

Ry Spada

Columbia University American Studies Department

Maura Spiegel and Hillary Hallett, Advisors

2 April 2024

The Fols/m Street Fair:  
The Making of a Sexual Tourist Attraction  
and the Selling of San Francisco's South of Market, 1984-1997

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### Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to Stephen Reis and Paul Lerner for their gracious funding, which made this thesis project possible, and to Professors Hilary Hallett and Maura Spiegel for their patience. Thank you, as well, to whoever is reading this—take as many breaks as you need.

In the spectacle—the visual reflection of the ruling economic order—goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself... It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.

—Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Ken Knabb)<sup>1</sup>

I pretend not to notice the absence of Black images in this new gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, even my own fantasies. Something in Oz was amiss, but I tried not to notice. I was intent on the search for my reflection—love, affirmation, in eyes of blue, gray, green. Searching, I discovered something I didn't expect, something decades of determined assimilation cannot blind me to. In this great, gay Mecca [of San Francisco], I was an invisible man. I had no shadow, no substance, no place, no history, no reflection.

—Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (1989)<sup>2</sup>

Queer pilgrimage does not conform to the homogeneous sense of queer identity but, rather, is mediated by other factors such as race, class status, age, and gender.

—Alyssa Cymene Howe, “Queer Pilgrimage: The San Francisco Homeland and Identity Tourism”<sup>3</sup>

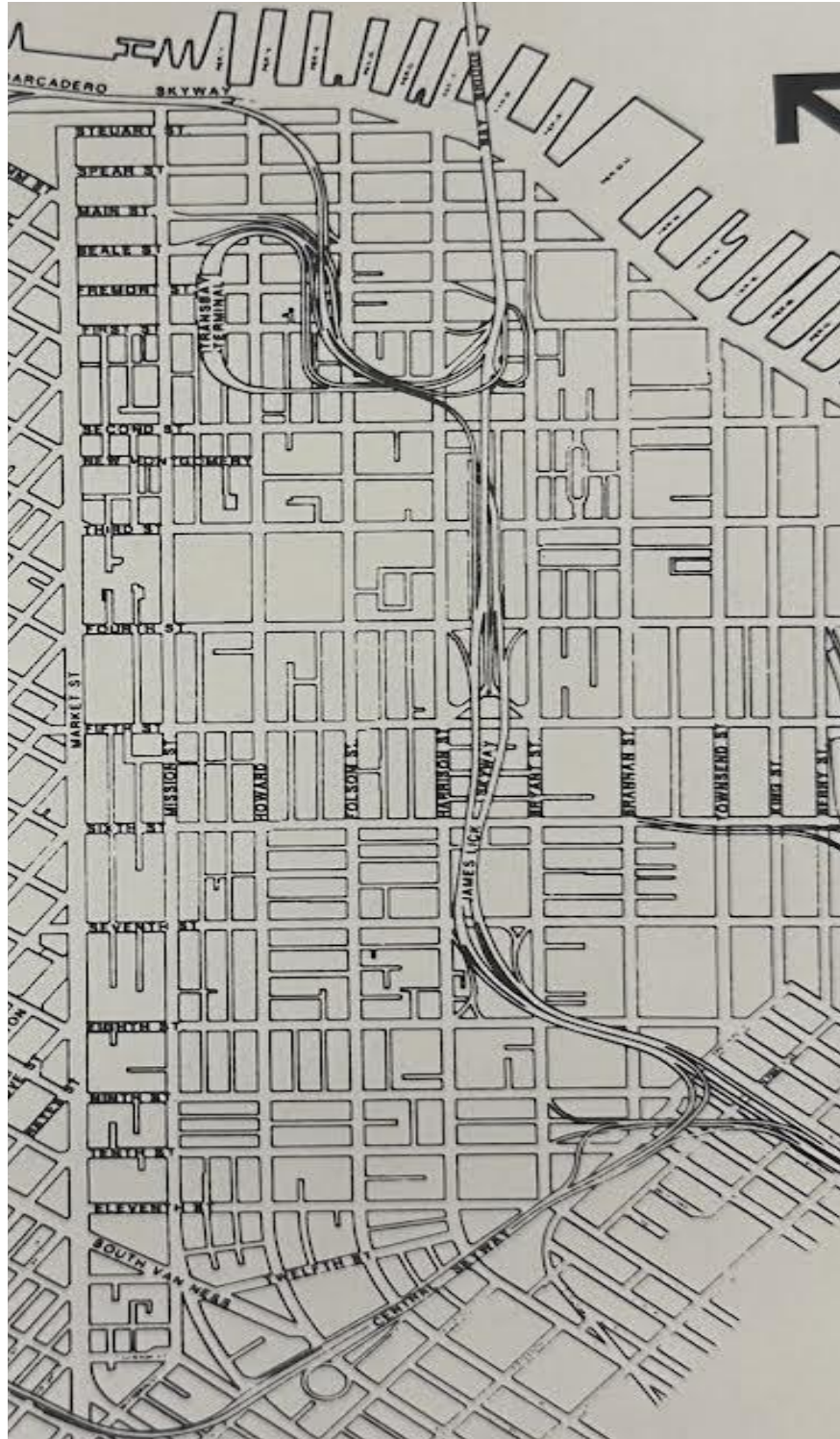
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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 4-5, <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Tongues Untied*, directed by Marlon Riggs (1989; San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel), *Criterion*.

<sup>3</sup> Alyssa Cymene Howe, “Queer Pilgrimage: The San Francisco Homeland and Identity Tourism,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (February 2001): 52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/656601>.

**Figure 1.** Map of San Francisco's South of Market district bound by Market Street to the north, Townsend Street to the South, the Embarcadero Skyway to the east, and the Central Freeway to the west (San Francisco Department of City Planning, 1984).<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> City and County of San Francisco Department of City Planning, South of Market Rezoning Study, July 1984, SF EPH, Sc-Sy box, South of Market District 1983-84 folder, San Francisco Ephemera Collection, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

### Prologue: The South of Market's Sodomasochistic Street Fair

The South of Market district of San Francisco has been synonymous with leather sexuality for so long —nearly 30 years—that the terms are almost interchangeable.

—Joseph Bean, “Changing Times South of Market”<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2.** Promotional poster for twenty-third Folsom Street Fair showing the leather-and-latex *Last Supper* (FredAlert, 2007).<sup>6</sup>

In September 2007, the San Francisco-based non-profit Folsom Street Events became the lightning rod of a nationwide controversy after the organization released the promotional poster for the twenty-third annual Folsom Street Fair (Fig. 2). The backlash against this advertisement —which featured men and women in leather and latex fetish gear posed around a table à la Da

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Bean, “Changing Times South of Market,” *Advocate*, March 29, 1988, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Folsom Street Fair 2007 advert with photography by FredAlert, September 2007, SF SUB COLL, Fairs and Festivals box, Folsom Street Fair 1984-2013 folder, San Francisco Ephemera Collection, San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco, CA.

Vinci's *Last Supper*—was crucial in cementing the street fair's notorious public image.<sup>7</sup>

Organizations such as the Christian Anti-Defamation Commission, as well as several concerned Christian individuals, wrote to the press to condemn the advert's mixing of religious iconography with the leather pride flag and "sodomasochistic sex toys."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps more revealing, however, was the fact that these critics used the leather-and-latex *Last Supper* scandal to raise alarm bells about the Folsom Street Fair's outdoor presence and sexual charge. "Eyewitnesses said police backed off while the partygoers celebrated by practicing, in public, oral sex, nudity, masturbation, and orgies," wrote Tom Cosat for the *Journal Gazette* in Indiana.<sup>9</sup> South Dakota resident Beth Spitzer questioned the fair's very existence in the *Rapid City Journal*, asking why "homosexuals" were "given this exception" if the "standard in our country has always been that public nudity is not allowed."<sup>10</sup>

On September 26, 2007, Fox News hosts Alan Colmes and Sean Hannity brought the fair before America's conservative audience in a debate featuring Matt Barber, the then-policy director of the Evangelical lobby Concerned Women for America. Describing the festival as a "mini Sodom and Gomorrah dressed up as a gay pride event," Barber told Fox viewers of "two-to four-hundred-thousand people, many of them nude, engaging in public sex on the streets of

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Strona, a public health educator and sex work advocate pictured standing in the center back of the promo photograph, describes 2007 as the year that the Folsom Street Fair "broke the internet." "Folsom Street Events has always had creative imagery for their posters but this one really took the cake," he continues [Frank Strona (public health specialist), interview by author, Zoom, August 14, 2023].

<sup>8</sup> Beth Spitzer, "Folsom Street Fair appalling in its portrayal of Christianity," *Rapid City Journal*, October 12, 2007. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/528953589/?terms=%22folsom%20street%20fair%22&match=1>; "Today's Newsmakers: The Folsom Street Fair," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 27, 2007. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/566427774/?terms=%22folsom%20street%20fair%22&match=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Cosat, "Bible-believers, not gays, being persecuted," *Journal Gazette*, October 20, 2007. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/84800564/?terms=%22folsom%20street%20fair%22&match=1>.

<sup>10</sup> Spitzer, "Folsom Street Fair appalling."

San Francisco.”<sup>11</sup> Four days later, as he so ominously warned, hundreds of thousands of San Francisco residents, tourists, and voyeurs flooded the fairgrounds between Seventh and Twelfth Streets along the westernmost part of Folsom Street in the South of Market district.

Although the 2007 advert faced unprecedented censure because of its religious imagery, the Folsom Street Fair’s sexual nature was no new phenomenon by then. Official promotional materials had begun to reflect the event’s growing orientation toward the “kink, leather and alternative sexuality communities” as early as the late ‘80s.<sup>12</sup> Even so, the unabashed sexual fête promised in 2007 obscured how profoundly the fair had changed from the “positive expression of neighborhood” that its co-founders Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio first envisioned in 1984. They had intended for the inaugural fair to “bring together the many diverse groups who make the South of Market their home,” believing their efforts would reach beyond the time and space of the one-day event. Rather than the fair being their teleological end goal, Connell and Valerio saw the event’s potential to mobilize a colorful “channel” of residents and local merchants throughout the year. Within their ambitions was an acknowledgment of the city’s destructive efforts to develop the district in prior years and during the early 1980s.

Despite its relatively small population of roughly 10,600 residents, especially in comparison to the neighboring Castro and Mission districts, the South of Market was one of the most heterogeneous neighborhoods in San Francisco by the first Folsom Street Fair in 1984. With rents that averaged “25% lower than the city median” throughout the 1970s, the neighborhood housed a “colorful” and largely working-class residential tapestry of single senior

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<sup>11</sup> “Ad Outrage,” *Hannity & Colmes*, Fox News, New York, NY: WNYW 5, September 27, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> “About Folsom Street,” Folsom Street, accessed February 25, 2024, <https://www.folsomstreet.org/about-folsom-street>.



citizens, Southeast Asian immigrants, extended Filipino families, and Latino and Black families.<sup>13</sup> The South of Market's quite exceptional diversity in the landscape of 1970s San Francisco was a testament to the city's vicious histories of redlining, wealth inequality, urban renewal (i.e., land grabbing), and ethnic cleansing.<sup>14</sup> The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency's 1953 "Western Addition A-1" and 1963 "Western Addition A-2" redevelopment plans—which James Baldwin called the "Negro Removal"—displaced over 17,000 residents, many of whom were Black and fled to East Bay cities like Hayward and Oakland.<sup>15</sup> Forced relocation and the purging of the Western Addition's historically Black Fillmore neighborhood from the 1950s through the 1970s also siloed a number of these residents into the South of Market. In the early 1980s, the concentrations of Black residents in South of Market neighborhoods such as South Park were some of the last residential holdouts in the city's steadily declining Black population.<sup>16</sup>

As it was waging war on the Western Addition, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency had also laid the groundwork for the future development of the South of Market. In June 1969, the organization unveiled the "Yerba Buena Plan," which provisioned for the building of a 350,000-square-foot convention center, a sports arena, a luxury hotel, and a shopping mall on a plot of land between Second, Fifth, Market, and Bryant Streets. That same year, in response to

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<sup>13</sup> Demographic data collected by sociologist Manuel Castells in 1970 offers insight into the South of Market's texture: 39% white, 10% Black, 33% Latine, 4% Chinese, 10% Filipino, and 1% Native American [Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 352]; Mark R. Wolfe, "The Wired Loft: Lifestyle Innovation Diffusion and Industrial Networking in the Rise of San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch," *Urban Affairs Review* 34, no. 5 (May 1999): 717-718. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/10780879922184158>.

<sup>14</sup> Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 47.

<sup>15</sup> Christina Jackson and Nikki Jones, "Remember the Fillmore: The Lingering History of Urban Renewal in Black San Francisco," in *Black California Dreamin': The Crises of California's African American Communities*, ed. Ingrid Banks et al. (Santa Barbara, CA: UCSB Center for Black Studies Research, 2012), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 47-48.

the growing threat of eviction, senior residents in the single-room occupancy hotels from Third to Sixth Streets founded Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment (TOOR).<sup>17</sup> After a grueling legal battle with the Redevelopment Agency, TOOR added a two-thousand-unit affordable housing complex, Woolf House, to the Yerba Buena Plan in 1973.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 3.** The gay leather bar Trench next to a small Phillipine grocery market on the corner of Natoma and Eighth Streets in the South of Market (Janet Delaney, 1981).<sup>19</sup>

By that year, some of the same features that made the South of Market hospitable for its working-class senior and non-white residents —namely, the low-cost living spaces —had begun to attract queer and creative countercultural crowds that were economically, culturally, and

<sup>17</sup> Peter Patrick Mendelsohn, the president of TOOR, recalls violent displacement efforts at the hands of the Redevelopment Agency and police during the early 1970s: ““They started forcing us out, kicking us out at night and kicking doors in. Our lawyers sued the City to stop it. People started to die during the fight—the fight had a lot to do with dying.”” [Manuscript of *No Vacancy* by Ira Nowinski, 1979, PIC box 3, No Vacancy photograph archive, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.]

<sup>18</sup> Chester Hartman, *Yerba Buena: Land Grab and Community Resistance in San Francisco* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1974), 24-27

<sup>19</sup> Photograph of Trench gay bar and Phillipine Grocery by Janet Delaney, August 1981, LAN box 1, folder 15, Janet Delaney archive of her photographic project titled *Form follows finance: a survey of the South of Market*, UC Berkeley Bancroft Research Library, Berkeley, CA.

sexually marginal to the city's broader bourgeois white society. A gay male leather and sadomasochism scene that operated clandestinely amidst Market Street's non-gay saloons and single-room occupancies following World War II began to assert itself spatially along Folsom Street during the late '60s and '70s.<sup>20</sup> In 1966, the successful leather bars Febe's and The Stud opened near Folsom and Twelfth, kickstarting a gay male leather occupation in the surrounding alley neighborhoods. Known as "the Folsom" and "the Miracle Mile," the area of Folsom between Seventh and Twelfth Streets became one of the world's densest and most commercially successful leather neighborhoods, as well as the sexual center of gay San Francisco, by the late '70s.<sup>21</sup> However, the rapid growth of the sexually unashamed Folsom quickly came up against the economic, spatial, and human devastations of the AIDS crisis, which spread unencumbered through the city's gay, transsexual, intravenous drug-user, and sex worker populations after 1981.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time as the gay "Folsom Street corridor" was pulsing on Seventh and Eighth Streets in the years leading up to the AIDS crisis, another "nonconformist community" of artists began forming cooperatives to communally purchase abandoned loft buildings and warehouses between Third and Sixth Streets. These bohemians then converted the units into live-in studios, leading to a proliferation of live-work galleries and performance spaces throughout the South of

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<sup>20</sup> Mark R. Wolfe, "The Wired Loft: Lifestyle Innovation Diffusion and Industrial Networking in the Rise of San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch," *Urban Affairs Review* 34, no. 5 (May 1999): 717-718. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/10780879922184158>.

<sup>21</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather, 1962-1997," in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 258.

<sup>22</sup> The number of AIDS cases in the city exponentially exploded from 127 during the first days of the crisis in 1981 to over 1,000 cases by the first Folsom Street Fair in 1984 [Tim Kellogg et al., "Atlas of HIV/AIDS in San Francisco 1981-2000," ed. Willi McFarland (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Department of Public Health, 2002), 44].

Market from 1978 to 1983.<sup>23</sup> This artistic crowd was thus central to the new image of the South of Market in the early 1980s as the so-called SoMa—an “avant-garde district supportive of artists, alternative culture, and individual expression.”<sup>24</sup> Mark I. Chester, a resident of Folsom Street since 1974, describes the distinction he saw between the neighborhood’s artistic and immigrant crowd—which he calls “the South of Market crew”—and the “Folsom leathermen”:

*You know, as an erotic photographer with a personal interest in radical sex play, I was literally in between those two worlds. I think people didn’t give the South of Market crew enough credit. In other words, there’s all this talk about leathermen but there was this whole other community. I mean, leather people could be part of it, but most of the crew didn’t see themselves that way. You know, it was a diverse group compared to the leathermen—a lot of poor people, people of color, gay people, and artists who really had a very open, accepting feel.*<sup>25</sup>

By 1981, the district’s newest countercultural populations had attracted the interest of the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), a public policy organization and well-established ally of City Hall’s Redevelopment Agency. In its proposed plan for the South of Market, SPUR acknowledged that Folsom Street had gained a “national reputation” as the epicenter of gay male leather and that artists were increasingly settling in the “warehouse/residential/industrial area South of Market.” However, in the same proposal, SPUR insisted on its pro-development stance and branded the South of Market an “industrial wasteland,” describing the diverse, working-class residential population as part of the South of Market’s “skid row” character.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 719

<sup>24</sup> Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 709.

<sup>25</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author, San Francisco, California, September 2023.

<sup>26</sup> San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), *A plan for South of Market* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, 1981), 10, 19.

It was this totalizing perception of the South of Market as an urban slum that Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio organized the inaugural 1984 Folsom Street Fair in opposition to. With their collective ten years of experience in affordable housing advocacy, the co-founders saw the need for a residential coalition to protect the mixed-use South of Market neighborhood against “extreme development pressures” and “an encroaching downtown” poised to spill over into the district from north of Market Street.<sup>27</sup> Years before it became a public sex festival, Connell and Valerio hoped that the Folsom Street Fair would send out a “long-term echo,” asserting the presence of the “vibrant” but long-neglected South of Market community against the destructive forces of urban succession in what was fast becoming one of the country’s most expensive cities.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the fair’s unique trajectory, it has yet to be the subject of sustained academic analysis. Several scholars have explored the gay male leather and sadomasochist (or S/M) subcultures that clustered along Folsom Street’s Miracle Mile following the late 1960s.<sup>29</sup> However, none have considered the Folsom Street Fair an urban phenomenon worthy of a free-standing, in-depth historical study. The few scholars who do discuss the fair tend to portray its evolution into a sexual tourist spectacle as inevitable, if not wholly free of tension. In their 2001 participant-observer testimonial, the fair’s co-founder Kathleen Connell and queer archivist Paul Gabriel offer a valuable picture of the event’s emergence. However, the authors also gloss over less favorable moments in the fair’s story to form a cohesive narrative about the event’s political

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<sup>27</sup> *South of Market News*, June/July 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as *South of Market News*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records].

<sup>28</sup> *South of Market News*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>29</sup> For an in-depth history of gay male leather South of Market, see Rubin, “The Miracle Mile.”

potency, first as an anti-development protest and then as a mutual aid fundraiser in the wake of the raging AIDS crisis.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, Connell and Gabriel crafted their account to memorialize the creation of the fair and not necessarily to offer a critical history of the event's complicated ascendancy.

Gayle Rubin, the foremost historian of South of Market's gay male leather culture, highlights Valerio and Connell's founding intention to suggest that the fair has never been "exclusively" leather-oriented or gay.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Rubin suggests that Valerio and Connell's coalitional, neighborhood-focused ethos was the organizing politic of the fair longer than it was. In reality, the official branding of the fair by its organizers and its representation in the press revealed that Connell and Valerio's anti-development, South-of-Market-first mentality lasted at most three years. While Rubin is correct in saying that the fair never attracted an exclusively gay or leather crowd, by the early 1990s, it was almost exclusively branded as a leather event. She does acknowledge this fact, arguing in an earlier text that the coalescence of San Francisco's Leather Pride Week in 1988 made the fair the "culminating event" of a "major attraction for international leather tourism."<sup>32</sup> By asserting that "Folsom Street again belongs to the leatherfolk" during the fair, Rubin unintentionally reflects the shifting focus of the event from the entire South of Market community to the alluring leather and S/M segment of its population.

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<sup>30</sup> In one glaring example, Connell and Gabriel praised SMMILE board member Paul Lester for increasing the fair's corporate sponsorships in 1995. Yet, as Chapter IV discusses, they make no mention of the fact that Lester's courting of Lucky Strike Cigarettes caused a controversy in the press, leading the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force to admonish the Folsom Street Fair's organizers (Kathleen Connell and Paul Gabriel, "The Power of Broken Hearts: The Origin and Evolution of the Folsom Street Fair," Folsom Street, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.folsomstreet.org/history>).

<sup>31</sup> Rubin, "The Miracle Mile," 268.

<sup>32</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "Elegy for the Valley of the Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981-1996," in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, eds. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 134.

At the same time, Rubin's focus on the 1988 Leather Pride Week as the sole force that catapulted the fair to international notoriety unintentionally obscures the many conflicts within the event's decade-long sexual and commercial ascent. Leatherfolk may have owned Folsom Street during the fair after 1988, but, as Chapter III of this thesis shows, it was the Southern Station police who dictated how the public fairgrounds could be used during the early 1990s. How is it that the Folsom Street Fair was able to grow into a magnet for public sexual tourism while the landscape of commercial and public sex in San Francisco, and specifically the South of Market, was experiencing a relatively opposite trajectory?<sup>33</sup>

One approach to answering this question lies in San Francisco's rich history of permissive sexual liberalism and the commercial potential of the city's long-held stance as a "wide-open town"—a reputation that garnered heightened financial importance after the city economy became reliant on tourism in 1980.<sup>34</sup> In her landmark history of San Francisco's queer commerce from the turn of the twentieth century to 1965, Nan Boyd shows how queer North Beach venues that "obviously catered" to tourists during the 1930s and '40s were relatively insulated from crackdowns on commercial sexuality because of their position in the highly-valued tourism industry. By the interwar period, "business interests" in City Hall were keenly aware of the economic benefits offered by sexual tourism and turned a blind eye to spectacular displays of sexual difference that may have otherwise engendered significant backlash.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For more on increases in the policing of public sex—both in venues and on the streets—during the wake of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, see Allan Bérubé, "The History of Gay Bathhouses," *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 304 (2003): 45-50. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n03\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n03_03).

<sup>34</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1; Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 45.

<sup>35</sup> Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 81.

Bringing this history into the 1980s, Boyd briefly argues that the South of Market leather district “escaped the specter of mainstream tourism” until the increasingly popular Folsom Street Fair began to draw tourists by the decade's later years.<sup>36</sup>

Nan Boyd and Gayle Rubin both locate the rise of the Folsom Street Fair in the context of sexual tourism. However, neither thoroughly examines how a fair that originated as a “political statement” against urban development became one of the city’s most significant outdoor tourist events.<sup>37</sup> What were the urban processes, sexual and cultural shifts, and economic and organizational interests that drove the emergence of the Folsom Street Fair as an unmatched hotspot of sexual tourism? What, if any, controversies did this transformation engender? How did its evolution impact the South of Market community that Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio initially intended the fair to uplift?

