San Francisco: Gold Rush to Google

Dancing on the Brink of the World

Jonah Raskin

with original art by Dana Smith

For friends and family
who mean to stay in the
wake of dislocation,
upheaval and the high cost of living.

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Gold Rush to Google

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By Jonah Raskin

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1. San Francisco – Geography – History – Culture.
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It was not the best of times, nor the worst of times, either, for "The City," as urbanites and suburbanites called San Francisco, the forty-six-square mile peninsula that's often regarded as an island set apart from the mainland and yet connected to the country and the world. It feels isolated and on the edge to me, and it has felt much the same to those who love it. The City is a place like none other: a magnet for the dreamers and schemers of the world who come to work, play, leave the past behind and re-create as I did in the mid-1970s when citizens complained about the inevitable, unstoppable "Manhattanization" of their beloved skyline.

The story of the City is the story of displacement, as tribes, social classes, ethnic groups and communities are deemed obsolete, its inhabitants uprooted, removed and relocated in the name of civilization, progress, technology, yuppification and gentrification. Displacement happens elsewhere, but in few North American cities is it as swift as in San Francisco, a place that didn't exist when the 13 original colonies declared their independence from Great Britain in 1776. Not until January 1847 was the name changed from Yerba Buena to San Francisco. A year later it left the hands of Mexico — the spoils of war — and became a part of the United States, along with California itself, a mythical land that was named after a mythical island inhabited by mythical Amazons.

The City isn't as inviting and as beautiful as it might seem to tourists who swoon and sway and boost the local economy. More than a century after the Gold Rush delivered tons of mercury from the ore-rich mountains to the waters inside the Golden Gate, beautiful San Francisco Bay still reeks of pollution and the oysters are inedible. On dry land, much of it reclaimed from the shrinking Bay, rents have soared as they've never soared before. City dwellers who feel the pinch complain about the inglorious Google buses that take techies from apartments to cubicles in Silicon Valley, though the buses, and the reaction to them, are only signs of a deeper discontent that will not go away anytime soon.

Still, for "Baghdad by the Bay," as San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen called San Francisco, 2015 did not look like it would become the worst of all possible years. The City had already witnessed a string of terrible disasters. With grace and dignity it had weathered the AIDS epidemic and emerged a much healthier and more tolerant place than ever before. S.F. also survived the assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk, known as the "Mayor of Castro Street." Voters regularly sent feisty politicians to City Hall.

By 2015, the dot.com bust of 1999-2000 seemed like ancient history, while new capital poured into start-ups such as Uber, the super-duper taxi company with world headquarters on the edge of the Tenderloin, the newest of the old neighborhoods fated for urban renewal and the eviction of the poor and the working class. For wealthy citizens the future looked as promising as it had looked for 100 years. If Ronald Reagan, California's have-a-nice-day-Governor from 1967 to 1975, were alive and in Sacramento he might have broken into a rendition of the Irving Berlin classic, "Blue Skies" that features the lyrics, "Blue days/All of them gone/ Nothing but blue skies/ From now on."

The City lost few if any opportunities to celebrate its own illustrious past — whether it was the halcyon days of the Beat Generation or the heady era of the hippies in the Haight-Ashbury — and in 2015 it couldn't resist the opportunity to look back once again at its storied past, spread its wings and soar into the blue skies above its fabled

