden information”—provided, as a genre, the vehicle for both commercial and

11 Chronicle, April 27, 1953, 1.
12Ibid., 2. When reading a draft of this article, Don Romesburg noted, playfully yet evocatively, that just as B-girls passed as secretaries or other professional women, their drinks passed as well. Tea masquerading as whiskey is especially suggestive given associations of tea and tea time with class-specific notions of femininity.
14At that time, the upstart penny press diverged from respectable newspapers by covering the underbelly of city life and especially crime. Papers like the New York Herald and its notorious editor, James Gordon Bennett, adopted a “particular view of urban life that was presented as intensely chaotic . . . even illegible.” Crime reporters pioneered the use of investigative journalism, mapping the urban terrain in language and style spectacular enough to sell papers to passers-by on the street. (Since mainstream newspapers were sold by subscription only, this need to attract instant buyers was new to the penny press.) See Amy Gilman Srebnick, The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York (New York, 1995), 67.
political aims. Editors and publishers believed that the ominous practices of those on the outskirts of legitimate society—as well as the failure of public officials to protect upright citizens from the hazards they posed—had the shock value to promote political reform.15

The political influence of newspaper reporting overlapped with but could not supplant the need for commercial success. The beginning of television's cultural ascent and the rapid spread of suburbanization in the postwar years challenged the hegemony of newspapers and motivated publishers to capitalize on those features still captured best by print media. In the 1950s, there were no newsboys urging potential customers to “read all about it” on suburban street corners, and commuting by car left little opportunity for newspaper reading.16 Meanwhile, by 1953, half of all American families owned a television set, and that number was still growing exponentially.17 Newspaper publishers started thinking not only about industry competition but also about how to market information (and sensation) in ways that demonstrated print media’s advantage over television coverage, as the exposé of B-girl tactics and lingo attests. The Examiner reporter posing as an out-of-town businessman in a B-girl bar could hardly have succeeded with a television camera in tow, nor could a television report have captured the nuances of B-girl grammar. Without newspaper coverage, most San Franciscans would have had no idea that the language, business, or practice of “B-ing” existed at all.18

During a time when they had moved away from the city, many men and women relied upon newspapers to titillate them with stories of urban lasciviousness and to educate them about urban life (especially the potential pitfalls

15Though parts 2 and 4 illustrate the presence of these themes in San Francisco newspapers of the 1950s, the following Examiner introduction to its series on B-girls is worth quoting here: “This is the first of a series on the B-girl racket and how it works in San Francisco. It is the first authentic exposé of how servicemen and others are fleeced and how the state board of equalization and its San Francisco district member, George Reilly, blocked the plan of a board enforcement officer which would have put an end to the vicious practices of the B-girls” (Examiner, January 22, 1953, 1).


18Television was well suited, however, to portray other aspects of the B-girl story. Governor Warren, for example, signed on television the 1953 law making drink solicitation a misdemeanor (Chronicle, July 2, 1953, 1).
harbored by its places of leisure). Nearly every article featuring the B-girl controversy in the *Chronicle* and *Examiner* during the winter and spring of 1953 appeared above the fold on the front page. Each paper ran a multiple-day exposé either including or exclusively addressing the practice and politics of drink solicitation. Publishers apparently expected the story to promote the authority, the influence, and the profitability of their publications.

**Part 2: The B-Girl Scare in California**

**Government and Media**

In the two decades before B-girls suddenly inspired the anxious rhetoric of politicians and reporters in 1953, they flickered intermittently on the public’s radar screen. In the 1930s, for example, the San Francisco Police Department targeted employers of B-girls rather than the women themselves. The B-girls in question, moreover, were young, even juveniles. Officials charged that the B-girl trade was linked to “white slavery.” Unlike that of the 1950s, the concern was the vulnerability of the girls and young women, not their customers.19

In the 1940s, B-girls were part of a constellation of women—variously called prostitutes, Victory girls, khaki wackies, barflies, and seagulls—whose perceived sexual availability generated fear about female sexuality, public health, and military virility.20 Though government authorities and the media rarely singled out wartime B-girls, they were part of a diverse group of women whose apparent promiscuity—and the risk that they carried venereal disease—warranted criminal sanction. Women whose behavior enforcement agents found questionable faced harassment, arrest, and quarantine. During the mid-1940s, the Office of Community War Services’ Social Protection Division carried out a national campaign to repress prostitution and other forms of female promiscuity, encouraging especially the use of local criminal justice systems. Between 1943 and 1959, inspired by this national leadership, the San Francisco City Separate Women’s Court processed and detained thousands of women arrested for prostitution, vagrancy, drunkenness, and lewd conduct. After their arrests, women were held without bail for up to seventy-two hours while they underwent mandatory medical testing for venereal disease. Those who were found to carry

19See *Chronicle*, January 28, 1938, 5. Thanks to Don Romesburg for showing me the 1938 articles.

venereal disease were quarantined for up to six months in a designated section of the county jail.21

Though B-girls were undoubtedly subject to such regulation, they were usually charged with vagrancy and are therefore statistically indistinguishable from other women similarly charged.22 Nonetheless, evidence suggests that B-girls were treated like other sexually problematic women during the war years, when many B-girls were probably selling sex as well as soliciting drinks.23 For example, when an arresting officer decided that a given woman should be examined for venereal disease, he or she completed a quarantine recommendation card. The officer could indicate reasons for this decision by checking one or more boxes indicating “known prostitute,” “seagull,” “promiscuity with male persons—contacts made in and about taverns,” or “B-girl—evidence of sex promiscuity.”24 The B-girl trade was automatically associated with indiscriminate and legally questionable sexuality.

21Although the stated aim of the court was to segregate first-time offenders from “habitués and criminal cases” and to aid in newcomers’ “reeducation and readjustment,” the practice of holding offenders under “observational quarantine” led to violations of the women’s civil rights serious enough to concern the American Civil Liberties Union. See “San Francisco Has Separate Women’s Court,” California Department of Public Health, Weekly Bulletin, June 26, 1943, 91. Also see ACLU of Northern California Records, folders 776–77, California Historical Society (hereafter CHS). On the Social Protection Division’s encouragement of special criminal courts to deal with women allegedly spreading venereal disease, see generally National Archives, Record Group 215.

22SFPD Chief Gaffey testified in 1954 that police simultaneously charged accused B-girls as vagrants: “We generally put a ‘vag’ charge against them also. If we don’t get it on the one, we get it on the ‘vag’—‘vag’ and quarantine” (California Legislature, Alcoholic Beverage Control in California: Report of the Subcommittee on Alcoholic Beverage Control, San Francisco Hearings, February 8, 1954, 58 [hereafter ABC in California]).

23The American Social Hygiene Association report for 1952 claimed that during the war years many B-girls were also prostitutes but that this overlap dissipated as crackdowns on bars harboring women who were reported as venereal disease contacts increased. See part 4 for a fuller discussion of the sexual practices of B-girls. See also Examiner, January 12, 1953, 12.

24ACLU of Northern California Records, folder 776, CHS. The card also reveals the link between B-girls and other sexually questionable women such as prostitutes and “seagulls.” The latter term referred to women who traveled from city to city, following navy servicemen. These women were often young, having recently left home with little money; they loitered in bars in order to pick up navy men who would provide for them financially for any length of time. Seagulls resembled “V-girls” or “Victory girls.” Another group of women whose sexuality exposed them to scrutiny and enforcement in the 1950s was working-class lesbians. Although their domain was also the bar, they do not appear in discussions about liquor administration or enforcement or venereal disease and are therefore beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, the Department of ABC persistently pursued bars frequented by gay men and lesbians in postwar San Francisco. See Chris Agee, “Gayola: The San Francisco Police Department, the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, and San Francisco’s Homosexual Bars: 1950–1965,” unpublished paper. The ABC appeals cases citing sexually “deviant” behavior as a basis for bar closure in the 1950s are too numerous to list, and most of them cite evidence of male homosexual rather than lesbian conduct. AB-230 (1956), however, accuses a
According to notes taken by staff members of the American Civil Liberties Union during court sessions, police officers targeted young white women who were seen (often repeatedly) spending time with men of color or with sailors. Loretta Schreider, a typist from Portland, was arrested for vagrancy after spending time in a tavern managed by a black navy veteran and business owner. Judge Leo Cunningham told Schreider to “stay away from nigger joints and niggers.” In the 1945 case of Helen Player, who was arrested for drinking with sailors in local bars, the police officer testifying against her claimed: “When you see a woman drinking at a bar with every Tom, Dick, and Harry, then you’re entitled to pick her up.”

Socializing (or working) in bars exposed women to the whims and the force of the criminal justice system. In fact, San Francisco officials such as Police Chief Gaffey so completely collapsed the distinction between socially undesirable and criminal behavior that Municipal Court Judge Twain Michelson published an editorial in 1944 urging the public to differentiate between “acts of a criminal nature and conditions that are purely pathological.”