Picking up this line of questioning, anthropologist Margot Weiss offers a more sober assessment of the fair’s growth and relationship to changes in the South of Market neighborhood. As Weiss sees it, “the devastation of a multi-use, demographically mixed neighborhood produced the Folsom Street Fair as a tourist event.”<sup>38</sup> Building off Boyd’s work, she asserts the economic connection between San Francisco’s brand as a sexually “tolerant” queer haven, its bulging tourism industry in the 1980s, and its histories of class- and race-based exclusion.<sup>39</sup> Weiss then teases out a set of arguments established by Gayle Rubin, showing how the increased branding of

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<sup>36</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 238.

<sup>37</sup> Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 134.

<sup>38</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 46-47.



queer San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s obscured the city's socioeconomic stratification as a result of its skyrocketing cost of living.<sup>40</sup>

While San Francisco's queer residential population was dropping throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century, the size, economic output, and sexual nature of the Folsom Street Fair were consistently growing. The initial Folsom Street Fair in 1984, which drew roughly 25,000 people, paled compared to the behemoth crowd of more than 300,000 people attending the more leather-oriented fair in 1991.<sup>41</sup> The counterintuitive relationship between the burgeoning commercialization of the fair and the epidemic destruction of a significant portion of the South of Market's queer life during the 1980s revealed two realities. First, the South of Market gay world saw the event as a historically unprecedented opportunity to assert its presence and economically reify itself amid the disastrous AIDS crisis. At the same time, by the 1990s, the fair epitomized what leatherman Joseph Bean called the synonymy between the South of Market and leather sexuality.<sup>42</sup> As such, the rise of the fair as a public sex frenzy obscured much of its home district's complex history of land struggles and governmental neglect while fetishizing the most sexually spectacular—and, thus, the most economically productive—segment of the South of Market community. In the solidification of San Francisco as a “postcard city” throughout the

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<sup>40</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 35; Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 107-109.

<sup>41</sup> Marcus Hernandez, “The New Kid On The Block,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 27, 1984. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19840927.1.28&e=-1984---1984--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+street+fair%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024); “Folsom Street Fair, 1991,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1991. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19910926&e=-----en--20--21--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Bean, “Changing Times South of Market,” 4.

1980s, the Folsom Street Fair's sexual spectacle may have attracted enough tourists for the fair organizers to be able to symbolically and tangibly purchase the event's protection.<sup>43</sup>

Expanding on Weiss's analysis, the following thesis project posits that the "devastation" of the South of Market did not merely produce "the Folsom Street Fair as a tourist event."<sup>44</sup> Instead, this thesis argues that, by the late '80s, the fair gradually became institutionalized, in its own right, as a constitutive force of the branding and further development of neoliberal San Francisco. As strange bedfellows, the Folsom Street Fair and the development of the South of Market occupied a counterintuitive but economically symbiotic relationship. Continued development of the South of Market in the early 1990s and Silicon Valley's irreversible entrenchment in the district rendered much of Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio's founding intention impotent.<sup>45</sup> In turn, the Folsom's erotic leather subculture took center stage, drawing larger crowds than ever before and increasing the economic incentives that the event could offer City Hall by the turn of the twenty-first century. Given its origin, the fair's evolution into a tourist attraction placed the event uneasily within a lineage of efforts by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency—notably, the Yerba Buena Plan—to transform the South of Market into a tourism and convention district.

As such, the evolution of the Folsom Street Fair described below traces not only the event's sexual ascent but also its simultaneous emergence as a corporation. Beyond the shopper frenzy driven by the fair's offerings of leather harnesses and S/M gear after 1989, the Folsom

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<sup>43</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 35.

<sup>44</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> For more on the tech industry's relation to urban space, see Manissa Maharawal, "San Francisco's Tech-led Gentrification: Public Space, Protest, and the Urban Commons, in *City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy*, eds. Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Street Fair's commerce was also the commerce of its cottage industry of hotels, venues, media publications, and shipping companies outside the South of Market neighborhood. As the fair grew, its producers set their gaze further outside the South of Market neighborhood.

To explore the event's complex and multi-pronged rise, this project maps the first fourteen years of the Folsom Street Fair (1984-1997), from its origins in neighborhood advocacy to its rise as a sexual tourist attraction, and employs a combination of newspaper articles, secondary sources, archival materials, and oral history interviews. The first chapter focuses on the fair's inaugural year to establish how profoundly it would change by 1997. This section illustrates how Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio embedded their coalitional intentions into the design of the first fair. It suggests that their efforts sat uncomfortably with the histories of masculine separatism and racial exclusion in the predominantly white and male Folsom leather crowd's venues. Despite this, press correspondents mostly publicized the fair as Connell and Valerio had hoped and specifically focused on the event's diversity and ability to highlight life in the South of Market beyond the infamous leathermen. I then turn to these leathermen to discuss how AIDS-hysteria restrictions on the privacy of semi-public sex, as well as spatial changes brought on by the human and economic costs of the epidemic, engendered a new visible leather consciousness that proved crucial in the fair's continued growth.

The following section focuses on the next three years of the fair (1985-1987), placing them within the context of the Planning Department's Spring 1985 rezoning study of the neighborhood and the 1986 South of Market redevelopment plan. It then directly takes up the issues of branding and privacy, offering one representative example of the debate between gay male separatists and proponents of sexual mixing. This debate is contextualized by women's

burgeoning presence at the fair and the continued efforts of entrepreneurs and real estate developers to transform the South of Market into SoMa, San Francisco's supposed corollary to New York's SoHo. Most importantly, this chapter explores *Bay Area Reporter* leather columnist Marcus Hernandez's key role in branding the fair as a gay leather event amidst the growing hostility of slummers and voyeurs from SoMa's growing affluent nightlife set. Hernandez's influence and Kathleen Connell's replacement by Jayne Salinger, as well as the increased gay orientation of the 1986 fair's political messaging in light of Proposition 64—which would have required people living with AIDS to report their status to the state government—finalized the third fair's movement away from neighborhood issues of development and toward the image of the Folsom Street Fair as a gay community event.

From there, Chapter III directly takes up the issue of branding the fair as a leather event, focusing on the formation of Leather Pride Week in 1988 and the increase of leatherfolk and leather-oriented merchant booths at the fair in 1989, which I call the event's year of commercial leather and public erotics.<sup>46</sup> This shift was, to some degree, the result of organizational repositioning: the dissolution of Salinger and Valerio's South of Market Community Action Network (SCAN) and the formation of the South of Market Merchants' and Individuals' Lifestyle Events (SMMILE) in 1990, which explicitly included in its mission the celebration of sexually alternative subcultures. Drawing a surge of voyeuristic attendees, the 1993 fair emerged as the year of public sadomasochism, prompting a series of press controversies and increasing police regulation of the fair in 1994. Looking toward the larger neighborhood, I place the increase of policing at the fair in conversation with the Alcohol Beverage Commission's labeling

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<sup>46</sup> Erotics henceforth refers to intimate physical displays at the fair (i.e. kissing, grabbing, etc.) that did not yet extend into the realm of actual public sex or full nudity. On that same note,

of the South of Market as a “problem area” and the coalescing interests of the neighborhood’s nascent high-tech Multimedia Gulch. As such, this chapter argues that the rise of the fair as an S/M-oriented event prompted debates about the proper uses of public space indicative of the neighborhood’s trajectory under the emerging wave of tech-driven gentrification. These debates counterintuitively solidified the fair as a sexually alluring, if not supposedly troubling, commercial urban event for tourists.

Finally, the last section explores the years from 1995 to 1997, opening with Michael Valerio’s passing and Paul Lester’s rise to the board of SMMILE. Lester was primarily responsible for expanding the fair’s commercial output at a time when the release of antiretroviral AIDS drug cocktails was relatively increasing the optimism of gay people. Shopping at the fair is one focus point in this chapter, correlated with advertisements and services speaking directly to the event’s growing tourist-shopper crowd. By 1995, political booths were almost entirely replaced by offerings of sex toys and leather goods.

Differentiating between what I call the politics of pleasure and the politics of place, this chapter further examines how Lester’s acquisitive drive wrenched the fair from Connell and Valerio’s anti-development stance and ultimately set the economic and logistical conditions necessary for 1997’s “Indulge,” the event’s unabashed sexual climax. Considering Lester’s actions alongside the demographic dynamics of San Francisco compared to the East Bay, I contend that the Folsom Street Fair would not have been able to experience the trajectory it did were it not for the preceding and contemporary efforts to price up the South of Market. While this thesis highlights darker realities about sexual tourism, it is also a testament to the difficulty of maintaining coalitional, class-conscious politics in light of the material benefits offered by San

Francisco's brand of libertarian, commerce-driven sexual progressivism. The history of the Folsom Street Fair reveals—figuratively and literally—how consumerism can kill community organizing and sexual spectacles can suffocate class struggles over urban space. As four-decade Folsom Street resident Mark I. Chester puts it, the fair's “spectacle lives off this [the South of Market] community, but I'm not sure it cares much about the community's life in return.”<sup>47</sup>

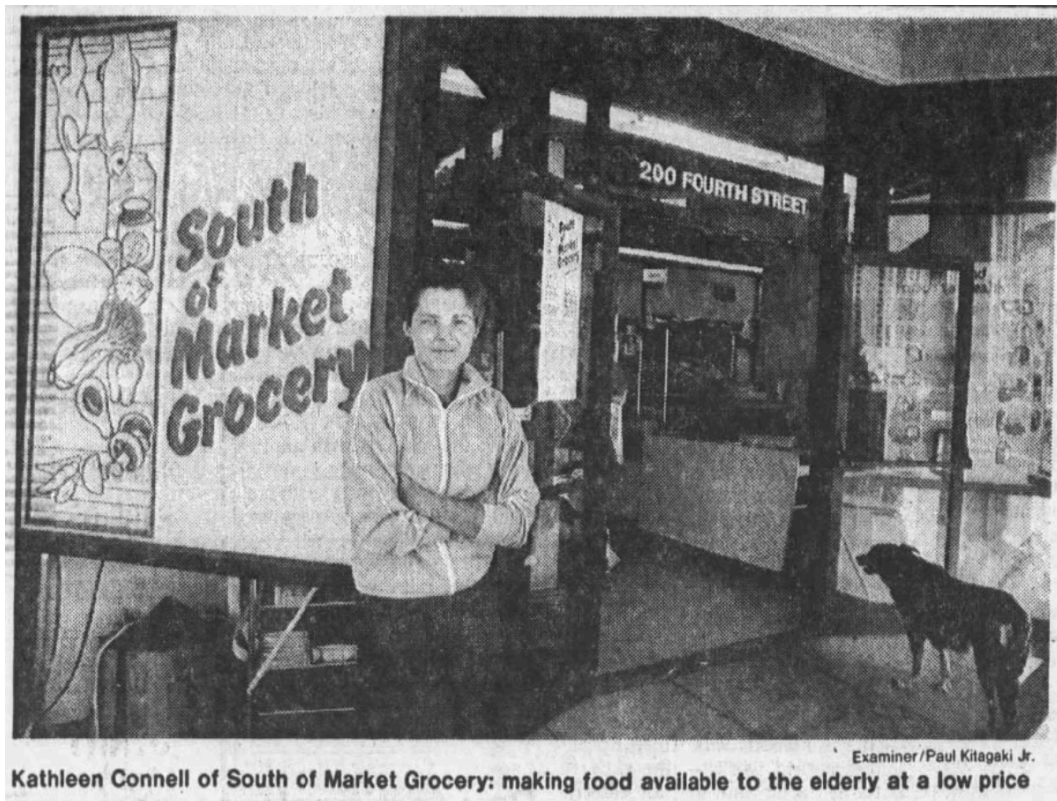
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<sup>47</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author, San Francisco, California, September 2023.

## I. Land Battles and Leather Space, 1984

‘We [Michael Valerio and Kathleen Connell] urge everyone to look beyond the Fair at the changes [in the South of Market]....’

— Allen White, “Rebels... Dreamers... Adventurers of Every Persuasion”<sup>48</sup>



**Figure 4.** Kathleen Connell outside of the South of Market Grocery Co-op, an affordable market she helped open at Fourth and Howard Streets in 1980 (Paul Kitagaki Jr., 1983).<sup>49</sup>

Kathleen Connell started her community advocacy work in the South of Market in 1978 when she joined the Tenants and Owners Redevelopment Corporation (TODCO). This low-income housing advocacy group had evolved out of Tenants and Owners Opposed to

<sup>48</sup> Allen White, “Rebels... Dreamers... Adventurers of Every Persuasion,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1985. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19850926&e=-----en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-michael+valerio-----> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>49</sup> Paul Kitagaki, “Kathleen Connell of South of Market Grocery: making food available to the elderly at a low price,” August 24, 1983, photograph, *San Francisco Examiner*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461128810/>.

Redevelopment (TOOR) in the late 1970s.<sup>50</sup> Connell’s earliest work with TODCO centered around the South of Market Grocery co-op, which opened in 1980 at Fourth and Howard Streets on the ground floor of the recently constructed low-rent senior housing facility Woolf House.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the co-op offered residents an affordable, full-service market amidst a growing food desert; by 1983, it was the “only store in the South of Market... to carry fresh meat and produce.”<sup>52</sup>

Connell recalls the diverse network of over 18,000 South of Market residents who shopped at the co-op, including bachelor seniors, immigrant families, blue-collar workers, and gay men. The store and its patrons reflected the neighborhood’s diverse but changing identity, as “bok choy” and “shrimp paste” stocked “for the convenience of Chinese and Filipino shoppers” sat alongside “candy and smokes” for tourists headed to the new Moscone Center around the corner.<sup>53</sup> Against the backdrop of this changing neighborhood, Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio envisioned the first Folsom Street Fair in 1984, intending it to be “an outdoor event as diverse as the neighborhood in which it is held.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Connell and Paul Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts: The Origin and Evolution of the Folsom Street Fair,” Folsom Street, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.folsomstreet.org/history>

<sup>51</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts”; Ken Wong, “South of Market Grocery co-op: fresh-meat-and-produce oasis,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 24, 1983. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461128810/?terms=Kathleen%20Connell&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>52</sup> Wong, “South of Market Grocery co-op”; Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

<sup>53</sup> Ken Wong, “South of Market grocery: oasis of fresh produce, meat,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 24, 1983. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461132684/?terms=Kathleen%20Connell&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>54</sup> Megahood ‘84 Collector’s Edition program by Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio, 22 September 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.



Connell and Valerio occupied the same activist circles before they ever met.

Unbeknownst to Connell, Valerio had been the Assistant Director of Management at TODCO since 1979. For Valerio, his activist work in the South of Market's housing landscape was deeply personal. He came from a long-standing Filipino family in east South of Market; his father had worked as a shipbuilder along the Embarcadero, and his grandfather, a merchant seaman, had made his home in South Park. Valerio also had his hand in many pots. Although TODCO focused on the district's senior residents, he was a board member of the South of Market Consortium, the North and South of Market Adult Day Health Care, and the South of Market (SOMA) Alliance. Although Valerio frequented the gay leather bars along the district's Miracle Mile, he understood the bigger picture of the neighborhood and its challenges better than the average leatherman who had migrated to the Miracle Mile since the late '60s.<sup>55</sup> As such, he embraced the culture of gay male leather but did not adopt the leather community's tendency to reject political organizing.<sup>56</sup>

Connell and Valerio formally connected in the early '80s, not because of TODCO but through their work with the SOMA Alliance, a "neighborhood-based advocacy group" that was particularly vocal about the needs of the district's low-income residents.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the early 1980s, the SOMA Alliance represented the South of Market community in negotiations with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency and Olympia & York, the development firm responsible

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<sup>55</sup> *South of Market News*, June/July 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as *South of Market News*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records].

<sup>56</sup> Manuel Castells, "Structural Identity, Sexual Liberation and Urban Structure: The Gay Community in San Francisco," in *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 156

<sup>57</sup> Connell and Gabriel, "The Power of Broken Hearts"; Gerald Adams, "Controversy missing from new Yerba Buena plan," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 13, 1984. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460714475/?terms=Kathleen%20Connell&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024).

for breaking ground on the second phase of the Yerba Buena redevelopment plan.<sup>58</sup> Olympia & York completed the first part of the plan's Yerba Buena Center in 1981, opening the Moscone Center South in a plot of land bound by Folsom, Howard, 3rd, and 4th Streets. The convention hall's name ironically paid homage to the recently assassinated former mayor, George Moscone, who was considerably more wary of redevelopment than his affluent successor, Dianne Feinstein.<sup>59</sup> The SOMA Alliance had been deadlocked in negotiations with the Redevelopment Agency and Olympia & York for years. By the time they reached an agreement in 1984—leaving Connell and the Alliance “extremely gratified”—the advocacy group had campaigned against every construction proposal that would have negatively impacted the district's most disenfranchised tenants.<sup>60</sup>

In 1983, Connell and Valerio were beginning to organize against another proposed wave of development that posed a particular threat to Folsom Street residents and merchants, including the artists living in warehouses on Folsom between 3rd and 6th Streets and the gay and lesbian residents clustered around the Miracle Mile on 7th and 8th Streets.<sup>61</sup> In August of 1983, the City Planning Department and the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association

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<sup>58</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

<sup>59</sup> Gayle Rubin even goes as far as to say that one of the “legacies” of Moscone's assassin Dan White was “a measure of responsibility for the accelerated Manhattanization [i.e. redevelopment] of San Francisco in the 1980s” [Gayle S. Rubin, “The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather, 1962-1997,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 264].

<sup>60</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts”; Adams, “Controversy missing from new Yerba Buena plan.”

<sup>61</sup> For more on the formation of these residential concentrations, see Mark R. Wolfe, “The Wired Loft: Lifestyle Innovation Diffusion and Industrial Networking in the Rise of San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch,” *Urban Affairs Review* 34, no. 5 (May 1999): 718-719. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/10780879922184158>.

(SPUR) released the controversial Downtown Plan—also called the South of Market Plan—for “citizen review.”<sup>62</sup>

One of the Downtown Plan’s primary goals was to restrict the over cramping of high-rises in the business hub North of Market by redirecting “future office growth to less traditional areas south of Market Street.” Attempting to form a “Special Development District between Howard and Folsom Streets,” the Planning Department finalized a new rezoning study of the South of Market a year after releasing the proposed Downtown Plan.<sup>63</sup> In the study, the Department zoned the area between Howard and Folsom Streets for a mixture of “light industrial” (M-1), “heavy commercial” (C-M), and “downtown support” (C-3-S) uses. The “downtown support” assignment most directly reflected the Redevelopment Agency’s view that the west South of Market was a holding center for the city’s expanding business district north of Market Street. The Planning Department’s glaring omission of Folsom Street’s thousands of residents was even more telling. Despite the existence of a “residential-commercial combined” zoning category, the Planning Department did not zone a single area along Folsom Street for future residential use.<sup>64</sup> Instead, the Downtown Plan “projected that 1,000 to 1,5000 new housing units needed to be built annually” in the South of Market to accommodate the workforce of the bulging business district north of Market Street.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts”; Dean Macris, “San Francisco’s Downtown Plan,” SPUR, August 1, 1999, <https://www.spur.org/publications/urbanist-article/1999-08-01/san-franciscos-downtown-plan>.

<sup>63</sup> James Simmie, “Planning theory and planning practice: An analysis of the San Francisco Downtown Plan,” *Cities* 4, no. 4 (November 1987): 312. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751\(87\)90092-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751(87)90092-8).

<sup>64</sup> City and County of San Francisco Department of City Planning, South of Market Rezoning Study, July 1984, SF EPH, Sc-Sy box, South of Market District 1983-84 folder, San Francisco Ephemera Collection, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>65</sup> Dean Macris, “San Francisco’s Downtown Plan.”

The proposed Downtown Plan prompted an unprecedented backlash within the San Francisco gay community. Noting that the community had a historically “low profile on [city] planning issues,” Chuck Forester started a weekly *Bay Area Reporter* column in October of 1983 that discussed “planning issues of direct importance to Gays and Lesbians.” He also urged his readers to make their “voice heard” by joining supervisorial hearings on the Downtown Plan and voting “yes” on 1983 ballot Proposition M, which would have imposed a limit on high-rise development in the city.<sup>66</sup> Writing with the knowledge that Prop. M did not pass that year, Rodney Thomas later took a more sardonic approach:

*Well I hope you... who voted against proposition M are happy. Now we have Feinstein's Downtown Plan, which 'controls' building downtown. But massive development can't stop, so where does the Downtown Plan expect it to go? To the 'under-utilized' south of Market area... Hey, but what the heck, all those Gay bars, hotels, restaurants, baths & shops (not forgetting affordable housing) never meant much to the Gay community anyway, did they?<sup>67</sup>*

As part of this growing resistance to the proposed Downtown Plan in 1983, Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio began acting as advocates for the South of Market alliance in meetings with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, the Planning Department, and the Board of Supervisors. While working as SOMA Alliance representatives, Connell and Valerio started to bond over their shared political ambitions. In the context of the tentative Downtown Plan and the AIDS crisis, which was rapidly proliferating by 1984, the pair felt the urgency to bridge their queerness and neighborhood activism more than ever before.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Chuck Forester, “Planning San Francisco: What’s In It For Us?,” *Bay Area Reporter*, October 13, 1983. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19831013.1.18&srpos=1&e=-1983---1983--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22downtown+plan%22-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>67</sup> Rodney Thomas, “Happy with ‘M’ Victory,” *Bay Area Reporter*, November 17, 1983. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19831117.1.8&srpos=2&e=-1983---1983--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22downtown+plan%22-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>68</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

Turning to the legacy of Harvey Milk—a staggering Castro community figure and the first openly gay man elected to San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors in 1977—Connell and Valerio found inspiration in the Castro Street Fair.<sup>69</sup> Milk organized the first Castro Street Fair seven years before the 1983 Downtown Plan under the auspices of the Castro Village Association, a business group he founded in response to the homophobic culture of the Eureka Valley Merchants Association.<sup>70</sup> In a letter to the *Bay Area Reporter* following the first Castro Fair, Milk described his vision for the street fair’s power to mobilize a neighborhood politically:

*And the spirit of cooperation that neighbors bring to putting on a street fair soon becomes directed toward solving chronic neighborhood problems. It never fails! That’s the spirit I would like to see at City Hall... Remember, you made the Castro Street Fair what it is, and you can make the City what you want it to be.*<sup>71</sup>

The Milk model of street fairs was, at least conceptually, more coalitional than commercial. He wanted every neighborhood to have a street fair, not simply to bolster the city’s economy via tourism but to foster a web of grassroots collaboration between the city’s residents. Indeed, Milk was acutely aware of the delicate balance between adding “more fun” to the Castro Street Fair each year and “keeping commercialism under control.”<sup>72</sup>

Through the history of the Castro Street Fair, Connell and Valerio found a blueprint for the idea coalescing in their heads: a street fair that would be “populist and activist,” linking the South of Market tenants and business owners’ struggle against development to the Folsom

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<sup>69</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

<sup>70</sup> For more on the political life of Harvey Milk, his role in the Castro, and his impact on San Francisco’s identity, see Lincoln A. Mitchell, “Harvey Milk,” in *San Francisco Year Zero: Political Upheaval, Punk Rock, and a Third-Place Baseball Team* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 87-106.

<sup>71</sup> Harvey Milk, “40,000 Throng Castro St. Fair,” *The Bay Area Reporter*, August 18, 1977. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19770818.1.11&srpos=11&e=-1974-----en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22Castro+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>72</sup> Harvey Milk, “40,000 Throng Castro St. Fair.”

crowd's fight against AIDS.<sup>73</sup> Guided by the motto "the world loves only the original," the fair's co-founders sought to celebrate the "varied cultural, social, and ethnic enclaves" of the South of Market.<sup>74</sup> In 1983, Connell and Valerio began researching other street fairs, connecting with South of Market merchants, and meeting with city officials. Harry Britt, the city supervisor who succeeded Harvey Milk and was a mentor to them both, vouched for their mission in his supervisorial meetings.<sup>75</sup> Having worked out some of the logistics by 1984, Connell and Valerio turned to the issue of promoting their new street fair. Four months before the fair, the co-founders printed and distributed the first edition of the *South of Market News*.