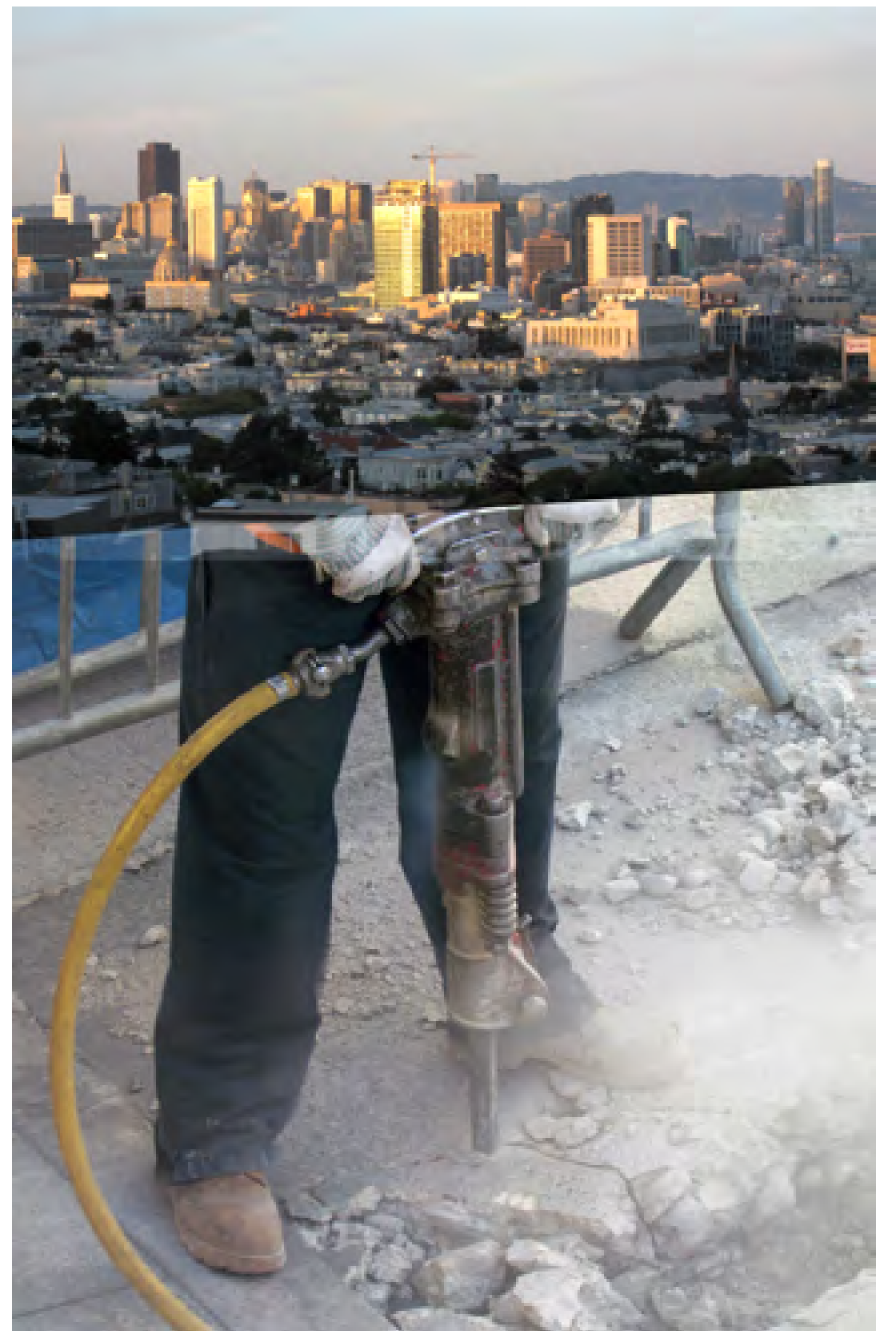
hills. 2015 marked the 100th anniversary of the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition that drew hordes to San Francisco from around the world to see the latest tools and technologies, indeed, to glimpse the future.

2015 would be a year to remember, much as 2014 was a year Giants' fans would remember because their team won the World Series for the third year in five years. Ed Lee, the first Chinese mayor in the City's history, pledged his support for the 100th anniversary of the 1915 Exposition and so did the city's financial wizards.

The Panama Pacific International Exposition followed hard on the heels of the 1906 earthquake and the devastating fires that followed it — some fanned by the flames of human ineptitude. The plague that preceded the earthquake didn't devastate the City, but it resulted in the deaths of more than 100 people and prompted real fears. Moreover, the fact that the city denied the very existence of the "black plague," as it came to called, damaged its reputation and led to the defeat of California Governor Henry Gage at the polls.

