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Epistemologies of the *Baño*: Bath Space, Affective Occupation, and Public Sex(ualities)
in Contemporary Queer Mexican Narrative

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Spanish

by

Koby Bryan Hansen

June 2026

Dissertation Committee:

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The Dissertation of Koby Bryan Hansen is approved:

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Acknowledgements

Since beginning my journey in higher education in 2016 an image has popped into my head from time to time. It's a picture of my younger self, almost six years old, holding Mo, my father's border collie puppy. When I see myself in that picture, I can see the feelings of confusion, of not belonging, of wanting a life drastically different from the lives of the men who were in my life at the time. More than anything, I see sadness. This journey starts with the decision to be brave and search for a new path.

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Finally, to my younger self: this is for you. You don't need to feel ashamed anymore; you found where you belong, and you have so, so much to be proud of.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Epistemologies of the *Baño*: Bath Space, Affective Occupation, and Public Sex(ualities)
in Contemporary Queer Mexican Narrative

by

Koby Bryan Hansen

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Spanish
University of California, Riverside, June 2026
Dr. Iván Eusebio Aguirre Darancou, Chairperson

Despite being one of the recurrent spaces in contemporary Queer Mexican narrative, little scholarly attention has been given to baños. Employing a critical approach to bath space, this dissertation explores the representations of bathrooms and bathhouses and their potential not only in their narrative function but also as opportunities for critical reflections on larger dynamics of power related to space, gender, sexuality and the control of bodies. I begin by making an argument for *Critical Baño Studies*, an analytical framework for understanding bath space narratives. In chapter one, I argue for a rereading of Ana Clavel's novel *Cuerpo naufrago* with an acute focus on the protagonist's overnight transition into a man, her new obsession with urinals, and an understudied portion of the novel that portrays masculine sociality in the bathhouse. In chapter two, I bring together a score of pre- and post-2000s films under the genre of "Bathhouse Film." With a new approach to the iconic films *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* and *El Callejón de los Milagros*, as well as the newer films *Cuatro Lunas* and *Salón rojo*, I propose an approach to bathhouse films that regards bath space as critique. In the third and final chapter, I bring Critical Baño

Studies to the sonic through the podcast *CUIR: Historias disidentes* to demonstrate the ways in which we can affectively occupy bath space via the auditory. In all, this dissertation brings together scholarly conversations from across Mexican Studies, Queer Theory, and Spatial Humanities to make a case for the importance of bath space as a key site of critique and knowledge production in contemporary narrative.

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Introduction

Put bluntly, peeing is political, and so is taking a shit and washing up.

—Harvey Molotch, *Toilet*

From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality.

—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

...

My phone weighs heavy in the pocket of my gym shorts. I know I'm not allowed to have it with me during class, but I'm waiting. Anxiously. The excitement of breaking the rules, doing something I'm not supposed to be doing makes my heart race. It beats faster when I feel the first vibration. I sneak off to the edge of the gym to see the notification. It's from K. The Other K. The not-gay K. The popular K. The message is short but clear: meet me in the locker room. I tell my P.E. teacher that I'm going to run to the bathroom really quickly. As I make my way towards the locker room, I almost begin to tremble with anticipation. Looking down the stairs that lead to the changing room, I'm on a precipice, on the edge of breaking even more rules. I smile then descend.

...

As I write this, I cannot help but to think of the long and winding road that has led me to where I am today. This journey starts with the decision to go down those stairs to meet my middle school crush. Since then, a lot has changed; I moved to another state, I began to fully embrace my queerness, I learned another language (or a couple), I became an academic. But the origins of my story remain the same.

Recently, a friend and colleague asked me what it's like to visit my hometown. Without thinking much of it, I said that it's like seeing a ghost: so much has changed, yet nothing has changed. This description is especially apt, given that my hometown of Baker City, Oregon once was a major stop on the Oregon Trail, a booming mining town, then a logging town, and now little more than a ghost town that managed to survive, unlike the many satellite settlements that surround it. My story too is full of ghosts, specters of rural queerness that have had a profound impact on my life. The anecdote with which I start this introduction is one such specter.

Growing up queer in rural Oregon was anything but pleasant; I was 5 or 6 years old when someone called me a faggot for the first time. In middle school, the boys in my gym class started a fake petition to have me removed from the class so they wouldn't "get AIDS." In the locker room, always reeking of pubescent sweat and the cheap cologne used in vain to cover it up, they would call my name so I would look at them, and then threaten me if they caught me looking at them again. That same year, a boy in the grade above me, invited me to sneak into the empty locker room during class so that he could have his first gay kiss (in secret, of course). Secrecy and discretion subsequently defined much of my teen years, meeting with boys in the woods or near abandoned mineshafts who would tell me how much they enjoy being with me in the dead of night and terrorize me at school during the day. This terror reached its maximum when I was left a note in my high school locker that said if I did not stop being so queer that they would "Matthew Shepard" me. When I shared this with school administration, they said it was not possible to do anything because they could not be sure of who had written the note. On October 6th, 1998, Matthew

Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming, was approached by two men at a bar who offered to give him a ride home. The two men proceeded to drive him to a secluded area, rob, beat, torture, and leave him tied to a fence to die. I was very young when I heard of Matthew's story for the first time, and to this day it remains a salient reminder of the violence that queer people face in rural America.

Despite these painful experiences, my own queerness has never been something negative for me; I have always been unapologetically queer in a way that has been a constant source of euphoria. Even in the most difficult of times, being queer provided me with a sense of sureness that still comforts me to this day. Because of this, the way that I approach academics as a queer person and Queer Studies in general is from the perspective that refuses narratives of tragedy. Coincidentally, the year that I turned 14—the year my father died and that I officially came out to my family as being gay—was the same time that I was introduced to and found solace in queer literature; Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* enraptured me with beautiful prose and tongue-in-cheek representations of queer erotics and desire. For me, this novel perfectly evoked a reading experience that only solidified my pleasure in consuming queer media.

When I decided to abandon my rural hometown and head to Los Angeles to pursue higher education, I did so with my queerness in mind; in fact, much of what I did in my first year of undergrad focused on living a life that allowed me to enjoy what had been oppressed for so long. Paradoxically, it was not until my second or third year of undergrad that I decided to do a minor in LGBTQ+ Studies and, when I finally had declared the Spanish major, I decided to seek out queer Latin American literature. All of this because

being a reader of queer literature, a viewer of queer film, and a member of the queer community *makes me feel good*.

Years later, I found myself having a similar experience while studying for the master's exam; enter the third specter. Mario Bellatin's novella *Salón de belleza* centers around an unnamed owner of a beauty salon who, with the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis, converts his business into a hospice facility for those men at the end of their lives. The narrator explains that "Lo que antes fuera un lugar destinado para la belleza, se convertirá solamente en un espacio que alguna vez estuvo destinado para la belleza y ahora lo está para la muerte" (Bellatin 50). This story of transition from decadence and beauty to death and decay is undoubtedly the novella's major theme. The aesthetic aspect of the text is a major focus, with the salon's fish tanks serving as a parallel to the conditions of the dying men; as more individuals seek company and care in their final days, the state of the tanks also worsens. However, Bellatin's novella is not entirely dedicated to such a heavy topic; throughout the text, there are scenes that function as windows into the intimate moments of queer men's pleasure. It is these representations of spaces of pleasure—namely the depictions of cruising in bathhouses and oral sex in a movie theater—that interest me most. Even in the most depressing of topics, there is room for pleasure—the pleasure of being ourselves and the pleasure of being with each other.

The kind of representation that I have identified in Bellatin's novella is the crux of this project, which in the broadest sense, is an exploration of narratives of pleasure with a specific orientation towards spatiality. Following Sara Ahmed's development of orientation as it pertains to queer phenomenology, concrete spaces in the city and nation

become centerpieces of the narratives of pleasure that I am theorizing. Here it is important to note that by narratives I mean not only written texts, but also narrative film and (to a lesser extent) other forms of cultural production (plastic arts, performance, etc.). My emphasis on 21st century cultural production is an important aspect of this project; from my perspective, the state of queer Mexican Studies represents a kind of paradox in the sense that scholarship dedicated to queer cinema has exploded and embraced the 21st century, and yet LGBTQ+ literary and cultural studies have not quite stepped into this century to the same extent. The works of Salvador Novo, Luis Zapata and Mario Bellatin continue to dominate what could be called the queer cannon in Mexican literature. Of these texts, Bellatin's 1994 novella *Salón de belleza* and Novo's novel *La estatúa de sal* (published posthumously in 1997) are the two most recent, despite both texts being published nearly 30 years ago.

Putting Queer Studies aside for a moment, it seems like the largest trends in Mexicanist scholarship are centered around topics such as necropolitics and ecocriticism or are meant to destabilize the canon, giving a platform to more women's and Indigenous voices. Undoubtedly, one of the most important figures writing today is Cristina Rivera Garza, who represents a major shift in this moment of Mexican and transnational intellectual and literary movement. This shift comes parallel to other major cultural and political changes in post-2000 Mexico; in the general presidential election in 2000, Vicente Fox Quesada, candidate for the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), successfully won the presidency over Francisco Labastida, candidate for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), effectively putting an end to the PRI's 71-year control of the

Presidency.¹ Though the PAN's center-right politics and two presidencies wrought with controversy and corruption are a far cry from any kind of progressive politics, it nevertheless opened the possibility for defeating the far-right who had practically controlled the nation since the end of the Mexican Revolution.

However, the last two decades, there have been major advances in terms of LGBTQ+ rights in Mexico, most notably: the decriminalization of homosexuality as a form of "corrupting minors" in 1998; the introduction of an anti-discrimination law in 2003; the Supreme Court ruling that banning same-sex adoption is unconstitutional in 2015; the election of Jesús Ociel Baena Saucedo, the first non-binary magistrate in Latin America in 2022; the outlawing and sanctioning of conversion therapy in 2022; and the nation-wide recognition of same-sex marriages in 2022. Despite these major wins, however, the murder of Baena Saucedo and their partner in November 2023 and the refusal by Mexican authorities to investigate it as anything other than a "crime of passion" between the couple is a sobering reminder that Mexico remains a violently homophobic and transphobic country.²

¹ Mario Vargas Llosa once referred to it as the "perfect dictatorship" for the way that PRI's control of the nation operated under the pretext of democracy.

² As mentioned, Baena Saucedo was the first non-binary person elected to office in Latin America when they became a magistrate for the Electoral Court in Aguascalientes, Mexico in October of 2022. In the process, Baena Saucedo gained a lot of visibility on social media platforms, known for wearing heels and having a rainbow hand fan, and turning the popular gay phrase "y la queso(porte)" ("deal with it") to "y la que legisre" ("and the one who legislates"). Because of this, Baena Saucedo's visibility acted as a beacon of hope for many queer and non-binary folks, particularly as Mexico heads into the next cycle of elections where conservative and centrist candidates with no demonstrated commitment to LGBTQ+ issues are most popular. Beyond social media and visibility, Baena Saucedo's activism with many LGBTQ+ issues, such as gender inclusive language and gender markers on official government identification, had material implications for queer people in Mexico, with the potential to create precedence for other countries to follow suit. The minimizing of the murder of Baena Saucedo led to protests and vigils all over Mexico, as well as critical conversations about the ways in which the phrase "crimes of passion" has historically been used to excuse any official responsibility to investigate the matter.

I also argue that technological and industry advances have also shaped 21st century queer cultural production; without a doubt, the introduction of and increasing accessibility to pharmaceuticals such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), and antiretroviral medications have drastically changed the way that people think about HIV. Whereas much cultural production of the 1980s and 1990s focused on the devastating effects that the virus has/had on society, these treatments not only save lives, but also make it so that the panic associated with contracting HIV no longer dominates the cultural imaginary to the same extent, allowing for other queer narratives to be explored.³

Queer? ¿Cuir? Sexual Dissidence? A Note on Terminology

In trying to determine what the most apt terms to use in reference to the subject and themes of queerness/LGBTQ+/anti-heteronormativity throughout this research, it has become clear that each has their own limitations because “denominar, nombrar, no es un acto simple, banal, es un asunto político y requiere de responsabilidad histórica y reflexión” (Bustamante Tejada 205). The first option is to follow the dominant current in Mexican Studies, which is to use the phrase *diversidad sexual*. *Diversidad sexual* is a viable option, especially given that it appears to be the preferred term in recent gender and sexuality studies in Mexico, at least since the 1990s (Núñez Noriega 12). In *¿Qué es la diversidad sexual?*, Guillermo Núñez Noriega argues that there are three main uses of the term “diversidad sexual”: as a euphemism for stigmatized groups who are typically referred to with vulgar words; as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual sexual practices and/or gender

³ For example, a common narrative in post-2000 cultural production is living with HIV instead of dying because of it.

identities; a way to refer to those who fall outside of the “macho-masculino-heterosexual” trilogy (28). In other words, “diversidad sexual” would function well in the way that it encapsulates many different aspects of being outside the hegemonic bounds of cis heteronormativity.

A second option is found in the more general scope of Gender and Sexualities Studies in Latin America. *Disidencia sexual* (sexual dissidence) is particularly well known for its politization of motivated and intentional acts of resistance against compulsory heterosexuality. With *disidencia sexual*,

el lugar de la disidencia implica, de parte de quienes nos interesamos en la generación y difusión de conocimientos, ser también estudiosxs, académicxs, escritorxs, generadorxs de conocimiento, disidentes de nuestros campos de formación, que tradicionalmente han estado al servicio de los relatos hegemónicos androcéntricos, para producir entonces otros relatos, utilizar otras fuentes, o implementar otras metodologías y otras preguntas para las tradicionales. Para ello es necesario también, hacer uso de ese poder performativo del lenguaje, que es una necesidad ineludible y también puede y debe estar al servicio de la disidencia. (Bustamante Tejada 231)

This could, in a way, be a useful framing of the “dissident” uses of bath space as an act of public sexuality, though it is not without its limitations; specifically, the notion of a totalizing dissidence is less applicable to this project. What I mean by this is that there are grey areas in which the narratives that I examine do not fully constitute an act of dissidence in the sense of imagining radically different stories, sources, and methodologies, as Bustamante Tejada describes. Some of the stories explored in the following chapters do not resist homonormativity or even problematic displays of heterosexuality. In other words, sexual dissidence necessarily implies an active deconstruction of oppressive structures, but

I would not say that every text that I am working with has a political commitment to deconstruction.

That brings us to a third and final option (and yet another dilemma): *cuir/queer*. *Cuir* coming from Latin America has the benefit of situating itself firmly in terms of cultural context; this is especially true since it embraces Spanish phonology to linguistically and symbolically distance itself from the Anglo context. As Francesca Dennstedt affirms,

these diverse transformations underscore a conscious and deliberate critical exercise that recognizes the importance of recontextualizing the term queer for the Latin American setting... what is significant is not merely the word itself, but rather the act of translating the term as a means of displacing it, which implies a political, cultural, and affective localization. (4)

Like Dennstedt, I am less interested in the debate about which term is most appropriate—in terms of signifier—and more so invested in the context in which these words are most applicable given the examples of cultural production analysis in this dissertation, which open itself to any of the terms mentioned above. Nonetheless, for the sake of consistency, I have had to make a choice on which to use throughout this project. In the end I opt to use the English *queer*, not to emphasize the word as a reclamation and the political commitment that said reclamation implies, but more so as a specific reference to Queer Theory, without which this project would be impossible.⁴ In particular, it is an homage to the Queer of Color thinkers that have significantly shaped my intellectual journey for the past decade. Lastly, I am more inclined to use queer for the way that it indicates the perspective from which I

⁴ To be clear, when I use the word *queer(ness)*, I mean it in a way that echoes Kathryn Bond Stockton's mantra that gender is both "a word and a system" (8). As a word, it signals individual moments and expressions of queer genders and sexualities, whereas as a system it points to the larger relationship between individuals and normativity.

analyze the narratives in this project; with cuir, I would be inserting myself into an intellectual community that I have not been a part of per se, and that feels disingenuous as a US-based, white scholar.

There are, however, some pitfalls that I have worked to avoid as well; queer is an intentionally ambiguous term that purposefully blurs distinctions between the different categorizations or labels that have been given to certain non-normative genders and sexualities. In this way, queer serves as an all-encompassing umbrella term, but using it as such runs the risk of erasing the specificity of the cultural production that I am interested in, the majority of which deals with representations of homosexuality and homoerotic desire. What's more, as Alicia Arrizón puts it, "despite its counternormative politics, the term *queer* has come to signify white gay male...the appropriation of *queer* requires the recognition of differences and the locations of the racialized body" (*Queering Mestizaje* 181). To this end, I have done my best to reorient my use of queerness to avoid the white-washed and androcentric coopting that Arrizón describes.⁵

Perhaps the most representative description of how I am approaching this complex relationship of gender, sexuality, normativity, and representation is how Vinodh Venkatesh describes the transition in queer cinema in the way that

they move beyond a simple telling of "coming out" or of refusing to "pass," tropic elements that have been otherwise exhausted in a context of cultural production that went through Stonewall and the subsequent move toward identity politics, and focus instead on decentering notions of desire, orientation, and gender that are

⁵ This is especially true of chapter 2, as it is the only moment that I explicitly discuss the racial and ethnic features of the figures that appear on screen. In the other two chapters, race and ethnicity are rendered invisible by their respective mediums (i.e. there is not explicit mention of Antonia's racial/ethnic features in *Cuerpo naufrago*, nor are there any references to the appearances of any of the narrative voices in the *CUIR* podcast episode. Adding an intersectional approach with more examples that directly engage with race and ethnicity is one of the many ways that this project can evolve going forward.

housed within the dichotomies of sex that are otherwise taken as axiomatic in heterosexist discourse. (*New Maricón Cinema* 90-91)

In the chapters that follow, it will become clear that I am also thinking through these objects and situations with a stronger focus on understanding the nature of each topic in a way that decenters heterosexist discourse. In other words, I do not approach formations of identity, and specifically of sexuality, in the framework of being non-heterosexual or as Heterosexuality's antagonistic Other. Instead my focus is on the actual practices of sexuality and sexual behaviors with less of a need to neatly categorize those who perform their sexuality—except, very importantly, when specific identity markers provide greater insight or defy preconceived notions, such as in chapter 3 when a lesbian couple cruise the gym showers, unsettling the androcentric approach that much of cruising studies has taken.

Space and Place

One of the theoretical cornerstones of this project is the inclusion of anthropological, sociological, and architectural approaches to the concepts of space, place, non-places and placelessness. Henri Lefebvre, one of the preeminent voices in Space Studies, is fundamental in understanding the complexities of the spaces that I critically analyze in this project. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre critiques the approaches to space that prevailed in his time, ways of seeing space that were quick to dismiss it as a passive backdrop to other, more important things. In making this critique, Lefebvre argues that “(social) space is a (social) product” and that “space thus produced serves as a tool of thought and action; in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26). Lefebvre takes this further, stating that “social space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it

subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (73). This idea somewhat radically diverges from traditional conceptualizations of production via Hegel and Marx that sets space as a focal point instead of as the stage upon which other socioeconomic processes play out.⁶

As an important first step in understanding how I am engaging with this body of theoretical and conceptual work, it is imperative to understand the difference between space and place, which is much more than a matter of semantics; for this I turn to Marc Augé’s 1995 book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. In brief, Augé argues that within the last century, the world has experienced fundamental transformation because of excess; these excesses of time (imminent history), space (satellite images and high-speed transportation) and individualism have given rise to a supermodernity, which has had the side effect of creating what Augé names *non-places*.⁷ Non-places function antithetically to the concept of anthropological place, which are defined as “concrete and symbolic construction of space” (Augé 51) and that “these places have at least three characteristics in common. They want to be—people want them to be—places of *identity*, of *relations* and of *history*” (Augé 52; my emphasis).

⁶ Tim Cresswell echoes this sentiment in *In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, affirming that “geography has traditionally been ignored in critical theory. Class, gender, and race are often treated as if they happened on the head of a pin” (11).

⁷ This concept is similar to that of E Relph’s *placelessness* and Foucault’s *heterotopia*, both of which will be explored in the introduction to the dissertation. For the sake of presenting the argument that I am trying to make here, Augé’s text is best, while Foucault’s text being more apropos for the discussion of the bathhouse as it is one of the places that Foucault explicitly mentions as being heterotopic.

To illustrate this difference, I give the following example: *Insurgentes* is a popular station on the *Línea Rosa* of the metro in Mexico City because of its proximity to Roma Norte (and the Zona Rosa, Mexico City's "gayborhood"). Upon exiting the metro station, one can expect to find the Glorieta de los Insurgentes, a plaza filled with people; starting at the overpass a little way away, street vendors also sell all kinds of goods well into the Zona Rosa. For Augé, this area is an example of an anthropological place in the way that it is marked geometrically by lines (routes), intersections of lines (the Glorieta, marketplaces) and a point of intersection (the border between Juárez and Roma Norte). Speaking more socially, this place also checks off all three of the characteristics mentioned previously; it is a place of identity in the way that can indicate origin ("soy de Insurgentes"), employment ("Trabajo en Insurgentes"), or social practices ("Paso los jueves en Insurgentes"); it is a place of relations in the way that it serves as a meeting place and also an open air market, which necessarily relies on the interaction of people to exist; and it is a historical place in the sense that it simultaneously echoes a historical past (named after the Independence army) and is the site of a constantly developing history, most recently being one of the sites attacked by Alcaldesa Sandra Cuevas, who wants to remove all street vendors in a fascist move to "beautify" the alcaldía of Cuauhtémoc.

Conversely, the metro station of the same name would be a non-place according to Augé. This is in great part due to the way that the name "Insurgentes" is appropriated and removed from the site with historical significance; this means that a passenger who rides the *Línea Rosa* may see the name "Insurgentes" and begin to associate the word with the station and not the avenue that it refers to, thereby changing the signified (in the semiotic

sense). Furthermore, in a Augéan reading, the metro is an ephemeral space that lacks any real connection between people; although passengers may interact with one another—for example, someone might apologize for bumping into someone else or they may offer their seat to someone older—these interactions are not fundamental to the operation of the metro nor are they particularly *meaningful* interactions. This is what Augé refers to when he writes that “non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality” (94). The passenger, then, exists only as an atemporal, ahistorical figure who has no identity, no past, with the sole purpose of using the metro’s infrastructure to travel from point A to point B.

However, I argue that this definition of non-place lacks important nuance, especially when talking about spaces such as the metro, which is mentioned as being exemplary of non-places. Augé’s reading of the metro is a painfully (hetero)normative one; in defining what constitutes *meaningful interactions*, Augé only references the experience of the dominant culture. In this case, the passenger of the metro that is reduced to a body that only moves between two points is based on a heteropatriarchal ideal in which all users of the metro abide by the rules, both explicitly stated and unspoken. What is not considered is an entire subculture that exists and uses the metro in a distinct way; the metro in Mexico City, for example, with its more than five million daily users, tells a much different story. Vendors, encounters between friends, and other social encounters are a common sight in

any one of Mexico City's metro stations; as Carlos Monsiváis says, "el Metro es la ciudad, y en el Metro se escenifica el sentido de la ciudad" (*Los rituales del caos* 107).⁸

In this way, the metro has all the common characteristics for being defined as an anthropological place, *not* as a non-place. There is no doubt that Augé would also consider restrooms—another key space that I am working with—to be non-places. In conversation with other critics and building upon previous work in the Mexican cultural and social landscapes, what I propose, then, is a reading of affective occupation. It is nothing new to say that queer bodies navigate the world in a distinct way; this is due in part to the fact that the world is largely organized in a violently heteronormative way that punishes anyone who transgresses the norm. Yet through various techniques and practices, such as cruising, queer folks have created ways of occupying space in ways other than what was originally intended. By intended, I mean both the literal intention of a space and its design, and the heteronormative logic that has the intention to exclude queerness from forming part of society. A restroom, from an architectural standpoint, is designed in such a way that it effectively addresses the need for a space to defecate and urinate. It is also designed, socially speaking, in such a way that staunch separation of gendered restrooms implies a co-policing of bathroom-goers. This means that the various ways of differentiating

⁸ The phenomenon known as *el metreo*—or cruising in the last car ("último vagón", "cajita feliz")—potentially unravels much of Augé's argument. In this case, the public sex acts between men, most commonly oral sex, constitutes a significant relation between people; what's more, the act of being someone who participates in *el metreo* itself can be understood as a kind of belonging to a subculture of cruising, akin the argument that Tim Dean makes about barebacking as a subculture because of the way that it is "defined by its distance from not only heteronormative society but also gay society" (Dean 37-38). This distance from the rest of normative gay society is a result of the way that barebacking has been characterized as being regressive, i.e. undermining mainstream gay respectability politics and for being counterproductive in terms of "safe" sex education.

restrooms—through the words “men” and “women”, symbols and their variations—give sufficient permission for anyone to be a vigilante “protector” of the separation of genders. This is, however, only part of the normative uses of the bathroom, which also effectively mobilize a host of ideologies to control numerous gender expressions (femme, masc, androgenous) and sexual roles (penetrated, penetrator) and practices (sex-positivity, cruising). By openly defying the normative uses of bath space, these non-normative bodies and expressions of gender actively resist compulsory heteronormativity, which has very real and material consequences for them: access, visibility, and ultimately change.

Finally, my insistence in affective occupation is also poetic in the way that it also “occupies” queer narratives and Queer Studies, which has a long tradition of focusing on the psychoanalytic and violence. Though in recent years there has been an increase in interest in other aspects of Queer Studies—it would be remiss to not mention the way that the work of José Muñoz, Leo Bersani, Javier Sáez and others fundamentally changed the trajectory of Queer Studies—the particular approach that I am proposing here remains relatively unexplored in the context of Mexico. For that reason, the pages that follow propose a reading of this fascinating aspect of Mexican queer cultural production beginning with the most quintessential space of them all: the *baño*.

Narrative Pleasure

Since its conception, pleasure has been a central element to this project. More concretely, I have been interested in the way that pleasure is represented in narrative, both as an affective response in the audience and as a shaping force in the narratives themselves. Though before diving headfirst into pleasure, I want to take a moment to specify the way

in which I understand and use narrative throughout this project. Generally, I fall into the same line of thinking as Roland Barthes when he speaks to the forms and omnipotence of narrative:

Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, *drame* [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies... (237)

I make this clarification now as to avoid potential misunderstandings about the content in the following chapter. There is a tendency to equate narrative to text, which in this case would be very erroneous. If I had to speculate, I would say that this is in part because of the way that the word “narrative” is used as a qualifier when referring to non-written texts (i.e. narrative film), yet it stays in its nominal form when referencing literary forms.⁹

Having established that, one of the ideas that has informed this project is that of being a practitioner of pleasure, a combination of experiences of pleasure and the creation of cultural objects that convey it. In a way, this somewhat autoethnographical approach is meant to critically examine the how and why of contemporary queer cultural production in Mexico. In the examples that follow, it is clear that the division between creator/author and audience is being eroded by a sharing of erotic material; the experience of this material (reading, watching, listening), its creation and the creative process that each text implies, as well as my own experience writing about it now are all tied together by a shared pleasure.

⁹ This is equally true in Spanish. *Narrativa* is much more commonly used as being synonymous with written texts than with other narrative forms.

It is this affective experience, this *feel-good* response that continues to draw me (us) to these texts time and again.

Anal Magazine's (2009) inaugural issue, for example, tells readers “Disfruten esta revista que está hecha para leerse a una sola mano, puesto que la otra seguramente la tendrán ocupada” (Altamirano et al. 6). What is key here is the explicit acknowledgement of the pleasure that the magazine is meant to produce, though it is equally important to recognize that the magazine’s purpose is not exclusively pornographic. Rather, it seems to be inviting readers to take pleasure not only in the erotic images and content of some of the texts, but also to enjoy the texts themselves in an embodied way. This can perhaps be best understood in Audre Lorde’s functions of the erotic as she outlines them in *Sister Outsider*; the first function of the erotic is “providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers”, and the second function being “the open and fearless underlining of [my] capacity for joy” (56). Though Lorde’s essay is presented in the context of the uses of the erotic for Black women specifically, this kind of undermining repressive structures of power that have historically sought to rid the potential of the erotic is commonality that can be seen with this queer publication. In the context of *Anal Magazine*, it is important to problematize Lorde’s theorizing of the erotic (embracing power) and the pornographic (denying power) as being oppositional; *Anal Magazine's* inaugural issue goes as far as combining the two with an article written by Victor Altamirano titled “El no hombre” that explores the sexually liberatory practice of creating hardcore and taboo pornography in “Cirque noir”, with special attention to the appearance

of a trans actor. In this sense, the content in *Anal Magazine* problematizes both the purely physical or sensational found in pornography and the joy of sharing in the intellectual pursuit of creating space for critical conversations about topics relevant to the queer community. The embracing of the pornographic as an element of the erotic, then, might be the distinguishing factor between women's erotics as described by Lorde and queer men's erotics as practiced by *Anal Magazine*.