This periodical was a project of the South of Market Alliance, and its release was set to coincide with each year's fair. On the first issue's cover story published in June, Connell and Valerio foregrounded the residential milieu of the post-industrial South of Market. "Not too far behind the concrete facades," they wrote, "a pulsating, living mosaic-like community is alive and well."<sup>76</sup> Working against the image of the South of Market as "an empty slum in need of urban renewal," as pro-development city officials tended to portray the district, Connell and Valerio wanted fair visitors to see and celebrate the South of Market's everyday life force.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Connell and Gabriel, "The Power of Broken Hearts."

<sup>74</sup> *Southern Oracle*, 1989, 1996-33, box 85, folder 19, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Records].

<sup>75</sup> Connell and Gabriel, "The Power of Broken Hearts."

<sup>76</sup> *South of Market News*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>77</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "The Miracle Mile," 268.

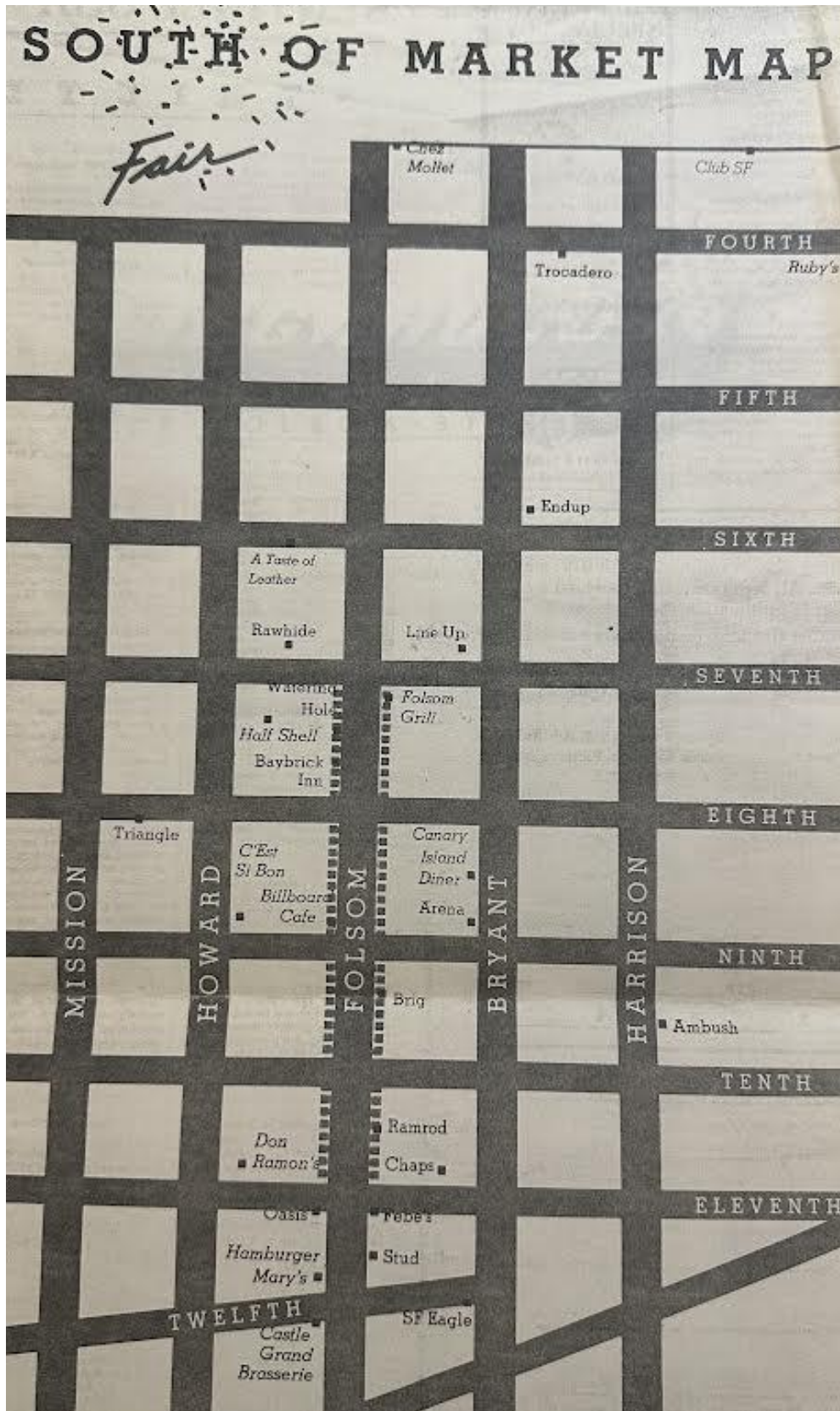


Figure 5. Map of 1984 Folsom Street Fair with notable South of Market establishments marked and the faigrounds indicated by a dotted line (GLBT Historical Society, 1984).<sup>78</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Map of 1984 Folsom Street Fair, September 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

Entitled Megahood—a name meant to conjure the diverse, multi-use character of the South of Market—the first Folsom Street Fair took place September 23rd on a four-block stretch of Folsom Street between Seventh and Eleventh Streets (Fig. 5).<sup>79</sup> Among the offerings amidst its bookended “Folsom” and “SOMA” sound stages were a lineup of postwar classic cars, arts and crafts booths for families, and a block-long art deco walk.<sup>80</sup> Although the fairground occupied the whole of the “Miracle Mile,” Connell and Valerio established a specific “LeatherSpace” at the West end of the fair.<sup>81</sup> This area featured a few booths that sold a tamer sample of the products fairgoers could purchase down the street at Alan Selby’s leather shop Mr. S. It also housed the Folsom stage, on which popular South of Market leatherfolk like *Bay Area Reporter* columnist Marcus Hernandez presented “leather fashion” late into the afternoon.<sup>82</sup>

The presence of this leather-specific zone reflected Connell and Valerio’s populist intentions behind the fair, as well as the negotiations they had to make in trying to mobilize a sexually and generationally mixed crowd. Visitors attending the fair noticed that the offerings became less “kinky” as they snaked through the crowds from Eleventh to Seventh Streets.<sup>83</sup> Of the four open bars on the fairground—The Baybrick Inn, the Brig, the Ramrod, and the Arena—

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<sup>79</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts”; 1984 Folsom Street Fair South of Market map, n.d., 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>80</sup> Megahood ‘84 *Sentinel USA* advertisement, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>81</sup> Megahood ‘84 collector’s edition program, 23 September 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as Megahood ‘84 collector’s edition program, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records].

<sup>82</sup> Allen White, “All’s Fair on Folsom Street: Makin’ Hay While the Sun Shines,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 27, 1984. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19840927.1.15&srpos=171&e=-----en--20--161--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>83</sup> White, “All’s Fair on Folsom Street.”



the two westmost bars, the Brig and the Ramrod, were reportedly the most packed throughout the day.<sup>84</sup> By 1984, the Miracle Mile's four-block stretch housed various nightlife and sexual commerce venues. Walking eastbound down Folsom, the “leather fashion show” and “uptempo music” spilling out of the Ramrod on Eleventh gay way to the “tastefully mellow” atmosphere of Theatre Rhinoceros’ performance in the Bay Brick Inn on Eighth, a woman’s performance venue, bar, and hotel overseen by Connell’s then-girlfriend and former actress Lauren Hewitt.<sup>85</sup> Through its layout, the fair mirrored Folsom Street’s cultural topography in the 1980s, with its gay residents and establishments clustered around the “Miracle Mile” in the westernmost portion of the district and an increasing presence of live-in artist studios and performance spaces in renovated warehouses further east between 3rd and 6th Streets.<sup>86</sup>

The South of Market's gay leathermen noticed an unusual crowd in their haunts on the Folsom during the fair, compared to the primarily white and almost exclusively macho male set that had historically frequented the area. While the population of gay males living in the South of Market had exploded throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s, lesbians would not populate the district in significant numbers until the 1980s.<sup>87</sup> Lauren Hewitt’s Baybrick Inn reflected and further drove this lesbian growth when it opened in 1982, becoming the first women’s venue on the Miracle Mile of Folsom Street.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Karl Stewart, “Black Lashes,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 27, 1984. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19840927.1.29&srpos=11&e=-1984---1984--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+street+fair%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>85</sup> White, “All’s Fair on Folsom Street”; Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

<sup>86</sup> Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 719.

<sup>87</sup> Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 718; Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 106-107.

<sup>88</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

In the late '70s, the only S/M-oriented sex venue that was open to women in San Francisco was the Catacombs, a private, invite-only fisting dungeon in the basement of Steve McEachern's Mission District Victorian home.<sup>89</sup> Following the Catacomb's demise in 1981 and throughout the mid-'80s, Mission district resident Marilyn recalls that "the only game in town for S/M lesbians to be around each other" was the women's educational S/M group The Outcasts, which held monthly meetings at the Shotwell House in the Mission District.<sup>90</sup> An article published in *Drummer* four years before the 1984 Folsom Street Fair even more shamelessly laid out the gender dynamics of the Miracle Mile's leather and S/M venues:

*Leave your fag hag girlfriend behind... Many of the bars do not have a ladies room at all; and most of the private clubs bar admission to women altogether. For the most part, Folsom is a men-only environment... [It] gets too raunchy for female company.<sup>91</sup>*

The rationale that women were excluded because "female company" threatened the sexual mood unraveled in the case of non-white men and gender non-conforming males who had their own experiences with discrimination in South of Market venues. There was a long history of discretionary admission practices dating back to the early days of commercial leather in the South of Market. In the 1964 *Life* article that exposed America to the first leather bar in the South of Market, the Tool Box, co-owner Bill Ruquy laid out his approach to forming a homomale leather space: "This is the antifeminine side of homosexuality... We throw out

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<sup>89</sup> "Fisting" refers both to a sexual practice—sexual penetration by the hand and arm, rather than a penis or sex toy—and a sexual subculture that often overlapped with S/M and leather subcultures, but had its own distinct history [Gayle S. Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," in *Leatherfolk: Radical sex, people, politics, and practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991), 121, 130-131].

<sup>90</sup> Even so, Marilyn recalls that the Outcasts had frequent internal conversations throughout the 1980s regarding the organization's lack of women of color [Marilyn, interview by author, San Francisco, California. September 30, 2023].

<sup>91</sup> "The Folsom South of Market Attitude," *Drummer* 37, 1980, 33, quoted in Sides, *Erotic City*, 107.

anybody who is too swishy. If one is going to be homosexual, why have anything to do with women of either sex?”<sup>92</sup>

By the late 1970s, the Club Baths—a franchise of the nationwide bathhouse chain located on Eighth and Howard Streets—had become a hotbed of discrimination in the South of Market, leading to a slew of civil lawsuits against the venue and a mass protest organized by Bay Area Gay Liberation, the Black Gay Caucus, and the Society for Individual Rights in 1977.<sup>93</sup> Unlike the extant leather venues South of Market, the Club Baths was one of the non-leather sex venues that had opened in one of the district’s empty warehouse spaces during the mid-1970s. The club advertised itself to a distinctly bourgeois and white crowd reminiscent of the Castro District, reflecting the South of Market’s growth as a sex district for gay concentrations outside of the district.<sup>94</sup> Mark I. Chester recalls manager Ray Andrews’s attempts to kick him out of the venue throughout the early ‘80s, suggesting that Andrews tried to attract an affluent, masculine crowd distinct from Chester’s working-class, leather-clad South of Market image:

*He didn’t like the fact that I was dancing in the hallway. He said something like ‘this is a sex club, not a dance club’ and told me if he saw it again he’d kick me out. The next time he said it was because of my leather boots... I think he connected them with the South of Market, while Club Baths was, you know, middle-class guys with towels.*<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Welch, “Homosexuality in America,” *Life*, June 26, 1964, 66-80.

<sup>93</sup> “Have you been clubbed by Club Baths?” demonstration poster, 1977, SUB EPH, box B-G, folder C, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as “Have you been clubbed by Club Baths?” demonstration poster, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection]; “Has the Club Baths Discriminated Against You?” flyer, 1979, SUB EPH, box B-G, folder C, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>94</sup> According to Gayle Rubin, “the same features that made the area attractive to leather bars made it hospitable to other forms of gay sexual commerce” [Gayle S. Rubin, “The Miracle Mile,” 258].

<sup>95</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author, San Francisco, California, September 2023.

# HAVE YOU BEEN CLUBBED BY THE CLUB BATHS?

## MANY PEOPLE HAVE:

**"EFFEMINATE" MEN:** Last April, Robert Bartlett and Randy Montgomery entered the Club Baths. One wore a few rings; the second had on a dab of musk oil. The two were refused admittance to the Club Baths by an attendant who told them: "This is a bath-house for men." In a similar incident, Dan "Tanye" Whittaker was also barred from entering, due to effeminacy.

**THIRD WORLD MEN:** Melvin Squire, a Black man, is but one of the many instances of racial discrimination at the Club Baths. Another Black man, Clarence "Loretta Love" Austin, was refused admittance because he "looked like he had a cold," according to the attendant on duty. Austin didn't have a single symptom of illness of any kind.

**"ELDERLY" MEN:** Anthony Thompson was refused admittance to the Club Baths because the attendant felt he was too old to use the facilities safely. Anthony is 39 years old.

**OTHERS.** Michael Cherolis was thrown out for the "unmasculine" conduct of snapping his fingers. Hank Wilson was barred from entering because he wore a BAGL (Bay Area Gay Liberation) t-shirt. Richard Schwartz and Jerry Hanley were turned away because they came in with two others who were judged "effeminate" by the attendant--"guilt" by association.

## DEMONSTRATE!

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 16th**  
at the **CLUB BATHS, 201 8th Street**

**8 PM - MIDNIGHT**  
(corner of Howard)

## PARTY!

**MIDNIGHT - 4 AM**  
at the **GAY COMMUNITY CENTER, 32 Page Street (near Market)**  
**\$1.50 Donation**      **FREE Beer, Wine, & Juice**

We're not anti-baths; we're anti-discrimination. We believe that the Club Baths practices arbitrary discrimination on the basis of race, age, and appearance in their illegal screening process. This is in direct violation of the Unruh Act, which prohibits discrimination of any kind in public places. As victims of discrimination, we cannot allow bigotry within our own community. We should be free to choose our own sexual partners without having the standards of others imposed upon us.

Who are we? We are a coalition of gay people like you: old and young, fat and thin, Third World and white, effeminate and masculine. We are people representative of the many ways the Club Baths has discriminated against our brothers.

Support our action. Picket and party with us on October 16.

Partial list of sponsoring organizations:

Bay Area Gay Liberation (BAGL)  
Black Gay Caucus  
Board of Directors of Society for Individual Rights (SIR)

**HAVE YOU BEEN CLUBBED BY THE CLUB BATHS?**  
Join the class-action law suit. Call attorney Richard Gayer at 861-3454  
For more information, call 431-1522 or 863-6831.

## WILL YOU BE NEXT?

**Figure 6.** Flyer for protest against discrimination at Club Baths on Eighth and Howard Streets, organized by Bay Area Gay Liberation, the Black Gay Caucus, and the Society for Individual Rights (GLBT Historical society, 1977).<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> "Have you been clubbed by Club Baths?" demonstration poster, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection.

While the actions of Club Bath's staff may have been more egregious examples of the racism and misogyny in San Francisco's gay world, they were by no means isolated occurrences. In his study of the Mission District's Gay Latino Alliance (GALA) from 1975 to 1983, Horacio Ramírez describes how various gay venues in the city required people of color to present two or even three forms of identification for entry—a troublingly common practice. Although many of the men in Ramírez's study described the Folsom “as a sexual center for their adventures,” GALA explicitly critiqued the “macho bandwagon” of the South of Market's “leather clone” culture. In doing so, the organization made a powerful claim against the largely untoned racism and “male chauvinism” of white gay male culture.<sup>97</sup>

During the rise of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, there were notable moves toward gender integration in San Francisco's leather community, marked by the increased presence of leatherwomen in community organizations and the institutionalization of the Mr./Mrs. leather contest title system.<sup>98</sup> However, stories of racist and sexist exclusion in South of Market venues still ran throughout the pages of the *Bay Area Reporter* by the first Folsom Street Fair in 1984. A month before the first Folsom Street Fair, Henry Michael Judge Chappell took to the newspaper after being kicked out of the Watering Hole on Folsom and Seventh Streets. Chappell, who had been living in the hotel above the Watering Hole for over a year, described how the manager requested two forms of photo identification after seeing her “appearance as a transvestite.” Having heard stories of the manager's “discriminatory remarks regarding blacks,” she was

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<sup>97</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, “‘That’s My Place!’: Negotiating Racial, Sexual, and Gender Politics in San Francisco’s Gay Latino Alliance, 1975-1983,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (April 2003): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704613>, 232, 253.

<sup>98</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981-1996,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, eds. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 131.

surprised that, among the few Black patrons in the bar, she “was singled out.” She clarified that the manager’s actions were indicative of a tension boiling over in the gay world: “I feel that this type of attitude reflects very poor taste—not just upon this bar, but upon this community itself.” Even so, Chappell ended her indictment by asserting that the other patrons in the bar had no issue with her.<sup>99</sup>

The demographically mixed South of Market community that Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio hoped to showcase through the Folsom Street Fair was not free of its own internal disputes. As Folsom resident Mark I. Chester describes, the countercultural “South of Market crew” and “Folsom leathermen” often overlapped but were unique communities with demographic, political, and spatial distinctions.<sup>100</sup> Mark Thompson, the senior editor for the *Advocate*, further illustrated the separation between the district’s “Filipino, Samoan, and other Third World” populations and its leather community, calling them “separate realities that seldom touch[ed].”<sup>101</sup> In aiming to bring together these relatively disjunct groups, Connell and Valerio ran the risk that the sexually spectacular leathermen and the fair’s location in the heart of the Miracle Mile would complicate their “populist” vision.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Henry Michael Judge Chappell, “Not Welcome Here,” *Bay Area Reporter*, August 9, 1984. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19840809.1.8&srpos=10&e=-1984---1984--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22the+watering+hole%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>100</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author.

<sup>101</sup> Mark Thompson, “To the Limits and Beyond: Folsom Street, A Neighborhood Changes,” *Advocate*, July 8, 1982, 28.

<sup>102</sup> However, Connell and Valerio primarily chose this location because it was one of the main areas provisioned for wholesale redevelopment by the 1983 Downtown Plan [*South of Market News*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records]; Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

For some attendees from the leather crowd, the fair's supposed coalitional intentions were of little importance. Instead, as columnist Karl Stewart saw it, the fair was merely leathermen's "excuse to come out and be in the sun."<sup>103</sup> For Stewart, the placement of "political action booths" on the "far right and far left" of the fairgrounds indicated that leather sexuality, not multicultural politics, was central.<sup>104</sup> Others at the fair noted the diverse crowd but viewed it with confusion or even distaste. A writer for *Drummer* described the milieu as "curiously mixed," while the owners at the Watering Hole kept the venue's blinds shut all day, hoping "the punk rockers outside on the [SOMA] stage would go away."<sup>105</sup>

For the most part, however, reviews of the fair circulating throughout the gay press echoed Connell and Valerio's aspirations. After manning their booth on the Folsom, members of the San Francisco-based, mixed-gender S/M education group Society of Janus wrote to their international membership to describe how the fair "attracted a diversity of participants that ranged from the curious to the well-known personalities [i.e., the leathermen] from the South of Market."<sup>106</sup> The same *Drummer* writer who was surprised by the mixed crowd ultimately admitted that "the fair was, after all, a neighborhood effort, [and] not just a leather festival."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Stewart, "Black Lashes."

<sup>104</sup> In reality, the placement of the booths was likely more indicative of the fact that attendees needed space to move through the cramped four-block fair. Stewart, "Black Lashes."

<sup>105</sup> "Leather Scene," *Drummer* 79, 1984, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/079/index.htm>; Stewart, "Black Lashes."

<sup>106</sup> *Growing Pains: Published by The Society of Janus, Inc. for its members*, 1984, 2000-19, box 1, folder 12, Cynthia Slater papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>107</sup> "Leather Scene," *Drummer* 79.

In their live broadcast of the day on KUSF, radio station producers Ray Michaels and Jim Dunbar similarly described the fair “not so much as a Gay event but as a time to emphasize the unique talents of the people who live South of Market.” Perhaps most notably, journalist Allen White marveled at Connell and Valerio’s “success” in broadening “perceptions people hold of the area.” “Most expected leather,” he conceded, “and they got it. Yet, they got so much more.”<sup>108</sup> Even Marcus Hernandez, who had previously marketed the fair to the leather community in his weekly “Mr. Marcus” column, appreciated the hodgepodge of “straights, gays, and all manner of humanity” who fostered a “real human to human sense of family.”<sup>109</sup>

In its first year, the leather presence at the Folsom Street Fair was not the sole focus of its representation in gay media nor of its branding under the direction of Connell, Valerio, and the South of Market Alliance. It had yet to become known as an explicitly gay, leather, and S/M-oriented sexual event. Nonetheless, Connell and Valerio recognized that bringing together a population of leathermen would undoubtedly lead to cruising and, if taken to its most sexual extreme, the threat of police intervention.

To avoid a potential police crackdown, the fair’s co-founders collaborated closely with security monitors provided by Community United Against Violence (CUAV) and, to a lesser extent, officers from the San Francisco Police Department's Southern Station under Captain Robert Forni.<sup>110</sup> In a letter written to CUAV Program Coordinator Suzanne Gautier a week

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<sup>108</sup> Allen, “All’s Fair on Folsom Street.”

<sup>109</sup> Marcus Hernandez, “Baptism on the Miracle Mile,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 20, 1984. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19840920.1.32&e=-1984---1984--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+street+fair%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024); Marcus Hernandez, “The New Kid On The Block,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 27, 1984. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19840927.1.28&e=-1984---1984--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+street+fair%22-----> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>110</sup> Megahood ‘84 collector’s edition program, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records



before the fair, Connell and Valerio noted “questions of obscenity” as an area of concern for the monitors.<sup>111</sup> In turn, Gautier took time during the final safety monitor training to discuss the protocol for handling “questions of nudity.” The “event hierarchy” was as follows: “monitors” were the first response team, followed by “medics,” and finally police. Gautier clarified that police were to be “call[ed] in” only if necessary.<sup>112</sup> Ultimately, the police were not called in, which Gautier celebrated in a debrief to Connell and Valerio after the fair: “We took the Police Liaison completely out of the realm of the safety monitors!”<sup>113</sup> Even with its “kinky” LeatherSpace, few descriptions of the first fair mentioned anything more physical than shirtless men cruising with their eyes—or “hot dudes parading their pecs around the four-block pastiche of brotherhood,” as Marcus Hernandez put it.<sup>114</sup> While many attendees came “to look at each other,” they did little more than look.<sup>115</sup>

The organizations that received donations from the fair also reflected Connell and Valerio’s broader focus on the South of Market residential community, not just its gay leather occupation and subculture. The Shanti Project, a medical support network and hospice for people living with AIDS was the only AIDS-specific organization serving as a beneficiary in 1984. The other three organizations—two of which Valerio was on the board of—were support groups directly benefiting the South of Market community and its diverse population: The North and

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<sup>111</sup> Letter from Michael Valerio and Kathleen Connell to Suzanne Gautier, 20 September 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence Records (CUAV), GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>112</sup> Outline for CUAV Monitor Training, 21 September 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Suzanne Gautier to Michael Valerio and Kathleen Connell, 1 October 1984, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>114</sup> White, “All’s Fair on Folsom Street”; Hernandez, “The New Kid On The Block.”

<sup>115</sup> “Leather Scene,” *Drummer* 79.

