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They Called it a Boom: Nation Building in Coronado, California in 1888

On January 9, 1888, the *Coronado Evening Mercury* ran on its front page an announcement of the Coronado Beach Company's (CBC) successful land auction that sold 609 lots in less than eight hours, with profits totaling \$181,550.¹ These auctions were the brainchild of Elisha Babcock, a Midwestern businessman intent on capitalizing on the Southern California land boom of the 1880's, who legend claims envisioned the resort island of Coronado while hunting rabbits with his business partner H.L. Story.² The success of Babcock's endeavor rested on publicity reaching the East through the mass circulated press on the very rail lines that made the boom possible, perpetuating an image of Coronado as a sophisticated, growing metropolis that was both a safe return on investment and a genteel environment for elite tourists.³ Facilitating this publicity campaign were the local publishers of the *Coronado Evening Mercury*, with articles and advertisements echoing the desires of Anglo men across the nation, determined to establish themselves in what historian Susan Lee Johnson calls "becoming white:" by participating in cultural, social, and economic practices that followed the structures of dominant heteronormative, Anglo American constructions of gender, class, and race.⁴ In doing so, the CBC and the *Coronado Evening Mercury* were active participants in the growing project of

¹ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9, 1888, 1.

² Larry Booth, Roger Olmsted, and Richard F. Pourade, "Portrait of a Boom Town: San Diego in the 1880's," *California Historical Quarterly*, 50, no. 4 (December 1971): 373.

³ Gloria Rick Lothrop, "The Boom of the '80's Revisited," *Southern California Quarterly* 75, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1993): 292.

⁴ Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) 275-276.

nation building in America, furthering the ideology of Anglo, middle-class male dominance in the West as an extension of the growing race, class, and gender hierarchies of the East. Their use of bourgeois hegemony, heteronormative masculinity, and exclusion of ethnic undesirables provide the social scaffolding for the continuation of the great American project.

For Babcock and the paper, the first priority was to assure readers of the existence of economic opportunity leading to the middle class and a safe investment for Eastern capitalists. For this, the paper used a common tactic among the mass circulated press surrounding the boom, strategically disguising advertisements for the real estate in the town as news articles.⁵ These covert advertisements in Coronado utilize several angles, including direct reports of the success of auctions, indirect reports of town growth through the building of infrastructure, and local sightings of prominent visitors from back East.⁶ These “reports” speak to two audiences Babcock needs for his campaign; the Eastern elite who can invest heavily and stimulate the local economy through tourism, and the Midwestern everyman seeking the middle class. Announcements for daily shows at Leach’s Opera house abound, as well as a report of Mrs. H. L. Story masquerade ball for the local cotillion, assuring the former audience to a continuity of Eastern society.⁷ On January 14, 1888, several covert advertisements assuage the former’s anxieties concerning profit, claiming that, “all hotels are full,” and, “every store-keeper...has more business than he can attend to.”⁸ The image of Coronado as a haven of middle-class recreation would not be lost of the latter audience, however, but rather act as incentive. Those willing to abide by the maxims extolling the Protestant Work Ethic placed in the paper’s “Pungent Paragraphs,” were free to participate in the improving society of visiting tourists.

⁵ Lothrop, “The Boom of the ‘80’s Revisited,” 292.

⁶ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9-14, 16, & 17, 1888, 1-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

⁸ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 14, 1888, 3.

Announcements for local unions and fraternity meetings throughout the paper could assuage anxieties about powerlessness in the face of capital.⁹ Speaking to both audiences about the economic growth and possibilities in the town reinforced existing ideology about the West incorporated into the nation through bourgeois hegemony, binding classes of Americans together in their whiteness.

Normative middle-class values require more than economic practices however, with cultural practices of heteronormative masculinity as additional ingredients for Anglo dominant nation building. Historian Peter Boag argues that the end of the nineteenth century produced the, “‘modern’ sexual and gender system,” predicated on the two-sex/two gender binary of masculine males and feminine females performing their gendered identity.¹⁰ Within the Gilded Age, historian Dana Elder argues that normative masculinity required the visible distinction between oneself and undesirables through proper deportment, appearance, and manners, which became the responsibility of any man who gained social and economic mobility.¹¹ For those who intended to achieve their middle-class whiteness, performing genteel masculinity would be a major concern, which is reflected in the *Coronado Evening Mercury* through instructive pieces meant to guide middle class newcomers. On January 13, 1888, an article describing courtship during an Apple Bee ran, explaining that a young man’s struggle for kisses from young woman who, “writhe[s] from within his arms,” was more than a kissing game. Instead the fight would decide, “his reputation for manliness and gallantry,” bestowing on him either, “victory or eternal disgrace.”¹² The January 16th issue in 1888 ran a cautionary tale of J.S. Williams, a recent emigre from the Midwest who came to make his fortune, but instead spent everything he had to

⁹ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 17, 1888, 1.

