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# **The Malleable Man: The International YMCA and Christian Manhood, 1890-1940**

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In the summer of 1936 Hitler's Nazi regime co-opted the prestige of the Berlin Summer Olympics by using sweeping victories and a title wave of propaganda to prove the racial superiority of blue-eyed, blond-haired Germans.<sup>1</sup> This narrative is familiar to most people. A lesser known story is that of the international YMCA's involvement in the Games. In 1935 the Y distributed newsletters, pamphlets, and other printed materials all advertising the 1936 Olympics as an event of international and interracial Christian Brotherhood. Christian athletes and coaches from China, Japan, the Philippines, India, and the United States came to Berlin, not only to represent their nations, but also to represent the YMCA's mission. The Y encouraged its members from all over the globe to come to the Olympics and celebrate the YMCA's contribution to sports, Christianity, and manhood. While the Y's effort achieved nowhere near the coordination, publicity, or success of the Nazi effort, the international YMCA's relationship to the 1936 Olympics provided a stark ideological contrast to that of Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup>

Christian manhood, as taught by the YMCA, seemed remarkably tolerant and racially progressive for its time. Y literature is filled with calls for interfaith, international, and interracial understanding, and lacked derogatory rhetoric about other peoples, cultures, or countries. In light of this information, the North American YMCA's missionary work over the world from its inception in 1888 through the 1930s provides an interesting avenue to study the ideology of manhood among white Americans.

American manhood is an important subject of study at the turn of the century because of masculinities rising importance as a discourse used to justify power. American men, especially middle class men, participated in various activities and used different types of rhetoric to construct new masculine identities relevant to the emerging urban industrial society. The Y's dedication to "making men" within communities of Anglo-Americans, immigrants in America,

and in foreign countries makes the YMCA all the more relevant to the field because it placed American manhood in dialogue with issues of race, class, religion, and gender. My study explores these intersections by comparing and contrasting discourses of manhood the YMCA constructed under these varying circumstances. This paper treats Christian manhood as a set of ideas and material practices, used to justify power and privilege such as other discourses of whiteness, patriotism, class status, or citizenship. The two major claims that come from this study are:

- 1) Christian manhood was a multifaceted discourse built upon racial, class, sexual, and cultural difference, and
- 2) Christian manhood was a malleable discourse because of its ability to emphasize and suppress different aspects of its varied rhetoric in order to address different people, in different places, at different times.

The work and success of the international YMCA proves these assertions.

The flexibility of American manhood should not be confused with fluidity. The YMCA always kept its program within the parameters of its philosophy of ministering to the mind, body, and spirit of young men, and kept middle class Protestant American culture as the ideal for constructing manhood.

In order to examine the relevance of the YMCA, first, let us examine the some of the history and historiography which surrounds American manhood at the turn of the century.

### **Historiography**

In nineteenth century America self-made or Victorian manhood defined the gender identities of middle and upper class men. Self-made manhood arose in the late eighteenth century in tandem with the birth of the American Republic, the market economy, and the middle

class. Society judged a man's gender identity by assessing his ability to control his emotions, limit his impulses, and use his reason to channel his competitive passions into productive endeavors; all values thought to be vital for success in a market economy and in republican government. Socially, Victorian manhood predicated itself upon the separation of spaces, or spheres, which symbolized gendered arenas of power. White, Anglo-Saxon, middle and upper class men, inhabited the public sphere, that of work and politics, and exercised the control over the most important aspects of American society. Women inhabited the private sphere, that of the home and family, and guided of the moral and domestic aspects of American life.

In post-Civil War America industrialization created powerful currents of social and economic change which altered these patterns. Economically, America experienced rapid industrialization. Between the years of 1870 and 1900 America's industrial output increased five-hundred percent. The rise of massive corporations followed, and hastened the decline of small businesses and small scale entrepreneurship. In 1800 four out of every five Americans were self-employed. In 1870 only 1 in 3 held the same distinction.<sup>3</sup>

Socially, America became a more diverse country. Immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe flooded American cities working in the factories of American capitalists and, to the horror of Anglo-Americans, voting in large numbers for the political machines which dominated urban politics. The women's movement was also on the rise. Women's increasing power in politics and entrance into the workplace, two previously exclusively male spaces, changed the landscape of social relations. Finally, the white Americans held lingering anxieties over African-American emancipation and Reconstruction.

Needless to say, the economic and social developments of post-Civil War America worked to undermine the worldview of middle class men. Industrialization, corporations,

financial panics, and economic depressions undermined their economic independence and made them question the values of restraint which they attached to small scale capitalism. Additionally, immigrants, African-Americans, and women's entrance into politics and the workplace threatened their supremacy over the public sphere. Finally, the growth of white collar work coupled with the expansion of the industrial labor force made middle class corporate managers feel insecure about their bodies. At the turn of the century Middle class men seemed to collectively ask themselves the question of, "What makes us true men?" in the wake of losing a firm hold on economic independence, political prominence, and corporeal maleness.

Their answer was a newer, rougher type of masculinity. Although historians' descriptions vary, most agree that middle class men generally rejected refined Victorian standards and called embraced their more "primitive" instincts. According to the new masculine philosophy real men freed themselves from complicated emotions and took clear and bold actions. Men assigned greater importance to their bodies and physical strength, and equated their character with physical attributes. They made competition, military activities, and adversarial sports life metaphors and tests of manhood.<sup>4</sup>

Historians of manhood do not disagree so much about the catalysts for change or the general changes in manhood, but rather disagree on how men constructed these new masculinities. Historians point to different sets of evidence which propose divergent theories of how middle class men reconstructed their gendered identities amidst changing social circumstances.

