From the 1880s on Porfirian educators, social reformers, and balneal entrepreneurs produced a discursive cacophony encoding bathhouses in the language of morality, class, hygiene, and civilization since they viewed these establishments as important for the propagation of the regime’s “primer of progress.” Bathrooms, washhouses, and public baths became crucial sites of encounter between individuals of humble social origins and their social superiors, and there, it was hoped, would acquire the elite’s superior sanitary practices. Reports from army hospitals, poorhouses, trade and boarding schools from throughout the 1880s detailed how their administrators endeavored to replace primitive facilities with novel porcelain toilets and high-pressure water showers. These innovations, reports noted, would teach the lower orders the elite’s superior values of cleanliness and morality. These novel procedures and habits, some hoped, would also introduce to the unclean masses new practices and concepts more in keeping with the advanced economic and social transformation of Mexico, such as the value of privacy, individualism, and time-keeping. In actual practice, however, few of the city’s poor actually made it to the baths.

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1 Consejo Superior de Salubridad, *Memorias del primer Congreso Higiénico-Pedagógico reunido en la ciudad de México el año de 1882* (Mexico City: Imprenta del Gobierno dirigida por Sabás A. y Mungrúa, 1883), 37-38 and 54-56; and Blas Escontrías, *Memoria presentada al H. Congreso del Estado de San Luis Potosí por el gobernador constitucional Ingeniero Blas Escontrías relativa a los actos administrativos correspondientes al periodo de 1o de septiembre de 1899 a 31 de agosto de 1901* (San Luis Potosí: Gobierno del Estado, 1901), unpaginated. In the *Memoria* of Escontrías, refer to the report by the new director of the Escuela Industrial Militar, in the *Memoria’s* section on the *Ramo de Instrucción Pública*. The rare *Memoria* is located in the Colección de Memorias Administrativas, Fondo de la Secretaría General del Gobierno, Archivo Histórico del Estado de San Luis Potosí, San Luis Potosí, Mexico.


At the turn of the century, Mexico City’s bathhouses, with few exceptions, attracted people of the middle and upper classes. Study of bathing establishments can thus yield more light on the *gente decente*, particularly since, as I posit, middle and upper class patrons constructed their sense of identity by highlighting and contrasting their balneal practices with those of the lower orders. The washed classes, then, if you will allow me use of this term, also made interesting implications about gender and national pride in their writings about bathhouses. In a separate paper, I posit that bathing establishments constitute important cultural sites not only for the propagation of novel cultural and consumption patterns, but also for drawing chauvinist, patriotic comparisons of the bathing culture of Mexico *vis-à-vis* Western Europe, but in my presentation today, I am going to focus on how authorities’ increased surveillance of bathhouses in Mexico City at the turn of the century is indicative of a thriving community of men who engaged in same-sex-attraction.

Hispanic societies have long viewed bathing—because it requires the human body to be unclothed—as an ambivalent, dangerous, morally-threatening activity. During the Reconquista, one of the first things that Kings did upon taking possession of a newly-liberated Moorish town was to close the bathhouses, because in the dark shadows of the steamrooms, according to many a-moralizing, Bible-thumping cleric, the Devil could easily lure the Christians to commit nefarious acts. Early modern Spanish *dichos* (folk wisdom) are perhaps the best measure of the traditional Hispanic mentality toward bathing: *De los baños, menos provechos que daños* (You have more to fear than gain from bathing), *la corteza guarda el palo* (bark protects the stick—

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4 Víctor M. Macías-González, “Los Baños Turco-Romanos en la Gran Alberca Pane or the Discourses of Chauvinism and Gender in Mexico City Bathhouses, 1880-1920” in *In the Men’s Room at Sanborns, and Other Masculine Sexual Spaces in Mexico Since 1810*, ed. Víctor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein, forthcoming from University of New Mexico Press.

Bark as in encrusted grime), *más vale tierra en cuerpo que cuerpo en tierra* (it is better to have dirt on your body than for your body to be six feet under) and *más vale oler a puerco que a muerto* (it is better to stink like a pig than like a corpse). But with the Enlightenment, Spaniards became more accepting of bathing, and increasingly recommended ablutions with therapeutic aims. Maladies as varied as venereal disease, cardiovascular afflictions, or dyspepsia were treated through medically-supervised soakings and the ingestion of mineral waters, leading to the development of spas and similar health resorts throughout Spain and the Americas.