However, this is not to say that publications such as *Anal Magazine* should not be thought about in terms of the pornographic; in fact, I would argue the opposite to be true. This is partially because of the way that pornography is a highly politicized label, meaning that queer cultural production is more likely and quicker to be deemed as pornographic, and therefore inappropriate for the rest of society. Insisting on a reclamation of queer pornography is a means of reclaiming queer pleasure, which is fundamentally different from heterosexual pleasure. Heterosexual pleasure falls in line with a capitalistic logic in the sense that it is productive, as in it can (and "should") produce offspring; queer pleasure on the other hand, is seen as purely hedonistic, superfluous, non-productive.

Some critiques of (heterosexual) pornography also echo Foucault's description of the object of pleasure in terms of inequality in experiences of pleasure. He writes:

sexual relations—always conceived in terms of the model act of penetration, assuming a polarity that opposed activity and passivity—were seen as being the same type as the relationship between a superior and a subordinate, an individual that dominates and one who is dominated, one who commands and one who complies, one who vanquishes and one who is vanquished. Pleasure practices were conceptualized using the same categories as those in the field of social rivalries and hierarchies... this suggests that in sexual behavior there was one role that was intrinsically honorable and valorized without question: the one that consisted in being active, in dominating, in penetrating, in asserting one's superiority. (Foucault 215)

Though Foucault rightfully gestures towards the inequality and exploitation present in some sexual practices, which is also the stance that many critiques of pornography take, the idea that all pleasure practices are unidirectional is erroneous; among what is missed is the pleasure of being penetrated. In this way, bottom pleasure is minoritized, rendered invisible by a reading of sexual behavior that reifies the privileges of being the penetrator.¹⁰ The mention of social hierarchies also lends itself well to a conversation about racial sexual dynamics between queer men; the (Brown) bottom's pleasure is a stellar example of José Muñoz's "feeling brown" because of the way "minoritarian affect is always, no what matter its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by the normative citizen subjects" ("Feeling Brown, Feeling Down" 679). Beginning with *Anal Magazine's* title, which decenters the phallus (representative of the active penetrator) in favor of the anus (the passive bottom), it is clear that the publication has an agenda to make legible this kind of pleasure experience, again, in a way that combines the erotic with the pornographic.

Antonio Bertrán's *Crónicas con prepucio: Lo más ardiente de Nosotros los Jotos* presents a similar erotic invitation to its readership: "Así ha sido, y solo me queda desear ardientemente que tú también disfrutes estas crónicas, porque su finalidad no es otra que propiciar un gozo como el que da jugar con el cuerito (propio o ajeno)" (13–14). Bertrán's compilation of chronicles also unabashedly features expressions of queer erotics and sexuality; each story is either one that comes from Bertrán himself or is one that others

¹⁰ Xiomara Verenice Cervantes-Gómez goes as far as to say that "those being fucked are positioned as a stand-in rhetorical prop for all that is precariously ignorable, destroyable, and ultimately disappear-able without a trace" (1).

have shared with him. In this way, *Crónicas con prepucio* can be understood as a kind of autoethnographic project that presents the reality of queer Mexican men in the 21st century. By doing so, Bertrán also invites readers to take pleasure in the reading experience, a pleasure that can either be felt alone or as a shared sensation (“jugar con el cuerito (propio o ajeno)”).

This concept, however, is not limited to *leerse a una sola mano*, but also is present in cinematic productions as well; in 2016, TLA Releasing, the world’s largest distributor of LGBTQ+ films, released a collection of short films titled *Mexican Men*. The collection features films directed by Julián Hernández, except for one film, which is directed by Roberto Fiesco. These films are described as “short encounters, emerging love stories and deeply touching connections, these short films are sure to stir the heart...and body.” Whereas the former literary examples seem to encourage a pleasurable (or pleasuring) reading experience where the texts are mostly based in reality (i.e., chronicles), *Mexican Men* seeks to incite a pleasure experience that is not purely physical (“...and body”) but also affective (“stir the heart”). This is made even more interesting with the last couple of short films included in the collection, which can only be classified as highly conceptual art films. In this way, *Mexican Men* intends to provide pleasure for its audience not solely when watching films with traditional narrative—that is to say, fictional movies that are easy to follow—but also for an appreciation of art film and, by extension, queer aesthetic of art filmmaking.

Queer Theory and Cruising (as) Methodology

The final, and perhaps most important pillar of *Epistemologies of the Baño* is Queer Theory. Over thirty-five years ago, at a conference on Lesbian and Gay Sexualities at UC Santa Cruz in February of 1990, Teresa de Lauretis coined the term Queer Theory, providing the foundation to the field as we know it today. In the subsequent publication of the conference proceedings, de Lauretis makes the case for Queer Theory, stating that

Male and female homosexualities—in their current sexual-political articulations of gay and lesbian sexualities, in North America—may be reconceptualized as social and cultural forms of their own right, albeit emergent ones and thus still fuzzily defined, undercoded, or discursively dependent on more established forms...The work of the conference was to articulate the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imaged as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture. (iii)

For me, these two ideas are also what inform much of my intellectual practice, as both a queer person and a scholar of Queer studies. The articulation of this idea that queerness is not heterosexuality's improper opposite and that Queer Theory makes possible the kinds of thinking needed to imagine and understand the kind of resistance to cultural hegemony and dominant discourses that de Lauretis describes holds up remarkably well. It is partially thanks to de Lauretis' conceptualization of Queer Theory in this specific way that has afforded it the longevity that it has today.¹¹

Nearly simultaneously to de Lauretis' initial words on Queer Theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Epistemology of the Closet*, a book that would become another

¹¹ Teresa de Lauretis sadly passed away on February 2, 2026. Being in the final stages of drafting this dissertation when she passed, I cannot help but to hope that the words within these pages sufficiently serve as an homage to a thinker to which I am greatly indebted, intellectually and personally.

foundation text for Queer Theory. The impact of Sedgwick on this work likewise cannot be understated, as even the title of my own project is a play on Sedgwick's seminal text; most importantly, I want to point out two aspects of Sedgwick's work that has informed the shape of this research for the past five years. The first of these is the centrality of spatial metaphor in *Epistemology of the Closet*; Sedgwick's work begins with a set of contradictions in the ideologies of homo/heterosexuality, from which she constructs the minoritizing view of homosexuality—which sees it as an issue only for a minor portion of the population—and the universalizing view—which holds great significance in determining people's lives across the spectrum of sexuality. For anyone who has ever, even most superficially, engaged with queer theory, this idea is immediately recognizable, perhaps even being one of Sedgwick's most known contributions to queer studies.

Returning to *Epistemology of the Closet* after first engaging with the text as an undergraduate, I was struck by the way that space holds a central position in Sedgwick's argumentation throughout the book. Here I am not simply referring to the reference of the closet, which is, of course, the most obvious and direct use of space. Rather, I am referring to larger, more general references to space, especially in the way that they connect with the realities of the lived experiences of actual people, instead of the mere theorization of space as an abstract concept. In one such example, Sedgwick writes

What was new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or heterosexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. (2)

The idea that the governance of gender and sexuality has implications that affect, define, and control our daily lives, even in the least sexual of contexts is one of the guiding ideas of this project. What's more, the concept of world-mapping as Sedgwick uses it here is particularly useful for understanding how I will engage with space and narrative in the chapters that follow; in a way, world-mapping highlights the power that hegemonic entities and institutions have in spatially defining the world.¹² Perhaps the clearest example of this is the Mercator projection, a way of spatially representing the globe on a two-dimensional surface that favors and centers colonial powers. Much closer to home, the division of public restrooms into men's and women's restrooms likewise provides an example of this kind of mapping by normative powers.

As Sedgwick continues, we arrive at the “relations of the closet—the relations of the known and unknown, the explicit and inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition—[which] have the potential for being particularly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally” (3). Here what becomes clear is the relationship between space (the closet) and discourse (speech acts). Sedgwick's principal argument that to understand Western culture, we must also undergo a critical evaluation of the relationship between homo- and heterosexuality is, in large part, supported by this kind attention to the performative in the texts that she analyzes. This approach becomes the blueprint from the same kind of critical analysis that I propose within these pages, though with a minor caveat; whereas Sedgwick focuses on the discursive through speech acts—and even more centrally through the

¹² This idea will continue to be explored and problematized, especially when comparing the idea of world-mapping (imposed projections of the world) and world-building (as a form of agency) in the queer narratives that I explore in each of the context chapters.

relationship between speech acts and silences—I shift that attention to sexual behavior through affective occupation. If for Sedgwick “the force of various rhetorical effects has seemed uniquely difficult to calibrate,” then for this work the complexity of various affective orientations for queer subjects in bath space, which seem to be at odds with one another, is the driving force for the analysis that I do here.

The second aspect in Sedgwick’s text that has fundamentally shaped this project is her engagement with a vast set of binarism that, little by little, are questioned and problematized throughout its chapters. In chapter one of *Epistemology of the Closet*, some of these binaries are explored; Sedgwick speaks to the not-so-black-and-white relationship that “outness” and “closetedness” have with one another, especially in their functions of enacting real change for queer people—stopping briefly to discuss the effects of Stonewall as being “invigorating” to invite more public self-disclosure of gayness, yet at the same time it was far less transformative than is commonly stated (69). However, the “in and “out” of the closet presents a spatial orientation of disclosure represent a major problem as

[the] relationship of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public, that were and are critically problematical for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large, mappings whose enabling but dangerous incoherence has become oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality...The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century. (71)

Of note, Sedgwick establishes the connection between the secrecy/disclosure and private/public binaries as the central problem of gay oppression, thereby underscoring the relationship between speech acts and space yet again. Though the closet certain still holds a major position in the oppression of queer people, I will argue that some of this oppressive power has actually shifted to the bath space; in particular, restrooms have become the stage

for cisheteronormative ideology to enact anti-queer/anti-trans violence, a problem of secrecy/disclosure and private/public space that has major resonances with Sedgwick's work.

Moving towards the more contemporary, it is specifically Queer of Color Critique that has most profoundly informed my intellectual growth as a scholar. Originally coined by Roderick Ferguson in his 2003 book *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, which responds to a need to “examine how culture as a site of identification produces such odd bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms—fosters unimagined alliances” with a specific “interest in social formations, it locates itself within the mode of critique known as historical materialism” (3–4). Dialoguing directly with José Esteban Muñoz (more on him in a moment), Ferguson engages disidentification as a powerful tool of rethinking historical materialism to better suit the needs to which Queer of Color Critique responds.¹³ In the context of Latin American Studies, thinkers like Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes have employed Queer of Color Critique as a way of both destabilizing Latin American Studies and Queer Studies, to give an example.¹⁴

Within Queer of Color Critique, two thinkers have been most influential in *Epistemologies of the Baño*. The first of these scholars is Sara Ahmed, whose formulation of queer orientations has guided me theoretically throughout this process. The notion that

¹³ For Ferguson, this means directly interrogating African American culture, gender, and sexuality within the structure of a capitalist, Western society, not just as an exercise of intersectional analysis, but rather of a radically new vision of what that kind of critique inquiry can look like.

¹⁴ See for example *Translocas: The Politics of Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Performance* in which La Fountain-Stokes presents an intellectually-provoking look at Puerto Rican performance by de/un-stabilizing categories of queerness that instead “must consider the particularities of Boricua and or Puerto Rican sexuality, with its ample repertoire of terms” (17).

“orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” points towards the justification for this kind of project (Ahmed 3). By critically interrogating the very orientations that queer Mexican cultural production has towards bath space and, posteriorly, the orientation that the audience has towards these examples of queer Mexican cultural production, we can begin to see the inner workings of the larger network of gender and sexuality ideology, the control of bodies, and social anxieties.

The second, and most influential thinker for me, is José Esteban Muñoz. Zeroing in on *Cruising Utopia*—though I could just as easily dedicate the rest of this introduction to his entire oeuvre—Muñoz describes its main objective as critical examination of Stonewall era cultural production that share a certain “modality of queer utopianism” (*Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition* 3). This is partially achieved through “hope as a critical methodology [that] can best be described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (*Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition* 4). In the midst of global, local, and personal crises, the idea of hope as a critical methodology has continued to reinvigorate this project in new and unexpected ways. Muñoz’s challenge “to feel hope and to feel utopia” necessarily pushes us (and queer studies) in a new direction that resists fatal pessimism in a time where the radical imagination of (queer) utopia helps us see the potential for a different future (*Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition* 18)

With this grounding in Queer Theory and the aforementioned studies of space and place, we come to the methodological approach that I employ throughout *Epistemologies of the Baño*: cruising. Cruising is undoubtedly historical, pointing towards an entire

tradition of queer sexuality. In *Cruising Utopia*, for example, José Muñoz writes that “at this junction [the height of HIV/AIDS cultural critique], commercial sex spaces (backrooms, movie theaters, bathhouses) are weathering a new round of attacks from both the repressive state power apparatus and reactionary, sex-negative elements of the gay community” (34). Muñoz’s phrasing “a new round of attacks” is a gesture towards a historical precedent, one that goes back before the depathologizing and decriminalization of homosexuality. Identifying both repressive state forces and mainstream gay society as antagonistic towards cruising as a sexual practice is also telling; I argue that the main rupture in the queer community came with the dawn of the Gay Rights Movement in 1968, in which radical queers were separated and further marginalized by (mostly) white gay men who preferred an approach to gay rights based in respectability politics. This means that cruising, as a radical sexual practice in the context of both gay rights and the anti-sex responses to HIV/AIDS, needs to be understood in terms of the “transformative potential of queer sex and public manifestations of such sexuality were both a respite from the abjection of homosexuality and a reformatting of that very abjection” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 34). To cruise Mexican cultural production is to follow the clues, cues, and instincts that lead us to what we are looking for. As Leo Herrera says “cruising is an imperfect art, but most of this becomes common sense and second nature with practice” (6).

Towards a Critical Baño Studies

On the 12th of September 2023, Laura Glover, a trans woman, was forcibly removed by security guards from the women’s restroom at the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico City.

Though this is not a new phenomenon and trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming folks have experienced this for years, this particular incident sparked a lively conversation on social media; many came to defend Laura and to chastise the Cineteca for their performative allyship, a reference to their showing queer films (which ultimately brings in revenue) while having security officers who actively and violently discriminating against trans patrons. Others, including conservatives in the Mexican government, spoke out in favor of the officers, and many of these officials used the incident to again deny the existence of trans people or recognize their genders. Though this is not a new phenomenon, in recent years it has become the popular manifestation of transphobia and discourses of hate towards the queer community globally.

However, the relationship that queer folks have with restrooms is not only violent; paradoxically, restrooms have also historically been a site of queer pleasure, specifically in the form of cruising. In contemporary queer Mexican cultural production, I have identified four spaces in which representations of cruising manifest; the first is the traditional representation of sex in *baños*. For the purpose of my research, I am opting to use the Spanish word *baño* precisely for its polysemy. Instead of insisting in a division between bathrooms and bathhouses (both of which are generally understood as *baños*¹⁵), I am proposing that they be included together because of the similarities that they share in terms of spacio-homoerotic norms. In other words, there exists a certain, mostly unspoken set of norms within men-only spaces like the *baño* as they pertain to the exploration and

¹⁵ Restrooms can be specified with the phrase *cuarto de baño*, while bathhouses are also referred to as *baños de vapor* and *baños turcos* amongst other terms.

expression of homosexual and homoerotic desire(s). Paul Preciado describes these norms when recounting his experience using the men's restroom, explaining:

When I first began this process of transition, it took me some time to decipher the codes of dominant masculinity. And, believe it or not, nothing was more difficult than getting used to the stench and the filth of men's toilets. I was tormented by the smell, by the pools of urine splashed over and around lavatories and, despite my best intentions, it took weeks before I managed to overcome this revulsion. Up until the moment when I realized that this filth, this stench, corresponded to a kind of strictly homosocial relationship: men had created a fetid circle to keep women at bay. Inside the circle, in secret, they were free to look at each other, to touch each other, free to wallow in their own bodily fluids, away from any representation of heterosexuality. Whereas women go to the bathroom to recreate their mask of femininity, men go there to forget their heterosexuality for an instant and revel in the pleasure of being alone, away from the strange alter egos that are the women by whom they must be accompanied in society to fulfill a reproductive and heteroconsensual role. (*Can the Monster Speak?*, 34-35)

Preciado's insight offers a lot in terms of understanding the relationship between space and a dominant cisheteropatriarchal society; this is to say that the upholding of "codes of dominant masculinity" in the way that they relate to the creation of a homosocial space allows for the open exploration of homoerotic desire ("free to look at each other, to touch each other"). Preciado's choice of descriptors is also telling; words such as "stench", "filth", "smell", "splashed", and "revulsion" reveal an initial shock to the change in space and the practices that take place within it.¹⁶ Interestingly, Preciado says that they were eventually able to "overcome" the revulsion, which echoes attitudes that the general public has towards kinks and fetishes. When something transgresses the norm, like the freedom

¹⁶ Although I understand the argument that Preciado is making, I would be hesitant to accept such an uncritical generalization about restrooms. Men's restrooms are not inherently "grosser" than women's restrooms, and in that sense, Preciado's argument has a major flaw.

for men to “wallow in their own bodily fluids,” it comes in tandem with a kind of disgust, especially if the person expressing the disgust does/did not enjoy the practice.

However, there is one major fault in the quote above. Preciado speaks of men in universal terms, meaning that there is no recognizing that the liberty of homoerotic exploration and expression is not equal amongst all men. In their book *Por el culo: Políticas anales*, Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa argue that “esa vigilancia de nuestros traseros no es uniforme: depende de si el culo penetrado es blanco o negro... o el de un/a trans... si es un culo rico o pobre, si es católico o musulmán” (13). For context, *Por el culo* offers a unique approach to what the authors name “anal politics,” not approaching it from a scientific, anthropological or personal narrative standpoint, but rather exploring the ways that the anus provokes not only the negative reactions that Preciado describes, but also the curiosity, attraction and fascination with it. Though Sáez and Carrascosa’s book deals primarily with anal penetration, the kind of recognition of the various factors that create a disproportionate policing of bodies is something that needs to be problematized in Preciado’s text.

Furthermore, I would also argue that Preciado’s assertion that men “forget their heterosexuality” when they enter a restroom is another unfounded claim. In fact, I argue the exact opposite is true; it is their heterosexuality that informs every part of this kind of pleasure. For example, it is not uncommon for heterosexual men to impose arbitrary limits on their sexual acts—a straight man who seeks to have sex with another man may refuse to kiss him or will only have sex while acting as the “top,” as opposed to the “bottom,” which is more associated with sexual passivity, because those particular acts are reserved

for heterosexual sex. Men who identify as heterosexual and have sex with other men do not “forget” their sexuality because sex acts are not necessarily tied to sexual behaviors. Sociologists (and researchers in other fields) have pointed out that MSM (men who have sex with men) behavior is common in many homosocial spaces, such as prisons or the military, and that behaviors do not definitely determine identity.

Yet Preciado correctly points out that these men, these practitioners of a certain sexual behavior, “revel in the pleasure of being alone” with other men, but where does this pleasure come from? I propose that this pleasure comes not from forgetfulness, but rather from transgression; in a way, what Preciado describes is the transgression of a heteronormative role, which may be better understood as something akin to Foucault’s reading of the repressive hypothesis. To paraphrase Foucault, historically institutions and agencies of power (like Heterosexuality) repressed sexuality by imposing discretion, but in reality, what these institutions required was the confession of sexuality to the institutions themselves as opposed to the free expression of sexuality because, paradoxically, “in order to gain mastery over it [sex] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present” while at the same time there was “an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (17-18; original emphasis).¹⁷ If we understand Heterosexuality to be the dominant institution of sexual

¹⁷ See Part II of *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*.

relations, then the constant mentioning of it is a must, even when the heterosexual man is being penetrated by another man. In this way, the excitement, the pleasure of MSM sex comes, at least in part, from the transgression of the “heteroconsensual role,” to use Preciado’s words.

What I have presented in the preceding pages, then, culminates into an initial look into what I am calling Critical Baño Studies. The conceptualizing of this field of study is one of the main goals of this dissertation; I argue that bringing critical attention to bath space is fundamental for understanding not only the state of queer cultural production in the twenty-first century, but also of Mexican studies writ large. Before doing this, however, it is necessary to define this project’s first key word: bath space. As I use it throughout these pages, bath space is an umbrella term that refers to a collection of spaces in which the relationship between bodies, water, and hygiene is foregrounded. Examples of bath space include (but are not limited to): restrooms, bathhouses, gymnasiums, locker rooms, and athletic clubs. The overarching connection between restrooms and bathhouses—the two principal bath spaces analyzed in the following chapters—is doubly supported by the polysemic meaning of the Spanish word *baño*, which can be used to refer to both the restroom and a bathhouse/sauna. This double meaning, in tandem with the use of the Spanish *baño* as an attempt to better situate this field of study within the Mexican context, explains the choice of the name “Critical Baño Studies.”

Critical Baño Studies and Its Predecessors

In addition to the studies of space and queer theory, fundamental to this project is the network of scholarship dedicated to critical examinations of bath space. By and large,

the bulk of this scholarship has been produced in an anglophone context, and most of it is deeply anchored in the Social Sciences, namely sociology and, to a lesser extent, anthropology. This is not to say that there is not any Humanities work on the bathroom, because there definitively is; notably film and media studies somewhat frequently visits the restroom, which perhaps can be explained by the common representation of bathrooms in both horror and drama, offering a slew of ideological and psychoanalytical interpretations as shown by Slavoj Žižek in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006).¹⁸ Though psychoanalysis is not something that I will engage with much in this project, this example functions well to show the kind of bath space work that has also been done within the Humanities.

Much more relevant to this project is the archive of bathroom studies works that have become the third and final pillar of this dissertation. The first of these is the edited collection *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* edited by Harvey Molotch and Laura Norén. The volume's introduction, written by Molotch, neatly outlines the three ideas that function as the threads that unite each chapter. First, the introduction's title "Learning from the Loo" comes from the notion that toilets "have the potential to make discoveries with implications for personal hygiene, psychological stress, and social betterment. We can also learn about power and the capacity to shape others' life chances" (Molotch 1). The idea that the bathroom as a space has the capability to impact our lives

¹⁸ Žižek's discussion of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) are particularly illustrative of this point (00:40:00-00:44:00).

echoes my previous discussion of both space studies and queer theory and the ability of each to likewise affect our daily experiences.

Secondly, Molotch highlights that

we have in the toilet an instrument and an institution that both reflects how people and societies operate and also reinforces the existing pattern. Precisely because the toilet operates somewhat in hiding, those who plan, manage, and control its use often act on their own, without a public to which they must provide detailed and explicit accounts of what they are doing. The toilet thus operates irresponsibly. (4)

This explicit mention of the power that bath space has in terms of both organizing space and governing bodies within it is fundamental. This intellectual orientation towards the toilet is so effective because of the way that it allows us to both think of the bathroom in terms of the material—spatial configuration, surfaces, design, aesthetics—and in terms of the ideological or within the framework of normativity (and how the restroom mutually constructs said normativity). As Molotch mentions, the toilet operates in hiding, in part because of the phantom institution that controls it, and in part because of our reluctance to speak about what goes on in the restroom.

The third connecting thread in *Toilet's* introduction is the relationship and tensions between function and actual use. At first glance, the design of a restroom is straightforward: people need a hygienic way to dispose of bodily waste in a way that avoids the transmission of disease and the contamination of water and soil. However, as Molotch writes, “one important goal of industrial designers, and often of architects as well, is to serve people’s actual practices” (9). This allows me to posit the ever-important question: what are the actual practices of queer people in restrooms and how is the design of bath space conducive to those practices? In considering this tension between function (excretion) and other

practices (such as cruising), we can delve deeper into the critique of cisheteronormativity as it relates to bath space and the historical specificity that led to the development of these practices in the first place.

The second anglophone predecessor that is key to this project is *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* edited by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner. Much like the previous *Toilet*, *Ladies and Gents* covers a host of topics which are split into two parts: “Potty Politics: Toilets, Gender, and Identity” and “Toilet Art: Design and Cultural Representations.” The chapters take on a much wider scope as they critically examine toilets and restrooms from Africa to Australia, from the nineteenth century to present day—though glaringly Latin American is absent, with the exception of references to Mexico and “Montezuma’s revenge” [sic] in the chapter “Colonial Visions of ‘Third World’ Toilets” (Moore 115).¹⁹ While each of the authors of the chapters present important, sharp observations about their respective topics, the biggest thing that has stuck with me is the controversy with which the book starts. The editor explains that once they released the call for papers that led to the creation of this volume, there was an immediate and vitriolic reaction from the public and from parts of the academic community. Several articles were written in response to the CFP, questioning above all else the legitimacy of such scholars and their scholarship. As the editors write, “It is hard to understand how a discussion of a ubiquitous public space would automatically invalidate an inquiry’s scholarly status, unless

¹⁹ “Montezuma’s revenge” refers to the stomach issues that many (gringo) tourists experience, especially during their first visit to Mexico, as if the last Mexica ruler was punishing them. Though in this chapter it is contextualized and problematized through the lens of de/post-colonial critique, it nonetheless forms part of a global imaginary that reduces Mexico to tourism and tourist’s diarrhea, symbolically (and sometimes literally) shitting on the region, as if it and its bathrooms do not warrant deeper study.

we see it as an issue of control” (Gershenson and Penner 3). This knee-jerk reaction to the project is symptomatic of a larger unwillingness to break the social taboo of speaking about what goes on in the restroom—much less write about it critically from an academic standpoint—not to mention that silences are an important tool in the functioning and reproduction of bathrooms as an institution; after all, once bathrooms are critically examined, it threatens the whole system that governs them (and us).

The last of the anglophone scholars that I want to mention here is the work of Sheila L. Cavanagh, whose work in bathroom studies I admire greatly. Cavanagh’s monograph *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* and chapter “Toilet Training: The Gender and Sexual Body Politics of the Bathroom” have provided a sort of roadmap for effective scholarly intervention in bathroom studies that I have emulated in these pages. In *Queering Bathrooms*, Cavanagh outlines the effect of this kind of work, stating that “by imagining queer and trans-positive designs, ones that can accommodate a range of bodies, desires, genders, and non-normative identifications, we may build a more inclusive and luxurious bathroom” (26). Cavanagh continues, writing that

The project of the twenty-first century is to build a fluid and less exacting plumb line, one that does not mirror an essential connection between sex and gender, body and identity, but makes room for new and unexpected configurations of gender and sexed embodiment in space. (26)

This vision of the twenty-first century provides a tangible mission for both bathroom studies and queer studies writ large, all the while echoing the kind of optimistic hope for a queer(er) future. This kind of hope and radical imagination rooted in queer futurity is precisely what has guided me through the last six years with this project.

However, it is important to note that not all the core texts in my corpus of bathroom studies are purely academic in the traditional sense; the work of Laura Sofía Rivero has captivated me during the development of this project. Rivero, born in 1993 in Mexico City, is one of the most interesting essayists of her generation. Her prose is masterfully constructed, weaving in research with personal observation, producing texts that not only give a valuable insight to Rivero's thoughts as a cultural critique but that also inspire the reader to critically consider the most mundane of objects that surround us.²⁰ One such example of this is Rivero's text *Dios tiene tripas: Mediaciones sobre nuestros desechos* that not only reflects upon the restroom, as the title would suggest, but that also effectively draws the reader's critical attention to one of the most overlooked spaces that permeates our everyday lives.²¹

Though the above texts focus on bathrooms, bathhouses are equally important in approaching bath space. To that end, texts such as Jordi de Gispert Hernández's *La ducha como dispositivo: Mecanismos de control de la higiene* are key for understanding the relationship between hygiene and the control of bodies. *La ducha como dispositivo*, deeply rooted in de Gispert Hernández's expertise in architecture and design, adds a much needed perspective that prioritizes the spatial configuration of bath space from the point of view of architecture.

Lastly, the work of Víctor M. Macías-González has been particularly informative in terms of providing a historical approach and context to bathhouses in Mexico. Macías-

²⁰ See *Enciclopedia de las artes cotidianas* (2025, published by Penguin Random House) for an example.

