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2014

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# Flex Marks the Spot: Histories of Muscle Beach

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# Flex Marks the Spot: Histories of Muscle Beach

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**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**August 2014**

# Dedication

To memory of my mother, my first reader.

To my father: *nereden nereye*.

## Acknowledgements

If there is one person responsible for this project, it is my father, Huseyin Ozyurtcu. For over thirty years, he has been my biggest influence and my best friend. Together with my late my mother, he taught me to love knowledge, think independently, and trust my instincts. In his love and unwavering support, I have found the strength and confidence to be myself. I owe him everything. I am also very grateful for my stepmother Vanessa, my brother Marcos, and my sister Yasmin. It has been almost ten years since our families came together and I cannot imagine life without them—to be in their presence is to know how good life can be.

I consider myself fortunate to have had the support of Dr. Jan Todd since I began my graduate education in 2008. As my dissertation advisor, Dr. Todd gave me the freedom, encouragement, and feedback necessary to complete a large and ambitious project. But Dr. Todd is more than an advisor— she is a mentor, collaborator, inspiration, and friend. She has allowed me to pursue a broad range of interests and perspectives on my path to becoming a scholar. Along the way, she has taught me much about the inner workings of academia, the makings of good writing, and the pleasures of historical research.

I am similarly indebted to the rest of my dissertation committee, Drs. Marlene Dixon, Joan Neuberger, Janet Davis, and Thomas Hunt. Without their patience and support, this project would have been impossible. As dissertation readers and teachers they taught me to ask meaningful questions, integrate theory into my work, and write clearly. An extra thanks is in order to Dr. Hunt, who has been an invaluable source of wisdom and reason in my academic journey, both as a mentor and a friend.

Further thanks are due to the faculty and staff at the University of Texas at Austin who have helped me throughout my studies, especially those with the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education and the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports. There are too many to name them all, but I am particularly grateful for the support of Drs. Terry Todd, John Fair, Kim Beckwith, Chris Green, Michael Sanders, and John Bartholomew. At the Stark Center, library director Cindy Slater and archivists Brent Sipes and Geoff Schmalz were great office mates and a tremendous help in conducting my research. I have also benefitted from working with a great cohort in my doctoral program, each a generous peer and excellent scholar: George Kioussis, Dominic Morais, Florian Hemme, Lauren Osmer, Ben Pollack, and Sam Twito.

Many good friends have kept me sane and happy throughout the dissertation process. Seth Kessler, a willing accomplice and sounding board for ideas good and bad since we met in 2008, has convinced me that suburban Los Angeles and rural Missouri may not be so different after all. Matt Bowers has been a willing guide to academic life and a friend for the ages. CJ Stanfill, Darren Kelly, Jeff Carrillo, and Shelby Sherman Bowden deserve credit for making Austin feel like home and for teaching me that new friends can quickly become great friends. The Austin crew has gotten me through these last several years, but I would not have made it this far without the continued support of an amazing group of long-time friends: Jeff Pickett, Matt Caplan, Erol Ari, Al Brown, PJ Shakstad, Amir Shoucri, Anthony Arroyo, Jose Izquierdo II, Jordan Stuart, and Nick Troutman each deserve more thanks than I can offer here. I am especially indebted to Al Brown for his help on this project; I would not have been able to meet my deadline without his many hours of research assistance.

Finally, I will be forever grateful to Katy Snell for her love and support in everything I do. Finishing this project would have been impossible without her. There really are no words to describe how much she means to me.

Flex Marks the Spot: Histories of Muscle Beach

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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The original Muscle Beach, in Santa Monica, California, is considered by many to be the birthplace of the modern physical fitness movement. From 1934 to 1958, the strip of sand south of the Santa Monica Pier offered acrobats, gymnasts, weightlifters, and bodybuilders a place to learn, train, and perform feats of physical culture. This milieu helped shape the careers of fitness luminaries like Jack LaLanne, Vic Tanny, and Steve Reeves; it also catalyzed the development of modern fitness equipment and health clubs The site's popularity peaked in the post-war period, especially over summer holidays, when up to 2,000 spectators crowded around an elevated platform by the boardwalk to watch the annual Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests and other acrobatic and strength exhibitions. In the American imagination, Muscle Beach became a symbol of the mid-century California dream, the promise of sunshine, health, and good living captured in iconic images of the toned and tan beach athletes. Despite these real and symbolic legacies, Muscle Beach remains an understudied site, especially from scholarly perspectives. The essays that constitute this work examine Muscle Beach using three different historical points of engagement. In the first study, I offer a theoretical perspective for unpacking the widespread influence of Muscle Beach. Drawing from oral history interviews with several Muscle Beach legends, I argue that the role of Muscle Beach in ushering in the modern fitness movement is best understood as the result of

social processes of innovation. In the second study, I explore the abrupt closure of Muscle Beach by the city of Santa Monica in late 1958 and I evaluate the civic legacy of the site for the city. In the third and final study, I analyze the use of Muscle Beach in the fitness magazines of Joe Weider. I argue that Weider deployed a mythic Muscle Beach, creating an imaginative take on the California dream for his readers and customers. Combined, these studies advance the historical understanding of Muscle Beach as both a real and symbolic place.

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# Introduction

In the summer of 2004, I paid a small fee, signed a waiver, and lifted some weights at Muscle Beach Venice. I was joined by four friends, visitors from New England. We traded turns on a bench press, knocked out a few "skull-crushers," and took some pictures. The gym itself was pretty lousy, but the location spoke for itself. In retrospect, we were really paying for the photo shoot, because we had ten more people in our group, waiting on the other side of the weight-pen fence, ready to head to Tito's Tacos or In-N-Out Burger after a day spent playing tourist on the Venice Beach boardwalk. For the five of us inside the fence, gym rats with a sense of history, it was a chance to pump iron in the spirit of *Pumping Iron*. We may not have been putting up the same poundage as Arnold Schwarzenegger, but we could say that we had trained at the legendary Muscle Beach, and we had the pictures to prove it.

That day was the first (and only) time I crossed the threshold of the facility, but I was no stranger to what is now called Muscle Beach. Growing up in Manhattan Beach, ten miles down the coast, I had spent my fair share of time on the Venice boardwalk. In high school, the seedy, quasi-bohemian freak show on the edge of the Pacific was an occasional diversion; a quick drive for a carful of teens looking to kill an afternoon, buy knockoff sunglasses and used CDs, or get a piercing or tattoo from studios that had lax ID policies. In my younger years, Venice was a requisite stop on the sightseeing tours my dad led for out-of-town guests. These earlier trips blend together in my memory, a collection of lingering traces: corn dogs and limeade, roller-skaters and basketball players, one-man bands, old hippies selling pamphlets and pipes, Hare Krishnas and Black Israelites. I do not remember much about Muscle Beach in this period, but I do

remember that it was a mandatory photo-op for whomever we were with. Like my east coast friends, these visitors— cousins from Turkey, Norwegians visiting for business— believed it was a place worth capturing.

Having spent the better part of the past two years working on Muscle Beach as a historical subject, I have listened to friends and acquaintances recall similar days spent at Venice Beach. These shared memories are a pleasant byproduct of my research interest in the site. Where many academic subjects are conversation non-starters, I have the luxury of studying something that is familiar (at least in name) to many people. Asked about my dissertation topic, I have enjoyed stories of family vacations and coastal road trips, while nodding in acknowledgement of complaints about crowds, parking, and the cold waters of the Pacific. I have also gotten reactions from people who have not made the trip, familiar with Muscle Beach from movies, television, and fitness magazines: "Dude. ARNOLD!"; "I remember it from *White Men Can't Jump*."

When I inevitably tell these kind people that I am not writing about *that* Muscle Beach, not Venice, but the *original* Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, I do so with the admission that, until a few years ago, I did not know there was a significant difference. Having read various strength and fitness magazines since I was in high school, I had a vague sense that the Muscle Beach I grew up with was not the original. As I understood it, Muscle Beach had taken various forms over the years, but those forms had been more or less in the vicinity of the current site. I was partially correct. What is now officially known as "Muscle Beach Venice" has gone through several permutations since it emerged (after the closure of the original Muscle Beach) in the early 1960s. But that this Muscle Beach was the descendant of an earlier, much different facility, located a mile and a half north, in the shadows of the Santa Monica Pier? In the words of the late Johnny Carson: I did not know that.

## LOCATING MUSCLE BEACH

While the memories and impressions of Muscle Beach I have encountered are about the Venice Beach rebirth of the site, their underlying themes extend to the original. Like the "new" Muscle Beach, the original served multiple functions: it was a training facility for both stars and people in the neighborhood, and a sightseeing destination, where tourists and locals watched athletic spectacles and made memories. From 1934 to 1958, it was a place of convergence, where gymnasts, acrobats, stage performers, wrestlers, weightlifters, and bodybuilders came together to learn, compete, and entertain. Fitness industry pioneers emerged from the beach, including early regulars like Vic and Armand Tanny, Harold Zinkin, and Pudgy Stockton, as well as frequent visitors like Jack LaLanne and Joe Weider. Even Bob Hoffman, scion of the York Barbell Company and self-appointed "Father of American Weightlifting," didn't come to California without stopping by for a visit at Muscle Beach.

It was also a symbolic place. In photographs and newsreels, Muscle Beach captured an emergent California at mid-century.[1] If California was the land of a new, post-war American Dream, it was embodied by the buffed and beautiful, scantily clothed Muscle Beachers, performing feats of athleticism and strength for all to admire. A photogenic subject in an increasingly visual era, images of Muscle Beach were prominent after World War II, signaling the high-flying possibilities and boundless freedom that many associated with the Golden State.

There was also possibility and freedom in the bodies of the athletes, the men and women challenging conventions of physical beauty and entrenched beliefs about the effects of strenuous exercise. In the pages of popular magazines like *Look*, *Pic, Life*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, the women of Muscle Beach offered proof that feminine

[1] Jan Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 1 (January 1992): 5–7.

beauty and robust strength were not irreconcilable, while the men dispelled notions that training with weights produced an immobile, inflexible, and "musclebound" body.[2] These new conceptions of the body spread through print, but no medium did more to draw attention to the body than film. Muscle went to Hollywood from the beach, not just in the physique of Steve Reeves, the lead in *Hercules* (1957), but also in the pioneering stunt work of beach athletes like Russ Saunders and Paula Boelsems. Hollywood also found muscle at the beach. Actress Mae West recruited nine Muscle Beach bodybuilders for her 1954 Las Vegas nightclub revue and stars like Ricardo Montalban went there to learn from and train with the regulars.

Closed abruptly in the wake of a sex scandal involving weightlifters, Muscle Beach was finished by the end of 1958. But it has lived on, in name, spirit, and legacy. Most prominently, of course, at the Muscle Beach Venice site, but also as a pop cultural symbol of California and as the mythic home of bodybuilding The fitness and exercise legacies of the site are myriad. Beyond bodybuilding, the denizens of Muscle Beach shaped modern fitness, leaving their mark on health clubs and gyms, exercise machines, the organic and natural food movements, and more. Even CrossFit, arguably the most successful and influential fitness movement of the early twenty-first century, bears vestiges of the original Muscle Beach. Like the beach athletes of yesteryear, male and female CrossFitters train side-by-side in a variety of modalities, like weightlifting, calisthenics, and tumbling. Drawing from various disciplines, CrossFit also signals a return of the well-rounded body idealized at Muscle Beach. Opposed to the increasingly specialized bodies and practices of the late twentieth century, the CrossFit body (at least

[2] Joel Sayre, "The Body Worshippers of Muscle Beach," *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 5, 1957; Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton."

in principle) seeks a holistic combination of aesthetic appeal, health, strength, power, and athleticism as an end unto itself.

As site and symbol, Muscle Beach was many things. Reduced to simplest terms, it was, as the memorial plaque placed at the site in 1989 reads, "the birthplace of the physical fitness boom of the twentieth century." But, for all of its mid-century popularity and lasting sociocultural impact, Muscle Beach remains understudied, especially from an academic perspective. Focused on different historical aspects of the site, the three essays in this volume address this lack of attention. In the remainder of this introduction, I discuss what has been written about the original Muscle Beach and conclude with an overview of the essays that follow.

## READING THE BEACH

Only two books have been written about the original Muscle Beach: *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hardbodies Began* by Harold Zinkin (with Bonnie Hearn) and *Muscle Beach: Where the Best Bodies in the World Started a Fitness Revolution* by Marla Matzer Rose.[3] They are not quite interchangeable, but they essentially tell the same, "big picture" history of Muscle Beach. Both are serviceable popular histories and general introductions to the site, delivered mostly through the anecdotes and recollections of former Muscle Beachers.

While the titles significantly overlap in their coverage of the subject, Zinkin's book is the best starting point for unfamiliar readers. Two factors tip the scale in his favor. First, he has the benefit of legitimacy: he was an early Muscle Beach regular and

[3] Harold Zinkin and Bonnie Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hard Bodies Began* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 1999); Marla Matzer Rose, *Muscle Beach: Where the Best Bodies in the World Started a Fitness Revolution* (New York: L.A. Weekly Books, 2001).

enjoyed an influential career in the fitness industry. He blends his own memories with the voices of his old Muscle Beach friends, lending a sense of authenticity to his history of the site. Second, the book is full of photographs of the site in its heyday. Caught in the gaze of mid-century spectators and magazine readers, Muscle Beach was literally a site to be seen, and the visual record provided by Zinkin is a solid one.

With only a few images scattered throughout the text, Rose's take ultimately cannot compete with Zinkin's. But Rose deserves credit for providing more in the way of sociocultural context and for casting a wider net around the historical Muscle Beach. She dedicates chapters to the mid-century gym boom, the relationship between Muscle Beach with Hollywood, and the emergence of bodybuilding. Her evidence and analysis in these areas is a little weak, but serves well enough to situate her history. Where Zinkin is focused almost exclusively on the main characters of the Muscle Beach story, Rose pays some attention to fringe groups, like the Nature Boys, a group of proto-hippies who became part of the Muscle Beach milieu in the late 1940s.[4]

As popular histories, the books provide an acceptable, albeit limited, starting point for scholarly work on the subject. The lack of references in either is frustrating for the researcher trying to verify claims or looking for primary source material to explore new dimensions of the Muscle Beach story. Relying on the memories of former Muscle Beachers, both books are also steeped in a nostalgia befitting their popular perspectives. The nostalgia makes for nice stories, but has an obscuring and oversimplifying effect. This effect is particularly noticeable when either discusses the impacts and legacies of Muscle Beach, which come off as inevitabilities instead of the result of complex social processes.

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[4] For more on the Nature Boys, see: Gordon Kennedy, *Children of the Sun: A Pictorial Anthology From Germany to California 1883-1949* (Ojai, Calif.: Nivaria Press, 1998).

Zinkin and Rose may oversimplify Muscle Beach, but it barely exists in broader studies of sports and fitness. Perhaps owing to the semantic boundaries of the term "sport," Muscle Beach is not even mentioned in several key surveys of American sport history written by academics, including Elliot J. Gorn's *A Brief History of American Sports*, Randy Roberts and James Olson's *Winning is the Only Thing: Sports in America since 1945*, and *Sport in America: from Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figure and Globalization, Volume II*, edited by David K. Wiggins.[5] Surprisingly, Muscle Beach does not fare much better in volumes dedicated to the history of exercise and fitness. Shelly McKenzie, an independent scholar, makes no reference to the site in her recent *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America*.[6] McKenzie's study begins in the early 1950s and includes figures like Jack LaLanne and Armand Tanny, so her omission of Muscle Beach is striking. A short but informative take can be found in *Ultimate Fitness: The Quest for Truth about exercise and Health*, by *New York Times* health and science writer Gina Kolata.[7] Her overview of Muscle Beach's history is cursory, but insights from physical culture scholars John Fair and Jan Todd provide some basic analysis of the context and impact of the site. Kolata's pages on Muscle Beach also appear to be the basis for journalist Jonathan Black's summary in *Making the American Body: the Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds and Passions Shaped*

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[5] Randy Roberts and James Olson, *Winning Is the Only Thing: Sports in America since 1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Elliott J. Gorn, *A Brief History of American Sports*, 1 Ill edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); David Wiggins, *Sport in America, Volume II: From Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figures and Globalization*, 2 edition (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2009).

[6] Shelly McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

[7] Gina Kolata, *Ultimate Fitness: The Quest for Truth about Health and Exercise* (New York: Picador, 2004).

*Fitness History*.[8] Black's is a recent work, and like McKenzie's, the lack of emphasis on the role of Muscle Beach in a history of twentieth century fitness is somewhat perplexing.

Muscle Beach receives similarly scant attention in studies of twentieth century Los Angeles and Santa Monica. The sheer volume of work on Los Angeles in this period suggests that Muscle Beach must surely appear somewhere, but it is absent from major treatments of the city, including those by Carey McWilliams, Mike Davis, Reyner Banham, Norman Klein, Vincent Brook, and Eric Avila.[9] Muscle Beach fares slightly better in two studies of Santa Monica. Jeffrey Stanton, an independent historian of Santa Monica and Venice Beach, covers the original Muscle Beach in a little over two pages in his *Santa Monica Pier*. Stanton's is yet another quick and general take, notable mostly for its lack of detail compared to the rest of his book. In *Santa Monica: a History on the Edge*, Paula Scott chronicles the twentieth century rise of the city, including several pages on Muscle Beach.[10] Unfortunately for the researcher, Scott's Muscle Beach is a summary of the aforementioned book by Marla Matzer Rose.

There are numerous possible explanations for the generally lacking and superficial treatments of the original Muscle Beach. Some are obvious and banal, the same reasons why any understudied subject remains understudied: a lack of available archival evidence, conflicting appraisals of the importance of the subject, and so on. However, there is one factor that might help to explain the status of Muscle Beach as a

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[8] Jonathan Black, *Making the American Body: The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

[9] Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1980); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 2008); Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Vincent Brook, *Land of Smoke and Mirrors: A Cultural History of Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

[10] Paula A. Scott, *Santa Monica: A History on The Edge* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2004).

historical subject, and that is the timing of the site's existence. Spanning twenty-five years over three decades, Muscle Beach emerged before World War II, kept going in a less active capacity during the War, and enjoyed its heyday in the decade following the War. As historians have tended to bind and categorize subjects relative to the dates of both World Wars (as well as the period between the war), Muscle Beach's straddling of these periods may leave it in an unwarranted gray area. This is the case with the two of the best studies of early American fitness movements, *Fitness in American Culture*, edited by Kathryn Grover, and *Fit for America* by Harvey Green, both of which use 1940 as their terminus.[11] The aforementioned post-war histories by McKenzie and Black really look at 1950 and beyond, treating the tail end of the 1940s as background. Muscle Beach arrived too late for Grover and Green's consideration and peaked too early for McKenzie and Black.

**THE ESSAYS**

The three essays in this volume each offer a different historical analysis of the original Muscle Beach. Working from a range of sources and theoretical frameworks, I explore the real and symbolic Muscle Beach. As histories of Muscle Beach, the essays are related and complementary, but they can also be read as stand-alone studies. As such, I have presented them in the sequence that makes the most sense if they are to be read in order, especially because the study in the first chapter contains the best general introduction to the site within the three essays.

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[11] Harvey Green, *Fit for America*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Kathryn Grover, ed., *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and the Body, 1830-1940* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

The first essay is titled "Critical Mass: Oral History, Innovation Theory, and the Fitness Legacy of Muscle Beach." I begin with a brief historical introduction to Muscle Beach, providing context for my analysis of the site as "the birthplace of the physical fitness boom of the twentieth century." Taking this designation as an assumption, my aim in the essay is to reveal Muscle Beach as the type of social environment that *could* have given birth to such a movement. This is a narrow point to address, but its focus provides a point of entry for beginning to unpack the legacies of Muscle Beach, which have previously been presented in a broad and uncomplicated manner. Furthermore, approaching the subject this way allows me to address something as varied and amorphous as the "fitness boom." As I explain in the essay, focusing on the productive potential of Muscle Beach allows the "boom" to be considered as a whole.

A collection of unpublished oral history interviews with former Muscle Beach luminaries provides the main archival evidence for the essay. Conducted in 1999 by physical culture historians Jan and Terry Todd, the interview subjects include notable figures like Steve Reeves and Armand Tanny. Details of the day-to-day, social world of Muscle Beach emerge from the interview tapes, filling in some of the gaps in existing work on the subject. Following the historical introduction, I introduce the tapes and provide some perspectives on the use of oral history as evidence. My analysis of Muscle Beach as the incubator of the boom follows, based on the innovation theories presented by Steven Johnson in *Where Good Ideas Come From*.[12] Drawing evidence from the interviews, I argue that Muscle Beach should be considered a site with great innovative potential, one that could have produced a phenomenon like the fitness boom. Employing Johnson's concepts of the "adjacent possible," "liquid networks," and "exaptation", I find

[12] Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010).

that the social and spatial dynamics at and around Muscle Beach fostered the type of diverse, creative, and loosely structured environment that produces innovation, or what Johnson simply calls "good ideas."

The abrupt and controversial closure of Muscle Beach is the subject of the second essay, titled, "The Short Goodbye: Scandal, Politics, and The End Muscle Beach." In December 1958, the Santa Monica City Council ordered the immediate closure of Muscle Beach following the arrest of five beach weightlifters (two were members of the US national team) on a range of "morals" charges, including statutory rape. The charges were all eventually reduced or dismissed, but the die had been cast, and Muscle Beach was done. In the limited histories to date, the closure is dealt with vaguely and details of the surrounding events are hazy. In Zinkin and Rose, it is explained as the unfortunate convergence of some "bad apples" with an opportunistic city leadership that was conspiring to evict Muscle Beach from prime real estate.

Drawing on evidence from the archives of the Santa Monica City Council and the now-defunct Santa Monica *Evening Outlook* newspaper, this essay tells the story of the last days of Muscle Beach, the civic debates about the facility's future that followed, and the city's efforts to distance itself from Muscle Beach in the years following the closure. I begin with an examination of the city's administrative relationship with Muscle Beach in the years leading to the shuttering. While there were some unsuccessful efforts to relocate the facility in these years, City Council minutes and internal documents indicate support for the site. That the city sponsored the summertime Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests prior to the closure also seems to counter the conspiratorial insinuations in Zinkin and Rose's accounts.

There may not have been a calculated conspiracy, but the events following the weightlifters' arrests in December reek of opportunism. Councilwoman Alys Drobnick,

police chief Otto Faulkner, and Robert McClure, publisher of the *Evening Outlook,* led the Muscle Beach opposition; a three-headed hydra determined to keep muscle off the beach permanently. Drobnick framed her opposition in terms of fiscal responsibility and family values, while Faulkner took every opportunity to declare Muscle Beach a breeding ground of "undesirable elements." McClure and his paper sensationalized the story, emptying the whole bag of journalistic tricks to present Muscle Beach as a den of iniquity and a moral threat to the good people of Santa Monica. Even after circulating a petition calling for the permanent closure of Muscle Beach, the paper declared itself objective and fair, never wavering from its "just the facts, ma'am" editorial position.

I follow these figures and others through a year of civic debates, special commissions, and proposals, all dedicated to the future of exercise on the beaches of Santa Monica. This part of the story ends with the opening of the unceremoniously named Beach Park Number Four, a new playground with a few gymnastic implements that emerged from the post-closure debates. From there, I return to the final years of Muscle Beach, speculating on the underlying reasons for the moralistic opposition to the facility and its users. I conclude the essay by tracing the civic legacy of Muscle Beach in the city of Santa Monica, noting how the city distanced itself from the name and the site for three decades before acknowledging Muscle Beach with a small memorial plaque.

In the third and final essay, titled "Go West, Young Men: The California Dream and Joe Weider's Muscle Beach Myth," I shift my focus from Muscle Beach as a real place to a symbolic use of Muscle Beach. Working from Roland Barthes' conception of "myth" as a type of communication, I argue that fitness magnate Joe Weider deployed a mythic version of Muscle Beach in his magazines and used the myth to sell products, boost his reputation as a fitness authority, and legitimize the sport of bodybuilding. For Barthes, myth is a specific type of contemporary communication, a sign that appears self-

evident but is itself built out of already constructed signs. The major consequence of myth is that it obscures history and denies the possibility of change in society; in myth nothing reveals how it came to be, everything appears to be "the way it has always been."