E. Anthony Rotundo argues that during the period of self-made manhood middle class men defined themselves in opposition to boyhood. During the period of passionate manhood they embraced the violent and playful aspects of boyhood, and instead defined themselves in

opposition to womanhood. Rotundo cites the rise of the word “sissy” as an insult insinuating feminization, the embrace of militaristic activities, and a growing obsession with the male body to prove his thesis.<sup>5</sup> Gail Bederman, on the other hand, argues that Anglo-American men predicated their manhood upon racial subjugation citing recapitulation theory, imperialist thought and action, and the discourse of civilization bound to Lamarkianism and Social Darwinism.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Winter’s *Making Men, Making Class* refutes both of these claims and argues that middle class men did not create a new type of masculinity, but adjusted old notions of manhood in the context of changing class difference. Winter shows that middle class YMCA secretaries, who attempted to instill manhood in industrial laborers, sharpened their own class biases and came to define their manhood through their superior social standing.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Clifford Putney’s study claims that middle class Protestants incorporated the male body and aggressive manly virtues into religion to define their manhood in terms of their male bodies and *Muscular Christianity*.<sup>8</sup>

Although the research of the previously mentioned authors may seem at odds with one another, it is my opinion that their research compliments each other and shares many commonalities. The first intertwining thread is that at the turn of the century middle class men redefined what it meant to be man in opposition to an Other. Men in various circumstances used different groups of people, such as women, African-Americans, or industrial laborers to create categories of difference to justify what made them true men and what made the Other not. A second common denominator was that each group of men incorporated the male body in the process of constructing new masculinities. And a final uniting factor was that masculine identity constructed a historical narrative that naturalized their masculine power as an eternal truth.

My study of YMCA's domestic and international work shows how the YMCA program fulfilled each of these facets of masculinity and unites the work of the previously mentioned authors by demonstrating the YMCA's version of American manhood drew upon a multitude of differences, not just one. The YMCA is a unique case study to prove the multiplicity and malleability of middle class masculinity because it placed American males in contact with people who could represent one of many different Others. Taking the YMCA's work with Anglo-Americans as a starting point, we can determine how the YMCA changed its message of Christian manhood as it took it to immigrants in the United States and to foreigners abroad.

### **The Y at Home**

When the YMCA came to the United States in 1851 the organization's goal was to promote evangelical Christianity among middle class men by providing them with a space, and a message, that catered to their needs. At first North American Ys engaged mainly in bible study and religious instruction, but as time passed middle class manhood and the Y program evolved. By the 1890s the YMCAs of North America became major centers of recreation which corresponded to a growing enthusiasm for sports and leisure time activities. During this period the Y adopted the famous red triangle which represented its program of mental, physical, and spiritual development and its objective became to promote character in young men. Character was a term that encompassed all three qualities of the YMCA's red triangle, largely a reflected middle class American culture, and defined what it meant to be a successful man for the YMCA.

The Y is an important case study for American manhood not because it was a club exclusively for men, but because the Association's goal was to "make men." Historians Clifford Putney, David McLeod, and Thomas Winter all place the YMCA in the movement to construct masculinity through class status and some other variable. Putney's study emphasizes the



importance of the body; McLeod's, the importance of middle class culture; and finally, Winter's in exercising control over working class men. While all three authors correctly identify important themes of the YMCA's program, they fail to identify other crucial ideas the Y used to build Christian manhood. I argue that the American YMCA, in its work with middle class Anglo-Americans, created a discourse of masculine power from multiple discourses such as class, gender, and racial differences.<sup>9</sup>

A major part of constructing Christian manhood after 1890 came from the YMCA's physical department. *Keeping in Condition: A Handbook on Training for Older Boys*, an official YMCA publication, argued that physical training was a "practical guide for training" in manhood. When boys found themselves free "from the larger responsibilities of adult life" the handbook encouraged them to engage in physical activity to develop their virility. Virility, an umbrella term used to describe manhood, encompassed six traits: strength of muscle, endurance, energy, self-control, will-power, and courage.<sup>10</sup>

Other YMCA materials echoed the importance of physical development and stressed that the development of the male body directly led to the enhancement of men's moral and mental faculties. A 1924 *Report of the Commission on Scope, Aims, and Responsibilities of the Physical Department* of the YMCA continued to argue that "the full development of Christian character and sturdy manhood depended upon the proper and adequate physical training," which was sorely needed to overcome the "subtle and vicious tendencies of modern life."<sup>11</sup> The Y's program promoted health and disease prevention to accompany the development of a strong and virile male body. YMCAs across the country sponsored health talks and published pamphlets on contractible diseases. Talks covered topics such as proper diets, athletic training, glands, tobacco, married life, bachelorhood, and venereal disease.<sup>12</sup>

The YMCA's physical training program contained other themes beyond merely encouraging health. The literature on physical development explicitly linked itself to developing young men's racial status and shaping the future of the American race for the good of the nation. The previously mentioned report, states that young YMCA members were experiencing "the important epochs of life history of the race." This statement is a nod to recapitulation theory, a popular psychological premise of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which stated that a child's development mirrored the great "cultural epochs" of his race's history. According to this theory, children were literal savages who evolved into civilized men as they approach adulthood. On the surface, recapitulation theory seems merely like an antiquated scientific supposition, but the subcontext of the theory is laced with racist thought. Most people believed that only Europeans were capable of reaching the final cultural epoch of civilization while all other races remained stuck in a primitive state.

G. Stanley Hall, a leading proponent of recapitulation theory, warned Americans about neurasthenia, a disease caused by the strains of leading an overly civilized life. To fight this debilitating disease, Hall prescribed vigorous physical exercise, to inoculate men with primitive strength, and limited sexual activity, so men could retain the fluids that provided them with the nervous energy to carry out the work of civilization.<sup>13</sup> The Y's physical program adheres to these prescriptions perfectly. The Y reports stated that the conservation of male virility was essential "our national progress and welfare," and if boys squander their virility through poor sanitation, a lack of physical activity, or "impure thinking" and excessive sexual excitement which leads to "emissions at too frequent intervals," they endangered the power of their manhood, their race, and their country.