²¹ In the book manuscript version of this project, I will include a chapter on *Dios tiene tripas* because in both content and form it brings valuable nuance that would only make this project better. Time constraint is the only reason that it does not appear here currently.

González' chapter "The Bathhouse and Male Homosexuality in Porfirian Mexico" outlines the events that gave rise to the modern baño de vapor as we know it today. A major strength of this chapter is the way that it accounts for the spatial developments of Mexico during its modernizations projects and how these connect with anxieties related to race, class, gender, and sexuality. Though, for as much as bathhouses were originally constructed to be a productive place of normative masculinities for the growing urban zones, as Macías-González describes, "this effete material decadence of the bathhouse, combined with its homosocial dynamic, ultimately queered the very space that society had hoped would serve to overcome men's anxieties towards modernization" (31). Having this kind of historical context not only helps inform this project in terms of *why* bathhouses exist in Mexico but also provides a parallel for understanding the social anxieties that bath space produces when we consider the modern-masculinity crisis as not wholly distinct from the trans-bathroom crisis that we see today.

Writing From/Within the Baño

Up until this point, my approach to bath space, the issues that surround it, and, most importantly, the writings about it have been through a critical or analytical lens. However, I do not want this project to take on a cold, distanced stance that sees this problematic as an abstracted idea. I, too, am implicated in this web of relationality—after all, it was my own tumultuous and conflicting relationship with bath space that led me to this topic in the first place. Though largely theoretical in nature, I want to take a moment to emphasize an element that will not be as deeply explored in the chapters that follow but that nonetheless has a fundamental impact on the texts that I will analyze as well as my own process of

writing. One of the things that most interests me about the discussion of bath space that I will present in the following pages is the process of creation: what does it mean to write (from within) bath spaces? What is the relationship between the writer and the space that they write in and about?

In her text “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” Gloria Anzaldúa directly addresses the writing process for Women of Color. Here Anzaldúa likens the writings of Women of Color to speaking in tongues, in a way addressing the dismissiveness that primarily white reading have towards such texts, as well as critically positioning the writings of Women of Color as a language rendered inaudible to white ears that “do not bother to learn” their language (Anzaldúa, “Speaking in Tongues” 163). Along with an intimate reflection on her own struggles with writing,²² Anzaldúa posits two key questions about the practice of writing: who gave Women of Color permission to write? and why does Anzaldúa specifically feel compelled to write?

As is the case in much of Anzaldúa’s other works, the answer to the first is more of a rhetorical question, an invitation to reflect on the idea of being granted permission to be called a professional writing as a tool of white supremacy and misogyny. The answer to the second question becomes the central idea around which the bulk of the essay is organized. It comes in four parts: Anzaldúa writes to avoid complacency, and with that, rejects the naturalization of hegemonic power structures that govern us; Anzaldúa writes

²² In the first paragraphs of the letter, Anzaldúa shares that she had attempted to communicate the message of the letter in both the form of a poem and an essay, but the latter resulted in a text that was “wooden, cold” and ultimately “esoteric bullshitting and pseudo-intellectualizing” (163). It is precisely because of the intimacy and immediacy of the letter form that guided Anzaldúa’s choice to use it to convey the message within its pages. This idea of the suitability of certain mediums to convey embodied writing practices is one I want to pursue further in the future.

as an act of worldbuilding, a tool that “compensates for what the real world does not give” her; Anzaldúa writes as a form of self-discovery and actualization, as a way of taking back the control to create her own narrative(s); and Anzaldúa writes because the fear of not writing is far greater than the fear of writing (“Speaking in Tongues” 166-167).

However, the part that I suspect most people take from this text comes near the end of the letter as Anzaldúa describes a specific mode of writing that is not simply the registering of ideas on paper, but a kind of embodied writing that she names *organic writing*: the process of creation from within “your innards, in the gut, and out of living tissue” (170). As will become clear in the chapters that follow, the bathroom is one of the few spaces that affords the body the freedom to just *be* a body. What I mean by this is that, while in the bathroom, the body is not subjected to the same kind of violence that it is in medical contexts, where the body is converted into an object of normalization by “fixing” it via medicine. Nor is the body subjected to the reduction of it to labor, as it is in the context of work. Simply put, the body just exists as is to take care of all the biological processes of waste disposal that is needed, which is doubly important in the context within which Anzaldúa is writing. The bathroom is one of the only spaces in which Women of Color may find respite from the policing gaze of both men and of white supremacy.

Although this letter provides an interesting starting point from which we can begin to engage with the processes of (embodied) writing, my interest in it comes mostly from Anzaldúa’s explicit mention of the bathroom. When discussing the legion of obstacles that may prevent Women of Color from writing, Anzaldúa insists that they

Forget the room of one’s own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between

sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the John. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron—you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write. (168)

Beyond the reference to Virginia Woolf's 1929 extended essay *A Room of One's Own*, which for Anzaldúa more than likely functions as a critique of white feminism as a concept and as a spatial metaphor (i.e. having an actual office space to write), the specific spatial references of this quote suggest a couple of key ideas. First is the idea that, by necessity, writing needs to occur at every given moment in any given location. This is especially true for writers who are not sponsored and who cannot put their social and familial responsibilities on hold so that they may write. Second, there is an interesting way that Anzaldúa establishes an ethical and political connection between writing in all these spaces; writing in the kitchen, for example, has strong undertones of reappropriating a space to which Women of Color have been relegated for centuries. To give another example, the direct reference to the welfare line implies a certain kind of socioeconomic disadvantage, though Anzaldúa is insisting that even in disadvantaged situations, they must write.

At first glance, the bathroom almost seems out of place; not only that, but the bathroom is the only space that is mentioned twice, once by name ("lock yourself up in the bathroom") and again through the reference to sitting on the toilet ("John") to write. It is entirely possible that the reference to the bathroom serves a similar purpose to the reference to the kitchen, as a way of recognizing women's domestic labor and then reappropriating the space to make their voices heard, though I do not find this as convincing as an argument.

Instead, what I see is a recognition of the unwavering presence of bathrooms in the lives of all; much like the common use of hunger as a bodily metaphor to describe an intense desire, using the bathroom can also be used in a similar way. It is, after all, one of the very few spaces (and bodily functions) that unites us all.

I want to briefly return to the idea that Anzaldúa establishes a certain ethical and political connection but this time exclusively focusing on the bathroom. One of the phrases that most catches my attention here is the call to “listen to the words chanting in your body.” Though Anzaldúa does not acknowledge the materiality of the bathroom—save for the reference to the toilet—there is an interesting resonance between this phrase and the literal construction of the bathroom. If we are to consider the tiles that cover (most) bathrooms, then the chanting of words that comes from within us reverberates off the tiled surfaces. The echo created by this interaction between sound waves and material objects allows for the sounds—our words, our writings—to be amplified, almost as if they are given a voice that is stronger than if it were to be said in other spaces. In this way, the bathroom becomes the perfect kind of studio in which bodily chants can be heard, refined, and ultimately put on paper.²³ I bring the example of Anzaldúa’s letter to third world women writers because it speaks to the crux of a practice of writing (from within) bath space.

²³ I am eternally grateful to Sara Potter for the enlightening questions and conversation about the materiality of the bathroom and its relationship with the sonic; not only has it helped me think through this portion of the chapter, but it will return as a relevant point of discussion in chapter 4 when examining the practice of recording a podcast episode in a public restroom.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter 1, titled “Leer el baño: Reorientating Ana Clavel’s *Cuerpo náufrago*,” I propose a return to Clavel’s 2005 novel to disentangle the relationship between bath space and identity. Whereas previous scholarship has not considered the queering potential of Clavel’s novel, I propose a different reading that is not limited by the apparent binarisms in the text. I begin by exploring the implications of Antonia (the protagonist)’s fantastic and immediate transformation into a man. Beginning with the novel’s approach to transformation and identity formation, I lay the foundations for understanding its critique of binarisms. I then shift to Antonia’s obsession with urinals, which is perhaps the most well-known part of the novel. In addition to being narratively interesting as Antonia reflects on the kind of arousing disgust/disgusting arousal that the urinal provokes, the section provides the opportunity to investigate Clavel’s commitment to multimodal art as an artist herself. Following this, I take us to a scene of Antonia in the bathhouse, which is an under-examined scene within the novel; through a reading of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, I trace the tensions of (un)belonging and the erotic desire that Antonia feels towards her friend as a way of reading the novel in the light of queerness as horizon. Finally, I end the chapter with an approach to the *mingitauro*, a trash bag-covered urinal in the women’s restroom of a public office that resembles the head of the legendary minotaur. For Antonia, the *mingitauro* becomes the key figure with which she can identify; in other words, it is an opportunity to reject the identitarian struggles that plague her throughout the novel, instead providing a third, hybrid option that allows her to fully embody all aspects of her past, present, and future self. Ultimately, I argue that Antonia’s obsession with urinals, her

uncomfortable and erotic experience in the bathhouse, and the metaphor of the Mingitauro's labyrinth of identity can be better understood through the framework of desire paths.

Chapter 2, titled “Ver el baño: Contemporary Mexican Bathhouse Film” traces the production of queer films that share narrative, thematic, and stylistic elements related to the bathhouse. I begin with a genealogical approach to the bathhouse, and in the process, provide a rereading of two iconic Mexican films: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (1985) and Jorge Fon's *El Callejón de los Milagros* (1995). This approach to these iconic films is rooted in Vinodh Venkatesh's conceptualization of *maricón cinema*, taking the distinction of optical/politically passive and haptic/potentially political as the groundwork upon which I build my theorization of bathhouse film. In *Doña Herlinda* and *El Callejón*, I argue that the bath space in both films is used to explore the tensions between cisheteronormativity in the external world and the possibility of queerness within the saunas in each. On the other hand, I argue that bathhouse film post-2000 presents a queerer vision of bath space; beginning with Sergio Tovar Velarde's *Cuatro lunas* (2014) I propose a rereading of the story of Joaquín, an older man and established poet, as he attempts to achieve sexual gratification with the much younger hunk, Gilberto. Instead of falling into the stereotypical dynamic of the *chichifo*—the male hustler who takes advantage of gay men's attraction to him typically for economic gain—I propose a different, deeper affective relationship between the new men. I end the chapter by turning to Orlando Karín's short film *Salón rojo* (2024). In particular, I engage a reading of the film the affective contours created through its aesthetic shots and narrative; here, I

argue that José Esteban Muñoz's work with the figure of ghosts in *Cruising Utopia* helps to make sense of the use of bath space, illness, and loss in the film which creates resonances between the COVID-19 pandemic and the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Finally, chapter 3, “Escuchar al baño: Bathroom Narratives and the Auditory in *CUIR: Historias disidentes*” turns towards the intersection of the sonic and bath space in Mexican podcast. Although Podcast Studies as a field has struggled with the ontology of podcasts—questioning whether or not they form part of the history and evolution of radio or whether podcasts are better understood as a mode of communication or as a practice—what remains clear is the fundamental relationship that podcast create between speaker, listener, and technology. In the chapter, I explore the podcast as both medium and social-technical assemblage with special attention to the use of sound design as an important part of storytelling. As an example of this in the Mexican context, I argue that *CUIR: Historias disidentes* demonstrates a masterful use of sound design that serves not only to underscore the stories that the podcast tells but also orientates the listener through the auditory. In the episode “Instrucciones para ir al baño,” this uniquely effective use of sound intersects with bath space to create a series of stories that provide key meditations on identity, gender, sexuality, and space. I begin with the first story in the tripartite episode, a story of a young lesbian couple, as they tackled the hyper-sanitized vision of bath space for people with vulvas, opting instead to reclaim bath space as having erotic potential for them as well. This story specifically helps to combat the androcentric nature of erotic bathroom narrative which, more times than not, centers on men's sexuality. I then transition to the second story in the episode, which follows a gay man as he cruises public bathrooms. Though not a

novel idea—gay men cruising narratives are a dime a dozen—Leodan’s story is unique in the reflections on gay sexuality and cruising practices that it includes; furthermore, the story includes real audio ofLeodan performing oral sex, thereby placing the listener in a quasi-voyeuristic position. In the third and final story, I critically read the story of Alanís, a trans woman, as she works up the courage to use the women’s restroom for the first time. For Alanís, the bathroom functions as an allegory for her process of transitioning. In all, I argue that the chapter is an important addition to Critical Baño Studies in the way that it brings attention to the auditory, forcing the listener to sonically occupy bath space.

I conclude by reflecting on the spaces and thinkers that have guided my research for the past five years, as well as acknowledging the spaces that did not make it into this project. I begin with a recapitulation of the pillars that support my articulation of Critical Baño Studies. I then reflect on the state of the world and the ease with which we can fall into the pessimist position of hopelessness; with the help of Muñoz, I insist that we must not lose hope, for the anticipatory horizon not only of queerness, but of a better world, only continue to be through the essential work that hope provides. These reflections, more than anything else, function as a roadmap for the future of this research, including the deeper, more explicit development of a Critical Baño Studies in the Mexican context.

Positionality or My Queer Orientation

It is not anything groundbreaking to say that, as queer folks, we exist in the world in a very different way; we learn at a very young age to critically read spaces and those within it for our own safety. On top of being vigilant for threats, we also seek kinship;

finding (and being in) community in a space where queerness is not the norm is also a form of queer survival.

When I began this project, it looked a lot different; I was originally interested in taking a more panoramic approach that critically engaged with a different queer(ed) space in each chapter. It was in this phase of the research process that I came across a pleasant surprise: many of the queer narratives situated in the Northern part of Mexico resonated with my own experience growing up in rural Eastern Oregon. From the smell of leather from well-used horse saddles and the sounds of the rodeo to the clandestine love affairs of the *campo*, I recognized many of the parallels between these narratives and my own.

With this dissertation, I suppose I was also seeking kinship in a way. That is why I think that it is important to begin with a positionality statement because, after all, I do not belong to the communities that I am writing about here. I am a white, U.S.-born, queer academic working from a Research 1 institution. I recognize that these set of privileges greatly influence the way that I approach these stories that are not my own. For that reason, I am honored and humbled by those who have allowed me to share space and engage in dialogue. I am thankful to have the opportunity to be in community with fellow queers and to have learned when space, narratives, and conversations simply do not belong to me.

The goal for this dissertation, and all my research writ large, is not to speak on behalf of the community, nor try to reveal some greater truth about their own stories; rather, I am presenting my own critical observations about a particular narrative phenomenon. I hope that with this project I have put into practice queer kinship with continuing intellectual conversation instead of forming part of the long history of U.S. academic extractivism in

the Global South. After all, I don't know if there's anything more unifying than the need to use the restroom, something that we all share.

Chapter 1

Leer el baño: Reorientating Ana Clavel's *Cuerpo náufrago*

la identidad empieza por lo que deseamos. Secreta, persistente, irrevocablemente. Lo que en realidad nos desea a nosotros.

—Ana Clavel, *Cuerpo náufrago*

Come, come! I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Introduction

Ana Clavel's 2005 novel *Cuerpo náufrago* (*Shipwrecked Body*) opens to a familiar scene, as our protagonist, Antonia, is enjoying a night of sleep before going to work. The premise of the novel is simple: Antonia suddenly wakes up one morning in the body of a man and must learn how to navigate the world in her new, masculine body—a kind of Kafkaesque metamorphosis and an inversion of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (Zárate Sánchez). Because of the protagonist's exaggerated and fantastic transition from Antonia to Anton, the novel offers valuable insight into the way that we navigate the world as gendered subjects, highlighting above all else the intersection between quotidian spaces, interpersonal relationships, and gender.²⁴ Furthermore, Antonia's quest to learn how to

²⁴ Here I am intentionally engaging the word fantastic in the tradition of Tzvetan Todorov; in particular, Halszka Lelén's affirmation that the devices of the fantastic "redynamize" mimetic fiction because they are "techniques oriented at transposing mimetic ways of representation into new, but still recognizable, models of the word" is helpful to understand the way that *Cuerpo náufrago*'s break from total realism through Antonia's transition ultimately creates the conditions for the novel's social critique (Lelén 8). This will be explored more throughout the chapter.

occupy her new masculine body leads to Quixotic absurdity that, while comical, provide the possibility to critically reflect on our own journeys as gendered subjects.

The main question that arises from Clavel's novel is precisely how to untangle the relationship between identity, space, and the bizarre story in which it unfolds; from Antonia's transition to her eventual obsession with photographing urinals and lingering desire for men, it becomes clear that *Cuerpo náufrago* is much more complicated than it appears at first glance. Previous scholarship dedicated to Clavel's novel has focused on the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and gender dysphoria (Tovar); postmodern feminist readings of *lo inusual* (Pietrak); multimedia narrative and referentiality (Erazo); new elements of the contemporary poetic with a play on sexuality that deconstructs gender (Plaza Morales); the ontological foundations that delimit gender identity and the hybridity that defies them (Doucet); and troubling gender, genre and intertextuality (Lavery). While the critiques in these works importantly highlight different aspects of the texts, there are two notable shortcomings of the previous academic writing on *Cuerpo náufrago*: first, there is a tendency to fixate on the representation of the gender binary and the perpetuation of cisheteronormativity by the protagonist; second, there is little to no mention of the bathhouse. These two issues prevent us from seeing the complete panorama of the novel, which limits the potential that it has in terms of offering insights into the (de)construction of Mexican masculinities and practices of gender and sexuality that are necessarily tied to bath space.

The purpose, then, of this chapter is to reorientate a reading of *Cuerpo náufrago* that engages both Critical Baño Studies and desire paths as a framework for reading the

non-normativity in its narrative. I will do this by first examining the representation of gender and transition in the novel; I will then spatially analyze the bath space in the novel with a focus on the function that it has in its larger context—i.e. why Antonia finds herself becoming obsessed with urinals instead of any other quotidian object. Special attention will also be given to the bathhouse, a space that hitherto has been neglected in most academic work about the text. I argue that, like the bathrooms in the novel, the bathhouse also provides an opportunity to critically engage with representations of identity, but unlike the bathrooms, the bathhouse scene adds the necessary social aspect to the construction of masculine identity. By offering a rereading of *Cuerpo náufrago* inspired by Bourdieu's idea of *habitus clivé*, I employ a new framework by which we can understand the relationship between Antonia's gender, sexuality, and the dynamics of the spaces that she occupies. Finally, I end the chapter with an analysis of the figure of the "Mingitauro," an object whose hybridity reflects Antonia's own identity and, ultimately, allows her to imagine a radically different way of being in the world.

Fantastic Transitions

Since the beginning of the novel, the opening fragment of the novel importantly establishes two main themes that come to define the text;²⁵ first, it establishes a starting point in Antonia's own conception of her gender identity and second, it insists on the relationality between corporeality and masculinities. The first lines read:

Ella—porque no había duda sobre su sexo, aunque las presiones de la época contribuyeran a que asumiera otros roles—estaba dormida en la cama y se resistía a

²⁵ The structure of the novel consists of seven chapters, which have names, and within each chapter are numbered sections of the text. These sections function like vignettes, typically describing a singular episode in Antonia's story, which gives the novel a fast-paced feel. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to these sections as fragments.

abandonar el último sueño, donde tres niños se alejaban del salón de clases y a una señal desenfundaban sus sexos nacientes para medir su poderío. **Ella**—a quien conoceremos en breve como Antonia—veía la escena como si fuera cada uno de ellos. (Clavel 11; my emphasis)

“Ella” being the first word of the first two sentences concretely demonstrates that Antonia’s perception of herself is not at question, but rather that her womanhood is foregrounded in the reader’s introduction to her. The affirmation that “no cabía duda sobre su sexo” likewise signals to the reader that Antonia’s story is not the result of a repressed desire to be a man in the same way that a trans narrative presents gender dysmorphia, but rather that this desire for masculinity is rooted in something else. Though social conditions have led her to assuming less-than-traditional gender roles, she is still a woman, at least at the moment that the text introduces her.

The other key element in this introduction to the text is the dream sequence with which the story begins. Antonia, fast asleep, dreams of three boys who sneak away from class to measure their penis size. The dream, which continues from the previously mentioned scene, continues explaining that

veía la escena como si fuera cada uno de ellos. Finalmente, se decidía por el chico que aún mantenía oculto su sexo con la mano. Al contemplar el tamaño de los otros se animaba a mostrar su pene larvario sin temor. (Clavel 11)

In this dream, the three boys leave the classroom, metaphorically/symbolically leaving behind the site of formal education to engage in the informal education of masculinity. Here the novel establishes a clear division between the explicit education of boys (via the classroom) and the implicit ones that occur in homosocial, semi-private contexts (via the comparison of penis size). However, the comparison of penis size between (presumably) prepubescent boys who are just beginning to sexually develop is presented less as an act of

sexual curiosity and more so as a way that establishes rank amongst them. By “medir su poderío,” the text establishes that the symbolic capital of developing boys is directly related to the size of their penises. Notably, the boys only look at one another, as that is the only acceptable way of measuring manhood according to dominant cisheterosexual masculinity. This measuring of penises (and power) becomes the very basis for their budding masculinity—at least this is how Antonia imagines that masculinity functions.

As Antonia wakes up to get ready for work, she passes by a mirror in which she sees for the first time “su nuevo sexo” (Clavel 12). Her transition, however, is not limited to genitalia; this sudden transformation also includes changes to secondary sex characteristics that are commonly associated with males, including broadened shoulders, increased body hair, a more angular jawline, and a more pronounced Adam’s apple (Clavel 13). In this sense, Antonia’s transformation allows her to pass as a man.²⁶

One of the main critiques of the novel is the way that “la narrativa reduce de manera extremadamente simplista la identidad de género al binomio biológico hombre y mujer” (Tovar 128). Furthermore, a common reading of *Cuerpo náufrago* focuses on its perceived reification of cisheteronormativity. This, in part, comes from the following passage that describes Antonia’s relationship to masculinity:

Cierto que desde pequeña había deseado ser hombre. No porque se creyera un varón atrapado en el cuerpo de una mujer, sino porque la intrigaba la naturaleza de esos seres que, suponía, eran más completos y más libres que ella. Sí, se recordaba

²⁶ “Passing” refers to a certain adherence to gender expressions such that trans and travesti individuals are perceived as the gender that they are embodying, as opposed to being “clocked” (“found out”) as trans and travesti. There is discourse within the trans community regarding the aspiration to be passing because of the way that it reinforces cisheterosexual gender norms, but there is also a historical precedent of passing as a tool for avoiding transphobic violence. Anderson et al. (2025) provide an in-depth analysis of the costs and benefits of “passing” for trans communities.

perfectamente de niña envidiando a sus hermanos y a los amigos de sus hermanos...
(Clavel 13)

Though Jane E Lavery argues that “the text ambivalently sways, in a true postmodern fashion, between a desire to challenge gender narratives which espouse dominant and stereotypical gender/sex constructions, whilst also upholding such gender/sex constructions” (60), I argue that this tension between queering the narratives and moments of upholding cisheteronormativity is the necessary basis for the journey towards a queer consciousness that Antonia experiences throughout the novel. I see a similar gesture in *Cuerpo náufrago* to Gloria Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness which seeks “to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner” (80); akin to the process that Anzaldúa describes to reach a consciousness that challenges patriarchal and colonial violence, Antonia too has to engage in the struggle caused by disjointedness between her feminine lived experience and newfound masculinity and corporeality.

Furthermore, I maintain that the mentality that Antonia has regarding the position of men and women in Mexican society is more reflective of the desire to exist outside of the chingón-chingada (fucker-fucked) dynamic. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz presents a critical reflection on modernity as well as Mexican nation-building. The text, often characterized as an exercise of sensuous intelligence, is wrought with sexuality as a device for Paz’s critical approach to authenticity in the Mexican context. One such example of this is his reflection on the verb *chingar* (“to fuck”); for Paz, “chingar es hacer violencia sobre otro. Es un verbo masculino, active, cruel: pica, hiere, desgarrar, mancha” (Paz 222). Beyond the sexual relation, the chingón—being the one who inserts during sexual encounters—is also understood to be a title of celebration or to emphasize greatness. For

example, one may be labeled a chingón for doing an extraordinary favor for a friend (“eres un amigo bien chingón”).

What does it mean that greatness—and by extension authentic Mexicanness—is expressed in terms of a verb that is ultimately violent? In *Bottoms Up: Queer Mexicanness and Latinx Performance*, Xiomara Cervantes-Gómez tells us that “Reading Paz for bottoming accounts for how the bottom is rhetorically positioned as a locus upon which authentic and divergent ideas of Mexicanness are imagined, projected, and represented” (9). The bottom, represented by a slew of identities from women to queer folks to marginalized racial and ethnic groups, becomes the stage upon which Mexicanness, the nation state, and masculinized individuals can perform and ultimately become chingones.

It is precisely here that *Cuerpo náufrago* intervenes; by creating a mode of being outside of the chingón-chingada dynamic, Antonia holds the potential of radical imagination, a way of seeing and understanding a new positionality (in terms of gender/sexual position) and relationality (in terms of dominance as a central element to identity). In this sense, Antonia’s relationship to gender in this passage is not the result of internalized misogyny or the newfound pleasures in being in the dominant position in a machista society, but rather it gestures towards the desire to escape the violences that the cisheteropatriarchy exercises on bottoms, to use Cervantes-Gómez’s terminology. It makes sense, then, that Antonia’s desire to become a man is because they can “salir solos por la ciudad sin correr tanto peligro” (Clavel 13). In other words, Antonia does not want to be a man because that identification would be better aligned with how she sees herself or because of a latent desire to exercise violent domination over others, but rather that she

wants to be afforded the same social and cultural liberties that are only available to men in Mexico.

How, then, can we make sense of the queer elements of this novel, given the centrality of dominant heteronormativity? My reading of *Cuerpo náufrago* is intrinsically linked to the erotics of possibility; in the first fragment after her transformation, Antonia explains that “No supo por qué, pero la posibilidad de lo desconocido la excitó al punto de sentirse que se preparaba para un gran salto...Un relámpago se erizó entre sus piernas” (Clavel 15). Her transformation, though disorientating, also provides the perfect scenario for finding a different way of being and being in the world. In other words, the possibility of the unknown that Antonia has an erotic bodily reaction to can be describe in terms of what José Esteban Muñoz might have called the “anticipatory illumination of the utopian” (Muñoz 18). It is the possibility of a queerness/queering of the narrative that has the potential to defy neat categorizations of gender and identity writ large.

Evoking Duchamp

The second chapter of *Cuerpo náufrago*, titled “El mingitorio más acá de Duchamp,” is perhaps the clearest connection to what Jane Elizabeth Lavery has called “the text’s cyber dimension [which] expands the notion of intertextuality through hypertextual and hypermedial readings” in Clavel’s larger “proyecto multimedia” (108). Here Lavery is referring to the interrelationality between Clavel’s written text and the illustrations—mainly photographs, but also diagrams—that become much more frequent after the novel’s second chapter.

The first notable part of this intertextuality is the clear reference to the French artist Marcel Duchamp and his 1917 sculpture titled *Fountain*. The sculpture consists of a porcelain white urinal that has been placed in such a way that the part that attaches to the wall lies flat on the display box. The words “R. MUTT 1917” are written on the rim in black, dripping ink (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1. 1964 version of *Fountain* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). Artwork © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp. Photograph © Koby Bryan Hansen, 2025.

Scholarly work produced about the infamous piece as “one of the most significant and radical contributions to the history of modern art” is numerous (Franklin 26). *Cuerpo náufrago* suggests the same, as, during her undergraduate years, Antonia’s professor in “Corrientes Estéticas” (“Aesthetic Trends”) describes *Fountain* as “la innovación de un artista francés de vanguardia que retomaba objetos de la realidad cotidiana para develar su belleza hasta entonces agazapada y poner en entredicho la noción convencional de lo artístico” (Clavel 32). From this we can determine that the general trend of interpretations

of the sculpture reduces it to an important innovation of a dadaist and vanguard artist—at least this is what Antonia’s professor in *Cuerpo náufrago* does.