Weider folded the real and symbolic Muscle Beach into one, producing a myth that allowed him to co-opt the California Dream (itself mythic) from his offices in New Jersey. By the time he moved his companies to Southern California in 1973, it seemed as if he had been there all along. The essay begins with an introduction of Barthes' concept of myth and an overview of Joe Weider's roles as a businessman and the driving force behind modern bodybuilding. I explore Weider's Muscle Beach myth through a reading of magazines from the first half of his publishing career, beginning in 1940 and ending the study in 1973, the year that Weider fulfilled his own California Dream. I analyze the myth first in terms of content, then form. The contents of the myth served to establish a link between Weider and culturally accepted elements of an idealized California: health, sunshine, girls, Hollywood, and so on. The forms of the myth made it real and accessible to readers and consumers. Myth was delivered in a variety of forms by Weider, but I focus on advertising, gossip columns, and photography, discussing why each was particularly suited to serving Weider's mythic purposes. In the spirit of Barthes, who felt that decoding myth was an inherently critical act, the essay concludes with a short critique of Weider's myth.

The essays are followed by a brief conclusion, offering some final thoughts and directions for further research on Muscle Beach as a historical subject.

# Chapter 1: Critical Mass: Oral History, Innovation Theory, and the Fitness Legacy of Muscle Beach

*If we want to understand where good ideas come from, we have to put them in context. Our thought shapes the spaces we inhabit, and our spaces return the favor.*

-- Stephen Johnson, Where Good Ideas Come From

*Well I can't say that it was a catalyst of any kind. It did exist, but it sort of existed as simply a playground for the very people who made fitness what it is today. Guys like Jack LaLanne and my brother. Zinkin. Joe Gold. Many of them, early on they all had a hand in it. Even Joe Weider came around there once in a while. He visited the beach when he came around.*

--Armand Tanny, interview with Terry Todd

*I figured that this was the place to give drama and life to the bodybuilding lifestyle.*

--Joe Weider, interview with Terry Todd

In 1989, thirty years after shuttering the original Muscle Beach, the city of Santa Monica, California erected a memorial to the famous site. For the past twenty-five years, visitors to the stretch of sand due south of the Santa Monica Pier have encountered a small plaque, declaring the location: "The birthplace of the physical fitness boom of the twentieth century." Similar claims about Muscle Beach provide the subtitles of the two books dedicated to the history of the site: Marla Matzer Rose offers that Muscle Beach was where "the best bodies in the world started a fitness revolution"; Harold Zinkin's take is that Muscle Beach is "where hardbodies began."[13] In their popular histories of

[13] Zinkin and Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach*; Rose, *Muscle Beach*.

exercise and fitness, Gina Kolata and Jonathan Black assign similar, seminal importance to the site.[14]

In their entry on Muscle Beach for *The St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, physical culture historians Jan and Terry Todd weigh in on the claim of the aforementioned plaque: "Although somewhat hyperbolic, the statement is not far wrong."[15] They note that physical culture had boomed at sites predating Muscle Beach, pointing out that John Harvey Kellog's Battle Creek Sanitarium, Bernar Macfadden's Physical Culture Hotel in Florida, and Bob Hoffman's York (Pennsylvania) Barbell Club had all attracted scores of people seeking physical health and development. But the Todds contend that Muscle Beach eclipsed these other places: "Two things elevated Muscle Beach over these earlier Meccas of strength and health: first, the 'Beach' did not depend on the personal force of one man, and second, the location was unbeatable."[16]

In this essay, I draw on oral history interviews with former Muscle Beach luminaries to understand the "birth of the fitness boom" at Muscle Beach. I employ a theoretical framework of social innovation, interpreting the fitness boom as the result of social and spatial processes. My perspective is broad, but my aim is narrow: I consider the "fitness boom" as a general phenomenon to address *how* such a phenomenon could emerge from a place. I accept that the Todd's diagnosis of the memorial plaque is accurate: that, at least in broad strokes, the modern fitness movement *can* be traced back to Muscle Beach. I also accept their position that that the influence of Muscle Beach can be understood through its social dynamics and location. My analysis of the Muscle Beach fitness legacy centers on these two factors, albeit with a qualification about the

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[14] Kolata, *Ultimate Fitness*, 212–16; Black, *Making the American Body*, 31–42.
[15] Jan Todd and Terry Todd, "Muscle Beach," ed. Tom Pendergrast and Sara Pendergrast, *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (Detroit: St. James Press, 2000), 453.
[16] Ibid.

role of location. The Todds suggest that the glamorous, sun-drenched image of the California coast helped draw people to Muscle Beach. I agree with this assertion; there is no doubt that California and Los Angeles loomed large in the mid-century American imagination. Framing the location this way addresses why some people were attracted to Muscle Beach, but does little to address how the fitness movement came from the site. Toward this end, I consider the location of Muscle Beach in functional terms, not as an image or a destination, but as a site of social exchange within the larger urban network of Los Angeles.

The essay proceeds in three parts. In the first, a brief history of Muscle Beach provides some background and context for the analysis that follows. In the second part, I introduce the oral history archive used in the essay and discuss methodological concerns. In the third part, I begin with brief biographical sketches of the Muscle Beach interview subjects and an introduction of Steven Johnson's theories of innovation and his concept of the "good idea." Then, using the oral histories of Muscle Beach as evidence, I analyze the social and spatial processes that produced the fitness boom through Johnson's framework. From this analysis, Muscle Beach emerges as a fertile site of potential innovation, indicating that it may justly be dubbed the "birthplace of the boom." A brief conclusion follows my analysis, offering further research directions for understanding the widespread legacy of Muscle Beach.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSCLE BEACH, 1934-1958[17]

The Muscle Beach interview tapes reveal a site of social engagement, an incubator of the organic interactions that gave rise to the fitness boom. The origin of Muscle Beach was similarly organic— there is no definitive answer as to exactly when or how the site began. There is speculation that there were athletes training in the sand as early as the mid 1920s, but 1934 is generally accepted as the year that Muscle Beach began to take shape, when Santa Monica High School gymnasts Paul Brewer, Al Niederman, and Jimmy Pfeiffer began practicing gymnastics at what was then called the Santa Monica Beach Playground. The gymnasts initially trained on rugs and mats that they brought down to the beach, but by 1936 Niederman had received permission from the city to build a low, wooden platform. The platform was a pivotal development, providing the stable footing for acrobatics and weight lifting to flourish at the beach. The platform also functioned as a stage, elevating and calling attention to the athletes, nudging the site toward its dual function of training facility and performance space. In time, rudimentary gymnastic rings and bars were also built at the beach. With the arrival of the platform and apparatus, local wrestlers, vaudeville performers, and circus, acrobats began to make their way to the beach, training and staging early performances alongside the young athletes. Although new to the site, the wrestlers, performers, and acrobats were not strangers to training at the beach, having formerly spent their days practicing at the nearby Crystal Pier.

In 1938, Niederman and Brewer led a successful lobbying effort, and the city agreed to build a much larger platform with the help of the local Works Progress

[17] Meant to situate my later analysis and to provide some context for readers unfamiliar with Muscle Beach, this history. It is a very general introduction, derived from the following sources: Zinkin and Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach*; Todd and Todd, "Muscle Beach"; Rose, *Muscle Beach*; Randy Roach, *Muscle, Smoke, and Mirrors*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008).

Administration. Three feet tall, ten feet long, and forty feet wide, this second platform cemented the site as an entertainment destination, with weekend crowds gathering around the platform throughout the year. Spectators came and so did new athletes; by the end of the 1930s, future stars like Russel Saunders, Paula Boelsems, Harold Zinkin, Les and Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, and Armand Tanny were already regulars at the beach. Gymnastics, acrobatics, and *adagio* were the dominant activities during this era, but weightlifting was also growing in popularity. There is no clear date for the arrival of weights at the beach; the city did not maintain a weight set until the late 1940s, so athletes brought their own when they could. There were specialists in the crowd, but most of the athletes, male and female, practiced a variety of disciplines. Their bodies shaped by barbells, dumbbells, and gymnastic work, the women of Muscle Beach helped challenge entrenched beliefs about the effects of rigorous training on the female physique. At once strong and feminine, Pudgy Stockton was the best known of the Muscle Beach women, and she became a popular symbol of what a woman at mid-century could be.[18]

Although the momentum of the 1930s was lost with the start of World War II, the playground remained active. With many of the male athletes serving in the war effort, the beach remained a place for local youths to train and stage impromptu exhibitions and American GIs recuperating at nearby facilities to work on their rehabilitation exercises. The war years at the site are poorly documented, but there was at least enough activity to keep the playground alive until after the war.

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[18] In 1939, Stockton appeared on the cover of Pic magazine, and was also featured in an advertising campaign that ran in Life magazine. Stockton's combination of power and beauty was in high demand for over a decade and her image graced the cover of forty-two magazines from around the world. Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 5.

The name "Muscle Beach" was in use by the end of the 1930s, but it really stuck with the post-war resurgence of the site, when bodybuilding emerged as the main attraction at Muscle Beach. Bodybuilding was not born at Muscle Beach, but with early icons like Steve Reeves and George Eifferman making the facility their home in the late 1940s, the sport grew up there. Along with bodybuilding, weightlifting remained popular and both sports benefited from the new weight pit built after the war. Once more, the platform was raised and enlarged, accommodating a growing number of visitors to Santa Monica and the beach. Making good use of the new platform, the annual Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach bodybuilding and beauty contests drew over two thousand spectators during the site's peak popularity in the early 1950s. Held during summer holiday weekends, the contests ran from 1947 to 1958 and featured music, acrobatics, balancing acts, and various displays of strength, in addition to the contests. DeForrest "Moe" Most, appointed by the city as the first park director of the beach in 1947 is credited with organizing and promoting the contests. Most managed the site, but he was an athlete himself, and a revered instructor.

By the early 1950s, many of the prominent figures associated with Muscle Beach had moved on. Some became fitness industry pioneers, like Harold Zinkin, who's Universal Gym Machine revolutionized machine-based weight training. Before launching his long-running fitness television program in 1951, Jack LaLanne routinely spent weekends at Muscle Beach, driving down from his home in Northern California. Others hit the road and the stage, cashing in on the last days of nightclub acts and variety shows. The actress Mae West enjoyed a career renaissance after launching her eponymous 1954 Las Vegas revue, featuring "Mae's Muscle Boys." West discovered some of the "Muscle Boys" at Muscle Beach, including Armand Tanny, George Eifferman, Mickey Hargitay, and Joe Gold. Hargitay is best known for marrying Jayne

Mansfield, while Gold eventually launched the famous Gold's Gym in Venice Beach. As a gym owner, Gold followed in the footsteps of early beach goers like Vic Tanny and the Stocktons, Pudgy and Les. Muscle Beachers also found their way to Hollywood, where athletes like Russ Saunders and Paula Unger Boelsems were pioneers in stunt work. Steve Reeves also made it to Hollywood, taking his star turn as the lead in *Hercules* in 1957, he appeared in fourteen more films over the next decade.

Despite the departure of some of its stalwarts, Muscle Beach remained popular well into the 1950s. The annual contests continued to draw solid crowds and informal weekend exhibitions carried on. But, by the middle of the decade, Muscle Beach was coming under scrutiny from the city of Santa Monica. After a young boy suffered an injury in early 1955, the local government pressured beach regulars to form an association. The resulting Muscle Beach Weightlifting Club counted over two hundred members by the year's end, collecting enough dues to purchase an insurance policy and pacify the city leadership. In 1957, the club successfully challenged an increasingly hostile City Council's attempt to relocate Muscle Beach, but it was a short-lived victory. In December 1958, following the arrest of five Muscle Beach weightlifters on charges of statutory rape, a quarter century of physical culture history came to a grinding halt. The charges against the men were all heavily reduced or dropped, but the scandal and the ensuing local debates were too much to overcome, and Muscle Beach was done. [19]

[19] The closure of the site is the subject of a companion essay in this volume.

## TALES OF THE TAPES: THE MUSCLE BEACH INTERVIEWS AND ORAL HISTORY

The oral history archive used in this essay was compiled in 1999, intended to provide source material for an historical study of Muscle Beach by physical culture historians Jan and Terry Todd.[20] Their Muscle Beach project remains a work-in-progress and this essay represents the first use of the oral history interviews they conducted. I was initially given access to the interview tapes as potential source material for other projects, but I quickly came to think of them of as a unique archive in their own right: a collection of rare firsthand accounts of Muscle Beach and some of the final testimonies of hugely influential figures in modern fitness. Seven former Muscle Beach athletes and entertainers were interviewed: Paula Boelsems, Beverly Jocher, Steve Reeves, Russ Saunders, Glenn Sundby, Armand Tanny, and Harold Zinkin. An eighth subject, fitness magnate Joe Weider, was not active at Muscle Beach, but was a critical figure in spreading the image and reputation of the site domestically and internationally. Individually, these subjects represent the diverse athletic practices at Muscle Beach during its peak popularity between the late 1930s and early 1950s. As a group, they are among the biggest names to be associated with the site; six of the eight have been inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame. Saunders and Zinkin are the exceptions, although it is likely a matter of *when* they will be inducted rather than *if* they will be.

### *Oral History as Evidence*

For all that the tapes contain, they also carry the burdens and challenges of oral history. Framed by issues like subjectivity, memory, and nostalgia, myriad debates have revolved around oral history as a scholarly source. By and large, the underlying concern of these

[20] As part of the private collection of the Todds, the interviews will eventually be archived at the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, at the University of Texas at Austin.

debates has been the reliability of the oral historical source as evidence, about what we can reasonably learn from such testimonies.[21] Of course, as some writers have been quick to point out, this is a fair concern for any type of evidence.[22] As an historical source, the Muscle Beach tapes have their own issues of reliability: the interview subjects represent an elite subsection of a population, they are advanced in age, and rely on memories to discuss events dating back over a half-century. The subjects contradict each other on certain details and the spread of time covered by their overlapping experiences can be disorienting at times. For example, the tapes do not offer much insight about the origin of the "Muscle Beach" name or the last days of the site in 1958. I had hoped to learn more about these historically obscure subjects, but in retrospect my expectations were unrealistic. That I did not find what I was looking for serves as a reminder that such archives are inevitably autobiographical, limited from the outset by the lived experience of the subjects.

But for all that oral history cannot say, or at least has trouble saying, there is plenty that it can. Responding to the critical hazing of oral history as evidence, the late British historian Trevor Lummis wrote, "The great advantage of the retrospective interview is that it enables historians to intervene directly in the generation of historical evidence relating to the recent past, and so it becomes possible for the historian to collect the type of evidence which customary documentary and material sources have not supplied."[23] Sport historian Susan K. Cahn echoes Lummis, celebrating oral history for

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[21] A good overview of these debates is provided by Alistair Thomson in his introduction to The Oral History Reader. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[22] See, for example: Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Shelley Trower, ed., *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[23] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

its utility in "filling in the gaps" of the traditional archive, for giving rise to marginalized voices, challenging entrenched narratives, and revealing social dynamics.[24] Documenting lived experience and social exchange, oral history also contributes to the historical study of places. Historian Shelley Trower argues that oral history can help to understand localities and local cultures, "by accessing people's firsthand experiences of and bodily involvement with specific physical environments."[25] In their study of an elderly community's memories of World War II, historical geographer Gavin J. Andrews and his collaborators find oral history essential to understanding the "historical geography of social life."[26] They argue, "What these narratives provide is recollection about self, about relationships with others and a place, insights rarely provided in such depth by other methods.... Moreover, oral histories inform us about how social processes play out in place."[27] My analysis of the Muscle Beach tapes proceeds from these perspectives. Examined critically, the tapes provide glimpses of an everyday Muscle Beach that has not been articulated in the broad strokes of the nostalgic histories dedicated to the place. From these glimpses, the social world of Muscle Beach emerges, offering a means for understanding the role of the site in the larger history of American fitness

### *Terminology*

As I am working from the assumption that Muscle Beach was the "birthplace of the physical fitness boom of the twentieth century," both the ideas of the "boom" and

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[24] Susan K. Cahn, "Sports Talk: Oral History and Its Uses, Problems, and Possibilities for Sport History," *The Journal Of American History* 81, no. 2 (September 1994): 594–609.
[25] Shelley Trower, "Introduction," in *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, ed. Shelley Trower (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.
[26] Gavin J. Andrews et al., "'Their Finest Hour': Older People, Oral Histories, and the Historical Geography of Social Life," *Social & Cultural Geography* 7, no. 2 (April 2006): 153.
[27] Ibid., 170.

"birthplace" deserve some attention. As a matter of style, rather than relying on the cumbersome designation "the birthplace of the physical fitness boom," I use terms like "boom," "fitness movement, and "fitness legacy" interchangeably. I employ these terms broadly and generally, as an umbrella for the vast range of fitness and exercise related activities, practices, subcultures, businesses, and technologies that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. The variants within the boom are beyond tallying: from bodybuilding to juice bars; to the invention of the multi-station Universal Macine, to national chains of chrome-clad health clubs, to muscle in the movies, and exercise on television.

Taking a broad view of the boom requires a similarly broad conception of Muscle Beach as its "birthplace," a metaphor that works nicely on a municipal sign but is limited for understanding the fitness boom as a legacy of Muscle Beach. The boom may have come *from* Muscle Beach, but the forms of the boom came *through* it; in the history of American fitness, there is *before* Muscle Beach and there is *after*. Thus, while I do use terms like "birthplace" and "starting point," it is important to also think of Muscle Beach in terms of transition, refinement, and interpretation.

## MUSCLE BEACH: BIRTHPLACE OF GOOD IDEAS

I now turn to the interview tapes and the innovation theories of Steven Johnson to analyze Muscle Beach as the birthplace of the fitness boom. Following brief biographical sketches of the interview subjects, I introduce Johnson's concepts, offer evidence from the voices of the Muscle Beach legends, and analyze how the boom was born.

***The Subjects, In Brief***

**Paula Dell (Unger) Boelsems** (1925-) was an acrobat, stage performer, stuntwoman, and physical educator. One of the post-war female regulars at Muscle Beach, Boelsems collaborated and performed with other beach acrobats like Russ Saunders and Glenn Sundby, and eventually enjoyed a long career as a physical education teacher with the Los Angeles Unified School District. Always a vocal advocate for Muscle Beach, Boelsems was a leader in the unsuccessful effort to preserve the site in 1959 and played an instrumental role in the memorialization and partial restoration of the site in the 1990s. Boelsems was inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame in 2005.

**Beverly (Jocher) Smart (1936-)** won the 1952 Miss Muscle Beach contest and the 1953 AAU California Weightlifting Championship. A 1954 profile in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that Jocher had won ten beauty pageants and that she was strong enough to support the weight of five men in a balancing trick. Like Saunders and Boelsems, Jocher also did some film work and performed professionally as an acrobat. Now retired and living in Canada, Jocher was inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame in 2013.

**Steve Reeves (1926-2000)** was a bodybuilder and actor, best known for his leading role in Pietro Francisci's *Hercules* (1957) and *Hercules Unchained* (1959). Reeves briefly visited Muscle Beach as an 18-year old in 1944 and would spend a year living in a nearby apartment following the end of his military service in 1948. Reeves was a bodybuilding champion before he was a movie star, winning the 1947 AAU Mr. America and the 1950 Mr. Universe. Following *Hercules*, Reeves appeared in fourteen films over the next

decade, mostly of the "sword and sandal" variety. Reeves was inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame in 2005.

**Russell (Russ) Saunders** (1919-2001) was an acrobat and stuntman. Raised in Winnipeg, Saunders first came to California and Muscle Beach in 1939. After serving as a photographer during World War II, Saunders spent over forty years as a stuntman in Hollywood. Amongst many others, Saunders doubled for Gene Kelly in *Singin' In The Rain* (1952) and Alan Ladd in *Shane* (1953). In a different kind of double, Saunders was the model for Salvador Dali's painting *Christ of Saint John of The Cross*. With his good friend Paula Boelsems, Saunders played an active role in achieving civic recognition for Muscle Beach in the 1990s. As of this writing, Saunders has not been inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame.

**Glenn Sundby (1921-2009)** was a gymnast, stage performer, publisher, and an early regular at Muscle Beach. In the 1940s, Sundby and partner George Wayne Long performed their strength and balancing act on stages from Broadway to *The Ed Sullivan Show*. A lifelong advocate for gymnastics, Sundby produced a number of magazines dedicated to the sport, including the long-running *International Gymnast*. Sundby also worked to legitimize the sport, as a founder of both the United States Gymnastic Federation (now USA gymnastics) in 1962 and the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 1986. Sundby was inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame in 2006.

**Armand Tanny (1919-2009)** was a weightlifter, bodybuilder, performer, and writer. Along with his brother, legendary health club entrepreneur Vic (1912-1985), Tanny moved from Rochester, New York to Los Angeles in 1939 and quickly became a Muscle

Beach regular. One of bodybuilding's most celebrated early champions, Tanny won the 1949 Professional Mr. America and the 1950 Mr. USA contests. Along with eight other Muscle Beach athletes, Tanny was part of Mae West's traveling nightclub act through the early 1950s. Following his years on the stage, Tanny enjoyed a long career as a fitness writer, contributing heavily to a number of Joe Weider's publications. Tanny was inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame in 2005.

**Joe Weider (1920-2013)** was a fitness publisher and businessman. With his brother Ben, Weider founded the International Federation of BodyBuilders (IFBB) in 1947, and published some of the most important fitness magazines of the late twentieth century.[28] Based on the east coast until the early 1970s, Weider was only an occasional visitor to the original Muscle Beach. But, through his magazines, Weider delivered the image and spirit of Muscle Beach to his worldwide readership. His connection and commitment to Muscle Beach were recognized with a lifetime achievement award from the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame in 2006. His wife Betty was inducted in 2012.

**Harold Zinkin (1922-2004)** was a bodybuilder, inventor, entrepreneur, and author. A native of Southern California, Zinkin was training regularly at Muscle Beach by 1939. In 1941, Zinkin won the first Mr. California bodybuilding contest. Acknowledged by his contemporaries as one of the strongest Muscle Beach athletes, Zinkin earned a reputation as a rock-solid "bottom man," serving as the human base for a variety of strength and balancing feats on the Muscle Beach platform. In 1957, Zinkin changed the world of fitness with his invention of the Universal Gym Machine that quickly became ubiquitous

[28] The organization is now known as the International Federation of Bodybuilding and fitness.

in schools, YMCAs, and commercial gyms. Addressing concerns of safety, space, and practicality, the compact and easily adjustable Universal ushered in the era of machine-based weight training and in particular, revolutionized strength training for sport. In 1999, Zinkin published one of only two books on Muscle Beach, the part-memoir, part-history *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hardbodies Began*. As of this writing, Zinkin has not been inducted into the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame.

### *Good Ideas: Patterns of Innovation*

Evaluating the fitness boom that emerged from Muscle Beach requires identifying a unifying theme amongst its constituent parts: the diverse practices, technologies, and ideologies that got Americans moving in the second half of the twentieth century. To address a legacy that includes revolutionary weightlifting machines, the modern health club, beliefs about women's exercise, and even the concept of a "fitness lifestyle," I propose that the new ideas, devices, and methods of the fitness boom be grouped together as "good ideas," science writer Steven Johnson's catch-all term for successful innovations. In *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Johnson lays out a historically derived theory for understanding a broad range of tangible and conceptual innovations, a range that includes software platforms, mathematical theories, the helicopter, and continental drift. Explaining this terminology, Johnson states, "The academic literature on innovation and creativity is rich with subtle distinctions between innovations and inventions, between different modes of creativity: artistic, scientific, technological. I have deliberately chosen the broadest possible phrasing—good ideas—to suggest the cross-disciplinary vantage point I am trying to occupy."[29]

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[29] Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, 21.