South of Market Adult Day Health Corporation manned a live-in center for senior residents facing risk of institutionalization; The South of Market Health Center ran a clinic for medically underserved residents, helping a clientele of 35% Filipino residents throughout the 1980s; and, as mentioned, The South of Market Alliance was a voice for the district's working-class community in negotiations with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency.<sup>116</sup> Regardless of how the fair shook out, its organizers had ensured that the money spent on the Folsom that afternoon would be redirected into the South of Market community. Connell and Valerio described that the fair was explicitly “designed to put any proceeds that are made back into the South of Market community.”<sup>117</sup> While leathermen may have occupied a significant presence on the fairgrounds, they were not the primary focus of fundraising efforts by the South of Market Alliance.

For some leathermen (or leatherpeople, for that matter), the fair's fundraising efforts were less valuable than the public daytime visibility it promoted. Karl Stewart's totalizing perception of the fair as an “excuse to come out into the sun” was not only a rejection of the co-founders' coalitional aims. This statement also acknowledged the fair's unprecedented approach to bringing leather culture out of the shadows.<sup>118</sup> Since the early days of the Miracle Mile two decades prior, South of Market's commercial leather world had primarily operated at night, “unfolding in the dark” as Mark I. Chester recalled.<sup>119</sup> On the pages of the *Advocate* in 1982, Mark Thompson illustrated how leathermen would migrate to the district's “nearly 30 gay bars,

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<sup>116</sup> Megahood '84 collector's edition program, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records; Dexter Waugh, “Filipinos protest about S.F. clinic,” *Bay Area Reporter*, December 3, 1987. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461263220/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>117</sup> *South of Market News*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>118</sup> Stewart, “Black Lashes.”

<sup>119</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author.

restaurants and sex clubs” only after the rest of the neighborhood’s population had turned in for the day.<sup>120</sup> Through the Folsom Street Fair, leatherpeople—especially those who were sexually and racially marginalized—enjoyed new possibilities for collective visibility.

Years prior, such openness was unimaginable and even actively discouraged within the leather and S/M communities. After a photograph of the S/M playroom in his Folsom Street apartment was called a “torture chamber” and captioned with his address in a *Chronicle* article covering the 1981 Folsom Street fire, Mark I. Chester recalls experiencing “zero support” from the leather community. Instead, former friends viewed his being forced out of the closet as a threat to their privacy: “I had a ton of people tell me they could no longer be my friends. Most other people were not open—well, they were very, very much in the leather closet and it was risky, you know, to be totally visible about who you were and the kind of sex you liked to have.”<sup>121</sup>

However, Chester noticed “something change” during the first Folsom Street Fair in 1984, describing the influx of people in leather vests and harnesses that crowded the street during the afternoon. “I had never seen anything like it before,” he continues. Yet, some men were slower to change than others and were hesitant to be so open at the first fair, regardless of the anonymity offered by the crowd of over 25,000 attendees.<sup>122</sup> While “hundreds of leather dudes

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<sup>120</sup> Thompson, “To the Limits and Beyond.”

<sup>121</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author.

<sup>122</sup> The San Francisco police department estimated that anywhere from 25,000 to 30,000 people attended the first Folsom Street Fair [Marcus Hernandez, “The New Kid On The Block”].

ventured forth into an outside world,” a less adventurous group “shrank from the sunlight” under cover of The Brig and the Ramrod.<sup>123</sup>

If these men were seeking privacy from the outside world during the fair, they did so with the understanding that the privacy they had long enjoyed in South of Market’s sex venues was currently under attack by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (DPH). Since the early onset of the AIDS crisis in 1981, the city’s gay bathhouses had become the center of conversations by both good- and bad-faith political actors who sought to curb the spread of the disease. By 1984, calls to close the bathhouses had led several bathhouses and S/M and fisting venues in the South of Market to shudder.<sup>124</sup>

Frank Strona, a public health educator working with the Center for Disease Control in San Francisco by 1982, describes how misinformation from non-gay clinicians and anti-gay crusaders in the early ‘80s turned fisting and sadomasochism into the “sacrificial lambs” of the “anti-bathhouse crusade.” “Some people said fisting was just unsafe and irresponsible, but, like most sexual practices, there were safe and unsafe approaches,” Strona continues.<sup>125</sup> Even so, the group Bay Area Physicians for Human Rights listed “fisting” as an inherently “unsafe” sex practice in June 1984, four months before the first Folsom Street Fair.<sup>126</sup> Louis Gaspar echoed these sentiments in 1983 when, of his own volition, he shut down his South of Market S/M “sex palace,” The Hothouse. Explaining how “business plummeted by fifty percent” that year, Gaspar

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<sup>123</sup> White, “All’s Fair on Folsom Street.”

<sup>124</sup> Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 114-119.

<sup>125</sup> Frank Strona (public health specialist), interview by author, Zoom, August 14, 2023; Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 112.

<sup>126</sup> Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003): 81, [https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1300/J082v44n03\\_05](https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1300/J082v44n03_05).

blamed the rise of AIDS on the sexual exploration of the gay community: “I tried to give gay men a place to live out their adolescent sexuality... but people have been going to extremes in recent years and now it’s all balancing out.”<sup>127</sup>

As the district with the highest concentration of gay bathhouses and the epicenter of San Francisco’s most experimental sexual cultures, the South of Market’s venues were hit particularly hard by this early series of closures.<sup>128</sup> According to Gayle Rubin, long before the Department of Public Health took official action against the bathhouses, some South of Market venue owners had already sold their properties and moved away from the city in a phenomenon she calls “AIDS related out-migration.”<sup>129</sup> Many sex venues that stayed behind faced imminent closure, initially because of “diminishing attendance and increased operating costs” more than public health violations or censure from City Hall.<sup>130</sup> This changed a week after the first Folsom Street Fair on October 9, 1984. Throughout the spring and summer of 1984, Mayor Dianne Feinstein ordered “on-duty, plainclothes San Francisco policemen” to go into the city’s bathhouses, posing as patrons, and “write a report for her on the sexual activities they saw.”<sup>131</sup> With these reports on hand, the Department of Public Health’s Director of Health, Mervyn Silverman, officially ordered the closure of fourteen gay bathhouses and sex clubs on October

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<sup>127</sup> Randy Shilts, “A Gay Bathhouse Closes Its Doors in S.F.,” *Examiner*, July 11, 1983.

<sup>128</sup> Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 118.

<sup>129</sup> Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 137.

<sup>130</sup> Stathis Yeros, “AIDS and the city: bathhouses, emplaced empathy and the de-sexualization of San Francisco,” *Urban History* 50, no. 3 (2022): 8, doi:10.1017/S0963926822000141.

<sup>131</sup> Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles,” 94.

9.<sup>132</sup> As Frank Strona argues, “the bathhouse closures effectively killed the sex venue business in San Francisco.”<sup>133</sup>

Although the closures had not extended to non-sexual leather venues on the Miracle Mile, such as the SF Eagle, the Stud, and the Ambush, correspondents in the gay press began to tell of the “Fall of the Folsom.”<sup>134</sup> A November 1984 *San Francisco Focus* article entitled “The Death of Leather” offered the most sobering view of the Folsom’s fate: “The AIDS epidemic hit Folsom St. aficionados sooner and much harder than it hit other gays, sending the S and M subculture into a tailspin from which it has never recovered.”<sup>135</sup> Within such premonitions was an acknowledgment of the devastating human costs of the AIDS crisis.

Without the privacy of the bathhouses, some gay men returned to the “pre-bathhouse sexual landscape” of public cruising in the South of Market’s alleyways, leading to an increased number of street arrests for public obscenity in the district throughout 1984 and 1985. Others chose to “relocate their sexual activity” to bathhouses in other Bay Area cities, such as Oakland.<sup>136</sup> Either way, the effects of “AIDS-related capital flight” on the Folsom’s leather economy, its people, and its spaces were undeniable.<sup>137</sup> The AIDS crisis, culminating in the bathhouse closures, had set into motion the spatial conditions necessary for the “accelerated” gentrification of the Miracle Mile and had ushered in a new wave of the very changes that

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<sup>132</sup> Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles,” 74, 108.

<sup>133</sup> Frank Strona (public health specialist), interview by author.

<sup>134</sup> Rubin, “The Miracle Mile,” 259.

<sup>135</sup> “The Death of Leather,” *San Francisco Focus*, November 1984.

<sup>136</sup> Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 304 (2003): 49, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n03\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n03_03).

<sup>137</sup> Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 129.

Connell and Valerio organized the first Folsom Street Fair in opposition to.<sup>138</sup> As the leather and S/M communities grappled with the ravages of AIDS and residents in South of Market warehouses faced the increasing threat of displacement from the looming expansion of downtown business interests, Connell and Valerio's activist efforts were more pertinent than ever before.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Rubin, "Elegy for the Valley of the Kings," 119.

<sup>139</sup> Carl Irving, "Appeal for artists' studios," *Examiner*, June 26 1984. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461128812/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024); "A matter of artist survival," *Examiner*, July 6, 1984. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460733938/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024).

## II. Political Booths and Priced-Up SoMA, 1985-1988

‘How does God tell you that you have too much money? You start a club South of Market.’

— Rob Morse, “Space meanies”<sup>140</sup>



**Figure 7.** The Baybrick Inn, a women’s venue and hotel at 1190 Folsom Street, with decorations for the second Folsom Street Fair (GLBT Historical Society, 1985).<sup>141</sup>

In August of 1982, two years before the first Folsom Street Fair, Lauren Hewitt opened the Baybrick Inn as a women’s performance space, dance club, and hotel on Folsom and Eighth

<sup>140</sup> Rob Morse, “Space meanies,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 28, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461626781/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>141</sup> Photograph of the Baybrick Inn decorated for second Folsom Street Fair, 1985, BUS EPH, B to BI box, Baybrick Inn folder, San Francisco LGBT Business Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.



Streets. A former actress and director with the queer performance troupe Theatre Rhinoceros, Hewitt had been part of the growing lesbian community in the South of Market during the early years of the decade.<sup>142</sup> While cultural institutions of lesbian life like the all-women bathhouse Amelia's were mainly sequestered to the Mission District and Bernal Heights during the 1970s, Hewitt envisioned an "upscale entertainment complex" for women in the nightlife scene South of Market.<sup>143</sup> Working with Rick Carver and Mark Cornils, the owners of the Victorian at 1190 Folsom that had formerly housed the Atherton Hotel, Hewitt brought her vision to life to much applause on August 15, 1982. When the Baybrick Inn opened, it "caused a revolution in the lesbian bar scene in San Francisco," drawing crowds of women to the historically male Miracle Mile in the South of Market district.<sup>144</sup>

Hewitt and Kathleen Connell met in 1983, during one of Connell's nights at the Baybrick, and started dating soon after. When Connell and Michael Valerio began producing the first Folsom Street Fair a year later, Connell ensured that the Baybrick would be a space for women in attendance.<sup>145</sup> After the success of the 1984 fair, Lauren Hewitt saw another opportunity in 1985 to extend the event's outreach to San Francisco women. She suggested to Connell that the San Francisco Women's Building be one of the fair's donees.<sup>146</sup> The Building—which had

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<sup>142</sup> Dianne Gregory, "Going, Going, Gone! The Baybrick Inn Closes Its Doors After Five Years," *The Bay Area Reporter*, October 1, 1987. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19871001.1.17&srpos=2&e=-----en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-lauren+hewitt-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>143</sup> Sides, *Erotic City*, 115, 225.

<sup>144</sup> Gregory, "Going, Going, Gone!"

<sup>145</sup> Connell and Gabriel, "The Power of Broken Hearts."

<sup>146</sup> Letter from Women's Center Fundraising Coordinator Holly Fincke to Lauren Hewitt, September 25, 1985, 1996-15, box 41, folder 17, San Francisco Women's Building/Women's Centers Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

survived an arson fire, a bomb threat, and a pipe bomb explosion all in 1980—offered “low-cost” rental spaces, as well as lesbian support groups, housing and employment services, rape crisis counseling, and ESL classes for Latinas in the Mission District. After years of financial trouble, the Building’s board members raised funds in 1985 in hopes of purchasing the property from its landlord by 1988.<sup>147</sup>

The Folsom Street Fair and Women’s Building were an odd pair insofar as the first fair had attracted crowds from the leather and S/M communities. The Building had been “off limits” to S/M women since the late 1970s, a period when the so-called lesbian sex wars brought sadomasochism to the forefront of feminist debates.<sup>148</sup> In 1982, the S/M lesbian rap group Samois, which would evolve into the Outcasts by the mid-1980s, tried to rent a space in the Building but received a letter denying their request. Samois turned to the South of Market instead, renting out a gay male performance space for their weekly meetings.<sup>149</sup>

At the same time, as the previous chapter discussed, the Miracle Mile’s venues had a long-standing misogyny problem. Despite this ideological friction, the Women’s Building board saw the fair partnership as an opportunity to “increase awareness” of their offerings. Women’s Building Fundraising Coordinator Holly Finke wrote to Kathleen Connell before the second fair to express how the board was “particularly pleased by the association.” As Connell and Valerio had intended, the board viewed the fair not as a leather or S/M festival but as a means of

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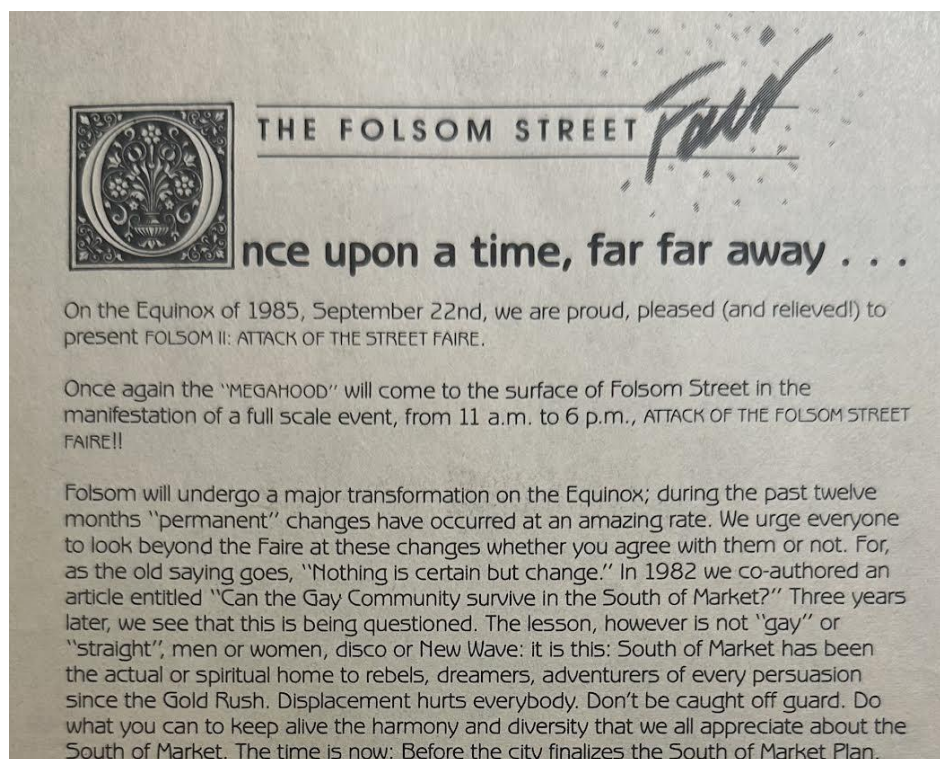
<sup>147</sup> Sides, *Erotic City*, 165; Letter from Women’s Center Fundraising Coordinator Holly Finke to Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio, August 23, 1985, 1996-15, box 41, folder 17, San Francisco Women’s Building/Women’s Centers Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>148</sup> Sides, *Erotic City*, 223; Patrick Califia, “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco,” In *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd edition, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 249.

<sup>149</sup> Califia, “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community,” 279-280.

“promoting cohesion and political clout in the South of Market.”<sup>150</sup> In the same letter, Finke also sought out Connell’s knowledge on redevelopment, hoping to discuss changes in the Building’s home district of the Mission.

Contestations over the development of the South of Market were central to the second Folsom Street Fair, as in its first year. Against the backdrop of the bathhouse closures and the Redevelopment Agency’s soon-to-be finalized South of Market plan, Connell and Valerio felt the heightened importance of their efforts to advocate for the diverse South of Market constituencies. The producers reflected this urgency in their letter for the 1985 fair’s program (Fig. 8).



**Figure 8.** Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio’s introductory remarks in the program for the second Folsom Street Fair (GLBT Historical Society, 1985).<sup>151</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Letter from Women’s Center Fundraising Coordinator Holly Finke to Kathleen Connell, June 7, 1985, 1996-15, box 41, folder 17, San Francisco Women’s Building/Women’s Centers Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>151</sup> Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio’s letter in 1985 Folsom Street Fair program, September 22, 1985, June 7, 1985, 1996-33, box 85, folder 15, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

One of the “permanent’ changes” that Connell and Valerio described in September 1985 was the opening of at least six large dance clubs around Folsom Street’s Miracle Mile in the months leading up to the second Folsom Street Fair. With “dance floors of up to 10,000 square feet,” new venues like DV8 and Oasis began to attract “a steady flow of yuppies” that stood out amidst the South of Market’s working-class gay, artist, immigrant, and senior communities. The “suddenly lucrative dance-club market” and its middle-class milieu further drew the interest of private development companies, such as the brokerage firm The Breitman Co., that sought to “cash in on” the “relatively low cost” properties in what “fast becoming the most popular entertainment district in the City.”<sup>152</sup> As early as March 1985, press correspondents began to prognosticate “upscale art galleries, cafes and bistros” in the “new SoMa,” evoking “San Francisco’s [supposed] answer to New York’s SoHo.”<sup>153</sup> By that year, anywhere from “40 to 60 new eating, drinking, and/or dancing establishments” had opened on the South of Market blocks between Howard, Harrison, 12th, and 8th Streets.<sup>154</sup>

A multi-page article by Richard Rapaport in the *San Francisco Examiner* entitled “Will SoMa Become San Francisco’s SoHo?” detailed the growing number of people from wealthier North of Market communities who began heading South of Market for the “vital arts and entertainment scene.” Venues like “artist-as-businessman” Paul Shultz’s SOMA Cafe on 12th and Howard—a combination cafe-gallery that served as “a focal point for neighborhood cultural and

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<sup>152</sup> Rose Ragsdale, “Sudden boom in big dance clubs,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 26, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461379266/> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>153</sup> “The SoMa Saga,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 17, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460634024/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>154</sup> Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 719.

community events”—had birthed an attractive new art scene to complement the burgeoning straight dance club scene on the Folsom.<sup>155</sup>

While property-owning businessmen like Shultz were able to capitalize on the district’s rising “avant-garde” appeal, other artists in the district’s live/work warehouse studios were facing displacement as landlords aimed to increase property values by reconverting the warehouses from “living space to industrial use.”<sup>156</sup> Yet, according to Rapaport, the “growing demand... for upgradeable space” among these artists and the Folsom’s “‘leather’ gays,” threatened to “finish the job” started by real estate speculators of driving out the district’s non-white working-class populations.<sup>157</sup> There was certainly truth to Rapaport’s assessment. As urban planner Mark R. Wolfe sees it, the “nonconformist” gay and artistic communities that burgeoned on Folsom Street in the 1970s “first bestowed upon SOMA its bohemian, alternative caché, giving rise to” the district’s “citywide reputation as a novel, cutting-edge ‘frontier’ area in which to venture.”<sup>158</sup>

Still, Rapaport underestimated the effects of downtown expansion on displacement in the district, not to mention the rising cost of living, the economic costs of the AIDS crisis, and the precarious housing situation of many artists in the district’s warehouse live/work studios. In reality, many critics who argued that the Downtown Plan would particularly harm working-class people of color and transient communities in the South of Market did so in reference to the new

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<sup>155</sup> Richard Rapaport, “Will SoMa Become San Francisco’s SoHo?,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 17, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460634386/> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>156</sup> Richard Rapaport, “Will SoMa Become San Francisco’s SoHo?,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 17, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460634386/> (accessed February 15, 2024); Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 709, 718.

<sup>157</sup> Rapaport, “Will SoMa Become San Francisco’s SoHo?”

<sup>158</sup> Wolfe, “The Wired Loft,” 718.

office spaces and high-rent condominium complexes proposed by the South of Market redevelopment plan.<sup>159</sup> Yet, Rapaport placed the brunt of the blame for the racially and economically hostile housing landscape on the district's largely working-class artist and gay populations.<sup>160</sup> Perhaps, as Supervisor Harry Britt put it, Rapaport's conclusion was a case of gays "being scapegoated for solving the problems" that Black residents had been "scapegoated for creating."<sup>161</sup>

Intending to burst "the speculative bubble" and protect the diversity of the South of Market against downtown expansion, the San Francisco Planning Department began a new rezoning study of the district in the spring of 1985. This study differed significantly from the disastrous 1984 rezoning study discussed in the previous chapter. Under the direction of city planner Susana Montana, some of the new plan's proposed goals included increasing the number of affordable residential hotels along Sixth Street, protecting artists' live-work studios as a "principal use" of the district, and restricting the growth of new dance clubs and restaurants to Howard, Folsom, Eleventh, Second and Townsend Streets.<sup>162</sup> By containing nightlife entertainment in the district, Montana hoped also to contain the negative impacts of the growing club scene on the existing South of Market community. As she put it, "These clubs that attract

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<sup>159</sup> John Roszak, "The Shape of Things to Come," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 30, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461423898/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>160</sup> Cultural geographer Manuel Castells notes that the gay men who colonized the Folsom throughout the '70s were "generally poorer and less-educated" than the more affluent Castro gays [Manuel Castells, "Structural Identity, Sexual Liberation and Urban Structure: The Gay Community in San Francisco," in *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 156].

<sup>161</sup> Forester, "Planning San Francisco."

<sup>162</sup> Gerald Adams, "Plan to control South of Market growth," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 2, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460975797/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 14, 2024).

people from Walnut Creek, the Peninsula, and Marin are not nice to the neighborhood... The patrons park in driveways, get in fights with the residents, act rude and leave Beck's Light and Chivas Regal bottles on the ground beside their cars."<sup>163</sup> However, restricting new nightlife growth to a fixed area that included the Miracle Mile also meant increasing the geographic pressure on the venues, residences, and businesses already there.

Despite having praised the mixed crowd that attended the first Folsom Street Fair in 1984, leather columnist Marcus Hernandez changed his tone in light of the "phenomenal influx of straight and gay yuppies" to the Miracle Mile's new dance hall circuit during 1985.<sup>164</sup> At a March symposium held by South of Market leather community leaders in the SOMA Cafe, Hernandez argued that the rise in middle-class straights slumming in the neighborhood posed a distinct threat to the already threatened spaces and privacy of the gay leather scene. "Curiosity seekers break the scene apart," he said blatantly. "With attention all the leather boys fly away."<sup>165</sup> In opposition to Hernandez, the owner of the popular Folsom leather bar, The Brig believed that the community should come to terms with the changing neighborhood:

*It's time we come out of our gay ghetto... I think the mixing of gay and straight is good for everybody. We get women and straight men in here—some come slumming and are voyeurs, of course—but it's a good thing. The people who don't want it to change are generally the uptight Republican fags who find it easier to fabricate and realize their sexual fantasies down here. But it's all changing and they'll have to accept that.<sup>166</sup>*

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<sup>163</sup> Ragsdale, "Sudden boom in big dance clubs."

<sup>164</sup> Hernandez, "Baptism on the Miracle Mile"; Rapaport, "Will SoMa Become San Francisco's SoHo?"

<sup>165</sup> Rapaport, "Will SoMa Become San Francisco's SoHo?"

<sup>166</sup> "Folsom Flux," *Drummer* 82, 1985, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/082/index.htm>.