However, within the body of scholarship about *Fountain*, “several art historians argue that this quintessentially masculine object is feminine in gender and, thus, yet another heterosexual rendering of the white female body” (Franklin 26). Likewise, Antonia perceives urinals in general as seductively feminine in various moments of the novel. Art Historian Paul B. Franklin, however, sees a different gesture within *Fountain*; Franklin contends that “Duchamp’s choice of *Fountain* as a readymade²⁷ is a revolutionary gesture in the history of art precisely because it questions canonical notions of authorship and the art object by making visible the intimate alliance between certain modes of avant-garde artistic production and queer sexualities” (26). Put another way, the emphasis on the potential of such a quotidian object as a urinal is indicative of a “queerness yet to come,” a way of challenging the dominant affective regimes of heterosexuality (Muñoz 25). This queer reading—or perhaps better said, this queer reclamation—of Duchamp’s piece is fundamental; by highlighting the connection between avant-garde art and queerness, a similar gesture can be uncovered in *Cuerpo náufrago*: much like *Fountain*, *Cuerpo náufrago* is not simply a novel which challenges the limits of the written text vis-à-vis intertextuality and hypermediality, but rather it is also a gesture in queering the traditional Mexican novel through both content and form. It importantly challenges notions of identity

²⁷ Readymade art refers to creations that take objects and present them as artistic production with very little work necessary. In other words, there is very little construction of the pieces, mostly presentation.

and belonging in part by directing audience awareness to an object that otherwise is only ever pissed on.

My approach to *Fountain* bridges Duchamp's work and Clavel's novel. For me, a notable part of *Fountain* is the way that the urinal has been laid down in such a way that the part that usually attaches to the wall is flat against the pedestal that holds it. This is to say that the urinal is rotated 90° from its typical orientation. I intentionally use the word orientation here to dialogue with Sara Ahmed's affirmation that "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation" (Ahmed 3). By adjusting the orientation of the urinal—the position of the sculpture in Duchamp's case, and Antonia's re-orientation to public restrooms in her new masculine body—the everydayness of dominant masculinity comes into question, and the resulting disorientation pushes us to recognize the gendered structures that shape our day-to-day lives.

Another aspect that interests me about this section of *Cuerpo náufrago* is the elements of ekphrasis that can be read throughout it. Here ekphrasis is understood as "la representación visual de una representación no verbal... puede ser un género discursivo (o un género literario) pero también una figura retórica dentro de una obra mayor" (Cruz Arzabal 137). Roberto Cruz Arzabal has identified six different functions that ekphrasis can have within (or as) a work; however, the two that are most relevant to my reading of *Cuerpo náufrago* are the semiotic-functional and ideological uses of ekphrasis. As Cruz Arzabal explains, the semiotic-functional use provokes "la autoreflexividad—la

problematización entre referente y obra” (140). On the other hand, the ideological use “no necesariamente se ocupa de la diferencia o semejanza de los lenguajes, medios o códigos, sino de la función social simbólica que cumplen” (Cruz Arzabal 142). With both in mind, we can say that the ekphrastic reference to Duchamp serves to evoke a certain auto-reflection and to make visible the ideologies that inform the social function of the object—in this case the urinal.

To demonstrate this, I turn to the episode where Antonia (still in her feminine body) comes face-to-face with a urinal for the first time. The text explains that in

...un baño de azulejos blancos de los que emergía un receptáculo semejante a la obra de Duchamp, pero invertido. Se levantó hipnotizada y se dirigió hacia él. Sin entender por qué, cerró la puerta con seguro y permaneció desarmada frente a aquel objeto que bostezaba ensimismado en su propia vanidad. (Clavel 32)

Though this scene takes place prior to her sudden transformation into a masculine body, it importantly demonstrates the origins of the way in which the knight’s armor symbolically comes to represent Antonia’s ability to “protect” herself throughout the novel. To that end, my reading of this scene spans across temporalities because although this episode occurred in the past, I argue that reading it in conjunction with Antonia’s masculinity present provides a more nuanced understanding of the metaphor of the suit of armor and the text’s linguistic play with gendered language. In this passage, we can see that the materiality of the bathroom is foregrounded, since the first thing that Antonia mentions are the white tiles that cover it. From there, the text jumps into the reference to Duchamp, which instead of being a superficial reference used solely to describe the form of the urinal, is instead used to provoke reflection on an object that until now had been completely foreign to Antonia. What’s more, the passage ends with an ideological reflection—the relationship between

object and masculinity, articulated here as a kind of vanity—which is explored throughout the novel with Antonia’s various hypotheses of the shape of the urinal and what that implies when men use it.

Because she is “hipnotizada” by the urinal, she loses control of herself, thus standing “desarmada” in the presence of something so new. The ambiguity of the phrase “se dirigió hacia él” is also worth noting because of the way that “él” can be read as a reference to the urinal (el urinario)—this is the more literal reading—or as a reference to Anton. Understanding “él” as Anton would suggest that there is a profound connection between *becoming* Anton and being in the presence of the urinal because of the way that it has already been presented as something essentially belonging to men. This reading is made possible by the larger context of the novel which is intentional in the way that it keeps Antonia separate from Anton—which we can see in the use of the feminine form “hipnotizada” and “desarmada” to refer to Antonia.²⁸

Furthermore, “desarmada” also works here as a double entendre; if Antonia’s imaginary protective gear is constructed to echo that of a knight, then the reference to being (dis)armed is a reference to a sword, an undoubtedly phallic object. In this case, then, Antonia (a woman) stands in front of the urinal penis-less, even though her new body does possess a penis. Ultimately, the use of “desarmada” and its *albur*-esque use support my

²⁸ For the most part the novel refers to Antonia using the feminine form of adjectives, except in specific moments, such as during Antonia’s visit to the museum to learn about chivalry. While wearing a suit of armor, the text explains that “Se sentía rígida e incómoda, pero al menos estaba protegido” (44). As is the case with much of the novel, this phrase is ambiguous in the way that it does not specify whether the feminine “rígida” and “incómoda” refer to the armor (“la armadura”) or Antonia herself and the masculine “protegido” as a reference to the covered arm (“el brazo”) of the suit or Anton. In my reading of the novel, I maintain that this play on gender is key to emphasizing a kind of mind-body dualism (Antonia = feminine = mind; Anton = masculine = body) that is ultimately undone with the novel’s ending.

previous claim that Antonia enters the restroom, and upon doing so, embodies Anton. In a Preciadian analysis of this part of the text, the tensions between identities (feminine/masculine, Anton/Antonia, etc.) can be articulated in terms of contrasexuality in the way that

los cuerpos se reconocen a sí mismos no como hombres o mujeres sino como cuerpos hablantes, y reconocen a los otros como cuerpos hablantes. Se reconocen a sí mismos la posibilidad de acceder a todas las prácticas significantes, así como a todas las posiciones de enunciación, en tanto sujetos, que la historia ha determinado como masculinas, femeninas o perversas. (Preciado 4)

This is perhaps the novel's biggest contribution to an epistemology of the *baño*; the entirety of the sex-gender system depends on neat categorization and subsequent exercises of power. By constantly putting that neat categorization in play, the novel presents a view of sexuality and erotics that is not contingent on the identity of men or women, and it presents an embodiment of gender that likewise is not entirely dependent on primary sex characteristics.

Returning to the previously mentioned scene, the novel describes how Antonia

Descubrió un grifo y probó a hacerlo funcionar. El agua corrió sosegada por los recovecos según un mecanismo de gravitación y fluidez que Antonia percibió como erótico: un abandonarse a la fuerza de una voluntad que no es la nuestra y perderse en el agujero oscuro de la más absoluta disolución. Fue entonces, cuando hurgaba en el orificio de desagüe, que se percató del intenso olor que emanaba de las paredes interiores. Una marejada acre y corrosiva, pero también dulzona, que le hizo perder el aliento. Entonces, ante la imanencia [sic] fulgurante y la repulsión provocadas, Antonia recordó varios nombres: urinario, mingitorio, fuente... Supo de pronto que aquellas realidades verbales correspondían a este rostro cóncavo, profundo y agazapado que por fin la miraba también a ella. (Clavel 32-33)

The erotic that Antonia perceives upon inspecting the urinal is multifaceted; first, it introduces a kind of erotics that has not been mentioned in the previously referenced texts, and that is the erotic nature of submission. This is particularly interesting given the liminal

space that Antonia/Anton occupies; having both aspects of masculinity and femininity—and thus, stereotypically, embodying both the dominant and the submissive sexually-speaking—the gesture towards submission stands out. As Antonia, still in her feminine body, enters the restroom, the combination of curiosity, disgust, and erotic tension compel her to make the urinal flush, an act that confirms the existence of what had been, until now, an abstract concept. Through a close reading of this passage, I come to the following conclusion: if the previous part of this scene was to establish Antonia's transformation into Anton in front of the urinal, then I argue that this part seeks to establish a connection between Anton's masculinity and the transgression of heterosexual male submission. Although in recent years this kind of submission has become more publicly acknowledged, it nonetheless represents a subversion of traditional Heterosexuality's gendered sexual roles. If men are not dominant, then the entire structure on which the institution of Heterosexuality is predicated collapses. For that reason, identifying that kind of submission in an object like a urinal, which is so connected to masculinity, is erotic. Yet it is not the only kink mentioned in the passage; the description of urine, specifically the use of the word "dulzona", also works as a reference to the previously mentioned water sports.

I want to pause here to emphasize the importance of the erotics of the bathroom. Though erotics are not as central of a theme to novel as gender and transformation, I argue that it is still a fundamental aspect to understanding the larger message of the text. In the previous scene, Antonia comes face-to-face with a urinal for the first time and notes something erotics about the way that it functions, as well as the peculiar shape of the object. This idea continues and intensifies later in the novel when Antonia and Malva visit the

urinals in the Bellas Artes building, per the recommendation of Carlos, to photograph them for their evident sensuality (Clavel 88). Antonia insists on Malva seeing the urinals for herself, putting Malva in the same position as Antonia was previously; upon entering, Malva notes that the objects are very strange because of how unfamiliar they are to her as a woman (Clavel 89). While Antonia takes various photographs, Malva finally notes that the urinals “parecen mujeres” (Clavel 89). This utterance confirms the suspicion that Antonia had about the reason that urinals were, paradoxically, so alluring and disconcerting. To capture this comparison photographically, the two make a deal: Antonia can photograph Malva’s naked figure next to the urinal—thereby making the parallel between the shape of a woman’s pubis and the urinal evidently clear—if Antonia uses the urinal in front of Malva, a kind of secret desire stemming from never having seen a man urinate in one before. Antonia complies, though his erection makes urinating difficult, as Malva undresses; as Antonia urinates, she notes that the urinal too is a kind of “thirsty mouth” (“boca sedienta”) that yearns to be satiated (Clavel 90). Sexual tension at a fever pitch, the scene ends with Malva and Antonia having sex amidst the urinals jetting out from the tiled bathroom wall.

In both cases, by mentioning the shape of the urinal, the text is establishing this construction of the erotics of the bathroom space. In previous instances, the urinal’s shape is compared to that of a concave face (“rostro cóncavo”), which importantly allows the urinal to return Antonia/Anton’s gaze. This is further complicated by other descriptions of the urinals; in one moment, for example, Antonia compares the form of a urinal to “las caderas de una mujer” (Clavel 27). By this, she is referring to the shape of the pelvic bone

which, in some cases, resembles the shape of urinals. After saying this, however, the text states that Antonia feels as if she has transgressed an unknown limit (“transgredía un límite desconocido”) with this kind of fascination and eroticization of the urinal by comparing it to a woman’s body (Clavel 27). This is precisely what leads her to want to photograph Malva’s naked body next to a urinal as a way of confirming this similarity. However, in yet another moment, while researching urinals, Antonia comes across a diagram that seems to suggest that the shape of urinals mimics that of a cross-section of a penis (Clavel 48). In this way, both of the objects that do the gazing, the urinal and Antonia/Anton, are both constructing as being masculine and feminine concurrently.

Lastly, I would like to point out that the chapter title queers the phrase “más allá de” (“beyond”), instead inviting the reader to think of the local (“más acá de...”). By doing this, the novel firmly situates itself within Mexico City, with only a small portion taking place outside of the metropolis. The journey that Antonia takes from her *colonia* to the Palacio de Bellas Artes to La Lagunilla Market with the special attention to spaces and objects that otherwise go unnoticed (and therefore are rendered less important) function as a kind of ode to lesser seen spaces of Mexico City. This is why an approach to 21st century Mexican literature through analyses of space and place are fundamental.

Baños de vapor: Mesoamerica to the Present

As mentioned previously and before going to its specific scene, the bathhouse is a seriously understudied aspect of *Cuerpo náufrago*, but to understand what it can offer in terms of the critique that I am developing here, it is first necessary to trace the genealogies of bathhouses in Mexico.

Although precursors to the modern bathhouse are typically associated with Greek and Roman bathing spaces in antiquity or perhaps with the naturally forming onsens (hot springs) in Japan, Mesoamerican communities likewise had el temazcal, a balneal space with “características propias, entre las que destacan su compleja arquitectura y sus relaciones con otras tradiciones mesoamericanas” (Romero Contreras 133). As one can imagine, the Spanish Conquest negatively impacted the use of el temazcal due to the erotic nature and function of the space, though it was not eradicated totally (Romero Contreras 134).

Over three hundred years later, the bathhouse found its new function in Mexican society. In his chapter “The Bathhouse and Male Homosexuality in Porfirian Mexico,” Víctor Macías-González describes the genesis of the modern bathhouse in Mexico as part of a national identity-fortifying and modernizing project. The hope was that

Bathrooms, washhouses, and public baths became crucial sites of encounter between individuals of humble social origins and their social superiors. There, it was hoped, the poor would acquire not only the elite’s superior sanitary practices, but also their notions about how bathing could potentially be an object of national pride. (Macías-González 27)

From this, it becomes clear that the bathhouses represented an important zone of contact between classes. Scholars such as Tim Dean have written about the distinction between contact (which occurs between diverse demographics of people) and networking (which occurs within close demographics for social and economic gain) in cruising contexts (*Unlimited Intimacy* 191). The project that Macías-González describes transforms the public bath space from one of networking where “they could socialize with friends and pamper themselves with steam baths, treat themselves to a massage, and get a haircut while

having a drink, gossiping, and closing business and political deals” to one of contact to encourage the shift in bathing practices (29).

This shift likewise had a racial and gendered component to it; the idea was to emulate the bathing practices of Europe and the United States, which afforded white (and “whitish”) Mexicans “symbolic superiority” that regarded them as clean—and therefore moral—while mestizos were thought of as dirtier, both in the literal and moral sense (Macías-González 28). Paradoxically, however, the bathing practices of indigenous communities were also celebrated as being superior, rivaling (and even surpassing) those in Europe (Macías-González 28).²⁹ There was also a clear gendered aspect to the patronage of bathhouses, as the strict division of public (masculine) and domestic (feminine) spaces was still in full effect.³⁰

However, the attempt to reshape the Mexican public via the bathhouse space backfired tremendously as

Public opinion scorned the luxurious lifestyle of *lagartijos* (fops)³¹ because they blurred traditional gender boundaries and represented a sterile or unproductive—and thus unmasculine—use of capital that violated the values of frugality, modesty, decorum, and capital accumulation that the regime advocated. This effete material decadence of the bathhouse, combined with its homosocial dynamic, ultimately

²⁹ The relationship between indigeneity and Mexican national identity is complicated and tumultuous, but in this particular instance we can see a clear example of how indigeneity can be co-opted as a symbol of national pride while the nation simultaneously and actively exercises violence against indigenous peoples. There is a similar gesture in Romero Contreras’s article which highlights that the majority of interest in el temazcal is rooted in New-Age spirituality and neocurandismo, not for a genuine interest of recovering a central element to Mesoamerican social practice.

³⁰ It’s not until later that we see women-centered narratives in public bath spaces; this will be explored further via a short film in Chapter 2.

³¹ *Lagartijos*, similar to the dandy figure, are one of the many archetypes of sexual dissidence in Mexico. They are typically characterized by their effeminate qualities (behavior, manner of dressing, speech) and their middle- or upper-class backgrounds during the 18th and early 19th centuries. One common context in which *lagartijos* are discussed is the incident of “El baile de los 41” in which headlines read: “Los 41 maricones encontrados en un baile de la calle La Paz el 20 de noviembre de 1901” (Chaves 75).

queered the very space that society had hoped would serve to overcome men's anxieties towards modernization. (Macías-González 31; original emphasis)

What is key here is that this queering of space also opened the opportunity for the realization of same-sex sexual and affective relationships. As a response, programs were created to give urban men a chance to work their bodies in the urban gymnasiums that often accompanied these balneal spaces, a replacement for the manual labor of rural life, emphasizing the relationship between productively working one's body and the kind of masculinity that was desirable for the modernizing nation (Macías-González 31). Yet ultimately it did not matter as both effeminate and hypermasculine spaces gave rise to the possibility of homosexual/erotic relationships. Interestingly, this shift from hard labor in rural zones to this kind of dandy lifestyle in the urban centers in the Porfirian era could also possibly explain, at least in part, the knee-jerk reaction towards effeminate men during the Mexican Revolution, which pedestaled the figure of the macho revolutionary man, a kind of "Make Mexico Masculine Again" campaign. This mentality was further exacerbated by the increase of the presence of women in the public sphere throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Aguirre Darancou 34).

Lastly, there is another fundamental connection between Macías-González's historical work and the reading of the *baño* that I have presented in this chapter. Much like restrooms, bathhouses provide a valuable insight into the construction of masculine (sexual) identity as Víctor Macías-González argues:

Bathhouses and similar aquatic recreation spaces helped individuals to imagine themselves as belonging to a distinct community of same-sex attracted men. These bathing spaces allowed the crystallization of abstract identities, becoming 'showcases' that made possible and tangible desires and identities that until then

had not been as easily manifested. As such a ‘showcase,’ the bathhouse transformed same-sex desire from a behavior into an objective identity. (26)

What catches my attention here is the specific use of the term “showcase”; in a footnote, Macías-González explains that he is drawing from the French concept *vitrine identitaire* as proposed by Brigitte and Joseph Krulic (46). The construction of bathhouses as part of the Porfirian national modernization project allowed for the construction of the foundations of modern homosexual identity and the creation of a space that ends up functioning as a queer(ed) space.

After the Porfirian era, bathhouses fell out of fashion as a modernizing tool, in part due to the Mexican Revolution. However, upon the return to the urban centers of post-Revolution Mexico, men were able to engage in public sexual encounters in these spaces once again. This continues throughout the first half of the 20th century to the extent that Mexican thinker and chronicler Carlos Monsiváis considered “baños de vapor” to be part of a larger constellation of the wandering ghettos (“ghettos ambulantes”) of 20th century gay culture (“Los gays en México” 113). In the same article, Monsiváis also describes the homophobia rampant in these spaces as they become the arena to arrest, blackmail, and extort the men that were caught looking for pleasure with other men (113). Other scholars, such as Kevin Chrisman describe the policing of known cruising spaces going back to as early as 1960 (256-292).

The 1980s and 1990s brought forth an even more difficult time for bathhouses as the HIV/AIDS crisis spread rampantly. Bathhouses became infamous for being one of the primary sites of transmission; a popular (albeit fictionalized) account of this is Mario Bellatin’s 1994 novel *Salón de belleza*. From there, bathhouses have been in decline, and

in the first two decades of the 21st century, many establishments are shutting down. However, and somewhat paradoxically, there is a renewed interest in bathhouses, especially in cultural production. This uptick in literary texts, films, and other art forms that include the bathhouse may be enough to help some of Mexico's most famous cruising spots hold out a bit longer.

The Bathhouse and Bourdieu's *Habitus*

Ana Clavel's novel provides valuable insight into bathhouse culture in the 21st century, with both new formations and the legacies left by the Porfirian and earlier baths. For the context of this dissertation, my reading of the bathhouse scene is not only novel in both approach and in the way that it sheds light on an understudied aspect of the text but also contributes to a greater understanding of the social construction that happens within the bathhouse space. This is a fundamental aspect to developing a Critical Baño Studies in Mexico, as will become clear in the following pages.

After Antonia goes out with her friends, the narrator explains that "Era sábado por la mañana, así que Carlos sugirió que fueran al vapor: uno de los rituales de purificación que acostumbran muchos hombres luego de trasnocharse" (Clavel 62). In a close reading of this scene, we can see that patronage to the bathhouse is closely tied to both rituals of purification and the normalized work week.

The idea of patronage to a bathhouse as a purification ritual is particularly interesting, in part because it can be understood in a multitude of ways; first, we can understand it in the physiological sense. After a night of drinking, a visit to the bathhouse would allow the men to sweat out the alcohol that lingers in their system, presumably

helping with inebriation and hangover. This same purification can also be understood with religious undertones; culturally, Mexico is heavily influenced by Catholicism, which, like other religions, prominently features water-based purification rites (baptism for Catholics).³² In a sense, then, the purification ritual of the bathhouse also represents a kind of washing oneself of the “sins” of the night before, whatever they may be.

As for the relationship to the normalized work week, according to the narrator, this habit of going to the bathhouse on Saturday morning occurs after a long night of drinking on Friday. This presupposes a normative work week in which men work during the day from Monday until Friday; Friday night and Saturday morning, then, become the time for homosocial leisure which, harkening back to Macías-González’s chapter, has historically had the goal of making men more productive during their workday. Because of this, we can assume that most of the patrons of the bathhouse belong to a socioeconomic status that permits them the luxury of not working on the weekend. I argue that this kind of “middle-class” representation is meant to posit this scene as an insight into the most “average” Mexican men, which is important as Antonia and her friends have a very different lifestyle.³³

However, Antonia feels hesitant as “*aparte de los mingitorios, era la primera vez que se enfrentaba a la situación de encontrarse en un ámbito de intimidad exclusivamente masculina*” (Clavel 62). Part of this hesitation comes from the element of lingering

³² Islam and Judaism also feature practices of washing oneself before entering holy places or performing religious activities. The point I am making, though, is not to identify a specific religious practice that can be read in this text, but rather I am pointing out that there exists a notable connection between religiosity and purification by water/washing.

³³ This is to say that the lifestyles of an artist, photographer, and pilot create much different opportunities than the average working man being described in this part of the novel.

sexuality since “estaba la cuestión de los cuerpos desnudos: el suyo y el de los otros que se encontrarían en el lugar, aunque la verdad es que sentía curiosidad: aún le atraían los hombres” (Clavel 62). The fear of being found out as an imposter in the sense that Antonia’s heterosexual desire as a woman still exists as a vestige of her previous life, risking the disclosure of her latent desires and the resulting homophobic violence.³⁴ Articulated in another way, Antonia’s discomfort in this situation can be explained by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, “the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures...to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely...in the organisms...lastingly subjected to the same conditionings” (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 85). In the context of the bathhouse, this manifests itself as a set of unwritten rules, including looking at other men to compare penis sizes, but not for too long; your penis remaining flaccid; laughing when others tell a joke, even if it is not funny.

This lack of conditioning is precisely what fuels Antonia’s fear of being “caught” in the homosocial space; in other words, she has not gone through the process of learning (explicitly or implicitly) and internalizing the norms of the space. Furthermore, given the emphasis on corporality in *Cuerpo naufrago*, Bourdieu’s conceptualizing of an embodied cultural capital—understood here as the cultural capital acquired from personal, first-hand experience—is particularly useful in understanding the link between culture capital and the body. In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu writes:

³⁴ Gay bashing is a common response to unwanted advances by other men, especially in the canon of queer representation in Mexican cultural production: Ripstein’s *El lugar sin límites* (1978), Fernanda Melchor’s *Temporada de huracanes*, Jorge Fons’ *El Callejón de los Milagros* (1995), to name a few.

Most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment. The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of what is called culture, cultivation, *Bildung*, presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand (so that all effects of delegation are ruled out). (1986)

The idea that cultural capital must be “invested personally by the investor” is especially resonant with *Cuerpo náufrago* given the way that Antonia first seeks models of masculinity in *Amadís de Gaula*; the chivalry novel, however, is no replacement for the lived experience of masculinity. It is for this reason that

No podía evitar sentirse incómoda... nunca como ahora había experimentado la sensación opresiva de ser tráfuga sobre todo por el temor a que una mirada suya, un gesto inapropiado, la hicieran parecer sospechosa a los ojos de los otros. (Clavel 63)

In a reading of this novel via Bordieuan concepts, the discomfort that Antonia feels is the direct result of a disconnect between the space of the bathhouse and her embodied cultural capital within it.

The key moment that elucidates this idea is after one of the other patrons makes an incestuous, misogynistic, and homophobic joke.³⁵ After the initial shock of the joke, the text explains that

Antonia se descubrió gesticulando una carcajada tan pronto como se percató de que incluso Carlos reía. Entre las brumas del asombro, atisbó en la procacidad un acto de desnudez violenta que compensaba los tapujos del lenguaje y las convenciones, incluidos los trabajos, las corbatas, las fiestas familiares. De modo que no era un rumor: el mundo soez de los hombres podía ser tan ilimitado según se encontraran en los límites de la confianza suficiente, es decir, entre ellos solos. (Clavel 64)

³⁵ In short, the joke goes: a daughter asks her father for permission to go out, he says yes if she gives him fellatio, she accepts but comments that his penis smells like shit, and the punchline is that her brother already asked their father to use the car (implying that he had anal sex with his son).

From the first line of this passage, the novel reinforces the idea that Antonia has not yet fully assumed her new identity in her masculine body. Although Tovar insists that “los hombres en el baño turco, e intuitivamente Antón también, se rían del chiste, indica la forma en la que la homofobia es parte inexorable en la masculinización de los mexicanos” (135), I offer another reading of this passage; by “gesticulating” a guffaw or cackle, the narrative emphasizes the exaggeration of this gesture—which is to say, the subtlety of a normal laugh versus performativity and the drama of a cackle—and it creates a juxtaposition between Antonia (impostor) and the other masculine subjects in the bathhouse, especially with Carlos. About imitation and identity, Judith Butler writes that the supposed imitation or parody of heterosexuality by non-heterosexuals reveals a “panicked imitation of [heterosexuality’s] own naturalized idealization. That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself reveals that it is perpetually at risk” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 314). This “act of elaborating itself” works on two fronts: first with Antonia’s performative masculinity, and second with Carlos’ performative masculinity.

With her faked laugh, the text first suggests that Antonia must compensate for not understanding the adequate response in that situation. The intuitiveness of Antonia’s laugh is not the result of a newfound homophobia as part of her masculinization, but rather it should be understood as a manifestation of her second-hand cultural capital, in Bordieuan terms. Bourdieu explains that “social space is so constructed that agents who occupy similar conditions and submitted to similar conditionings and have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing practices that are themselves

similar” (*In Other Words* 128). In this sense, Antonia’s lack of “similar conditionings” to the other men in the sauna means that she misses the cue that she is supposed to laugh at the homophobic and incestuous joke, yet she possesses enough cultural capital to know that when others laugh, it is time to laugh too. On top of the element of compensation, it further underlines that Antonia’s identity—both gender and sexuality—are likewise in crisis and require panicked imitations of what both are “supposed” to look like in contemporary Mexican society.

For Carlos’ part, he was previously introduced in the novel with a machista comment, saying that “mingitorios son como las mujeres, los usas y ya” before letting out a cackle (Clavel 36). He then apologizes, explaining that he didn’t say that, but that “lo dijo Matatías, ese muchacho que me sale a veces y que todo hombre que se precie lleva dentro” (Clavel 36). I argue that this conscious awareness of machista practices amongst men in homosocial situations is key to understanding the scene in the sauna; more than anything, this scene demonstrates that “incluso” Carlos, despite how self-aware he may be, also feels compelled to embody his alter ego and laugh at the bad-taste joke. It is a performative disidentification with himself, preferring to project heterosexuality’s naturalized idealization onto a persona, yet in the bathhouse he feels compelled to laugh along with the other men, affirming that the crisis of heterosexual masculinity requires the elaboration of itself, in Butler’s words. In this sense, the novel presents a particular version of habitus—or the unwritten norms of the homosocial space created through repetitions—specific to the bathhouse space that reifies and reaffirms their masculinity and heterosexuality.

However, the habitus of the patrons of the bathhouse and that of Antonia are not the same; Bourdieu explored this phenomenon with the concept of habitus *clivé* (split): just before his death, “Bourdieu said that his was a divided habitus—a *habitus clivé*—as a consequence of the contradictions he experienced in coming from lowly social origins to achieve high scholarly distinction” (Bennett 201). In 2016, Sam Friedman returned to the concept to explain the affective effects of social mobility, arguing that for those who “had travelled so far in subjective terms from the objective conditions in which their habitus had been formed, they were unable to ever fully adapt or acculturate” (139). At the social level, this has alienating effects, that would make it difficult to form and maintain meaningful connections with those who did not have such social movement; at the aesthetic level, the incomplete acculturation would feel *just a bit off*, with a certain uncanniness that is only perceivable by those whose habitus was formed within those conditions. This idea of an incomplete acculturation to a new field is particularly relevant, given that Antonia’s fantastical transformation into a man represents the ultimate form of social mobility in a machista and patriarchal society, which not only supposes that all men will be socially superior to women, but also constitutes a system of material conditions that further the superiority of men. Though, as shown in the previous passage from the novel, Antonia, like Friedman’s subjects, is unable to fully reconcile her feminine upbringing and her new masculinity. What this allows the novel to do then, is explore a critique of masculinity from an infiltrator’s point of view.