In addition to Johnson's phrasing, I employ his theory of innovation as a means of understanding how Muscle Beach produced the cross-disciplinary range of good ideas that added up to the fitness boom. Put simply, Johnson argues that innovation happens when ideas are allowed to freely develop and connect with other ideas. His theory is rooted in the observation that innovations follow seven patterns, which he labels: the adjacent possible, liquid networks, the slow hunch, serendipity, error, exaptation, and platforms. Of the seven patterns, two are critical: the "adjacent possible" and "liquid network." The adjacent possible describes the amount of connections or combinations an idea can make at any given time. Johnson explains: "Think of it as a house that magically expands with each door you open. You begin in a room with four doors, each leading to a new room that you haven't visited yet. Those four rooms are the adjacent possible. But once you open one of those doors and stroll into that room, three new doors appear, each leading to a brand-new room that you couldn't have reached from your original starting point."[30] Johnson's second pattern, the "liquid network," describes the ideal conditions for the development and refinement of good ideas. A "liquid" network is one that allows for ideas to freely connect with other ideas, both constantly and randomly, creating new adjacent possibilities. By contrast, a "solid" network is too stable to provide adequate randomness, while a "gaseous" network is too fleeting to foster meaningful connections.

Good ideas do not necessarily display evidence of all of the patterns, but they tend to spring from combinations that allow for the exploration of the adjacent possible. Three of the patterns describe the internal characteristics of innovative networks: the slow

[30] Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come from*, 31. The current fitness trend of activity tracking devices that connect to smartphones illustrates the adjacent possible: Bluetooth wireless technology and the use of accelerometers in phones opened up the adjacent possibilities of devices that traditionally stood alone, like heart rate monitors and pedometers.

hunch, serendipity, and error. Countering the popular assumption that innovation occurs in momentary flashes of genius, the "slow hunch" describes innovation as a process of incubation, wherein hunches and inklings evolve into full-fledged ideas over a period of exposure to the adjacent possible. Johnson's fourth and fifth patterns of innovation, "serendipity" and "error," are basic concepts that produce good ideas under the right conditions. Like the slow hunch, serendipity underscores the fact that innovation cannot always be planned, that it often emerges as a "happy accident." Liquid networks can harness serendipity, transforming the unplanned and unintentional into fodder for good ideas. Similarly, good ideas emerge in networks that allow for errors to be made, investigated, and corrected. Fearing error can reduce important processes like risk taking and speculation; innovation is stunted in networks where mistakes are punished.

The remaining patterns describe how innovations spread between networks and how innovative networks evolve. "Exaptation" is Johnson's sixth pattern of innovation, a term he borrows from evolutionary biology to describe how existing ideas are adapted and reinterpreted across networks. Again, the open and fluid network is essential, but exaptation also requires close proximity to other open networks: exaptation occurs when there is enough stability for specialized ideas to develop and enough opportunity for these ideas to be repurposed for new uses across networks. Johnson's final pattern, the "platform," describes how open networks can produce and sustain the progressive scaffolding of knowledge necessary for further innovation. In other words, platforms are present wherever ideas can build upon themselves, in turn providing structural support for the next idea.

In the following two sections, I argue that the fitness boom began at Muscle Beach because it was an environment that supported the exploration of the adjacent possible. Many of these patterns can be observed in the case of Muscle Beach. Given its

organic origins and its accessible location, it bears the mark of serendipity. As a collective space where collaboration was valued above competition, slow hunches and errors could turn into good ideas. For this study, I limit my analysis to the two most salient patterns of innovation that fostered the adjacent possible at Muscle Beach: the "liquid network" and a site of "exaptation."

***Muscle Beach: a Liquid Network in the Sand***

Acrobats, gymnasts, weightlifters, and bodybuilders are the core groups traditionally associated with Muscle Beach. The acrobats and gymnasts tend to represent the early days of the site, the weightlifters and bodybuilders with the postwar period. As a general trend, this trajectory is accurate, but these groups were not so rigidly divided, nor were they the only ones there.

> **Russ Saunders, acrobat and movie stuntman:** *There was a boxing and wrestling arena, the professional type. Up Pico Boulevard about two blocks. And they came down to work out. There was nothing for them to do in the afternoon, so they would come to the beach, and they would go swimming, and they started to do some low hand to hands and hand to hands, and that's how it started.*[31]

> **Armand Tanny, weightlifter and bodybuilder:** *The wrestlers were always part of it. Even before the actual Muscle Beach, the wrestlers used to hang out there in the Thirties. They all came down. Between stints you know or whatever, they would come down there, then disappear again for months on end. But they were in and out, always in and out. The whole idea was very stimulating for anyone*

[31] The testimony throughout this part of the essay is from the Todd's Muscle Beach interviews.

*who wanted to get involved in any of the activities. It was just a delight to be there. You can't imagine all the people that were there.*

**Paula Boelsems, acrobat and movie stuntwoman:** *They kind of mixed with some of the acrobats, and some of the acrobats became wrestlers. They worked out at a place called Crystal Pier that was just south of the Del Mar Beach Club. And they worked out there long before Muscle beach was there.*

Saunders also mentions the presence of ice skaters, circus performers, and various groups of vaudevillians. Boelsems suggests that the declining popularity of vaudeville left local performers with ample free time to visit the beach and that a visit to Muscle Beach was a regular stop on the Los Angeles itineraries of touring stage troupes. Perhaps because of the influence of these groups, the training atmosphere at Muscle Beach was integrated, collaborative, and supportive, indebted both to performance rehearsal as athletic practice.

**Steve Reeves, bodybuilder and actor:** *At Muscle Beach, all the wrestlers wanted to make me a wrestler. All of the adagio dancers wanted to make me an adagio dancer. All of the acrobats wanted me to perform with them.*

**Harold Zinkin, bodybuilder and inventor of the Universal Gym Machine:**
*Every conceivable balancing event that you wanted to do. There'd be a little bit of a line, taking turns, doing whatever we wanted to until we were tired. And we'd bounce off of what other people were doing, or put combinations of things together. So you already had a game, you saw good things happening from people you didn't know. And everybody shared whatever they had, without hesitation, and you'd do it. At that time it was important, because not knowing*

*some of the older kids that were there, I'd be doing something, I'd get corrected and I'd be coached a little bit. So the learning process went real well and it was a fun thing to do, because it was a game.*

**Armand Tanny:** *I did a little tumbling back in New York, in Rochester. But not like these guys were doing, you know. But I got involved in tumbling there. I was twenty years old, learning how to do flip flop backs and back somersaults.*

**Paula Boelsems:** *Everybody was welcome and they would teach anyone that was willing to learn. In all the years, there was seldom an accident. People watched one another so they knew what they were doing.*

**Russ Saunders:** *It was good place, if you weren't a show off. You just worked out with each other and you compared notes and you learned from each other.*

**Harold Zinkin:** *It was practice, but you start putting things together, even unknowingly. You'd have a little sequence, a trick you may have created, a trick you saw somebody do that you liked. Something you polished up. Maybe had a better way of choreographing, getting from one trick to another, and all of sudden you'd have people clapping. To me it was a novelty. All of sudden you get people clapping and you figure "hmm, I did something pretty good."*

**Beverly Jocher, weightlifter, acrobat, and performer, Miss Muscle Beach 1952:** *We performed at beautiful hotels like the Beverly Hills hotel, around the pool. I don't know how we got these bookings, if it was through Russ' stunt work. But then I ended up modeling for Rose Marie Reid, at some of her fashion shows.*[32] *That was a fun thing to do. Movie stars would be there. Then I went on to do my acrobatic contortion work on a surfboard. Then I got bookings myself,*

[32] Reid was an influential and award winning bathing suit designer and manufacturer.

*like Gilman hot springs, I stayed there for two weeks, performing in the pool. There were other performers there that did paddleboards, synchronized swimming…then I'd come out as a feature act.*

With its population of diverse athletes, performers, and physical culturists coming together to interact and exchange ideas, Muscle Beach was a "liquid network." Johnson explains that all good ideas are produced in networks, but that the greatest innovative potential is found in networks that hit a sweet spot between stability and fluidity. In other words, a liquid network is best, because it is the balance between the instability of gas and the inflexibility of solids. Liquid networks are stable enough to grow and provide ample opportunity for connections between elements, but are also flexible enough so that these connections occur through constant, random "collisions."

The testimonies of the Muscle Beach athletes reveal a large network, capable of spreading new ideas through random and varied collisions. Because of the constant stream of new arrivals, temporary visitors, and regulars returning from their travels, the size of the network extended well beyond the given users of the site at any single moment. On the tapes, Saunders, Boelsems, Jocher, Sundby, and Tanny all relay anecdotes of their time as performers, taking the stage in places like Las Vegas, Hawaii, and New York. In these places, they extended the reach and influence of the Muscle Beach network. These travels also enlarged and enriched the network; the knowledge, skills, and inspiration the regulars found on the road created new adjacent possibities to explore upon their return to Santa Monica.

The capability of Muscle Beach to sustain a liquid network can be found in the site's own balance of permanence and instability.[33] As a fixed and well-known place, open year-round and free of charge to use, Muscle Beach provided a physical locus for creative exchange. Under such conditions, it easy to conceive how techniques learned in far away places could converge, evolve, and multiply. But in an important way, the site was also fluid and changing. Across the interviews, the impermanence of the physical configuration of the site emerges: platforms for tumbling and performing were erected, razed, and moved; some gymnastic implements, like rings and bars, were fixed in the sand, while others were temporary structures held in place with crude weights; the facility did not have a permanent weight set until the late 1940s, relying on whatever implements the athletes brought with them. Whether it provided options or constraints, this shifting setup was also a driver of creativity and innovation, producing both opportunities to engage with new equipment and challenges to reimagine and make the most of what was available.

[33] As an example of the impact a space can have on the network it contains, Johnson offers the story of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's "Building 20." Like Muscle Beach, Building 20 was a site of innovation in a diverse range of disciplines. "The magic of Building 20 lay in the balance the environment struck between order and chaos. There were walls and doors and offices, as in most academic buildings. But the structure's temporary origins—it was originally built with the expectation that it would be torn down after five years—meant that those structures could be reconfigured with little bureaucratic fuss, as new ideas created new purposes for the space." Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come from*, 63.

***Subculture and the City: Exaptation***

As unique communities of specialist athletes and performers, the groups that converged at Muscle Beach were subcultures. In coming together, they also formed a larger subculture of physical culturists. In the pre-boom days, Muscle Beach offered these proto-health buffs a "third place," sociologist Ray Oldenburg's term for the informal settings where communities come together.[34] Distinct from the home or the work place, third places anchor social groups, creating a space that fosters engagement, exchange, and creativity.

> **Harold Zinkin:** *We used to have fun things that we used to do, we did what we called "odd lifts." I'm glad they changed to "powerlifts." We were already odd enough!*

> **Armand Tanny:** *When I was in high school, I was a weightlifter. But you were 'musclebound' if you touched weights. And the coaches frowned upon it. There was a very negative feeling about weightlifting. They were convinced that you'd get musclebound and that you couldn't move and it was just the opposite. Today, all your boxers, all your wrestlers, all your baseball players, all they do is lift weights. It was every day of the week…You always had a friendship. No matter when you went to Muscle Beach there was always somebody around there that you knew. And it was the big attraction. It was like a club, it was a community. We all had common interests. It was just very much part of our lives. That was what made it a lot of fun. You knew everybody when you went down there. It was delightful.*

[34] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1989).

> **Glenn Sundby:** *The main thing I would say about Muscle Beach, for a person like myself…It reminds me of Lou Gehrig's closing statement: I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I think of the people at that age and that time, there was no place in the world like it. And there wont' be again.*

As a third place, Muscle Beach brought subcultures together in a liquid network, producing a new subculture that transcended physical disciplines. But subcultures do not merely inform each other: through the process of exaptation, subcultures have the potential to influence society at large. Exaptation is another of Johnson's major patterns of innovation, used to describe how things are repurposed from their original or intended use. The term comes from evolutionary biology, where it was coined to describe evolutionary traits that had evolved for one purpose and were later repurposed (or exapted) for another.[35] As Johnson applies the term to human networks, good ideas come from environments that enable the two-step process of exaptation. They allow for enough concentrated specialization to develop new ideas, but also offer enough connectivity for ideas to be repurposed by disparate groups. If Muscle Beach did give birth to the fitness boom, exaptation helps to explain how the routines and workouts of the beach athletes were coopted into the mainstream, distilled and transformed into the diverse fitness practices of suburban health clubs, university weight rooms, yoga studios, and beyond.

Where the internal dynamics of the Muscle Beach site incubated a liquid network, the location of the site enabled exaptation. Johnson describes how cities facilitate exaptation by allowing subcultures to thrive and spill over into broader society:

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[35] Bird feathers are the classic example: initially an adaptation for warmth, feathers were eventually exapted for flight.

> Lifestyles or interests that deviate from the mainstream need critical mass to survive; they atrophy in smaller communities not because those communities are more repressive, but rather because the odds of finding like-minded people are much lower with a smaller pool of individuals…Subcultures and eclectic businesses generate ideas, interests, and skills that inevitably diffuse through the society, influencing other groups...Cities, then, are environments that are ripe for exaptation, because they cultivate specialized skills and interests, and they create a liquid network where information can leak out of those subcultures, and influence their neighbors in surprising way.[36]

Between 1930 and 1960, the decades comprising the original Muscle Beach era, the population of the city of Los Angeles grew from just under one million to over three and half million residents. Los Angeles County grew at similar rate, from just over two million to six million.[37] Situated within this urban boom, the fitness subculture could thrive and spread its influence. Muscle Beach was the hub, but this subculture was also nurtured across a network of related places that the rising metropolis could support, especially in early gyms and health clubs. Some Muscle Beach regulars, like Vic Tanny, Pudgy and Les Stockton, and Bert Goodrich operated successful gyms. Others, like Steve Reeves, Armand Tanny, and Harold Zinkin, worked at these facilities. Other, less formal facilities also sustained the subculture; in her interview, Beverly Jocher recalls weight training and bag-punching sessions in beach athlete Barney Fry's garage gymnasium. In these spaces, the subculture achieved critical mass and found opportunities to spill over into the broader culture. Beyond the network of the fitness subculture, Los Angeles provided myriad points of entry for exaptation, especially into the movie and television industries of Hollywood and the area's burgeoning professional and collegiate sportscape. Entering the mainstream through these channels, the techniques, knowledge,

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[36] Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come from*, 161–162.

[37] US Bureau of the Census, *California: Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*, March 27, 1995, http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/ca190090.txt.

and ideals of Muscle Beach outlasted the lifespan of the site, its legacy booming well into the twenty-first century.

## CONCLUSION

Steven Johnson's framework of innovation offers a means of deconstructing how Muscle Beach gave birth to the modern fitness movement. Taking a broad view, what Johnson refers to as the "long zoom," I have argued that the fitness boom should be interpreted as the result of the socio-spatial processes facilitated by Muscle Beach and Los Angeles. According to Johnson, innovation—the "chance" comes from the connected mind. In his now viral, online TED talk, Johnson argues that the Enlightenment began when coffee houses became popular in England because these new communal sites were places to gather, drink stimulants and share ideas.[38] Perhaps Muscle Beach, in Johnson's arcana, is best understood as a coffee house of the body. The physical exercise stimulated the Muscle Beachers, changed their attitudes toward the body, and inevitably caused some of them to try to share their own passion for those changes with a wider world. Innovation inevitably followed. My analysis offers a foundation for understanding the widespread influence of Muscle Beach, but also points toward the additional research required to understand the site as birthplace.

Where I have considered the fitness boom broadly, the specific legacies of Muscle Beach can also be studied in terms of their social development and evolution. Such an approach can begin to unpack the constituent parts of the boom, like health clubs, exercise machines, and television workout programs. Where Johnson's "good idea"

[38] Johnson argues that before coffee houses, that most Britons drank only spirits during the day—beer for breakfast, wine at lunch, often gin at supper—and subsequently were unable to function at their intellectual best. Coffee and tea, first sold at the new coffee houses that began to open in the late 1600s, allowed deeper thinking and more innovation.

patterns are useful for understanding the big picture, these narrower parts may be better interpreted through more focused frames of analysis. Johnson's framework may fall short in explaining the narrower, tangible parts of the boom, but it can be extended to offer deeper understandings of some the more complex legacies of Muscle Beach. For example, the marginalized sport of modern bodybuilding may be better understood in terms of exaptation. Taking place on a stage (rather than a field or court), uncomfortably straddling the divide between performance and sport, bodybuilding carries traces of creative collisions with the vaudevillians, wrestlers, and acrobats of Muscle Beach.

For the boom to take place, it not only had to be developed and produced, it also had to be disseminated. To fully evaluate Muscle Beach and the boom, the diffusion of the boom's knowledge, technologies, and ideologies must also be considered. Toward this end, studying the communicative roles of the media, universities, sport organizations, public health initiatives, and the military can explain how the boom was transmitted from Muscle Beach. Like the specific legacies, these diverse channels of transmission can be examined individually through appropriate frameworks, but also as a broader, interconnected system of diffusion. If the links between the developmental roots of the fitness boom and its modes of communication can be teased out, the impact of Muscle Beach can eventually be fully evaluated, potentially emerging as more than an educated assumption.

## Chapter 2: The Short Goodbye: Scandal, Politics, and the End of Muscle Beach

*The tragedy of life, Howard, is not that the beautiful die young, but that they grow old and mean. It will not happen to me.*

--Raymond Chandler, The Long Goodbye

In many ways, 1958 was a banner for year for Santa Monica, California. After more than a decade of sustained, post-war growth, the completion of two major construction projects in the summer of 1958 positioned Santa Monica as a premier amusement and entertainment destination for visitors from the greater Los Angeles area and beyond. On June 15, the city officially opened the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, a three million dollar project that would make the facility the second largest of its kind Southern California. There was much fanfare in the opening week of the auditorium: the schedule included a performance by the Santa Monica Symphony Orchestra, a theater production of Inherit the Wind, and a Friday night variety revue featuring the Keigo Imperial Dancers, from Japan. In addition, the Los Angeles Times noted that free tours of the new building were available to the public, and that "pretty hostesses" would lead them.[39]

A little more than a month later, a new amusement park opened its gates to the public for the first time. Pacific Ocean Park, referred to as POP ("pee-oh-pee") by locals, was a $10 million dollar joint venture by the radio and television Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and the Hollywood Turf Club, operator of the now legendary Santa Anita horseracing track in Arcadia, California. Located where Pier Avenue ran into the beach in Santa Monica's Ocean Park neighborhood, POP was conceived as a competitor to

[39] "Santa Monica Unveils $2,900,00 Auditorium," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1958, sec. WS; Scott, *Santa Monica: A History on The Edge*, 132.

Disneyland. Opening almost three years to the day that Walt Disney's grand vision in Anaheim first opened its doors, POP was an ambitious project, covering twenty-eight beachfront acres with nautical themed attractions. Over twenty thousand people visited the park on opening day, and almost twice as many came the following day to enjoy thrill rides like the Whirl Pool and the Flying Dutchman, to take a scenic tour seventy-five feet above the Pacific on the cable-gondolas of the Ocean Skyway, and watch marine animals perform in the two thousand seat Sea Circus auditorium.[40]

While the Civic Auditorium and POP ushered in a distinctly commercialized era of seaside recreation and entertainment, Santa Monica and its pier had long been a destination for leisure and amusement. A short walk up the coast from POP, A short walk up the coast from POP, stood another large pier, the Santa Monica Pier. First constructed in 1909, it had been home to an amusement park in the 1920s, and by the 1950s still had a merry go round, a dance hall turned into a roller rink, and an arcade to attract tourists.[41] On the sand immediately to the south of the Santa Monica Pier, visitors could also find Muscle Beach—a site where gymnasts and other physical culturists had gathered for a quarter of a century. Originally known simply as the Santa Monica Beach Playground, this patch of sand held gymnastics equipment, a weight pit, and a large platform where men, women, and children practiced acrobatics, lifted weights, and even mounted large scale exhibitions; by the end of World War II the playground was internationally known as "Muscle Beach." While athletes, wrestlers, stuntmen, and various performers trained at Muscle Beach throughout the year, the facility received the

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[40] "Pacific Ocean Park Gets Ready to Open: 1200 Workmen Put Finishing Touches at $10,000,000 Play Center at Seashore," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1958; "Pacific Ocean Park Opening Set Tomorrow," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1958.

[41] Jeffrey Stanton, *Santa Monica Pier: A History from 1875-1990* (Los Angeles: Donahue Publishing Company, 1990).

majority of its public attention during the summer months. Interest peaked for the annual Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests, a staple of Santa Monica's summer activity calendar beginning in 1947. Mr. Muscle Beach was an amateur physique competition integrated into the city's Fourth of July festivities; Miss Muscle Beach was a beauty pageant (with minimal emphasis on "muscle") that initially took place over Labor Day weekend, although in later years it was held earlier in the summer.[42]

The summer of 1958 saw the twelfth annual installments of the Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests. Following tradition, Mr. Muscle Beach was held on Friday, July 4, as part of program that also featured tumbling, *adagio* (a type of acrobatic dance done with a partner), and a variety show. Hossein Shokouh, a bodybuilder from Iran, won the Mr. Muscle Beach title.[43] Miss Muscle Beach 1958 was held on August 3 and featured a similar program to the male contest held a month earlier. Over two thousand spectators crowded the beach to see Ann Johnson, a seventeen year-old high school senior from Norwalk, claim the title over nineteen other young women from the area.[44] Like previous installments of both events, the contests were organized with the oversight of the Santa Monica City Council and the Santa Monica Chamber of Congress. The municipal leadership had maintained an ambivalent relationship with Muscle Beach over the years, but their coordination of the events suggests an understanding of the value of the local and national attention that Muscle Beach garnered.[45] Given the popularity of Muscle Beach and the rising star of Santa Monica, there would have been no reason to

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[42] For more on the contests, see: Zinkin and Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 82–94; Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 76–83.
[43] "A Real Armful," *Evening Outlook*, July 5, 1958.
[44] "Blonde Winner at Muscle Beach," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1958.
[45] For example: Sayre, "The Body Worshippers of Muscle Beach."

expect that the summer of 1958 would be the last time Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach were crowned in Santa Monica.

But there would be no contests in 1959 or the years that followed. By New Year's Day 1959, there would not even be a Muscle Beach. On December 10, allegations would emerge implicating several members of the American weightlifting team, one of whom was an Olympic champion, in a statutory rape investigation. On 15 December 1958, the same City Council that had sponsored the beach fetes ordered the closing of Muscle Beach, literally overnight.[46] Within three months of the closing, there would be no trace of the performance platform and fitness equipment that had help establish Muscle Beach as the epicenter of modern fitness. It would be another thirty years before the city of Santa Monica embraced Muscle Beach again, with the dedication of a small memorial in 1989.

**A STORY BURIED IN THE SAND**

This essay examines the closing of the original Muscle Beach in the context of municipal politics and policy. Drawing on public archives, media coverage, oral history, and popular histories of Muscle Beach, it is an effort to tell a story that has largely been forgotten. It as story marked by ambivalence, political opportunism, and the vagaries of memory. As an historical project, it is characterized by the ongoing challenges presented by the passage of time and archival sources that are incomplete and often unsatisfying. Despite these challenges, the evidence and analyses that follow provide the closest examination of the subject to date.

[46] "Morals Cases Bring Muscle Beach Closing," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1958.