In sum, B-girls were part of a wartime framework in which certain people were designated as socially and legally delinquent based on their presumed sexual availability and their participation in sites of urban leisure and/or patterns of interracial sociability. State institutions such as the courts, the legislature, the police, and the Board of Equalization attempted to manage the B-girl business as part of a larger effort to uphold the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate female sexuality. B-girls’ commercially motivated sexual availability jeopardized precisely this distinction.

As the immediacy of war faded from memory, as antibiotics increasingly controlled venereal disease, and as crackdowns on prostitutes continued in places (like San Francisco) where many servicemen remained, panic about sexual immorality faded. Rhetoric surrounding the wartime B-girl controversy suggests that its legacy included apprehension among

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San Jose bar of being a “meeting place for homosexuals of both sexes” and of allowing “uninhibited exhibitions of moral depravity” by men and women seen by society as “degenerate and degraded.” For an analysis of how lesbians were viewed as increasingly similar to prostitutes in the postwar period, see Donna Penn, “The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,” in Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960 (Philadelphia, 1994).

25ACLU of Northern California Records, folder 777, CHS.

26Press release, January 18, 1944; ACLU of Northern California Records, folder 777, CHS. San Francisco was not the only Bay Area city with such troubling arrest and quarantine procedures. In 1950 the City of Berkeley paid $500 to settle a damage suit arising from the quarantining in jail of two Berkeley women. The two African American women charged that they were eating at a Berkeley restaurant when an Officer Pepper entered and told them that the police had a report that they had “burned” (transmitted a venereal disease to) a couple of sailors. They were jailed for four and a half days until tests showed that they were free of VD. They were never charged with a crime (press release, January 26, 1950; ACLU of Northern California Records, folder 776, CHS).
officials about something related yet different: sexualized commercial fraud. The victimization of servicemen still focused anxiety about the consequences of unconfined female sexuality but with the added element of consumerism.

In early 1953, B-girls entered the public spotlight with unprecedented intensity. B-girls’ relationship to prostitutes helps explain the timing of the controversy. Reporters and American Social Hygiene Association investigators repeatedly implied that municipal authorities’ persistent repression of streetwalkers and brothel prostitutes during the war and early postwar years led to a flowering of B-girl activity. Since prostitutes could be hard to find, “[t]he male looking for female companionship, or a pickup,” the Examiner explained, “wanders into a bar and finds it there, in these harpies.”27 By 1953, nearly a decade of antiprostitution enforcement had opened an unusual gap in the sexual marketplace: as B-girl commerce flourished in response, so did media and political attention to this particular variety of sexualized commercial fraud.28

The B-girl trade also prospered in the early 1950s because the Board of Equalization, the state tax board charged with administering and enforcing liquor law, essentially ignored provisions prohibiting bar owners from employing female drink solicitors (soliciting drinks was not itself a crime until 1953). The San Francisco Police Department was equally ambivalent, fitting B-girls into a “broader system of extortion,” including prostitution, gambling, and gay bars.29 Governor Warren commented on this link early in 1953, charging that “b-girls could not operate unless there was corruption in law enforcement.”30 Board of Equalization employees

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27 Examiner, January 22, 1953, 1. Because of the importance of San Francisco as a port for American forces in the Korean War, repression of prostitution extended well into the mid-1950s.

28 The role of the B-girl controversy in liquor reform also helps explain the timing of the 1953 crackdown. See part 3.

29 Agee, 3. Throughout the spring of 1953, media and political attention to B-girls was enmeshed in accusations of corruption, though newspapers generally exposed corruption in relation to prostitution. The Chronicle, for example, ran an exposé on “grift and graft” in San Francisco in mid-April. One article featured a madam telling about extortion. She had no problem, she explained, with policemen selling “legitimate protection” but resented “shake artists” who took regular payments and then demanded more. Offended, she added that these crooked cops had the guts to call her a hustler (Chronicle, April 21, 1953, 1, 4).

30 Chronicle, April 18, 1953, 1. Extortion pervaded the relationship between enforcement agents and owners of San Francisco bars in the 1950s. Extortion payments usually determined the timing of raids; generally, bar owners making payments were shielded from enforcement except during flare-ups in public pressure and/or media exposure. At these times, newspapers published exposés on vice conditions and the police’s failure to repress them, politicians swore change, shakeups occurred, vice details were created, arrests were made, public concern was generally satisfied, and then, slowly, corruption tended to return.

Owners could respond to extortion in several ways: until 1955, owners of bars catering to homosexuals could refuse payoff requests by the police, because serving drinks to homosexuals was not itself a crime; however, such refusal opened up owners and patrons of gay
insisted, however, that it was nearly impossible to prove that a waitress or entertainer was hired for the specific purpose of solicitation or to catch a bar owner in the act of paying an employee a percentage of money earned through “B-ing.” Police officers agreed, pointing out that many B-girls posed as waitresses or as women just dropping by for a drink, making arrests hard to justify and convictions nearly impossible to attain. Concerned about the welfare of servicemen, the armed services placed certain bars off-limits, but this posed more of a business problem for bar owners than an enforcement threat. During the early 1950s, then, neither B-girls nor their employers had much to fear.

In early 1953, however, the environment surrounding the routine practice of “B-ing” temporarily changed when political and media attention to bars to police harassment. Owners of bars employing B-girls may have had less flexibility, since paying a woman to solicit drinks violated liquor laws outright. In the early 1950s, corruption forestalled sustained and organized drives against gay and “B” bars. This essay addresses the ways in which the enforcement environment changed for B-girls in 1953. Gay bars faced newly aggressive enforcement after Sol Stoumen, owner of the Black Cat, won a court ruling in 1951 against the board, finding that no state law prohibited homosexuals from gathering in bars. The California legislature responded in 1955 by passing a law allowing the ABC to revoke the liquor license of any establishment serving as a “resort for sexual perverts.” What followed was a decade-long campaign by the ABC characterized, according to Chris Agee, by a “passionate contempt for gay bars” in San Francisco (4). While police in the 1950s “forced gay bars to endure harassment and extortion, state liquor agents threatened the bars’ very existence” (ibid., 22). Members of the board timed antigay crackdowns in response to the efforts by Stoumen and other bar owners to reveal board corruption and to use the courts against board harassment. Harassment by enforcement agents, of course, had very different meanings for owners of bars employing B-girls and those serving a gay clientele; in the latter case, police arrested and then released bar patrons whose names local newspapers often published. Because of the stigma associated with homosexual identity and behavior, public exposure was a key tool in the extortion of gay bars (ibid., 14, 15; see also John D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970 [Chicago, 1983], 186–87).

Despite these differences, however, homosexuals, B-girls, and prostitutes had more in common than simply their subjection to graft. Released in May 1953, the report of the California Crime Commission recommended mandatory revocation of the liquor licenses for places where B-girls operate as well as “for any bar which is a resort for prostitutes, pimps, panderers, or sexual perverts” (Examiner, May 11, 1953, 21). The American Social Hygiene Association also associated B-girls and homosexuals, pointing out that one or the other was found in eighteen establishments in January 1953 and that “flagrant violations of the liquor laws were observed” in each case (Chronicle, January 13, 1953, 2). Finally, in 1950, District Liquor Administrator Don Marshall tried to revoke the license of a B-girl bar using a constitutional provision allowing the Board of Equalization to close down any bar considered to be a disorderly house and “injurious to public morals.” As it turned out, Reilly blocked Marshall’s effort (and was later accused by the media of corruption for doing so), but the provision itself (and Marshall’s attempt to use it) suggests the extent to which B-girls qualified as part of a nexus of urban vice that included homosexuals and prostitutes.

Again, police could pick up B-girls on vagrancy charges, but as wartime pressure to contain venereal disease dissipated, police had little motivation to bother with arrests.

31Examiner, January 9, 1953, 8.
the “B-girl racket” suddenly increased. Responding in part to increasing concern about vice and corruption among law and alcohol enforcement authorities, the 1952 San Francisco County grand jury called attention to the B-girl problem. Its members urged that enforcement agents find ways to convict B-girls and the bars that employed them. San Francisco District Attorney Thomas Lynch publicized this otherwise obscure recommendation. He decided that it was “time for a crackdown on the B-girls who infest many of the city’s bars” and promised a “vigorous investigation of vice, gambling, and the B-girl racket in San Francisco.” The day after his pledge to end the B-girl trade, Lynch raised the rhetorical stakes by implying the existence of a “pattern of vice operations,” which reporters interpreted as a crime ring or even an organized crime syndicate, involving the “B-girl racket,” prostitution, gambling, and bar shakedowns. Though the 1952 grand jury denied the existence of organized crime in San Francisco, Lynch’s remark played on public fascination with and fear of organized crime in order to garner support for the antivice crusade that he championed. Following the district attorney’s lead, State Attorney General Edmund Brown and San Francisco Police Chief Michael Gaffey increased cooperation between state narcotics staff and local police in order to help “clean up” the B-girl and prostitution problems.