In addition to constructing masculinity through racial difference, the Y built masculinity through Othering women as well. The YMCA's portrayal of Jesus was one way that the Y built masculinity through discouraging femininity. A national YMCA program titled, *The Christ Way of Living: A Series of Discussions for Young Men*, taught members that Jesus was not "soft-faced" or "effeminate." Instead of embodying female qualities, the savior embraced his masculinity. The author, Reverend Fred Trotter, describes Jesus as "a red-blooded, two fisted" physically fit working man who embodied good health, ambition, and daring.<sup>14</sup>

The YMCA discouraged feminine ideas in education as well. A *Survey of Educational Activities of the Los Angeles YMCA* emphasized the importance of a masculine education. The report states that public schools alone were an inadequate means to educate young men because they were "feminized" institutions. The survey states that 84% of public school teachers were women, a factor which discouraged young men from pursuing an education. The report concluded that the YMCA was integral to the educational efforts of Los Angeles because of its ability to attract young men to education and offer them male led vocational, physical, and character training.<sup>15</sup>

Preaching middle class values was a final way the YMCA shaped Christian manhood among its Anglo-American constituency. The Sportsmanship Brotherhood, an organization sponsored by the YMCA, linked evangelical morals with the development of the male body. The organization established student led chapters in high schools and colleges throughout the country. Chapters supported good sportsmanship which meant "playing clean, sticking to your faith, playing fair, trying your best, and discussing Sportsmanship in promoting religion, brotherhood, world peace, and citizenship." The literature on the Sportsmanship brotherhood focused on teaching character, a middle class buzzword, which corresponded with evangelical

morals and a conservative attitude towards tobacco, alcohol, and sex. The organizations glorification of the male body through recreation, not labor, also implied a commitment to middle class culture and gender difference. The Sportsmanship logo, which depicts two naked athletes shaking hands over a globe, shows the organizations attempt to fuse a masculine corporeal presence with evangelical values through the glorification of the male body and club's Christian motto (see figure 1).

An overall assessment of the YMCA's program reveals that middle class Anglo-Americans synthesized Christian morals with newer, rougher, more "primitive" types of masculinity. The YMCA wanted men to express their physical strength and aggression, yet confine it to the playing field; to exercise dominance, but do so following a code of sportsmanship; to become the utmost virile beings, but completely control their sexual urges. They accomplished this through a various avenues such as calling attention to the racial superiority of their membership, promoting middle class Christian values, and criticizing "feminized" culture, all of which emphasized their inherent differences and superiority in comparison with other groups.

Despite the Y's tendency to Other outside groups, the missionary impulse of the organization convinced its membership that Christian manhood was a universal standard which should be taught to the other groups of people. Armed with a supreme confidence in their program, the YMCA reached out to immigrants and racial minorities to give them the gift of Christian manhood. When middle class Christians went to "make men" out of immigrants in the United States, they revealed that American masculinity was a flexible creed.

### **A Home Away from Home**

When working with immigrants within the United States the Y dropped the racial component of its program and instead highlighted the positive aspects of masculine recreation, religion, and education. The YMCA's willingness to adapt its program to a different constituency demonstrated that it and Christian manhood were both pragmatic and malleable discourses of power. The examples the Honolulu YMCA, the Japanese YMCA of Los Angeles, and the San Pedro Older Boys' Conference reveal several ways the YMCA adapted American masculinity to gain influence in different communities.

At the turn of the century the YMCA of Honolulu had built an extremely diverse institution. According to internal data the YMCA's recruitment efforts from 1922 to 1927 yielded a multi-racial constituency which consisted of Filipino, Korean, Portuguese, Haole (Hawaiian born and speaking Caucasians), Chinese, and Japanese members, with Japanese and Chinese men making up the majority of volunteers. Surprisingly, the racial diversity of the Honolulu YMCA did not stop a significant number of white members from joining and participating. By 1932 the Honolulu YMCA added 691 "Anglo-Saxon" members, which made them the third largest racial group in the Honolulu YMCA behind only Japanese and Chinese members.<sup>16</sup>

The YMCA changed its program to fit this racially diverse Association. Instead of emphasizing aspects of biological difference, the Honolulu Y constructed a concept of manhood that professed interracial tolerance, yet strove for cultural conformity through Christianity and class customs. YMCA's efforts to teach middle class values came from a variety of father-son activities which were marketed as ways to foster manhood among boys. *Man-Making on the Island with the YMCA*, a pamphlet outlining the program of Hawaiian YMCAs, laid out an agenda of basic middle class activities such as camps, hikes, athletics, lectures, father-son events,

and religious instruction. Another pamphlet titled, *The Stern Responsibilities of Manhood for Fathers and Sons*, suggested a ritual for members of the Honolulu Y to celebrate “boys passing into manhood.” The ceremony consisted of fathers passing on five symbols to their sons: a shovel to symbolize labor, a flower for honoring women, a microscope for the search for truth, a flag for citizenship, and a bible for religion. All of these symbols stood for well established middle class values such as education, evangelical Christianity, and patriotism. Although Y literature did not promote middle class Americans culture by name, its program unmistakably trumpeted its values.<sup>17</sup>

Christianity was a second way the Honolulu YMCA imposed uniform masculinity among its diverse constituency. *Articles on the “High Way” by Honolulu Students*, a published book of essays written by mostly Japanese and Chinese boys, confirm the evangelical mission of the Association. Essays on “Why I became Christian” testify to the boys finding strength in Jesus Christ or pleasure in a Christian life. Other boys praised Jesus as a manly role model. One boy wrote,

“It has been the popular conception until very recent times that Christ was a kind of an effeminate man that he was all right for women but not for red-blooded men. His ideals were correspondingly thought to be too womanish. This idea is rapidly being replaced by the knowledge that Jesus was not a weakling. On the contrary, He was physically strong, mentally awake, courageous, kind, magnanimous, in fact, we have very reason to believe that he was the strongest man that ever lived. He had every quality that we admire in great men today.”