Given the sparse, mostly superficial treatment of Muscle Beach as a historical subject, it is not surprising that there is a paucity of reliable information about the demise of the facility.[47] As with any tale that has been stripped of its details over time, the story of the last days of Muscle Beach remains vague. What has been written tends to brief, without sources, and tinged in nostalgia. This is the case with the only two books about Muscle Beach: Marla Matzer Rose's popular history, *Muscle Beach*, and Harold Zinkin and Bonnie Hearn's memoir-tribute-history, *Remembering Muscle Beach*. The subject is also absent in most histories of Los Angeles and Santa Monica, except for Paula Scott's *Santa Monica: A History on the Edge* and Jeffrey Stanton's *Santa Monica Pier: A History from 1875 to 1990*. Scott's take is derived wholly from Rose and Zinkin's popular books; Stanton provides a few more details than the other authors but still manages to cover the issue in three quick paragraphs.[48] References in histories of sport and exercise are similarly rare and exceedingly vague or brief. For example, in her book *Ultimate Fitness*, Gina Kolata dedicates several pages to what she calls the "Muscle Beach Phenomenon," only to summarize the end of Muscle Beach in one sentence.[49]

In 1999, sport historians Jan and Terry Todd interviewed several notable mid-century athletes about their time at Muscle Beach.[50] Even in the memories of these prominent Muscle Beach figures, the story of the last days of the facility remains incomplete and out of reach. For some, like Russell Saunders and Paula Boelsems (who were interviewed together), the closure of the site was still a difficult subject to discuss. Boelsems spoke feistily, insistent that Muscle Beach was the victim of political opportunism; Saunders could barely discuss the subject, he sounds frustrated on the tape

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[47] See the introduction to this volume for more on the historical treatment of Muscle Beach.
[48] "Morals Cases Bring Muscle Beach Closing," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1958.
[49] Kolata, *Ultimate Fitness*, 215.
[50] These interviews are in the private collection of Jan and Terry Todd and are currently unpublished.

and almost as if he is in pain.[51] Saunders and Boelsems were popular, long-time regulars at Muscle Beach until its closure, but many of the site's early success stories, like Beverly Jocher, had moved on by the late 1950s. Jocher, the Miss Muscle Beach winner in 1952, stated that she was unaware of the events that led to the closure, despite the fact that one of the accused athletes was her former, long-term boyfriend.[52]

The essay proceeds in the four parts, beginning with an overview of the relationship between Muscle Beach and the city of Santa Monica in the years immediately preceding the closure of the facility. The second part is a close investigation of the allegations and civic debates surrounding the end of Muscle Beach and its immediate legacy. The third part looks backwards, returning to the final years of the playground in a speculative attempt to identify the forces and conditions that allowed for such an abrupt end to a beloved destination. The concluding section traces the faint civic legacy of Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, from a 1963 attempt to rename the facility, through the following decades of a relative silence, and to the eventual, official memorialization of the Muscle Beach site in 1989.[53]

## MUSCLE AND THE CITY I: LEGISLATING MUSCLE BEACH, 1955-1958

In the years following World War II, Muscle Beach reached the height of its popularity, both as a destination for spectators and a nexus of physical culture. This period was also a time of transition, with notable changes in the activities, physiques, and reputation of the site. There was a marked shift in the types of athletes and bodies that frequented Muscle

[51] Russ Saunders and Paula Boelsems, interview with Jan and Terry Todd, July 1999. Private collection of Jan and Terry Todd.

[52] Beverly Jocher, interview with Jan Todd, 1999. Private collection of Jan and Terry Todd.

[53] While self-contained, this essay is just one part of the greater story and legacy of Muscle Beach. Readers unfamiliar with the early story of Muscle Beach may want to refer to the overview provided in the first chapter.

Beach, most notably, modern bodybuilding had arrived. In her popular take on Muscle Beach, Marla Rose notes that, "After World War II, the beach only became more popular. The popularity of weight lifting was rising fast, and the sport of bodybuilding was beginning to take hold."[54] This shift would only become more pronounced, by the mid-1950s, as weightlifting, bodybuilding, and physique displays had almost completely replaced the earlier gymnasts, acrobats, and *adagio* practitioners. The rise of these sports also indirectly led to the first formal organization of Muscle Beach athletes in March of 1955. Earlier that year, a young boy hurt himself trying to pick up a barbell and his family promptly sued the city for $200, prompting the director of recreation to lean on the beach athletes. In response, the Muscle Beach Weightlifting Club was founded and Dr. Paul Maclin was named its president. The club organizers committed to overseeing and maintaining the facility, in addition to securing the first-ever insurance coverage for the site, using funds from a two-dollar annual fee collected from over one hundred members.[55] It was also during the 1950s that the bodies of Muscle Beach transitioned from the sand to the mass media. Muscle Beach regulars worked as stuntmen in Hollywood, toured with famous names like Mae West, and appeared in a broad range of domestic and international media, where images of their physiques were deployed to sell both products and an abstract ideal of California, America, and modernity.[56]

At the same time, the city of Santa Monica was experiencing its own post-war boom. City leaders and area businessmen were keen to turn the city into a prosperous, family-friendly hub of tourism and commerce. This civic identity project was heavily endorsed by the local *Evening Outlook* newspaper and facilitated by the City Council's

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[54] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 122.
[55] Stanton, *Santa Monica Pier*, 120.
[56] Ruud Stokvis, "The Emancipation of Bodybuilding," *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 9, no. 3 (2006): 463–79.

development of a multifaceted master plan for developing the city. Many years later, former Muscle Beach athletes would link this municipal context to the seemingly heavy-handed manner in which the facility was shut down. In short, the Muscle Beach alumni felt that the city was looking for an opportunity to get rid of the popular, yet unprofitable attraction.[57] As the following analysis shows, there was certainly a vocal opposition to Muscle Beach that came forward in the wake of the 1958 morals charges against beach athletes. The roots of this opposition are less clear. There is little indication that there was serious opposition to Muscle Beach before December 1958 and the facility actually enjoyed financial and operative support from the city until its final days.

Muscle Beach existed for over two decades before it was first mentioned in the proceedings of the Santa Monica City Council. On 21 June 1955 the Council approved an appropriation of $4,000 dollars for the continued development of Muscle Beach. In addition to being the first appearance of the site in the public record, this Council action was notable because it explicitly endorsed additional weightlifting facilities and an enlargement of the performance platform. The minutes of the meeting do not suggest strong opposition to the appropriation, but two Councilmen who voted in favor of the funds did so with qualifications that foreshadowed the eventual debate surrounding the closing. Councilman Rex Minter stated that he "did not like clubs on a recreation facility" and Councilman Jack Guercio said that "he hoped past conditions in the area would not reoccur."[58] There is no indication as to what the "past conditions" in the area were.

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[57] Zinkin and Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 98–122; Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 121–132. This sentiment is common in the aforementioned Muscle Beach oral history interviews collected by Jan and Terry Todd, especially in the reminiscences of Russ Saunders, Paula Boelsems, Harold Zinkin, Glenn Sundby, and Armand Tanny.

[58] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," June 21, 1955, Volume 21, 394-396, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

In July of the same year, an amendment to the city's ongoing beach master plan briefly mentions Muscle Beach, indicating that the facility should remain "approximately in its present location."[59] Santa Monica had been slowly moving forward on such a plan for the better part of a decade, the goal being to establish a long-term, systematic program for the city to regulate the development of its beaches.[60] Eighteen months later, on 21 January 1957, the City Council approved a half-million dollar bid from architect Welton Beckett to move forward with the beach development master plan.[61] The minutes indicate that Beckett's plan included the relocation of Muscle Beach, presumably to the location that would eventually be designated "Beach Park Number Four." In June 1957, the City Council approved its annual budget, including a provision confirming the planned relocation of Muscle Beach to a new site that would include children's playground equipment in addition to the exercise facilities. David Schwartz, representing the Muscle Beach Weightlifters Club, voiced an unsuccessful protest, arguing that the beach athletes had not been consulted about the proposed move.[62]

The supporters of Muscle Beach continued their protest and by the end of the summer they succeeded in convincing the city Recreation Commission to keep the facility in its existing location. In a memo to the city manager, director of recreation Leonard F. Bright summarized the commission's position: "I believe I interpreted the consensus of the commission by stating that as far as the commission is concerned there

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[59] "Resolution of the City Planning Commission of the City of Santa Monica Adopting An Amendment of That Portion of a Master Plan Concerning Shoreline Development in Said City," July 21, 1955, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

[60] For example, see: A.H. Adams, "A.H. Adams, Los Angeles County Director of Planning to Santa Monica City Council," September 2, 1949, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives; Joseph E. Day, "Recreation Commission to City Council," October 8, 1951, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives; Geoffrey F. Morgan, "Recreation Commission to City Council," November 8, 1951, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

[61] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," January 22, 1957, Volume 22, 137-139, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives Beckett was also responsible for the aforementioned Civic Auditorium.

[62] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," June 24, 1957, Volume 22, 198-199, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

is no valid reason for changing the location of Muscle Beach except that the master plan has to be amended."[63] This position was echoed by Adele Bower, chairman of the Recreation Commission, at the September 10 meeting of the City Council. Bower also urged the Council to keep Muscle Beach and the new children's playground as separate facilities, with the playground at the previously proposed location a few blocks down the beach.[64] Also at this meeting, five letters from Santa Monica residents arguing for the relocation of the beach were read into the record. The minutes do not suggest the basis for this opposition, but these letters would re-emerge over a year later, as support for the eventual closing of the facility. The minutes further indicate that the Council took no action regarding Muscle Beach during this meeting.

Muscle Beach remained in its location over the next year, but the legislative back-and-forth continued. Despite having successfully lobbied the Recreation Commission, Muscle Beach supporters eventually conceded to the City Council and approved a relocation plan in October 1958. Muscle Beach would be rebuilt, alongside a playground for children, at the new Beach Park Number Four, a half-mile south of the original location.[65] This was the last time that either Muscle Beach or Beach Park Number Four appeared in the city's legislative process before the heated closure debate that began two months later.

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[63] Leonard Bright, "Leonard Bright to Randall Dorton," July 26, 1957, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[64] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," September 10, 1957, Volume 22, 233, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[65] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," October 21, 1958, Volume 22, 368, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

## MORALS & MUSCLES: THE CLOSURE OF MUSCLE BEACH

### *Allegations and Prosecution*

In the limited treatments of the subject to date, the end of Muscle Beach amounts to one clear event and much speculation. The clear event is the charging of five Muscle Beach athletes on "moral charges" on 9 December 1958.[66] Beyond those charges, lies the speculation: about the actions that led to the charges and about the motivations of the city leadership to leverage those charges to remove Muscle Beach as part of an ongoing effort to position Santa Monica as a prosperous, wholesome place to live and visit. Over fifty years later, the details of the events leading to the charges and the resulting court cases remain murky.

There is little in the way of a verifiable narrative about the alleged sex crimes. The story was sporadically covered in the Santa Monica's *Evening Outlook* and the *Los Angeles Times*, but was almost immediately overshadowed by the closure and debates surrounding the Muscle Beach facility. As for the alleged crime and following prosecution, scant details ever emerged. The case was first brought to light on December 10, in an *Outlook* article entitled "Musclemen Held on Sex Charges." According to the *Outlook*, five Muscle Beach athletes were implicated in a "morals case" stemming from an incident that had occurred the previous month at a beachfront apartment shared by two of the men. The men were Isaac Berger, David Sheppard, John Carper, William Siddalll, and George Sheffield. Sheffield was charged with a misdemeanor for the "exhibition of obscene photographs," while the other four men were charged with felony complaints of statutory rape.[67] Two of the men were well known: Berger was the reigning Olympic featherweight weightlifting champion and Sheppard was a former U.S. and world

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[66] "Musclemen Held on Sex Charges," *Evening Outlook*, December 10, 1958.
[67] "Morals Cases Bring Muscle Beach Closing"; "Musclemen Held on Sex Charges."

champion in the same sport.[68] The allegations were particularly damning because of the age and race of the victims: the athletes were said to have engaged in sexual activities with two African-American girls, ages twelve and fourteen. The girls were identified as runaways, also from Santa Monica, who had met the men at Muscle Beach.

Despite the front-page headlines, few details about the cases ever emerged. The scandal was briefly heightened because the police could not locate Berger after the charges were announced. On December 11, under the headline "Champion Muscleman Hunted," the *Outlook* reported that Berger was still at large and the subject of an ongoing police search. The drama was short-lived, as Berger turned himself on December 15, accompanied by his lawyer, Paul Caruso, who declared that the charges were "false and unfounded." Following Berger's surrender, the fate of the musclemen became a secondary concern for the papers, the focus shifting to the fate of Muscle Beach. As the following section explains, the *Outlook* actively campaigned to permanently close the facility, which helps to explain why the newspaper was not exactly diligent in following the stories in the courts. Coverage of the athletes' fates is frustratingly incomplete, and available information remains limited to the following details.

William Siddall was cleared of all charges within two weeks of his arrest. The *Outlook* dedicated exactly one sentence to his dismissal, buried deep within an article sensationalizing the Muscle Beach issue.[69] The charges against Isaac Berger were dismissed for lack of evidence on 8 January 1959. Perhaps because Berger was a reigning world and Olympic weightlifting champion, his case was the only one to garner

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[68] For more on Berger and Sheppard, see: John D. Fair, *Muscletown USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).
[69] "Muscleman Issue Aired in TV Quiz," *Evening Outlook*, December 23, 1958.

coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*.[70] On January 19, John Carper pleaded guilty to reduced charges of statutory assault. The *Outlook* initially noted that he would be cleared of additional morals charges at his sentencing hearing on February 18, but a later article remarked that he would be sentenced on March 11. There is no coverage in the paper for either of the possible sentencing dates.[71] On March 4, George Sheffield pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges for the possession of lewd pictures and books. Two other charges against Sheffield were dismissed and his sentencing was set for March 31. Following a pattern, the *Outlook* never covered Sheffield's sentencing.[72] The only trace of David Sheppard's case also appears in the *Outlook* article about Sheffield, where the paper indicates that he would stand trial on statutory rape charges on April 20. There is no evidence that this trial took place or that Sheppard was ever sentenced.[73]

The lack of information about the case inevitably begs for some speculation. Given the spate of dismissals and reduced charges, one possibility is that there was simply not enough evidence for prosecutors to pursue the case. Another, grimmer possibility is that the race of the alleged victims may have been a limiting factor in the court's efforts to prosecute the case; it is easy to imagine a different narrative if the victims had been young white women. However, even this line of reasoning is debatable, as Sheppard had once openly dated Beverly Jocher, a young, white Muscle Beach athlete. Sheppard and Jocher began dating in 1950, when they were nineteen and thirteen years

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[70] "Weight Champ Freed of Molesting Charge," *Evening Outlook*, January 8, 1959; "Weightlifter Wins Morals Vindication," *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1959.
[71] "Muscleman Pleads Guilty in Sex Case," *Evening Outlook*, January 19, 1959; "Muscleman Sheffield Admits Morals Charge," *Evening Outlook*, March 5, 1959.
[72] "Muscleman Sheffield Admits Morals Charge."
[73] Sheppard's case never reemerged in the papers and my efforts at finding information through court resources were unsuccessful.

old, respectively.[74] Reflecting on this period in a 1999 interview, Jocher noted that the couple were an item for three years and the relationship even had the approval of her mother.[75] These muddy lines of speculation also point to another possibility: that the accusations and arrests provided a flash point for political opportunism, giving influential voices in Santa Monica a foot in the door to mobilize against Muscle Beach. This hypothesis has been suggested by several Muscle Beach alumni over the years and provides the starting point for the analysis in the following section.

***Closure and Ensuing Debates: 1958-960***

In *Remembering Muscle Beach*, Harold Zinkin suggests that some in Santa Monica's civic leadership were looking for a reason to eliminate Muscle Beach. Zinkin writes:

> But by the late fifties, many Muscle Beach fans began to see the handwriting in the sand. Some believed the city wanted to take over the Beach to create more parking lots. Others blamed influential Ocean Park Pier business owners who didn't like the competition of free entertainment. Still others felt that the owners of the Surf Rider Hotel (where the Loew's Santa Monica Beach Hotel stands today) didn't think their guests would enjoy the unruly crowds. Whatever the reason, the city soon had a legitimate reason to disband the fun at Muscle Beach, or so it seemed.[76]

Of course, the "legitimate reason" Zinkin refers to is the morals case against the weightlifters. Zinkin's position represents the general consensus his fellow Muscle Beach alumni and others who have written about the history of the site. The sequence of events following the December 1958 allegations supports the idea that an influential

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[74] Of course, "dating" is a broad idea and Jocher does not offer many details about the relationship. Given the social mores of the time, it is not a given that Jocher and Sheppard's relationship was a sexual one.
[75] Beverly Jocher, interview by Jan Todd, Santa Monica, CA (???), 1999 (?).
[76] Zinkin and Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 115.

portion of Santa Monica's civic leadership wanted Muscle Beach gone, what is less clear is the source of this sentiment or when it began to emerge.

In the wake of the charges against the athletes, the Santa Monica City Council closed Muscle Beach on 15 December 1958. The closing was initially billed as temporary, ostensibly to allow the Council time to establish a committee to investigate the charges and the future of Muscle Beach. Few details are available about the manner of the closing, but according to an interview with longtime Muscle Beach athletes Russ Saunders and Paula Boelsems, things moved very quickly. Boelsems says that, before any public hearing was held, tumbling platforms and gymnastic equipment were torn down in the middle of the night and police patrols kept visitors and athletes away.[77] On December 16, during a regularly scheduled meeting of the City Council, the "Muscle Beach problem" was discussed.[78] The following day, the *Evening Outlook* wrote that debate on the issue began with a "dramatic moment," when an area woman charged that Muscle Beach had corrupted her son and that there were other mothers who were afraid to share similar experiences in public. The discussion continued with an odd form of opposition: seven letters calling for the removal or relocation of Muscle Beach that had previously been recorded at a City Council meeting in September 1957, were re-read into the record.[79] The floor was then opened and a letter from a then twenty-two year old Paula Boelsems was read. Boelsems' letter suggested that the facility be allowed to continue, but with greater supervision. An attorney, John Onesian, representing the Muscle Beach weightlifting club, asked the Council for additional time to investigate the issue. The minutes of the meeting note that twelve more citizens, including three beach

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[77] Saunders and Boelsems, interview with Jan and Terry Todd.
[78] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," December 16, 1958, Volume 22, 411, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[79] "Musclemen Issue Faces SM Study," *Evening Outlook*, December 17, 1958.

concessionaires, spoke on the matter; the *Outlook* coverage indicates that these voices were supportive of the continuation of Muscle Beach.[80]

The final perspective on record is Santa Monica chief of police, Otto Faulkner, who voiced his opposition to keeping the facility open: "I firmly believe that Muscle Beach is not an activity the city should provide. I also don't feel the city should provide a place for exhibitionists to show off…nothing has ever 'gone wrong' on the platform, but it does create a condition." Following Faulkner's statement, the Council briefly discussed the matter. While the minutes do not contain the Council members' statements, the *Outlook* article used selective quotes from the meeting to frame the issue in a decidedly negative manner. Mayor Russel K. Hart stressed the need for municipal control of the beaches, while Councilman Rex Minter said, "I think there is a need for some sort of an activity such as an outdoor gym. But if it has to be a mecca for sex deviates, it has to go." The firmest statement of opposition on the Council came from Alys Drobnick, who declared, "I would like to see Muscle Beach removed from the recreation program. This area belongs to Santa Monica and has never been sold to a group of weightlifters. I want the beach developed for everyone, not just certain groups."[81] The *Outlook* noted that two Council members voiced support for a more controlled Muscle Beach, but did not identify the speakers or share their words. Following this discussion, the Council unanimously approved a motion to immediately discontinue financial support of Muscle Beach and to refer the matter for investigation by the Recreation Commission.[82]

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[80] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," December 16, 1958.
[81] "Musclemen Issue Faces SM Study."
[82] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," December 16, 1958.

On 15 January 1959, the Recreation Commission announced that a decision on Muscle Beach would be delayed, pending further investigation by a special committee.[83] Despite the formation of the committee, ongoing coverage in the *Outlook* suggested that permanently closing Muscle Beach was a foregone conclusion. The slow-moving story continued in the *Outlook* over the next two months, during which time the paper also continued its active role in the campaign against Muscle Beach. The paper had been quick to establish its position, publishing an editorial entitled "Let's Get Rid of Muscle Beach" on 12 December 1958, just two days after breaking the news of the athletes' arrests.[84] The editorial derided the "undesirable element" that was to be found at Muscle Beach; a thinly-veiled "history" of the facility in the same day's paper filled several column inches with a critique that essentially echoed the editorial.[85] The paper also helped to sensationalize the morals allegations against the weightlifters, its bold headlines implicating the men in a "sex orgy."

The *Outlook's* stance reflected the pro-business, conservative values of editor-in-chief Robert E. McClure. Under McClure, the paper continued a tradition of local journalistic boosterism dating back to the 1920s, when former editor Robert P. Holliday spearheaded the successful campaign to prevent the annexation of Santa Monica by the city of Los Angeles.[86] By the late 1950s, McClure had already used the pages of the *Outlook* to advocate his vision of a strictly managed, business friendly Santa Monica of the future.[87] In the wake of the Muscle Beach allegations, McClure's paper emphasized the likeminded voices of Alys Drobnick and Otto Faulkner, the aforementioned

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[83] "Muscle Beach Issue Faces Special Study," *Evening Outlook*, January 16, 1959.
[84] "Let's Get Rid of Muscle Beach," *Evening Outlook*, December 12, 1958.
[85] "Muscle Beach History Reviewed," *Evening Outlook*, December 12, 1958.
[86] Scott, *Santa Monica: A History on The Edge*, 104.
[87] Ibid., 108–110; Stanton, *Santa Monica Pier*, 98,114.

Councilwoman and police chief. In almost every article about the Muscle Beach situation between December 1958 and March 1959, the *Outlook* quoted Drobnick and Faulkner's positions. Drobnick framed the issue as one of civic fiscal responsibility, repeatedly suggesting that city taxpayers not be burdened with supporting special groups; Faulkner did his part by questioning the moral character of the Muscle Beach crowd, using terms like "deviate," "undesirable," and "homosexual" interchangeably. Complementing the anti-Muscle Beach voices was the silence in the paper about the legal fates of the athletes: every article on the issue mentioned that the morals case against the "Muscle Beach habitués" was the root of the problem, but there was no coverage of the legal proceedings after early January.[88]

McClure, Drobnick, Faulkner, and others opposed to Muscle Beach would get their way, in the short term and beyond. The facility remained closed until its demolition in March 1959, and ensuing city policies on beach recreation would ensure that a similar attraction would never again be possible. The March 1959 report of the committee appointed to study Muscle Beach would set the legislative tone to come.[89] Outlining twelve policy recommendations, the full report reads:

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[88] An interesting characteristic of the *Outlook* articles from this period is the reliance on the term "habitués" to describe the denizens of Muscle Beach. The standard reference to the accused athletes was that they were "Muscle Beach habitués." A January 16 article notes, "[police chief] Faulkner added that Muscle Beach is a magnet for runaway juveniles and is the first place the police check for missing youngsters. He asserted that the Muscle Beach habitués 'do not cooperate' when questioned about missing juveniles." This may have been a matter of editorial taste, but in the ongoing context of these articles, the word had the effect of totalizing the entire Muscle Beach crowd into singular group of "undesirables." For the sake of comparison, the word "habitué" only appears 32 times in the *Los Angeles Times* for all of 1958 and 1959. The term also implies that the Muscle Beach crowd were not local citizens, but transient users of the facility. Muscle Beach attracted plenty of visitors, but the core crowd were predominantly local, with many having grown up in the area.