A few days later, the papers announced indignantly that in its annual report on vice conditions, the American Social Hygiene Association had given San Francisco a rating of “poor.” In response, Chief Gaffey stated that he considered “B-girls and loose women in bars” to be “the major problem” identified by the report, and he assured the public that he would consult with local Board of Equalization member George Reilly concerning B-girls. “[I]f that doesn’t do any good,” he continued, “I’ll assign a special squad to harass them, make it so uncomfortable for them that they’ll move out.” Six members of the Board of Equalization were assigned to travel with members of the SFPD vice squad in pursuit of B-girl arrests. Anticipating the results of this unusual degree of interagency cooperation, B-girls ceased operating temporarily. Several Tenderloin and Market Street bar owners reacted by replacing their musicians with “all-girl orchestras.” After all, Examiner columnist Herb Caen explained, they had to “brighten things up for the boys” one way or another. For the first time in at least fifteen years, B-girls and bar owners across the city acted to shield themselves from anticipated raids by police and liquor control agents.

33 For more on Lynch and his political career, see part 3.
34 Examiner, January 9, 1953, 1, 8; Chronicle, January 9, 1953, 1, 4.
35 Chronicle, January 6, 1953, 1.
36 Examiner, January 10, 1953, 1, 16, January 11, 1953, 22.
37 Examiner, January 12, 1953, 1, 12, January 13, 1953, 4.
38 Chronicle, January 13, 1953, 1; Examiner, January 16, 1953, 19.
By mid-January, the *Examiner* jumped on the B-girl bandwagon, capitalizing on and fueling the story by releasing a five-part, front-page series exposing the “B-girl racket in San Francisco.” The series emphasized that most “victims” were servicemen, that “swindling” B-girls used secret tricks to “fleece” their victims of money and pride, and that the Board of Equalization (Reilly in particular) refused to protect citizens from the B-girl threat. The paper educated its readers about the vulnerabilities of unsuspecting patrons and galvanized the struggle against the B-girl problem.

Over the following weeks, officials such as Police Chief Gaffey, District Attorney Lynch, Chief Assistant District Attorney Sherry, Attorney General Brown, and Governor Warren heavily criticized the board’s record of failure to enforce anti-B-girl statutes, especially in San Francisco. Warren insisted that “there could be no widespread system of B-girl operations if there was earnest law enforcement in the liquor traffic” and demanded that the board eliminate the B-girl “disgrace.” He ordered an “immediate cleanup” of conditions “reminiscent of the Barbary Coast days.”

The board’s corruption and neglect threatened Warren’s distinction between the lawless chaos of the Barbary Coast and the modern efficiency of post-war California.

Such vociferous charges provoked even stronger reactions. Determined to preserve his position on the Board of Equalization without admitting fault with its practices, Reilly proposed a new law forbidding unescorted women to enter bars and requiring all female employees of a bar to be fingerprinted and licensed. These unusual suggestions elicited critical responses by citizens, some of whom defended the right of women to patronize bars without escorts and pointed out that men also had some responsibility for their participation in the B-girl business. Despite the attorney general’s insistence that revocations were already justified by a clause of the state constitution empowering the board to close down any facility it considered to be a “disorderly house” or injurious to public morals, Reilly maintained that without new laws, the board lacked the enforcement power necessary to close down the B-girl trade.

Under heavy pressure from politicians and the media, the SFPD and the Board of Equalization each attempted to control violations of liquor law. Over the following year, the board and the SFPD coordinated their efforts when doing so was politically advantageous. On the night in September 1953 that a new state law criminalizing drink solicitation went into effect, for example, board agents and city police initiated a well-publicized combined drive against B-girls. At other times, the agencies acted

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40 Notably, several men and women wrote letters to the editor insisting that naive men were at least partially responsible for the B-girl problem and that Reilly’s proposals unfairly targeted all women (*Examiner*, January 30, 1953, 20).
41 *Examiner*, February 5, 1953, 3.
42 *Chronicle*, September 9, 1953, 1.
independently, often competing for authority; at least once, Board of Equalization officers raided bars looking for B-girls without informing Chief Gaffey or the SFPD vice squad.\textsuperscript{43}

In a desperate move to appear responsive to official criticism, Reilly abandoned his apathy toward B-girl violations, pledging in early 1953 that from then on, B-girl charges would carry the board’s heaviest penalty: outright cancellation of liquor permits. In April, the board nullified the license of the Tux on Market Street on charges that the tavern refilled bottles and employed B-girls. This case established a precedent for the board, which initiated a pattern of enforcement against bars employing B-girls. License revocation was an extremely harsh penalty and often resulted in professional disaster for bar owners. Significantly, it was the B-girl cases—not, for example, cases of bars selling alcohol to minors, harboring prostitutes, or other violations—that both forced and allowed the board to portray itself as a serious enforcement agency.\textsuperscript{44} Within the realm of alcohol control, the 1953 crackdown on B-girls created a new threshold of punishment.\textsuperscript{45}

The results of increased enforcement and punishment by the police and the board were mixed; bureaucratic measures directed against establishments were generally more successful than enforcement directed against individuals. The Board of Equalization initiated proceedings against an unprecedented number of licensees in the spring of 1953.\textsuperscript{46} Each month during the spring and summer of 1954, the board shut down between one and four bars for employing B-girls.\textsuperscript{47} Criminal prosecution was less

\textsuperscript{43}Chronicle, March 20, 1954, 1, 2.

\textsuperscript{44}Even after the legislature removed the administration and enforcement of liquor law from the Board of Equalization, creating the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control in 1955, bureaucrats continued to demonstrate their commitment to reform by shutting down bars with B-girls. As Chris Agee explains, “On January 6, 1955, just days after the ABC’s establishment, . . . the ABC’s deputy director . . . set the new department’s tone by closing three B-girl operations in San Francisco” (see Chronicle January 22, 1955, 1, cited in Agee, 29).

\textsuperscript{45}Chronicle, June 19, 1953, 8; see also Examiner, May 29, 1953, 6. In contrast to the penalty of revocation for B-girl activities, the Department of ABC regularly assigned only a fifteen-day (sometimes thirty-day) suspension for sale to minors. See, for example, Report before the Alcoholic Beverage Control Appeals Board of the State of California (hereafter ABC Appeals), file AB-404.

\textsuperscript{46}In May, for example, the Board of Equalization faced the heaviest disciplinary calendar in its history. The board held hearings on twenty-six charges filed since the vice squad raids began. Six of an unspecified number of B-girl charges were made by state liquor agents who had been sent to raid bars without having informed local police or local liquor agents. This lack of coordination reveals the extent to which law and alcohol enforcement officers were often competitive and mutually resentful. Chief Gaffey regularly blamed the board for having failed, in the past, to follow up on B-girl arrests made by the police; at the same time, ABC authorities Marshall and Reilly publicly disagreed about the best methods of enforcing anti-B-girl statutes. Marshall, in particular, blamed Reilly for failing to use state law to its fullest extent in prosecuting barroom vice (Examiner, May 3, 1953).

\textsuperscript{47}State Board of Equalization, Liquor Control Division, ABC Bulletin 19, nos. 4–9 (April–September 1954). Board appeals statistics and repeated challenges of the new statutes in
successful. Board members made twenty-two arrests for "the employment of hostesses on a percentage basis" between January and June 1953, but San Francisco juries consistently refused to convict the employers of B-girls of criminal charges.\textsuperscript{48} Though there are other possible explanations for this refusal, including ambivalence toward the B-girl threat or the belief that police and board harassment was sufficient, Reilly and Gaffey insisted that it stemmed from the difficulty of collecting solid evidence against B-girls under then-current statutes. This insistence gave rise to the second front of the battle against B-girls in the legislature.

During its 1953 session, the California legislature took up the fight to rid the state of its B-girls. Assemblyman Julian Beck, a Democrat from San Fernando, introduced a bill extending municipal laws against employing B-girls to the state level, bolstering the enforcement power of the board. For the first time, the act of soliciting drinks would also be a misdemeanor. Although the bill eventually passed both houses, Assembly and Senate committees delayed and weakened its original language. Significantly, they eliminated a provision requiring the mandatory revocation of licenses of bars where B-girls were found.\textsuperscript{49} On July 2, Governor Earl Warren finally signed Assembly Bill 2758. He repeated, however, that "unless there is a will to enforce it, the new law won't be enforced any better than the present law.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48}\textit{ABC Bulletin} 18, no. 7 (July 1953): 17–22. Notably, the report does not specify where in the state these particular license revocations and arrests took place. Generally, Los Angeles District was responsible for the vast majority of alcohol enforcement cases statewide. In fact, the comparison with San Francisco supports the contention of state politicians and reporters that San Francisco enforcement was irresponsibly minimal. For example, from July to December 1953, the San Francisco District filed 42 accusations of liquor violations, whereas the Los Angeles District filed 243 (\textit{ABC Bulletin} 19, no. 1 [January 1954]: 20; \textit{ABC in California}, 11). Regarding juries' refusal to convict, it is possible to interpret this as evidence of San Franciscans' apathy toward the B-girl problem generally. Though evidence is scarce, the few available editorials written by average men and women downplay the urgency of the issue and question the inflated rhetoric of public officials.