Another student argued that Christianity and the home religions of many Chinese and Japanese students, Buddhism and Confucianism, were not at odds with one another, but were complimentary in their belief in a supreme being and in their “spirit of tolerance” for all religions. Although this is not what official YMCA leaders may have wished for their converts to internalize, the boys adoption of the manly virtues of Christianity along with their own liberal interpretation of Christian theology demonstrated that immigrant members constructed a belief system that met their own needs.<sup>18</sup>

Even though racial integration was the norm for Honolulu YMCA, it pragmatically formed segregated group activities to bolster recruitment and member involvement. The YMCA targeted Korean, Chinese, and Japanese business leaders by forming groups around their interests in hopes that they would become leaders who would spread Christianity in their communities. Integrated groups also targeted future leaders as a practical recruiting tactic. The Y sponsored a student exchange program between the University of Hawaii and American universities on the mainland. The programs objective was to better campus life at the University through “promoting interracial friendship” and to allow students leaving Hawaii to do the same throughout the United States. The Y hoped the exchange program, like the business leaders groups, would promote Christian values among the future leaders of Hawaii and America.<sup>19</sup>

While the Honolulu YMCA built an interracial organization, the YMCAs of Los Angeles reached out to immigrant groups in a segregated fashion. The Japanese YMCA of Los Angeles instilled manhood in its constituents in a similar manner to the Honolulu Y by preaching Christianity, teaching middle class values, and avoiding issues of biological difference. The Japanese Y made recruitment its first priority. The L.A. Y tracked membership in each of its branches and in 1941 set the goal of doubling the membership of the Japanese branch.<sup>20</sup> Beyond working with twenty-eight different Japanese Churches to increase its membership, the YMCA sponsored yearly events such as its “Learn to Swim Campaign” which provided free swimming lessons to boys of all races, religions, and backgrounds and introduced them to the Y program throughout the 1920s and 30s.<sup>21</sup>

Once Japanese men and boys became members of the Y, the stated goals of the Japanese branch were:

1. to build character “through club grouping with special emphasis upon making the program a cooperative one with Japanese Churches”

2. to acquaint Japanese and American boys with one another and “build appreciation for one another”
3. to “bring the Japanese community a conception of camping” and “character values”
4. to acquaint American groups with the Japanese community to facilitate better understanding
5. to enhance the welfare of Japanese youths as they are “the hybrids of two civilizations”
6. to teach Japanese youths that religion pervades every aspect of their lives
7. and to provide service to the community and train its future leaders<sup>22</sup>

To accomplish these ends the YMCA worked especially hard with Nisei, second generation Japanese-Americans, through groups, camps, and a myriad of athletic events. The Japanese YMCA supported the Young People’s Church Federation which taught evangelical Christianity through weekly bible studies and religious meetings; in addition, the branch held an annual Older Boys’ Conference throughout the 1930s for Nisei youths to hear speakers, debate relevant issues, and take leadership roles in their community.

The Japanese Y used popular American sports as a means of attracting new members, and instilling Nisei youths with middle class notions of character. The YMCA encouraged Nisei participation in its own athletic program along with the Japanese Athletic Union of Southern California (JAU). The JAU sponsored a wealth of different sports leagues for Japanese youths and built their motto of “Unity, Sportsmanship, Fraternity, Leadership” upon the YMCA’s concept of character. Nisei youths participated in swimming, baseball, basketball, wrestling, football, softball, and track through the JAU. Additionally, the Y encouraged its Nisei members to hold leadership positions in the JAU, asking them to embrace middle class evangelical values and teach them to non-Christian Japanese youths.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, the Japanese and Honolulu YMCAs altered the original Y’s ideas of race, from dominance to tolerance, and crafted a manhood that was more inclusive. The stated goals of these YMCAs encouraged friendly, tolerant, and respectful relations between Asian-Americans and “American boys.” On the other hand, the Y’s middle class American cultural norms



remained a standard. Regardless of whether or not the Y labeled its program as, white, middle class, or American, it remained those things. As stated earlier, middle class Protestant men built the entire YMCA program in reaction to the social conditions of modern America, and it was not a universal standard. When ministering to different immigrant groups in the twentieth century, the YMCA changed little of its original program. As the rhetoric of race faded from the literature and consciousness of immigrant YMCAs their middle class, white, Protestant members simply came to understand Christian character and athletic prowess as a universal set of masculine qualities which transcended differences of race or region. While this made the American masculinity more inclusive, it also hid cultural and class biases of the creed.

Although Anglo-American YMCA workers removed the discourses of racial power when working with immigrant communities, Mexican-American members of the Los Angeles YMCA recognized the program's potential as a discourse of racial uplift. The leadership of San Pedro YMCA Older Boys' Conference and the Mexican-American Movement (MAM), which evolved out the Older Boys' Conference, took the YMCA's non-racial message of self-improvement through athletics and education to heart and used it as a message of racial pride to empower the their community. Through achievement in sports, educational institutions, and civics the leaders of MAM felt that the Mexican-American community could improve their race, so as to gain equal status in American society. Their philosophy of self-improvement and discipline had its roots in the message and program of the YMCA.