The New World territories of the Spanish Crown were a bit ahead of Spain, for Prehispanic cultures had long-embraced bathing. In fact, because of Amerinds’ recognition of the therapeutic qualities of steam baths—known in Mexico as *temascales*—we should not be surprised that Church authorities, ever-vigilant of the Indians’ relapse into their “idolatry,” closely surveyed bathhouses. But it was more than an occasional invocation of a Precolumbian deity during an herb-scented steam cure that the Inquisition encountered in the steam rooms of Colonial Mexico. Informants observed that certain out-of-the-way bathhouses and swimming pools attracted *sométicos* or sodomites. But perhaps because many of the same-sex-attracted males arrested in its mid-seventeenth century bathhouse raids turned out to be students and clerics, the Inquisition dropped the subject. Instead, it seems, Colonial authorities devoted themselves to creating additional bathhouses so that women and men did not have to mix. After

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independence, in 1821, the perpetual penury and weakness of authorities diminished their ability to monitor bathing establishments.

When public baths finally regained the attention of officials in the 1870s, it was not their relative morality that concerned them, but rather, whether bathhouses paid their taxes on time. Gradually, bathing establishments attracted government vigilance, since public hygienists thought that inadequately maintained bathhouses could pose a public health threat. For, before authorities completed their multi-million dollar overhaul of sanitation services at the turn of the century, Mexico City frequently experienced epidemics of cholera and typhus. Accordingly, the sanitary codes of the capital—beginning in 1892—enlisted the collaboration of all owners and managers of “public meeting areas”—among them bathhouses—to remain ever-vigilant of those clients whose bodies or behavior had the tell-tale signs of contagious diseases. Those suspected of cholera, bubonic plague, yellow fever, typhus, smallpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, etc., were to be banned from the establishment in question and their names reported to authorities. Bathhouses themselves—with the exception of their wells, sewage line connections, toilets, urinals, and boiler rooms—were not regulated until the late 1890s, when the purview of the Sanitary Code of 1891 (after many amendments) was extended to bathhouses.10

At the turn of the century, 40 entrepreneurs owned Mexico City’s 46 bathing establishments. Most of these catered to the city’s middle and upper-middle classes. The working class, according to a leading social scientist, were simply too poor to bathe, as soap alone “would consume 25% of their income.”11 The poor made do with washing their face, hands, and chest, but little else. Even when authorities or philanthropists funded free public

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11 Guerrero, *La génesis del crimen*, 118.
baths, the poor shied away. In fact, when authorities decreed in 1901 that all guests of the public shelters must bathe in order to secure a bed, the occupancy rate diminished to nearly 50%. By 1905, the municipal government closed its free public bathhouse in La Lagunilla for lack of use.12

Cleanliness—at least as the hegemonic sectors of society viewed it—was closely linked to social status, and increasingly, a matter of national pride. Mexico could very well be underdeveloped or even inferior, the *gente decente* could perhaps acknowledge, but at least, it was a clean country. As early as 1885, government reports proudly noted how per capita consumption of water in urban areas reached levels comparable with Berlin, Brussels, or Vienna. By 1904, new pumping stations and an expanded sewer system allowed inhabitants of Mexico City a *per capita* average of 244 liters, a figure nearly thrice that of Berlin, twice that of Brussels or Vienna, and a full 70 liters ahead of the average Londoner. Five years later, with the completion of the Xochimilco Water Works in 1909, the populace of Mexico City increased its water use to 400 liters, a figure comparable with Rome, Chicago, or New York.13

While government statistics would have us conclude that Porfirians were wont to proclaim the superiority of Mexican bathing practices *vis-à-vis* Western Europe, analysis of balneal literature from 1880 to 1890, however, reveals a certain anxiety at the state of bathhouses in major urban areas. A guidebook that Romualdo de Zamora y Duque, Mexico City’s bathhouse tycoon, commissioned in the late 1880s is particularly telling. Zamora y Duque’s hired pen, the *Ingeniero* Alberto Malo was under instructions to “diligently” study bathing

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establishments in the United States and Europe in order to assess the quality of bathhouses in Mexico City. After much consideration, Malo concluded that the capital’s bathhouses were inferior—and frankly, decrepit. With most establishments installed in buildings dating from the eighteenth century, few offered comfort. They consisted of a reception area, a dressing room and a long, cold, dark gallery where a shivering clientele took its ablutions in hand-filled talavera-tiled tubs with little or no privacy. Modesty was found wanting, as the employees who delivered the barely-heated water to customers were often men, and they tended to ogle at female bathers.\footnote{Del Valle Arizpe, 413-417 and Anonymous, \textit{El Hamm Am. Baños Turco-Romanos en la gran Alberca Pane. Hidroterapia completa. Guía del Bañador} (Mexico City: Tipografía Berrueco Hermanos, 1897). Unpaginated. A copy can be found in the Felipe Teixidor Collection of the Rare Books Room of the Biblioteca México, Mexico City.} Few had showers or steam rooms, and for the most part, reflected bathing technology from the beginning of the nineteenth-century.

