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Review of *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco* by Nan
Alamilla Boyd.
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By Benjamin Shepard

All too often queer history is thought to begin with the police riots at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village of June 1969. Yet, for many 1969 is an arbitrary moniker. Many in San Francisco recall protests after a police dragnet on benefit on New Year's day 1965 at California Hall as the beginning of a shift in consciousness marking the beginnings of a Left Coast queer gay liberation. Nan Alamilla Boyd, author of the newly published *Wide-Open Town: A History of San Francisco*, explains: "while Stonewall remains a crucial part of east coast gay and lesbian history – it operates as a key turning point – it did not function as a mobilizing factor in San Francisco's queer social history. In fact, many of the demands articulated through the Stonewall Riots had already been addressed in San Francisco by 1965," (p.10). While countless texts (see George Chauncey, Eric Marcus, Martin Duberman) emphasize lesbian and gay history in relation to Stonewall, the story is far broader. It's a delight that Nan Allan Boyds's social history *Wide Open Town* emphasizes the story of the police attempt to shut down the benefit for San Francisco's Council on Religion and the Homosexual, the protests which ensued, and the movement the response set in motion. Yet, instead of allowing her work to fall into the familiar narrative arch of the liberation movements which thrived after 1969, Boyd considers the forces propelling queer liberation within the context larger forces of US history including Prohibition, World War II, and the Cold War.

Further, it's a delight to see a text which emphasizes the role of migratory patterns and sex tourism in the making of modern queer sensibilities. San Francisco has always been a place where social outsiders have come to reinvent themselves. For countless reasons, wave after wave of dreamers – from those panning for gold during the rush of 1849 to Beats of the 1950's – have created lives for themselves on the Bagdad by the Bay. By World War II, those military discharged for conduct unbecoming had little interest in going home to tell mom and dad about what they did in the 'Good War.' It could not be more essential that a history breaks down these migratory patterns, contextualizing this patterns. Boyd has created a striking single volume for San Francisco queer history.

For many, San Francisco's appeal stems from the ongoing reality that San Francisco was a 'wide-open town.' Throughout the first half of the 20th century, bars opened in which gender insubordination, bohemian conversation, cross dressing, and burlesque thrived. When a reactionary mayor tried to 'clean up' the city, players who depended on these spaces for their livelihood openly fought back. Boyd interviews a number of these players detailing their struggles in a manner which gives Studs Terkel a run

for his money. Further, the author makes detailed use of archival materials detailing the police attempt to stifle San Francisco's burgeoning queer culture. This is thrilling history. Through her compelling deployment of oral histories of players to introduce detailed chapters on the close relation between the battles over vice, bar culture, and a city municipality which recognized it was to its advantage not to thoroughly enforce prohibition, Boyd presents a dynamic, immanently readable study of the making of queer public culture in San Francisco. What unfolds is the story of the making of a vast democratic civil society born of an underground bar culture, cross dressing, performance, and conviviality which translated into an enduring political constituency and movement recognized around the world.