In the early 1930s the YMCA of Los Angeles recognized its unique position to bring Christian manhood to Mexican-Americans, being in proximity to one of the largest populations in the United States. The 1931 Los Angeles YMCA's *Year in Review* encouraged Y members and organizations in East Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley, Van Nuys, and Southeastern Los

Angeles to reach out to Mexican churches, organizations, and communities. The review even targeted a student at Whittier College who might possibly become “a part-time Mexican secretary” and a leader in the YMCA movement. The Los Angeles YMCAs put on events, such as the International Festival highlighting songs, dances, and sports from around the world and the Festival of Old Mexico which recreated streets, singers, and food from “Old Mexico,” to encourage Mexican-Americans to join the YMCA. The San Pedro YMCA’s Older Boys’ Conference began in 1934 and became the Los Angeles Y’s most successful tool to recruit Mexican-American members.<sup>24</sup>

Originally organized as an event to highlight the success of the YMCA’s Mexican-American youths and bolster new membership, the San Pedro Older Boys’ Conference evolved into something completely different. The original Mexican-American members of the conferences took ownership and turned it into an event that promoted educational, athletic, and civic achievement in the community. By 1938 the conference set social, recreational, and civic goals. By 1940 the President of the Youth conferences stated that its purpose was to “inspire Mexican Youth to meet the social and intellectual requirements of our highly progressive American civilization.” And in 1944 the Conference became the Mexican-American Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the Mexican-American community through education and civics. Although the YMCA’s involvement in the conference faded over time, MAM retained strong elements of the YMCA’s philosophy of self-improvement through athletics, education, and clean living.<sup>25</sup>

Leaders of the Older Boys’ Conference used *The Mexican Voice*, a monthly paper sponsored by the Los Angeles YMCA, to communicate the Conference’s message to its membership. In every edition of *The Mexican Voice* the editors of the paper devoted a section to

the athletic achievements of the Mexican-American community. In the July 1938 edition, the Voice did an extensive review of Mexican youth athletes' accomplishments in football, basketball, and track, ending the segment with these words of encouragement to its readers,

“...we Mexicans are as good of athletes as any other race! Let's follow the example of these champions of our race! They know that to be champions, they must train hard – no smoking, drinking; regular hours and clean fun.”

Basketball, a sport invented by the YMCA, seemed to be a favorite of the *The Mexican Voice* and the Older Boys' Conference. Each Older Boys Conference kicked off its events with a basketball tournament of the local Mexican-American basketball teams. The Voice listed an annual all-city, all-county, and all-country teams of high school Mexican-American basketball players, in addition to reporting on players who had reached the ranks of junior college and university teams. *The Forward*, the newspaper sponsored by MAM and the heir apparent to the Voice, continued its tradition of reporting on Mexican-American athletes in high school and college.<sup>26</sup>

While sports played an important role in the Voice, educational achievement held the most cherished position in the paper. Editorials constantly touted the importance of education. The June 1938 issue devoted half of the paper to “The Value of Education” which argued that formal and self-taught education were the only ways “to advance ourselves in today's competitive world” and that they were also the most important steps in “building interracial tolerance.” A similar message appeared in “Horizons,” an article of the August 1939 issue, which stated that “the great future of our people depends to a great extent on social work and other forms of more formal education.” The article goes on to argue that Mexican-Americans need education to teach them principles and ideals of American government, to take on a scientific attitude towards “our social problems,” and learn the value of organization.<sup>27</sup>

Articles describing successful Mexican-Americans highlighted education in a different light. For example, “Dr. A.A. Sandoval- A Portrait” tells the story of a man who grew up in Mexico, came to the US, and through hard work, night school, the ROTC, and perseverance became a doctor and respectable role-model for Mexican-Americans. Similar stories exemplified the hard-work, education, thrift, and determination of Mexican-Americans who had “made it.” Following the profile of a scholar and musician David Vasquez, the editor tried to energize Mexican-Americans about the importance of education by writing,

“Just realize – a Mexican did this, a Mexican with the same kind of blood as you and I. You can too!.... Don’t heed the fellows loafing at the street corners, wasting their time. They’ll tell you an education is worthless. Don’t believe them. They don’t want you to progress. They are greedy and jealous, because you have a better chance.”<sup>28</sup>

In conjunction with its inspirational stories, *The Voice* profiled schools and scholarship opportunities for Mexican-American youths to help them achieve such lofty goals. Paul Coronel and other frequent contributors to the paper praised the YMCA as an organization that gave Mexican-Americans “a rare opportunity” to advance themselves through education.<sup>29</sup>

Besides *The Mexican Voice*, the Older Boys’ Conference and MAM put on events that stressed the importance of education. Every Older Boy’s Conference included lectures, speech contests, and discussion groups which provided boys and young men with the opportunity to learn and express their opinions, concerns, and talents. As the Conference grew and evolved into MAM, its leaders branched out and began a series of smaller conferences at for high school and junior college students during the 1940s. Speech contests on topics such as “What must I do to be a good American?” and “The responsibility of Mexican Americans in achieving equality” along with discussions held at junior colleges on “The Importance of Education,” “Interracial Problems,” and “Adjusting to American culture” continued the organizations philosophy of education, patriotism, and progress.<sup>30</sup>

Tying together its themes of education and athletics, *The Mexican Voice* advocated clean living and character training as the glue that would hold together their philosophy of racial advancement; values not so different from the YMCA's program. Paul Coronel, a leader in the Older Boys' Conferences and later the President of MAM, wrote a series of articles in 1939 ("Our Misguided Youth," "Social Conditions of the Mexican People in General," and "Giving Yourself a Chance") on social problems and character issues facing Mexican-American youths. In each article Coronel castigated "young lazy fellows hanging around corners, poolhalls, gambling joints, and everywhere DOING ABSOLUTELY NOTHING for themselves." Coronel felt that Mexican-American youths should invest their time and money in their education, instead of "wasting" their resources on fancy clothes, cars, dancing shoes, and other "fruitless recreations." Coronel placed blame on no one except the Mexican-American community for their problems, stating,

"If this is the reputation you like, no is to blame but ourselves. We as Mexicans must face the unquestionable problem of racial prejudice and poverty in order to achieve our ambitions. Our background makes it all the worse, and by this I mean our uneducated folk. If they didn't have the opportunity to know what an education is, how can we blame them if they cannot inspire it in us? Talent and capacities are not lacking in us. What is lacking is GUTS; AMBITION; FAITH; ANIMATION, and greatest of all A DESIRE TO ELEVATE OUR MEXICAN RACE!"<sup>31</sup>

The Voice, the Older Boys' Conference, and eventually MAM related the previously discussed values of athletic, educational, social, and personal achievement to racial advancement and pride. Borrowing from the YMCA's program of building middle class manhood, these organizations adjusted middle class standards of masculinity and advocated the same values to build a better Mexican-American community.