\textsuperscript{49}This language eventually passed in 1954, significantly strengthening the enforcement power of liquor control agents (\textit{Chronicle}, April 17, 1953; \textit{Sacramento Bee}, April 2, 1953, 1).

\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Examiner}, May 8, 1953, 1; \textit{Sacramento Bee}, July 3, 1953, 1.
There is no definitive end to the story of anti-B-girl efforts in postwar California. Newspaper reports of B-girl arrests and bar closures became periodic and scattered after 1954, but this says little about B-girls themselves. In mid-1954, one board member offered several explanations for their intransigence: bar owners still considered B-girls essential for business, local board agents were now too familiar to work undercover, local police were not doing their part, and the San Francisco courts were so backed up that bars whose licenses had been revoked continued operating “full speed ahead” until litigation was completed.51 B-girls inspired fewer appeals to the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) over the course of the decade, until they virtually disappeared in SFPD arrest records by the early 1960s.52 As late as 1971, a report on nonvictim crime in San Francisco confirmed that B-girls still worked the city’s bars, although their identity and practice may have overlapped increasingly with that of performers and prostitutes.53 Officials clearly fell short of their goal to rid San Francisco and California of the B-girl evil. Overall, the anti-B-girl campaign of 1953 was a short-lived and politically advantageous endeavor, more instructive for what it revealed than for what it achieved.

PART 3: THE B-GIRL THREAT AS BUREAUCRATIC CATALYST AND COMMERCIAL LIABILITY

One of the most striking elements of the B-girl story is the degree to which women’s efforts to support themselves in San Francisco’s illicit, postwar urban economy intersected larger political projects. Politicians leveraged their opposition to B-girl activity in order to promote their reform agendas and, consequently, their own careers. Not surprisingly, those politicians leading the charge against vice, corruption, and B-girls stood to gain politically as a result. District attorneys’ offices in the Bay Area had proven successful launching grounds for expansive political careers at least since Earl Warren bounded from Alameda County district attorney to California attorney general to governor in the 1930s and 1940s. As district attorney,

51In at least one case, over a year elapsed between the raid that inspired board action and the culmination of related litigation (Chronicle, July 20, 1954, 1, 2).

52In 1963, for example, the SFPD Annual Report listed only one B-girl arrest: a white woman age thirty-five to thirty-nine. Again, it is possible that B-girls were still being arrested as vagrants, but the virtual disappearance of actual B-girl arrests is suggestive nonetheless.

Warren distinguished himself as a crusader against vice, prosecuting fraud and racketeering in the police, the courts, the sheriff’s office, and private enterprise.\(^54\) Edmund Brown and Thomas Lynch followed similar political trajectories. In 1951, Brown moved from the San Francisco district attorney’s office (where Thomas Lynch was his assistant) to the attorney general’s office. At Brown’s urging, Mayor Elmer Robinson then appointed Lynch to the district attorney’s office, where Lynch remained, unopposed, for three terms; in 1964, then-Governor Brown appointed Lynch as attorney general.\(^55\) In 1953, then, both men were climbing California’s political ladder. Lynch and Brown ran unopposed in the municipal elections of 1955 and state elections of 1954, respectively, so there is little reason to ascribe any urgent importance of the campaigns for liquor reform and against B-girls to the timing of their election bids. Nonetheless, these men’s stances against corruption, vice, and fraud—into which their opposition to B-girl activity fit squarely—directly promoted their political careers.\(^56\)

The struggle to reform the administration and regulation of liquor law played a prominent role in the political lives of Brown, Warren, and other major political figures in California. When Prohibition ended, legislators hastily assigned alcohol control to the state Board of Equalization. For years, board members urged the state to reassign alcohol-related responsibilities, but powerful liquor lobbyists opposed any change that would erode their influence over elected board positions. During the reform-minded 1950s, the issue finally received widespread consideration. In order to promote change, reformers such as Brown and Warren sensationalized and targeted B-girls. Two key moments illustrate that the ideologies and tactics of state liquor regulation in this period depended in part on the B-girl controversy.

The first of these moments followed the California Commission on Organized Crime’s release of its final report in May 1953, criticizing the state Board of Equalization for tolerating “general laxity of enforcement” in taverns and the continued existence of “B-girl operations.”\(^57\) An ardent advocate for a new department of Alcoholic Beverage Control constituted by governor-appointed members, Governor Warren suggested that the currently elected board had failed in its mission to promote temperance and public welfare in California. He contended that “the B girl operations in California drinking establishments, assailed by the crime commission, is


\(^55\)Chronicle, September 30, 1951, 15, November 7, 1951, 8, November 9, 1955, 2, November 4, 1959, 1, September 1, 1964, 9.

\(^56\)Though Brown’s reelection in 1954 was relatively secure, Agee notes that police corruption and tavern-related vice were “central issues” in that election year more generally. For example, he points out that 1954 was the only year during the early 1950s in which the police department instated an organized drive against gay bars (Agee, 18–19).

\(^57\)Examiner, May 11, 1953, 1, 18, 21.
[sic] proof . . . that there is corruption in the California liquor situation."

In his view, the practices of B-girls directly threatened the well-being of the public: "The manner in which these girls . . . work affects the moral welfare of the community. The people they operate on mostly are youngsters in the military service." The image of innocent young servicemen being deceived and cheated by immoral B-girls highlighted the subversive character of the B-girl trade and illustrated—in the most practical terms—that a new system of alcohol administration and enforcement was essential.

A series of hearings held by the Subcommittee on Alcoholic Beverage Control, which was created by the state Senate in 1953 in order to study the controversial issue of ABC reform, further exhibits the utilitarian marriage between B-girl and liquor reform. Casper Weinberger, who took the helm of the newly established subcommittee, was determined to help create an appointed agency less subject to corruption and profiteering than the elected board. The main function of the hearings was to reveal the indolence, inefficiency, and corruption of the current Board of Equalization. During an era in which regulatory legislation swelled to new heights across the United States, the California effort to reform liquor administration fit into a national context. The national trend, however, played out through struggles on the local level, where contingent and often unpredictable factors shaped each city and state's movement for liquor reform. In San Francisco, the curious figure of the B-girl helped consolidate statewide support. Although the subcommittee discussed B-girls infrequently, when legislators did invoke the issue, their purpose was to demonstrate the board's "utter failure of administrative responsibility" and to illustrate the need for an independent agency.

During the committee's San Francisco hearings, for example, liquor lobbyists realized that opposing the transfer of authority from an elected board

58 Sacramento Bee, June 17, 1953, 6.
59 Sacramento Bee, July 3, 1953, 1.
60 Guiding the subcommittee was a 1950 study of liquor laws by the national Joint Committee of the States to Study Alcoholic Beverage Laws. The 1950 report called for the modernization of liquor administration: "[A]dministrators of control should be independent, honest, expert and fearless, and should be given an exceptionally free hand in carrying out the will of the people in the name of their health, welfare, peace and safety" (Joint Committee of the States to Study Alcoholic Beverage Laws, Alcoholic Beverage Control: An Official Study, 1950, 5). In the face of a local system entrenched in the time-honored politics of patronage and nepotism, Weinberger consistently employed the language of reform,outing the importance of political objectivity and professional expertise. For example, Weinberger suggested to San Francisco Board member George Reilly, "We'd hope to be able to eliminate political influences if we established a nonpolitical board with staffing by experts." Reilly scoffed, suggesting that Weinberger's comments "must come from Harvard or Yale" rather than from the streets of San Francisco, where political considerations always presided (ABC in California, transcript of San Francisco hearings, 35).
61 ABC in California, 9.
to an appointed department would require attention to the B-girl problem. Anthony Anselmo, who represented the Joint Council of Culinary Workers, Bartenders, and Hotel Service Workers in San Francisco, claimed that the media and the committee overemphasized the blemishes in the current system of liquor regulation. When a committee member asked Anselmo if his organization took any disciplinary action against “the so-called B-girls working here,” Anselmo cited a recent statement by the waitresses union that they would cooperate with efforts to eliminate the B-girls and that they did not condone B-girls working as waitresses. By disassociating law-abiding waitresses from B-girls and by minimizing the prevalence of B-girls themselves, Anselmo attempted to avert increases in the regulatory burden of licensees. The question of what to do about B-girls was directly associated with the controversy over whether and how to reform the administration and enforcement of liquor law in California.