[89] Leonard Bright, "Recreation Commission Recommendation (Muscle Beach Policy)," March 3, 1959, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

**Report Of Committee on Muscle Beach Policy**

This committee, consisting of Alf Dahl, Alfred Quinn, and Paul J. Molly, has conferred with a number of people on the problems presented by the area known as MUSCLE BEACH, and presents the following as its recommendations to the Recreation Commission:

1. That the nomenclature of MUSCLE BEACH, in all future publicity and correspondence, should be discontinued.
2. That formal organizations, other than the Department of Recreation Employees, should not be given special privileges in the area.
3. That weight-lifting activities should be suspended until the anticipated new beach park facilities are prepared.
4. When the new beach park facilities are prepared weight-lifting should be confined to a definite area, to be used only by adults and young adults over 16 years of age.
5. That all weight-lifting equipment used in the area should be provided by the City and should be under the direct control of the Beach Park Director, to be checked out and checked in by users in accordance with standard practice on the loaning of sports equipment. Any privately owned equipment coming into the area should not be stored or maintained permanently in the beach area.
6. That the weight-lifting area should be removed from the beach immediately adjacent to the Promenade.
7. That gymnastic equipment of bars and rings should be continued.
8. That the present gymnastic platform should be set at not more than one (1) foot above sand level.
9. Any and all public performances should be scheduled through the Recreation Department, and at the their discretion.
10. That actions of participants should always be within the bounds of public propriety, and this policy should be strictly enforced by the area director.
11. That the entire area should have a full-time Director and other "as needed" playground attendants through the summer period and at other times when attendance warrants.
12. That there be frequent periodic evaluations of playground procedure policy, and personnel, by the Administrative Staff of the Recreation Department.

All together, the twelve recommendations amounted to a clear, three-part policy for the future of Muscle Beach and adult exercise on the beaches of Santa Monica. First, the name "Muscle Beach" was to be immediately and permanently abandoned. Second, the city would assume total control and supervision of similar facilities and activities

going forward. Associations like the Muscle Beach Weightlifting Club would have no influence and recreational equipment choices would be consciously steered toward traditional gymnastic apparatus rather than weights.[90] Third, while athletic performances were not explicitly banned, the restriction on platform height removed the spectacular potential of the site, creating a *de facto* prohibition of tumbling shows, revues, and physique contests.

Despite the opposition voiced by city leadership and the clear directive of the Recreation Commission to abandon Muscle Beach, the future of weightlifting and physical culture on the beach remained a subject of debate for much of 1959. The third and fourth points of the proposal mention that certain Muscle Beach activities could take place at a "new facility." The new facility, dubbed "Beach Park Number Four," had been proposed as a new site for Muscle Beach as early as 1955. This existing proposal, combined with public support for the continuation of a "Muscle Beach," re-focused the debate on the possibility of a new facility that the city could officially endorse. The *Evening Outlook*, ever quick to sensationalize the issue, ran a front-page headline on 18 March 1959, declaring "Muscle Beach Will Reopen."[91] The accompanying article clarified that the City Council had tentatively approved that an exercise facility be built at the established Beach Park Number Four Site. The Council's decision came in a meeting the previous day, following a two-hour hearing, where both sides of the Muscle Beach debate continued to build on their previous positions. The *Outlook* noted that the Council chambers were near capacity, with most of the present spectators supporting Muscle Beach, but the opposition remained persistent. Alys Drobnick went on record, once again

[90] Of course, removing and barring the name was also a form of municipal control.
[91] "Muscle Beach Will Reopen: Council Moves to Rebuild Weight Center," *Evening Outlook*, March 18, 1959.

questioning the legitimacy of using city funds to support such a facility; lacking an actual voting privilege, Mayor Hart declared that he "personally would not vote to put Muscle Beach as it was under any circumstances."[92]

Perhaps because of the ongoing public support for Muscle Beach, the city leadership continued the two-pronged attack on the possibility of a new facility. The following week, acting city manager George Bundy and Councilman Wellman mills reiterated Drobnick's financial concerns.[93] Echoing the mayor's uncertainty, police chief Faulkner insisted that the problem was the "activity" and not the facility, arguing that, "The activity draws people to the beach and it excites them to do things they wouldn't otherwise do. Supervision won't end the problem."[94] Despite the continued opposition, municipal documents from April 1959 indicate that Santa Monica remained committed to offering adult fitness facilities on the beach, given that the recommendations of the special committee on Muscle Beach were followed. Interdepartmental memos from the offices of the city manager and city engineer contain no reference to Muscle Beach, but offer options and estimated construction costs for building adult gymnastic apparatus alongside a children's playground.[95] On April 15, the *Outlook* confirmed that the city was moving forward with a new facility, although the financial viability of such a project was once again questioned.[96]

After six quiet weeks, Muscle Beach was back in the headlines on 10 June 1959. That day's *Outlook* reported that the City Council had approved the purchase of new gymnastic equipment for Beach Park Number Four, effectively bringing a Muscle Beach-

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[92] Ibid.
[93] "Musclemen Issue Remains Unsolved," *Evening Outlook*, March 25, 1959.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Leonard Bright, "Beach Park No. 4 Memorandum," April 10, 1959, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives; Maurice M. King, "Beach Park No. 4 Memorandum," April 10, 1959, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[96] "New Muscle Beach Ordered Installed," *Evening Outlook*, April 15, 1959.

type facility back to the beach.[97] Following the lead of the earlier Recreation Commission recommendations, the new facility would not have a weightlifting platform, weightlifting equipment, or any space for athletic exhibitions. Breaking with the recommendations, a provision for increased supervision of the facility was notably absent. Not pleased with the outcome, the city's anti-Muscle Beach faction once again attempted to mobilize. No longer content with simply framing the issue negatively, McClure and the *Outlook* responded to the Council's decisions by taking a more active role in the fight against waterfront exercise. On June 12, under the headline "Must We Buy Back Muscle Beach?" the paper published a lengthy editorial and call for petitions.[98] The most salient parts of the editorial are reproduced below:

> In one of the most abject Councilmanic surrenders the City of Santa Monica has ever witnessed, the ways were greased with taxpayers' money Tuesday night for a new launching of the kind of beach exhibitionism and riffraff attraction that led to the closing of Muscle Beach last fall. Five out of seven Council members voted to install gymnastic equipment at Beach Park 4 on the recommendation of Recreation Leonard Bright and without any provision for supervising the new facility.
>
> As a sop to the previous plea that this would be a playground, two pieces of children's equipment were included! Recreation Director Leonard Bright cared little about the children who might use the playground, in his eagerness to bring the Muscle Beach athletes and their followers of all three sexes…
>
> Police Chief Faulkner also disapproved, reminding that the installation of adult gymnastic equipment might lead to objectionable "exhibitions" such as brought perverts and sex criminals to our beaches in the past…
>
> But these warnings did not deter five members of the Council, including Frantz and Minter, from voting for a new Muscle Beach that may be counted on, without, supervision, soon to rival the old one, which was a favorite haven of the sexual athletes and queers of Southern California.
>
> Because the Evening Outlook believes that our beaches should be kept for the use of decent people and not turned over to gymnastic exhibitions which might better be held in private gymnasiums, we protest this Council action. We

[97] "Muscle Beach Row Revived by SM Action," *Evening Outlook*, June 10, 1959.
[98] "Must We Buy Back Muscle Beach?," *Evening Outlook*, June 12, 1959.

> invite the good people of this community to join us in our protest, by indicating their willingness to sign their names to a petition that the Council rescind its voted of Tuesday night. Beginning tonight and continuing for two weeks, ballots will appear on Page 1 of this newspaper reading as follows:
>
> 'I am opposed to any restoration or return of Muscle Beach. I want our public beaches to be reserved for the recreational use of healthy-minded young people, families with children, and our older citizens. Therefore I ask the Santa Monica City Council to rescind its previous vote for gymnastic equipment at Beach Park 4, and to bar any return to the previous exhibitions at Muscle Beach.'

Responding to the *Outlook*'s push for public support, proponents of Muscle Beach began collecting signatures on a petition of their own, filing 1,207 signatures in support of Beach Park Number Four.[99] The *Outlook* was quick to discredit the petition, suggesting that many signers were deceived as to the purpose of the petition and that the majority of the names belonged to children or non-residents of Santa Monica. As for the veracity of theses claims, the *Outlook* offered a "spot check" of the petition. The newspaper's coverage of the petition was once again framed by usage of the name "Muscle Beach," despite the fact that the name was no longer present in city documents moving the new facility forward. Finally, the *Outlook* made sure to remind readers that its own petition was still in circulation "for those interested in retaining the beach for the use of healthy minded young people, families with children, and our older citizens."[100]

The *Outlook* petition was received by the city on July 8 and read into the minutes of the City Council meeting on July 14. Twenty-five days elapsed between the newspaper's initial call for signatures and the submission of the petition, but only 1,657 names had been collected. The *Outlook*'s rigor in conducting the petition was problematic: according to a letter from editor Robert McClure to the City Council, it was the newspaper's belief that "virtually all the signers of this petition opposing any return

[99] "Petition Filed Backing Muscle Beach Plan," *Evening Outlook*, June 18, 1959.
[100] Ibid.

of Muscle Beach are residents of Santa Monica and persons who feel that they have a real stake in the community. Many have children in our schools and are property owners."[101] However, doubts about the signers were absent in *Outlook* coverage: after casting a shadow over the veracity of the pro-Muscle Beach petition, an editorial simply noted that over 1,600 Santa Monica citizens had voiced their opposition to a new facility.[102] While the dueling petitions suggest that there was a real debate about the future of Muscle Beach and adult recreation on the beach, the impact of either petition is hard to gauge retrospectively. Based on the 1960 census, each petition only represented a little less than two percent of the city's population.[103]

Whether or not the City Council was responsive to the signatures, one final legislative maneuver took place in July of 1959. The Muscle Beach opposition, led once again by Councilwoman Drobnick, took a new approach. In response to the developing plans for Beach Park Number 4, the opposition's final play was to support a decentralized program of adult exercise on the beach. Written by city manager George Bundy, the new proposal argued for installing new gymnastic equipment at several locations along the beach instead of providing a self-contained facility. Once again, Drobnick and her supporters argued for their plan on the basis of saving city funds, but also added that not allowing athletes to congregate would serve as a precaution against "future nuisance."[104] The *Outlook* noted support for the new proposal, but it was ultimately not enough: the Council rejected Bundy's proposal by a 4-3 vote and once again committed to the previously approved plan for Beach Park Number 4.[105]

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[101] McClure, Robert, "Letter From Robert E. McClure to Santa Monica City Council," July 8, 1959, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[102] "So Muscle Beach Comes Back," *Evening Outlook*, July 17, 1959.
[103] The 1960 US census lists 83,249 residents in Santa Monica.
[104] "So Muscle Beach Comes Back."
[105] "Council Upholds Muscle Beach," *Evening Outlook*, July 15, 1959.

Following more than six months of public debate, Beach Park Number Four opened on 8 August 1959. Most of the various recommendations put forth by the Recreation Commission and the City Council appear to have been met by the reopening. The new facility had a mix of adult gymnastic equipment and children's playground equipment and was supervised by city employees under the guidance of the Santa Monica lifeguard captain Bill Bowen.[106] As promised, there was no platform or weightlifting equipment, nor did the city use the name "Muscle Beach." The only notable development to the city's existing plan was the relocation of Beach Park Number Four to the old Muscle Beach site, due south of the pier, rather than the proposed site a few blocks south. The *Los Angeles Times* summed up the new facility in a headline, "Muscle Beach Open—But with No Muscles."[107] The *Outlook*, gracious in defeat, covered the opening in a mostly positive light, noting that over two thousand people visited the facility on Sunday, August 9 alone and that the "creeps" had stayed away. The paper only hinted once at its previous opposition, asking " but will things stay that way?"

Things did stay that way. After the summer of 1959, the legislative tale of Beach Park Number Four would be mostly limited to debates about appropriations and equipment purchases.[108] There was only one notable exception, from a Recreation Commission memorandum dated 22 January 1960.[109] The memo contained a report from a sub-committee designated to study the equipment needs of Beach Park Number Four and related funding considerations. The six recommendations of the sub-committee were

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[106] McClure, Reed, "'New' Muscle Beach Returns to SM; 'Creeps' Miss Opening," *Evening Outlook*, August 10, 1959.
[107] "Muscle Beach Open- But With No Muscles," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1959.
[108] For example: "Muscle Beach Funds Cause Council Fight," *Evening Outlook*, October 16, 1959; "Recreation Program Bared By SM Board," *Evening Outlook*, November 20, 1959.
[109] Leonard Bright, "Recommendations- Beach Park #4," January 22, 1960, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

essentially a continuation of previous year's decisions relating to the facility, underlining the need for supervisory staff and the continued development of children's playground equipment.[110] The sixth and final recommendation restated the city's position on the types of acceptable adult exercise, reading simply: "That no weightlifting facilities or equipment should be included in site planning." Given the previously established city policies and the lack of any newsworthy incidents involving beach athletes in 1959, this final recommendation seems onerous. Whatever the reason for the final recommendation, the legacy of the yearlong debate and legislative process was clear: Santa Monica would no longer endorse muscle on the beach.

## MUSCLE AND THE CITY II: CONTEXTUALIZING THE "UNDESIRABLE ELEMENT"

As a narrative of municipal policy, the chain of events between the morals charges of December 1958 and the committee recommendations of January1960 appear to be a case of political opportunism. This rendering is supported by the municipal context of Santa Monica at the time. In short, Santa Monica was a post-war boomtown, dedicated to positioning itself as an exemplary city of families, industry, and commerce. Progress was the name of the game in mid-century Santa Monica. The city established a new charter in 1946, adopting a Council-city manager model of governance in an effort to modernize its administration and to clearly distance itself from the civic corruption of the 1930s.[111] The push for civic progress was codified by the adoption of new master plan for the city in May 1957. Prepared over the preceding year by consultant Simon Eisner, the plan outlined a transition to more family housing, increased business development, and the re-

[110] Paul Molloy, "Report and Recommendation of Committee on Beach Park #4," January 21, 1960, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[111] Scott, *Santa Monica: A History on The Edge*; Stanton, *Santa Monica Pier*.

zoning of some public spaces as entertainment and shopping districts. The plan was heralded by the *Outlook* as a blueprint for the "Santa Monica of the Future." Within the context of the city's self-improvement project, the case of Muscle Beach fits the logic of political opportunism. Santa Monica's beaches had long been a locus of economic activity, and the re-development of the waterfront was increasingly focused on distinctly modern commerce and entertainment in the post-war period. Muscle Beach, while still capable of drawing large crowds during the late1950s, was not an easily monetized attraction for the city or local business.

As discussed earlier in this essay, the feelings of city leadership toward Muscle Beach were historically positive, if somewhat ambivalent. In the period between the appropriations of 1955 and the October 1958 approval of the plan for Beach Park Number Four, there was little to suggest that anyone was trying to shut Muscle Beach down. By the end of 1958, opponents of the facility would claim that it was a clear nuisance, a place that had a tradition of harboring unsavory characters. But the archival record does not support this claim. That the city supported continuing weightlifting facilities and an exhibition platform suggests that relocating the facility was an issue of city planning and not part of a systematic effort to rid the beach of athletes. Furthermore, the long-planned inclusion of a children's playground at Beach Park Number Four contradicts the eventual characterization of Muscle Beach as a den of iniquity.

Thus, while Muscle Beach was not without its opponents in the late 1950s, the steps taken by the city to prevent a gymnasium on the sand from reappearing were more of a municipal shift, rather than an extension of preexisting policies and attitudes. The impetus for this shift is difficult to identify. In the wake of the morals charges, editor McClure and the *Evening Outlook* led the opposition against Muscle Beach, insinuating that the facility had an ugly history. However, there is no evidence that the paper had

ever opposed Muscle Beach in the past. Coverage of the annual Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests between 1947 and 1958 was generally mundane and factual, sometimes playful, but never negative.[112] When Dominick Juliano, a former Mr. Muscle Beach, was convicted of burglarizing movie stars' homes, the paper made no attempt to vilify Muscle Beach.[113] As late as October 20, 1058—less than two months before the morals charges— *Outlook* columnist Clara McClure (no relation to the editor) tackled the history of the "Muscle Beach" name in a light-hearted and positive manner.[114] Similarly, Muscle Beach also enjoyed positive attention from other media outlets. National magazines, like *Holiday* and the *Saturday Evening Post* featured photos of beach athletes and described Muscle Beach as a family-friendly destination where people of all ages could take in a performance or receive instruction in gymnastics and exercise.

From the legislative record and contemporary media coverage, there is no support for the depiction of Muscle Beach as a site of rampant undesirable activity.[115] The only convincing conclusion that can be drawn from the archival evidence is that the opposition had a vision for Santa Monica and that Muscle Beach did not fit that vision. Leveraging the shock value of the morals allegations, opponents of Muscle Beach relied on a

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[112] For example, see: "Sun Baked Crowd Sees Beauty Crowned Muscle Beach Queen," *Evening Outlook*, September 3, 1947; "Mr. Muscle Beach," *Evening Outlook*, July 4, 1949; "Muscle Beach 'Body Beautiful' Contest Draws Record Throng," *Evening Outlook*, September 5, 1950; "Mister Muscle Beach of 1957 Poses," *Evening Outlook*, July 6, 1957; "Shapely Model, 17, Wins Miss Muscle Beach Crown," *Evening Outlook*, August 5, 1957; "A Real Armful."

[113] "Muscleman Gets Year in Filmland Burglaries," *Evening Outlook*, June 4, 1956.

[114] McClure, Clara, "That Reminds Me," *Evening Outlook*, October 20, 1958.

[115] In What Soldiers Do, historian Mary Louise Roberts documents the loosening of sexual norms and expectations of American GIs returning from World War II. Interviewed by Jan Todd in 1999, former Muscle Beach star George Eifferman said that in the days after World War II, many American servicemen gravitated to Muscle Beach for the social scene. And, that it was not uncommon for men like himself and Steve Reeves (veterans themselves) to find consenting young women hanging around the beach. So, while the beach undoubtedly served as a space for meeting the opposite sex and engaging in non-binding sexual relationships, no records from Santa Monica suggest that the laissez-faire attitudes of those spending time there was a matter of civic concern before the late 1950s. Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2013).

nebulous rhetoric of "bad elements" and "sex deviates" to sensationalize the issue and cast a dark shadow over the site. Terms like "bad element" and "undesirable" are intentionally vague but inherently loaded, especially when deployed in the interest of policy. The voices of the Muscle Beach opposition frequently invoked these labels to generalize a group, but never presented evidence that the labels were justified. Nor did they ever explain what they meant by these terms. Reflecting broader 1950s assumptions about the type of man who would obsess over his physique, the petition in the *Outlook* hints at a homosexual element at Muscle Beach. Historian Shelly Mckenzie notes, "men who were preoccupied with their bodies were the objects of suspicion and derision."[116] This perspective is reflected in an August 1959 article in *Sports Illustrated,* the only major national press coverage to emerge from the Muscle Beach closure.[117] In the piece, author Stephen Birmingham lampoons the growing "cult" on the "lunatic fringe of fitness," citing Muscle Beach as the cult's "national headquarters." Birmingham offers a sketch of the Muscle Beach morals case that reads like a digest of the *Outlook*'s coverage, making no mention of the fact that all of the charges had been reduced or dismissed by the date his article was published. In sweeping generalizations, Birmingham links the Muscle Beach story to the growing moral threat posed by the cult of the body, lamenting that such men have abandoned the realm of healthful, purposive fitness for a world of narcissism, homosexuality, and pornography.[118]

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[116] McKenzie, *Getting Physical*, 8.

[117] Stephen Birmingham, "For Love Of Muscle," *Sports Illustrated*, August 3, 1959.

[118] Birmingham clearly had an opinion of such bodily practices and his appraisal of the relationship between bodybuilding, pornography, and homosexuality is oversimplified as it is heavy handed, but not unfounded. Accused of disseminating thinly veiled male pornography since early in the twentieth century, the publishers of fitness magazines were quick to defend their content as instructional material toward an athletic, healthy, and heteronormatively masculinity. The perceived connections were only exacerbated in the post-war era, when magazines like Bob Mizer's Physique Pictorial (1945) elevated the celebration of the male physique, making only minimal efforts to pass as instructional volumes. Historians have convincingly argued that homosexual men were consumers of both kinds of publications, but the larger narrative linking bodybuilding culture, the fitness industry, and male pornography has yet to receive a

While it is highly likely that the Muscle Beach opposition shared Birmingham's perspective, the *Outlook* petition is the only direct trace of this line of attack in the available records. Thus, lacking a firm basis for their desired removal of Muscle Beach, the opposition engaged in an old-fashioned smear campaign. But a smear campaign requires something that can be smeared. Sensationalized or not, that the opposition essentially got their way suggests that there was some basis for the negative characterizations of Muscle Beach, that some sliver of public imagination already associated "undesirables" and "deviates" with the public gym. As far as "undesirables" go, one possibility is that Santa Monica was nervous about the rise of the counterculture. The jazz and Beatnik scene flourished across the Los Angeles area in the 1950s and Santa Monica's neighbor to the south, Venice Beach, was an epicenter of activity.[119] In Venice, the poetry reading, hash-smoking young bohemians took advantage of dilapidated, cheap housing to set up their crash pads and studios.[120] It is highly likely that some beatniks had also established themselves near Muscle Beach; Santa Monica had been working to rid itself of similar housing conditions for the better part of the 1950s, but cheap, shabby accommodations still dotted the city, especially near the beach.[121] It is impossible to say how concerned Santa Monica may have been with the young hipsters, but there is an

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comprehensive study. For more on the subject, see: F. Valentine Hooven III, *Beefcake: The Muscle Magazines of America 1950-1970* (Kǒln: Taschen, 1995); Erick Alvarez, *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007); David L. Chapman, *American Hunks: The Muscular Male Body in Popular Culture, 1860-1970* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009).

[119] *Holy Barbarians*.

[120] That Venice fell under the decentralized control of the City of Los Angeles, rather than the dedicated and attentive local governance of Santa Monica, was likely a factor in the tolerance enjoyed by the young beats. It was also a likely factor in the eventual emergence of the Venice Boardwalk as a tolerant place for performers, hucksters, and individuals operating on the fringes of the local culture, not to mention the site of the reemergence of bodybuilding on the beach.

[121] Scott, *Santa Monica: A History on The Edge*, 130; In the late 1940s, after George Eiffermanm, Steve Reeves, and other bodybuilders rented rooms from Joy Cortez, her beachfront boarding house came to be called "Muscle House." Jan Todd and Terry Todd, "The Last Interview," *Iron Game History* 6, no. 4 (December 2000): 3.

amusing bit of city legislation that suggests that the Muscle Beach crowd was not friendly to the beats. On 23 July 1957, the City Council approved an amendment to the section of the city's municipal code dealing with disorderly conduct and public nuisances. Urging the adoption of the new ordinance, four local men appeared before the City Council, including David Schwartz, the head of the Muscle Beach Weightlifting Club. The successful amendment to the law was narrowly focused: it prohibited the playing of bongo drums on the beach.[122]

Even if the ordinance was indicative of greater tension between the Muscle Beach crowd and the beatnik scene, such tension would not have precluded the Drobnicks and Faulkners of Santa Monica from lumping various subcultural groups together as morally questionable bogeymen. Furthermore, while the beats and their bongos would be hard to mistake for the muscular athletes of Muscle Beach, they may have very well evoked a previous clique that had existed on the fringes of the post-war Muscle Beach scene. They were called the "Nature Boys" and by all accounts were the original California hippies, professing the merits love, peace, and natural living twenty years before the summer of love. A loosely affiliated group of drifters, the Nature Boys wore their hair long, kept their feet bare, and lived off the land, residing in the Los Angeles canyons of Topanga and Laurel, just a short stretch north of Santa Monica. The larger story of the Nature Boys is an interesting one that has been partially told, but there is not much written about their connection to Muscle Beach.[123] The Nature Boys are the subject of a brief chapter in Rose's book, wherein she suggests that they provided comic relief as the "court jesters" of Muscle Beach, in addition to influencing the dietary beliefs of future fitness

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[122] "Santa Monica City Council Minutes," July 23, 1957, Volume 22, 197, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

[123] For more on the Nature Boys, see: Kennedy, *Children of the Sun: A Pictorial Anthology From Germany to California 1883-1949*.

personalities like Jack LaLanne.[124] Rose notes that Muscle Beach was one of several stomping grounds for the Nature Boys, but her chapter provides enough evidence that the men and their followers were semi-regularly part of the Muscle Beach scene in the late 1940s and early1950s. From the socially conservative perspective of the Muscle Beach opposition, these proto-hippies would certainly fall into the "undesirable" category, even if they were only a memory by the late 1950s.