Manuel Olaguíbel, the general manager of the Alberca Pane, the flagship establishment of de Zamora y Duque’s balneary emporium, subsequently implemented remedies to better the conditions that Malo’s report had described. When it opened finally opened in 1895 after years of remodeling, the pompously named \textit{Baños turco-romanos de la Gran Alberca Pane} became the most modern and luxurious bathhouse of Mexico City. No expenses were spared. Located on the city’s most elegant avenue, the Paseo de la Reforma, in front of the Monument to Christopher Columbus, the Alberca Pane featured the latest hydrotherapeutic gadgets, steam baths, and saunas, on facilities that also housed a massage parlor, barber shop, bar, reading lounges, formal gardens, and refreshingly cold spring-fed pools. Local and imported marbles, fine furnishings, and exotic paintings glamorized the establishment.\footnote{El Hamm Am . . . unpaginated.} Other bathing entrepreneurs soon followed suit. Eduardo Dublán, owner of the Factor Baths, located in front of the Mexican Congress, had the courtyard gardens of his establishment replanted with flowering bushes and hired a string
ensemble to “harmonize” the conversations of its all-male Sunday clientele. To the sides of the elegantly bestatued, classically-ornamented indoor pool, led off a series of maze-like hallways with private bathing alcoves. The Hidalgo Baths, owned by Salvador Miranda, advertised the elegance of its installations, stressing the beauty of its gardens, and called attention to the great beauty of its oriental pool.16

The sumptuous redecoration, redistribution, and redesign of bathhouse spaces in the 1890s reintroduced to Mexico City’s bathing facilities—which in colonial times had been crucial to the development of same-sex-attracted male social networks and affective ties—as a homosexual space. The urban landscape now provided a place where scantily-clad men could unsuspectedly congregate and, through careful observation, lingering looks, furtive glances, and guarded comments, gradually contact others who shared their same-sex attraction. This “cruising” was greatly facilitated through the new lay out; from the large central pool, men could gaze at dozens—if not hundreds—of other bathers. Once mutual interest was established, the couple could safely, discreetly, and separately leave the pool and rendezvous in the darkened hallways radiating from the pool along which were located private bathing cabinets. Once behind closed doors, and perhaps in collusion with a well-bribed bath attendant, they could safely carry on. Contacts could also be made in the exercise rooms, where conversation about weightlifting techniques or carefully phrased compliments about someone’s musculature, could safely evolve into a pick-up line. For less out-going types, the reading galleries of the larger bathing establishments, where men often lounged nude, could also prove fruitful; one had only to glance at what type of book or magazine a person favored . . . and perhaps from deducing a

person’s interests, make a love connection.\textsuperscript{17} It should not go without notice that commonly used pejoratives for effeminate men in nineteenth-century Mexico—*perfumado* (the well-scented or perfumed one) or *polveado* (powdered or talcked)—clearly suggested that contemporaries thought gay men spent too much time grooming themselves—and hence, frequented first-class bathing establishments.

It did not take long for authorities to catch on to the “dirty dealings” at the bathhouses. The behavior, practices, and sumptuous trappings of the same-sex-attracted male bathing culture of the 1890s, gradually became unacceptable by 1905 owing to increased elite anxiety stemming from widespread claims that upper class males were becoming too soft, self-serving, and hedonist to be entrusted with the country.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, a series of homosexual scandals\textsuperscript{19} at the turn of the century implicating members of the country’s highest social, industrial, military, and political circles, forced health authorities, journalists, bathhouse entrepreneurs, and others to more closely scrutinize steam rooms, gymnasiums, swimming pools, and showers as sites that endangered public health and morality. In urban areas of northern Mexico, the widespread practice of sodomy among unmarried teen males—at least as observed in Salvador Novo’s recently-published posthumous memoirs\textsuperscript{20}—prompted legislatures into action. The authors of the 1905 Chihuahua civil code not only criminalized same-sex rape and persecuted all forms of

\textsuperscript{17} For the emergence of similar spaces and practices in the U.S. at the same time, consult John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same Sex Relations and the YMCA* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially chapter 7.