The Panama-Pacific Exposition showed the world that San Francisco wasn't down and out and contaminated, but very much in the fight to link California commerce to the canal that cut across the isthmus and to bring Asian markets closer to America and American companies closer to Asia. To create the space for the 1915 exposition, the City first had to destroy a small city within the city that thrived near the Bay, in what's now called the Marina, along the waterfront. Shops, factories and homes were razed or relocated. "California Welcomes the World," the text on a poster for the event read, though the world had already invaded and occupied the peninsula more than 50 years earlier. Moreover, the world would have been hard pressed to him a real, live California bear the likeness of the bear depicted on the poster. Hunters like William Tecumseh Sherman had exterminated the grizzly and its cousins.

The City was reborn in 1915 as it had been reborn in 1849, 1850 and 1851 when fires destroyed the hastily constructed shacks, cabins and tents that housed the gold miners who didn't strike it rich, but who created the first truly international metropolis in the world. In Gold Rush California, Chinese rubbed shoulders with Chileans, Russians jostled with Turks and Anglos from the East Coast tried to



push out everyone else and create a white republic on the shores of the Pacific. Even the San Francisco-born writer and socialist, Jack London screamed about "the yellow peril."

The single most remarkable fact about San Francisco history, it seems to me, isn't its nineteenth-century intolerance for Chinese immigrants, or its twenty-first century tolerance for nearly every nationality on the planet provided they had cash, brawn or bankable skills but rather its unrivaled ability to rise from its own ashes with more speed than anywhere else in the world. Call it the City of velocity. What happened in 1915, when the city destroyed a part of itself to rebuild and renew itself, transpired all over again in the 21st twenty-first century, with vast accumulations of wealth on one side and vast poverty on the other that persuaded longtime residents to talk about the Dickensian world they saw at their feet. The metamorphosis of the old into the new took place faster than ever before, and while San Franciscans lamented the homelessness and the sense of despair they were also elated by the vitality of the City where human beings seemed to be more alive than anywhere else.

The Indians who lived around the Bay before the coming of white men seemed to embrace change as the natural order of things. They built roundhouses so that they only lasted twenty years. When they fell down they were rebuilt. Still, the Indians didn't make room for modern notions of planned obsolescence, penthouses and single-room-occupancy hotels, and they weren't buying and selling property on the market, either.

Speed might have been San Francisco's middle name. "Step on it," Sam Spade, the shifty detective, exclaims in *The Maltese Falcon*, Dashiell Hammett's fast-paced homage to the restless city that he called home in the 1920s, the decade when the whole nation went rapidly from boom to bust and then to the Depression. "Step on it," Spade says when he wants the cops to apprehend the speediest, greediest fictional criminals ever to grace the pages of California noir.

Decades before the 1929 publication of *The Maltese Falcon*, Karl Marx, the German pamphleteer and troublemaker, offered a moral condemnation of California. "Nowhere else has the upheaval most

shamelessly caused by capitalist centralization taken place with such speed," he wrote. A gold miner from the East Coast, and hardly a trained political economist, saw much the same world that Marx saw. "Everything is in a state of fermentation, rolling and tumbling about," he explained. From his digs in San Francisco he added, "I have got enough of California and am coming home as fast as I can."

In Dashiell Hammett's Marxist-Freudian-McLuhanesque metropolis, sex and sleuthing go hand in hand and murder is both the medium and the message. The novel's and the movie's principal players all pursue relentlessly a rare statue that slips though their fingers. The shady gunsel, the lady who's a man-killer, the gay fellow named Joel Cairo and the Fat Man himself, as well as the detective who looks like Satan, all step on it and on one another, too.