The Voice frequently published pieces which pressed for racial uplift. An article, "Are We Proud of Being Mexican?" argued that Mexican-Americans should be proud of their Aztec and Spanish heritage because each provided Mexicans with the blood of "high cultural civilizations." The article goes on to say that when Mexicans' Aztec and Spanish background is

“tempered with the fires of the Anglo-Saxon understanding of enlightenment” Mexican-Americans will be second to no other people. In another article Coronel scolds Mexican-Americans for telling people they are of Spanish descent. He contends that for Mexican-Americans to improve their status, successful and honorable members must display their racial background with pride. “Our Frontier,” a final article which highlights this phenomenon, states that while Anglo-Americans currently bemoan the loss of their American frontier, Mexican-Americans are currently on the brink of their own great frontier, racial uplift in American society.<sup>32</sup>

As demonstrated by its success with the Mexican-American community, the YMCA stripped its program much of its Othering rhetoric by the early part of the twentieth century, and convinced themselves that Christian manhood was a universal good which could be successfully acquired by immigrants groups of different races, classes, and cultural backgrounds. While the YMCA was not an expansive institution in immigrant communities, they convinced a substantial number of Japanese, Chinese, and Mexican immigrants in Honolulu and Los Angeles that Christian manhood was a relevant way to add meaning to their lives.

When compared with its program for Anglo-Americans, the YMCA’s work with immigrants proved to much more tolerant and inclusive. The Y’s newfound tolerance, however, was double-edged. It allowed the YMCA expand its ministry, with genuine compassion, to groups of people that looked much different than the typical American Y member. On the other hand, the Y program remained rooted in an understanding of manhood that was unique to white Protestant middle class American’s and was not understood as a universal value by groups unfamiliar with American culture. When the North American YMCA went abroad, it carried on

its confidence in the universality of its program and its belief in tolerance, but the Y's motives for ministry and points of emphasis changed in response to a new set of working conditions.

### **The Y Abroad**

The story of the North American YMCA's international work began in the years of 1888-1889, when several national and international (Europe and North America) conferences established the desire and resources for the Y to expand into Asia, Africa, and South America. North American YMCAs established their first international Associations in Japan and India shortly thereafter. From then on the YMCA's international work grew steadily. Between the years of 1890 and 1930 the North American YMCA sent 529 secretaries to foreign locations and established 16 YMCAs in Latin America, 207 in "The Far East," and 68 in "Southern and Western Asia and Africa." Huge increases in the foreign work budget accompanied the rising number of foreign Associations and workers. In the year 1916 the foreign work budget totaled approximately \$561,000. One decade later, the budget nearly quadrupled to approximately \$2,155,000. The exponential growth in the number of international Associations, foreign workers, and the foreign budget all indicate the American YMCA and its membership fully embraced the idea of sending the Y's message of Christian manhood overseas.<sup>33</sup>

Jon Thares Davidann's *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan, 1890-1930* chronicled the North American YMCA's mission of international evangelization in Japan and gives an insightful starting point for analyzing the YMCA's foreign work. Davidann argues that in pre-World War I Japan, YMCA missionaries and Japanese Christians clashed over nationalistic issues inherent in their religious beliefs. Both Japanese and American Christians held a strong belief that history was the story of human "progress" and that Christianity was a harbinger of that progress, but disagreed over what that Christianity should look like. Progress

turned into crisis for both American missionaries and Japanese Christians during conflicts over theology. American missionaries condemned Japanese liberal Christian theology as inferior to American conservative counterpart, and Japanese Christians found it difficult to balance their fears of Japanese moral degradation without feeling like cultural traitors by adopting Western religious practices.<sup>34</sup>

Davidann's work and my own prove that when the Y's program traveled overseas, it, and Christian manhood, became malleable once again. Departing from its work with Anglo-Americans and immigrants in America, Associations abroad taught foreign men they needed Christianity to build their manly character. Foreign Associations augmented their program with a strong message of tolerance and leadership as part of its mission to turn its converts into missionaries themselves. The YMCA placed less emphasis on physical recreation and virile masculinity and instead used it as a way to attract foreigners to Christianity, but not to build character.

Surprisingly Davidann's study, and much of the YMCA's own promotional material, rarely mentions manhood. In fact, the index of *A World of Crisis and Progress* has no entry for men, manhood, masculinity, gender, athletics, sports, physical training, or character; all key elements of the North American YMCA's domestic program. While the total exclusion of masculinity may have been an oversight in Davidann's book, his work correctly identifies that when the YMCA went overseas it lost much of its masculine rhetoric.