Here I would like to pause to unpack the implications of employing a sociological concept (and characteristics of social class) onto the analysis of gender in a literary text, an

innovative approach to both *Cuerpo náufrago* as well as Bourdieu. First, it requires recognizing that all individuals are gendered and subjected to the dynamics of social class. Second, that there are resonances between class mobility and the representation of gender (in terms of depiction, but also performance) in the sense that both are malleable and highly dependent on their specific historical moments: it is not the same to be a woman for Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as it is for Antonia, in the same way that becoming a nun during the viceroyalty would not imply as much change in social class as it would be today. However, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that changing gender is not like a change in social class; a change in social class, more than anything, represents a change in material conditions and opportunities, whereas a change in gender identity implies a bigger change internally: a fundamental change to one's being. This distinction is particularly clear with the popular saying "I am not my job," but I would say that I am my gender identity and sexual orientation. Finally, I see a certain productive gesture in bringing a reading of and habitus and habitus clivé in *Cuerpo náufrago*. For example, Antonia, as her feminine self, had already navigated the art gallery space, so when she had to do the same in her new masculine body, she was already attuned to the habitus associated with that field. On the other hand, any of the restroom scenes provide an example of her habitus clivé, where the learning of the new habitus is emphasized as opposed to being inherent due to prior experience.

Returning to the previous passage from *Cuerpo náufrago*, the interest in the space itself is a central element because of the way that gender is embodied and social. Using words like "las brumas" and the verb "atisbar," the text employs the metaphor of the

sauna's interior, whose vapor largely obstructs vision, yet not completely, to embody this moment of bearing witness to what Antonia calls "el acto de desnudez violenta" (Clavel 64). The reference to nudity here not only reinforces the image of all the completely naked men in the sauna, which is, after all, the cause of Antonia's unease in the space, but it also underlines another kind of metaphoric nudity that is only permitted "entre ellos solos": vulnerability. About this, the text explains that the vulgarity ("procacidad") of men is simply part of the farce of dominant cisheterosexual masculinity, utilizing their macho masks to appear as if they are not vulnerable in front of women and children. Unlike heterosocial spaces ("los trabajos", "las fiestas familiares") where their roles as working men and fathers are strictly upheld by notions of heterosexuality and dominant masculinity, the bathhouse functions as a homosocial sphere in which vulnerability between men is permitted.

The reference to ties, for its part, can be understood as the symbolic masculinity of office culture and, in this way, introduces a specific reference to white collar masculinities. In the larger context of the novel, ties also form part of the allegory of armor as a representation of masculinity intrinsically linked to the ways of dressing; in this sense, ties evoke the ideal professional man in the same way that armor comes to symbolize knights. Additionally, ties have an interesting resonance with the bathhouse space in the sense that ties, a flaccid, phallic object, echo the flaccid penises of the bathhouse patrons. The phallus, and specifically the flaccid phallus, functions as a recurring motif throughout the novel, as it is used to measure the virility of various figures in the text.

Temptation finally takes over when Antonia and her friend Carlos are showering to leave the bathhouse; she first glances at his penis after observing that most of the men also did it, in a way constantly comparing themselves to those around them (Clavel 65). This reaches a fever pitch when Antonia reflects on why nudity makes her so nervous; about this she explains that we are just “cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes. Sólo cuando el deseo se abre paso—Antonia miró con deleite la espalda y las nalgas de Carlos cubiertas por una capa de espuma—florece” (Clavel 66). The text suggests, then, that it is through desire that we reach our fullest potential. Yet this scene ends with Antonia/Anton wanting to approach Carlos as he finishes showering but does not do it, signaling that the norms of the homosocial space are stronger than that of her own desire to find pleasure with her friend. Reading this gesture towards desire can be understood in terms of what Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia*:

The mode of “cruising” for which this book calls is not only or even primarily “cruising for sex.” I do see an unlimited potentiality in actual queer sex, but books of criticism that simply glamorize the ontology of gay male cruising are more often than not simply boring... I do nonetheless distill some real theoretical energy from historical accounts of fucking and utopia... Indeed [I ask] one to cruise the fields of the visual and not so visual in an effort to see in the anticipatory illumination of the utopian. (18)

This anticipatory illumination of the utopian is what I read in the aforementioned scene in *Cuerpo náufrago*; especially when reading the phrase without the parenthetical (“Sólo cuando el deseo se abre paso...florece”), the potentiality of desire as a mode of achieving a higher level of self-actualization (via the verb *florece*) becomes legible. Desire as a guiding force is found throughout the novel; desire is the motivator that leads Antonia to untangle the unsettling and arousing feelings produced by urinals, a journey that results

in friendships, relationships, and key moments of self-discovery. As I will explore in the next section, this is why the concept of desire paths as a narrative tool is so productive, especially in the case of *Cuerpo náufrago*.

El Mingitauro

To end this chapter, I would like to turn to a recurrent image in *Cuerpo náufrago*. In various moments of the novel, Antonia evokes the myth and Theseus and the Minotaur to describe her journey of introspection as it relates to her identity. In the first mention of the myth, the text states:

En cambio ahora su existencia se le antojaba una suerte de laberinto, un adentrarse en un territorio desconocido, sin posibilidad de vislumbrar una meta o una salida. Recordó el mito de Teseo que había entrado al laberinto de Creta para matar al Minotauro... Pero cuando retornó, Teseo era alguien distinto. ¿Qué fue lo que descubrió en ese recorrido? ¿Pudo no sentir piedad al degollar a la bestia de mirada humana? ¿Reconoció en ese rostro su propia animalidad embozada? Antonia hizo un gesto de impaciencia: se llevó la mano a los testículos y comenzó a rascárselos. Era una delicia hacerlo, aunque no sintiera comezón. Puesta a la entrada del laberinto, no podía sino introducirse y arriesgarse. Exponerse a que el Minotauro fuera ella misma en esas partes desconocidas y que su oscuridad, en vez de sepultarla entre tinieblas, la iluminara. (Clavel 42)

This quote, though extensive, serves to establish the clear resonances between the story of Theseus and Antonia's own. The labyrinth comes to symbolize the complex task of navigating her new gender identity, while the figures of Theseus and the Minotaur represent Anton's masculinity and Antonia's femininity respectively.

Additionally, this passage provides a clear example of the tongue-in-cheek humor that fills the novel's pages. The reflection on Theseus, specifically whether Theseus recognized his own "animality" in the face of the Minotaur, is momentarily interrupted by a return to reality in which Antonia scratches her testicles. Though humorous in the way

that it suggests an animality in the act of “rascárselos,” it simultaneously brings forth a hyperawareness of the performative parts of masculinity. Performative, here, is understood in the Butlerian genealogy as the repeated actions that constitute a meaning beyond the action itself; in Antonia’s case, this is the stereotype of the man who scratches his testicles to remind those around him that he has them and that he is free to do so both in private settings and publicly.

However, in a true Clavel fashion, the novel does not solely rely on Greek mythology to articulate this idea. As I mentioned previously, Ana Clavel’s work is informed by a larger multimedia project that brings together various media elements, and *Cuerpo naufrago* is no exception; about halfway through the novel, Antonia’s love interest, Malva, takes her to see a special urinal as a final gift before Malva leaves for Barcelona. Upon entering the women’s restroom in the Civil Office where Malva gets a copy of her birth certificate, the two come face-to-face with a urinal wrapped in a trash bag, evidence that the women’s restroom is in fact a recently renovated men’s restroom (see figure 2).

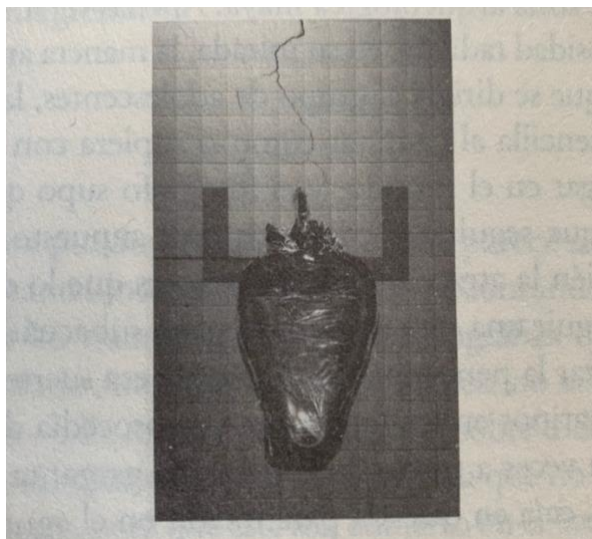


Figure 2. El Mingitauro in *Cuerpo náufrago* (pg. 167). © Ana Clavel.

After seeing this, Antonia says

—Hasta parece que lo hicieron a propósito: taparon un mingitorio y crear la cabeza de un minotauro—dijo a media voz, sin poder apartar la mirada enfebrecida del objeto—. ¿Quién iba a decirlo? Un mingitorio-minotauro en el baño de mujeres. Un Mingitauro...

—¿Un qué? —preguntó Malva.

Antonia lanzó un suspiro. Era más que un juego de palabras, pero ¿cómo explicarle a Malva los vericuetos de algo que ella misma estaba descubriendo? (Clavel 99)

With this scene, multiple layers of hybridity become legible; first, there is a clear mixing of mediums as Clavel's own photographic work appears between paragraphs.³⁶ Second, there is a gesture of gender mixing, as both the Mingitauro and Antonia no longer belong in a space that has been reappropriated as a women's bathroom. And lastly, there is a certain kind of hybridization that goes beyond the portmanteau "Mingitauro", one that combines Antonia's story (the "mingitorio") with Theseus's story (the "minotauro").

³⁶ In fact, this is one of the original things about this novel that caught my attention. It is interesting to think about the way that Clavel uniquely occupies the position not only of author of the text, but also artist and curator, providing the visual aspects to compliment (and problematize) the written word.

To me, this is one of the breakthrough moments of the novel; Antonia, now having met the Mingitauro, has an object upon which she can project her feelings of disidentification. In other words, she is finally able to articulate a feeling of identity that is not entirely masculine nor feminine, but rather through the kinship that she finds with the Mingitauro, she is able to imagine a new and radical way of being in the world that does not require her to choose one or the other. The monstrous figure in this moment ceases to be a monster in the sense that it no longer poses a threat to Antonia and the adherence to strict cisheteronormative gender norms; instead, it provokes the realization that Antonia is not like Thesus, tasked with killing the symbolic representation of her former self, but that she is herself the minotaur, trapped within the complex maze of identity.

With this newfound image of possibility, Antonia once again finds herself navigating the labyrinth, albeit changed this time, since “tras deambular sin sentido ni orientación, olvida ya la idea de asirse a las paredes, pues más que escapar la impulsaba un deseo recóndito e inexplicable de seguir adelante” (Clavel 165-166). First and foremost, this is a key reference to the “solution” to labyrinthine mazes in which you run either hand along the wall, eventually leading to the exit. Antonia, however, has abandoned this idea; instead, she wanders as her unexplainable desire pushes her forward. It is precisely this abandonment that makes my reading of *Cuerpo náufrago* through the framework of desire paths such a productive way of interpreting the text.

Desire paths are deviations from the established routes and are often formed from necessity or desire for a quicker, easier, or just different way of reaching a destination. Applied to the novel, we can see two major ways that Antonia strays from the typical path;

the first way was explored in previous sections as Antonia occupies both bathroom and bath house space to critically develop her relationship to masculinity and (homo)erotics. The second has been explored here through the metaphor of the labyrinth to describe Antonia's untangling of her gender identity. By insisting on a new way to navigate the labyrinth that is based in the desire to aimlessly continue forward instead of the pressures to "solve" the problem of her gender identity by confronting the Minotaur that is her feminine self, she instead forges a new path. This new path ultimately opens the door to a new world of possibility.

The novel ends with Antonia travelling to the Aeolian Islands of Italy to chase after Paula, a woman that she has fallen in love with. It is in this section that we finally see some resolution to Antonia's identity problem through the antepenultimate fragment of the novel which in many ways parallels the novel's opening, as seen in Figure 3:

First Fragment (pg. 11)	Antepenultimate Fragment (pg. 181)
Ella—porque no cabía duda sobre su sexo, aunque las presiones de la época contribuyeran a que asumiera otros roles—estaba dormida en la cama y se resistía a abandonar el último sueño, donde tres niños se alejaban del salón de clases y a una señal desenfundaban sus sexos nacientes para medir su poderío. (Clavel 11)	Él o ella—porque cabía duda sobre su género, aunque poco importara para aquellos que podían percibir su belleza indiferente—arribó al aeropuerto de Lipari, la mayor de las islas Eolias, un mediodía de junio. (Clavel 181)

Figure 3. Textual Comparison of the Beginning and End of *Cuerpo náufrago*

As we can see, there are three major revisions to our original introduction to Antonia. First, Antonia is no longer presented exclusively in the feminine through the subject pronoun "ella," but rather is presented using both masculine and feminine subject

pronouns, as well as the conjugation “o,” which implies that either are applicable to Antonia. Secondly, the change from not doubting her sex to doubting his/her gender shows a major ideological shift in terms of the gender/sex dichotomy. Above all, it shows a more nuanced understanding of gender identity that does not reduce it simply to primary sex characteristics (i.e. genitals). However, the last major revision with the operative conjugation “aunque” shows the biggest change in Antonia. In the first fragment, the text is concerned with contextualizing Antonia’s position within contemporary Mexican society as a woman, comparing her actions to the traditional roles that were relegated to women, which according to the novel, have changed in this new era (i.e. after Second and Third Wave feminism). On the other hand, the end of the novel disregards the social pressures, instead foregrounding the importance of those who accept Antonia regardless of her gender. In this sense, the comparison of these two fragments serves as the evidence that Antonia has found the way to create her own desire path with the possibility of existing outside of compulsory heterosexuality and the gender binary.

Conclusion

In all, *Cuerpo náufrago* is a fascinating novel that takes the established trope of a sudden metamorphosis and adds its own unique spin. Although previous scholarship on Ana Clavel’s novel have critiqued it for its somewhat unimaginative representation of gender and sexuality—that is to say that instead of capitalizing on the fantastic situation that Antonia finds herself in to explore new, queer possibilities, critics of the novel have focused on the ways that Antonia’s story reifies dominant heteronormativity—the reality

is that the text provides a much more nuanced depiction of masculinity in contemporary Mexico than previously thought.

In this chapter I have demonstrated the need for a more robust reading of Ana Clavel's *Cuerpo náufrago* that is less concerned with perceived subscriptions to gender binaries and gender-sex essentialism. Rather, I have shown that Antonia's experience in the bathhouse is fundamental to our understanding of the novel's larger explorations of the construction of a masculine gender identity in Mexico. By emphasizing the social aspect of the bathhouse episode and by employing Bordieuan concepts, I have provided a reading of *Cuerpo náufrago* that allows us to make sense of what otherwise is a discordant scene. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the bathhouse project in modern Mexico as a tool for the controlled creation of the new Mexican man backfired spectacularly; likewise, the supposed heteronormative and homosocial norms of the bathroom and bathhouse that dictate what kinds of relationships are permissible amongst men also fail. In the bathroom, she is faced with the urinal, which becomes her object of fascination and reflection as she embarks on her journey of self-discovery. In the bathhouse, Antonia is exposed to the farce of hegemonic masculinity and the temptation of homoerotic desire with a close friend, both of which are key in shaping her journey of self-discovery and her epitome at the end of the novel: other ways of embracing masculinities are possible.

Chapter 2

Ver el baño: Contemporary Mexican Bathhouse Film

Después los cuerpos se confunden con el vapor que emana de la cámara principal. Unos pasos más y casi de inmediato se es despojado de las toallas. De allí en adelante cualquier cosa puede ocurrir.

—Mario Bellatin, *Salón de belleza*

It would be a mistake to idealize gay sex institutions as utopian spaces liberated from the conflicts that permeate the world outside their walls...

—Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*

Introduction

The bright red paint of the old pickup truck stands out against the earthen tones of the dirt road as Pancho (Gonzalo Vega) drives towards the dwindling town of El Olivo. Alternating between wide and medium shots, the flashiness of Pancho's truck creates a visual tension with the arid landscape of the rural area in which *El lugar sin límites* (dir. Arturo Ripstein, 1978) is set. Intermittently, the camera locks into a voyeuristic view that peers into the driver's side window of Pancho's truck, allowing the viewer to see dashboard radio where, presumably, the accompanying track is coming from. His body is only seen as fragmented, with a visual focus on his muscular arm which becomes the center of our attention, albeit briefly. By extension Pancho is the object of desire, a perfectly masculine foil to the *travesti* characteristics of La Manuela (brought to life by the extremely talented Roberto Cobo).³⁷ Thus begins one of the most emblematic queer films in Mexico.

³⁷ Here the term *travesti* is used carefully and intentionally as it best encapsulates the mode of geopolitically situated representation of sexual dissidence that is simply missed when we refer to La Manuela as trans, transvestite, or least of all homosexual. As Cole Rizki explains "While in English *transgender* often needs to be modified in order to respond to local hierarchies of race, class, ability, and other forms of difference,

Beyond its legendary status as a foundational film in the cinematographic history of Mexico—and the kind of rite-of-passage that it represents for queer scholars in Mexican Studies—the thing that continues to interest me about Ripstein’s film is its legibility to someone who did not grow up in the rural Mexican countryside. Yet the contours of the film, from the barren dirt road to the dying community whose lifeforce has been redirected by the opening of a nearby freeway, is eerily similar to the ghost towns of Eastern Oregon. What is it about the textures of the film’s narratives that resonate with me so deeply, even to this day? This question has floated around in the background of my mind for several years, and by posing it here, it functions as both a way to highlight the connections that exist between these two ruralities and also as a commonality that helps bridge the personal and the academic. Despite the specificity of each context, the historical and material conditions of my hometown and El Olivo produced a similar reality rooted in economic disparity paired with, more importantly, a specific positioning of queer subjects that exist outside of the urban centers.

In the larger schema of Mexican cinema, *El lugar sin límites* occupies one of the most important places in part because of its “protagonistic” representation of homosexuality, and in part because of the way that it transforms the sexually dissident figure into a realized subject with the capacity to feel (Arratia Reyes 2022). Though La Manuela meets a tragic end at the hand of homophobic violence, she remains a productive figure in the potential for social and political change that can be found through the *fichera*

travesti underscores instead the impossibility of such an articulation in the first place” and that we might instead understand “*travesti* as an identification, a critical analytic, and an embodied mode of politics” (Rizki 2019, original emphasis).

films of the 1970s and 80s.³⁸ Sergio de la Mora argues that these “queeny *jotos*” are actually the “sites of pleasure and celebration” of queerness as opposed to being the flat, impotent caricature of homosexuals that only serves to highlight the macho characteristics of the male protagonist in Golden Age cinema (*Cinemachismo* 5; original emphasis). In this sense, figures like La Manuela exist within the stereotypical imaginary of Mexican film, but she herself cannot be simply reduced to a stereotype. Instead, she becomes a figure that brings attention to the very same homophobic violence that marks her death at the end of the film. Put another way, the figure of La Manuela lays the groundwork for taking the silences around homosexuality out of the closet of Mexican cinema, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might say.

Although it has been argued that queer representation in film continues to rely on violent representation and stereotypes when treating queer topics, thereby playing a fundamental role in the construction of cultural norms through the audiovisual (Espinoza Camacho and Pesci Gaytán 2025), I fall more in-line with the genealogical approach to queer Latin American cinema proposed by Vinodh Venkatesh in *New Maricón Cinema: Outing Latin American Film*. Venkatesh’s *New Maricón Cinema* importantly provides the necessary context for understanding a genealogy of queer representation in Latin American film. With such an understanding, Venkatesh develops a distinction—but not a dichotomy, more like a continuum of in the process of filmic representation—between what he names

³⁸ Sergio de la Mora describes *ficheras* as a “picaresque...brothel-cabaret comedy” (*Cinemachismo* 1). The name comes from the Mexican term for a woman who works in the nightlife industry, existing anywhere between an exotic dancer and a sex worker. *Ficheras* films are a play on the early genre of *cabareteras*, which are melodramatic films that often focus on a young female protagonist who, by some misfortune, has fallen into prostitution.

maricón cinema, a scopic, visually-oriented, and stereotypical set of films that maintain a distance between the spectator and the nonnormative bodies and desires represented, and *new maricón cinema*, a haptic, multisensorial set of films that affectively interpolate the spectator so that they are “touched” by the film. Venkatesh argues that new *maricón cinema* plays an important role in changing the ethico-political outlook of the public towards nonnormative genders and sexualities, and that the circulation of such films is paramount to their affective mission in reaching the audience.

Though I will be using Venkatesh’s theorizing of *maricón* and new *maricón cinema* as a framework with which we can understand the development of bathhouse film in the last four decades, a specific point in which Venkatesh and I disagree is worth noting. For Venkatesh, there is a necessary shift from the urban to the rural that must happen in order to become new *maricón cinema*, in part due to the fact that

the geographies of the urban and its vertical and horizontal topographies (and their respective alleyways, nooks, windows, apartments, etc.) engender a scopic perception of the gendered subject that nullifies any act of orientation, alignment, or empathy. In its place we are left with a simple vision or flat image of the body...which impacts both the ethics and politics of making, viewing, and collocating these films as cultural artifacts of real sociocultural behaviors. (26)

While I can agree that the city as a backdrop for queer narratives functions as a structural and architectural representation of the heteronormative, I disagree that the use of urban spaces, particularly in newer films, fails to effect a political or ethical effect on the viewer or filmmaker. Furthermore, Venkatesh’s affirmation that “The structures of urban, namely closed, framed spaces and scopic roads and alleys promoted a perception of [the *maricón*] as an abstracted and abjected object” does not account for the possibility of an affective occupation of space (60). By appropriating the same spaces that Venkatesh assigns to

scopic and stereotypical maricón cinema, newer filmic productions can subvert heteronormativity and then enact a queer potential in the urban space. One prime example that highlights the queer potential of urban spaces is the filmic production of Julián Hernández as the “urban settings [of his films] serve as the site of subjective unfolding” (Podalsky 172) for his leading characters who are “invariably dark-skinned and indigenous looking gay [men]” (Subero 100).³⁹ Nonetheless and despite this difference in opinion on urban space, new maricón cinema is particularly useful for employing a genealogical approach to queer film with especial attention to how it—and its potential to affectively reach the audience—changes over time.

I want to pause briefly to address some of the major difficulties that writing this chapter presents; in contrast to the previous and next chapters, this chapter is not focused on a singular work. Therefore, the question of categorizing this specific curation of films must be addressed before delving into the analysis of each one. As the title of this chapter suggests, I have opted to call this collection of films “Bathhouse Film” to call attention to the setting and narrative use of the bathhouse in each of them. In the next section, I will mention how *El callejón de los Milagros* and *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (dir. Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, 1985) function as a kind of pre-2000s predecessor to bathhouse films since they feature scenes set in the bathhouse, though not quite in a central way. However, this

³⁹ This is further demonstrated by the blurb on the back cover of the film collection *Mexican Men* (2016) that features short films directed by Julián Hernández and Roberto Fiesco. The blurb describes the films as “short encounters, emerging love stories and deeply touching connections, these short films are sure to stir the heart...and body.” It is precisely through this particular occupation of the urban space that Hernández is able to both erotically (“the body”) and affectively (“the heart”) reach the audience.

filmic genealogy does not quite explain the gesture that I wish to make here of defining this group of films by the presence and representations of the bathhouse.

To address this issue, it is important to understand that “Bathhouse Film” is not solely a neat way to label these films; rather, I argue that Bathhouse Film should be understood in terms of film genre.⁴⁰ Genre films are films that follow a defined set of conventions to varying degrees so that the spectator can identify it as such. Put another way, they “are narrative films which, through repetition and variation, tend to tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations in familiar ways” (Grant 1). Barry Keith Grant’s affirmation that genre films are necessarily narrative films underscores the insistence on familiarity in his definition of genre film, though there might also be good for familiarity in art film, perhaps at the aesthetic level.

The familiarity—or conventions—of genre film are constructed through various elements: content, theme, style, and form (Grant 13). My formulation of Bathhouse Film largely draws on shared content and theme, though style may also be considered to a lesser extent. In terms of content, this is the easiest characteristic to identify in Bathhouse Film: each of these films includes, in a central way, a bathhouse. For its part, the shared thematic characteristic happens in two distinct ways; first, there is some form of conflict between the protagonist and the cis heteronormativity of Mexican society. Second, there is some affective gesture that leans into the erotic potential of the bathhouse. In other words, the

⁴⁰ There is a particularly interesting phenomenon when talking about genre in Spanish since “género” is likewise the word for gender. Genre and gender have very interesting parallels since both were created from the desire to organize (or taxonomize) people and things (Grant 14). However, both categories fail to offer a perfect organization as each contain a spectrum of identities (in the case of gender) and varying degrees of followed conventions (in the case of genre).

bathhouse becomes the arena in which the tensions of compulsory, violent heterosexuality and queer pleasure are explored.

Here, I am interested in thinking through the genre of bathhouse film in the context of new maricón cinema; specifically, given their emphasis on the haptic rather than the purely visual, I argue that there are clear resonances between these two ways of conceptualizing queer film. Where they depart, however, is in the kind of affects that are mobilized in the viewing process; Venkatesh strongly emphasizes that new maricón cinema seeks to establish a kind of empathetic relationship between the spectator and the filmic body, but empathy certainly is not the goal of bathhouse film. Rather, bathhouse film looks towards the erotic, which does not merely “touch” the spectator, but encourages a visceral reaction to the viewing experience. The figurative erection provoked by bathhouse film invites the spectator to actively participate in the transgression of heterospatial norms, thereby challenging the governance of space and bodies as the erotics takes rein.

In talking about genre and affective, it would be remiss to not point out the resonances that Bathhouse Film has with what Linda Williams names “body genres.” Falling somewhere on the spectrum between pornography and melodrama, bathhouse film prominently features “the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (4), one of the foundational aspects of Williams’ body genre. Moreover, the success of bathhouse film is likewise predicated on the film’s ability to affectively reach the audience, a success also “measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen” (Williams 4). As I pointed out in the introduction chapter to this dissertation, the orientation towards provoking an erotic—or at the very least

an arousing—reaction from the audience is a common objective that is explicitly recognized by queer Mexican cultural producers.

Less explored, however, is the other affective force present in bathhouse film. Given that the films analyzed in this chapter are not in themselves pornographic,⁴¹ the dramatized elements of tension and conflict must be accounted for in another way. Though perhaps not fully melodramatic, the filmic narratives in this chapter nonetheless have a close relationship with emotional excess. Elena Lahr-Vivaz argues that Mexican New Wave directors from the 1990s and 2000s drew upon Golden Age melodramas to offer “a vision of (allegorical) fragmentation at the same time that they open a space for critical resistance, encouraging spectators to formulate—and voice—their own admonitions of the outdated status quo” (*Mexican Melodrama* 8). Following suit, I argue that the affective range from erotic to dramatized (even melodramatic) likewise serves to create a site of resistance where cisheteronormativity is challenged through active, embodied reactions in the audience.

In this attempt to better understand the production and function of Mexican bathhouse film, I begin with a somewhat genealogical approach; by (re)viewing the iconic films *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (dir. Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, 1985) and *El Callejón de los Milagros* (dir. Jorge Fons, 1995) as pre-2000 examples of queer filmic production in Mexico. I also use these two films as the basis for bathhouse film as a genre, given that the stylistic, thematic, and narrative elements within these films create a certain resonance

⁴¹ Here pornographic is being used as a reference to the adult film industry rather than the vague, problematic label given to nudity in film as an attempt to dismiss it as inappropriate and immoral, a label much more likely to be placed on queer productions than their heterosexual counterparts.

between them. Looking towards post-2000 queer film that prominently feature the bathhouse, I turn to Vinodh Venkatesh's theorizing of a *new maricón cinema* to account for the shifts in narrative and affective-political potential of these films. Through Venkatesh's conceptual framework of maricón cinema and Laura Marks' seminal work on haptics and visual media, I approach three examples of contemporary bathhouse film: the feature film *Cuatro lunas* (dir. Sergio Tovar Velarde, 2014) and the short film *Salón rojo* (dir. Orlando Karín, 2024). I argue that the evolution of storytelling—both at the technical level of film production and at the narrative level—in bathhouse film is indicative of a larger shift in the preoccupations of queer Mexican filmmakers, a shift that ultimately allows for sharp social commentary to manifest in their filmic production.