As Spade explains, "Most things in San Francisco can be bought, or taken." Before his time —— most notably during the Gold Rush, and then again during the silver rush, and in each and every successive boom — San Franciscans have hoped to find their own version of the falcon. They have also been stepping on it ever since the days of Spade and his creator, Dashiell Hammett, who's remembered by an alley that bears his name and by a plaque that marks one of the many murders that take place in the surreal world of *The Maltese Falcon*, where life and death clash by design and by accident. The novel and its cast of quirky character are fondly remembered and imagined by tourists and natives alike who take Don Herron's tour of Hammett's dead end streets and shadowy alleys. Herron keeps the Hammett legend alive, much as Jerry Cimino keeps the Kerouac legend alive at the Beat Museum, across the street from City Light Bookstore.

For the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition, San Francisco raised millions in no time at all and constructed the "Emerald City," as it was called, a kind of giant movie set where ordinary urbanites would wander about and then continued with ersatz Roman ruins, a reflecting pool, towers, colonnades, imitation European "palaces" and galleries packed with sculpture and painting gathered from across California and around the globe, too. The Golden State had culture, the exposition screamed. Alas, most of the buildings didn't last as

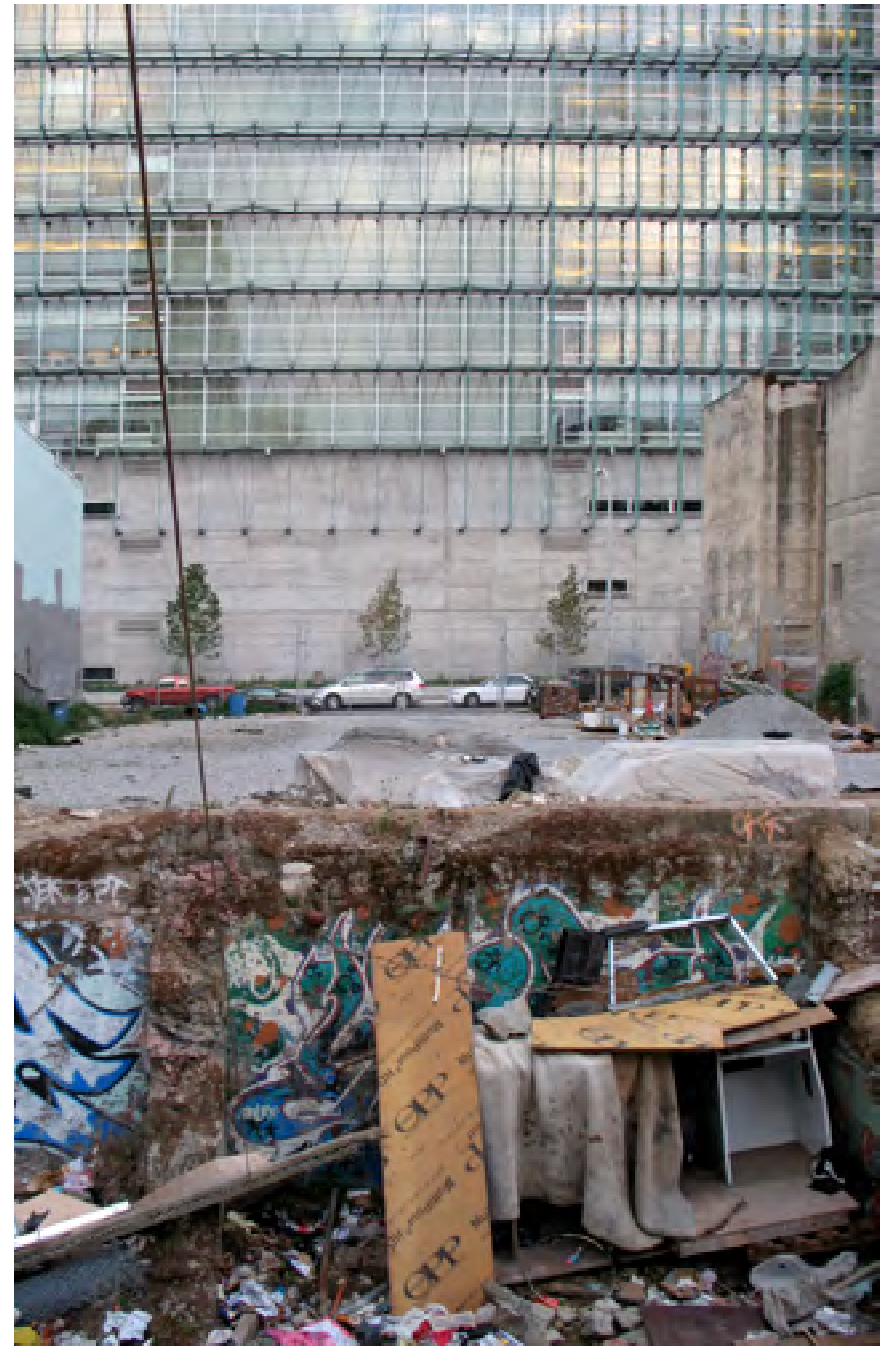
long as Roman structures. Year by year, little by little, the Emerald City collapsed. San Francisco celebrated the demise, much as it had celebrated the rise with fireworks and music and legend has it with weeping crowds sad to see it go.