Given the political utility of public criticism of B-girls, how precisely can one explain the social liability that they were seen to impose? What was it exactly about these modern-day percentage girls that made them such easy targets for postwar authorities? Two sources of administrative and judicial power—the appeals board of the ABC and the California Appellate Court—shed light on this set of questions. Though these bodies were invested in protecting the legitimacy of the state’s governmental institutions, their motivations were less opportunistic than those of politicians and publishers. Their analysis of the dangers posed by B-girls was also more extensive and better attuned to subtlety. As the pairing of parts three and four will show, the appeals board and court decisions reflected many of the same dynamics and tensions that B-girls themselves reported experiencing. For these reasons, the decisions featured below mediate between sensationalist public rhetoric and the ordinariness of B-girl work; they suggest that the coexistence of public space, commercial fraud, female sexual cunning, and vulnerable masculinity warranted official scrutiny and institutional intervention.

Undoubtedly, commercial exploitation was, in and of itself, a central regulatory and judicial concern. In 1956, the appeals board of the Department of ABC made its first extended comment on the evils of the “B girl operation” in California. The board’s decision regarding Market Street’s “Gold Rail” identified the “pattern of solicitation” employed by B-girls, in which the “patron is induced to buy a large number of expensive drinks in the shortest period of time possible. It has none of the characteristics of social drinking for pleasure or relaxation, but is a cold, calculated, scheme or device whereby a patron is induced to spend [all his money].” The board

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62Ibid., 87.
63This particular discussion extends beyond 1953 and 1954 into the middle and later years of the decade, when the crackdowns inspired by the 1953 campaign produced cases for bureaucratic and judicial review.
protested the “despoilment” of the proper barroom atmosphere by calculating solicitors. In another instance, “Inducements which persuade a patron to dissipate his earnings and consume alcoholic beverages beyond his capacity are the proper subject of regulation.” Any plot designed to encourage—even to coerce, the board implied—patrons into squandering income on excessive drinking warranted official discipline.

Embedded in opposition to commercial abuse was the related danger of what might be seen as nonconsensual drinking. In ruling on the case of Greenblatt v. Martin, the District Court of Appeal explained: “[T]he Legislature aimed to protect . . . the customer from persuaded potation of any drink. . . . The evil at which the Legislature aimed was not the harm bar girls might suffer . . . but rather the danger to the public that bars might be converted into places for solicitation of customers to purchase drinks for others. The Legislature did not want bars to become sources for the artificial stimulation of purchase of ‘drinks’ by patrons through the inducement of the bar’s employees.” Both the ABC and appeals court decisions stress the legislature’s intention to shield citizens from the corrupting pressure of professional solicitors. Judicial authorities stopped just short of calling customers victims, implying not only that alcohol consumption could be nonconsensual but that B-girls’ commercial extortion was moral as well as financial. Responsibility for maintaining the sobriety and welfare of male visitors rested not only with the men themselves but with the legislature, the agents of the Department of ABC, and with the licensees. When bar owners conspired with B-girls to prey upon customers, the state was obligated to intervene on the public’s behalf.

Yet the “public” in this case was explicitly male, and the exploitress was unmistakably female. In Greenblatt, the court listed “feminine favors” and “feminine cajolery” as “[a]ttendant evils of solicitation” and as “characteristics of the B girl pattern.” The court concluded that “the Legislature has protected the customer’s right to access to his drink without exposure to entrapment by females who urge the purchase of orange juice at exorbitant prices, and without subjection to a systematized commercial exploitation of the unwary.” The ABC appeals board concurred: “The vagaries of human nature being as they are, the patrons of cocktail bars are peculiarly susceptible to the importunings of the ‘female of the species.’ This weakness is well known to the licensees of this regulated industry and it is the duty of the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control to prevent . . . this exploitation of bar patrons.” The ABC was responsible for protecting inherently vulnerable men from women who profited on their natural capacity for sexual deceit.

64 ABC Appeals, file AB-183, 6–7.
65 ABC Appeals, file AB-130, 4.
66 Greenblatt v. Martin, 2 Cal.Rptr. 508, 509.
67 ABC Appeals, file AB-183.
In this view, male patrons of B-girls were not fully accountable for containing their "natural" heterosexual drive. The appeals board implied that the Department of ABC should shield men from their irrational impulse to empty their wallets in pursuit of sex, especially since few B-girls actually provided the sexual outlet that their companions clearly sought. Strategically encouraging and deflecting men’s sex drives, B-girls both fueled and contained aggressive masculine sexuality. It is likely that part of the “exploitation of bar patrons” to which the board referred was precisely the fact that male customers never got what they thought they were paying for. In a compelling turn of events, women who were seen during the war years as dangerous because of their sexual availability offended postwar sensibilities with their deceptively enacted sexual unavailability.

B-girls embodied both the hazard of calculated femininity and the danger of coordinated commercial machination. In the minds of many postwar men and women lurked fear both of overly powerful womanhood and of organized crime. Cultural commentators such as Philip Wylie warned that overprotective mothers raised weak and passive sons and that the debilitating effects of “Momism” would enfeeble the nation and expose it to enemy takeover. In his analysis of cold war-era popular film, Michael Rogin claims that movies depoliticized the hysteria over Communist subversion by blaming it on female personal influence.68 The specter of organized crime may also have caught the journalistic and public eye because of its association with Communism. Lawrence Friedman points to the superb propaganda (if less stellar evidence) of the federal Kefauver Committee on organized crime, which claimed that the Mafia had its tentacles in every major city and “was growing rich and powerful on the spoils of vice and crime. . . . The Mafia theme was endlessly fascinating to the general public.”69 Rhetorically, the threat of an unseen, organized enemy reflected the preoccupation of cold war ideology with invisible subversion. These anxieties found a haven in the figure of San Francisco’s postwar B-girl. By describing B-girls and their trade as organized, as a racket, as insidious, as a menace, as evil, and as an entrapment, authorities in media, politics, and the courts enlisted cold war rhetoric associating B-girls with subversion and danger. During the height of domestic anti-Communism, even consumerism took on ideological meaning, representing American superiority over the Soviet system.70 Anti-B-girl rhetoric stressing the exploitation of bar customers and the fraud involved in disguised drinks and drink solicitors echoed cultural concerns with the politics of consumption. B-girls should not be understood, then, as merely symbolic

68Philip Wylie, Generation of Vipers (New York, 1942); see also Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York, 1988), 74, 96, 116; Michael Paul Rogin, ed., Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology (Berkeley, 1987), 238, 245, 259.


70Whitfield, 173.
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pawns in a state-level political game. Official and popular sources linked B-girls’ exploitation of male bar patrons with organized crime, with municipal and state corruption, with consumer fraud, and even with subversion.

The (largely accurate) notion that B-girls preyed on servicemen also raised figurative red flags. Servicemen were the diplomats and instruments of and the participants in the “American way of life,” an omnipresent concept in anti-Communist rhetoric. In the 1950s, returning servicemen benefited from job protection, the GI Bill, and government-subsidized mortgage lending, and they literally embodied idealized middle-class family life. By taking advantage of these men, B-girls appeared subversive to American families and, in a twist characteristic of (though not unique to) the Red Scare, to America itself. B-girls’ apparent skill in duping servicemen exposed the cunning of the former and the naïveté of the latter. Neither public authorities nor the institutions that they upheld welcomed that exposure.

PART 4: THE LIVES AND TIMES OF SAN FRANCISCO’S 
POSTWAR B-GIRLS

Underneath the flurry of anti-B-girl criticism, hundreds of female San Franciscans plied their trade night after night. Political rhetoric, however, revealed (and reveals) surprisingly little about the contours of the B-girl trade. This section asks who B-girls were, how they practiced their enterprise, and how they perceived themselves, their profession, and their excoriation. Their history raises important historiographical questions about the definition of sex work, the role of sexualized labor in the postwar urban economy, the management of nonmarital sexuality during the early cold war years, the impact of bureaucratic, criminal justice, and military policy on everyday work practices, and the place of the illicit in postwar women’s history.

First of all, who were the women in question? The illegality of their trade as well as the destruction of San Francisco arrest records and Superior Court documents make B-girls nearly invisible statistically. Although police department annual reports specify the age, nativity, and sex of those individuals arrested for “B girl” charges, the numbers of those arrests were extremely small. In 1953, for example, seventeen B-girls were arrested.

71Stephen Whitfield comments that “[w]hatever undermined family unity might be interpreted as Communistic” (ibid., 185). On the relationship between family life and domestic anti-Communism generally, see May.

72Since newspaper articles furnish some of the best information about B-girl work, it is difficult to separate completely the representation of B-girls from their lived experience, yet combining newspaper accounts with other sources provides an inside perspective that often departs significantly from the content and meaning of anti-B-girl discourses.