Nevertheless, as the “SoMa leather scene’s number one publicist,” Marcus Hernandez made sure to advertise the second Folsom Street Fair in ways that he knew would specifically attract leather and S/M practitioners, regardless of Connell and Valerio’s focus on the longevity of the broader South of Market community. If Hernandez was to be believed, the only notable offerings at the 1985 fair were “a horde of leather title holders” and “tits and ass galore.”<sup>167</sup>

Although Hernandez intentionally represented the event hoping to draw a primarily leather crowd in future years, his description of the second fair was not entirely off-base. On September 22, the over 30,000 attendees at the second fair enjoyed more erotic entertainment than the previous year. Most notable was a performance by Blush Productions, an all-female group of “erotic strippers” that had weekly Tuesday night shows at Lauren Hewitt’s Baybrick Inn. As the Blush women “did almost everything allowable on a public street,” some gay leathermen in attendance were “stunned” by the public display of lesbian eroticism. Much like the previous year, the leathermen who “didn’t want to get too close to the action” retreated into The Stud and Ramrod throughout the day, while the Baybrick Inn was once again “home base” for lesbian fairgoers.<sup>168</sup>

Even with the Blush Productions strip show, the organizers of the fair were quick to shut down nudity on the Folsom. After missing the first Folsom Street Fair, Mark I. Chester participated as a vendor in 1985, hoping to earn some “extra cash.” After he laid out prints of his “erotic photography” on his table near 11th Street’s LeatherSpace, Chester began to notice

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<sup>167</sup> Marcus Hernandez, “Steve Kajikawa Wins Leather Daddy’s Boy Contest III,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 12, 1985. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19850912.1.35&srpos=24&e=-----en--20-BAR-21--txt-txIN-michael+valerio-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>168</sup> White, “Rebels... Dreamers... Adventurers of Every Persuasion.”



discomforted stares from the Community United Against Violence safety monitor stationed there. “Soon after, she came by and covered all my dicks with stickers,” he recalls. “Well, they wanted it to be a family event.”<sup>169</sup> Despite this, Marcus Hernandez described the fair as a gathering of fairies and non-fairies with “lots” of cruising and “heavy leather.”<sup>170</sup>

Connell and Valerio’s effort to make the fair family-friendly showed in the assortment of merchants and artists that had booths that year. Compared to the inaugural 1984 fair, which had “fewer politicians, craftsmen, organization booths and stops for food-and-beer than... the city’s more established street fairs,” the second Folsom Street Fair had over “100 carefully selected arts, crafts, and fashion booths.”<sup>171</sup> Connell had also collaborated with Viacom to have the fair filmed and broadcast on television during the Fall, particularly to reach people who were homebound due to disability, child care, and hospitalization from AIDS-related illnesses.<sup>172</sup>

In its second year, the fair was an amusement-park-style spectacle, as it transformed the Folsom with a “dazzling array of classic cars,’ a dance floor atop the bed of a “50-foot Mack truck” and an eighteen-foot model of a serpent meant to represent the South of Market Megahood swallowing the 7th Street SOMA stage.<sup>173</sup> “We Wanted Folsom II: Attack of the

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<sup>169</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author.

<sup>170</sup> Marcus Hernandez, “That Old Summer,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1985. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19850926.1.31&srpos=39&e=-----en--20-BAR-21--txt-txIN-michael+valerio-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>171</sup> “Leather Scene,” *Drummer* 79; “Attack of the Street Fair,” *Bay Area Reporter*, August 29, 1985. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19850829.1.33&srpos=51&e=-----en--20-BAR-41--txt-txIN-michael+valerio-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>172</sup> “Attack of the Street Fair”; Letter from Kathleen Connell to Holly Fincke, August 9, 1985, 1996-15, box 41, folder 17, San Francisco Women’s Building/Women’s Centers Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>173</sup> “Attack of the Street Fair.”

Street Fair to have an even greater visual impact on the crowd. So, I went looking for someone to create the actual physical body of Megahood,” Valerio recalled.<sup>174</sup>



**Figure 9.** The South of Market Megahood swallowing the SOMA stage on Folsom and Seventh Streets during the second Folsom Street Fair (GLBT Historical Society, 1985).<sup>175</sup>

The ornamentation of the post-industrial Folsom was so profound that, a month before the 1987 fair, a *Bay Area Reporter* journalist wrote to “warn” those planning to attend that they would “not easily recognize Folsom Street.” Instead, he promised, they would “recognize

<sup>174</sup> *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence Records (CUAV).

<sup>175</sup> *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence Records (CUAV).

Folsom Street as the city does in the new South of Market [redevelopment] plan, which designates the street as an ‘entertainment zone.’<sup>176</sup>

Connell and Valerio had entreated their attendees to “keep alive the harmony and diversity” in the neighborhood, hoping to raise awareness about the soon-to-be-finalized South of Market Plan and mobilize the community against further displacement of the district’s residents and businesses. By bringing together a coalition of South of Market venues, merchants, artists, performers, and residents in the production of the fair, the organizers hoped that the visual spectacle of the fair would reflect the vitality of this group amidst the coalescing “‘entertainment zone’” and its growing non-residential, middle-class crowd.<sup>177</sup> As reporter Allen White relayed it in 1985, Connell and Valerio aimed for “the inclusion of all people in the area to join together to form a new community” and, in doing so, “set a pattern in a fast changing part of the city.”<sup>178</sup>

Having developed an organizational and political model for the fair by its second year, Kathleen Connell retired as executive producer in 1986 to pursue post-graduate work.<sup>179</sup> At Connell’s behest, her friend Jayne Salinger from New York took over her role as co-producer for the third Folsom Street Fair. Upon Salinger’s entrance, she and Valerio rebranded the South of Market Alliance as the South of Market Community Association (SCAN), and they began working on the first issue of the organization’s periodical, the *SOMA Prescription*.<sup>180</sup> Under the leadership of Valerio and Salinger’s SCAN in 1986, the fair had its most outwardly political and

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<sup>176</sup> “Attack of the Street Fair.”

<sup>177</sup> Folsom II: Attack of the Street Faire program, September 1985, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>178</sup> White, “Rebels... Dreamers... Adventurers of Every Persuasion.”

<sup>179</sup> *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence Records (CUAV).

<sup>180</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

gay-oriented year thus far. Continuing to work against the pro-development rhetoric of agencies like the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association, the new producer duo designed the third fair to assert the presence of the neighborhood's politically active constituency.<sup>181</sup>

The dedicated LeatherSpace on Eleventh Street still attracted a large crowd of gays and leatherfolk to the Folsom in 1986, but it was surrounded by far more political and fundraising booths than in the previous two years.<sup>182</sup> When they were not “dancing in the streets” to beats by the “lesbian percussion group” Sistah Boom, the roughly 90,000 attendees spent the afternoon in conversation with representatives at the “over 150 booths at the fair.”<sup>183</sup> Notable examples included the City Planning booth, where Paul Lord was fielding concerns about the “not-yet-implemented South of Market Plan,” and the third annual booth by the mixed-gender S/M group Society of Janus, where a member named Martha was teaching short workshops intended to dispel common myths about S/M.<sup>184</sup>

For the first time, however, AIDS-related gay organizations outnumbered the South of Market-specific groups on the fairgrounds. The organizations that Salinger and Valerio chose as

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<sup>181</sup> Carla Marinucci, “South of Market’s woman at City Hall,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 27, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461297233/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 14, 2024).

<sup>182</sup> Marcus Hernandez, “Jim Buhler Wins Leather Daddy’s Boy IV Contest,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 4, 1986. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19860904.1.32&e=-----en--20-BAR-41--txt-txIN-michael+valerio-----> (accessed February 14, 2024).

<sup>183</sup> South of Market Community Action Network, *SOMA Prescription*, November 1986, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records]; Charles Linebarger, “Diversity: Leather, Drag, Police, Boa Constrictors Are All Found At the Folsom Street Fair,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 25, 1986. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19860925.1.18&srpos=75&e=-----en--20--61--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>184</sup> *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records; Linebarger, “Diversity.”

donees for the third fair reflected this shift. While the two previous Folsom Street Fairs had raised funds for a blend of AIDS-oriented and South of Market advocacy groups, the 1986 fair benefited the Coming Home Hospice and the Godfather Service Fund—two organizations focused on providing end-of-life care for people living with AIDS.<sup>185</sup> Like the donees, many gay activists manning the Folsom that year saw the fair as an opportunity to bolster their mutual aid efforts. Among these groups were the two aforementioned donees and People With AIDS, all three of which were raising funds for care packages to be delivered to AIDS wards throughout the city’s hospitals. Other gay organizations and civil rights groups were more interested in consciousness-raising than fundraising. Right outside the LeatherSpace, fairgoers lamented the rising wave of conservatism in state politics with the Gay Rights Chapter of the ACLU at the “No on 64” table, looked over pamphlets from the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club that urged the gay community to back the three gay candidates up for state elections in November, and brushed up on their sexual health practices with the Stop AIDS Project after grabbing a handful of complimentary condoms. All the while, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence wove through the crowd with their trademark satire of rosaries and neon makeup, “selling ‘Stop LaRouche’ buttons for the ‘No on 64’ committee.”<sup>186</sup>

Although Salinger and Valerio’s efforts to center AIDS activism in 1986 may have seemed to signal a pivot in the fair’s branding, they were primarily a direct response to a rising wave of proposed anti-gay legislation in the California State Government. The crucible of this AIDS hysteria policy-making was Proposition 64, a ballot initiative drafted by the Prevent AIDS

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<sup>185</sup> *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>186</sup> Linebarger, “Diversity.”

Now Initiative Committee (PANIC). Thanks to the cult-like following of far-right politico Lyndon LaRouche, the initiative had gained the necessary number of signatures to be placed on the state-wide November ballot one month after the third fair. Known informally as “the LaRouche initiative,” Proposition 64 had intentionally unclear language that, if passed, could have been interpreted to legalize everything from a mandatory state AIDS registry to the exclusion of people with AIDS from the education and service sectors to an out-right AIDS quarantine. Although the initiative made no explicit mention of “detention centers for AIDS victims,” various LaRouche-backed publications had called for quarantines throughout 1986, leading many gay people to protest against the slippery slope toward gay internment.<sup>187</sup>

As was the case with the two previous fairs, which opened in the wake of the proposed Downtown Plan and the bathhouse closures, respectively, conflicts regarding the use of urban space and the right to privacy (in this case, the medical privacy of people living with AIDS) were boiling over amidst the 1986 fair’s dancing crowd. Rather than promoting mindless escapism from the political backlash looming overhead, Salinger and Valerio intended the third fair to mix entertainment with a solid and much-needed dose of political consciousness-raising. As such, the purpose of the “party” was to unite the “variety in the community,” albeit optimistically, in pursuit of a collective political front akin to the symbolic “Megahood” that Connell and Valerio first envisioned in 1984.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Kevin Roderick, “Prop. 64 Feud Between Gays, LaRouche Backers Grows,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 1986. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-09-17-mn-10528-story.html> (accessed February 14, 2024); Jay Mathews, “LaRouche’s Call to Quarantine AIDS Victims Trails in California,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 1986. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/10/26/larouches-call-to-quarantine-aids-victims-trails-in-california/f79e0d33-02be-4fad-a643-08bf0d462f95/> (accessed February 14, 2024).

<sup>188</sup> *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records; Linebarger, “Diversity.”

Despite Salinger and Valerio's strident efforts, cultural and sexual distinctions between the South of Market's diverse communities did not always mesh into the idealistic coalition that the fair's producers desired. Continuing his leather-first branding from the prior year, Marcus Hernandez advertised and recapped the 1986 fair with the explicit intention of foregrounding its significant leather presence. "There is entertainment galore, booths, crafts, arts, leather, comedy, leather, hot dance groups, leather, and more than anyone could expect," he wrote in his *Bay Area Reporter* column three days before the fair weekend.<sup>189</sup> The women's S/M group The Outcasts echoed Hernandez's view when they endorsed the event as a "leather street fair" in the *Lunatic Fringe* newsletter sent out to members in early September.<sup>190</sup>

The issue with these descriptions was not that they were inaccurate; even the non-leather entertainment reporter Charles Linebarger noted that "leather appeared to be the fabric of choice" at the third fair.<sup>191</sup> The picture of the fair offered by Hernandez instead acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more well-known leather figures branded the fair as an erotic leather event, the more attendees were expecting a leather event. To illustrate this point, after reading about the fair in Hernandez's *Bay Area Reporter* column and *Drummer* magazine, a man from Los Angeles rented a bus with his friends to attend in 1986. "All for the best afternoon on earth," he said.<sup>192</sup>

This group was part of a relatively small but growing number of people from outside the Bay Area who traveled to attend the third fair, including "busloads of people from L.A. and even

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<sup>189</sup> Marcus Hernandez, "Big Pieces and Some Tid-Bits," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 18, 1986. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19860918.1.32&srpos=25&e=-----en--20-BAR-21--txt-txIN-michael+valerio-----> (accessed February 14, 2024).

<sup>190</sup> The Outcasts, *Lunatic Fringe* newsletter, September 1986, 1994-07, box 1, folder 1, Carol Truscott Papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>191</sup> Linebarger, "Diversity."

<sup>192</sup> *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

at least one from the Big Apple.”<sup>193</sup> As the predecessors to the sexual tourists who would attend the fair as it became more sexually explicit during the 1990s, these tourists highlighted that news of the unusual event had already spread beyond San Francisco by its third year. While those with access to the *Bay Area Reporter* had come to expect “oiled bodies and leather lads and lassies,” as Marcus Hernandez wrote, only those who attended the fair saw firsthand its complex “mixed crowd.”<sup>194</sup>

Within Hernandez’s columns promoting the fair, there was little acknowledgment of what Charles Linebarger called “a fair for all ages.”<sup>195</sup> Neither Hernandez nor the Outcasts mentioned the “young families that strolled through the Fair, stopping by the face painting and stuffed toy booths so the little ones could also participate in the fun.”<sup>196</sup> Rather than uplifting the neighborhood’s community, as Valerio and Salinger had intended, Hernandez honed in on the “contrast to all the wholesomeness” seen in the “small but choice representation of bared buns and breasts” on the Miracle Mile.<sup>197</sup> His fear that the opening of the Folsom would “break the [leather] scene apart” had led Hernandez to become the Folsom Street Fair’s self-appointed leather propagandist at a time when the Folsom’s new yuppie crowd was increasingly external to and even hostile toward the gay, leather, and S/M scenes that had once blossomed there.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>194</sup> Linebarger, “Diversity.”

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *SOMA Prescription*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Rapaport, “Will SoMa Become San Francisco’s SoHo?”



Marcus Hernandez's branding of the Folsom Street Fair as a leather event was, more than anything, his attempt to assert Folsom Street's leather presence and history amid the AIDS crisis and a changing spatial landscape. By 1986, the South of Market and Folsom Street's Miracle Mile had become a hub for entrepreneurial investors hoping to open the next big nightlife spot. The most ambitious of these clubs, DV8 had its "grand opening" in June 1986. It was uncharacteristically large, with "20,000 square feet of party potential" and a "state-of-the-art sound system." DV8 co-owner and manager Gerry Gerrard had heard the growing talk describing SoMa like SoHo and described DV8 as SoMa's answer to New York's massive Area and Palladium. Gerrard saw DV8's potential to cash in on a niche not yet filled in South of Market's nightlife: a club that ignored "targeted in-groups" and drew characters from "punk rockers to the [affluent] Nob Hill crowd."<sup>199</sup>

Even before it was finished, the club had started to set a dangerous precedent for the South of Market's smaller, long-standing establishments. Both the size of DV8 and the far-ranging crowd it drew posed a threat to smaller, more specialized clubs like Lauren Hewitt's Baybrick Inn and Mark Rennie's Billboard Cafe. Despite Hewitt's and Rennie's preemptive actions to diversify their audiences, they suffered declining business, and by July 1986, the Baybrick and the Billboard, as well as the long-standing disco club Trocadero Transfer, were all listed for sale.<sup>200</sup> Despite the surge of nightlife spots in South of Market during 1985 and 1986, the bubble was beginning to burst by that summer.

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<sup>199</sup> David Armstrong, "Subculture paradise," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 27, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461297233/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>200</sup> Armstrong, "Subculture Paradise"; Joel Selvin, "Bulls And Bears Both Rushing," *San Francisco Examiner*, July 13, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461263991/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

Along with the competition from bigger clubs, Hewitt noted the rising financial strain of insurance rates, which had “quadrupled” since she opened the club in 1982. Rennie, whom the *San Francisco Examiner* dubbed the “Svengali of SoMa,” had had more success with his “ultra-hip” Club Nine on Harrison and Ninth Streets—“probably the most successful alternative SOMA nightspot”—which replaced an “AIDS-depleted gay bar” in the summer of 1985 to much praise by the press.<sup>201</sup> With Nine, Rennie had hoped to bring “spectacle” to the South of Market, invoking Studio 54 in Manhattan.<sup>202</sup>

While Rennie had led the charge in the shifting South of Market nightlife scene around the Folsom, clubs like DV8, DNA, and Epic I cemented the change. Jay and Juthika Master finished work on Epic I late in the summer of 1986, after three years of construction and “more than \$3 million.” Located on Harrison and Seventh Streets, the “New York style nightlife emporium” featured a huge dance hall, a restaurant, an art gallery, a jazz club, and a mezzanine.<sup>203</sup> Like the artists who began settling there a decade prior, The Masters had been attracted to the South of Market’s “low-cost” warehouses. The high “monthly maintenance and overhead” on their “25,000-square-foot” club would have been “prohibitively expensive in other areas of the city,” said Bruce Breitman, owner of the SoMa-specialized real estate broker Breitman Co.<sup>204</sup>

DNA opened right before Epic I in another historic gay location South of Market—the intersection of Folsom and Eleventh Streets. Earlier that year, the club had supplanted the gay

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<sup>201</sup> Armstrong, “Subculture Paradise.”

<sup>202</sup> Armstrong, “Subculture Paradise.”

<sup>203</sup> Selvin, “South of Market.”

<sup>204</sup> Ragsdale, “Sudden boom in big dance clubs”; Selvin, “South of Market.”

leather bar Chaps and, by the September of the third Folsom Street Fair, had begun to attract a bourgeois, straight crew to what had been the “heart” of the Miracle Mile’s “leather fortress.”<sup>205</sup> In a fictional account of a heterosexual couple meeting at DNA, *Examiner* writer-in-residence Aaron Latham noted the changing texture of the nighttime South of Market crowd: “Now young men and women in furs — a peculiar summertime fad — have replaced men in chaps.”<sup>206</sup>

The pricing up of the Miracle Mile came in the wake of and was indeed made possible by the relative despatialization of the Folsom leather and S/M scenes during the first years of the AIDS crisis.<sup>207</sup> Unsurprisingly, many in the new nightlife crowd had little empathy regarding the epidemic. DNA’s doorman Courtney Payne Persinger offered a particularly cold assessment of the forces changing the Folsom: “I’ve heard a lot of bitching about yuppies coming down here and buying out the gays... But there’s a reason they’re being bought out. That’s because they’re not doing any business.”<sup>208</sup>

As private businesses, the leather haunts left on the Folsom—many of which had already closed years earlier—were generally outside the realm of “preservation” efforts by the Planning Department. As discussed, the Department had tentatively designated parts of Howard, Folsom, Eleventh, Second, and Townsend Streets as an entertainment zone in the 1985 rezoning study following the disastrous 1983 Downtown Plan proposal. The rezoning study, which continued

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<sup>205</sup> Aaron Latham, “Boy meets girl at DNA: A Place, a lifestyle, a fashion show,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 8, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461581678/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22> (accessed February 15, 2024); Rubin, “The Miracle Mile,” 266.

<sup>206</sup> Latham, “Boy meets girl at DNA.”

<sup>207</sup> Gayle Rubin argues that the “patterns of urban succession in the South of Market resulted from “geographic competition” predating AIDS and “public policy decisions about disease control,” as much as from the human costs of the epidemic itself (Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of the Kings,” 109, 135).

<sup>208</sup> Latham, “Boy meets girl at DNA.”

into 1986, was not concerned with the type of entertainment venues that came to these streets. In fact, by attempting to restrict the growth of new nightclubs to Folsom and Eleventh Streets, the proposed rezoning plan helped accelerate the displacement of gay leather clubs like Chaps by middle-class straight venues like DNA.<sup>209</sup>

This is a seemingly counterintuitive fact, given that the lead city planner on the “long-awaited” ’85 study, Susan Montana, was one of few voices in City Hall for the South of Market’s “healthy, vibrant community of small businesses and immigrants,” as well as their “divergent interests.”<sup>210</sup> Born and raised by an immigrant single mother in a “Latino San Jose barrio,” and the product of a “girl gang called ‘Con Safos’” (meaning “protected”), Susana Montana was not the usual Establishment city planner.<sup>211</sup> Her “controversial work” to maintain the South of Market’s diversity while also sustaining its growth as a nightlife district caught the ire of Mike McGill of the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), who accused her of prioritizing the “SoHo philosophy” over the city’s economic growth by way of downtown office development. There was a kernel of truth in McGill’s critique, given that offices and tourism were the “principal” industries in the city by the mid-1980s.<sup>212</sup> In Montana’s eyes, however, SPUR misrepresented the South of Market as an “industrial wasteland” destined to hold “market rate housing for all the execs” living downtown.

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<sup>209</sup> Rubin describes the corner of Folsom and Eleventh as a “vivid example of neighborhood change” (Rubin, “The Miracle Mile,” 266).

<sup>210</sup> According to Montana, by April of 1986 the 460 acres of the South of Market area had “10,000 residents in houses and artist’s lofts, 27,000 workers, and 3,000 businesses” (Marinucci, “South of Market’s woman at City Hall”).

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Gerald Adams, “Mahler’s plans to change South of Slot,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 18, 1985. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/460643116/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

Montana also had a more empathetic view of the South of Market's long-maligned unhoused population, which had grown throughout the early '80s due to development around the Yerba Buena Center and the ramping-up of displacement from Third to Sixth Streets. These blocks now bore the brunt of the neighborhood's historic indictment as a "skid row."<sup>213</sup> This trend reflected the crippling housing crisis in the city during that time. Pro-development neoliberal urban housing policies under Mayor Dianne Feinstein and President Ronald Reagan had struck a significant blow to San Francisco's working-class and transient populations, eliminating much of the affordable housing infrastructure in the increasingly expensive city. The San Francisco Homeless Project (SFHP) attributed the "sudden visibility" of thousands of unhoused people in the early years of the decade to the "abrupt de-funding of public housing" by the Reagan administration in 1983.<sup>214</sup>

Unlike many of her colleagues at the Planning Department, Montana viewed the South of Market's community of "peaceful street people" as something worth protecting. "They know this is their permanent home... The Mission's too violent for them; the Tenderloin has hookers and drug users. They just like to drink, and keep warm... We have no intention of moving (them) to another neighborhood," she told the *Examiner* reporter profiling her in April of 1986. For Montana, the transient population was a bulwark against the destruction of the district's larger

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<sup>213</sup> Marinucci, "South of Market's woman at City Hall."

<sup>214</sup> According to SFHP research, Reagan slashed the Federal Government's annual public housing budget from sixteen billion dollars in 1979 to just one billion dollars by 1983, when roughly one-and-a-half million Californians were already out of work in the wake of the 1981-82 economic recession (Jay Barmann, "Why San Francisco's Homeless Became A Problem in 1982," *SFist*, June 27, 2016, [https://sfist.com/2016/06/27/san\\_francisco\\_homeless\\_history\\_1982/](https://sfist.com/2016/06/27/san_francisco_homeless_history_1982/)).

working-class residential population, as its presence made the district an undesirable living location for the nighttime yuppie visitors who “would up the price of housing.”<sup>215</sup>

Despite Montana’s efforts to preserve the disadvantaged residential and transient populations in the South of Market, the Folsom leather community did not enjoy similar protection. Instead, the rise of straight clubs like DNA and Epic I brought increased hostility against the gay patrons who had seen the Folsom as the center of their nightlife and sexual experiences for over two decades. Rose Christensen, a long-time South of Market resident and the co-owner of Hamburger Mary’s on Twelfth and Folsom, experienced firsthand the downsides of the “SoMa boom.” A more professional crowd—“the Bank of America people,” as she put it—had already begun to trek to her restaurant from north of Market Street in the late 1970s. However, it was the “recent influx of nightclubs” and the “affluent youth” populating them that most notably “brought more hostility” and crime to the area.