In 1964 the few remaining ruins of the Emerald City were demolished, the city reborn once again as it had been reborn in 1937, when the Golden Gate Bridge connected San Francisco to Marin County, put most of the ferries out of business, enshrined the car and the Freeway and altered patterns of urban life. San Francisco resurrected itself again during the Second World War when workers from around the nation, including southern blacks, poured into the shipyards and helped to defeat fascism, until they were deemed obsolete and driven out of town.

San Francisco won World War II albeit with a little help from the Russians at Stalingrad and U.S. troops at Iwo Jima and elsewhere in the Pacific and Europe. After the 1945 San Francisco confab that helped to inaugurate the United Nations, the City and its citizens focused their energies on trying not to blow up the world, though across the Bay, major corporations had their headquarters and at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory nuclear bombs were designed. The military industrial complex, as President Eisenhower called it, did very nicely for itself all around San Francisco Bay. Thousands and thousands of soldiers and hundreds of battleships steamed in from war and steamed out to war and factories produced guns and bullets.

Still, the Beats, the beatniks, the hippies, the pacifists, the punks, the gays, the tree-huggers, the Buddhists, the feminists and the foodies made the city into a countercultural capital of the U.S. They insisted that the nation ought to make love not war, eat gourmet food not fight, read not bleed, write poetry not issue bellicose manifestos and plant trees not drop bombs on the far-flung capitals of the world. "Books not bombs," North Beach T-shirts read.

The City's diverse communities, including the Castro with its gay men, provided as much if not more cultural capital than the opera, the ballet and the theater. Nearly anything and everything that impresarios and alchemists could turn into something of value



for tourists they did turn into value, including the bars and the dance halls of the legendary Barbary Coast, albeit only after the seedy district lost its fangs at the start of the twentieth century.

Herbert Asbury in *The Barbary Coast* (1933) his classic about San Francisco gangs, pimps, prostitutes, snarky cops and corrupt politicians, observes that the Coast was "a veritable slummers' paradise" and that "wide-eyed spectators…were firmly convinced that they were watching the underworld at its revels, and seeing life stripped to its elementals." The City provided a near-constant spectacle of indoor and outdoor entertainment for the masses. The actress Sarah Bernhardt thrilled San Francisco audiences. Real estate agent Joshua A. Norton turned himself into Emperor Norton after he fell on hard times. Wearing a U.S. Army uniform, he promenaded up and down the City's streets and was treated like royalty. San Francisco thrived on eccentricity and eccentrics eager to party, not to follow a party line or fall into lockstep with flag-waving patriots. In countercultural "Frisco," as Kerouac and Ginsberg called it, far-off battlefields didn't elicit patriotic cries, nor were followers of the Beats eager to join the American military in Vietnam, Panama, Nicaragua and elsewhere.

Images of Vietnam flickered across a small black-and-white TV screen in April 1975 in a crowded apartment in San Francisco where I sat and watched the last sad, surreal days of the war that had defined nearly my whole adult life. The City at the end of the continent seemed the perfect place to watch the end of the war.