73As discussed above, police usually circumvented the difficulty of collecting sufficient evidence to achieve convictions on B-girl charges by arresting B-girls as vagrants. Thus the
One of them was age twenty-one, one was twenty-four, six were ages twenty-five to twenty-nine, seven were ages thirty to thirty-four, and two were forty to forty-four. Of these, fifteen were white and native born, one was white and foreign born, and one was a native-born “Negro.” Successive years reveal even less information, given that only nine B-girls were arrested in 1955 and six in 1956. The 1957 report identified twenty-six arrests; twenty-two of these women were native-born whites, one was a foreign-born white, two were categorized as Negroes, and one was a foreign-born Mexican. To the extent that one can generalize from such small numbers, it appears that most B-girls arrested by the SFPD were native-born white women and that, notably, they varied in age from young to mature adulthood.⁷⁴

More than any other source, newspapers reveal the experiences of Bay Area B-girls, though they tended to overemphasize the profiles of full-time B-girls: women who worked off the books for bar owners and who arranged with a bar owner to “loiter” at a bar exclusively for the purpose of soliciting drinks. There were other types of B-girls as well, though there is less detailed evidence for their activities: waitresses, hostesses, strippers, and other types of entertainers (including female impersonators) undoubtedly also raised their earnings by “B-ing” during breaks and/or after performances. In states unlike California, where women could legally work as bartenders, female bartenders similarly profited.⁷⁵ Employers sometimes required these employees to solicit drinks; more often, hostesses or waitresses voluntarily supplemented their regular salaries in that way. In establishments operating without a liquor license, such as “bottle clubs” serving nonalcoholic drinks, B-girls were witnessed “peddling liquor out of their apron pockets.”⁷⁶ This particular practice reveals the variety and malleability of B-girl work.

During periodic crackdowns, B-girls sought ways of protecting themselves and one another. Jackie Walsh, former president of the San Francisco

⁷⁴SFPD, Annual Reports, 1951–57. Newspaper articles reporting arrests of B-girls confirm this variation in age. For example, the first four B-girls convicted of criminal charges in California were Phyllis Nyman, Rosalie Aycox, Elma Johnson, and Ellen Worthington, who were forty-one, twenty-seven, forty-five, and twenty-eight years of age, respectively (Chronicle, July 1, 1953, 3). Four B-girls arrested by State Board of Equalization members in March 1954 ranged in age from twenty-two to thirty-two (Chronicle, March 20, 1954, 1, 2). It is significant that these women were, in fact, adults.

⁷⁵Bilek and Ganz, 39. On B-girls posing as cocktail waitresses, see Examiner, January 22, 1953, 1. “Ginger,” the Examiner’s informant, explained that “some strip joints in town used to have girl entertainers put something on, after an act, and mingle with the customers, trying to wheedle drinks. On a percentage basis, of course” (Examiner, January 25, 1953, 20).

⁷⁶ABC in California, Los Angeles Hearings, December 21–22, 1953, 95.
local of the waitresses union, recalled that the union had trouble with B-girls who sought union membership, presumably to mask the illegality of their work. Without proof of legitimate job classification, Walsh explained, “it was pretty obvious that they were hustling drinks.” By working part time as waitresses or entertainers, many B-girls minimized their exposure to prosecution by law and alcohol enforcement agents. B-girls were also vulnerable to the whims of bartenders and bar owners, who could report uncooperative women to the Board of Equalization or to the police. More commonly, bartenders underpaid the women.

Not surprisingly, then, drink solicitors developed ways of shielding themselves from such manipulation, including keeping their own count of their “sales.” In Greenblatt v. Martin, agents of the Board of Equalization testified that each time an undercover agent bought Laura Overlin a drink (which, in this case, was an expensive two-dollar orange-colored cocktail), she removed a toothpick that was served in the drink and added it to her collection. Similarly, waitresses and women loitering at a San Francisco bar owned by Cooper and Sanchez were observed removing plastic stirring rods from drinks bought for them. To the licensees’ dismay, an officer of the board observed one of the women exchanging her collection of stirring rods for cash at closing time. By devising a way of tracking her own sales, this B-girl ensured that she would receive adequate compensation for her night’s labors; at the same time, this strategy backfired when her actions led to the loss of the bar’s liquor license and, presumably, to her unemployment. Other women found different but equally creative accounting devices. “Barbara” used matchbooks. For each fifty-cent drink purchased for her, she bent a match forward; for each dollar drink, she bent one back. The bartender also kept track, tossing a penny into either a glass or a spot in the cash register reserved to record Barbara’s sales. These bookkeeping measures were critical to the business of “B-ing.”

What kinds of drinks B-girls consumed was an important issue, both for the enforcement of the anti-B-girl statutes and for the working conditions of the women themselves. Playing an Arizona B-girl in Bus Stop (1956), Marilyn Monroe drinks four tea-and-sodas before her companion angrily confronts her. Nervously, “Sherrie” admits that that’s “what they let us drink here” and whines that the previous night she had to drink fifteen of them. Since it was commonly believed that anti-B-girl codes

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77 Jackie Walsh, oral history (1980), 122, MS5587, CHS.
78 Greenblatt v. Martin, 2 Cal.Rptr. 508.
79 Cooper v. State Board of Equalization, 137 C.A.2d 672.
80 Board of Equalization agents caught the bartender of the Arabian Nights using both of these methods, placing pennies in old-fashioned glasses and in compartments in the cash register marked with the names of different waitresses and/or B-girls (Examiner, May 9, 1953, 1; see also Examiner, January 23, 1953, 11).
81 Joshua Logan, director, Twentieth Century Fox, Bus Stop (1956). Interestingly, though the publicity surrounding B-girls apparently generated enough interest to warrant a B-girl
referred only to the solicitation of alcoholic drinks, bar owners and B-girls used nonalcoholic substitutes in part to deflect pressure from law and liquor enforcement. An even more compelling reason for serving fake drinks was to increase bar owners’ profits. Bartenders regularly charged up to two dollars for what was really just ginger ale, orange juice, or even colored water. If a customer protested the price, the bartender would claim that the drink was a “double.” In some cases, if a customer became overly belligerent, the bartender would accuse him of trying “to pick up a decent girl” and would threaten to have him arrested for vagrancy.

Keeping the drinks low on alcohol increased B-girls’ profits as well. Some women managed to consume up to forty drinks per night—an impossible pace to sustain with standard cocktails. Staying sober also helped women manage the intensity of their business encounters. Servicemen, tourists, and other men turned to B-girls when wartime and postwar crackdowns on streetwalkers and brothel prostitutes reduced local opportunities for affordable commercial sex. Male customers therefore pursued sex at least as aggressively as B-girls pursued drink commissions. In fact, the demand for women was so high that one Tenderloin bar owner worried about losing customers to one of the many other local bars that offered more readily available female companionship.

Despite this demand, however, various sources confirm that during the early 1950s comparatively few B-girls offered paid intercourse. The American Social Hygiene Association, which performed annual investigations into the conditions fostering venereal disease in major U.S. cities, found character for Marilyn Monroe, “Sherrie” was far more innocent and naive than politicians and reporters imagined most B-girls to be. Only after another female employee gave her a joke with which to open conversation could she muster the courage to ask a customer for a drink. When her customer accused her of “making a sucker out of me” by drinking tea instead of whiskey, she did not deny the charge but rather complained plaintively that she had no other choice. She was also a dancer at the saloon where she solicited drinks, reflecting that many B-girls also worked in non-B-girl capacities.

As it turned out, the Greenblatt case disproved this theory; in the 1960 case, the judge ruled that the danger identified by the legislature was not that female drink solicitors would become drunk but that bars would become places calculated for solicitation of customers. The case also specified that the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control had jurisdiction over any place alcohol was served, whether or not the drinks in question contained liquor (Greenblatt v. Martin, 2 Cal.Rptr. 508).

For example, the Examiner reported that Barbara claimed to be drinking “Green Hornets” (vodka and crème de menthe), but the greenish drinks costing Barbara’s sailor $1.50 were water with food coloring (Examiner, January 22, 1953, 1, January 24, 1953, 14).