Doña Herlinda y su hijo (1985)

Like *El lugar sin límites*, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's 1985 film *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* is another cornerstone of queer Mexican cinema. The film follows the romantic affair of Rodolfo (Marco Antonio Treviño), a pediatric neurologist, and Ramón (Arturo Meza), a musician, as they navigate intimacy and privacy in conservative Guadalajara. It opens to a half-naked Ramón in his run-down apartment as he awaits the arrival of Rodolfo. The decidedly urban setting perfectly frames the film's central theme of struggle between closetedness and disclosure as the daylight and the sounds of neighbors passing by in the hall penetrate the solitude of the apartment, a constant reminder that the two lovers are never truly alone.⁴² This changes only slightly when Ramón moves residence, as he is

⁴² In thinking of the architectures of (homo)sexuality, I opt for the term *closetedness* as the opposite of disclosure in part to recognize the centrality of space in the film and in the spatiality of permissible homosexuality writ large, as well as an homage to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who speaks of the obligatory

eventually invited to live in the house of Rodolfo's mother, the titular Doña Herlinda (Guadalupe del Toro), in part to keep the lonely woman company and so that the lovers may take advantage of the (marginally) more private atmosphere of Doña Herlinda's large mid-century home. Though, as Ramón quickly learns, this situation is also not ideal; the lovers must learn to navigate the complexities of domesticity as Rodolfo continues to pursue a heteronormative relationship with Olga (Leticia Lupercio) to appease his mother.⁴³

Despite being a favorite amongst fans of queer Mexican cinema, the film is far from liberatory in its representation of gayness. In fact, "the film is less an ideological posture of gay liberation and more an exploration of how gayness...can be inscribed onto extant structures" (Venkatesh 41); put another way, *Doña Herlinda* stays well within the heteronormative structures that defined the time instead of employing a radical queer reimagining of what is possible. This can be seen through the spatial formation of the film. In many ways, the architectural focus of the mise-en-scène frames the film within closed structures, producing a rigid image that does not allow the viewer to imagine what lies beyond the camera because we intuitively sense the presence of the hard walls of Ramón's cramped apartment, the classic stone of the conservatory, and finally the chic 70s design of Doña Herlinda's home. More symbolically, the film's architecture is a reconfiguration of the closet in the sense that the lovers, instead of being able to be in a relationship outright,

designation of hetero or homosexuality in the twentieth century as act of "world-mapping" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 2).

⁴³ Interestingly, Ramón also finds himself in the position of appeasing Doña Herlinda, as he becomes a kind of surrogate son when Rodolfo leaves the home to fulfill his husbandly duties to Olga. In other words, to produce grandchildren for Doña Herlinda.

firmly maintain the guise of heterosexuality for the sake of Doña Herlinda's—and by extension, all of Mexico's—heteronormative sensibilities.

A less explored aspect of the film, however, is the use of the sauna space. Located on Doña Herlinda's property, the sauna is presumably another recreational space akin to the pool and exercise equipment since Rodolfo, and later Ramón, are portrayed as being very into physical fitness. In the course of fifteen minutes, there is a sequence of scenes that cut in-and-out of the sauna space. The first of these is a highly erotic, thematically and visually poetic scene in which Rodolfo and Ramón are positioned such that Ramón lays against Rodolfo who is sitting with his back to the wall (see figure 4 below). The visual pleasure of the scene is immediately noticeable, as our eyes follow the contours of the men as they lounge in this statuesque position; our eyes are guided through the scene from right to left, beginning with Rodolfo's hairy body, continuing along Ramón's nearly hairless physique, until reaching his very visible, natural pubic hair (as opposed to clean shaven), which serves as the visual counterpart to Rodolfo's figure.



Figure 4. Rodolfo and Ramón lounge naked in the sauna (00:41:00).

As the men enjoy the steam, Rodolfo can be heard reciting Manuel Acuña's "Nocturno a Rosario." This poem is particularly symbolic in Acuña's oeuvre as it is considered the final poem that he wrote before committing suicide; tracing the impossibility of reciprocated love from his muse, Rosario de la Peña, the speaker shifts from describing the pain of unrequited love to a foreboding farewell that foreshadows the author's own death. In the scene, it is clear that Rodolfo is attempting to memorize the verses, which are ultimately repeated in the film's final scene, but here we can see that Rodolfo struggles with the lines as Ramón has to interject to help him. The lines of the fifth stanza— "a veces quiero darte mi eterna despedida / borrarle de mis recuerdos / huir de

esta pasión”—underscore, in a heavy-handed way, the principal conflict of the film: the uncertainty of Rodolfo and Ramón’s affair as Rodolfo develops his relationship with Olga, a gesture of heteronormative conformity to please his mother. Taken another way, the film echoes and laments the impossibility of an outwardly homosexual relationship between the two lovers, in a way signaling the beginning of the end of their relationship as they currently know it.⁴⁴

Besides the poetic connection that this scene has with the end of the film and the erotic positioning of the two men’s naked bodies, it offers little in terms of furthering the plot. If anything, it foreshadows a tragic ending that is not quite in line with the film’s actual ending—but more on that later. However, in the context of the other sauna scenes, this first glimpse into the space provides valuable visible indicators of the relationship between our protagonists when they find themselves far from the view of others. One of the more striking elements of the set is the plainness of the sauna, which avoids all traces of Mexican maximalism, lovingly referred to as “Meximalismo,” or even a color pallet that evokes the feeling of a late 1970s to mid 1980s setting, which is a common visual tool employed in film to concretely place it in a specific time and place. Instead, the brown tone of the men’s skin stands out against the pure white tiles, which rather than providing the audience with a visual orientation of where this scene might take place, becomes a site of abstraction, a representation of the affective relationship between the lovers. Because the lovers cannot exist as such in the heteronormative social space, their relationship is

⁴⁴ What’s more, the film has even stronger narrative and thematic connections with the Acuña poem as the mother figure is deified in both. Given the strength of these parallels, I would go as far as to argue that *Doña Herlinda* can be read almost as an example of reverse ekphrasis, where the filmic attempts to capture the poeticness of Acuña’s written word through the use of the audiovisual.

decoded and recorded through abstraction, ultimately becoming a strategy for queer survival.

This idea becomes particularly clear with the second sauna scene in which Ramón's cold body language and lack of contact with Rodolfo reflects his frustration that Rodolfo is spending more time with Olga. More than purely visual, the audio element is also in stark contrast to the first scene; whereas previously Rodolfo's voice made up the entirety of the audio with Acuña poem, in this scene a dripping sound effect is added. The nondiegetic addition of the sound serves as a subtle reminder that something—in this case, Rodolfo's relationship with Olga—exists beyond the field of vision of the sauna space; it also auditorily interrupts (or invades) what was previously established as an erotic or affective sanctuary for the lovers. Taking it a step further, the sound of dripping water quickly becomes more than just an interruption or an invasion of the space; it morphs into a distraction, an annoyance that needs to be addressed. In the literal sense, this is fixing the faucet so that it no longer drips; in the metaphorical sense, it means recognizing the effects that Olga's presence has on their relationship.

In the later scenes, however, the sauna space takes on a different meaning; when Rodolfo professes that in the upcoming week he will ask Olga to marry him (“la semana entrante voy a pedir la mano de Olga”) we are met with a hard cut to Ramón who is looking up toward the showerhead as water flows furiously over his body (47:45). If we follow my previous affirmation that the dripping water is representative of Olga's disruptive presence for the lovers, then this is the climax of said disruption as droplets become powerful streams from the showerhead. The amount of water flowing, its pressure, and Ramón's lack of

movement also point to a dramatic representation of “washing away” the upsetting news of Rodolfo’s engagement. In a sense, Ramón is also attempting to wash away any semblance of heteronormativity that is pervading their relationship.

Similarly, the final sauna scene is packed with symbolism. As Rodolfo and Olga participate in the wedding ceremony in Doña Herlinda’s house, Ramón can be seen leaving the crowd before disappearing behind sheets on the clothesline. In the next shot, Ramón enters the sauna, fully clothed, where he sits on a tiled bench, visibly upset (see figure 5 below). As he pulls his legs up to his chest, the ceremonial words of the wedding are heard before cutting to the next scene. What is important to note here is the total breaking of the sauna space as an abstraction of the affective relationship between Ramón and Rodolfo. This is accomplished through the tracking of Ramón as he walks through Doña Herlinda’s patio and once again when the film cuts to the shot of Ramón entering the sauna. By shifting to an angle that allows the camera to see Ramón enter the room, we are permitted to see a brief glimpse of light from the patio, confirming that the “real world” exists outside of the tiles.



Figure 5. Ramón sits in the sauna during the wedding ceremony (00:55:00).

With the scenes that I have analyzed here, it begins to become clear how *Doña Herlinda* represents an important moment, perhaps even the genesis of what I am calling bathhouse film. Not only is the bathhouse (or simple sauna, in this case) an important setting in the film's overall story, primarily as the space in which the main conflict of the film reaches a fever pitch, it also establishes a precedence of using the sauna space in aesthetic ways. By this I mean to highlight the ways that sauna is used for a non-narrative purpose as well, such as in the emphasizing of the erotic and sweet moment through the contrast of color (tiles vs. skin) and texture (smoothness vs. hair) as seen in figure 4.

That being said, the critiques of *Doña Herlinda*'s lack of radical imagination of a homosexual relationship in 1980s Guadalajara and its focus on guiding the eyes of the viewer in what Venkatesh calls a visual cinema date the film. As will become clear with the post-2000s examples of bathhouse film, the preoccupations of Mexican filmmakers have definitively shifted in the decades since the release of *Doña Herlinda*. Nonetheless, it deserves its spot as the foundational film for this chapter.

El Callejón de los Milagros (1995)

Less iconic as a queer film than *Doña Herlinda*, but perhaps more well-known for its career-launching effect for Salma Hayek, Jorge Fons' 1995 film *El Callejón de los Milagros* (translated as *Midaq Alley* in English) explores the complexities and interconnectedness of neighbors within an apartment complex through a multi-perspective narrative, or what Alissa Quart might call a hyperlink film as it "toggles back and forth between its ending and beginning" while interweaving the stories of key characters ("Networked" 50).⁴⁵ The film is an adaptation of the novel *Midaq Alley* (hence the film's English translation) by Nobel Prize winning Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz, which was first published in 1947.

Set in the titular Callejón de los Milagros, found in central Mexico City, the film takes an almost slice of life approach to the residents of the zone, but rather than having the film's tone stay in the realm of the mundane, it gains an exaggerated dramatic effect that is characteristic of Mexican films in the 90s (Lahr-Vivaz 2016). The film is divided

⁴⁵ Joining *El Callejón de los Milagros* as perhaps the most important example of this kind of filmic storytelling is Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (2000). These films reflect a certain interest in relationships between people, both acquaintances and strangers, in the years proceeding and directly following Y2K and the exponential expansion of technology in the digital age.

into four parts or chapters, that are titled as follows: “Rutilio,” which centers on Don Rutilio (Ernesto Gómez Cruz), the owner of a cantina and patriarchal figure; “Alma” (Salma Hayek), a beautiful, young woman who tragically ends up being exploited as a prostitute; “Susanita” (Margarita Sanz), the landlady with poor oral hygiene that is made to be an ugly duckling character; and “The Return,” which focuses on the stories of Abel (Bruno Bichir) and Chava (Juan Manuel Bernal) as they return from their exile to the United States and search for Alma.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will be focusing exclusively on the first part of the film as it contains the only representation of the bathhouse. Despite the fleeting moment of the story that occurs in the bathhouse, which amounts to a single sequence, I argue that it is a significant narrative and thematic usage of the bathhouse that warrants its consideration as being part of the larger constellation of bathhouse film.

With “Rutilio,” the audience is immediately introduced to the social dynamic present in the neighborhood. A man sweeps the street as a multitude of people dressed in aprons and other work attire walk down the small road, which is partially blocked by an assortment of five-gallon buckets and plastic crates; with this visual, the opening shot firmly establishes the El Callejón as a working-class neighborhood. A brief cut to a name plaque confirms to the audience that we are currently seeing El Callejón before cutting to a black title card that reads “Rutilio,” indicating the start of the film’s first chapter.

In stark contrast to the open air of the film’s first shot, the beginning of “Rutilio” takes place in the dimly lit, crowded cantina owned by Don Rutilio. A group of men are seen playing dominos, as Güicho (Luis Felipe Tovar) serves the clientele and Don Ru, as

he is commonly called, mans the cash register. Immediately, the lack of women in the cantina is notable; in this way, Don Ru's bar is positioned as a homosocial space from the start. This homosociality, however, is very particular in the way that is constructed and deemed permissible through its excessive heterosexuality.⁴⁶ Outside of the cantina, the personal relationships that Don Ru has with his family add key aspects to the construction of his character as well. After publicly chastising his son for being a lousy worker and for always being around Abel to the point that the two "parecen putos" (00:05:45), the film finally enters the domestic space. As he assumes his position at the head of the dining room table, Doña Eusebia enters from the kitchen, wearing a vibrant red dress and a full face of makeup. Dimming the lights and lighting more candles, she insists that the two of them are going to have an intimate dinner together. This scene provides a valuable insight into the marital relationship between Don Ru and Doña Eusebia, in which Don Ru appears to be disinterested as evidenced by his comment about her dress ("¿te vas a un carnaval o qué?") and his casual forgetting of their thirtieth wedding anniversary. The dinner that she has prepared consists of Don Ru's favorite meal and imported white wine, which is a form of intimate courting because what Doña Eusebia really desires is to have sex. Doña Eusebia's desire, however, is not reciprocated by her husband. In fact, Don Ru's facial expressions, which range from disgust to almost pained, point towards a major reluctance on his part to be physically intimate. Although the couple does eventually have sex, what I find

⁴⁶ By excessive heterosexuality, I am referring to both an over-the-top expression of heterosexuality that borders on caricature and a heterosexuality that exceeds what is normally socially acceptable. The homosocial space of Don Ru's cantina breeds this kind of excess so that the men can reaffirm each other's sexuality through competition (in other words, who is the most heterosexual), and its limited population (i.e. purely men) allows the patrons to act this way without committing social faux pas.

interesting about the scene is how Doña Eusebia convinces him. By explicitly mentioning how Don Ru got her pregnant (“¿recuerdas de lo que hacías para que me embarazaras de tus hijos?”) (00:14:10), Doña Eusebia reinforces the idea of Don Ru as a virile man in at least senses of the word: as in having the capacity for procreation and as in being robustly masculine.

The morning after their anniversary, Don Ru goes to get a haircut since Chava is looking after the cantina. While getting his hair cut by Abel—his son’s friend that he previously called a fag—the two men discuss Abel’s budding relationship with Alma. Don Ru then transitions the conversation into a diatribe about how women are difficult and that men of his age must seek out “otras cosas, nuevas formas para ser feliz, nuevos intereses, nuevos sentimientos, nuevas emociones,” the implication being homoerotic love affairs (00:17:30). Don Ru then turns to ask Abel if he understands what he is saying. This casual confession of a homosexual/homoerotic/homoaffective inclination in the barbershop is not by accident. Much like the cantina—and the eventual appearance of the bathhouse—the barbershop is yet another homosocial space in which unfiltered conversations and relationships between men can take place. In this case, it appears that Don Ru suspected a bit of queerness in Abel because of the relationship Abel has with Don Ru’s son and was attempting to establish a kind of connection between them, but this is not the case. As Don Ru turns to ask Abel if he understands his veiled message, Abel pushes the patriarch’s head to face forward, thereby “straightening” him using physical body language.

The evident sexual frustration—and the implied homosexual tendencies earlier in the film—act as the major impetus for Don Ru’s love affair. Leaving the barbershop, Don

Ru spots Jimmy (Esteban Soberanes), a twink who works as a salesman at an upscale clothing store.⁴⁷ After a momentary pause, Don Ru enters the store under the pretense that he wants to buy some socks that are on sale. As Jimmy packs the socks, we see a prime example of Ernesto Gómez Cruz's masterful acting with Don Ru's face becoming the softest and most sympathetic that it has been thus far in the film. The change, albeit subtle, is fundamental because of how it places Jimmy in a much different place than the relationships that Don Ru has with other characters. Don Ru waits for Jimmy to leave work to "coincidentally" run into him again, gifting him the socks that he purchased earlier. Thus begins Don Ru's courting of Jimmy.

The affair only becomes a scandal after Jimmy visits Don Ru at his cantina; much to the disapproval of his friends and son, Don Ru is anything but discrete during Jimmy's visit. Chava takes the affair as an affront to his mother, who he tells immediately. Heartbroken, Doña Eusebia turns to el Poeta for help, hoping that he can convince Don Ru to stop seeing Jimmy. Their plan, however, fails as the confrontation between el Poeta and Don Ru takes a violent turn; el Poeta begins to lecture Don Ru about "el pecado de Sodoma" according to Dante, which sends Don Ru into a fit of fury that culminates with him shouting "Si yo me cojo al Jimmy, o al Güicho, o al puto mustio de Fidel o al quien se me antoje, es mi gusto" (00:28:00-00:28:30). He continues, shouting that both el Poeta and

⁴⁷ "Twink" is a term used within the queer community to refer to slender, mostly hairless, effeminate men. In the popular imaginary, they are typically the ones who also take on the role of the bottom, though this is not always the case; *twink* more so references body type and gender expression rather than sexual position. This queer archetype has long historical connections occasionally referring back to the Greco-Romans with the figure of the ephēbe, who likewise was valued for their non-hypermasculine gender expression. The trope only strengthened with the femininity of the dandies and, much later, with the effects of the AIDS epidemic which posited the slimmer, healthy bodies as the most desirable.

Dante can “chingar a su madre” or Don Ru will fuck them both (00:28:40). This violent outburst after being called out for publicly exhibiting his homosexual affair is indicative of the larger dynamic of patriarchy and violence. Don Rutilio has built a space for himself within the microcosm of el Callejón de los Milagros as a figure that is respected, in part for being a business owner, but more importantly for being a husband and father. In a patriarchal society that affords the most privileges to men who comply with the roles that compulsory heterosexuality assigns to them, then Don Ru’s violent outburst can be understood as an attempt to maintain that position via the language of domination. It takes on an almost exaggerated position, as if to say, “I am so manly that I could fuck any man I want to” and still be acceptable within the patriarchy.

It is after this scene that the bathhouse sequence finally begins; a hard cut takes us from the wails of Doña Eusebia to Don Ru and Jimmy as they enter the bathhouse together. Much like the previously homosocial spaces in the film (the cantina, the barbershop), the bathhouse is constructed as a space that exists separately from the outside world, a separateness that allows it to be the perfect place for homosexual lovers to openly express their sexuality. In the first shot of the bathhouse, the camera is positioned at eye level, and the shot is framed by the tiled walls of the poorly lit hallway (see figure 6); the lack of lighting in this area is starkly contrasted by the natural overhead lighting in the background of the shot, near the entrance to the bathhouse (00:29:30). The contrast of light and color tone in this shot seem to suggest that the camera, and by extension the audience, is spying on the lovers as they enter the bathhouse together. The costuming is equally as important; before the lovers enter, the three other figures in the shot are only wearing a towel or are

shirtless. On the other hand, the two lovers enter dressed in suits.⁴⁸ This difference in clothing shows that the two men are about to cross the threshold into a different world. That is to say that their suits represent the “outside world”, their everyday lives, whereas the other men in the towel represent those who have already entered the world of the bathhouse.



Figure 6. Don Rutilio (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) and Jimmy (Esteban Soberanes) enter the bathhouse together [00:29:30].

After being given their towels by the attendant, enter the showers. Don Ru’s giggles reverberate off the tiled walls as Jimmy rubs soap over his fully naked, fully visible body. Don Ru then switches to be behind Jimmy as he begins to sensually massage his shoulders and back (see figure 7). In stark contrast to the sexually intimate scene between Don Ru

⁴⁸ The colors of their suits also suggest certain dynamics between Don Ru and Jimmy. Jimmy’s suit, nearly all white, suggests a kind of purity and innocence that Don Ru is able to take advantage of given the power dynamic created by their difference in age. Taken another way, Don Ru’s dark suit almost appears to be an outfit for mourning, perhaps signaling the proximate murder of Jimmy.

and Doña Eusebia, here Don Ru adopts an enthusiastic attitude towards the erotic moment with Jimmy. Despite this change in attitude, I argue that there is an important maintaining of sexual position that creates an analogous dynamic between Don Ru and his sex partners. Don Rutilio assumes the position of the top with Jimmy, as he erotically lathers him with soap, which we can understand as an act of foreplay before Don Ru fucks him. In *Bottoms Up: Queer Mexicanness and Latinx Performance*, Xiomara Verenice Cervantes-Gómez states that “sex as a modality of relational exposure underscores...the aesthetic and political contours of the one being fucked” (1). In a certain sense, both Doña Eusebia and Jimmy occupy the position of the one getting fucked, and both are subjected to a similar kind of patriarchal violence.



Figure 7. Don Rutilio and Jimmy shower together as an act of foreplay [00:30:20].

Moments later, Chava enters the shower room and immediately attacks Jimmy. The attack carried out by Chava can be understood as a violent upholding of the

heteropatriarchal norm; in a way, Chava becomes the one who must punish his father for stepping out of his role as “padre de la familia.” Tim Dean writes that “sex confuses the separateness and hence the distinguishability of bodies, thereby shattering (or threatening to shatter) our sense of corporeal integrity” (*Unlimited Intimacy* 1). From Chava’s point of view, the real danger is losing the ability to distinguish between Don Ru (the patriarch) and Jimmy (the fag) which disrupts the hegemonic power that cisheterosexuality has in Mexican society. By killing his father’s lover, Chava preserves his own position within the patriarchal hierarchy, especially once he becomes a father in the latter half of the film. Interestingly, this clip ends with Don Rutilio sobbing as Jimmy bleeds out, followed by a hard cut to Alma making out with Güicho, a kind of return to acceptable heterosexuality after the queer affair and gay bashing.

Though the presence of the actual bathhouse space is brief, its function within this chapter of the film’s narrative warrants the critical attention. The bathhouse in *El Callejón* functions as a foil to the cantina and the barbershop, the other two homosocial spaces in the film. Whereas the cantina is presented as the realm of excessive heterosexuality through the patron’s unfiltered sexist language and homophobic teasing of Don Ru and the barber shop becomes a space where Don Ru’s homosexual exploration is corrected by the “straightening” of his head, the bathhouse is the only space in which the sexo-affective relationship of the lovers can be realized, though it cannot fully escape the reach of heterosexual violence. This is supported by the fact that the scene in the shower is the only scene in which the audience is permitted an intimate view of their relationship, a kind of vulnerability that is emphasized by full frontal male nudity. Though perhaps not the most

prevalent space in the film, the bathhouse nonetheless has arguably the most important function in Don Ru's story: to be a space of unbridled passion and pain upon which the dynamics of desire, heteronormativity, and violence are played out.

Together with *Doña Herlinda*, these two films constitute the pre-2000s portion of the bathhouse film genealogy. Their thematic, narrative, and aesthetic devices have significant commonalities, as the bathhouse or sauna space is used as the arena in which the tensions of homosexual desire and the outside pressures of heteronormative are explored and processed. As Venkatesh would say, both of these maricón films rely heavily on the visual aspect, and the audience is allowed to take a passive role as the camera principally guides us through the narrative. It is also not a surprise that neither film has a happy ending for their bathhouse patrons; by relying on queer tragedy to create some semblance of affective reaction in their audience, these films fall into stereotypes and lack the radical imagination to envision a world where the outcome of queerness is anything but tragic. In what follows, I will explore post-2000s bathhouses to trace their similarities and, importantly, shed light on the development in bathhouse filmmaking in the last decade or so.

***Cuatro lunas* (2014)**

Released in 2024, Sergio Tovar Velarde's film *Cuatro lunas* is both an exploration of and homage to homosexuality in the different stages of life.⁴⁹ Much like *El Callejón de los Milagros*, *Cuarto lunas* also employs a fragmented narrative technique, though the stories are not as intertwined as the previous example—this is to say, the characters do not

⁴⁹ The film's title is sometimes stylized as *4 lunas* or as *4 Moons* in the translated version.

know one another. As the title suggests, *Cuatro lunas* is a film that is split into four different stories, each named after a phase of the moon, that in some way deal with the theme of homosexuality in the different stages of life: youth (“luna nueva”), young adults in university (“cuarto creciente”), adulthood (“luna llena”), and mature adulthood (“cuarto menguante”). It is this last phase that features scenes in which accomplished poet Joaquín Cobo (Alonso Echánove) seeks the company of another, younger man named Gilberto (portrayed by Alejandro Belmonte) in a bathhouse.

In his chapter “*Cuatro lunas: un caleidoscopio fílmico de la homosexualidad masculina*”, Alfonso Ortega Mantecón rightfully signals that this phase of the film deals with that taboo of sexuality in the later stages of life, with a focus on how homosexual/erotic desire is suppressed in order to fulfill the heterosexual ideal of (pro)creating a family (193). Interestingly though, Ortega Mantecón’s chapter only superficially mentions the bathhouse by way of comparing Joaquín’s mundane heterosexual life and his almost-frenzied search for homoerotic release. To better understand the relationship between banal heterosexuality and erotic desire, I turn towards porn studies. While this film is not pornographic, porn studies offers useful insights about the erotic representation and relationship between the two male characters featured in this part of the film. In gay pornography, the straight man convinced or tricked into having sex with another man is a common trope. What this means for gay porn ideologically has scholars split into two main camps of thought: those who see this recurrent trope as

harmful, as it can glorify homophobic masculinity, and those who see the potential in queering—or at the very least complicating—heterosexuality.⁵⁰

In a case study of videos from three major contemporary gay porn studios, Doron Mosenzon explores the “ambivalent affective relationship between gayness and the heteromasculine power represented by straight men” (283). Mosenzon’s article traces the affective contours of disgust in a Trump supporter college hazing fantasy, amusement in a scene between a deceiving clairvoyant and a grieving straight man, and sadness in a film about a therapist who fantasizes about gay sex via the stories of one client. In the Latin American context, productions such as *Latin Leche* and *El Ángel de Bogotá* present similar scenarios in which economically disenfranchised men, presented as heterosexuals, find themselves in gay-for-pay situations.⁵¹ The capacity for arousal through sexual fantasy in these videos is complicated by the representation of financial exchange, which parallels the kind of double affect mentioned in the previous films. Ultimately, Mosenzon finds that in these videos different “affects [are] linked to some form of derision of straight men...is combined with or even bolsters their desirability” (291). It is precisely this affective relationship between derision of heterosexuality and the desirability of straight men that I see as a core element of *Cuatro lunas* (in this case pity is the main emotion correlated with the heterosexual body, which will be shown in the following analysis of select scenes from the film).

⁵⁰ For example, in John Mercer’s chapter “Straight Acting? Heterosexuality, Hypermasculinity, and the Gay Outlaw,” the author argues that “any sense of a dichotomous distinction between hetero- and homosexuality exists merely to be played with, complicated, questioned and satirized” (112).

⁵¹ Gay-for-pay is a commonly used phrase to refer to the practice of participating in gay sex in exchange for money.

The film's opening sequence shows introductory glimpses into each of the narratives. The glimpse into "cuarto menguante" opens to a hazy shot of six men in a steam room, five of which have their genitals covered by a towel and one who is fully exposed (seen in figure 5). The men, who do not look at or speak to one another, represent an array of ages, showing that the *vapor* is unlike other social spaces in the sense that it is not necessarily tied to a certain demographic.⁵²



Figure 8. The naked and seminude men at the beginning of *Cuatro lunas* (2014) (00:02:35).

From this first moment, we see an immediate shift away from the cinematographic techniques used in the previous films. As Venkatesh describes in his formulation of a New

⁵² We can consider, for example, the ways in which spaces like nightclubs and bars are typically constructed as spaces belonging to a specified age group. This is not to say that others from outside of that age range cannot occupy the space per se, but rather that there is a defined target audience, which is not the case with the *baños de vapor*. I will return to this idea later in the chapter.