In 1975, fresh from New York, I tried to think of San Francisco as a platter with assorted cultures ready for consumption. I could find, or imagine that I found, the 1950s while sipping cappuccino at the Trieste in North Beach, where I rubbed shoulders with the director Francis Ford Coppola who insisted in the mid-1970s that he was Francis Coppola. He didn't want any connection with then President Ford. In 1975, the 1960s also seemed alive in San Francisco, especially in Chenery Park where I played softball with young men in pony tails and young women in bib-overalls, all of them sporting T-shirts that boasted, "Eat the Rich." The Summer of Love that once attracted hordes of hippies had come and gone, but there was still plenty of

hippie love to go around and STDs hadn't yet arrived in force.

Good bagels and good croissants didn't exist then, but soon good marijuana from the hinterlands arrived in the City and then cocaine arrived, too, from far off Chile and Peru. I remember lines of coke on a mirror in the projection booth of a movie theater on 16th Street where I watched *The Big Sleep, The Maltese Falcon,* and *Out of the Past*, my favorite of the genre, with Robert Mitchum as the tough guy detective, Jane Greer as the femme fatale and Kirk Douglas as the criminal king pin. The most suspenseful parts of the film take place in the City, where something always comes out of the past to haunt the present.

In my eyes, San Francisco has always been a hot city of light and dark, passions and obsessions, not as the poet George Sterling called it "the cool grey city of love." On the coast it may be chilly and foggy, but the blood of San Franciscans like Sterling — who took his own life in 1926, two weeks shy of his 57th birthday— roils and boils. Journalist Gary Kamiya borrowed from Sterling the phrase and title "cool grey city of love" for his own Valentine to San Francisco, though he changed the spelling from grey to gray.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the poet H. Robert Braden called The City "Imperial San Francisco." His ode ends, "Translucent mirror of the Golden State,/ Fit portal of an empire great and free,/ We thee salute."

In *Cool Gray City of Love*, his 2013 Valentine, Kamiya hammers away at the financial history of the City from Gold Rush to Google, and then offers the observation that "it would be a colossal irony if high-spirited San Francisco ended up as a boring, money-obsessed burg." He adds that "San Francisco draws more venture capital money than any other American city" and that it's home to 1,700 tech firms and 44,000 highly paid tech workers. All that money, those firms and their workers seem to pose a real threat to San Francisco as the last stop on the continent for the mythical roving band of anarchists, pacifists, refugees, fugitives, exiles and outcasts.

Rebecca Solnit, perhaps San Francisco's preeminent contemporary intellectual, pulls no punches when she calls the city "the fraternity

house of the junior members of the new technocracy." Then she waffles and fades into the kind of fog that envelops Hammett's characters. "The very volatility of Silicon Valley could implode, backfire, give rise to revolutions and counter-revolutions and backlashes, be used against the overlords," she insisted in an interview for *Boom*, which calls itself "A Journal of California." "We can't see into the mist, or, since we're in San Francisco, the fog, to see what's going to get knocked over. It's a period of tremendous upheaval."

Indeed, it's a period of radical resettling which has always been a matter of unsettling and destabilizing, and, while the Silicon Valley technocrats probably can't read all the writing on the wall they're not stupid either. They live in San Francisco and not in Silicon Valley — home to Facebook, Google, Netflix, Salesforce, Yahoo!, and more — because the City has cultural capital. They know that much. What they probably don't know is that they're pawns in a global game and helping to create a place with a new and different kind of cultural capital that will alter the rhythms of San Francisco's urban life.

I've seen money and power at work, but I've also witnessed — and taken part in — strikes, protests and marches. For years, author Tillie Olsen regaled me with tales of the General Strike of 1937 that shut down the port. A native of Nebraska and the author of *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Yonnindio: From the 1930s*, Olsen wrote for workers, organized them into unions, lived the life of a working wife and mother and practiced to near perfection the art of fiction writing. "Solidarity Forever," she always said when we parted and wrote letters in a handwriting that begged for a magnifying glass. Tillie's San Francisco, the city of organizer Harry Bridges and the Longshoreman's Union, lived on in her memory, much as the Sixties live on and the Fifties live on, too, in someone's memory.