¹⁰ Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2011), 4-5.

¹¹ Dana C. Elder, “A Rhetoric of Etiquette for the “True Man” of the Gilded Age,” *Rhetoric Review* 21, no. 2 (2002): 150-169.

¹² Franc Wilkie, “Country Olia-Podrida,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 13, 1888, 1.

get drunk nightly until his reforming mother-in-law arrived.¹³ In “Courage and Suicide” which ran on January 11, 1888 following several town suicides, uses the example of a man facing severe financial ruin to show that a true, heroic man would face such, “grim fate” by continuing to live until “Dame Fortune,” comes to his rescue as recompense for not taking the cowardly way out.¹⁴ Taken together, the image of a dominant, restrained, stalwart masculinity emerges supreme when compared to feminized males who are cowardly, subordinated, and intemperate, instructing both audiences of nation building, those who pay for the nation and those who manage the builders. Those who manage understand their responsibility to perform middle class values in exchange for their economic mobility, while the capitalists are reassured of Coronado’s reliable masculinity free from the undesirable element, at least among white folks. Thus, this mutual understanding transforms heteronormative masculinity into a tool of white hegemony.

With economic opportunity and middle-class masculinity secure, Coronado and its paper turned to the last obstacle to their local manifestation of the great American project. Historian Stacey Smith argues that the fervor in California instigated by white free soiler anxieties about their own subjugation by capital led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, by clearly associating the bound labor of Chinese coolies with Southern chattel slavery, which was then extended to all Chinese immigrants.¹⁵ Diplomatic historian Yucheng Qin takes this argument further, claiming that Chinese native place associations, (called huiguan but named the Six Companies in the American press), were entangled into the net of white anxiety by incorrect associations between the companies, coolie contracts, and fighting tongs and highbinders who were seen as protectors

¹³ “He Got Drunk,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 16, 1888, 2.

¹⁴ “Courage and Suicide,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 11, 1888, 2.

¹⁵ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

of bound labor.¹⁶ A similar preoccupation develops in the *Coronado Evening Mercury*, with several unauthored opinion pieces calling for the removal of all Chinese labor, expressing concerns over the influence of the Chinese Six Companies, who seemingly control with impunity large amounts of immigrant Chinese workers who only bring disease, opium, and highbinders.¹⁷ Chinese labor cannot just be eliminated because of their essential participation in nation building through their construction of infrastructure, the capital infused into the state from taxation, and the capital brought into the economy by Chinese merchants.¹⁸ Therefore, an important distinction between the noble immigrant and the corrupting influence is made in articles about the Chinese, both racializing through vilification and feminization. On January 9, 1888 a report of the public beating of On Hay, “a respectable citizen for a coolie,” by highbinder Jim Lee demonstrates this, with Lee described as a “fiendish,” “Chinese tough,” who felt justified in his beating of a fellow countryman for blackmail, while Hay, despite his respectability, needed protection from onlookers and white police to stop the attack and had to be persuaded to swear out a complaint against his attacker.¹⁹ The former encompasses the worst manifestations of humanity, while the latter needs paternal protection and guidance of white men. For the publishers, (and ultimately Babcock), using narratives vilifying highbinders, gamblers, and other vice ridden immigrants while feminizing the industrious immigrant who requires the care of Anglo protection is a local interpretation of Chinese exclusion that preserves the nation building project.

On January 14, 1888, the *Coronado Evening Mercury* ran an opinion piece discussing the merits of calling Coronado a boom town. The piece claimed that a boom was neither an irresistible force or the work of fate, but rather a community-based project resting on the

¹⁶ Yucheng Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China's Policy toward Exclusion*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

¹⁷ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 10, 1888, 2.

¹⁸ Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism*, 37.

¹⁹ “Murderous Highbinder,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9, 1888 3.

individual, where a, “neighbor imitates the good example, thus setting a pattern to another,” until, “great and mighty cities will rise and expand as if some good genii had breathed upon the land.”²⁰ Those back East may have called it a boom, but Babcock and the paper understood that organizing their society according to established Eastern whiteness would make Coronado one of those good neighbors, doing its part toward building “great and mighty cities.”²¹ There were critiques in the paper, about the inefficiency of the post office, substandard sidewalk grading, and an overcrowded jail, but the narrative never diverged from Coronado as a transformative place, both for those willing to abide by the social, cultural, and economic practices of whiteness, and for the frontier in need of a nation.

²⁰ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 14, 1888, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

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