Maricón Cinema, the films of New Maricón Cinema transition away from a purely optical cinema towards one that utilizes much more haptic visuality. Haptic visuality

emphasizes the viewer's inclination to perceive haptically, but a work itself may offer haptic images. Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image. Thus it is less appropriate to speak of the object of a haptic look than to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image. (Marks 3)

The hapticity of this opening scene, then, operates on two levels: the lack of identification and how the film “touches” the viewer. For the former, I turn to *Queer of Color* critique, which has long been concerned with not only identity as being but also with processes of identification and counteridentification as becoming, and disidentification as unbecoming. Specifically, the work of José Esteban Muñoz is relevant here; Muñoz writes that disidentification is “a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment (*The Sense of Brown*, 11). For Muñoz, disidentification becomes a strategy with which marginalized subjects can survive within and work to transform oppressive structures. Unlike previous examples where the relationship between the viewer and identification is clear—as in feeling a kinship with La Manuela because I also desire Pancho (identification) or deciding that Don Rutilio is exactly the kind of violent masculinity that I do not use to describe myself (counteridentification)—*Cuatro lunas* places us somewhere in-between, a position in which the sauna's steam is preventing us from total identification with any one of the figures on the screen.⁵³

⁵³ This works doubly with the play on words made possible with “identification.” The word can be used both to describe the process of recognition of oneself in another (à la Muñoz) or as the nominal form of identifying, or figuring out, who or what someone or something is.

Engaging directly with film studies, Muñoz proposes that “disidentification...is a survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator...to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification” (*Disidentifications* 28). The film achieves this because it resists the impulses of heterosexuality to categorize and control bodies according to their gender and sexuality, all of which happens through the film’s ambivalent representations of the patrons of the bathhouse. A heteronormative reading of the film would force the audience to choose a side, identifying either with the pleasurable experience of cruising the bathhouse or with the interruption of relaxation time in the sauna. In this sense, *Cuatro lunas* is clearly disidentifactory in the way that it resists “assimilation into the heterosexual matrix” with the ambiguity of and impossibility to identify with any figure on the screen (*Disidentifications* 28). Instead, the focus is turned away from the normative spectator view and placed on the “shadows and fissures” within the scenes, thereby allowing the presence of queer pleasure to exist outside the constraints of heteronormativity (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 29). This is partially achieved through the shift from optics to haptics within the film.

In speaking of the element of touch, it is important to understand what we mean when we say that a film touches us; to understand this, I turn to Jennifer Barker who explains that

To say that we are touched by cinema indicates that it has significance for us, that it comes close to us, and that it literally occupies our sphere. We *share* things with it: texture, spatial orientation, comportment, rhythm, and vitality. (2; original emphasis)

Barker continues to explain that the degree to which a film touches us can be superficial (i.e. on the skin) or much more visceral (what I would call an affective response). In this

sense, touch goes much deeper than simple contact; instead it becomes “a profound manner of being, a mode through which the body—human or cinematic—presents and expresses itself to the world and through which it perceives that same world as sensible” (Barker 2). In the aforementioned scene, the film’s skin (the screen and the digital process of capturing the image) come into contact with our own, as the on-screen steam invites the viewer to feel the sticky heat of the sauna; at a deeper level, the film invites a relationality between the viewer and the semi-visible figures, a dynamic that is highly dependent on the viewer’s own past experience.⁵⁴ Someone who frequents saunas for sexual gratification might feel the rush of waiting for the small gestures that invite sex acts, an intimate language familiar to those who go cruising. In contrast, someone who does not cruise the sauna may be forced into a feeling of vulnerability as the men’s nakedness challenges our sense of clothed comfort. In both cases, exploiting the relationship between the viewer’s body and the mediated image is key for understanding what the film *does* with these scenes.

From the social perspective, an important aspect to acknowledge from this opening scene is the way in which homoerotic invitations are permissible in certain ways; in stark contrast to the exposed man at the beginning—who is not sexualized in any way—the entrance of Gilberto into the steam room immediately changes the tone of the scene (00:02:48). Gilberto, a heterosexual man who is trying to gather enough money to go to the United States by providing sexual services to other men, stands nears the door, rubbing his chest and stomach, in a kind of courting ritual, an invitation for any of the men (or multiple of them) to follow him to the shower where they will engage in sex acts. Contrary

⁵⁴ This is commonly referred to as embodied spectatorship.

to the bright, well-lit representation of showers and bathhouses seen in previous films, the space seen here is darker with steam often obstructing the view so that a perfectly clear look at the patrons is not possible. The changes in mise-en-scène reflect the change from a romantic relationship to a purely transactional one, as if touching upon the topic of sex work in the *vapor* implies a kind of illicitness in their behavior and needs to be reflected by creating an obscurer atmosphere.

However, this is not the only setting that we see in Joaquín's story; in the first scene showing his domestic life, Joaquín is eating breakfast at the table as his wife answers a phone call (00:05:10). From this brief call, we learn that Joaquín has been invited to a ceremony at Santa Catarina University to celebrate his distinguished career as a poet and professor. Though reluctant, he is convinced by his wife to accept the invitation. A hard cut takes us back to the bathhouse, where Joaquín appears just out of focus before approaching Gilberto who is prominently positioned in the foreground of the shot (see figure 9 below).



Figure 9. Joaquín approaches as Gilberto cruises the showers (00:06:07).

The juxtaposition of these two scenes is notable; in terms of tone, the brightness of the house starkly contrasts the deep blue tones used to create the shadowy effect in the shower room. This tonal difference implies a certain kind of acceptability in the relationship between Joaquín and his wife in the domestic space, and it implies a kind of impermissible relationship between Joaquín and Gilberto in the bath space. Similarly, the technical use of the camera's focus underscores the change in Joaquín's social position in both spaces; in the scene at his house, Joaquín is clearly seen as it is shot with deep focus. In a sense, his position as patriarchy is visually reflected through the sharpness of this camera shot. On the other hand, in the bathhouse it is Gilberto's bare torso that becomes the focal point of the shot until Joaquín emerges from the background. Here Gilberto is foregrounded, and the difference in focus in the shot suggests a hierarchy of power rooted in homoerotic desire.

It is in the scene that I have identified the first example of the relationship between the derision of heterosexuality and desirability, to follow Mosenzon's suit. As Joaquín approaches Gilberto, the poet asks how much he charges to which Gilberto replies fifteen hundred pesos (00:06:30). Throughout the interaction, Gilberto turns his head lazily to reply to Joaquín before ultimately turning his body away from the older man, expressing his disinterest through body language. For me, this is the scene that begins to sow the seeds of pity as it becomes clear that Joaquín is not in the financial position nor does he have the necessary power advantage to be able to resolve his sexual frustrations with Gilberto's services.

This pity grows in their next encounter. The two men are found alone, and Joaquín asks "¿Cuánto me cobras? No tengo mucho" in a tone of voice that borders on begging (00:23:48). Gilberto replies that the price has now increased from fifteen hundred to two thousand pesos. This is followed by a tantalizing fifty seconds in which Gilberto rubs his own chest, plays with his nipple, begins to massage his penis, first with the towel covering it and then exposing it. One particular close up on Gilberto's barely covered penis allows for a detailed view of his pubic hair, which provides a textural other to the rest of his smooth body and the tiled walls of the sauna. Using his pubic hair in this way goes beyond the purely visual and engages the audience haptically through texture and the erotic sensation produced by it. But as Joaquín leans over to perform oral sex, he is stopped by Gilberto who, without saying a word, exits the frame (see figure 10 below). This interaction demonstrates the way that Gilberto capitalizes on his desirability as a business strategy at the expense of Joaquín. Here the film furthers the idea of the pitiful heterosexual, as

Joaquín is portrayed as begging for an escape from the banality of long years of heteronormative marriage or has lived a long and lonely life in the closet.



Figure 10. Gilberto touches himself to tantalize Joaquín (00:24:12).

Joaquín’s sexual fantasy soon comes to fruition, though he waits over two hours for Gilberto to arrive at the bathhouse (01:04:33). Of note in this particular scene is the way that Gilberto rejects Joaquín’s advances as he goes in for a kiss on the lips, as if a kiss on the mouth is a threshold of intimacy that is reserved exclusively for women. This makes sense, given that marriage, as the ultimate symbol of heterosexuality, is sealed with a kiss. Put another way, Gilberto’s rejection of the kiss establishes a symbolic, albeit arbitrary, limit on intimacy, despite being for all intents and purposes a gay-for-pay character. Even sex work adheres to a specific notion of masculine normativity.

Masculine capital, or the “social power afforded by the display of traits and behaviors that are associated with orthodox, stereotypical masculinity” can be extremely

useful in understanding the sexual dynamic between Gilberto and Joaquín (Ravenhill and De Visser 1). Playing off Bourdieu's notion of *social capital*, masculine capital plays a key role in the sexual relationship between men, becoming especially present in their attitudes towards sexual position and gender expression. In their study of gay men's psychology, Ravenhill and De Visser found that

discourses of heterosexual masculinity and femininity delineated gay men who were anally receptive and those who were anally penetrative such that the top was considered to 'always' enact a masculine role, and the bottom was considered 'always' to enact a feminine role. (10)

In this way, Gilberto's refusal to kiss Joaquín and his role as the top do not jeopardize his masculine capital, and by extension his heterosexuality, in the same way that it does for Joaquín. This is also emphasized by Joaquín's confession that he liked it (the sex) very much, while Gilberto maintains an unenthusiastic expression throughout the encounter (01:06:22).

After Gilberto fucks Joaquín, the two men engage in a post-coital conversation that narratively advances the story, as well as transforms the affective relationship between gay sexual behavior and (pitiful) heterosexuality. In this conversation, the audience learns that Joaquín is dying, which explains his desperation to hook up with Gilberto and his misuse of the money that was meant to buy his grandchildren Christmas gifts in order to pay for the sexual services. This new information adds a layer of nuance to the already tragic story of the septuagenarian who has presumably spent a lifetime in the closet. However, Joaquín's story is not the only one that evokes a sense of pity; Gilberto reveals to Joaquín that he is not actually attracted to men and only engages in sex work to gather enough money to cross the border to the United States with his wife and child. Suddenly, the figure

of the hung, young stud takes a darker turn as it demonstrates sex work as one of the many forms of hyper-exploitation that make up the economic reality in the global South. Nearing the end of their conversation, Joaquín asks a final favor of Gilberto: that he attend the homage to honor Joaquín's poetry.

At the ceremony, one of Joaquín's newest poems is read aloud to the small audience:

Vuela dentro plumas doradas que siguen al sol / Aquel que no fue / Súbita noche vestida de lunas / Llueven las plumas que siguen al sol / Vuela, que yo sonrío / No importa donde, sea norte, sea este / No importa donde mientras vuelas en mí / Vuela, plumas doradas, trocitos del sol / Yo en tanto soñaré, es de noche aquí / Que no caigan tus alas mientras duermo / Me encanta llevarte dentro. (01:24:54 - 01:25:34)

It comes as no surprise that just before the host of the ceremony begins to read the poem Gilberto enters the auditorium. After all, the poem is very clearly dedicated to him; the allusion to the sun and the moon reflect the two men's different stages in life. Gilberto, who is in the prime of his life, soon leaves to head north, yet as Joaquín enters the final years of his life (the "night"), he carries with him the cherished moments that they shared. The scene is wrought with a moving sentiment that shows that for both men cruising in the bathhouse meant much more than simple sexual satisfaction.

Salón rojo (2024)

Moving to short-form film, *Salón rojo* (dir. Orlando Karín, 2024) necessarily employs a different set of strategies given the constraints and complexities of short film filmmaking.⁵⁵ In contrast to the previous films mentioned in this chapter, short films like

⁵⁵ I am beyond grateful to Orlando Karín for providing access to the film before it was available to stream or purchase.

Salón rojo are ephemerally shown at film festivals.⁵⁶ About this, film scholar Paul Julian Smith writes, “marginal to established cultural channels, they leave of necessity just a fragile reminder in print or on the web. This, the festival lives on only in its programs, posters, and promos” (*Queer Mexico* 8). In this sense, the film festival circuit operates in a similar way to cruising in that both are momentary experiences that engage the audience in a shared viewing experience. This is especially true in the case of queer Mexican short films, namely the MIX festival which has had twenty-nine iterations since 1996; *Salón rojo* formed part of the lineup for the 2025 edition under the theme of *resistencia*.

Short film, in the broadest terms, refers to brief audiovisual productions which rely on specific production and narrative techniques to convey their message in a short runtime. Genre-wise they are as diverse, if not more so, than any other filmic production. For its part, Mexican short film “notices the essence of a people, a consolation for a short and incidental existence that in its brevity intends to disrupt the impressions and formulations of a magnificent reality” (Garibay Franco 9). More specifically, in the fiction short film, “the primordial distinction of the Mexican fictional short film is perhaps its diversity” (Garibay Franco 32). Short film, then, becomes an important tool for the filmic articulation of *lo mexicano*, the essence of Mexican-ness as expressed popularly, especially for marginalized subjects.

⁵⁶ Consider the impact that distribution has on the films analyzed in this chapter: I (fairly easily) purchased a DVD copy of *Doña Herlinda* online; *El Callejón* is available to stream for free on Tubi (at the time of writing this); likewise, *Cuatro lunas* is available to stream on Tubi and had a limited theatrical rerelease at participating Cinetecas in Mexico in 2024 for the film’s 10th anniversary. Though there are outliers, like Julián Hernández’s films, in general the post-festival distribution of LGBTQ+ short films in Mexico is majorly lacking.

With a runtime of just over 11 minutes, *Salón rojo* covers a lot of ground in a very short amount of time. As the opening credits begin, non-diegetic moans of pleasure intensify, soon joined by the image of an open condom wrapper on the tiled floor of the bathhouse shower. Not long after, a used purple condom falls to the floor with an audibly wet slap (see figure 11). Yet what interests me is how the division between the erotic and disgust are blurred; the sexual panting that occupies the audio is exciting as the short film invites the audience into a voyeuristic relationship with the screen body. We may find ourselves wanting to see the bodies in action that are producing these moans, but the camera's locked view of the floor denies us the satisfaction of being true voyeurs. The visual element instead tells a much less sexy story; the filthy grout implies a level of use that is not removed by an equal amount of cleaning. The initial sight of the condom wrapper is innocuous, mere evidence of safe sex. However, when the used condom enters the shot, the immediate association with foreign bodily fluids makes the image more repulsive—this is especially true in a time that has been marked by two major public health crises related to transmittable illness and bodily fluid (HIV/AIDS crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic). This is in part due to the way that “homosexuality's social acceptance is being won by sanitizing queer people's image,” but the specter of HIV/AIDS troubles that public acceptance, regardless if a condom is used or not (Dean 19).



Figure 11. A used purple condom on the sauna floor (00:00:23).

The only evidence of the presence of people in this scene comes immediately before the cut to the next scene, where a foot wearing red shower sandals nearly steps on the condom. Because the camera is focused on the floor and because the man's body only appears as fragmented (i.e. only his foot), the film denies the viewer of the man's identity. Was he one of the people just having sex? Was he an onlooker who simply masturbated to the sexual endeavors of others? Or was he a bystander who tried to ignore the moans, despite knowing the reputation of Baños Finisterre as a cruising spot?

A hard cut takes us to a quite different image: a naked man lying face-down on a tiled marble table. The three quarters perspective of the camera allows for a (nearly) full body shot with the exception of his head, which remains out of view. These two shots constitute the film's opening sequence as what follows the headless man is the title card, and though both shots feature very different amounts of body imagery, the effect is still the same: through the fragmentation of bodies, especially with the absence of faces, the film underscores the element of anonymity that defines much of cruising.

After returning from the title card, the audience is greeted by the same non-diegetic moaning, but this time we see two scantily-covered men have a brief interaction in the hallway before entering a room that emanates fluorescent red light—presumably the titular *salón rojo*. As the men enter the room, the camera soon follows, revealing an orgiastic scene (see figure 12). Although this scene is strikingly similar to the first bathhouse scene in *Cuatro lunas*, the behavior of the men could not be more different. Around the room, men kiss, masturbate themselves and others, and engage in fellatio with the exception of the two older men that appear in the center of the shot. The positioning of the two men, who caress one another in a display of tenderness amongst almost frenzied sex, are juxtaposed to the other, younger figures that are sexually active, therefore foreshadowing their role as the film’s protagonists.



Figure 12. Many men engaging in sex acts in the sauna (00:01:10).

The two olden men leave the steam room to be alone in a more well-lit room. Shot in close up, they silently enjoy one another’s company, eventually linking their fingers

together to hold hands (00:02:12). The apparent tenderness of their relationship interjects and is interjected by the erotically charged shots of the bathhouse's other patrons who exist in various levels of clothedness, varying levels of sexual activity, and who represent a surprisingly diverse representation of the male body.⁵⁷ I argue that this oscillation between erotic tension and tenderness is not meant to be read as an oppositional relationship, but rather as a dialectic of an ethics of care.⁵⁸ As Tim Dean has argued, "promiscuity could be redescribed as promoting reciprocal care and self-protection... [promiscuity] is actually promoted as the route to something new" (*Unlimited Intimacy* 5). This reading of the bathhouse, then, would suggest that anonymous fucking in the showers and meaningful, intimate relationships are not two points on the spectrum of bathhouse encounters, but rather that they can be two sides of the very same coin. What's more, the short places a notable emphasis on the collective act of going to the bathhouse, and because of this, it effectively establishes a parallel between the open expression of sexuality and care, a hallmark of sex positivity movements and HIV activism. This understanding of erotics and intimacy as being one in the same has the potential to reshape the way that sexo-affective relationships between men are considered, especially when considered communally.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ By this I mean that there are figures in the film that represent varying body types (in terms of weight and build) and skin tone as the two most visible markers of corporeal diversity. This diverse representation of bodies does two things: first, it subverts the association between bathhouse cruising and the stereotypical object of gay men's desire (fit, masculine, light-skinned) and secondly, it reinforces the idea that the bathhouse is truly a democratic space that folks for many different walks of life can inhabit.

⁵⁸ It is worth pointing out that the older men are not relegated to the position of non-sexual intimacy; in one scene, one of the men kisses the other on the neck and playfully bites his ear, showing that their relationship has a sexual element to it as well as they engage in these acts that are typically associated with sexual foreplay.

⁵⁹ Put another way, my reading of *Salón rojo* poses the same kind of question with which Dean begins the last chapter of *Unlimited Intimacy*: "why should strangers not be lovers," Dean writes, adding "and yet remain strangers?" (180). In this formulation of an ethics of cruising, Dean argues that the sexo-affective relationship found in cruising needs not to be bound by the panic of safe sex and the impulse to "domesticate" the Other

For the sake of this chapter, the way that the relationship between tenderness and anonymous fucking is portrayed in *Salón rojo* highlights the erotic capacities of visual hapticity, as Laura Marks might say. As mentioned previously, the shift from a purely visual cinema to a more multisensorial (and haptic) one is one of the more important developments that distinguishes post-2000 bathhouse film from its predecessor. Marks argues that the erotic capacity of haptic visuality has two parts: “it puts into question cinema’s illusion of representing reality by pushing the viewer’s look back to the surface of the image” and “it enables an embodied perception, [with] the viewer responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin” (*Touch* 4). The former is clearly seen in the previously mentioned orgy scene in the sauna room; the viewer must actively work to pierce through the steam to visually make sense of the sexual sounds that accompany the projected image. The question of embodied perception in *Salón rojo*, then, comes into play with the tender, yet still sexual relationship between the two older men, a viewing experience that invites us to feel their touch as well.

The utopic vision of the bathhouse soon comes to an end as an exterior shot of Baños Finisterre brings the view back to reality. As the men, now fully clothed, prepare to leave, an ominous sign on the counter reads “cerrado por tiempo indefinido a partir del jueves” before a radio broadcast enters the track, reporting on the beginnings of the COVID-19 quarantine order (00:03:57). They share a moment of goodbye without saying

(to use his word). Instead, anonymous public sex can give us a model that proves that care, sex, and otherness can coexist.

a word before each man leaves through a different side of the double door, a sinister act of foreshadowing that calls attention to their departure.

Unlike our protagonists, the camera reenters the bathhouse, cutting through a series of shots that show the now deserted space before the lights are shut off. Given that the first half of the short focuses on the vitality and erotic energy of the space, to see it abandoned in the face of a global pandemic feels *wrong*. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz explores what he names the ghosts of public sex through a series of projects, including a photography project by Tony Just that captures public men's restrooms that were shut down over public health concerns during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. About Just's project, Muñoz writes:

In the photos, the shine of porcelain and metal, the way in which light reflects around and off these surfaces and objects—be they a porcelain urinal or a slightly corroded chrome fixture—cast an effect that is strangely mimetic of the haunted structures of feeling that circulate around the sites of the project. The pictures interrogate the curves and arches of lifted toilet seats and the rounded edges of porcelain toilet frames. The emphasis on tile, in conjunction with the empty foreground of the rooms, makes one think of an echo chamber. The connotation becomes one of reverberation and resonance. The pictures, through the negative charge of absented bodies, instill in the spectator a sense of gathering emptiness. (*Cruising Utopia* 42)

Though Muñoz's words reflect on an entirely different project in a distinct time and place, this description of the empty bathrooms is eerily befitting for the sequence of images seen in *Salón rojo*. The lack of bodies, and especially the absence of the sexual moans, fills the space. The shower is particularly impactful; whereas once the shower was inhabited by countless men, the now empty shower stalls with their tiled walls and floor reverberate with the "sense of gathering emptiness," evoking the feeling of loss that has come to define the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure 13 below).



Figure 13. The empty shower room in *Salón rojo* (00:04:52).

I argue, however, that it is important to read the ghostly absences of the Baños Finisterre not in itself, but also as part of a larger queer cultural memory. In the way that I suggested that the first image of the used condom evokes a kind of momentary fear because of the contact with bodily fluid, the same kind of response is elicited in the now empty bathhouse. Without the radio broadcast to provide key context to the historical moment of the film, the shift from a full, lively bathhouse to an empty one fully embodies the specter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This is to say that the shift from the first half of the film in which bodies and moans fill the space to an eerie, silent one resonates with the vacating of many queer spaces at the dawn of HIV/AIDS. The sudden disappearance of people, spaces, and the connections between both is disorienting, and it is difficult to come to terms with that magnitude of loss. In fact, the film capitalizes on the parallels between these two crises to create a “certain conjuring of ‘the past’ [so that] many of us see this past for the very first time” (Muñoz 38). It is a very powerful play with the affective potential of the film

that projects the feeling of loss in the 1980s and 90s through the contemporary referent of 2020.

This idea is only strengthened by the film's tragic end. After the worker finishes closing up Baños Finisterre and walks off into the night, a hard cut (and time jump) takes the viewer to outside of one of the men's salons, not coincidentally named *salón rojo* (00:06:00). The hairdresser, wearing all black, is comforted by his lover, who dons a police officer (or security guard) uniform. However, with a shift of the camera angle, the officer is suddenly seen sitting in the waiting chairs, multiple feet away from his lover. This suggests that the officer is no longer living, a fact confirmed by the collection of photos that create an impromptu altar for the man. Interestingly, this scene is spliced by clips of the two men dancing together in a reddish-purple hue, which is quickly shown to be the bathhouse. Below their feet are wilted flowers which bear a striking similarity to the condom at the beginning of the film, though this time the connotation is death and grief rather than pleasure.

As the lovers dance together, they occupy a space that transcends the separation of life and death. The sequence is accompanied by the spoken words of the hairdresser who tells his lover how much he misses him and that he no longer goes to Baños Finisterre. Here it is important to note that these are the only words in the film that are spoken by an on-screen figure, which furthers their narrative importance and affective impact. The spectral dance and the only utterance of words by one of the film's characters form the final piece of this bathhouse film. In all, the bathhouse becomes the stage on which the resonances and reconciliations with queer pleasure and loss play out. By blurring the lines

between tenderness and heightened erotics, COVID-19 and the HIV/AIDS crisis, and connection and loss, *Salón rojo* utilizes the bathhouse both narratively and figuratively to present a radical vision of queer sexual possibility. The film invites us to be present, both with the erotic bodies and the recent and not-so-recent ghosts of public sex, to use Muñoz's phrase.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made a case for bathhouse film as an important contribution to both queer Mexican Studies and Film Studies. In each of the films examined here, I have traced the narrative and thematic contours of the bathhouse as they are used as both a tool and setting to explore the complexities of queer sexual relations and heteronormative tensions. Beginning with *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*, I showed how architectures of heterosexual domesticity are challenged and navigated through the sauna space, particularly for Ramón as he bears the grunt of the obligatory heterosexuality that the movie portrays. In the case of *El Callejón de los Milagros*, the bathhouse is presented first as a kind of third space that allows for the free expression of love and repressed sexuality between lovers, but it ultimately becomes marked by violence both metaphorically (through the narrative) and literally (by the increasing pool of Jimmy's blood) as Don Rutilio's son punishes the two men for transgressing the Heterosexual norm and undermining Don Rutilio's status of family patriarch. Though the bathhouse is present as an important element to the two films, their potential becomes truncated by their lack of imagination for radically liberatory queer sexual politics. We can consider, for example, how both *Doña Herlinda* and *El Callejón* ultimately treat queerness as a fleeting moment,

and with the introduction of grandchildren, the complexities of queer sexo-affective relationships are abandoned completely for the comforts of heteronormativity.

Shifting to post-2000 filmic production, the potential for radical imagination changes drastically. Embodying a much more haptic cinema, *Cuatro lunas* represents the bathhouse space as existing within a complex web of social relationships between men. Playing with erotics and pity, the film challenges dominant narratives of both hetero- and homonormativity to provide a more nuanced look into the kaleidoscope of sexual and affective relationships between men. For *Salón rojo*, the bathhouse becomes the arena in which pleasure, pain, past, and present reverberate and resonate with one another. By creating an affective parallel between the affective connections and loss of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the film succeeds in engaging the audience in a viewing experience that invites us to confront the phantasmagoric figures of two public health crises in distinct historical moments.

With these films, it becomes clear that the bathhouse is the ideal space to tackle these topics and themes. From its materiality, with tiles that reflect back both moans of pleasure and the emptiness of loss, to its juxtaposition with a heteronormative outside world, the bathhouse is much more than just a space that men go to when they want to fuck each other. Through the sexo-affective relationships afforded by a space that can be frequented by all, the bathhouse becomes the ultimate space for imagining the possibility of a radically different queer sexual politics.

Chapter 3

Escuchar al baño: Bathroom Narratives and the Auditory in *CUIR: Historias*

disidentes

Los retretes y los desechos: no podemos escapar de ellos, son presencia ineludible en nuestros días, a pesar de que vivimos bajo su mutación. Por considerarlos cotidianos, ya no nos detenemos a pensarlo ni mucho menos sopesar sus implicaciones y sombras.

—Laura Sofía Rivero, *Dios tiene tripas*

...nos apropiamos del espacio que se nos había arrebatado.

—*Instrucciones para ir al baño*

Introduction

In an upper-division class that I taught in 2025 titled “Gender & Space in Mexican Cultural Production” (based on the research that informs this dissertation), a student asked for clarity about a term that until that point we had only spoken about in English. “Profe,” the student started. “¿Cómo se dice *cruising* en español? ¿Cruzando?” It is completely understandable how the student reached this conclusion; in the same way that *cruising* in English shares meaning with action of driving around leisurely, *cruzar*, especially in US Spanish, reflects the same shared meaning. I explained, though, that one of the most accepted terms is *cruising* as an English loan word—or the relatively new adaptation *crujin*—, though in Peninsular Spanish *cancaneo* also exists, which is more closely related to the British word *dogging*.⁶⁰ Regardless, this student continued to use *cruzando* to playfully refer to cruising for the remainder of the course.

⁶⁰ This is particularly interesting in the way that the cruising/cruising and dogging/cancaneo dynamic establishes a hemispheric difference in how public and semi-public sex is conceptualized. Though in Spain this is somewhat easily explained by a stronger resistance to Anglicisms, it still points towards a shared

Thanks to the student's inquiry, this question helped me bridge one of the conceptual gaps that was causing me major grief with this project. In this chapter, I will be tackling the bathroom narratives told in the episode titled "Instrucciones para ir al baño" from the queer Mexican podcast *CUIR: Historias disidentes*. Unlike the previous chapters that have somewhat neat categorization and a logical progression (i.e. the transition from textual analysis to filmic analysis), fitting in a chapter about podcasts was not as clear of a path. The immediate answer was to turn to narrative, an increasingly amorphous term to describe various modes of storytelling in a plethora of genres, as the unifying thread. However, this did not actually help me orient myself to find the exact angle that I was going to take in the chapter. *Cruzando*, on the other hand, proves to be very effective in making this connection. By *cruzando* these stories, each narrative is transformed into a cruising zone where the audience can expect to find an affective relationship between sexuality and (public) space. Likewise, the more generally accepted use of *cruzando* to mean *crossing* helps to explain the transmodal analysis that ties this chapter with the previous ones—in other words, both crossing and cruising the boundaries between the various forms that these narratives take.⁶¹

In what follows, I take a critical approach to podcasts. My analysis begins with a look at Podcast Studies as an emergent field within the larger context of the Digital Humanities. This deep dive into podcasts is concerned with cohesively defining the

relationship with dogging and European public sex more generally. This kind of comparative work is a major interest of mine for a future project.