Christensen specifically described growing tension surrounding the remaining outposts of gay culture South of Market: “Sometimes I’m outside the front door doing crowd control and I hear these big jock guys going, ‘Oh, here’s that fag place. Let’s look in the windows.’”<sup>216</sup> This middle-class straight crowd, many of whom saw the “South of Market as ‘slumming it,’” sometimes vandalized the neighborhood and attracted “scammers, muggers, and thieves” that began to “prey on them.”<sup>217</sup> Mark I. Chester, a resident of Folsom Street, similarly recalls the growing hostility on the streets surrounding his home on the Miracle Mile, lamenting the safety

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<sup>215</sup> Marinucci, “South of Market’s woman at City Hall.”

<sup>216</sup> Camille Peri, “SOMA Central: Rose Christensen keeps the home fries cooking south of the slot,” *San Francisco Examiner*, July 27, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461339571/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.; Rubin, “The Miracle Mile,” 266.

he felt before the AIDS crisis when there were “gay men on the streets at all times of the night.”<sup>218</sup>

Along with the increase of anti-gay hostility and street crime, Rose Christensen saw a deeper fissure beneath the capital being pumped into the district’s new nightlife scene. “Now that business, the money, has found South of Market, it’s the happening thing,” she told the *Examiner*. “But the real happening thing is that people are moving to Oakland, getting forced out to the warehouses over there.” With all the “hype about the new community,” the “real community” was in crisis.<sup>219</sup> As resident Stevanne Auerbach pleaded, the South of Market needed “fewer liquor licenses for additional clubs.” In his letter to the *Examiner*, Auerbach called on the “many people who seem to enjoy a night out in SOMA” to “think about how to improve the neighborhood — and not just use it and leave it without a second thought.”<sup>220</sup>

By 1987, the South of Market was “destined to become the next and final leg” of twentieth-century urban change in San Francisco and was “slated for a mega dose” of the city’s growth. Successive years of redevelopment had rendered much of the district a “storage locker for unwanted, unpopular, idealistic urban schemes and uncontrollable market forces,” as journalist Bradley Inman wrote in May.<sup>221</sup> With the most recent surge of development pressures in the mid-1980s came the idea that “everyone had been evicted from the district”—a false but pervasive notion made strikingly visible in the Planning Department’s 1983 Downtown Plan

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<sup>218</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author.

<sup>219</sup> Peri, “SOMA Central.”

<sup>220</sup> Stevanne Auerbach, “So bad in SOMA,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 9, 1986. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461640641/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>221</sup> Bradley Inman, “South of Market: a test of will,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 24, 1987. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461447336/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

proposal. In reality, roughly ten thousand residents lived in the district by the late 1980s, most of them still being working-class immigrant families.<sup>222</sup> The remaining fifty-one residential hotels along its Sixth Street skid row also offered affordable rents in a city where low-income housing was “a scarce commodity.”<sup>223</sup> Far from a mere “spill-over area” being turned chic by “up-scale eateries and nightclubs,” the South of Market was still a “remarkably stable” mixed-use neighborhood.<sup>224</sup>

As the district’s residents were taking to the press to assert this fact, Marcus Hernandez continued to write emphatically about the large leather crowd at the fourth annual Folsom Street Fair. Yet, the fair’s character and crowd were beginning to align with his descriptions more than in previous years. Following the focus on AIDS activism at the ’86 fair, the 1987 Folsom Street Fair emerged as a decidedly gay-oriented, but not yet explicitly sexual, event. However, unlike the ’86 fair, which was a benefit for two AIDS-related organizations, Valerio chose the South of Market Community Action Network (SCAN) and the AIDS Emergency Fund as 1987’s donees. Despite SCAN being the organization producing the fair, Valerio’s message in the program that year notably lacked broader context about the neighborhood. Besides plugging donations to SCAN, he did not mention the South of Market. Hoping most of all that attendees could feel the fair’s “positive energy,” Valerio centered the event’s emotional importance—its joy—during

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<sup>222</sup> “A park blooms in SOMA,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 6, 1987. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461476120/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>223</sup> Bradley Inman, “South of Market: a place for all reasons,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 31, 1987. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461518803/?terms=%22South%20of%20Market%22&match=1> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>224</sup> “A park blooms in SOMA.”



arguably some of the darkest days of the AIDS crisis.<sup>225</sup> After the 1986 fair, Valerio laid out his new understanding of the Folsom Street Fair's power: "It's a celebration of life... a way for many who cannot forget illness to affirm life—even if it's only for one day."<sup>226</sup> The fair's crowds quickly began to reflect this new conception of its importance.

Rather than capturing the demographic character of the South of Market, the crowd at the 1987 fair reflected the various sartorial and sexual subcultures of San Francisco's larger gay world. The Miracle Mile's so-called "old guard"—marked by their historically macho and primarily white image—mixed with a generally younger queer crowd of crop-haired leatherwomen in combat boots, drag queens in ruffle ballgowns, and leathermen of color in chaps (shirt optional).<sup>227</sup> As the over 100,000 attendees turned the Miracle Mile into a veritable catwalk, the fair appeared more of a cruising ground than ever.<sup>228</sup> Once again, Marcus Hernandez took up the mantle of foregrounding the fair's gay leather milieu in the pages of the *Bay Area Reporter*. He described a "plethora of leather, bare chests (men and women!), hot men, and heavy eyeballing" on the Folsom in late September.<sup>229</sup> A week before the fair, he had also promised

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<sup>225</sup> Folsom Dimension 4 Program, 1987, SF SUB COLL, Fairs and Festivals box, Folsom Street Fair 1984-2013 folder, San Francisco Ephemera Collection, San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco, CA (hereafter cited as Folsom Dimension 4 Program, San Francisco Ephemera Collection).

<sup>226</sup> *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

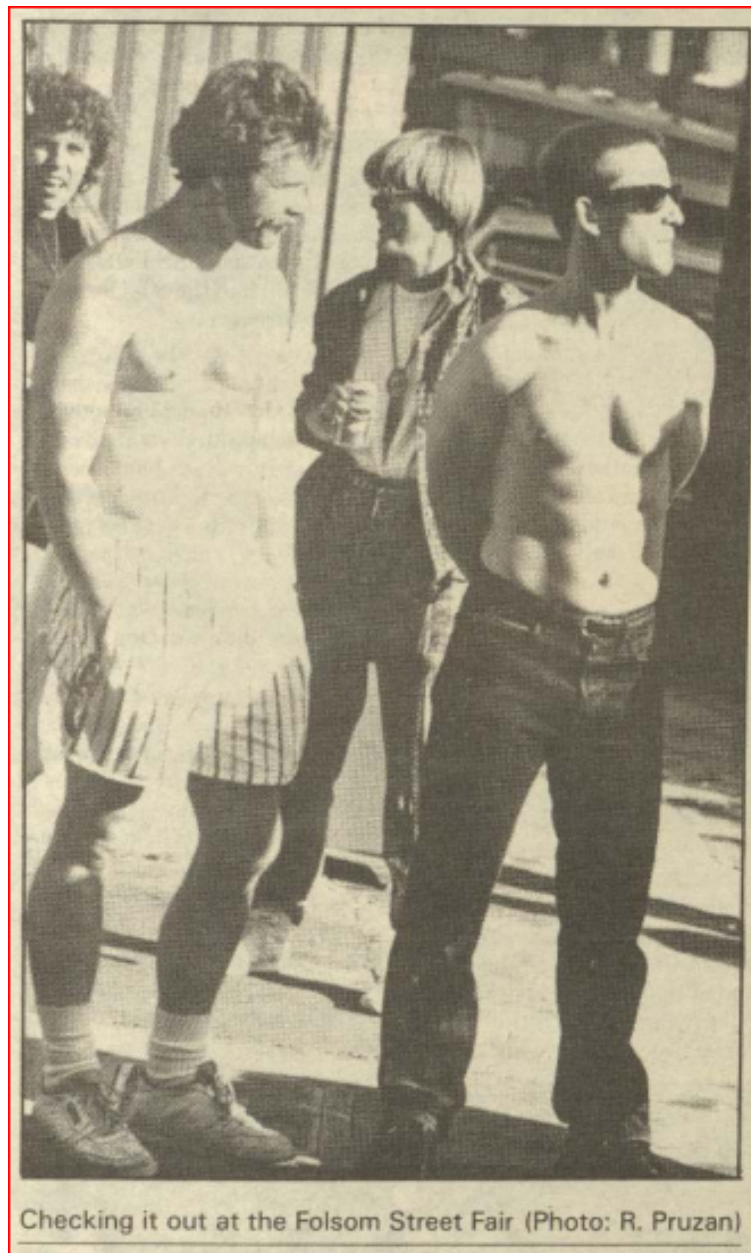
<sup>227</sup> "Mark Friese, "In Good Hands," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 24, 1987. [https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19870924.1.37&e=-----en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-"folsom+street+fair"----1987---](https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19870924.1.37&e=-----en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-)

(accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>228</sup> San Francisco Police Department Incident Report Form 871058456, 9 September 1987, 1996-33, box 85, folder 17, Community United Against Violence Records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA [hereafter cited as SFPD Incident Report Form, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records].

<sup>229</sup> Marcus Hernandez, "A Weekend You Can Never Duplicate," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 24, 1987. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19870924.1.32&e=-----en--20--81--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

visitors that “heavy cruising” was the event’s main attraction, more so than the “entertainment and booths.”<sup>230</sup>



**Figure 9.** Cruising at the fourth annual Folsom Street Fair. It was all about the eyes (Robert Pruzan, 1978).<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Marcus Hernandez, “The Cowboy Invasion & The Folsom St. Fair,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 17, 1987. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19870917.1.33&srpos=1&e=-1987---1987--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+street+fair%22-----> (accessed February 15, 2024).

<sup>231</sup> Robert Pruzan, “Checking it out at the Folsom Street Fair,” September 24, 1987, photograph, *Bay Area Reporter*, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19870924.1.35&e=-en--20--81--txt-txIN-%2522folsom+Street+Fair%2522----->.

Marcus Hernandez had called the fair a cruising ground since its inception three years earlier, but in 1987, there was a new intensity to his description of the event's sexual potential. Though they both agreed that the fair was a gay event by then, Valerio's vision of the fair as a "celebration of life" contained a sober recognition of the all-consuming AIDS crisis—a topic that Hernandez generally evaded in his *Bay Area Reporter* columns.<sup>232</sup> Yet, it is not incidental that these contradictory views coincided. Valerio's optimism regarding the fair's symbolic importance for the gay community was not the same as an endorsement of public sex during the event. Nevertheless, he unintentionally laid the path for others to perceive it that way. While he arguably shifted the fair's ethos to bolster, rather than commercialize, its gay crowd, later producers would build off this change to transform Valerio's "celebration of life" into an outdoor commercial sex fest. While it continued to occupy the same four-block stretch of the South of Market each September, the growth of the fair as a spectacular tourist attraction would gradually wrench it from the neighborhood. In 1987, however, the Folsom Street Fair was still a powder keg of sexual tension poised to explode, and the 1988 fair would light the match.

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<sup>232</sup> *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records.

### **Chapter III: Sexual Spectacle and Sexual Tourism, 1988-1994**

Next year, perhaps YOU will be one of the celebrants in the Greatest (Leather) Show on Earth!

—Marcus Hernandez, “Editorial”<sup>233</sup>

Tony DeBlase knew a thing or two about branding. Although he had only been publisher of the male erotica magazine *Drummer* for two years, after purchasing the magazine’s intellectual property from its co-founder John Embry in 1986, he had molded the periodical into its most commercially successful incarnation. In 1988, DeBlase recognized that the Folsom Street Fair was attracting thousands of leatherfolk to South of Market on the last Sunday of September. He began to see the commercial value in linking his franchise’s annual Mr. Drummer Contest with the fair. Through a flash of business savvy, DeBlase led the charge to center a growing number of leather events around the Folsom Street Fair, hoping to further attract tourists from around the world and solidify the explicit sexual orientation of the fair as it entered the final decade of the twentieth century. As he recalls his intentions:

*I looked around for where else to put the contest, to put it with another event, so that people would have more than just the contest to come to San Francisco for. You know, IML [the International Mr. Leather Contest] has made its name, not because it’s a Chicago contest, but because it attracts people from all over the world. I wanted to be able to try and do the same thing... It seemed to me the other thing I could tie to was the Folsom Street Fair... I started calling it Leather Pride Week in San Francisco.<sup>234</sup>*

DeBlase was not the only leather community leader to recognize the potential of the fair in this way. In fact, he set off a chain reaction. That same year, owner of Mr. S Leather and the

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<sup>233</sup> Mister Marcus, “Editorial,” *Drummer* 179, September 1994, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/179/index.htm>.

<sup>234</sup> Anthony F. DeBlase, “Leather Concordance” (unpublished manuscript, 1993), typescript, quoted in Gayle S. Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981-1996,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, edited by Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 134.

“mayor of Folsom Street,” Alan Selby, moved his infamous Fetish and Fantasy Night, which was held annually at The Powerhouse on 1347 Folsom Street, from late May to the Thursday before the Folsom Street Fair.<sup>235</sup> (Unsurprisingly, DeBlase was a special guest at the 1988 Fetish and Fantasy Night.<sup>236</sup>)

The coalescence of the Leather Pride Week also played out across the crowd at the fifth fair, with Allen White writing that leather was the “operative experience” in 1988. Gary Walker, the stage manager of the Folsom stage on Eleventh Street since the first fair in 1984, further described how the event looked “more gay and more leathery” than the prior year’s. During the inaugural Leather Pride Week, the fifth Folsom Street Fair became a visual representation of the emerging leather tourism industry that would continually center the Folsom Street Fair as its homing beacon.<sup>237</sup> Even before the first Leather Pride Week, City Hall had recognized the fair’s steady growth by awarding the South of Market Community Action Network its first “Grant for the Arts” in August of 1988. Although the grant only allotted \$3,000, it represented an essential step in the fair’s growth as an institution of the city’s broader tourism sector.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> The Outcasts Steering Committee Meeting Notes, 23 May 1987, 2003-36, carton 10, folder 1, Outcasts records, GLBT Historical Society Archives, San Francisco, CA (hereafter cited as May 1987 Outcasts Steering Committee Meeting Notes, Outcasts Records); Fetish and Fantasy 1988 promotional poster, September 1988, GLC SUB, box 3, Leather Community folder, LGBTQIA Ephemera Collection, San Francisco Public Library; James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, San Francisco, CA (hereafter cited as Fetish and Fantasy 1988 promotional poster, LGBTQIA Ephemera Collection).

<sup>236</sup> Fetish and Fantasy 1988 promotional poster, LGBTQIA Ephemera Collection.

<sup>237</sup> Allen White, “Dancin’ in the Street: South of Market Shows Its Stuff at the Fair,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 29, 1988. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19880929.1.4&srpos=11&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023); Gayle S. Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981-1996,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, eds. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 134.

<sup>238</sup> “Grants for the Arts from the Hotel Tax Fund,” *Bay Area Reporter*, August 17, 1988. [https://www.newspapers.com/image/462918997/?terms="Folsom Street Fair"](https://www.newspapers.com/image/462918997/?terms=) (accessed March 20, 2024).

By branding the Leather Pride Week and disseminating that branding across the international readership of *Drummer* magazine, DeBlase ostensibly set forth a public relations infrastructure that would bring the mass tourist appeal necessary for the Folsom Street Fair to reach its economic climax. The 1988 fair drew a crowd of over 150,000 people—an increase of one-and-a-half times the previous year’s attendance—and spatially expanded from past years by a block to fill the area from Folsom and 12th Street to Folsom and 7th Street.<sup>239</sup>

While the Folsom Street Fair had functioned as a de facto cruising ground since its inception, the 1989 fair marked the first step in its multi-part evolution into a full-fledged, commercial sexual spectacle. Considered to be the “Leather Community’s Stonewall,” 1989 was a pivotal year for national leather and S/M culture and the unprecedented sense of sexual pride was both a product of and impetus for the organizational achievements derived from community structures like the Leather Pride Week and the Folsom Street Fair.<sup>240</sup> This aura of pride was reflected in the fair that year. As the “mixed crowd[s]” of previous years gave way to a “resurgence in leather men as well as women,” fairgoers felt increasingly emboldened to strut their stuff—assless chaps and all.<sup>241</sup> The fair’s booths accordingly reflected this change. In previous years, most gay press coverage of the fair emphasized the variety of political, educational, and commercial booths that wound through the streets. When S/M and leather

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<sup>239</sup> White, “Dancin’ in the Street”; Will Synder, “Folsom Crowd Helps Nab Stabbing Suspect: Man Charged with Attempted Murder After Attack at Street Fair,” *Bay Area Reporter*, October 1, 1987. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19871001.1.5&srpos=8&e=-1987---1987--en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+street+fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>240</sup> Mister Marcus, “International Mister Leather 1989,” *Drummer* 132, August 1989, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/132/index.htm>.

<sup>241</sup> Charles Linebarger, “Diversity: Leather, Drag, Police, Boa Constrictors Are All Found At the Folsom Street Fair”; Allen White, “Party’s Not Over Yet—Take it Back to the Street,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 28, 1989. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19890928.1.38&srpos=92&e=-----en--20--81--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

organizations tabled, they were a mere erotic minority among the likes of the ACLU, Harvey Milk Club, and Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club.<sup>242</sup>

By 1989, however, the political booths assumed a more discrete position amidst the frenzy of sexual commerce. *Bay Area Reporter* cultural correspondent Allen White described the scene: “There were booths spreading up and down Folsom designed to titillate and excite those curious or fascinated by leather. [They] offered leather outfits from jackets to harnesses...”<sup>243</sup> Amidst these booths, leatherfolk cruised the streets, grabbing their lovers (or willing strangers) and “shoving their tongues down throats with the ease of a monkey eating a banana.”<sup>244</sup> Despite an increased presence of educational S/M organizations—including the women’s S/M group The Outcasts, who had their first booth at Folsom Street Fair two years prior—eroticism rather than education animated the majority of fairgoers.<sup>245</sup> The cameras of participants and voyeurs alike flashed throughout the overflowing crowd.

Nestled amongst the leather-clad set was a visually disparate group: the new South of Market crowd. Wearing their “shirts and slacks straight out of a high fashion restaurant,” these bourgeois interlopers aesthetically reflected the shifting spatial identity of South of Market.<sup>246</sup> At the same time, the notable presence of these individuals at the fair indicated that their nighttime attraction to the district’s new club scene in the early 1980s had begun to transform into residential interest in the district by the later years of the decade. As discussed in the previous

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<sup>242</sup> Charles Linebarger, “Diversity: Leather, Drag, Police, Boa Constrictors Are All Found At the Folsom Street Fair.”

<sup>243</sup> Allen White, “Party’s Not Over Yet—Take it Back to the Street.”

<sup>244</sup> Allen White, “Party’s Not Over Yet—Take it Back to the Street.”

<sup>245</sup> May 1987 Outcasts Steering Committee Meeting Notes, Outcasts Records.

<sup>246</sup> Allen White, “Party’s Not Over Yet—Take it Back to the Street.”

chapter, the economic impacts of the AIDS crisis and a decade of urban redevelopment efforts during Feinstein's mayoral run had spurred divestment in the Miracle Mile's gay economy, wrenching open the real estate at the behest for investors. By the late 1980s, a new brand of cosmopolitans began to flock to the neighborhood to patronize its hip eateries, live in its high-rise condominiums, and shop in its new businesses.<sup>247</sup>

The neighborhood had, by some accounts, become chic. In turn, land valuation in South of Market began to rise, making the district untenable for many of its previous working- and creative-class gay and immigrant residents.<sup>248</sup> A 1988 *New York Times* article advertised the long-built image of SoMA to a national audience while also hinting at the communities that were left behind in its transformation: "Once the rough threatening preserve of... struggling artists and gay men who dressed in black leather motorcycle outfits and metal studs, Soma has suddenly become fashionable... Now the streets are lined with shiny BMWs and Mercedes."<sup>249</sup> The overall growth of San Francisco's retail, service, finance, insurance, and real estate sectors—including the development of over 9,000 establishments throughout the city to house those proliferating industries—also threatened the further expansion of the financial district north of Market Street into the neighboring South of Market by 1990.<sup>250</sup> Thus, during a moment in which fairgoers and tourists were driving the Folsom Street Fair to new heights of public eroticism, the

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<sup>247</sup> It was during this period, as South of Market memoirist Jim Stewart chides, that "real estate agents and gallery owners invented the term SoMA." [See Jim Stewart, *Folsom Street Blues: A Memoir of 1970s SoMA and Leatherfolk in Gay San Francisco* (San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2011)].

<sup>248</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather, 1962-1997," in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, edited by James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 263-267.

<sup>249</sup> "Off-Beat Rough Toward Chic Very Fine," *New York Times*, September 15, 1988.

<sup>250</sup> Jasper Rubin. "The Best Laid Plans," in *A Negotiated Landscape: The Transformation of San Francisco's Waterfront Since 1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 180.



increasingly de-spatialized South of Market leather culture was becoming ever more economically and culturally mixed.

Despite its sometimes destructive impacts on the extant residential population of South of Market, this mixing provided a potential benefit in the fair's rise as a sexual tourist attraction. Three years after DeBlase established San Francisco's Leather Pride Week, the Folsom Street Fair was experiencing a period of sustained growth. In 1991, a crowd of over 300,000 people, many of whom were tourists external to the leather and S/M worlds, flooded the Miracle Mile in late September.<sup>251</sup> To a significant degree, the crowd was composed of visitors who specifically came "to look at those in leather."<sup>252</sup> Such "voyeuristic entertainment," as Nan Boyd notes in her study of sex tourism in mid-century North Beach, has helped economically cushion queer venues in San Francisco and insulate them from some threats of carceral and legislative backlash.<sup>253</sup>

In the case of the Folsom Street Fair during the early 1990s, visibly erotic leatherfolk constituted a sexual spectacle to be gazed upon and, thus, often became a force of economic productivity for the organization running the fair, the South of Market Merchants' and Individuals' Lifestyles Events (SMMILE), and the broader city-wide tourism industry. Although the objectifying pitfalls of sexual tourism were the exact opposite of Valerio's intentions, the increase of voyeurs throughout the early 1990s was also indicative of a more significant shift in the organizational structure that managed the fair. By March of 1990, Valerio and Salinger

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<sup>251</sup> "Folsom Street Fair, 1991," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1991. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19910926&e=-----en--20--21--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 72.

dissolved SCAN. Valerio then formed SMMILE with Jerry Vallaire, the Mr. Northern California Drummer contest organizer. The organization was primarily their response to the fair's growing leather and S/M orientation, a fact that was reflected in its mission statement. While SCAN was more purely a community empowerment and economic development organization, SMMILE introduced a sexual component to its organizational ethos—namely, the celebration and cultivation of tolerance for leather and S/M lifestyles.<sup>254</sup> However, self-identified “radical sex enjoyer” Mark I. Chester questions how the public, inclusive nature of the fair potentially subjected leatherfolk and S/M practitioners to misguided voyeurism:

*You know, the fact is that it is a street fair. Even if it was a leather street fair by the '90s, it was still a street fair. And you can't do a street fair in San Francisco and say "Only these people are allowed." Having been there, personally, I'm not sure if I needed public displays of leather... Maybe we shouldn't have been doing it as a spectacle.*<sup>255</sup>

Nevertheless, the Folsom Street Fair continued to grow as the most explicit late-twentieth-century turn in a lineage of San Francisco tourism dependent on such spectacular displays of sexual non-normativity. The fair was predated by a history of sexual tourism dating back to the 1933 repeal of Prohibition and subsequent establishment of “sexualized entertainment” venues, which evinced the commercial benefits that displays of sexual and racial difference could have on the tourist economy.<sup>256</sup> Yet, while many tourists were attracted to the fair because of its increasingly explicit displays of sexual difference—engendered in its public presentations of leather and S/M sexuality—its racial and gender dynamics remained relatively

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<sup>254</sup> Kathleen Connell and Paul Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

<sup>255</sup> Mark I. Chester (erotic photographer and Folsom Street resident), in discussion with the author, San Francisco, California, September 2023.