\textsuperscript{19} The 41 Affair was the principal one, but there was also a famous incident involving the staff of the Imperial German Legation. It happened when the German military attaché attended an official function so convincingly attired in feminine garb that he fooled an unsuspecting President Díaz into openly flirting with him. When the ruse was revealed, a much-embarrassed Díaz ordered the German’s immediate expulsion from the country. See the second volume of the memoirs of Victoriano Salado Álvarez, *Memorias, Tiempo Nuevo* (Mexico City: Edición y Distribución Ibero Americana de Publicaciones, 1946).

\textsuperscript{20} Read his early experiences in Chihuahua—and later in Torreón in Salvador Novo, *La estatua de sal* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1998).
“contra-natura intercourse” with stiff fines and penalties, but also sought to provide protection, both to men and to women, from any unsolicited sexual innuendos or advances in public spaces.\textsuperscript{21} Authorities and business-owners consequently elaborated regulations outlining what was considered proper and improper public behavior.

Thus, by 1900, Mexican bathhouses—much like gay baths in the late 1980s and early 1990s—symbolized sexual license, irresponsibility, degeneracy and scandal.\textsuperscript{22} Authors of bathing advertisements and guidebooks reassured the public of the safety and morality of first-class balneary establishments. In his prologue to the guide to the Gran Baño de San Felipe de Jesús, literary figure Luis G. Urbina stressed that unlike its competitors, this establishment was characterized by cleanliness, order, and propriety. Special attention was drawn to the employees’ honorable behavior, as well as their attention to detail and constant vigilance against physical and moral dangers. Facilities were well-lit, privacy was guaranteed, and most interestingly, noted the amplitude of all departments. At the San Felipe de Jesús Baths, its propaganda proclaimed, bathers were not so crowded that they would unnecessarily and uncomfortably rub up against each other. Rather, they could circulate freely and not be in close proximity to strangers, as was the case in “dubious” establishments. A set of rules were strictly enforced to guarantee safety, hygiene, and a “moral environment” to clients. These included a prohibition against the mixing of genders, precluded the presence of prostitutes, and strictly

\textsuperscript{21} Article 769 read “Se impondrá la pena de arresto mayor y multa de cinco a quinientos pesos, al que ultraje la moral pública ó las buenas costumbres, ejecutando una acción impúdica en un lugar público. Se tendrá como impúdica toda acción que en el concepto público esté calificada de contraria al pudor.” Crimes against decency, “atentados contra el pudor”, were further defined in article 771, which made a passing reference to homosexuality in noting “Se dá el nombre de atentado al pudor á todo acto impúdico que pueda ofenderlo, sin llegar á la copula carnal, y que se ejecuta en la persona de otro sin su voluntad, sea cual fuere su sexo.” Its aim was clearly to penalize any unsolicited sexual advances and innuendos from individuals in public areas. See: Estado de Chihuahua, Código penal del Estado Libre y Soberano de Chihuahua (Chihuahua City: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1905), 178-179.

\textsuperscript{22} See Pat Califia’s comments on gay baths in Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), 6.
banned the sharing of tubs or the scrubbing or handling of other bathers in any way. Moreover, loiterers were warned against dawdling about; they were to rapidly proceed about their business and vacate the premises within 45 minutes of entering. Anyone who took too long in the baths was fined; patrons were asked to not congregate in the gymnasium and to only use the equipment for 15 minutes. The harshness of these policies, the guidebook noted, was to curb the occurrence of improper behavior that apparently discombobulated polite society: “These procedures are meant to preserve order and morality in this establishment, in order to avoid any dangers or inconveniences to the customers.”

The regulations and language employed suggests that baths without adequate means to guarantee privacy, inappropriate or insufficient lighting or surveillance, and with crowded conditions, could lend themselves to bathers cruising the baths, inappropriately touching themselves or each other.