The YMCA remained a masculine institution though. In a study of the YMCA's world work done in 1919, a joint council validated the Y's mission to exclusively evangelize "boys and men" because of their ability to lead the movement and win converts among other non-Christians. Physical training and athletics remained a part of the Y's foreign program, but lost its strong



connection to manhood and became more of a tool to recruit and retain members. An overview of the Y's foreign work noted that "Boys in every land first join the Y because of its physical and recreational appeals." Athletics remained a large part of the Egyptian YMCA in Cairo. The First Annual Report on the Cairo YMCA in 1923 devoted a portion of the report to the Committee on Physical Work which touted the Y's gymnasium as the best in Cairo and stated that "happiness, good morals and good health are closely related" to physical activity (see figure 2). In the 1930s the Cairo YMCA into 1930s continued to schedule times for swimming, wrestling, handball, volleyball, tennis, badminton, and boxing. The YMCA also helped establish the first Egyptian basketball league in 1939.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the inclusion of physical activity, the YMCA did not explicitly link athletics to character and manhood as it did in the United States. Instead the international YMCA's linked Christianity to character development. A Y publication in China proclaimed that character was the nations most "fundamental need" and that only Christ and devotion to religion could satisfy this necessity. In Egypt the Y stated that "Character puts religion first." And in India a Y missionary argued that Christianity and character training were India's best hopes to solve their national problems. The correlations between character, religion, and physical activity were much different in America, where the road to Christian manhood was paved with push-ups, basketball drills, and swimming lessons more than prayer and bible study.<sup>36</sup>

The bulk of YMCA publications verify that Association's work overseas was based on preaching evangelical religion. *The Story of the YMCA International, 1884-1934*, stated that its mission was to bring people together during a time of "surging waves of nationalism, powerful currents of race prejudice, and dangerous troughs of religious and creedal division" by following the "teachings of Jesus Christ." The YMCA's foreign work book maintained an emphasis on

Christianity by asserting that foreign Y's mission was to present non-Christians with "Christ's teaching as the ultimate solution to his national problems." Additionally, the book gave a short history, prayer, and statement of how the Y could help every country in which it worked. Y missionaries were not, however, the only way that the YMCA evangelized foreign countries.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most effective methods the YMCA used to promote Christianity was its work with the National Council of Foreign Students and the Committee on Friendly Relations Among Foreign Students. These Y sponsored organizations recruited foreign college students attending universities in the United States to become Christian leaders in their home countries. The associations' membership was substantial, numbering over ten-thousand members throughout the 1930s. Working in tandem, the councils organized foreign college students into national chapters which published monthly newsletters, held meetings, and participated in conferences with other groups of foreign students.<sup>38</sup>

Newsletters from the Korean, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese chapters in the 1920s and 1930s indicate that each group strongly identified as Christians and had a vested interest in promoting Christianity in their home countries. Articles in the *Chinese Christian Student* titled, "What Makes a Christian Student Movement?" and "Chinese Students and Religion" offer proposals for expanding Christianity in China. The first article argues that their movement must maintain its nobility, realism, persistence, common goals, and "a consciousness of the basic solidarity of all humanity" to foster the growth of Christianity in China. The second article sizes up China's chances of becoming Christian nation and argues that although China's belief systems are traditionally humanistic, a positive Christian message has a real chance to influence the Chinese people because of the "great moral and spiritual vacuum" which currently exists there.<sup>39</sup>

An almost identical article which assesses “The Spiritual Outlook of Japan” appeared in *The Japanese Student Bulletin* ten years earlier. This article summarizes the major religions of Japan and asserted that “the destinies of nations depend, essentially, upon their moral character...determined by their religions.” The author concluded that Christianity had a very good chance of catching on in Japan because the Japanese people were aware of the importance of spirituality and were in search of new answers.<sup>40</sup>

*The Filipino Student Bulletin* highlighted the importance of the YMCA’s quest to recruit leaders in its efforts to Christianize foreign men (see figure 3). The Filipino Student Association considered itself an extremely influential in the Philippines and argued that it was the main organization which informed the American public about Filipinos as well as the most important conduit of American culture to the Philippines. Overall, the Filipino Association, as well as its Chinese and Japanese counterparts took their mission to lead their countries to Christianity seriously. The Y’s commitment to recruit the best and the brightest of foreign countries for the purpose of evangelism was part of its overall strategy of creating self-sustaining foreign missionary movement.<sup>41</sup>

*An Outline Study in the World Work of the YMCAs in the United States and Canada (1919)* verifies the Y’s strategy of recruiting foreigners to leadership positions. The report states that “It is obvious that if Christianity is ever to become indigenous in these lands, it must be under the leadership of (native) representatives of these three classes (students, government officials, and the upper business class).” The YMCA’s strategy in every country it entered was to build an indigenous leadership and eventually pass on its work to native leaders. *With the Youth of Thirty Nations*, a Y publication, profiled twelve of the YMCA’s indigenous secretaries and praised the system of native leadership as effective and efficient (see figure 4).<sup>42</sup>

The YMCA expected these foreign leaders to take up its conservative Christian values. The Egyptian Association targeted “young men of the educated classes” most likely to adopt the Y’s values and exercise influence over other Egyptians. Y leaders applauded their own efforts at turning political radicals into “ardent nationalists” along with recruiting twenty-four of Egypt’s “leading business and professional men” to sit on the YMCA national council. The indigenous leadership of the Y did not always live up to its expectations though. An enquiry report on Indian YMCAs revealed that the native leadership developed a substantial anti-British movement. Indian YMCA workers distributed anti-British literature, convened on political topics, eulogized revolutionary leaders, and sponsored anti-British lectures much to the chagrin of the American and European YMCAs. Despite such setbacks, the Y continued to targeted native leaders because of their importance in carrying out the Y’s work of spreading Christianity across the globe.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike the Y’s program among Anglo-Americans, tolerance was an important message of YMCA’s abroad. The YMCA’s international committee claimed to be non-political, interracial, and multinational, in addition to encouraging “bonds between spiritually minded people of all faiths.” Foreign YMCAs aspired to mitigate conflict among groups “in India, Jerusalem, and South Africa” through its message of tolerance. The Y also claimed to help the people of the world “for their own personal intellectual, and spiritual betterment, with no strings attached” by building bridges across divides of caste, class, race, religion, and nation.