<sup>256</sup> Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 77-79.

static throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century. Many press correspondents spent significant effort praising the diversity of the fair's first six years, asserting, for example, that "leather men and women of every size, shape, color, description and dress code abound."<sup>257</sup> However, few, if any, acknowledged that this diversity was bound by San Francisco's solidification as a predominantly white, wealthy, and racially segregated city by the 1990s.

After the mass eviction of the Black-concentrated Western Addition throughout the '50s and '60s, the city's Black population went into a tailspin from which it had not recovered. During the 1990s, the Black population dropped by an unprecedented 14%.<sup>258</sup> Survey data collected by the STOP AIDS Project annually at the Folsom Street Fair reflected this larger demographic breakdown, indicating that, from 1990 to 1998, approximately 70% of the 100 survey respondents were white.<sup>259</sup> For many queer folks of color, the relatively homogenous dynamics of San Francisco's gay and sexually alternative worlds came into often violent conflict with its mythos of queer tolerance. In his groundbreaking 1989 experimental documentary *Tongues Untied*, filmmaker and Berkeley resident Marlon Riggs highlighted shots of white gay leathermen at the 1989 Folsom Street Fair to visualize this feeling. "In this great, gay Mecca," he monologued, "I was an invisible man."<sup>260</sup>

Despite the notable presence of women in the first years of the Folsom Street Fair, the comparably largely male dynamic of the event also posed a certain discomfort for some women

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<sup>257</sup> "Leather Pride Week in San Francisco: September 20 through 24, 1989," *Drummer* 132, August 1989, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/132/index.htm>.

<sup>258</sup> Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 47.

<sup>259</sup> Folsom Street Fair Surveys, 1990-2000, M1463, boxes 94, 293, 296, 303, folders 1, 6-7, 3, 9, Stop AIDS Project Records, Stanford University Libraries: Manuscripts Division, Stanford, CA.

<sup>260</sup> *Tongues Untied*, directed by Marlon Riggs (Frameline, 1989), 17:00-18:00, <https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/tongues-untied>.

attendees, specifically those who were lesbian-identified. Marilyn, a Bay Area S/M practitioner and member of the Outcasts during the second half of the 1980s, recalls having a sense of unease during one of her first visits to the Folsom Street Fair in 1990: “It felt very liberating and very scary to be so open, but I didn’t really feel connected to it [the fair] in my early years, because it was a lot of half-naked men. It didn’t feel like a women’s space, at least not then.”<sup>261</sup>

That being said, the Folsom Street Fair arguably had more potential for racial and gender diversity than the average leather club or S/M venue in South of Market during the late twentieth century, precisely because the fair was a public community event. While private club owners and staff could (and often did) employ racist and sexist discretionary admittance practices—including, but not limited to, the informal requirement that men of color had to present three forms of identification—the organizers of the Folsom Street Fair intended to attract as many visitors as possible.<sup>262</sup> Valerio, as discussed, was of Filipino descent and was keenly aware of the importance of working for racial equity in the gay world. Despite this acquisitive drive for equality and the notable presence of a diverse range of tourists at the fair, its demographics largely reflected the broader demographic inequities of late-twentieth-century San Francisco. As fairgoers further continued to explore commercialized public nudity and sadomasochistic play throughout the first half of the 1990s, the primarily white and male character of the attendees likely influenced the relative impunity with which they evaded police regulation and arrest.

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<sup>261</sup> Marilyn (Exiles S/M group member and former member of The Outcasts), in discussion with the author, San Francisco, California, September 2023.

<sup>262</sup> For more on these racist discretionary practices, as well as the relationship between Missionite Latinos and the South of Market club scene, see Ramírez 230-232, 253.


The 1993 fair harkened back to its fifth year in that both marked distinct steps in the event's development as an explicit S/M- and leather-oriented event. If 1989 was the Folsom Street Fair's year of commercial leather and public erotics, then 1993 was its year of commercial sadomasochism and public nudity. One of the first explicit press mentions of full-body nudity at the fair came from Hugh Lorin, a student visiting from the University of California San Francisco. He reported back in the university newspaper *Synapse* of a "man [who] liked his black boots so much he decided that they were enough to go with his birthday suit."<sup>263</sup> 1993 also saw the innovation of two soon-to-be calling cards of the fair: the spanking and the lashing booths, where visitors could pay a few dollars for a swat or spanking—either over or under their pants—to benefit the AIDS Emergency Fund.


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<sup>263</sup> Hugh Lorin, "Street Fair City," *Synapse*, October 7, 1993, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=ucsf19931007-01.2.27&srpos=62&e=-----en--20--61--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

**SPANKING BOOTH**  
**FOLSOM STREET FAIR**  
**Sunday September 26 1993**


**\$1.00 A SWAT**  
**\$5.00 A SPANKING**



*All  
for:* 

**AIDS  
EMERGENCY  
FUND**

*Sponsored by:*

 **MAN'S HAND FILMS**  
633 Post Street Suite 500 F  
San Francisco CA 94109

write for brochure \$3

**Figure 11.** Flyer for the spanking and swatting booth at the ninth Folsom Street Fair (San Francisco Public

Library: James C. Hormel Center, 1993).<sup>264</sup>

<sup>264</sup> 1993 Folsom Street Fair Spanking Booth flyer, September 26, 1993, GLC SUB, A-F box, Folsom Street Fair 1984-1997 box, LGBTQIA Ephemera Collection, San Francisco, CA.

Police Officer Nicholas J. Rubino was shocked by what he saw on the Folsom that year. “Not personally offended,” he assured the readers of *The San Francisco Examiner*, but nevertheless dismayed at the “public display of private sexual practices”—the “bondage... bare breasts, genitals, and buttocks.”<sup>265</sup> His embarrassment supposedly stemmed from the chides of unassuming passersby, who questioned him about public decency laws and urged him to arrest the fairgoers. He responded that he was to have ““high tolerance,”” as he had been instructed by the Southern Station police chief Michael Yalon.<sup>266</sup> As would be expected of a neoliberal San Francisco cop, Rubino claimed that his issue was not with the events that occurred (per se) but, rather, with them occurring in public.

In 1993, notions of the proper use of public space in South of Market were once again shifting under the weight of the high-tech and interactive multimedia corporations that had begun to look towards the neighborhood’s abandoned, post-industrial warehouses as potential office complexes. As the successor to the wave of gentrification that created the chic museum district of the late mid-1980s, the rise of the so-called Multimedia Gulch would be the last discrete phase of urban redevelopment in the twentieth-century South of Market.<sup>267</sup> Rubino’s testimony suggests that much of the intent behind his patrolling of the fair was to restrain more than repress and, in doing so, to teeter between disrupting the place-marketing that fed straight into the tourist

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<sup>265</sup> Nicholas J. Rubino, “Raw Display on Folsom St.,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, September 29, 1993. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/462137095/?terms=%22Folsom%20Street%20Fair%22&match=1> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> For more on the formation of the Multimedia Gulch, see Wolfe.

industry and offending the growing professional crowd of South of Market tech industry workers, whose sector was becoming rapidly instrumental in the city economy.<sup>268</sup>

Even within the historic “wide open town” of San Francisco, Rubino’s experience ricocheted throughout the press and Southern Station, as it publicized the fair’s unique (and, to some, troubling) evolution. In a subsequent editorial dispute, R. Hensler and Dan Solliday presented two representative responses to this controversy, which reflected the perception that the Folsom Street Fair was, for better or for worse, a bonafide sexual spectacle. Solliday, on the one hand, was disgusted by the public “cruelty” that he felt he was wrongfully exposed to by the S/M practitioners at the fair; Hensler, on the other, believed that anyone who went to the fair knew what they were signing up for and, thus, gave their consent to be exposed. While Solliday sought to relegate the public nature of the fair back into the shame of the “closet,” Hensler put forth an all-too-familiar libertarian vision for personal accountability and personal pleasure.<sup>269</sup>

Aiming to avoid a similar controversy in 1994, and having learned from Rubino’s testimony, police captain Michael Yalon spoke to *Bay Area Reporter* correspondent Kent Brandley three days before the fair to warn attendees that public nudity would not be tolerated. Working closely with SMMILE, he adopted a fair policy that was essentially a differential form of policing meant to avoid threatening San Francisco’s beloved street fair culture. Recognizing that no city penal codes could specifically persecute public nudity, however, Yalon invoked Section 314 and Section 647(a) of the State Penal Code—the misdemeanor laws relating to

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<sup>268</sup> Jasper Rubin, “The Best Laid Plans,” 181.

<sup>269</sup> Dan Solliday and R. Hensler, “Sadomasochist Display,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, October 12, 1993. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461557489/?terms=%22Folsom%20Street%20Fair%22&match=1> (accessed December 8, 2023).



indecent exposure and lewd conduct in public, respectively—to curb displays such as public masturbation. Much like Rubino and Solliday, Yalon used the metric of the politics of privatization to argue that fairgoers could expose themselves in private insofar as the Alcohol Beverages Control authorities (ABC) did not object.<sup>270</sup>

The sublime and perhaps intentional irony of Yalon’s final claim was that, in 1994, the Alcohol Beverages Commission continuously objected. A month before the fair, ABC regional administrator Mike Tyyrell, in collusion with Yalon himself, ordered a crackdown on two South of Market venues as part of the larger effort to gain control over the neighborhood after the ABC designated it “a problem area.”<sup>271</sup> In the August night, Yalon arrested four men on charges of lewd conduct after they were caught naked during an underwear party at Gus Bean’s Underworld. A few hours later, Dr. Winkie, the owner of the Underworld, closed down a private party at the adjacent DV8 dance club. As the patrons spilled out from the Haring-covered, cavernous insides of the club onto Howard Street, Yalon’s forces made a slew of arrests for public intoxication. With a swing of the round-about policing that the ABC has made its historical trademark, Tyyrell intended for these arrests to restrain Dr. Winkie from further breaking the rules of his liquor license by selling alcohol to people who were already intoxicated.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Kent Brandley, “Cops on Folsom Look for Nudists This Weekend,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 22, 1994. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19940922.1.1&e=-----en--20--61--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>271</sup> Dennis Conkin, “Hallinan to Hold Hearings on SoMA Busts,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 22, 1994. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19940922.1.1&e=-----en--20--61--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

While this crackdown appeared under the auspices of the ABC, its mode of operation comported with a larger push from City Hall to regulate commercial sexuality and “disorderly conduct” by the mid-1990s. Two years prior, Mayor Frank Jordan had put into place the controversially aggressive 1992 Matrix program, which sought to incarcerate San Francisco’s growing populations of unhoused people and sex workers off of the streets. The Matrix program did so largely by resurrecting a host of abandoned city ordinances aimed against public intoxication, obstruction of sidewalks, and obscenity. Operating as a carceral appendage to the interests of city officials who wanted to “clean up the streets,” the program targeted San Francisco’s downtown neighborhoods and effectively criminalized street prostitution and other public displays of commercial sexuality vis-a-vis the incrimination of loitering, public sexuality, and nudity.<sup>273</sup> When they similarly designated the South of Market as a “problem area,” the Southern Station Police and Alcohol Beverages Commission were responding to a city-wide rise in the policing of “undesirable” social and sexual behaviors from what were slotted to become the stomping grounds of the city’s high-tech industrialists.

Despite this increased police pressure in the South of Market district, the organizers and attendees of the Folsom Street Fair wholly evaded arrest in 1994. Marcus Hernandez exclaimed this fact with a relieved sense of pride, writing in *Drummer* that there were “leather people everywhere in this tolerant city (*and not one arrest for nudity at the Folsom Street Fair!*). Next year, perhaps YOU will be one of the celebrants in the Greatest (Leather) Show on Earth,” he

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<sup>273</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33-35.

continued.<sup>274</sup> Hernandez highlighted how increased police regulation of the fair did not necessarily negate his personal understanding of San Francisco's famous tolerant nature. However, it is worth interrogating how the unique racial and gender dynamics of the fair, as well as the economic and cultural benefits it offered the city, afforded its patrons such impunity. At a time when City Hall and the police were cracking down on commercial sexuality, how did the city's most visible and commercial sexual spectacle keep getting more sexual?

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<sup>274</sup> Emphasis added (Mister Marcus, "Editorial," *Drummer* 179, September 1994, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/179/index.htm>.)

#### **Chapter IV: The Politics of Pleasure and The Politics of Place, 1995-1997**

The Folsom Street Fair is a celebration of life. In the midst of the ARC/AIDS epidemic, it's a way for many who cannot forget illness to affirm life—even if it's only for one day.

— Michael Valerio<sup>275</sup>

For the past ten years, Michael Valerio had spent the final Sunday of each September—including those he knew would be his last—watching sunlight glint back and forth from polished manacle hardwares to latex corsets. The sun always came out for the Folsom Street Fair. As he stared at the Formica ceiling tiles of his room in the Davies Medical Center, Valerio thought of the sun's warmth.<sup>276</sup> On January 5th, 1995, Michael Valerio joined his South of Market Merchants' and Lifestyles' Individual Events co-founder Vallaire and all those he had loved and lost.<sup>277</sup> In one of Valerio's many eulogies in the gay press, Marcus Hernandez remembered him as a profound community leader: "Your contributions to the welfare of so many in the Bay Area rank among the highest accomplishments that anyone could expect from one man."<sup>278</sup> The entire week after Valerio's passing, the skies of San Francisco were clouded with a gray "gloom".<sup>279</sup>

Although Paul Lester did not personally know Valerio, he entered the board of SMMILE in 1995 with a sense of the holes that Valerio, Vallaire, and Salinger had left behind. Lester recalls his first year at SMMILE as mired by institutional infighting and the activist burnout that Valerio had fought to ward off during his life. Despite insecurity within the organization due to

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<sup>275</sup> *Southern Oracle*, Community United Against Violence Records (CUAV).

<sup>276</sup> "Michael S. Valerio," SFGate.com, Jan 12, 1995, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/michael-s-valerio-3049993.php>

<sup>277</sup> "Michael S. Valerio," SFGate.com.

<sup>278</sup> Mr. Marcus, "Washington's Centaurs Celebrate 25 Years," *Bay Area Reporter*, January 12, 1995. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19950112.1.49&e=-----en--20--21--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

losing its founding leadership, Lester capitalized upon the San Francisco gay world's increasing optimism in the mid-1990s. Following the first releases of antiretroviral drugs to treat HIV and AIDS, over a decade after the crisis first peaked, Lester began to ride the wave of the community's strengthened lease on life by ushering in a new era of the Folsom Street Fair.

Lester's managerial prowess while on the board of SMMILE and his willingness to put profits first, despite the controversy, ultimately solidified the Folsom Street Fair's shift from a community fundraising event to a profit-driven sexual business. His methods, however, were not free from controversy. Still, Lester undoubtedly played a crucial, if not questionable, role in bringing the Folsom fairgrounds into the sexual commerce sector by the turn of the twenty-first century. Central to this final phase of the fair's evolution was the transition from what this thesis calls the collectivist politics of place to the individualistic politics of pleasure as the driving political logic of the Folsom Street Fair.

Valerio was the representative agent of the politics of place, as evidenced by the importance he placed on the Folsom Street Fair's role in organizing the South of Market community against redevelopers' wholesale carving up of the neighborhood. Even when his focus for the fair turned towards the South of Market gay scene, Valerio aimed to uplift the community's collective resilience, and not its sexual appeal, in the wake of the AIDS crisis.<sup>280</sup> On the other hand, Lester embodied the politics of pleasure insofar as he prioritized the acquisitive drive of the Folsom Street Fair through atomic, gain-seeking, and sometimes socially

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<sup>280</sup> In the first copy of the *South of Market News*, published in June/July 1984 to coincide with the inaugural Folsom Street Fair, Valerio writes: "SOMA [the South of Market Alliance] was instrumental in redesigning the City's study for South of Market to assure an on-going voice in the City's planning process." [See *South of Market News*, June/July 1984, 1996-33, box 85, folder 14, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives, San Francisco, CA.]

disengaged means. This chapter further uses the Folsom Street Fair to examine how, in the context of coalescing neoliberal San Francisco, the assumption of free-market individualism provided fair, tangible economic benefits unmatched by earlier collectivist framings of community support and mutual responsibility. To illustrate this point, under Lester's leadership, the amount of revenue earned by the Folsom Street Fair more than doubled from past years, increasing from \$63,000 in 1995 to \$150,000 in 1997, its most erotic year that far.<sup>281</sup>

The uptick in the fair's commercial output coincided with a shift in its identity, specifically concerning its symbolic relationship with the South of Market district. The representation of the fair in the gay media reflected this change. According to press coverage, the 1995 fair no longer captured the existing "vital and viable neighborhood" but, instead, "liven[ed] SoMa" as the city "open[ed] her famous golden gates to all the guests who stream[ed] in."<sup>282</sup> As the fair grew in its notoriety and brazenness throughout the 1990s, the influx of sexual tourism discussed in the last chapter also steadily increased. This fact was further evidenced by a collection of newspaper advertisements for shipping companies promising to "send [tourists'] leather home safely" after the fair.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Timothy Rodrigues, "Fundies flip lids over Budweiser Sponsorship of Folsom Street Fair," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 24, 1998. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19980924.1.31&srpos=12&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January, 25, 2024).

<sup>282</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather, 1962-1997," In *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, edited by James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 268; "Fair and Fairness," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 21, 1995. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19950921.1.6&srpos=717&e=-----en--20--701--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>283</sup> PO Plus, "Mail with Muscle," advertisement, *Bay Area Reporter*, September 21, 1995. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19950921.1.8&e=-----en--20--701--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 25, 2024.)

**PO PLUS**  
celebrates the  
Folsom Street Fair  
September 24, 1995!  
*Send your leather home safely.*

**MAIL WITH MUSCLE**  
CUSTOM PACKING & SHIPPING SERVICES

Domestic and worldwide shipping  
**AUTHORIZED SHIPPING CENTER**

**FedEx** Federal Express  
**UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE**  
**ups**

COMPLETE POSTAL SERVICES AND SUPPLIES  
Stamps • Office supplies • Notary Public • Copies • Faxing • Keys  
Private key locked mailboxes with 24 hour access  
VISA, MASTERCARD & ATM ACCEPTED

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San Francisco 94114

Phone: 415/864-5888  
Fax: 415/621-5592

Hours  
M-F 9AM-6PM  
SAT 10AM-4PM

**Figure 12.** Shipping company advertisement aimed toward tourists visiting San Francisco for the eleventh Folsom Street Fair (PO Plus, 1995).<sup>284</sup>

1995 was also a record year for attendance at all Leather Pride Week events, especially the fair. The boon tourists brought to the city's lodging, restaurant, and business industries cannot be understated. "Every available room in hotels, tables at restaurants, and other venues will be bulging at the seams until Monday morning," Marcus Hernandez wrote of the 1995 fair

<sup>284</sup> PO Plus, "Mail with Muscle."

weekend.<sup>285</sup> The growth of the fair, as noted in an editorial for the *Bay Area Reporter*, coincided with increased anti-gay action in the Republican party during the mid-'90s, as personified by North Carolina Senator Jessie Helms.<sup>286</sup> That same year, the chairman of the conservative Traditional Values Coalition, Lou Sheldon, called on the Republican party to stand proud in its bigotry when he lobbied for Congress to hold hearings on the threat that homosexuality supposedly posed to American society.<sup>287</sup> As this chapter explores later, solidifying the vocal New Right during this decade added a supposedly rebellious sense of importance to the leather visibility at the fair in 1995. The editorial above also contextualized the historical precarity of such visibility: “Not all that long ago, police had the authority to raid bars where we ‘deviants’ hung out—street fairs would have been out of the question.”<sup>288</sup>

However, a controversy surrounding the 1995 Folsom Street Fair would reveal a linkage between a sponsor of the fair and the New Right, indicative of the kinds of contestations engendered by the fair’s rise as a corporate sex festival. During his first year on the board of the South of Market Merchants’ and Individuals’ Lifestyle Events, Paul Lester notably increased corporate funding received by the Folsom Street Fair. Although the fair had had corporate sponsors since its inception in 1995, Lester’s increased outreach was central to the fair’s economic ascent. Before he had to step back from SMMILE in 1991, co-founder Jerry Vallaire

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<sup>285</sup> Mr. Marcus, “Hot Time! SoMa in the City!”, *Bay Area Reporter*, September 21, 1995. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19950921.1.1&e=-----en--20--701--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>286</sup> Despite his history of fear-mongering over the “gay agenda” and legislative record of pushing forth “traditional values” bills, during a 1995 Senate meeting Helms infamously said he did not “hate homosexuals.” “I do not even know any homosexuals,” he continued. [See Barry Yeoman, “No, Jesse, No: Is Senator Helms Gay Public Enemy No. 1?”, *Out*, May 1, 1996. <https://barryyeoman.com/1996/05/no-jesse-no/> (accessed January 24, 2024).]

<sup>287</sup> “Fair and Fairness.”

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*



knew that the fair organizers would have to begin reaching out to more corporations due to rising production costs.<sup>289</sup> However, Vallaire could not have predicted how rapidly Lester would begin implementing this.

One new sponsor that Lester brought on in 1995 was Lucky Strike Cigarettes. Although it was his first year on the board of SMMILE, Lester independently corresponded with Brown and Williamson, the tobacco company that produced Lucky Strikes, and accepted their sponsorship (supposedly) without approval from SMMILE's board of directors. Lucky Strike sponsored the 12th Street stage at the fair that year and the 8th Street stage featured a massive advertisement for the cigarettes. Representatives from the company also bobbed in and out from the roughly 100,000 attendees, handing out free branded lighters and t-shirts. In return, SMMILE received a "sizeable amount of money" from Brown and Williamson, as Lester vaguely recalled. Though Lester's actions economically benefitted the Folsom Street Fair, they also engendered a hit to its public image from within San Francisco's gay world.<sup>290</sup>

The sponsorship became a source of tension for some within San Francisco's gay world, bringing the Folsom Street Fair under fire from the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force and the California Lavender Smokefree Project, a Bay Area-based lesbian and gay anti-smoking organization. In a scathing takedown published in the *Bay Area Reporter* in early 1996, CLSP organizer Jim Smith critiqued arguments that viewed smoking or accepting advertising from tobacco companies as an expression of personal liberty. According to Smith, cigarette companies

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<sup>289</sup> Connell and Gabriel, "The Power of Broken Hearts."

<sup>290</sup> Dennis Conklin, "Tobacco \$\$ for the gay community: a Lucky Strike—or a cancer?" *Bay Area Reporter*, December 5, 1996. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19961205.1.18&srpos=24&e=-----en--20--21--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2025).

like Brown and Williamson were using advertising at the fair to “manipulate the [gay] community’s ‘strong libertarian streak’ and link gay rights to tobacco industry issues.”<sup>291</sup> He also warned of the dangerous precedent that the fair sponsorship set since it was the first queer event in California funded by a tobacco company.