Examiner, January 22, 1953, 1. Bar owners’ belief that their business depended on the presence of B-girls was partly responsible for the failure of the campaign against B-girls in 1953 and 1954. In July 1954, a Board of Equalization “official” told the Chronicle that “we haven’t even scratched the surface of B-girl activities in San Francisco.” He explained that “many owners think they must employ B-girls to drum up enough trade to keep their taverns going” (Chronicle, July 20, 1954, 1, 2).
that only two of the eighteen San Francisco bars spot-checked in late 1952 had B-girls who were prostitutes; previously, claimed the report, many if not most B-girls had bolstered their income in this way. Military policy influenced this apparent change in practice. As part of the coordinated campaign between the navy and the city of San Francisco to protect servicemen from venereal disease, naval administrators designated a bar off-limits if it was reported as a source of VD contacts or, during the spring of 1953, if it was found to employ B-girls.85 Afraid of losing lucrative business, bar owners began to prohibit prostitution and to require B-girls to work full time.86 Significantly, then, pressure emanating from the armed services, the police, and bar owners themselves combined to change the conditions in which B-girls worked and to reshape women’s participation in San Francisco’s underground economy.87

Of course, the implicit promise of sex was a key tool of the B-girl trade. Nelda Penny, colicencsee of the Tuxedo Club on Turk Street, enticed an Officer Ryan to “purchase drinks for her consumption by caressing him and fondling his private parts.”88 The case of Club 49’er in Los Angeles further illuminates the sometimes murky line between “B-ing” and prostitution. After finishing off the first drink that she solicited from Agent Willis Gough, Maria Martell reportedly “placed her hand on Gough’s trousers, fondled his privates and suggested that they take a back booth where there was not so much light.” In the booth, Martell exposed her breasts, saying, “If you think this looks good, the rest looks better.” Immediately thereafter, she signaled the bartender for another round of drinks.89 The American Social Hygiene Association confirmed the role of physical contact in the B-girl trade, reporting that B-girls “openly asked to be treated to drinks and were observed to concentrate their attention on servicemen. . . . Those who kept the B-girls’ glasses filled were permitted to take certain liberties.

85 In February 1953 the Examiner reported that the armed forces cracked down on San Francisco bars because of B-girls, putting four off-limits to servicemen and issuing warnings to four others (Examiner, February 12, 1953, 1, 12).

86 Examiner, January 12, 1953, 12, January 13, 1953, 4, January 23, 1953, 11. “Ginger” corroborated this explanation, stating that some B-girls used to go out with customers after the 2:00 a.m. closing, engaging in prostitution. “But that’s out now . . . [b]ecause if a bar had too many venereal disease contact reports, the armed services would put it off limits” (Examiner, January 25, 1953, 20).


88 ABC Appeals, file AB-203, 13. This case is unusual because the B-girl doing the soliciting was a colicencsee and, presumably, part owner of the bar.

89 ABC Appeals, file AB-238, 3. For the Examiner’s very similar version of the progression from flirtation to sexual favors in a back booth of a bar, see January 23, 1953, 11. It is significant in this case that testimony before the ABC appeals board so closely mirrored a newspaper account.
Frequently such liberties were of a lewd and indecent nature.”90 B-girls like Penny and Martell sustained their business with sexual favors and promises.

Interviews with B-girls in San Francisco newspapers provide the women’s own perspectives on sexual negotiation. “Ginger,” one of the Examiner’s informants, explained that “a customer would buy me a drink. He’d be playing for a one-night stand. He’d be looking for a key—to my heart, shall we say. So I’d dangle a figurative key before him, and he’d buy me drink after drink. But nobody ever got my key from me.” Ginger learned “what to do when the customer gets too amorous” from her B-girl mentor, Ruthie. B-girls taught one another how guarded flirtation lured men into buying a first drink, how caresses and kisses elicited more, and how making out in poorly lit booths accompanied by expensive bottles of champagne maximized the profits. Notably, B-girls also found one another jobs in the bars where they worked; networking was critical in this respect.

Despite the strain, however, most B-girls worked as long as they could. Though their vocation might have been exciting at times, B-girls valued the money most. Women described drink solicitation as a job, emphasizing their earnings, their hours, and the financial nature of their motivation. One B-girl interviewed by the American Social Hygiene Association, for example, explained, “We’re working girls—we get 40 percent of each drink.”91 Exclusive B-girls (as opposed to strippers and waitresses who solicited drinks on the side) worked regular hours. In at least one case, a new B-girl started out on a 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. schedule; once she “became more proficient,” she took the more lucrative 6:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. shift.92 Ginger pointed out that some “Bs” were divorced, and “it was a living. Some of us didn’t like the other jobs we had. Too dull.”93 Peggy drew a line between prostitution and soliciting drinks, commenting, “I wanted to eat, but I’m no bum and I wouldn’t hustle”; she nevertheless admitted that even B-ing involved compromise between “morals and economics.” The sixty dollars that she regularly pulled in during an evening’s work was a strong argument in favor of “turning B.”94

Peggy’s substantial earnings obviated any temptation to augment her income with theft, but some women who earned less (Barbara reported

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91Examiner, January 13, 1953, 4. Other women reported earning 50 percent of the value of the drinks they solicited (Chronicle, April 27, 1953, 1).

92Examiner, January 25, 1953, 20. The American Social Hygiene Association corroborated the newspaper accounts, reporting that the eighteen B-girls they identified in late 1952 were working regular shifts (Examiner, January 12, 1953, 12).

93Examiner, January 25, 1953, 1.

94Chronicle, April 27, 1953, 1.
earning fifteen to twenty dollars per night) did resort to stealing. These 
women either cooperated with bartenders to short-change customers or 
simply stole money from the wallets of very drunk men. For example, 
Genevieve Gallagher, a B-girl at George’s Place on Sixth Street, reportedly 
cooperated with the bartender to treat a twenty-dollar bill as a ten. If a 
customer protested, the two of them insisted that he was mistaken.\textsuperscript{95} Some 
waitresses merely supplemented their legitimate income by soliciting a few 
drinks on their breaks, while some of their more determined colleagues 
“twist your arm for drinks, almost pulling you in off the streets.”\textsuperscript{96} One 
teenage B-girl described her quick schooling in how “to accost customers, 
break down sales resistance and ‘roll’ drunks.”\textsuperscript{97} The level of desperation 
varyed according to the establishment and to each woman’s individual 
situation, but money was these women’s primary motivation to “B.”\textsuperscript{98} 

Full-time B-girls dressed either as waitresses or as women casually stop- 
ping by the bar for a drink.\textsuperscript{99} They “pose as circumspect damsels—white 
collar girls, secretaries, stenos . . . . They are ‘waiting for a girl friend’ or 
‘killing time before going home to [their] gloomy bachelor girl apartment.”\textsuperscript{100} They avoided heavy makeup and were attired “in quiet dresses, 
or well-cut suits.” Barbara, the \textit{Examiner} reported, wore “a gray suit and 
red hat. . . . [T]here was nothing to indicate she worked for the 
house” and “nothing to differentiate [her] from the girls you’d see in any 
office.”\textsuperscript{101} It was all too easy, in other words, for B-girls to put on office 
wear and to perform what was essentially sex work. B-girls passed quite 
convincingly, donning the vocabulary, the physical presentation, and the 

\textsuperscript{95}\textit{ABC Appeals}, file AB-416, 4. 
\textsuperscript{96}\textit{Examiner}, January 23, 1953, 1. 
\textsuperscript{97}\textit{Examiner}, January 22, 1953, 8. 
\textsuperscript{98}\textit{Taxi} dancers in early-twentieth-century Los Angeles reported similar hesitations and 
motivations. Juana Martinez explained, “[A]t the beginning I didn’t like this work because 
I had to dance with anyone but I have finally gotten used to it and now I don’t care since I 
do it in order to earn my living.” Since B-girls could choose which men to solicit, they may 
have had more control over their work than taxi dancers, who had to dance with any man 
who had a ticket in hand. In the cases of both taxi dancers and B-girls, a sense of entitle-
ment was also at play. One taxi dancer remarked, “[A]s long as I have to put up with fresh 
guys no matter where I work, I might as well get $3.00 an hour for it”; similarly, one B-girl 
reasoned, “I figured since guys were always making passes, why not collect on it?” Given 
the aggressive masculine heterosexuality of leisure environments, these women decided to 
profit financially from what were already compulsory social and sexual negotiations (Linda 
Maram, “Negotiating Identity: Youth, Gender, and Popular Culture in Los Angeles’ Little 
\textsuperscript{99}Board of Equalization and police enforcement agents complained about B-girls’ dis-
guises, since it made identifying them for repression purposes quite tricky. See \textit{Examiner}, 
January 9, 1953, 8. 
\textsuperscript{100}\textit{Examiner}, January 23, 1953, 1. 
\textsuperscript{101}\textit{Examiner}, January 22, 1953, 1, January 24, 1953, 1.
costumes of women with respectable jobs and semilegitimate reasons for appearing alone in a bar. In doing so, they transgressed and blurred boundaries of status and of sexuality.\textsuperscript{102}

In the mid–twentieth century, single professional women fit into conceptions of class, gender, and sexual respectability with some degree of unease. Their nominal claim to economic and social propriety made them more appropriate objects of male attention than prostitutes or even than so-called pickups or barflies, who were supposedly detached completely from economic and social moorings. At the same time, B-girls’ independence from the restraints of family as well as their presence at bars probably attracted the interest of service- and businessmen looking for romantic and/or sexual encounters or, as the \textit{Examiner} put it, “an easy conquest.”\textsuperscript{103} B-girls may have chosen to dress as office workers as a way of enticing the sorts of men who felt more comfortable with the traditional practice of treating, including the implicit exchange of drinks for affection and/or sex, than with the opportunity to pay for sex outright. Men seeking prostitutes, for example, would presumably resist paying for expensive drinks in addition to sex itself. Men with class- or status-based apprehensions about prostitution, on the other hand, may have been financially capable of spending large sums on overpriced drinks and bottles of champagne. It is possible, then, that the secretary costume was part of a deliberate effort by full-time B-girls to maximize their customer base and, in the end, their earnings.\textsuperscript{104}