With the contemporary beatniks and the past presence of the Nature Boys, the opposition could negatively exploit fringe elements and alternative lifestylers on Santa Monica's beaches. Amidst the general 1950s paranoia about the declining moral state of American youth, the potential of these groups to undermine the city's embrace of family friendly leisure would have seemed legitimate to many in mainstream society. But this vague threat was not as damning as the claim that Muscle Beach was safe-haven for "sex deviates." The morals allegations against the weightlifters opened the door for this portrayal of Muscle Beach, even though there was no record of previous incidents involving either the site or its users. Like so many other political maneuvers, the basis for linking Muscle Beach to sexual deviance appears to have been a single, very well known event that was only tangentially related to the issue at hand. On 29 November 1956, ex-convict Steven Nash brutally murdered a young boy beneath the Santa Monica Pier. Claiming he was settling a score with society, Nash stabbed 10-year-old Larry George Rice over thirty times with a hunting knife; Rice succumbed to the injuries a few hours later at Santa Monica Hospital.[125]

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[124] In other words, if Rose is right, the unwashed Nature Boys are possibly responsible for the inescapable Jack LaLanne Power Juicer television infomercials of the 1990s and early 2000s. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 95–109.

[125] Bill Thorson and Durley Taylor, "Pier Murder Suspect Tells 'Urge to Kill,'" *Evening Outlook*, November 30, 1956.

The following day, Nash was in custody and the story was front-page news. Nash had actually been arrested the night of Rice's murder, in connection with another stabbing in Long Beach, when Los Angeles police found the blood-soaked murder weapon from the pier slaying. The *Outlook*'s coverage noted that Nash had served seven years at San Quentin for robbery and that the Los Angeles Police Department considered Nash a "known sexual pervert and psychopath."[126] The *Outlook* made it clear that there was no evidence that Rice had been molested, but Santa Monica police chief Otto Faulkner stated that his department were "not overlooking any possibility."[127] Much as they would in the wake of the Muscle Beach morals allegations, Chief Faulkner and the *Outlook* used Rice's murder to call attention to moral problems on the beach. Running next to the lead story of Nash's arrest, an *Outlook* editorial entitled "Stop this Vileness!" condemned "those areas of our beach which have long been notorious as the hunting grounds of degenerates." The paper demanded better policing of the poorly lit areas of the beach, as well as "resorts in or near these areas which cater to sex deviates and attract them here from all parts of Southern California."[128] Like the later calls for the end of Muscle Beach, the problem was said to be endemic, but no evidence was given of previous incidents. Neither the editorial nor the articles about the murder made any mention of Muscle Beach. This is a particularly notable fact, because Faulkner would later attempt to connect the murder to the Muscle Beach morals cases. Two years after Rice's murder, in one of the earliest *Outlook* on the Muscle Beach issues, Faulkner reminded readers of the Nash case and stated that Nash had told police, "I've always wanted to go to Santa Monica and see Muscle Beach."[129] The veracity of Faulkner's

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[126] Ibid.
[127] "Police Chief Pushes War On Deviates," *Evening Outlook*, November 30, 1956.
[128] "Stop This Vileness!," *Evening Outlook*, November 30, 1956.
[129] "Musclemen Issue Faces SM Study."

claim is unknown, but the absence of Muscle Beach from initial reporting on the case suggests that Faulkner may have taken some license in reminding the public of the shocking case.[130]

A final, speculative interpretation can be found in the Rose and Zinkin books on Muscle Beach. Both authors suggest that the opposition mobilized around the sex crime allegations in part because they wanted to be rid of the increasingly muscular bodies that the rise of bodybuilding brought to the beach. Focused more on the heyday of Muscle Beach, Rose and Zinkin offer little analysis of this possibility. This stance was rarely expressed explicitly by opposition leaders like Drobnick, Faulkner, and McClure but can be somewhat traced throughout the preceding analysis of the closure debates. Despite the lack of hard evidence, Rose and Zinkin's body hypotheses offer an interesting interpretive angle that deserves a dedicated study in its own right. For the purposes of the current essay, it must suffice to say that discomfort with the built body certainly could have factored into negative perceptions of Muscle Beach.

In all, the gap between the insinuations made by the opposition and the facts available appears to confirm that the closure of Muscle Beach was an act of political opportunism. Faced with the lack of evidence of criminal deviance, the position of Muscle Beach's opponents could only be rooted in a desire to control the types of people who frequented Santa Monica's beaches. That criticism by the *Outlook* centered on questionable behavior at beach clubs in 1956 and on the Muscle Beach scene in 1958-1959 suggests that the opposition wanted the beaches to fall in line with the city's progressive push for a family-friendly reputation, not as sites of potential homosexual activity or the celebration of exposed physiques.

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[130] The aforementioned *Sports Illustrated* article also makes use of this specious quote, attributing it not to Nash, but as the general sentiment of the various drifters lured to Muscle Beach.

## FROM MORALS TO MEMORIAL: 1960-1989

Ironically, the end of the real Muscle Beach preceded a long-running cultural legacy that continues to the present day. In the decades since the closing, "Muscle Beach" has lived on, especially as a symbol of California's body-obsessed culture. The 1963 film, *Muscle Beach Party,* is arguably the most significant cultural artifact bearing the "Muscle Beach" moniker, although the film has little to do with the real Muscle Beach. Discussed at length in another essay in this volume, health and fitness publisher Joe Weider would style "Muscle Beach" as the symbolic home of bodybuilding and fitness. In Weider's magazines, Muscle Beach was never closed, but lived on as an ideal, a destination, and a commodity. Even in the 21st century, Muscle Beach remains a cultural touchstone, crossing over into decidedly contemporary formats: the site has been digitized in Rockstar Games' massively popular *Grand Theft Auto* series of video games and is the title of a reality television series currently looking to be picked up by a network.

As a site, the name also lives on at "Muscle Beach Venice," the outdoor bodybuilding gymnasium located about a mile down the Pacific coast from the original site. The Venice Beach facility has taken on a variety of forms in recent decades, but actually dates back to the late 1950s, when it was known simply as "the Pit." The "Muscle Beach" moniker was adopted informally in the 1960s, but the name "Muscle Beach Venice" would not be officially used before the 1980s. Located on the popular Venice Beach boardwalk, the gym has appeared in countless television shows and films, and is seen by millions of tourists a year. The exposure the site has received, combined with the culture legacy of the original Muscle Beach, has led to the common misconception that the Venice site *is* the original.

In contrast, the city of Santa Monica was slow to claim ownership of the site, avoiding any connection to Muscle Beach until 1989. It is hard to say how conscious this avoidance was, but a trail of documents and publicity materials indicates that Santa Monica continued to embrace and promote waterfront leisure while keeping a safe distance from the name and legacy of Muscle Beach. A legislative debate from early 1963 suggests that even terminology that loosely evoked Muscle Beach was unacceptable to city leadership. On 2 January of that year, the Recreation Commission unanimously recommended that the City Council re-name Beach Park Number Four as "Olympic Beach." The City Council rejected the recommendation. At the end of the month, the Recreation Commission sent another recommendation, asking that the Council reconsider its initial vote. The second recommendation stressed that "Olympic Beach" would be a more "distinctive and appropriate" name for the facility and the recommendation was not being made because of "comments or coercion of persons." It is unclear what sort of coercion may have been implicated in the process, but it is not stretch to suggest that the specter of Muscle Beach still loomed over the city's actions. On February 19, the City Council rejected the recommendation for a second time.[131]

Reference to Muscle Beach is noticeably absent from a selection of other documents about beach and recreation policy in the ensuing decades. For example, the lengthy city manager's report for the 1962-1963 fiscal year devotes eights pages to the multitude of recreation opportunities in the Santa Monica and even contains photos of adults using gymnastic equipment on the beach.[132] The photos appear to be of Beach Park Number Four, but no mention is made of Muscle Beach. Later editions of the same

[131] K.O. Grubb, "Letter to Recreation Commission," February 26, 1963, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.
[132] Ernest N. Mobley, "City Manager Report for Fiscal Year 1962-1963," 1964, Santa Monica History Museum Archives.

report continue to celebrate the city's commitments to recreation and the beach without reference to the old facility. A similar trend can be observed in beach-related legislation of the 1970s and 1980s. Recommendations for the long running "Beach Resource and Development Plan" included a variety of offerings for adult recreation, mostly focused on sports like volleyball, water sports, and gymnastics.[133] Again, the "Muscle Beach" name is absent, as is any mention of facilities or equipment for weightlifting. While it is likely that the "Olympic Beach" issue was directly related to the Muscle Beach debates of 1959, it is harder to assign significance to the continued absence of Muscle Beach from the city's municipal perspective. There is no evidence of an ongoing, active campaign against Muscle Beach in the following decades, nor is there evidence of any efforts to bring a similar facility back to Santa Monica. It is certainly plausible that, after some time, both sides of the issue accepted the new status quo and moved on.

Muscle Beach eventually returned to Santa Monica in 1989, not as an oceanfront gym, but as a site of history and civic pride. In February of that year, during the Santa Monica Arts Festival, artist Jeff Weiss unveiled a photomural called "Santa Monica Timeline." The mural, still on display in the Santa Monica Public Library, depicts the city's history, from the Gabrielino Indians through the 1980s, includes images of acrobats at Muscle Beach.[134] On September 3, the city officially recognized the site of Muscle Beach for the first time in thirty years, placing a small historical marker identifying the location of the "birthplace of the physical-fitness boom of the 20th century." Santa Monica Mayor Dennis Zane oversaw the dedication of the memorial at a small ceremony

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[133] City Planning Commission, "City Planning Commission Recommendations for Santa Monica State Beach Resource Management and Development Plan," June 15, 1979, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives; City Planning Commission, "Beach Plan Amendment," September 27, 1983, Santa Monica City Clerk Archives.

[134] Kevin Allman, "New Photo Mural Depicts Growth of Santa Monica," *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1989.

attended by several former Muscle Beach athletes, including Pudgy and Les Stockton, Steve Reeves, and Jack LaLanne. A generation removed from the municipal fight over the facility, Santa Monica could now lay its claim to the cultural legacy of Muscle Beach.[135]

[135] Dick Roraback, "Muscle Beach to Receive Landmark after 30 Years," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1989.

## Chapter 3: Go West, Young Men: The California Dream and Joe Weider's Muscle Beach Myth

*This cult of the body snubs tradition, formality, and dignity. Sun-bathing, nudity, bare heads, open-necked shirts are not imposed by cranks; they are dictated by the sun. Health consciousness is extreme and is reflected in the medical profession and in the prevalence of quackery, pseudo-science, and cultism. The climate is entirely congenial to the American athletics mania that sports flourish and champions are a major product.*

--Farnsworth Crowder, *Westways, Magazine of the Automobile Club of Southern California*, 1936

*The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past...Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else. For all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways.*
--Joan Didion, *Some Dreamers of The Golden Dream*, 1966

Places shape people and are shaped by people. Reality and the imagination collide in places: sites that are anchored and immobile, but perpetually constructed and shifting as soon as humans identify them. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes the human element required in making places, "Human places become vividly real through dramatization. Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life."[136] For the groundbreaking fitness publisher Joe Weider, Muscle Beach was a place both real and imagined: the home of Crowder's cult of the body and an un-ironic take on Didion's lamentable, unburdened dreamland. Dramatized by the late publisher and businessman in the name of health, wealth, and

[136] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 178.

…dreams, Joe Weider turned Muscle Beach into a place of myth and then used that myth to build a physical culture empire unparalleled in the history of sport and exercise.

As a publisher, writer, equipment and supplement manufacturer, and promoter, Weider was an enormously influential presence in twentieth century fitness and physical culture. A talented pitchman, Weider's success was in part due to his ability to stoke the dreams of consumers. Weider linked his products to dreams of a perfect body, a perfect life, and a perfect place. Drenched in sunshine and possibility, Muscle Beach was re-envisioned by Weider as a perfect place for his acolytes. As a mythic place, Weider's Muscle Beach was not simply a symbolic deployment of the California dream; it was a reflexive, self-contained abstraction of that dream. In the magazines, Muscle Beach was not just a place *in* California; it *was* California, Los Angeles, and Hollywood wrapped into one, a distillation of the real into an imagined landscape that served as a magnet for body culturists and transformed working-class, dingy-gymned bodybuilding into a celebrity-driven, socially acceptable, phenomenon.

This essay examines the function of Muscle Beach in Joe Weider's muscle magazines over the first half of his publishing career. It covers the era between the publication of his first magazine, *Your Physique* (1940) and the relocation of the Weider companies to Southern California in 1973. California and Muscle Beach are present in the magazines from the beginning, but the mythic Muscle Beach really takes shape from the 1950s onward. Source material is drawn from several publications, but the focus is on Weider's most popular titles: *Your Physique*, *Muscle Power*, *Muscle Builder,* and *Muscle Builder/Power*.[137] Weider oversaw all aspects of their production, including writing or ghostwriting much of the content, so these titles are treated as pieces of a

[137] To trace the somewhat spastic chronology Weider's magazines, see: Jan Todd, Joe Roark, and Terry Todd, "A Briefly Annotated Bibliography of English Language Serial Publications in the Field of Physical Culture," *Iron Game History* 1, no. 4–5 (1991): 26–40.

greater whole rather than unique publications.[138] They also represent more of Joe Weider's own ideas and creativity than do the later magazines when, due to the enormous success of these early publications, Weider hired independent editors and staff for each of his main muscle magazines and thereby turned over much of the editorial control to others.[139]

My analysis of Weider's Muscle Beach is derived from two frameworks. I argue throughout this essay that Muscle Beach should be read as a myth. Specifically, I rely on the concept of the semiological myth, as developed by the French linguistic theorist and cultural critic Roland Barthes, whose perspective I introduce in the following section. I also rely on the concept of the "trace," as it is used in the field of cultural geography. Jon Anderson argues that the trace is the essential unit of cultural geography, that "places are constituted by imbroglios of traces." Traces take many forms, but they are inherently cultural constructions. Traces can be material or non-material, apprehended by the senses or inscribed in memory. Anderson contends that, because traces are constantly being produced and interpreted, "places become dynamic entities; they are in fluid states of transition as new traces react with existing or older ones to change the meaning and identity of the location."[140] Myth and the trace offer complementary ways of understanding Weider's California. While not interchangeable, they share two important qualities: both forms are culturally derived and are always part of a larger network of cultural production. These features will become clearer throughout the essay, but the methodological result is an approach that casts a wide net into shallow water. To

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[138] Content was also regularly recycled across the publications, furthering the case to treat them as part of a whole. Weider discusses ghostwriting in his autobiography: Joe Weider, Ben Weider, and Michael Steere, *Brothers of Iron* (Champaign: Sports Publishing, 2006), 105.

[139] Interview with Terry Todd, 22 June 2014.

[140] Jon Anderson, *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces* (London: Routledge, 2009), 5.

understand the whole of Weider's Muscle Beach is to necessarily understand it as a repetitive deployment of its constituent parts. To put it another way, analyzing the myth is matter of breadth rather than depth.

The essay proceeds in three parts. In the first section, I begin with an overview of myth as conceived by Barthes. This is followed by a necessarily brief introduction to the related histories of modern bodybuilding and Joe Weider. This introduction has two aims: to ground the reader unfamiliar with these subjects and to position Weider as a mythmaker. The second and third sections analyze and break down the myth of Weider's Muscle Beach, first in content, then in form. This distinction is somewhat artificial, because myth itself has a tendency to blur the lines between content and form. The journalistic terms of "what" and "how" may be a more useful pair of designations. In the second section, the "what," I describe how Weider's Muscle Beach was derived intertextually from pre-existing notions of California, especially those of California as a health-granting frontier, California as a land of modernity, and California as a land of muscular fitness. This section focuses on situating the source material provided by Weider's magazines within these existing conceptions of a California dream. The third section, the "how," is more conceptually oriented, examining three dominant forms Weider used to transmit the myth: gossip columns, advertising, and photograph. Through additional theoretical perspectives, this section demonstrates how the Weider myth was communicated to readers as a reality that they could be part of.

## BARTHES' MYTH AND JOE WEIDER, THE MYTHMAKER

### *Barthes' Myth*

The Muscle Beach of the Weider magazines was not a real place: it was an abstraction, a pastiche, an assemblage of traces. It was a prismatic California, at once distorted and crystalline. A construction built out of layers of references, Weider's Muscle beach was what the French theorist Roland Barthes labeled "myth." One of his most significant contributions to linguistics and semiology, Barthes' myth is not merely a symbolic concept (i.e., a "legend"), but an entire system of communication.[141] Specifically, it is a second-order system, a *metalanguage*, comprised of units that are already imbued with symbolic meaning. In Barthes' semiotic terms, the system repurposes fully constituted signs as signifiers. In less academic terms, myth constructs meaning from things that are themselves constructions. For the sake of clarity, I defer to linguist Daniel Chandler's summary and contextualization of Barthes concept (emphasis mine):

> Signs and codes are generated by myths and in turn serve to maintain them. Popular usage of the term "myth" suggests that it refers to beliefs which are demonstrably false, but the semiotic use of the term does not necessarily suggest this. Myths can be seen as extended metaphors. Like metaphors, myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture. They express and serve to organize shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture. Semioticians in the Saussurean tradition treat the relationship between nature and culture as relatively arbitrary. *For Barthes, myths serve the ideological function of naturalization. Their function is to naturalize the cultural, in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural', 'normal', self-evident, timeless, obvious 'common-sense', and thus objective and 'true' reflections of 'the way things are'… Myths can function to hide the ideological function of signs and codes. The power of such myths is that they 'go without saying' and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified.*[142]

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[141] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 110.
[142] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 80–81.

Writing in popular French magazines, Barthes' developed the concept in a series of articles in the early-to-mid 1950s, identifying myth in popular cultural forms like wrestling, fashion, and cinema. Eventually collected in *Mythologies* (1957, English translation 1972), these pieces are some of Barthes' most enduring work. I find the mythical concept particularly useful because Barthes conceived it as a response to the emergent mass culture of the 1950s, at roughly the same moment when Weider was beginning to cash in on the same mass culture. While rigorously developed theories do not have a time limit on their utility I think it is important to consider the contexts in which a theory is produced. That said, while I return to Barthes periodically throughout this paper, I have attempted to avoid getting mired in the minutiae of his theory, instead focusing on the elements of myth most relevant to the analysis of Weider's Muscle Beach.[143] There are four that are especially notable. First, myth is comprised of language (whether pictorial, written, or spoken) that already contains existing cultural meaning. Weider's Muscle Beach was only possible because of preexisting images and conceptions of California and Muscle Beach. Second, as Barthes notes, "However paradoxical as it may seem, *myth* hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear." A result of this function is the mutation of history into nature, time and space are appropriated to produce essentialized images and ideologies detached from their socio-historical contingencies. Weider's Muscle Beach was not a pure fiction, but was grounded in a real California and the real bodies he located there. Third, myths are

[143] Barthes explains his approach in detail in "Myth Today," an essay accompanying the collected magazine articles in *Mythologies*. This is the best starting point for understanding the structural underpinnings of his theory, but his references in this essay are specific to French culture in the 1950s. For a useful accompaniment, see Andrew Robinson's two-part introduction to the concept, online at Ceasefire Magazine: http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-barthes-2/ and http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-barthes-3/

received and consumed, but not read and deconstructed. They transmit the appearance of complete ideas to the receiver, as statements of facts or commands. Weider's myth was successful because it was self-evident to his consumers. Fourth, myth is always motivated and always has a producer; myth is intentionally deployed.[144] Weider knew what he was doing, writing in his autobiography that: "the locale became a co-star in the pictures, and guys drooled over the beach in California as much as the great big muscles and the bikini girls I threw in for sex appeal. A picture in one of my magazines was never just a picture--it was a dream."[145] Weider was fond of titles, both for himself and his athletes. In addition to those he bestowed upon himself, like "Trainer of Champions" and "The Master Blaster," we can now add another: mythmaker.

***The Sport of Bodybuilding and Joe Weider, The Mythmaker***

To fully address the role of Muscle Beach in Weider's magazines requires some knowledge of the story of Joe Weider, the history of bodybuilding as a sport, and the inextricable link between the man and the sport. These are massive topics in their own right, that have been already been (somewhat) addressed elsewhere.[146] For the purposes of this essay, it must suffice to say that the sport of modern bodybuilding can be considered in two broad eras: before and after Weider. Before Weider, bodybuilding was largely the domain of Bob Hoffman, owner of the York (Pennsylvania) Barbell

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[144] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 110,121–123, 126–127.

[145] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 112.

[146] For a popular sport and activity, bodybuilding has received less written attention than might be expected. Academically, the focus on bodybuilding has been almost solely concerned with psycho-social studies of the body in the non-professional, participant subculture of the sport, like Alan M. Klein's *Little Big Men* (1993). The academic exception for bodybuilding culture and history is the journal *Iron Game History*, published since 1990 by Jan and Terry Todd. Randy Roach's *Muscle, Smoke, and Mirrors*, is a popular, but well researched history of physical culture with a strong focus on bodybuilding, and is probably the best starting point for those interested in the history of the sport. Joe Weider and his brother Ben tell their own story, with Mike Steere, in *Brothers of Iron* (2006).

Company, and publisher of *Strength and Health* magazine. Organized bodybuilding in the United States was sanctioned as a component of the competitive weightlifting section of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). As the top promoter and financier of the sport in the US, Hoffman was the guiding force of AAU weightlifting. Weider, with his brother Ben, began to challenge Hoffmann's dominance in the years following World War II. Through their International Federation of Body Builders (IFBB), the Weiders disentangled bodybuilding from weightlifting, grew the sport through the 1950s and 1960s, and thrust it into mainstream consciousness by the end of the 1970s.[147]

The battle for the control of bodybuilding offered an early incentive for Weider to create and promote his vision of California and Muscle Beach. Weider was in many ways indebted to Bob Hoffmann: *Strength and Health* was not only the blueprint for *Your Physique* and the other titles that followed, Weider actually pre-sold the first issue of *Your Physique* through a direct-mail campaign to Canadians whose mailing addresses he culled from the classified advertisements in the back of *Strength and Health*.[148] Weider's own approach to building the body was also heavily influenced by Hoffmann, a fact acknowledged by the publications of both men in the 1940s. As Weider grew more successful, a fierce rivalry developed between the two men, often played out in the pages of their respective magazines. The story of the rivalry is a long one, and can be found in great detail in *Muscletown USA*, John D. Fair's excellent biography of Hoffman.[149] This rivalry was both personal and professional, but was mostly framed in sporting terms, a battle of bodybuilding versus weightlifting. In his mission to wrest control of

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[147] For additional information on the rivalry between Joe Weider and Bob Hoffman, see: John Fair, Mr. America: Idealism or Racism," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture*, 8(1) (June/July 2003): 9-30.
[148] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 20.
[149] Fair, *Muscletown USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell*.

bodybuilding from Hoffman, Weider relied on the glamorous backdrop provided by California to glorify the sport, images of the Golden State offering a stark contrast to Hoffman's working class York, Pennsylvania. The post-war dominance of competitive weightlifting by the Soviet Union provided a second layer to this binary. The Soviets were a direct threat to Hoffman's legitimacy, but were little more than a Cold War caricature in Weider's magazines. By focusing on bodybuilding, but by including enough coverage of the Soviet success in weightlifting, Weider positioned bodybuilding as a demonstration of American prowess.

This history is extremely reductive, but offers a framework for understanding Weider's Muscle Beach as a response to his two related projects: legitimizing bodybuilding as a sport and growing his business empire. By Weider's own account, his life's work was to develop the sport of bodybuilding and to spread a gospel of health and fitness through his publications and products. He was inarguably successful toward both of these ends. However, these two projects might be better stated as manifestations of a singular, underlying project: wealth, fame, and success for Joe Weider. This is not a slight against the man, but a view that helps unpack how Weider constructed the world of his magazines.