A YMCA booklet titled *Twelve Portraits of Life* demonstrated a sympathetic point of view and a genuine commitment to acceptance. The booklet profiles twelve boys who are members of YMCAs around the world and are in need of the Y’s continued services (see figure 5). For example, the book tells the story of sixteen year old Yi Han Su of Korea, who works at a

furniture repair shop during the day and attends YMCA school at night to improve his future prospects. Another boy, Boris, a fourteen year old Bulgarian student, comes from a well-off family, attends a prestigious private school, and enjoys camping with the YMCA. Stories such as Yi Han Su's and Boris's showed the YMCA felt a genuine sympathy for boys and men from different backgrounds across the globe.<sup>44</sup>

Tolerance was also a practical avenue to power for the Y. Without changing its exclusionary creed, the YMCA would not have won many converts. Y missionaries counted on its message of tolerance to influence foreign men to consider the merits of Christianity and American culture. Finally, the Y hoped that missionaries preaching tolerance would mitigate conflict within foreign countries so Y workers could continue their Christianizing mission in a stable environment.

The YMCA's foreign work proved to be much different when compared to its domestic counterpart. International Y's tended to be more overtly Christian, placed less importance on physical training and virile manhood, and put more stress on leadership and tolerance. Racial and class status took a backseat to Christianity in establishing the Christian manhood of foreign members. While all YMCA's embraced the development of the mind, body, and spirit in its male members, the methods and points of emphasis varied greatly.

### **Conclusion**

The American YMCA's international work reached a crescendo in the 1920s, and the 1930s initiated a period of decline. Even though the YMCA maintained a high level of international work before WWII, it only did so through loans and massaging the its international budget. The Great Depression reduced donations and cut the foreign work budget drastically. In 1929 American YMCA members donated over \$1,500,000 to the Y's foreign work. In 1931 that

number dropped to \$700,000. Reduced budgets coupled with increasing conflict overseas meant the YMCA no longer had the means or the will carry out extensive missionary work.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of its losses, the YMCA crafted an effective and pragmatic message of Christian manhood by the time of the international Y's decline. By eliminating the rhetoric of race and emphasizing the programs Christian character and educational benefits the YMCA effectively gained power in immigrant communities and foreign countries, and proved the malleability and multifaceted nature of Christian manhood.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/olympics.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *The YMCA and the Olympiad (1935)- newsletter*, Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>3</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the history of manhood in the progressive era see Kimmel, *Manhood in American* or Rotundo, *American Manhood*.

<sup>5</sup> E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Winter, *Making Men, Making Class: The YMCA and Workingmen, 1877-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> David McLeod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983),

Winter, *Making Men, Making Class*,

Putney, *Muscular Christianity*.

<sup>10</sup> *Keeping in Condition: A Handbook on Training for Older Boys* by H.H. Moore (347 Madison Ave, NY, 1915), Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>11</sup> *Report of Commission on Scope, Aims, and Responsibilities of the Physical Department- May 1924*, Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>12</sup> *Health Talks- 1936* (advertisement pamphlet, sponsored by the NYC YMCA), Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>13</sup> For an extended discussion of recapitulation theory of see Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization*.

<sup>14</sup> *The Christ Way of Living: A Series of Discussions for Young Men* (prepared by Rev Fred Trotter) (published between WWI and WWII), Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>15</sup> *Survey of the Educational Activities of the Los Angeles YMCA, April 1924*, Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>16</sup> *Two Doors of Opportunity* (pamphlet from the Honolulu YMCA, 1933)

*Some Data on Five Years Work of the Young Men's Christian Association with the boys of the City and County of Honolulu 1922-1927*, all from Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>17</sup> *The Stern Responsibilities of Manhood (for Fathers and Sons)* by Albert W. Palmer.

*Man-Making on the Big Island with the YMCA* (a pamphlet outlining the programs of the Hawaii YMCA), all from Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>18</sup> *Articles on the "High Way" by Honolulu Students (1927)*, Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>19</sup> *University of Hawaii Exchange Plan (Memo, April 16, 1934)*,

*Two Doors of Opportunity* (pamphlet from the Honolulu YMCA, 1933), all from Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>20</sup> *YMCA Membership Enrollment Poster (Feb 19, 1941)*, Whittier YMCA Collection.

<sup>21</sup> *Learn to Swim Campaign* sponsored by the Hollywood YMCA (1937)- pamphlet, Whittier YMCA Collection.

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- <sup>22</sup> Japanese YMCA- Christmas 1937- Bulletin, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>23</sup> *Japanese YMCA- Christmas 1937- Bulletin*,  
Japanese YMCA-Report for October 1934, all from Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>24</sup> *YMCA Pamphlet "Year in Review"- 1931-* Whittier YMCA Collection ,  
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- <sup>25</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issues August 1938, February 1940.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Mexican Voice: issues July 1938, February 1939, February 1940*, Whittier YMCA Collection,  
*The Forward-* Vol. 1, No. 5- May 8, 1947, from CSUN- MAM archive.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issue August 1939, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issue July 1938, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>29</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issues August 1938, August 1939, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issue February 1940, Whittier YMCA Collection,  
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- <sup>31</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issues January 1939, August 1939, Spring 1939, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Mexican Voice*: issues August 1938, January 1939, January 1940, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Story of the YMCA International, 1884-1934* (New York: 1934),  
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- <sup>34</sup> John Thares Davidann, *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan, 1890-1930* (London: Lehigh University Press, 1998).
- <sup>35</sup> *Cairo YMCA Central Branch- 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Report 1923*,  
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- <sup>39</sup> *The Chinese Christian Student*: issues March 1929, October 1936, Whittier YMCA Collection.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Japanese Student Bulletin*: issue February 15, 1927, Whittier YMCA Collection.
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