National Lesbian and Gay Task Force spokesman Robert Bray also critiqued the sponsorship but from a different angle than Smith. Recognizing that lesbian and gay events often required “such advertising revenue,” Bray instead pointed out that many tobacco companies have long histories of funding far-right politicians in D.C. and California. He was mainly concerned by Brown and Williamson because tobacco money played an instrumental role in the 1994 California State Assembly elections, setting off a chain of events that led to a rise in proposed state-wide anti-gay legislation. A last-ditch donation from four tobacco companies—including the maker of Lucky Strikes—aided the election of Assemblyman Steve Kuykendall to the seat formerly held by Democrat Betty Karnette of Long Beach. Kuykendall’s election then tipped the Republican Assembly vote in favor of Curt Pringle, making him the Republican Assembly Leader and Majority Leader of the Assembly in 1995.<sup>292</sup>

By the time the *Bay Area Reporter* published the 1996 exposé on the ‘95 Brown and Williamson sponsorship, Curt Pringle had been elected Speaker of the Assembly and was supporting a set of proposed anti-gay laws. One bill, which was approved in January 1996 by the newly Republican majority Assembly Judiciary Committee, was intended to allow the California government the right to deny same-sex marriages recognized in other states. Proposed by

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

Republican Assemblyman Pete Knight from Palmdale, AB 1982 was a preemptive and reactionary response to Hawaii's considering legislation legalizing same-sex marriage, as no other state had yet to do so. Assemblywoman Sheila J. Kuehl from Santa Monica, a strong opponent of the bill and the first out lesbian to serve in the State legislature, would have headed the Judiciary Committee that approved it, had the election of Kuykendall two years prior not created the Republican majority necessary to elect Curt Pringle speaker. The lobbying funds offered to Kuykendall by Brown and Williamson thus had a direct effect on the approval of AB 1982.<sup>293</sup>

In his response to the funding controversy, Paul Lester did not mention Brown and Williamson's right-wing associations. Instead, he expressed his own "libertarian streak," as Jim Smith cuttingly put it.<sup>294</sup> At the same time, Lester's explanation indicated how the Folsom Street Fair had changed in its first eleven years and how Lester's political philosophy would mold it further into the late 1990s. Far from a "fair for all ages," as journalist Charles Linebarger described it in 1986, Lester quickly pointed out the adult orientation of the fair and its advertisers, assuring that no children had seen the cigarette advertisements.<sup>295</sup> He then mimicked the exact argument for personal freedom that activists like Jim Smith and Robert Bray derided: "We still have a right to choose and make choices here in California," he blurted out to journalist Dennis Conklin. "This is San Francisco."<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Dan Morain, "Panel Approves Bill To Shun Gay Marriage," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1996.

<sup>294</sup> Dennis Conklin, "Tobacco \$\$ for the gay community."

<sup>295</sup> Charles Linebarger, "Diversity: Leather, Drag, Police, Boa Constrictors Are All Found At the Folsom Street Fair," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 25, 1986. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19860925.1.18&srpos=75&e=-----en--20--61--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023); Dennis Conklin, "Tobacco \$\$ for the gay community."

<sup>296</sup> Dennis Conklin, "Tobacco \$\$ for the gay community."

Although Lester inherited the fair from Valerio, his defense revealed a fracture between Lester's political viewpoint and the community advocacy Valerio and Connell intended the Folsom Street Fair to stand for. The image of San Francisco that Lester put forth—a city of personal freedom unmoored by political responsibility—was far from the very real sense of responsibility that Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio felt toward protecting the South of Market. When Valerio passed in 1995, his over two decades of experience in housing justice activism were replaced by Lester's business-minded approach that would bring high economic rewards to the Folsom Street Fair but also costs to the South of Market community that housed it.

With Valerio no longer serving as a community advocate in meetings of the Board of Supervisors and San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, conversations between the Folsom Street Fair and City Hall were limited and mainly centered on bureaucratic matters.<sup>297</sup> Gone were the days of keeping “alive the harmony and diversity [from]... before the South of Market [redevelopment] plan,” as Valerio and Connell wrote a decade earlier in the program for the second Folsom Street fair; in were the days of the Folsom Street Fair™. Funding from conservative cigarette conglomerates, unrestrained shopper frenzy on the Miracle Mile, and street blowjobs were the new way.<sup>298</sup> The politics of pleasure had all but swallowed the politics of place.

Despite the 1995 controversy and 1996 editorial that linked Lester to a company funding the rising conservative wave in California politics, coverage of the fair in 1996 continued to position it in opposition to broader anti-gay movements in national politics. A week before the

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<sup>297</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”

<sup>298</sup> Folsom Street Fair 1985 Program: Attack of the Street Faire, September 1985, 1996-33, box 85, folder 15, Community United Against Violence (CUAV) records, GLBT Historical Society Archives, San Francisco CA.

fair that year, everybody's least favorite Democrat, President Bill Clinton, signed the "Defense of Marriage Act" into law. This federal law—put forth by conservative figureheads Bob Barr, Newt Gingrich, and Bob Dole—forbade state governments from legally recognizing same-sex marriages and denied same-sex spousal benefits. A *Bay Area Reporter* editorial contrasted the fair from this landmark strike to the rights-based activism of the gay and lesbian political movement: "This week is going to be better than last week. Last week the president put his signature to DoMA... *This week, on the other hand, is Leather Week and the Folsom Street Fair.*"<sup>299</sup> Much like Lester's defense earlier, this editor failed to consider the economic linkages that Lester's collusion with Brown and Williamson had nurtured between the fair and the state government's own growing homophobic conservative presence.

Rather than mobilizing fair attendees to protest this growth, the editorial promoted the fair as a chance to escape the growingly tenuous political climate, capturing the separation between the identity of the Folsom Street Fair and the political ambitions of the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement's prominent strain, as well as those of the emerging radical queer activist movement. The gradual fracture of the fair from its political origins, which the last chapter traced from 1989 to 1994, continued with vigor into the second half of the 1990s. In place of political action booths, visitors ecstatically squeezed through dense crowds in the world's biggest one-day leather shopping center. "Hundreds of booths loaded with merchandise" lined the Folsom in 1996, offering fair-exclusive goods—including the beloved Bare Chest erotica calendar—that many tourists could not otherwise access, unless via mail-order catalogs

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<sup>299</sup> "A Vote Sante," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1996. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19960926.1.26&e=-----en--20--301--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 25, 2024).

or the proliferating Internet.<sup>300</sup> Tourist-shoppers swarmed South of Market that year with a sense of urgency spurred on by the novelty and relative inaccessibility of the fair's offerings, particularly for those who lived outside gay-populated urban areas.

Increased consumption at the fair emerged in tandem with the gradual restabilization of queer capital as a result of the release of drug cocktails for treating HIV and AIDS in the mid-'90s. For the first time since the onset of the AIDS crisis over a decade earlier, a generation of queer people started to believe in the possibility of their future. As the economic costs of the epidemic slowly began to weaken and queer people were gradually spending less time in AIDS wards, gay economic activity started to pick up.<sup>301</sup>

The increasingly consumptive environment of the Folsom Street Fair was not without its share of criticism from within the gay world. The corruption of the queer dollar became one specific point of concern, as evidenced by the backlash to the 1995 Brown and Williamson sponsorship. The long-overdue rollout of HIV and AIDS treatments also slackened the community regulation of safe sex practices that had been a crucial line of defense in the San Francisco gay world's fight against AIDS during the '80s. Worn down by over a decade of pandemic fatigue, many queer San Franciscans and establishments began to neglect this sexual education. The lack of condoms at the 1996 Folsom Street Fair prompted another controversy over what some considered to be the fair organizers' growing ambivalence toward the community's public health.

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<sup>300</sup> Mister Marcus, "Leather Week: September 22-29," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1996. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19960926.1.56&e=-----en--20--301--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).

<sup>301</sup> Sharon Brock, "25 Years of AIDS: June 5, 1981 - June 5, 2006," University of California San Francisco, June 5, 2006, <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2006/06/102063/25-years-aids-june-5-1981-june-5-2006>.

The cover story of the *Bay Area Reporter* from October 3rd publicized the tension, compounded by the fair's continued partnership with Lucky Strike: "While Lucky Strike was out in force passing out lighters to promote their cigarettes at the Folsom Street Fair on Sunday, September 29, observers expressed surprise that condoms were not more readily available to promote safe sex among the revelers."<sup>302</sup> Within this critique was also an acknowledgment that the Folsom Street Fair had become a place to engage in sexual activities that necessitated condoms. Beyond even the cruising ground it had been in prior years, Lester was transforming the fair into a semi-public sex party.

Michael Bennett, a tourist who traveled from Washington, D.C., expressed his shock at the lack of condoms in the crowds and bars in the fairgrounds, as he expected the U.S. city most dramatically impacted by the AIDS crisis to have better prevention infrastructure in place. "I just thought [condoms] would be everywhere here," he admitted. The Stop AIDS Project, a long-time collaborator with the fair, was the organization overseeing condom distribution that year. Despite his belief that Stop AIDS had a duty to "provide condoms to the public," organizer Patrick Barressi admitted that they had not adequately prepared for the "sexually-charged" event. Although the fair drew a record crowd of over 300,000 attendees, Stop AIDS only handed out a couple thousand condoms. A *Bay Area Reporter* editor further highlighted the growing consensus that "more rubbers and fewer ribbons would be a welcome change" at the Folsom Street Fair.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Terry Beswick, "SF condom distribution: Poor to Fair," *Bay Area Reporter*, October 3, 1996. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19961003.1.1&e=-09-1996--10-1996--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).

<sup>303</sup> "Fair and foul," *Bay Area Reporter*, October 3, 1996. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19961003.1.6&srpos=15&e=-09-1996--10-1996--en--20-BAR-1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).

The waning presence of condoms at the fair reflected a broader phenomenon in the South of Market bar and sex club landscape. Local activist Michael Petrelis recalls how there were rarely condoms in sight at the Lone Star, the Powerhouse, and My Place—three bars in the district catering to the leather scene—in spite of rising infection rates, “particularly among young gay men.”<sup>304</sup> Kevin P. Mosley, a resident of San Francisco, wrote to the press in October of that year to highlight that the condom controversy surrounding the fair was broadly representative of the state of safe sex practices in the entire city: “These front-page revelations are, simply and unfortunately, business as usual in the ‘scene,’ whether it be in reputedly down-n-dirty SoMa, the ‘Mecca’ of the Castro or along ‘Polkstrasse.’”<sup>305</sup>

The condom controversy provided two crucial insights into the character of the fair and its role in San Francisco’s gay life in 1996. First, along with the Lucky Strike controversy, it represents a shift in the local community’s reception of the fair following Paul Lester’s ascension to the board of SMMILE the previous year. Second, it indicates the extent to which the sexual nature of the fair, as well as the organizers’ permissiveness regarding acts of public sex, was booming. Lester’s leadership had fundamentally altered the fair’s identity by 1996, obscuring much of its activist roots. Two notable changes he called for that year included the introduction of gates surrounding the fairgrounds and, in turn, the request for donations upon visitors’ entrance.<sup>306</sup> While Lester’s motivations may have been purely economic, the new format proved crucial in permitting the displays of public sex that had been blossoming on the stretch of Folsom

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Kevin P. Mosley, “Conscience and conscious,” *Bay Area Reporter*, October 10, 1996. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19961010.1.7&srpos=722&e=-----en--20--721--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).

<sup>306</sup> Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”



between 12th and 8th Streets for years.<sup>307</sup> By circumscribing the Folsom with gates, Lester effectively transformed the space of the once-public street fair into the closed arena of a semi-public, adult-oriented sex festival.

Lester's closing off of the fair's space also correlated with the gradual decrease in intervention from the San Francisco Police Department. Officer Nicholas Rubino and Southern Station Chief Michael Yalon were perhaps being truthful when, in 1994, they claimed that the issue was not public nudity at the fair itself so much as the implication of non-consenting passersby into said scenes of nudity.<sup>308</sup> Thus, despite its seemingly minor influence, the introduction of the gates precipitated a distinct before and after in the sexual character of the Folsom Street Fair, setting the scaffolding necessary for it to reach its sexually explicit climax by 1997.

A few days before the 1997 fair, Marcus Hernandez took to his weekly column in the *Bay Area Reporter* to remind attendees that “there *are* nudity laws.” “Exercise good judgment,” he cautioned, “so you don't get yourself in a jam with overzealous authorities.”<sup>309</sup> After years of branding the fair as a cruising ground, Hernandez had seen the fruit of his labors, only to unexpectedly become the most strident voice against further crackdowns on the fair's sexual

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<sup>307</sup> Prior to Lester joining the board of SMMILE, David Dysart had inherited the presidency from Valerio. Despite Dysart's measured and steady leadership, both the Folsom Street Fair and the Dore Alley Fair experienced economic lethargy in the early 1990s, returning only approximately \$30-40,000 to the allocated charities. [See Connell and Gabriel, “The Power of Broken Hearts.”]

<sup>308</sup> Nicholas J. Rubino, “Raw Display on Folsom St.,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, September 29, 1993. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/462137095/?terms=%22Folsom%20Street%20Fair%22&match=1> (accessed December 8, 2023); Kent Brandley, “Cops on Folsom Look for Nudists This Weekend,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 22, 1994. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19940922.1.1&e=-----en--20--61--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed December 8, 2023).

<sup>309</sup> Mister Marcus, “Here we go again!”, *Bay Area Reporter*, September 25, 1997. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19970925.1.59&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).

behavior. Hernandez had published a similar warning each year since the rise in police monitoring of the fair in 1994. One attendee seemed particularly unphased by Hernandez's advice and went to the *Bay Area Reporter's* classified ads the next day, hoping to curate his experience: "Folsom Street Fair. I'm taking you there on a collar and leash. You'll be wearing a leather strap face cage, mouth gag, tit clamps and chaps, with your butt bare and plugged."<sup>310</sup>

By 1997, Hernandez's reminders were also at odds with the official description of the fair put forth by the SMMILE Board of Directors under Paul Lester. In the program for the fourteenth annual fair, the picture they painted was just short of an outright endorsement of public sex:

*During September more than 300,000 people come to the Folsom Street Fair looking, touching, cruising, and connecting with others in a wild, sexually-charged atmosphere... Title holders, drag queens, leather women and men, studs in latex and rubber, and the curious, the jaded, and the shocked meet new friends or tricks and renew old acquaintances. Only in San Francisco do dog collars and leashes have new meanings, spanking and bondage booths are the norm, and sexual cruising is on everyone's mind.<sup>311</sup>*

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<sup>310</sup> "Plugged," in this case, refers to the use of a butt plug, a sex toy that is able to stay inserted in the bottom due to its conical shape and flared base stopper ["BARTalk: Seeking Adventure," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 26, 1997. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19970925.1.61&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024)].

<sup>311</sup> 1997 Folsom Street Fair program, September 28, 1997, GLC SUB, box 1, Folsom Street Fair 1985-1997 (folder), LGBTQIA Ephemera Collection, San Francisco Public Library, James C. Hormel Center, San Francisco, CA.



**Figure 13.** Program for the thirteenth Folsom Street Fair and its sexual climax entitled “Indulge” (San Francisco Public Library: James C. Hormel Center, 1977).<sup>312</sup>

<sup>312</sup> 1997 Folsom Street Fair program, September 28, 1997, GLC SUB, box 1, Folsom Street Fair 1985-1997 (folder), LGBTQIA Ephemera Collection, San Francisco Public Library, James C. Hormel Center, San Francisco, CA.

Dubbed “Indulge,” 1997 saw the long-awaited climax of the Folsom Street Fair’s gradual transformation from a community activist event into a uniquely San Franciscan sexual delight, offering attractions and merchandise like no other. The fair’s name that year suggested an open invitation to the world’s biggest sex party, drawing in leatherfolk and kinksters from all over, in numbers rivaling those seen at the Pasadena Rose Bowl.<sup>313</sup> The increase in fair attendance also paralleled the crowd’s relative demographic changes, as mediated through the overwhelming whiteness of San Francisco and the relative maleness of the South of Market crowd (which Chapter Three covers). In her 1997 study of AIDS in the San Francisco leather community, Gayle Rubin notes the new “leather political constituency” of the ‘90s that crossed “boundaries of gender, sexual orientation, and kink of choice.”<sup>314</sup> Despite Rubin’s failure to address the racial dynamics of the community—symptomatic of the colorblindness in her writings on leather and S/M—1997 saw increased recognition and organizing by leatherfolk and S/M practitioners of color in San Francisco.

Karen Smith, a Black lesbian and the reigning Ms. Alameda County Cheeks & Chaps at the time, was voted International Ms. Cheeks and Chaps during Leather Pride Week and walked throughout the fair that year with her sash.<sup>315</sup> Smith was not a resident of San Francisco but rather the city of Hayward, whose Black population was growing throughout the 1990s while

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<sup>313</sup> Mister Marcus, “SF Gets Wrapped Up in Leather This Week,” *Bay Area Reporter*, September 25, 1997. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19970925.1.1&srpos=14&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).

<sup>314</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981-1996,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, eds. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 134.

<sup>315</sup> Mister Marcus, “Here we go again!”

San Francisco's was steadily declining.<sup>316</sup> Like many Black and Latine Bay Area leather community members, Smith lived in a city outside of San Francisco and traveled for the Leather Pride Week, a testament to the decades of differential policing and racialized housing policies—most notably, the rampant use of restrictive covenants by white property owners—that had rendered the neoliberal city primarily white.

Like Smith, International Mr. Drummer '93 Graylin Thorton traveled from San Jose the last weekend of every September to attend the Folsom Street Fair and the satellite events of Leather Pride Week. Thorton, a Black leatherman, knew the importance of asserting his community's presence in San Francisco. The caption to Thorton's spread in the April 1993 issue of *Drummer* magazine (a prize he won as International Mr. Drummer) placed him within the context of the slowly diversifying gay male leather culture: "An intelligent forthright man, he [Thorton] brings a special message to our community: Equality and Respect."<sup>317</sup> Thorton carved out space for his message the Friday before the 1997 fair, hosting a reception in San Francisco with the leathermen of color organization Onyx Leathermen of Chicago.<sup>318</sup> The reception honored the New Village—the HIV support service for people of color in San Francisco—while also demonstrating the many contributions of leatherfolk of color by bringing together titans of the community like International Ms. Leather Genelle Moore, International Mr. Fantasy Ariq

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<sup>316</sup> The Black population in San Francisco has been in steady decline after the waves of expulsion that began to push Black residents out of the city following World War II. From 1990 to 2000, the population dropped by over three percent from 10.9% to 7.8%. [See "San Francisco Bay Area Decennial Census data, 1970-1990," Bay Area Census, Association of Bay Area Governments & Metropolitan Transportation Commission, accessed December 8, 2023, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/bayarea70.htm>.]

<sup>317</sup> "Graylin Thorton: International Mr. Drummer 1993," *Drummer* 174, April 1993, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/174/index.htm>.  
Mister Marcus, "Editorial," *Drummer* 179, September 1994, <http://cowboyfrank.men/Drummer/179/index.htm>.

<sup>318</sup> To illustrate the whiteness of San Francisco: Onyx did not have a chapter covering the city until two decades later, in 2017.

Robinson, and International Mr. Deaf Leather Patrick Richardson, all of whom traveled to San Francisco for the weekend.<sup>319</sup>

Despite the growing visibility of a non-white contingent in major San Francisco leather and S/M community events, survey data from the Stop AIDS Project suggests that attendees at the Folsom Street Fair (or, at least, the all-male survey respondents) were mainly white and stayed that way throughout the 1990s. The number of white respondents increased from 63% in 1992 to 71% by 1998, while the number of Black respondents decreased by half between those years, dipping below that of Asian and Latine attendees.<sup>320</sup> This dip reflected a larger decline in San Francisco's Black and Latine population since the 1960s, as well as the increase in the number of Black and Latine residents leaving (or being displaced from) the city throughout the 1990s. Critical geographer Manissa Maharawal links this trend to skyrocketing housing costs, largely the result of a wave of gentrification driven by the coalescence of Silicon Valley in the city during the early part of the decade, in what is commonly referred to as the "tech boom."<sup>321</sup> As discussed in Chapter Three, a collection of PC media companies began to proliferate in a dense cluster in the southwest part of the South of Market district, renovating deindustrialized warehouses into multi-use office spaces in what would soon become the Multimedia Gulch. Although the Miracle Mile was separated from the Multimedia Gulch by U.S. State Highway 80,

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<sup>319</sup> Mister Marcus, "SF Gets Wrapped Up in Leather This Week."

<sup>320</sup> Folsom Street Fair Surveys, 1990-2000, M1463, boxes 94, 293, 296, 303, folders 1, 6-7, 3, 9, Stop AIDS Project Records, Stanford University Libraries: Manuscripts Division, Stanford, CA.

<sup>321</sup> Manissa Maharawal, "San Francisco's Tech-led Gentrification: Public Space, Protest, and the Urban Commons, in *City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy*, eds. Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein (New York: Routledge, 2017), 31.

which cuts across the bottom third of the district, the new informational technology industries' impacts started seeping into the entire neighborhood's landscape.

Spatial theorist Mark Wolfe notes that one factor making the South of Market attractive to these multimedia companies, among the district's "abundance of old [WWII-era] industrial structures," was its cultural identity as an "avant-garde district supportive of artists, alternative culture, and individual expression."<sup>322</sup> The South of Market gay leather community and its residents, which had concentrated in the district since the mid-1970s, were a key part of the neighborhood's eccentric culture. By 1997, the Folsom Street Fair had become one of the district's most prominent tourist attractions, broadcasting this individualist, free-for-all mentality to its visitors. Rather than memorializing the diverse history of the district, as Valerio and Connell had intended it to, under two years of Paul Lester's leadership, the Folsom Street Fair had grown into a stunning indication of where the neighborhood was headed. Pleasure was suffocating place (and enjoying it too), implicating the Folsom Street Fair in the city's legacies of sexual tourism tied to rampant housing inequity and displacement. In many ways, the fair had become complicit in the same expulsive urban processes that Valerio had hoped would interfere with. And City Hall was thankful it had. The sexual spectacle of 1997's "Indulge" prompted little police controversy or political backlash.

Instead, as public sex became the norm, the fair grew rapidly in terms of economic output. It broke all previous records that year, both in attendance and earned revenue. With more than 400,000 people swarming in and out of the Miracle Mile, the gate fees Lester introduced

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<sup>322</sup> Mark R. Wolfe, "The Wired Loft: Lifestyle Innovation Diffusion and Industrial Networking in the Rise of San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch," *Urban Affairs Review* 34, no. 5 (May 1999): 709, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/10780879922184158>.

nearly doubled the amount earned from visitor donations a year earlier.<sup>323</sup> Chuck Roth, the treasurer of SMMILE, announced that the organization had taken away \$239,000 gross, an unprecedented amount.<sup>324</sup>

Seeing these numbers, officials in City Hall made a symbolic move to commemorate the new Folsom Street Fair business. In September of the following year, the few long-term residents of the Folsom, including Mark I. Chester, awoke to Tony DeBlase's Leather Pride flag peppered along six blocks of the street's lights. The managers of the Hotel Tax Fund and Grant for the Arts, who paid a couple of thousand dollars to install the banners, had made clear that the sex festival was good business for the city. Despite the continued disintegration of the community that Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio had created the fair to uplift, by its fourteenth year, the Folsom Street Fair had become too valuable to go anywhere.

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<sup>323</sup> In 1996, SMMILE earned roughly \$43,000 from the introduction of gate fees. By 1997, this number had almost doubled, bringing in \$73,000. [See Mister Marcus, "Folsom Bonanza: \$239,000!", *Bay Area Reporter*, October 9, 1997. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=BAR19971009.1.8&srpos=128&e=-----en--20--121--txt-txIN-%22folsom+Street+Fair%22-----> (accessed January 24, 2024).]

<sup>324</sup> Mister Marcus, "Folsom Bonanza."



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