From the beginning, Weider understood relationship between his publishing empire and the sport of bodybuilding, that the success of one could drive the other, and vice versa. Linked by Weider's pursuit of profit and personal gain, the magazines and the sport were always symbiotic, a sort of perpetual feedback loop. For the sport, the magazines offered legitimation and a platform to develop the constitutive elements of a sport. In the pages of his magazines, Weider imbued the growing sport with elements of established sports. Bodybuilders became recognizable as common sporting archetypes: up-and-coming rookies and savvy veterans, contenders and champions. Quantification,

an essential trait of modern sport, was developed in the pages of the magazine through an emphasis on measurement of bodies: both general figures like height and weight, but also body-part specific registers like the size of arms and circumference of thighs. Also common was the sporting trope of nicknames, turning individual athletes into sporting personalities: as baseball had "The Sultan of Swat" and the "Say Hey Kid" (Babe Ruth and Willie Mays, respectively), bodybuilding could now have "The Blonde Bomber" and "The Austrian Oak" (Dave Draper and Arnold Schwarzenegger). Most critical to this study, the magazines gave bodybuilding a place to call home: Muscle Beach. For a sport that took place in nondescript gyms, rented halls, and auditoriums, Muscle Beach offered Weider both an origin myth and a site where the sport was ostensibly always happening.

By developing bodybuilding in the pages of his magazines, Weider lent credibility to his methods, his products, and himself. If Weider methods and products could build sporting champions, it appeared self-evident that they could build the average reader. Decades before Gatorade implored American youth to "Be like Mike!" Weider offered readers the means to be like Steve Reeves, Larry Scott, Dave Draper, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Furthermore, by establishing these personalities, Weider could obscure the reality that he was responsible for the majority of the content in the magazines. Ghostwriting on behalf of the muscled champions of bodybuilding, Weider turned articles into advertorial endorsements.[150] Finally, by picturing and describing these men in California and at Muscle Beach, Weider developed a California dream for himself and his readers, a dream he fulfilled by relocating his companies to California in 1973.

No one emphasized the importance of the Weiders to the sport more than Joe himself, describing in his autobiography how, "Bodybuilding as we now know it--

[150] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 105.

training to create powerful, aesthetically pleasing musculature, with the opportunity to compete in physique contests sanctioned by bodybuilding's own, independent federation-- did not exist. It wouldn't exist until I, with the help of my brother Ben, brought it into being."[151] Weider's autobiography carries this tone throughout, offering his bombastic legend to anyone willing to read along. In fairness to Weider, he was arguably as important as he claimed to be. In a brief tribute following Weider's death in March 2013, Terry Todd describes Weider as the "patron saint" of physical culture. Todd, a historian of sports and physical culture, suggests that, "To say that Joe was a giant in the world of physical culture would be an understatement, and a case could be made that his reach and influence in North America during the 20th century in that broad field exceeded that of any person living or dead."[152] At least partially true, Weider's vision of himself reflects his life-long understanding of the power of myth, and his eagerness to play the role of mythmaker.

### CONTENTS OF THE MYTH

As myth, Weider's Muscle Beach was cobbled together from existing conceptions of a California good life. Weider's take on the Golden State contained traces of the historical image of California as a land of dreams and sanctuary of health, the post-WWII image of California as a land of movie stars and beautiful women, and the image of California as the epicenter of American physical culture.

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[151] Ibid., 26.
[152] Terry Todd, "Joe Weider," *Don't Weaken: A Blog by Terry Todd*, March 23, 1013, http://www.starkcenter.org/2013/03/joe-weider/.

***"A California of the Mind"***

Weider followed a long tradition of entrepreneurs, politicians, and other boosters to leverage an idealized version of California, what historian Kevin Starr refers to as the "California Dream." In the first volume of his epic cultural history of the state, Starr argues that this dream was always a composite ideal, a "California of the mind," an "imaginative goal," that "showed the beginnings of becoming the cutting edge of the American Dream."[153] Historical geographer James E. Vance, Jr. suggests that the search for a "California ideal" can be traced back to the naming of the region in the sixteenth century. Vance finds the pursuit of the ideal a persistent theme, palpable through the Gold Rush of 1849 and the eventual positioning of the state as a bucolic utopia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[154] Vance argues that in addition to the traditional economic and political factors used to explain migration, movement to California has been underwritten by a third factor, "the search for the image of the good life, not the second best or the compromise, but the ideal in the mind of the searcher."[155] Historian Neil L. York echoes Vance's argument. Surveying literary treatments of California, York describes how, "All of these authors agree that in one sense California is a psychological 'Eden,' a 'land of new beginnings'."[156] Essential to this ideal, this Eden, was the longstanding association of the state with physical health. Vance identifies a variety of manifestations of this association, a reputation solidified during the second half of the 19th century: the "medical climatology" movement launched by Dr. Daniel Drake's *Diseases of the Internal Valley of North America* (1850), the proliferation of

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[153] Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 46.
[154] James E. Vance Jr., "California and the Search for the Ideal," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 2 (June 1972): 185–210.
[155] Ibid., 194.
[156] Neil L. York, "California Girls and the American Eden," *Journal of American Culture* 7, no. 4 (1984): 33–43.

sanitariums in southern California in the 1870s, and the rise of a health-centric travel literature, the most influential example being Charles Nordoff's *California: For Health, Pleasure, and Residence, A Book For Travelers and Settlers*.[157]

From this California ur-dream, Weider's myth drew on narratives of migration and the image of California a health-granting land. Men in Weider's magazines were often relocating or returning to California and making their way to Muscle Beach, where the muscular body could best be developed.[158] Men who had developed themselves in California and landed elsewhere were eager to return and properly rededicate themselves to training. This narrative remained persistent through the 1970s, most notably in the stories of Idaho's Larry Scott, New Jersey's Dave Draper, and of course, Arnold Schwarzenegger, of Graz, Austria. Of Draper and Scott, Weider later wrote, "Those two golden guys were our ambassadors from paradise. They looked like California sunshine and healthful living distilled into men with fantastic muscles. Dave especially was like a billboard announcing that the west coast was the place to make yourself into a brand-new man."[159]

The visionary pathfinder for these migrations was, of course, Weider. In an article on biceps training, Dave Draper described how he arrived in California feeling insecure and inferior to the established muscle men of the west coast. Through Weider's support and vision he was able to develop a championship physique.[160] However, Weider would not take all of the credit for the awesome physiques of the Golden State, for the

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[157] Vance Jr., "California and the Search for the Ideal," 196–197.
[158] For example: George Lowther, "Greg McClure: Star of 'The Great John L.,'" *Your Physique*, August 1948; Earle Liederman, "My Gang O'Kids," *Muscle Power*, April 1948; George Eiferman, "Art Bynum The Most Muscular Man on Muscle Beach," *Mr. America*, December 1962; Earle Liederman, "Let's Gossip," *Muscle Builder*, December 1963.
[159] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 182.
[160] Dave Draper, "Power for Bigger Biceps," *Muscle Builder*, October 1967.

place itself had the power to bestow health and strength on its people. This health-granting feature of California was not only implied through images of powerful men on the beach, but was explicitly identified in articles like "California's Big Arms" and "Muscular Arms of the West".[161] In these pieces, California bore at least some of the responsibility for the developed of impressive biceps, triceps, and forearms. Ben Weider tackled the issue directly in "Is it Easier to Build a Perfect Body in California?"[162] The younger Weider acknowledged that a great physique *could* be built anywhere, but that the answer to his question was ultimately "yes." The article is an archetypical deployment of myth, intertwining reasonable assertions about the resources available to the California bodybuilder with a sense that there are less identifiable factors present as well. Weider notes that climate, access to wholesome food, and an enthusiasm for physical culture all contribute to the California physique, but that such factors alone cannot explain why "George Eiferman, Marvin Eder, Dick Dubois, Armand Tanny, John Farbotnik, Ludwig Shustereich, Dominick Juliano, Louis Degni, and other stars hit their peak of physical perfection when they moved west."

### *"I'll Get Me A Gal With Millions, A Movie Star"*

In addition to evoking historical notions of California, Weider's Muscle Beach drew on contemporary perceptions of post-war California and Los Angeles. With a booming population and thriving economy, the state's symbolic image and influence were widespread in this era.[163] In many ways a myth itself, this contemporaneous post-

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[161] Earle Liederman, "Muscular Arms of The West," *Muscle Power*, February 1952; Editors, "California's Big Arms," *Muscle Builder*, May 1957.
[162] Ben Weider, "Is It Easier to Build a Perfect Body in California?," *Muscle Builder*, January 1955.
[163] John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

war image allowed Weider to invoke notions of a sun drenched, modern good life in his imaginative geography. This was the pop-culture California, the one rhapsodized by the Glenn Miller Orchestra in "I'm Headin' for California."[164] Tex Beneke sang the lead on the popular 1946 recording, crooning, "I'll build me a swimming pool and buy me a flashy car, I'll get me a gal with millions, a movie star." Miller's lyric was fanciful, but as historian Kirse Granat May notes, the American public latched onto a dominant reading of California's mid-century image: "In a celebration of beach culture and the media portrait of baby boom life in California, the United States was on the very edge of its frontier. In California one could find the last, best chance for postwar America and a model of modern possibilities…The modeling of the California family and California youth, a life of cars, fashionable clothing, the drive-in, and the beach, loomed large in the national consciousness."[165] May provides evidence of this consciousness in national opinion polls of the era that "heralded California as the 'best' state in the union. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gallup polls consistently ranked California number one as a vacation spot, an 'ideal place to live', and the most beautiful state with the most beautiful cities."[166]

Weider depicted a West Coast lifestyle built on pop culture conceptions of the state, where Weider's readers could expect to find beautiful women and a shot at Hollywood fame. In "California Girls and The American Eden," Neil L. York writes, "The California Girl rhapsodized by the Beach Boys enjoys a wide appeal. She is part of a vivid imaginary landscape, with clean white beaches, gentle breezes, swaying palms

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[164] Glenn Miller and Arthur Malvin, *I'm Headin' For California*, Glenn Miller Orchestra led by Tex Beneke, 1946 by RCA Victor, 20-1834, 78 rpm.
[165] Kirse Granat May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5.
[166] Ibid., 13.

and a warm, soothing sun."[167] The portrayal of women and coverage of women's physiques in Weider's magazines deserves a study in its own right, so I will limit myself here to how women appeared in Weider's Muscle Beach, as a manifestation of what York calls a "distinct cultural type." The California Girl was not just a fixture in Weider's world, but was often the *only* girl in the magazines. When women were present in the magazine, they tended to be associated with California; most treated as potential pin-ups and arm candy, the implicit reward for developing the male body.[168] Weider drew on three versions of the California Girl in his publications; the supportive wife, the beauty queen, and, of course, the far more rare female physical culturist, women like the legendary Pudgy Stockton, who were sporadically featured in the Weider magazines beginning in the late 1940s.[169]

References to Stockton and her female training partners were far out shadowed in the magazines, however, by discussion of the other two types of women. The supportive wives of the accomplished California musclemen: women like Joan Nista, Norma Goodrich, and Penny Draper played an important role in the magazines of the late forties and 1950s.[170] These women sometimes shared their husbands' enthusiasm for fitness, were inevitably beautiful, and were always happy to be with a powerful man. More prominently featured by Weider, however, were young beauty queens and Hollywood starlets, usually pictured in bikinis and at the beach. Eugene Hanson's description of the

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[167] York, "California Girls and the American Eden," 33.

[168] The early years of *Your Physique* included a number of women on the beaches of Florida, but the California girls had taken over *en masse* by the post-war years. Other locations were rarely associated with women, save for the occasional photo of a New York bodybuilding show that also featured a beauty contest.

[169] Barring some hackneyed verbiage of the day, Weider's coverage of these women deserves credit for its early and progressive celebration of robust women's fitness.

[170] Earle Liederman, "One Day in the Life of Bert Goodrich," *Muscle Power*, February 1950, For example:; Earle Liederman, "Let's Gossip," *Muscle Power*, March 1957; Dick Tyler, "That Great Christmas Party," *Muscle Builder/Power*, August 1969; Dick Tyler, "Gossip Round Up," *Muscle Builder/Power*, August 1968.

1951 Miss Muscle Beach contestants is a typical treatment of these California girls: "Those twenty who remained were all the sort of creature who haunts a bachelor's dreams, and the three who won top honors were absolute princesses."[171] Most of these women were passing characters in the pages of the magazines, but some, like Val Njord became regular fixtures. Njord, the winner of the 1948 Miss USA pageant, was introduced to *Your Physique* readers in an interview with Patricia Whitsett and would later be credited with occasional articles, like her advisory "Why Women Admire The Well Built Man" in March 1949. Reinforcing the connection of beauty to California, Njord's piece was accompanied by a photo bearing the caption, "The Lovely Authoress Sun Bathing on the Sands of Santa Monica Beach." [172]

These two archetypes came together in the image of Betty Brosmer Weider, the female face of the Weider brand following her marriage to Joe in 1961. A native Californian, the blonde model, was cast as supportive wife and beauty queen all at once. She was the ultimate embodiment of Weider's California girl and Joe made great use of her in his magazines.[173] In the role of supportive wife, Betty was Joe's inevitable California prize, the gorgeous and vivacious reward for the well-built man.[174] As the blonde beauty queen, Betty's photographs illustrated all manner of articles, and she was the most commonly featured woman in the Weider advertisements of the 1960s and 1970s. Often clad in a leopard print bikini, Betty was almost always pictured on the beach, and almost always with a bodybuilder like Dave Draper, providing a glimpse of

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[171] Eugene Hanson, "Beach Festival," *Muscle Power*, February 1952.

[172] Patricia Whitsett, "I Interviewed Val Njord, Miss USA," *Your Physique*, January 1949; Val Njord, "Why Women Admire the Well Built Man," *Your Physique*, March 1949.

[173] Joe was not stingy in using his wife's image to sell his products, but the relationship does not appear to have been an exploitative one. The Weiders' remained happily married until Joe's passing in 2013 and Joe gives much credit to Betty's business ideas and acumen in his autobiography.

[174] See, for example: Joe Weider, "Weider Heads West," *Muscle Buidler/Power*, March 1971; Dick Tyler, "Go West Mr. America, Go West," *Muscle Builder/Power*, September 1971.

Weider's Muscle Beach dream. Of course, that dream could be purchased, consumed, and realized by ordering the nutritional supplements featured on the same page.[175]

California beauties also provided a natural link to Hollywood, one that Weider directly invoked and indirectly relied on to bolster the appeal of his Muscle Beach. Featuring built men and pretty girls, the trendy "Beach Party" movies of the 1950s and 1960s provided external touchstones for Weider's California, while the inclusion of bodybuilders in some of these films gave him a chance to take credit for some of Hollywood's success.[176] Weider's use of Hollywood was not limited to invoking Gidget and Frankie and Annette; Hollywood appeared as a microcosm of California, a fragmented myth of promise and legitimation. Movie stars provided another set of physiques for readers to admire and emulate, but physiques were also responsible for making stars.[177] Articles were sometimes directly credited to the stars, like "My Muscles Paid Off!" by Ricardo Montalban. Already an established star for MGM, Montalban's 1954 article for *Muscle Builder* suggested that his muscular physique and disciplined training regimen were "the real secret of my movie success."[178]

Not just the secret weapon of the well-known stars, bodybuilding was also framed as a means of entry to the glamorous world of Hollywood. In *Muscle Wars*, champion bodybuilder (and eventual Weider editor) Rick Wayne describes his early impression of

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[175] For example: "'Muscle up!' Advertisement," *Muscle Builder*, August 1965; "'Formula #7' Advertisement," *Muscle Builder/Power*, May 1969; "'Muscle Up & Make Out' Advertisement," *Muscle Builder/Power*, June 1969.

[176] For example: Editors, "Flash! Here's Sensational News For All Bodybuilders," *Muscle Builder*, June 1964. For more on the "Beach Party" movies, see: May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966*.

[177] See, for example: George Lowther, "How George O'Brien of the Movies Keeps Fit," *Your Physique*, October 1947; George Lowther, "John Payne," *Your Physique*, November 1947; Earle Liederman, "Hollywood Kids," *Muscle Power*, December 1947; Lowther, "Greg McClure: Star of 'The Great John L.'"; George Lowther, "Johnny Weismuller," *Your Physique*, March 1948; Editors, "How Hollywood Stars Build Muscle," *Muscle Power*, October 1956; Barton Horvath, "The Muscle Payoff in Hollywood," *Muscle Builder*, December 1956.

[178] Ricardo Montalban, "My Muscles Paid Off!," *Muscle Builder*, February 1954.

Hollywood's portrayal in the magazines: "Judging from the reportage on Steve Reeves, Lou Degni, Ed Fury, Joe Gold, and others, nearly every other West Coast muscleman was in the movies."[179] Having its basis at least partially in reality, this portrayal highlights the distorting and naturalizing qualities of myth. As stars and stuntmen, some bodybuilders and physical culturists like Steve Reeves, Dave Draper, and Bert Goodrich had transitioned to the screen.[180] In articles like "Would You Like To Be A Hollywood Star?" and "The Muscle Payoff in Hollywood", Weider's magazines suggested that Hollywood was waiting with open arms for all musclemen.[181] The former, penned by Weider, alerted readers that "Hollywood, TV Studios, and the stage are all looking for well built men with acting ability and he-man personalities who want to devote their lives to acting. If you have muscles and some acting talent, here is your chance to cash in on them and make them pay off in fame, fortune, and popularity."

***"Go West Mr. America. Go West"***

Weider's third touchstone for the Muscle Beach myth was the real Muscle Beach, the famed strip of sand off the Santa Monica boardwalk that was ground zero for American physical culture in the 1940s and 1950s. The other images of California deployed by Weider were already mythic and ripe for appropriation; in Muscle Beach, the publisher

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[179] Rick Wayne, *Muscle Wars: The Behind-the-Scenes Story of Competitive Bodybuilding* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 8.

[180] Usually cast as Hercules or a similarly Herculean mythical lead, Reeves was arguably the greatest crossover star before Arnold Schwarzenegger's rise in the late 1970s. That most of his films were filmed in Italy, rather than Hollywood, was minimally acknowledged in the Weider magazines. Goodrich, the first Mr. America in 1939, was an early Hollywood stuntman, appearing as a double in films like *The Great Circus Mystery* (1925) and *Tarzan the Fearless* (1931). Goodrich did not achieve screen stardom, but played small supporting roles as a variety of strongmen in later films like *Berlin Express* (1948) and *Athena* (1954).

[181] Joe Weider, "Would You Like to Be a Movie Star?," *Muscle Builder*, December 1954; Horvath, "The Muscle Payoff in Hollywood."

had a site that had yet to be mythologized, the raw material for a rendition of California that would be his most *and* least authentic. This paradox is characteristic of myth, the result of an equilibrium where reality supplies a historical foothold to myth that is naturalized and (temporally) flattened as part of the mythic concept.[182] Given his interest in developing the sport of bodybuilding, Weider's extensive Muscle Beach coverage during the site's 1940s and '50s heyday is not surprising. Even if the early California bodybuilders trained in a variety of facilities, Muscle Beach was the symbolic home of modern bodybuilding, a distinction repeatedly confirmed in photographs of men training there and the regular coverage of the aforementioned Muscle Beach contests. With relatively few big contests to cover, Weider leveraged the annual events to show the spectacular potential of the sport, covering the competitions in detailed recaps accompanied by photographs emphasizing the presence of large crowds.[183] Muscle Beach helped to legitimize bodybuilding because it was a real, physical place. Mickey Mantle and Lou Gehrig plied their trade at Yankee Stadium; early bodybuilding stars like Steve Reeves and George Eiferman plied theirs at Muscle Beach.

Weider also legitimized his brand through his mythic use of the real Muscle Beach, drawing loose associations to the place long after its closure in 1959. The myth of Muscle Beach was a layered and interconnected collection of traces that reinforced the links between bodybuilding, California, and the Weider brand. These traces were frequently found in the various gossip columns that continued to locate bodybuilders at "Muscle Beach" even after the closure of the original facility was noted in the October

[182] Barthes returns to this train of thought often in *Mythologies*, but his most direct treatment can be found on page 142 (Barthes, 1972).

[183] For example: Eugene Hanson, "Muscle Beach," *Your Physique*, January 1949; Hanson, "Beach Festival"; Eugene Hanson, "Mr. Muscle Beach," *Muscle Power*, December 1952; Eugene Hanson, "Miss Muscle Beach 1952," *Muscle Power*, February 1953. The contests were popular events, but the large turnouts must be partially attributed to their being held on holiday weekends (Mr. Muscle Beach over July 4th and Miss Muscle Beach over Labor Day).

1959 issue of *Muscle Builder*.[184] Dick Tyler's take on the gossip column, appearing in *Muscle Builder* beginning in 1966, was even titled "Gossip from Muscle Beach." In reality, there was some training apparatus on parts of the beach *near* the original facility (most notably in the Venice Beach "Pit"), but there was no longer a real Muscle Beach.

This appropriation of the site, while deceptive, was not necessarily nefarious or intentionally misleading, but is an excellent example of how myth abstracts and obscures reality to serve the purposes of the mythmaker. By keeping "Muscle Beach" alive in the gossip columns and other articles, Weider provided himself with an easily digested rendition of the California dream to associate with his products. With his equipment distribution centers and Earle Liederman running *Muscle Power* from Los Angeles, Weider had maintained a West Coast presence since the mid-1940s, but by 1963 he had tacked "Muscle Beach" onto the address of his Santa Monica office.[185] A recurrent locale in the publications, working at this office was depicted as the bodybuilder's dream job, giving men like Dave Draper steady employment and easy access to training facilities. When paired with photos of Draper on the beach, the insinuation was that Muscle Beach was the facility, rather than the nearby basement gym known as "The Dungeon," where he was actually doing most of his training.[186]

This nebulous, mythic take on Muscle Beach began to wane in the early 1970s, but only after Weider announced that he was moving his entire operation to California.[187]

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[184] For example, a November 1963 column notes, "The girls take over a shoulder-stand contest at Muscle Beach." Editors, "The Latest Scoop," *Muscle Builder*, November 1963.

[185] An order form in the February 1963 issue of Muscle Builder directs correspondence simply to: "Weider Barbell Co. Muscle Beach, General Post Office, Santa Monica, California." The office was actually located at 1220 Fifth Street in Santa Monica, a little less than a mile from the original Muscle Beach.

[186] The photograph of Draper and four others that accompanies "Let's Gossip" in the February 1964 issue of Muscle Builder is a good example. The caption describes "the latest scene at Muscle Beach," but there is not a piece of training apparatus in sight. For more on "The Dungeon" and bodybuilding in Los Angeles following the Muscle Beach era, see Randy Roach, *Muscle, Smoke, and Mirrors*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008).

[187] Weider, "Weider Heads West."

But there was still work to be done in California and Weider continued to adapt the myth he had developed over the previous decades. In 1971, with construction underway on the new Weider facility north of Los Angeles, it was announced that the Weider brothers and the IFBB were bringing the Mr. America contest to the west coast for the first time. In *Muscle Builder/Power*, Dick Tyler wrote, "Many years ago a famous newspaper publisher named Horace Greeley admonished young Americans to 'Go West' to seek their fortunes. We're finally getting one type of American out here at last. It's been a long time. Go West, Mr. America, Go West."[188] As the Weiders continued to steer bodybuilding toward California in the following years, the mythic California of Muscle Beach was swiftly transformed into a lost paradise that would be restored to its past glory. "California Will Once Again Become the Mecca of Bodybuilding," proclaimed the title of an article/advertisement for the 1974 Mr. International contest in Los Angeles. By this time Weider had completed his takeover of the sport and was penning a new chapter in its mythic history, one that presupposed the links between the man, the sport, and the place. The "Mecca" article noted that the Mr. International would be "presented" by Franco Columubu and Arnold Schwarzenegger, two of the biggest stars in the Weider stable, and that these men wished "to be the prime creators of this 'new beginning,' and then constantly participate in propagating the California bodybuilder's image…and Southern California as the 'Bodybuilding Capitol (*sic*) of the World!'"[189] Joe Weider had fully realized the dream that he laid out in his magazines for over a quarter of a century. He remained in California for the final four decades of his life and from his dreamland he oversaw the continued growth and success of his sports and business empire.