One suspects, nevertheless, that many men were never really fooled by the office wear. Certainly, Ernest Lenn, the \textit{Examiner} reporter exposing the B-girl story, saw through the disguise: “[T]hey’re too eager to smile

\textsuperscript{102}As is suggested in part 2, media and political authorities associated this ability to pass with the fraud and deception at the heart of the B-girl “evil.” It is interesting that reporters like Lenn denounced B-girls’ efforts to pass as respectable working women when he himself was in “disguise” as a naïve traveler in town on business. A helpful concept here is Marjorie Garber’s “category crisis,” defined as “disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” or “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another” (\textit{Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety} [New York, 1992], 16). B-girls in office dress worked on borderlines between prostitution and legitimate professionalism, sexual promiscuity and respectability, and economic desperation and relatively secure middle-class status. Especially in the context of a postwar culture engrossed by the invisible and the unseen, B-girls’ confusion of the categories of rank and sexuality contributed significantly to their apparent offense.

\textsuperscript{103}“To Betty, I was the same old story. The lonely serviceman or the on-the-town visitor hoping to make an easy conquest” (\textit{Examiner}, January 24, 1953, 14).

\textsuperscript{104}It is also possible that the secretary outfits alleviated some degree of external pressure by law enforcement officers cracking down on prostitutes as well as some B-girls’ internal pressure to differentiate themselves from prostitutes for emotional or moral reasons.
and make a pickup; too brazen in trying to keep the drinks coming.”105

Even if B-girls looked like secretaries, their behavior indicated otherwise. Indeed, some of the few preserved public reactions to anti-B-girl discourse express disbelief in the uniform naïveté of male customers. Responding to Board of Equalization member Reilly’s suggestion that the law prohibit unescorted women from bars, one Mrs. Harris of San Francisco editorialized: “[F]ellows who pick up strange women in bars surely have heard of B-girls. And I thought that servicemen got this dope in the educational movies during basic training. . . . Maybe [Reilly] meant ‘There should be a law forbidding unescorted MEN to enter bars?’”106

Unfortunately, available sources do not reveal male customers’ perspectives, but careful speculation is nevertheless suggestive here. Three possible scenarios seem possible: first, sailors and other men who encountered B-girls truly had no idea that these were women being paid to solicit drinks (but were hoping that with enough drinks would come sex or at least some exciting company). Second, customers either knew in advance or quickly figured out that the attractive women loitering at bars were not who they appeared to be but assumed that they were in fact prostitutes. Or third, some repeat customers knew exactly who B-girls were and considered some intimate time with their favorite girls in dimly lit booths a worthwhile expense in and of itself.

Of these possibilities, only the first appears explicitly in political, bureaucratic, judicial, and media discourse. The second scenario may have been at least as common as the first and appears implicitly in the rhetoric stressing the fraudulent aspect of B-ing. While passing tea off as whiskey was offensive and illegal, one suspects that the most enraging fraud of all was that no matter how much they drank, B-girls rarely became drunk enough to seduce. The third and probably least common situation challenges the basic tenet of anti-B-girl rhetoric: that men (and especially servicemen) were unwitting victims of scheming B-girls. If they knew what they were getting, and not getting, out of barroom commerce, male customers hardly needed the protection of the law or its enforcement agents.

B-girls themselves assessed their customers according to a spectrum ranging from naive dupes to informed aggressors. Echoing official disgust with the exploitation of servicemen, “Ginger” admitted that it “[t]ook time getting used to playing some fuzz-faced kid in uniform for a sucker. Or some lad with a new Korean campaign ribbon.”107 But “Peggy” responded to public criticism with a shift in agency: “The papers are filled with how we clip servicemen,” she remarked. “Well, I don’t see any servicemen or any

105 Examiner, January 23, 1953, 1.
107 Examiner, January 25, 1953, 1.
other kind of men being dragged into this joint and having his money taken away from him. . . . If he says no, I can't make him do it, can I?” Incensed that their hopes for sex had been thwarted by fake drinks, some men exacted revenge by reporting the women as thieves to the police. Peggy described instances in which a “guy would get a heat on in a joint and blow his roll on a couple of girls in the hope of getting to bed with one of them. Then he’d wind up broke and go squawking to the cops that he’d been rolled.” In order to protect herself from vengeful men, Peggy often invited a colleague (and a potential witness) to share her big-spending customers. In light of the contemporary criticism of B-girls, Peggy justified her trade by stressing the mutual exploitation inherent in exchanges between B-girls and the men who supported their industry.

For historians of women and sexuality, the social history of B-girls suggests several methodological points. It sheds light on a sector of the postwar labor market about which historians know relatively little, and it illuminates the ways in which changing mores of sexual behavior were enacted through the practice of professional drink solicitation in many of San Francisco’s less reputable taverns. In addition, this material enriches historical accounts of suburban life, domesticity, and the growth of the female labor force during the postwar era. Valuable studies by historians such as Elaine Tyler May, Jessica Weiss, and Joanne Meyerowitz have examined ways in which white middle-class women living in suburbs struggled with contradictory messages about career, home, and family and negotiated their status both as supplemental earners and as homemakers. On the streets and in the bars of San Francisco, a very different contest took place. Single women of various ages and backgrounds worked up to twelve-hour days hustling drinks from male patrons in order to make a living. Given their dependence on male bartenders and bar owners and the limits on their upward mobility, B-girls might even be seen as the “illegitimate” counterparts of pink-collar female laborers such as clerical and service workers who contributed to the swelling postwar American economy.

The social history of B-girls also illuminates the ill-defined category of “sex work.” B-girls chose whether to sell sex on the side according to various factors discussed above. Even when they refrained, however, sex—in the forms of sex appeal, sexual artifice, performance of sexual acts other

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108 *Chronicle*, April 27, 1953, 1, 2.
109 In other words, B-girls demonstrate yet again that middle-class reformers are never solely—or even primarily—responsible for historical shifts in the lived realities of gender and sexuality.
than intercourse—was still a key element of their work. B-girls shifted their behavior and self-representation according to varied (and changing) personal and professional concerns and compulsions. A flexible view of sex work encompassing the employment of sexual practice and gendered representation may allow historians to capture nuances generally overshadowed by the de facto definition of sex work as prostitution.

CONCLUSION

In 1953, it was easy to portray B-girls as ruthless and manipulative racketeers; today, it would be equally simple either to view them as victims of a sexist labor market or to champion their agency as women who insisted on working on their own terms. In their own eyes, however, they were a varied group of people struggling to capitalize on a sexualized urban marketplace while protecting themselves and having a bit of fun in the process.

B-girls’ own perspectives on their work had little to do, ultimately, with the political work that their image accomplished. At the same time that official disgust with the B-girl advanced alcohol reform, the widespread attention to B-girls also facilitated increasing familiarity with and even acceptance of nondomestic, extramarital female sexuality. Members of the public rejected the suggestion that unescorted women be banned from bars because they believed that women as well as men rightly held a claim to the entertainment and sociability offered there. Nearly a decade before the rise of singles bars, B-girls appeared less reprehensible than prostitutes but still less respectable than the career women whose costumes they wore. Their identity blurred the boundaries between bars as a source of commercial sex and as a ready source of pickups, or sexually accessible single women. Their work also violated beliefs about sexual and commercial conduct that were reified by institutions like the legislature, the courts, law enforcement, and the liquor control administration. Middle-class standards of behavior were under stress in the 1950s, and B-girls galvanized legal and police measures of repression and criminalization at the same time that they underscored the fractured and tenuous nature of the grip of postwar conformity and coercion.111

The social history of B-girls in the 1950s illustrates that the circumscription and normalization of acceptable forms of gendered, sexual, and commercial behavior in the postwar era required the identification and censure of unacceptable forms as well. Official agitation and media melodrama helped to delimit the bounds of legitimacy in postwar California. At the same time, however, the pairing of public scrutiny with accounts of

111For an account of the stress of 1950s sexual and social standards, see Freedman and D’Emilio, esp. chap. 12.
B-girls' everyday practices underscores the disconnect between political machination and social reality. San Franciscans did not lie awake at night in fear of the B-girl evil, nor did B-girls relinquish their well-paying jobs when threatened by predictably periodic raids and crackdowns. Rather, women working as B-girls in the postwar years adjusted their conduct as necessary to respond to the changing conditions and constraints of their times. Skillfully traversing the terrain between prostitution and free sex was par for the course. In the midst of the antivice storm that ensued in 1953, B-girls smiled warily and asked for another drink.