A guidebook dating from the 1890s, suggests—with luxury of detail—the homoerotically-charged environment of bathhouses. In a brief testimonial, a visitor to the Gran Alberca Pane described his experiences there in a most sensual manner. “I disencumbered myself of my clothing,” he begins his tale, insinuating the undesirability of clothing and the naturality of nudity. Upon entering the first of the tri-chambered Turkish bath (Tepidarium, Caldarium, and Laconicum), “I felt the warm air caressing, overpowering me.” The air is pleasurable and puts him in a mood whereby he can offer himself to something that is more powerful than he. As his eyes adjust to the dim light, he notices the play of colored lights. “These,” he relishes,

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23 Anonymous, *Ligeros apuntes históricos sobre el baño en México y datos históricos y estadísticos del gran baño de San Felipe de Jesús en la capital de la República* (Mexico City: Tipografía Vázquez e hijos, 1911). Unpaginated. A copy can be found in the Felipe Teixidor Collection of the Rare Books Room of the Biblioteca México, Mexico City.
idealize the spectacle that other bathers, who seemed dance and turn nude all about me. I lay down on a divan and entered a most pleasant somnolence free of all physical or moral restraint. My thoughts began to wander.  

And that was only the beginning! His sensual experience was heightened in the massage room, where, while a member of the “pleasant, smiling, refined, and exquisitely gallant” staff scrubbed and gave him such a good kneading, that delirious, he noted “I began to fall under a spell.” With the masseur’s hands running all over his body, he noticed the dim lights changing color:

beginning a rhythmic dance evocative of the arabesque designs on the walls, giving a rainbow hue to the drops of water dripping from the faucets [as fast] as the [beating] of the wings of a hummingbird . . . [the hands] of the most able and pleasant masseur, washes and lathers all of your body, and I know not where he is more tenderly gentle, if at the top, middle, or bottom . . .

One cannot but wonder whether the language here used is a veiled reference by the delirious bather to being tactilely stimulated by the bath boy, particularly given the pulsating phallic imagery (the hummingbird beating his wings and the faucet dripping). Lest one make such a conjecture, the narrator of the testimonial assures the reader that the stimulation the young man is making of his body is guided by “all the movements that science dictates.” Once he is thus reinvigorated, most fittingly, the much-aroused bather takes a cold shower and upon emerging from the pool, another young man envelops his naked body in a white towel.

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24 *El Hamm Am*, 17-18. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
25 Ibid., 18-19.
26 Ibid., 19-20.
Conclusions. Through analysis of the geography of leisure and hygiene, we can interrogate or garner observations about quotidian practices that allow us to understand how societies built their sense of self-worth and propriety. Through the study of the balneal practices of Porfirian Mexico, we not only obtain further insight into the much studied discourses of hygiene, morality, leisure, and class, but also increase our understanding of how Díaz’s social and economic transformation—whether through increased contact with the outside world or through the expansion of traditional definitions and manifestations of gender. The bathing culture of the gente decente not only allowed them to define and articulate the boundaries of polite society, but also provided them with a way of expressing, through a banal quotidian practice, a sense of national pride. From depths of their soapy bathtubs and dark steam baths, the middle classes could carry out their civic duty and personally contribute to the regime’s modernizing goals. A daily bath regimen not only gave them health and gave them membership in the country’s moral majority, but also allowed them to perform Mexico’s balneal superiority vis-à-vis an unwashed Europe.

But in the site that proclaimed the country’s civilization also lurked the sinister specter of moral danger. Bathhouses were instrumental in making public, visible, or evident the artificiality of heterosexual masculinity. In the steamy darkness of the balneal establishment, as the many regulations and prohibitions reviewed here suggest, Porfirian males could sexually satisfy themselves with other men. These regulations, clearly aimed at suppressing opportunities for same-gender sensuality, reveal a much more widespread practice of homosexuality than historians have attributed. Whether or not the men who sought out the affection of other men thought of themselves as members of a separate subculture is irrelevant to this point; we can leave the genealogy of a gay identity for another time. What is evident is that bathhouse
regulations sought to discourage or hide the public display or flaunting of non-reproductive, non-heterosexual sensuality. Rather, the enactment of these policies made evident that societal unease about the revelation of “an absolutely sanctioned public silence” on homosexuality. If society proved unable to suppress queers—raritos or jotos—from using the baths to seek out sexual partners, then the next best thing that could be done was to place legal impediments to those practices that facilitated same-sex intimacy in the bathhouse. Most interestingly—and a stream that I intend to follow in subsequent work—the authorities’ efforts to police the “dirty dealings” in the bathhouse (and hence the title of my presentation, “Scrubbing the Queer Away”) led to the elaboration of a criminal discourse to contain the homosexual. Ironically, in doing so, they also constructed a new social category, which over time, evolved into a distinct and thriving community of people.