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[188] Tyler, "Go West Mr. America, Go West."

[189] Editors, "California Will Once Again Become the Mecca of Bodybuilding," *Muscle Builder/Power*, October 1974.

## FORMS OF THE MYTH

Weider's Muscle Beach was the result of a repeated aggregation of cultural references. Content was a building block of the myth but the forms in which Weider communicated the myth were equally important. And, as the examples in the previous section demonstrate, the myth could be repeated and reinforced across different types of content. The Muscle Beach myth was not exclusive to articles and editorials, it was also offered to readers in gossip columns, advertisements, and images. This section examines how the myth was communicated through these forms.

### *Gossip Columns: "A Terrific Kingdom of Their Own, Out In California"*

First appearing as "Let's Gossip" in the April 1947 issue of *Muscle Power,* gossip columns were a fixture in most muscle magazines the magazines in the 1950s and 1960s.[190]These columns ran under various titles and were credited to several authors. "Let's Gossip" was the most prolific, making the jump from *Muscle Power* to *Muscle Builder* in 1953, where it would be followed after 1964 by "Gossip Round-Up", "Latest Scoop", and the aforementioned "Gossip From Muscle Beach".[191] Earle Liederman, then editor of *Muscle Power*, was responsible for producing the bulk of the "Let's Gossip" columns.[192]

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[190] *Strength and Health's* gossip column, for example, was called "The Iron Grapevine. It began in 1956 and ran until the magazine ended in 1986. "The Iron Grapevine," *Iron Game History*, 1(1) (February 1990): 4.

[191] The post-"Let's Gossip" columns appeared regularly, but the titles were used interchangeably and concurrently, and sometimes multiple takes on gossip would appear in the same issue. There does not appear to have been any reasoning behind this other than editorial taste.

[192] Liederman's writing was not limited to "Let's Gossip" and would appear across the Weider publications. Weider notes in his autobiography that Liederman was one of his select early authors who actually trusted to write the pieces that bore their names. See: Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 53.

From his post in Los Angeles, Liederman familiarized readers with the culture of bodybuilding and lent traces of detail to Weider's Muscle Beach.

Taken one at a time, the content of the columns is seldom notable. Most of the "gossip" is relatively innocuous, consisting of brief updates on the whereabouts or accomplishments of bodybuilders.[193] Rather than the content, it was the form and delivery of the columns that helped to develop and transmit the myth of California and Muscle Beach. The incessant, repetitive blurbs penned by Liederman and others referenced every part of the myth, lending a self-evidentiary credence to the surrounding content. Gossip made California out to be a very small place, where it was all but impossible to stumble upon Muscle Beach. Subheadings like "Around Hollywood with your Editor" or "Gossip from out West" would sporadically appear, lacking any obvious function except to truncate California geography.[194] "Roll-call" style blurbs were commonly employed, a quick-fire listing of names without much context, giving readers the impression that they might encounter a pack of musclemen at any moment if they made it out west.[195]

Among the functions of gossip is the designation of social boundaries. Gossip helps insiders distinguish themselves from outsiders, upholding insider values and power structures. Itself a mythic form of communication, gossip is necessarily derived from the greater social world it is situated within. Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks describes the appropriative quality of gossip: "Gossip creates its own territory, using materials from the

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[193] A typical example: "Steve Reeves has returned to batchlerhood (*sic*) and is sweeping moonlight of the sidewalk. Yet he found renewed ambition to make the most of himself and now looks better than ever before in his life. He weighs around 220 lbs…"

[194] For example: Earle Liederman, "Let's Gossip," *Muscle Power*, September 1952.

[195] A typical roll-call, in less than two column inches: "Larry Scott strolling the beach on a hot Sunday afternoon is something to behold…Reg Lewis is back in Santa Monica with his family after a long tour of flicker-making in Europe….Talk about triple takes: Chuck Ahrens and Steve Merjanian side-by-side on an evening walk along Sunset Strip; you have to see to believe." Earle Liederman, "Let's Gossip," *Muscle Builder*, February 1964.

world at large to construct a new oral artifact…The remaking that takes places as gossipers pool and interpret their observations expresses a worldview." Spacks argues that the collective worldview produced by gossip results in a "blunted awareness" on the "in-group," characterized by complacency and deference to the collective identity.[196] Cumulatively, these columns breathed life into the insular, constructed worlds of bodybuilding and Weider's California. Without proper sports structures to rely on, like seasons or leagues, the columns supplied some sense of rhythm and regularity to the bodybuilding world. Having built the myth throughout the magazines, the columns bestowed the place with a mundanity that made it more real.

In bestowing reality to the myth, gossip obscured the irony that actual Californians may not have found Weider's Muscle Beach to be as hip as it seemed in the magazines. In a 1957 *Saturday Evening Post* feature on Muscle Beach, Joel Sayre pointed out that, "Beach bums-those ornate youths who surfboard, loll and live off what they can cadge from the sun-loving well to do-shun it contemptuously for its total lack of pickings. Malibu is much more to their taste."[197] But the beach bums were not Weider's concern. His California dream must have been captivating enough for his readership, like bodybuilder Bob Paris, who dreamed of the Golden State from his home in rural Indiana. Paris describes encountering his first Weider magazine at a drug store in the late-1970s: "According to what I could tell, standing there and flipping through this magazine, these men occupied a terrific kingdom all their own, out in California."[198]

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[196] Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 7,15.
[197] Sayre, "The Body Worshippers of Muscle Beach," 136.
[198] Bob Paris, *Gorilla Suit: My Adventures in Bodybuilding* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 50.

***Advertising: "A Sun God at Ease in His Western Paradise"***

In the view of the late media theorist Marshal McLuhan, 20th century advertising shared its underlying mechanism with brainwashing. "Ads seem to work on the very advanced principle that a small pellet or pattern in a noisy, redundant barrage of repetition will gradually assert itself," wrote McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, "Ads push the principle of noise all the way to the plateau of persuasion."[199] Beginning with the first issue of *Your Physique,* Weider deployed a "redundant barrage" of his own to promote and sell his products. His earliest offerings were pamphlets and courses dedicated physical training and the development of masculine qualities, like a deep voice and persuasive comportment.[200] Later, he sold a variety of gimmicky exercise devices and other dubious accessories before moving into the weight-sets and nutritional supplements that would make him rich. Indebted equally to Sears, Roebuck, and Co. and the men's pulp magazines of the early 20th century, Weider's titles were like an early iteration of the "magalog" format, the catalog-as-lifestyle-guide popularized in the late 1990s by Abercrombie & Fitch.[201] In his autobiography, Weider acknowledges that the publications and products always went hand-in-hand:

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[199] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Boston: MIT Press, 1994), 227.

[200] The humor in Weider selling a deep voice pamphlet will not be lost on anyone who has seen *Pumping Iron* (1975) and heard Joe's nasally, high-pitched voice.

[201] This claim is difficult to verify. Robin Cherry's history of mail-order catalogs notes the cultural importance of the form since the late 19th century, but the earliest catalogs (e.g., Montgomery Ward, Sears) were broad in their scope, while niche sportsmen's outfitters like Eddie Bauer (1945) and Lands' End (1963) produced their first catalogs after Weider. Health and fitness publishers who sold products from their pages preceded Weider, but his rival Bob Hoffmann appears to have been the only other man in the industry who bundled a self-contained lifestyle with his words and products. Both men deserve some credit for laying the groundwork for what would become the "magalog." See: Robin Cherry, *Catalog: The Illustrated History of Mail Order Shopping* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); Joseph Henry Hancock II, "Brand Storytelling: Context and Meaning For Cargo Pants," in *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television*, ed. Peter McNeil, Vicki Karaminas, and Catherine Cole (Oxford: BERG, 2009), 95–105.

> Everything was good for everything else. The magazine sold weights, which meant I had to develop the Weider system of training and write a course to send with the weights. But then guys with weights turned back to the magazine to keep up with the latest developments and refinements…every product created a demand for something else…Look at it one way: I became my own major advertiser. Or another way, *Your Physique* was a mail-order catalog for Weider-brand products, but with excellent editorial content and pictures.[202]

Through the early 1970s, Weider's advertising style reflected the tropes and tactics developed by ad-men in the years between the World Wars, an era in advertising that is chronicled by Roland Marchand in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Weider's magazines fall outside the timeframe of Marchand's study, but they would not be out of place in his analysis. In these years, advertisers sought to create personal relationships with consumers, repositioning themselves as confidantes rather than pitchmen.[203] As confidantes, advertisers "gave advice that promoted the product while offering expertise and solace in the face of those modern complexities and impersonal judgments that made the individual feel incompetent and secure."[204] Such an approach preceded Weider in the fitness industry, like Charles Atlas' famous ads depicting the "97 Lb. Weakling." Weider positioned himself and his products as the mentor and tools a man required to overcome a weak, skinny, or flabby body. He was selling manliness. Marchand continues, describing how ad men cast themselves as "missionaries of modernity," who, "Constantly and unabashedly, championed the new against the old, the modern against the old-fashioned."[205] This was a favorite tactic of Weider's: bodybuilding was positioned as a decidedly modern sport,

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[202] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 56.
[203] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xxi, 13–14.
[204] Ibid., xxi.
[205] Ibid.

developing the contemporary man for a swinging life in California. Finally, Marchand notes how periodicals of the interwar period blurred the lines between advertising and editorial content, with articles supplying de facto endorsements or outright sales pitches for goods and services.[206] Again, this was standard practice for Weider, who wove his products and "Weider Principles" seamlessly into his writing on bodybuilders.

These tactics represented a shift from ads targeting consumer needs and problems toward ads that fostered consumptive fantasies and desires, toward what would later be called "lifestyle marketing," "brand community," or "subcultures of consumption." The latter term may be the most appropriate, referring to self-identifying groups who find ways to express a collective ethos through consumer goods.[207] Weider's ads beckoned men to the subculture of bodybuilding, of which the Muscle Beach myth was an essential element, an "imaginative geography" to be consumed.[208] Some ads specifically invoked Muscle Beach, like a two-page spread for nutritional supplements dubbed, "The Powerizers" in the May 1969 issue of *Muscle Builder/Power*. The ad features a photo of two bikini-clad women, bookended (and dwarfed) by two bodybuilders, all holding various colored beverages in clear goblets. Palm trees frame the image, and the bold caption alerts readers that "The Powerizers" are what "the swingers on Muscle Beach take to watch their weight-to Shape Up-Muscle Up-to Energize their bodies with power

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[206] Interestingly, Marchand gives partial credit for the rise of "advertorial" content to Bernarr Macfadden, who created the "confessional" magazine genre with *True Crime*, and was the preeminent health and fitness publisher of the pre-Weider era, publishing the influential *Physical Culture* between 1899-1941. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, 56; for more on Macfadden, see: Jan Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form," *Iron Game History* 1 (March 1991): 3–8.

[207] John Schouten, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22 (June 1995): 43–61.

[208] Captured in photographs and snippets of reportage and biography, Weider's California evokes colonial theorist Edward Said's concept of an "imaginative geography," a representation of a place imbued with the desires and intentions of its producer. Amongst a variety of potential ideological functions, imaginative geographies can transform places into commodities, to be consumed directly and indirectly via goods, experiences, and media. See: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

and virility."[209] That there had not been a Muscle Beach for over a decade does not seem to have bothered the "swingers" pictured in the ad. Other ads were less specific, but still incessantly referenced the California dream through images of the beach, surfboards, and swim-suit-clad bodies. In both cases, Weider's message was clear: readers who could not make a pilgrimage to the Mecca of the sport could still get a taste of Muscle Beach.

A final point worth mentioning about the advertisements is that they were not limited to the muscle magazines. Weider used the same ads to sell his apparatus and supplements in publications that he did not own, as well as across the range of men's magazines he published, including titles like *Fury, American Manhood,* and *Vigor*. The magazines may have had different content, but the myth was consistent, as journalist Robert Draper (no relation to Dave) describes:

> To see the promised land for myself, I needed only to buy a comic book or a true-crime or muscle magazine and thumb through the ads. And there, on a page devoted to bodybuilding products, would be California personified by the guy they called the Blond Bomber, posing dramatically alongside the waves of the Pacific in his cocktail napkin of a swimsuit -a sun god at ease in his western paradise, flanked by a host of bikini-clad sun goddesses who clung to his uncanny rack of muscles as if all hope and glory were encased within.[210]

***Photographs: "Now California was part of that dream."***

According to Weider, it was an early photograph of weightlifter and bodybuilder John Grimek in *Strength & Health* that inspired his life-long obsession with physical culture. In the image of Grimek, Weider saw, "so much of what I wanted…Artistry. Design. Beauty. Complexity. Most important, I saw manly strength."[211] Interviewed in an article

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[209] "'The Powerizers' Advertisement," *Muscle Builder/Power*, May 1969.
[210] Robert Draper, "Pumping Irony," *Gentleman's Quarterly*, November 2000.
[211] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 17.

commemorating the 60th anniversary of Weider's magazines, Terry Todd suggests that Joe's success as a publisher was in large part due to his aesthetic sensibilities: "He saw things more as an artist would see them, and the kind of publishing he's in depends so heavily on the visual."[212] Like other topics discussed in this essay, a thorough examination of photography in the Weider magazines could be a study in its own right. Here, I limit myself to the role of photography in producing and disseminating the myth of Joe Weider's Muscle Beach. Thus, my focus is not on the close reading of any particular image, but on the formal qualities of the photograph as a conduit for myth.

Illustrating articles on west coast bodybuilders and sprinkled throughout gossip columns referencing Hollywood and Los Angeles, photographs offered readers visual evidence that Weider's Muscle Beach and its musclemen were real. Like other elements of the myth, the images bore strong traces of reality, but a reality contingent on Weider. For Weider, any California beach could become "Muscle Beach," even when the location looked nothing like the photos that accompanied articles about the actual place. Identifying the break from reality in mythic images requires previous knowledge and an act of decoding. But, myth is received, not decoded. Received within Weider's mythical context, photographs were both deployments *and* evidence of the myth.

I turn again to the work of Roland Barthes to further explain this function of photographs. In *Mythologies,* Barthes argues that myth is mobilized in the insistent, imperative nature of images. Meaning in written speech must always be decoded, but pictures "impose meaning at one stroke."[213] Understanding how meaning is imposed is at the heart of his later book on photography, *Camera Lucida*. Per Barthes, the photograph always presents itself as evidence because a "necessarily *real*" had to have been in front

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[212] Jeff O'Connell, "Weider's Digest," *Muscle & Fitness*, July 1999.
[213] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 110.

of the lens to be captured by the camera. In this sense, photography is different than other visual art forms that can "feign reality without having seen it." Individual interpretations of the photograph may be myriad, but as the recipient of the image, "(I) can never deny that *the thing has been there*."[214] Like the more general mythical concept, the photograph distorts and obscures history. Rather than restoring the past, the photograph only testifies, "that what I see has indeed existed."[215] Thus, the evidence contained in the photograph validates time more than the object of the image, "the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."[216]

That myth is received rather than decoded does not mean everyone receives myth identically. Because it is necessarily constructed of cultural referents that carry previously encoded meanings, myth is received and simultaneously aggregated with these meanings. In the case of photography as myth, this aggregation is the overlapping of authentication (what is present in the image, its denotations) and representation (what is implied by the image, its connotations). Denotations are necessarily tangible, but connotations are social constructions, the cultural meanings and codes the viewer locates in the image.

In photographs of places or landscapes, any "sense of place" felt by the viewer is a production coordinated between denotation and connotation.[217] The relationship between these two facets of the image allowed readers a personalized take on the California dream as designed by Weider, who wrote "We ran shot after shot of him (Draper) out by the ocean. Always I provided the readers with thrilling beautiful dreams

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[214] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76–77.
[215] Ibid., 82.
[216] Ibid., 85–89.
[217] For more on photography and sense of place, see: Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

about having a body as fantastic as a Weider star and the pleasures that would bring. Now California was part of that dream."[218] In the above description, Weider suggests a more complete package than most of the photographs in the magazines visually offered. Focused primarily on bodies, most of Weider's images offer limited denotation: almost always a bodybuilder, often a training apparatus or Weider product, and sometimes an accompanying female. The locales, while picturesque, tended to be evocative of a California ideal rather than a specific place. If an image lacked a caption, it would be hard to name actual locations. This visual approach was probably intended by Weider to emphasize the physiques and the products, but it also opened up significant room for readers to fill the images with connotations derived of their own experiences and worldviews. That these connotations were inextricable from Weider's Muscle Beach was all the better for Joe, as his methods, products, and lifestyle seemed tailored to the reader's desires and dreams.

## CONCLUSION

Because myth transmits ideology, Barthes considered breaking down or decoding myth an inherently critical process. From Barthes perspective, myth is a form of communication bound to capitalism, and its function is to prevent the transformation of society. The preventative quality of myth arises from the permanence it offers, framing the existing social order as natural and self-evident, rather than the result of negotiated social relations that can be challenged and reconfigured.

Having relied heavily on Barthes' theory throughout this essay, it seems appropriate to conclude the decoding of the Weider myth with a critique. But there is a

[218] Weider, Weider, and Steere, *Brothers of Iron*, 183.

limit to the criticism of Weider that results from my analysis. To condemn Weider for the suggestive use of images, places, and bodies in the pursuit of profit is to condemn post-industrial capitalism as a whole, or at least any person or business who has engaged in marketing. Capitalism may deserve some condemnation, but to critique Weider in this way is reductive: if one is suspicious of the ideological apparatuses of capital, decoding Weider's mythic Muscle Beach is little more than an exercise in confirming this suspicion.

If a more subtle critique of Weider emerges from this essay, it is that the Muscle Beach myth obscured the reality of the built male body. Stripped of temporal reality, the bodies of Weider's Muscle Beach appeared as permanent ideals. What myth obscured in these bodies was not the process of their development, but the process of possessing and maintaining that level of development. Myth survives in part because it appears honest; Weider's entire premise was that those bodies *were* and *could* be built. By suspending time, myth effectively denied the ephemerality of the body in peak condition. Preparing for the stage or the camera, physique athletes manipulate their intake of calories, fluids, and minerals to flush water out of their bodies and achieve maximum muscular definition and vascularity. The resulting body cannot last, returning to a softer, denser state with the reintroduction of food and water. These were the bodies of Weider's Muscle Beach, captured in a moment, but presented in permanence. The grand deception of the myth was the appearance of these bodies as fixed endpoints that Weider was happy to escort you to, rather than the temporary flashes of possibility they actually were.

# Conclusion

As stand-alone histories of Muscle Beach, each of the preceding essays represents a step toward a more detailed and complete understanding of an important cultural and historical site. As a collection centered around a common theme, they highlight the multiple and complex functions of Muscle Beach: one location on a map serving as an incubator of social exchange and innovation, a battleground for civic debate and moral outrage, and a consumptive dreamland, all at once. Considering the site from these three perspectives also reveals new directions for research on Muscle Beach and its legacies. There are many, but for now I offer the following points of departure.

In chapter one, I argue that evaluating the impact of Muscle Beach on twentieth century fitness culture begins with understanding the site as a social hub capable of innovation. My analysis considers the "fitness boom" as a whole and Muscle Beach as the place where the diverse forms of the boom could develop. From this starting point, specific forms of the boom can be similarly deconstructed, leading to a greater understanding of the role of Muscle Beach in its production. Applied to the tangible legacies of the boom, like health clubs and exercise machines, this approach can reveal the needs, challenges, desires, relationships, and other circumstances that drove such innovations. But this approach should also be applied to the abstract legacies of the boom. For example, there is a general consensus that the women of Muscle Beach played a critical role in changing cultural perceptions of the athletic female physique. Given the timing of the site's emergence and the media exposure the women there received, this does not seem like an overstatement. But this conclusion is taken for

granted; we know how some of those women came to the beach, but we have yet to explain how they came to embrace the practices that developed their bodies. I think that the answer might be found in the trajectory of the types of activities that took place at the beach, that if gymnastics, acrobatics, and *adagio* had not preceded weightlifting, women like Pudgy Stockton and Beverly Jocher might not have begun training with weights. It is not that the early practices were necessarily feminine, but that women were already involved and sometimes essential to their performance. In Steven Johnson's terms, the women could explore the "adjacent possible" of weight training because they were already part of the social world of Muscle Beach.

Where chapter one produces theoretical implications for understanding Muscle Beach's legacies, chapter two reveals the archival gaps that limit how well we can know the beach as it was. To the best of my knowledge, the essay on the last days of Muscle Beach represents the most detailed attempt at telling a story that has largely been forgotten. I was able to draw on extensive municipal archives for the study, but my account is ultimately constrained by the limits of the archive. Numerous sources could add detail to the story, but I was especially disappointed to find that the Santa Monica City Clerk only has Parks and Recreation documents dating back to 1980. The Recreation Commission oversaw most of the substantive debates surrounding the closure and possible return of Muscle Beach, but the details of their meetings and communications are lost to history, acknowledged but not expanded upon in the documents I did have access to.

In addition to the limits of the incomplete archive, the story of the Muscle Beach closure points to important subjects unlikely to have ever entered an official archive. The most salient of these subjects is the potential function of the site for the homosexual community in mid-century Los Angeles. Beginning in the late 1940s, the emergence of groups like the Mattachine Society and ONE made Los Angeles an early battleground of the nascent gay rights movement.[219] If Muscle Beach was an important site for the gay community, this context offers a new perspective for interpreting the site. As I discuss in the essay, the opposition, in their moralistic attacks on Muscle Beach, insinuated homosexual activity, but there is no trail of archival evidence to confirm these claims. There is, of course, the possibility that Muscle Beach was not an important site for the homosexual community and that homophobic attacks on the site were representative of the broadly held suspicion that any man obsessed with his physique could only be gay, a pervert, or both. But there are non-archival traces that suggest this is a subject to investigate. Among them are the numerous post-war "fitness magazines" that served as thinly-veiled male pornography, the gender-bending legacy of bodybuilding, the emergence of a gay gym culture in the second half of the twentieth century, and Bud Clifton's 1958 pulp novel, "Muscle Boy."[220] There is a limit to erotic fiction as a starting point for historical inquiry, but that Clifton located his gay hustlers explicitly at Muscle Beach indicates that the site may have had a reputation worth exploring.

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[219] C. Todd White, *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
[220] Bud Clifton, *Muscle Boy* (New York: Ace, 1958); Alvarez, *Muscle Boys*.

My focus shifts from the real to the symbolic Muscle Beach in the third and final essay, a theoretical reading of Joe Weider's mythic appropriation of Muscle Beach. Weider deployed his version of the site to sell his wares and promote bodybuilding, and in his magazines, Muscle Beach became a cultural icon. Studying pop culture renditions of Muscle Beach, like Weider's, produces insights on public perceptions of the site and indicates another trajectory in which to follow the legacies of Muscle Beach. I think that studying the beach in pop culture may also help to explain some of the confusion about the different Muscle Beaches over the years. This is not to suggest that anyone who saw Frankie and Annette in *Muscle Beach Party* (1964) thought they were watching a documentary, but that the many points of entry Muscle Beach has found into pop culture have produced a sense of familiarity with the site, at least in name. Combined with the popularity and visibility of Muscle Beach Venice, pop cultural traces can lead to the types of partial historical knowledge about the site that I discussed in the introduction to this volume. Many who are familiar with Muscle Beach know it as historically significant, but are fuzzy on the details. Their lack of clarity is understandable. Having gone through the pop cultural wringer, Muscle Beach has gotten harder and harder to find.

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