Over the years I've come to view San Francisco not only as a platter of countercultures, but also as a kind of archeological site where I could find relics of the past. I discovered what was obvious to longtime natives: that the City was a place of neighborhoods and neighborhoods within neighborhoods: the Inner Sunset and the Outer Sunset, Presidio Heights and Laurel Village, the Excelsior, Telegraph

Hill and Pacific Heights where my lawyer and literary agent lived in a mansion with his wife, their dogs and the daughter they adopted and raised as their own child.

When my brothers settled at opposite ends of the City — one at Ocean Beach, the other in Bernal Heights — I felt I suddenly had real roots. When Canessa Gallery on Montgomery Street made me their official writer in residence I knew in my heart that I'd arrived.

In 1975, when I first landed in San Francisco it seemed to be in free fall. The world itself seemed to have shrunk and I felt an abiding sense of nostalgia for the world of Jack Kerouac who wrote about the lost world of San Francisco in his sad, dark, beautiful essay, "The Railroad Earth."

In an alley near the Southern Pacific Railroad station he watched "the Negroes" and "the bums" and wrote long rambling sentences that ran for pages. In the spirit of Proust and William Saroyan, Kerouac took in the "drowsy lazy afternoons with everybody at work in offices" when "you feel the impending rush of their commuter frenzy… the neat-necktied producers and commuters of America and Steel civilization rushing by with San Francisco Chronicles and Call Bulletins." The words "frenzy" and "rush" capture the velocity of the streets and the citizens.

There are almost no Negroes now and the bums are quickly vanishing. Silicon has replaced steel. *The Call* does not exist and neckties have all but disappeared. Cars and buses have largely terminated railroads, and while there are many good writers, such Kamiya, Solnit and Talbot, there's no Jack Kerouac to describe with feeling, but not the maudlin, the world that San Francisco loses everyday in the mad rush to get where it's going or where it wants others to go.

In time I made my peace with the City, first by coming to regard it, as my friend Jim Houston urged me to regard it, as a crossroads between East and West. From there, with help from family members from Mexico, I came to see it as a meeting ground between North and South.

The Ohlone were right. The tribes who lived here before Europeans arrived got it long before anyone else did. Of all the bits and pieces

of their songs that have survived none speaks better of their world or of ours than a singular, enigmatic fragment that makes my heart beat faster. It might have been sung by the whole tribe, though perhaps one singer might have infused it with more passion, sadness and hope than any one else, especially when that singer (with a drummer in the background) stood on the shore or on a hill that looked out at the thin dark line where the land meets the sea.

There and then he sang the line, “Dancing on the brink of the world.” That, indeed, I think, is San Francisco’s lasting gift to the world: the ability to go to the brink, live on the brink and see the brink as a frontier where past meets present and where the future unfolds.

The Indians lived on the brink. So did the workers who built the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Beats and the gays and now the venture capitalists who command wealth much as the nabobs commanded it during the era that followed the Gold Rush when so much of the City’s personality was forged.

Oh, and yes I do actually dance in San Francisco in an apartment along the Great Highway where I look out and see the Pacific and feel that like the Ohlone I’m on the brink of the world.

For additional reading:

Herbert Asbury, *The Barbary Coast*.
Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*.
Gary Kamiya, *Cool Gray City of Love*.
Jack Kerouac, “The Railroad Earth.”
Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City.*
David Talbot, *Season of the Witch: Enchantment, Terror, and Deliverance in the City of Love.*

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"Jonah Raskin captures the essence of San Francisco as a city and as an existential being that is within and at the edge of this strange place known as America. He channels The City By The Bay with a deftness and incisiveness of which few are capable."

- C.E. McAuley,
  Publisher/Editor-in-Chief *Culture Counter Magazine*

"This piece gives me the feeling of traveling in a low altitude helicopter sweeping across the City. It's a well delivered kaleidoscopic experience."

- Steven Halliwell