⁶¹ In Mexican Literary and Cultural Studies there exists a category of texts that fall under the name of "Literaturas expandidas." These expanded texts incorporate audio and visual elements to the written word in a way that has captivated scholars in recent years. Two prime examples of this kind of text are Verónica Gerber's *La compañía* and Gabriela Damián Miravete's *La canción detrás de todas las cosas*.

medium, exploring the established methodologies that guide their study, and identifying their potential as a new form of (auditory) storytelling in the digital age. *Whose* stories are being told and *how* they are being told becomes a central idea in this chapter. More concretely my question is this: how can we understand the relationship between storyteller, narrative, and listener through the podcast? How do the concepts of self-actualization, agency, and even embodiment inform or transform this relationship?

After this, I shift my focus to a specific example within the Mexican context. I will provide a brief contextualization of *CUIR: Historias disidentes* in relation to other independent podcast projects in Mexico before entering into the episode of interest for the sake of this chapter. With the tripartite episode titled “Instrucciones para ir al baño,” I will employ a formal analysis of each of the three stories told along with a critical approach to the episode’s sound design. I argue that in addition to providing valuable insight into the ways that three different identities experience bath space—which is to say, a lesbian couple in the locker room, a cis-gay man cruising public toilets, and a trans woman becoming empowered to use the women’s restroom—the auditory elements, including both the spoken stories and sound design, are fundamental to answering the questions that guide this chapter. Going beyond the purely aesthetic, the sound design of the episode enhances the stories being told and gives us a prime example of the podcast as a tool for queer self-actualization.

Podcasts Studies and Digital (Auditory) Storytelling

In the last twenty years, and especially in the years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of podcasts and podcasting has grown exponentially. Covering

a breadth of topics and formats worldwide, friends, experts, academics, and influencers have taken to the microphone to say something to their global audience. If one thing about podcasts is clear, it is that they are a highly ideological medium. The rise in popularity of podcasts in the 2020s has given massive platforms to creators like Joe Rogan and others within the manosphere, whose content is specifically aimed at impressionable and ideologically malleable young men under the guise of revealing the “truth” about the world when in actuality it is just another cog in the alt-right pipeline.⁶² Yet not all podcasts engage in fascist propaganda; in particular, platforms like NPR have produced important series like the ubiquitous, award-winning *Radio Ambulante*, whose mission has been to “tell stories that go unreported by other outlets” including “stories of love, migration, youth and politics, environment and families in extraordinary circumstances” (“Abouts Us”). In this sense, podcasts run the entire spectrum in terms of the content that they share with the world.

In the world of podcasting, there is no bigger question than what is a podcast exactly? Most people would respond by saying that podcasts are primarily auditory productions that people listen to. Those who have engaged with podcasts might even add an example or two of different types of them: true crime, chat shows, and political commentary are a few of the most popular. However, this definition is far from encompassing the complexities of this digital form. One of the main debates within Podcast Studies is about classification or genealogy. Are podcasts a subset of radio or something

⁶² The manosphere refers to a group of online communities in blogs, forums, podcasts and more that are responsible for perpetuating misogyny, anti-feminism, homophobia, transphobia and other patriarchal values.

differently entirely? Some scholars place podcasts firmly within the historical context of the radio, insisting that “independently produced, downloaded not broadcast, infinitely time-shiftable, not tied to broadcast schedule or content restrictions—[podcasts were] immediately recognized as a new form of radio, extending the documentary form in new directions” (Hilmes 11). In the chapter “But is it Radio?” Michele Hilmes argues for an expansionist view of radio that encompasses podcast production with a specific emphasis on the element of privacy that distinguishes podcasting as a subset of radio. Unlike public broadcast radio which is restricted to content that is deemed acceptable to a general public audience, podcasts have the benefit of an “unprecedented enablement of privacy” (12). Hilmes likens this level of privacy to the church confessional in the sense that “we as listeners hear deeply personal revelations of experiences, feelings, hopes, and fears of people whose names we may learn but who remain invisible and hidden from us, just as we are from them” (12). In this sense, there is a kind of paradoxical intimacy between invisible (or disembodied) speaker and listener, both of which engage in the very intimate, embodied acts of storytelling and listening. Despite these differences, Hilmes concludes that podcasts are indeed a subset of the radio medium.

Others, like Tiziano Bonini, take a middle ground approach. In the chapter “Podcasting as a Hybrid Cultural Form between Old and New Media,” Bonini begins with a deep look into the idea that podcasting is a remediation of radio—that is, the evolution of radio aesthetics, genres, and listening practices in the digital age. A central distinction between radio and podcasting is the way that in radio “our attention is often determined by the rhythms of everyday life,” a kind of background interaction between listeners and radio

shows, whereas “podcasting affords foreground listening, which begins and ends when the listener chooses it” (23). However, the relationship between podcasting and radio is not as simple as it seems since podcasting both draws from an array of other media (literature, theatre, and internet participatory culture, to name a few) and defies them, thus representing a kind of “new hybrid cultural form” (25). This middle-of-the-road approach allows us to see both sides of the argument, while highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. The rest fall into the non-radio vision of podcasting that definitively see it as something separate from radio altogether (García-Marín and Aparici; Berry).

A secondary concern of Podcasts Studies is the discussion of form and practice. One train of thought centers podcasts as a medium while the other focuses on podcasting as a practice. In the critical examination of podcasts as a medium, both in the sense of being a technological form like film or radio and as a medium for communication, a few recurrent ideas can be traced throughout the scholarship. First is the idea that podcasts are a kind of socio-technological assemblage (García-Marín and Aparici; Bonini) or a “space” that houses complex dynamics between podcast, podcaster, and audience (Llinares 2025). By employing an approach rooted in the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Bonini proposes an understanding of podcasting as “an emerging network of material and non-material elements” that include humans (producers, hosts, editors, etc.) and non-humans (platforms, algorithms, devices) (26). Adding the analysis of power within this system, namely through the Social Construction of Technology, this unequal distribution of power as a result of platformization (i.e. the concentration of podcasts to a few big-name tech companies like Spotify and Apple), the legacy of

traditional broadcasting, and the struggles of independent podcast production warrants a more complex understanding of podcasting as a socio-technical assemblage (27). By recognizing the multifaceted network of both humans and non-humans that constitute podcasts, we gain a better insight into the processes that make it possible to share our thoughts and stories in the digital medium.

Another recurring theme in Podcast Studies is the focus on podcasts as a tool for communication. One such example of this is the chapter “El *podcast* como recurso para documentar la historia contemporánea. Experiencia de creación de la serie Voces: memorias del COVID,” Perla Olivia Rodríguez Reséndiz traces the genealogy of the role of technology in the diffusion of scientific information. Rodríguez Reséndiz argues that the shift from print media in the 18th and 19th century to audiovisual mediums in the 20th and 21st century represents a key shift in the way that ideas are shared at the macro scale. The author even goes as far to say that “lo que no estaba escrito y publicado prácticamente no existía” (Rodríguez Reséndiz 207). This changed, of course, with the introduction of film and radio which provided alternatives to print media for the recording and divulgation of information. To make this connection even clearer, Rodríguez Reséndiz presents a comparative analysis of projects of digitalization of information related to the Spanish influenza and COVID-19; the author points out that the confinement of information to print texts and the confinement of people (via quarantine) led to crises because of the lack of access to key studies, observations, and experiences recorded about both illnesses (212-213). This, then, leads us to the most important argument in the chapter: new digital media is fundamental to the preservation, creation, and sharing of information in the 21st century,

especially in the context of crisis, putting emphasis on the “alcance y las posibilidades del podcast como recurso narrativo y documental en el ecosistema digital contemporáneo” (Rodríguez Reséndiz 216).

Other communication-oriented studies explore such topics as mediating identity and knowledge through podcasts (Llinares 2018); as an intimate form of communication that bridges gaps between an increasingly diverse public (Swiatek); and the quality of the narrating voice as having an affective potential for its listeners (Copeland; H. Smith). What is interesting about these studies is the way that they engage different methodologies, like feminist self-reflexivity and affect theory in a way that challenges traditional and orthodox practices and archives in academia (Beckstead and Llinares). Part of this involves shifting critical attention to other parts of the globe. Still falling under the general umbrella of communication and storytelling in Podcast Studies—and bringing Podcast Studies to Latin America—some scholars have argued for Latin American journalistic podcasts to be understood as a new form of *crónicas* (Reyes García and Martínez; Sellas and Gutiérrez). Broadly understood, *crónicas* are “a somewhat unstructured genre that combines literary aestheticism and journalist form... [which] has been surprisingly successful in recent years at consolidating critical recognition with popular appeal” (Mahieux 1). This is possible because of the way that podcasts and *crónicas* “[share] characteristics and methods, such as the use of literary devices to enrich the narration of facts, the author’s subjectivity, freedom of subject matter or a scene-based construction” through the use of sound narratives (Sellas and Gutiérrez 259). In the context of Mexico, this conjures the image of Carlos Monsiváis whose critical writings on subcommunities and marginalized groups

form part of the cornerstone of the Mexican chronicle in the latter half of the twentieth century.

However, there is yet another group of scholars that diverge from the idea of podcasting being a finished product and instead argue that the practice of podcasting is a critically understudied element in the field. Particularly salient are the reflections that posit podcasting as a form of care and community building for marginalized groups (Cory); feminist collaborative and reflexive practice (Copeland et al.); podcasting as a practice of critical intervention that provokes reflection in both podcaster and audience (Jorgenson and Lindgren); and the use of podcasting practice and its connections with pedagogy and higher education (Jorgenson and Lindgren; Bonini; Llinares, “Academic Podcasting”; Beckstead and Llinares). Because “higher education institutions, universities, and individual professors adopted podcasting as an educational tool even before radio stations started turning their broadcast shows into podcasts” and my own position in higher education (Bonini 21), the connection(s) between podcasts and academia fuels much of my interest in podcasts and is what initially led me to including a chapter on it here. This idea becomes clearer when we consider the intersection of the podcast medium, marginalized identities, storytelling, and pedagogy. In the introduction to the edited collection *Crossing Digital Fronteras: Rehumanizing Latinx Education and Digital Humanities*, the editors propose that the volume is built upon “*crossings*, or the intellectual and praxis-based journeys” that sustain and connect each of the essays (Martinez et al. 1). Thinking back to the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter, if “*cruzando*” was a way for my former student to remember cruising and “*crossings*” is a way for Martínez et al. to think through journeys rooted in

praxis and intellectual engagement, what happens when we think of these two instances as being intrinsically connected? Cruising is a form of knowledge making, and the pleasures of the crossings that Martínez et al. outline give us a way of cruising academia.

Focusing on the pedagogical, they explain that Latinx Studies and the Digital Humanities can work in tandem to overcome neoliberal borders in academia, “[which] means thinking and even working outside the confines of existing structures of higher education in order to promote critical student self-empowerment at all grades through more sustainable, long-term strategies for self-discovery, and self-definition” (Martinez et al. 5). One such example of this are podcasts. Though the principal focus of *Crossing Digital Fronteras* is pedagogical, I argue that the same benefits of self-empowerment, self-discovery, and self-definition that are touted as major benefits of teaching practices based in the digital humanities are also reaped by those who produce and consume podcasts.

With this background in Podcast Studies, we can understand the scholarly conversation within which this chapter falls. According to Britta Jorgenson and Mia Lindgren, traditionally “radio and podcast research is done through analyses of ‘texts’, policy documents, production and distribution ecosystems; archival research; audience studies; and interviews with producers” (50). In their chapter “‘Pause and Reflect’: Practice-as-research methods in radio and podcast studies,” the authors build a case for another, practice-based approach to the study of radio and podcasts. With a detailed analysis of researcher-as-podcaster projects, the authors provide an argument for a way of doing research that centers the critical-reflexivity of podcast production. This is particularly relevant for this chapter in the way that “self-reflexivity is commonly used as

storytelling technique” (55). In the following sections, I will explore this idea through an analysis of the stories being told, but there is another immediate connection I would like to point out before then. Critical self-reflexivity has become one of the methods used in the writing of the chapter in the sense that I too am asked to pause and reflect (to borrow Jogenson and Lindgren’s phrase). Between listening to fragments of the episode “Instrucciones para ir al baño,” I have gone to the bathroom and experienced a profound awareness of myself, my queerness, and the relationship that I have (had) with restrooms. In a way, the bathroom has become a key space to think of the very reflections that I am writing about here.

CUIR: Historias disidentes (2019-2022)

Shifting to focus on podcasts in the context of queer Mexico, we land on *CUIR: Historias disidentes* as a prime case study. *CUIR* is part of the podcasting network *Esto no es radio* created by journalist Fernando “Micro” Hernández Becerra based out of Guadalajara, Jalisco. The principal goal is simple: “en *Esto no es radio* habitan historias de personas que vivieron situaciones límite, recuerdos inmortales y conflictos internos” (Hernández Becerra). A glance at the platform’s Instagram profile (@estonoeradiomx) reviews further information about Hernández Becerra’s mission; using his more-than fifteen years of experience in the podcasting and recording industry, Hernández Becerra crafts informational videos about the best practices for independent podcasters, as well as offering a course through WhatsApp about telling personal stories through the narrative podcast genre.

CUIR and its producer Erick Yáñez joined the *Esto no es radio* network in 2019 with the trailer of the podcast being released on the 28th of June. The trailer, with a total runtime of five minutes and thirty seconds, offers valuable insights into the political posture, content, and audio design and aesthetics that are to be found in the podcast's subsequent episodes. It begins with the phrase “hace algún tiempo decidí dejar de ser [...] normal” (*Trailer*, 00:00-00:05). From this first moment, Yáñez, as both producer and narrator, makes it clear that *CUIR* is a podcast that challenges normativity in various aspects, as we will see in later examples. The slight pause before saying “normal” adds impact to the word, as if putting it in bold (to borrow a writerly metaphor).

Immediately following the first sentence is the first indication of the audio design that the podcast is going to adopt in its twenty-seven-episode run. As Yáñez's voice fades out, radio static fills the audio which in turns transitions to dance music—not unlike the music that you would hear at one of Mexico's gay *antros*, like the iconic La Purísima. The use of static is notable given the relationship between podcast and radio explored above; static is the result of poor connection or interruption to radio signal, so in a way, *CUIR*'s use of the sound sonically suggests both an interruption to and break from what we could consider normative broadcasting. Furthermore, the use of nightclub music transports us to one of the quintessentially queer spaces, in what David Tenorio would call “synoptic connections of feeling and sensation that, taking place across queer and trans nightclubs, dance floors, performance stages, and other nighttime-like scenes like this one, bind us all together” (1). It is an auditory form of orienting the listening towards a queer sound/space.

From there, the podcast breaks into its characteristic narrative structure in which the main “story” being told is interrupted and interpellated by various sounds and other stories, which serve to underline the point being made. This is made clear as Yáñez continues, stating that “si tú has estado donde yo he estado y has vivido lo que yo he vivido, entonces lo sabes; sabes cómo se siente, cómo se siente enamorarse” which is interrupted by audio fragments from two different voices that detail the first time that someone experienced queer love (*Trailer*, 00:12-00:39). This back and forth between the main narrative of the story and the audio fragments provides a preview into the episodes that follow, but it also highlights the podcast’s mission to give voice to *nuestras voces*, as Yáñez puts it (*Trailer*, 04:00-04:04). It is a way of putting *nostredad* (Wayar) and podcasting as care by giving marginalized groups a voice (Cory) into practice. Lastly, it represents an interesting way of dismantling the hierarchy that is inherent in much of podcasting; as the principal producer—and narrator of this particular trailer—it is typically expected that Yáñez’s voice would be the voice of power in the sense that it is the guiding force that controls the direction of the podcast. However, because of the way that Yáñez is constantly interrupted, it suggests that his voice is less the voice of direction and rather forms an equal part of this polyphony of queerness—a kind of horizontal relationship instead of a hierarchical one.

Within Yáñez’s part of the narration (transcribed below), we can ascertain two main ideas: rejecting normativity as a path to accepting queerness and the importance of storytelling in the pursuit of self-discovery, breaking stereotypes, and creating a sense of

community and belonging. The first part of the narration centers on the rejection of normativity and the shared experiences of such a reject and goes as follows:⁶³

Hace algún tiempo decidí dejar de ser [*pause*] normal [*static followed by dance music*]. Y, si tú has estado donde yo he estado y has vivido lo que yo he vivido, entonces, lo sabes; sabes cómo se siente; cómo se siente enamorarse...Cómo es pertenecer. Y, un día, ... ir contra la corriente. Cómo se siente conocerse. Y, al conocerse, ...cómo se siente ser tú mismo, misme, misma. Eres como yo, eres queer. (*Trailer*, 00:00-01:22)

From this first fragment, it is clear that this figuration of Mexican queerness is rooted in the verb *sentir*. As Fran Dennstedt tells us, “Cuir/queer affect teaches us that that feelings do not originate from identity” but rather from the constant and repetitive tensions that it has with “sustaining heteronormativity” (18). For me, this idea is particularly productive in thinking through a kind of affective occupation that I have described throughout this project; in a way, Yáñez brings affective occupation to the sound space through the evocation of both affect and emotion. It is an invitation to *feel*, which in the format of a podcast has a similar effect to that of guided meditation. Yáñez’s voice leads us through various modes of feelings that constitute this act of abandoning normality (“dejar de ser normal”) and in the process invites us, the listener, to feel as he asks: how does it feel to fall in love? To belong? To know yourself? To be(come) yourself?⁶⁴

⁶³ In the transcription of the podcast, I have opted to use ellipses to indicate where other audio fragments interrupt the narration. Because of the centrality of the audio design, in addition to the transcription of the spoken word, I will also employ the use of square brackets [] to indicate added effects or non-verbal sounds that are key to my analysis of the podcast episode.

⁶⁴ The play on *conocerse* here is extremely thought-provoking in the way that it points not only to a knowing of oneself but also to a process of becoming oneself. It suggests that I can know myself (“me conozco”) but also meet myself (“me conocí”) in a concrete time.

The second half of the fragment shifts towards queerness, and in doing so, gives an indication as to why the podcast is named *CUIR: Historias disidentes*. About queerness, Yáñez states:

Ser queer es ser raro/extraño/sospechoso [*each spoken in a different voice*], es resignificar palabras que antes eran usadas como insulto para encontrar en ellas el poder que nos quitaron... Ser queer es cuestionar nuestra identidad... y cómo la construimos... Es hacernos las preguntas que nadie se hace... Es aprender a amarnos... Amar nuestras historias... Es lo que elegimos... Lo que no pudimos elegir... Y lo que podemos transformar para hacer oír nuestras voces... Estas son las historias de quienes se han atrevido a ser quienes realmente son, quienes han aprendido a olvidar lo aprendido y quienes han roto los discursos sobre qué significa ser Normal. Este es un podcast íntimo sobre uno de los mayores misterios, nuestra identidad, nuestras diferencias, nuestra sexualidad... que son nuestro regalo... nuestra magia. (*Trailer*, 01:24-04:57)

What interests me most about this half of the narration is the way that queerness develops as the podcast goes on. It begins with the etymological origins of queer as different and strange, which at the same time gestures towards the numerous euphemisms used throughout Mexico to refer to queerness and queer people (i.e. *raritos*) (Núñez Noriega, *Sexo entre varones*). In terms of audio, it highlights another key characteristic of *CUIR*'s sound design; as indicated in the transcript, when the words “raro,” “extraño,” and “sospechoso” are said, the pronunciation of each word overlaps with the others, and the audio itself is put through a distortion effect. The audio distortion of key concepts and words as a way of punctuating them is a hallmark of the podcast's sonic design. It demands our attention amongst the other twenty to fifty minutes of episode time.

The genealogy of queerness continues as Yáñez explains the reappropriation of the term that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. This idea hints at a countercultural, queer political posture that rejected the assimilationist and normative push

towards acceptance that was the dominant narrative until the late 1960s. Again, this brings us back to the idea of leaving behind normalcy and moving towards an embracing of queerness. However, the podcast is also quick to point out that it is also against normative discourses within queer communities as well; by questioning our identity (“cuestionar nuestra identidad”) and how it is constructed (“cómo la construimos”), the podcast states its intent in platforming a variety of non-conforming, sexually dissident narratives that do not simply replicate a cis-gay normativity—still a major issue in terms of representation of queerness in the twenty-first century. This array of stories, as Yáñez tells us explicitly, is our gift, our magic. You will notice here that there has also been a linguistic shift from the impersonal, rhetorical “cómo se siente” to a direct use of the *nosotrxs* form, fully leaning into the idea of queerness as community and as belonging.

However, it would take a little more than two years for the first official episode of *CUIR* to be published.⁶⁵ The “episode” titled “Antes de empezar: este podcast es para ti” was released on July 7th, 2021, and within its nine-and-a-half minute runtime, it reaffirms much of the outlooks and goals that were outlined in the trailer. Yáñez states

No importa quién eres, de dónde eres, cómo te vistes, con quién fue tu primer beso, ni en quién o qué piensas cuando tienes un momento a solas. Este podcast es para ti porque tienes oídos y porque quieres escuchar. (*Antes de empezar*, 00:20-00:40)

The first phrase here is fairly straight forward in the way that it positions the podcast as a welcoming, inclusive space that does not exclude on the basis of identity, origin, dress, or sexuality. This is a common statement used more than anything in queer contexts to suggest

⁶⁵ The gap between the publication of the trailer and the introductory episode is not explicitly addressed, but I can confidently assume that the COVID-19 pandemic and the period of quarantine in 2020 had an impact in this delay.

a level of safety—in other words, that the space is non-discriminatory. The second phrase, however, reveals much more information; whereas the trailer presents a more active vision of the storytelling process through phrases like “hacer oír nuestras voces” and “hacernos preguntas que nadie se hace,” this introduction focuses more on the act of listening. It suggests both the capacity (“tienes oídos”) and the desire (“quieres escuchar”) to be a listener. From the beginning, the podcast is assuming a certain orientation towards queer narrative, a very specific desire to engage with it auditorily.

As I mentioned previously, this is somewhat different from the trailer, which focuses on the “telling” part of storytelling. It also deviates greatly from the practice of producing the podcast. For context, the podcast is sustained in large part by folks who submit their own stories, either to tell themselves or to be narrated by another. In the context of *CUIR*, Rodríguez Ortiz describes the interviewing process, which can last upwards of three hours, as a “momento de diálogo e intercambio entre entrevistado y entrevistador/a, es un espacio también de cuidado por los y las productoras del podcast” (281). How, then, do we make sense of this seemingly disparate relationship between the audience as both active storytellers and passive (albeit eager) listeners? Once again, I am brought back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* and its engagement with the “chronic modern crisis” of a full list of binarisms as being defined by an “irresolvable instability” between them (10–11). I see a similar relationship here; at its core, what *CUIR* is asking of

its audience is a queered version of listenership, challenging the implicit dynamic and hierarchy of passivity/activity in both the acts of listening and narrating.⁶⁶

Another element that sets this episode apart from the rest is the amount of biographical content that Yáñez includes, to the extent that we can say that “Antes de empezar” is as much an introduction to the podcast as it is to its producer. To briefly summarize, it covers Yáñez’s experience as the producer of *Psicofonías*, a horror podcast, and then is largely devoted to Yáñez’s life as a queer person. At first glance, this can be read as a kind of positionality statement by Yáñez, a way of disclosing particular identities in an act of acknowledging the ways that they can influence and effect our manner of navigating various topics and how we approach them. While I think that this is a valid way of understanding the introductory episode, there are many critiques to be made of positionality statements, above all else in the way that they run the risk of banalizing relationships of power, most of which are deeply rooted in coloniality. In other words, the critique of positionality statements comes down to using the act of acknowledging power dynamics as a way of pardoning them. Given this, I want to propose a different way of approaching it that is based in orientations. As Sara Ahmed writes, “orientations are about how we begin; how we proceed from ‘here,’ which affects how what is ‘there’ appears, how it presents itself” (8). This way of seeing positionality goes beyond the self and acknowledging positions of power, and instead speaks not only to identities, but also to

⁶⁶ “Listenership” is meant to be understood here as the sonic counterpart to spectatorship, to borrow the term from Film Studies.

approaches, future directions, and the ways that all three can impact the perception of the final product.

CUIR produced a total of two seasons between 2021 and 2022, each with thirteen episodes. The episodes cover a host of topics, including uses of Grindr, an infamous hookup application; Roller Derby in Mexico; Muxes; drag; and much more. The final episode, “El cuarto violeta,” explores BDSM (bondage, domination and sadomasochism) and was released on November 22nd, 2022. As of writing this, I have not found any information about a formal end to the podcast, nor anything related to future plans. For the purposes of this chapter, the following analysis will center on the episode titled “Instrucciones para ir al baño.” “Instrucciones” was released on August 9th, 2022, as the seventh episode of season two. In addition to the content, this episode in particular interests me because of its critical acclaim, becoming a finalist in the 2022-2023 Third Coast International Audio Festival for “Best Documentary: Non-English Language.” In what follows, I employ a close analytical listening and critical self-reflexivity approach—putting into practice the “pause and reflect” methodology (Jorgenson and Lindgren)—to highlight the ways in which *CUIR* excels as a sonic example of queer Mexican Baño Studies.

Instrucciones para ir al baño

As mentioned previously, “Instrucciones para ir al baño” was released in August of 2022 as the seventh episode of season two of *CUIR: Historias disidentes*. The episode was released with an accompanying cover art image designed by Irving de Jesús Segovia (see figure 14 below). I highlight this non-audio element of the podcast as an example of the kind of transmedia engagement strategies that have become part of podcasting’s “own

narrative grammars” (“gramática narrativa propia”) (García-Marín and Aparici 1072). The image, a digital collage, is typical of the artist’s self-proclaimed style of “bodrios y cosas ‘anti/estéticas” (de Jesús Segovia). A toilet, decontextualized from the bathroom space, floats on the background of a sky with various floral imagery and a pink-toned earth. On the toilet itself we can see the famous image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and within the toilet sprouts a phallic cactus with suggestive petals shooting from the top, mimicking ejaculation. I argue that these elements, along with the episode’s title (discussed later), constitute the kind of narrative grammars that García-Marín and Aparici describe, which provides a specific orientation towards the episode even before the audio begins. With the toilet in the sky, the image suggests a kind of defamiliarization of the object—to borrow the term from the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky—in a way preparing the listener to engage with it from a new perspective. On the other hand, the use of the Virgen and the cactus points towards a distinctly Mexican aesthetic that is also being subverted as the Virgen appears almost as if it is graffiti and the cactus takes a phallic form.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ The subversive use of the Virgen de Guadalupe and other Catholic iconography is a recurrent theme in contemporary queer Mexican artists, perhaps best demonstrated by Valerio Gámez’s series “Tendencias guadalupanas” and more recently in the collage and multimedia work of LA-based Alberto Navarro.



Figure 14. The cover art for "Instrucciones" done by Irving de Jesús Segovia (@tuxamee).

The second non-audio element that orients the listener before the episode begins is the title, which can be taken in two different ways: first “instrucciones” as recognizing the normative uses of bath space that govern them (and us), and then subverting them; and second, “instrucciones” as a kind of survival guide for queer bodies navigating an increasingly violent, homophobic world. In the first reading of this title, there is an explicit recognition that “we have in the toilet an instrument and an institution that both reflects how people and societies operate and also reinforces the existing pattern” of that social context (Molotch 4). By putting a critical focus on this type of control that is found through normative uses of the bathroom—or their “instrucciones”—we open the door to a broader analysis of structures of power and the way that they influence the organization of our societies. Taking this idea further, we can say that instructions likewise lead to critically examining the flaws in the way that societal organization and space intersect. One personal anecdote of this is from my time as an undergraduate student. A sign was posted in the

men's restroom that asked students to avoid masturbating in the showers because it was causing plumbing issues. At first, it seemed like a ridiculous situation: were the students really masturbating enough to clog the drains? But digging deeper, we can see that the root issue is the lack of access to adequate privacy to satisfy sexual needs. In a way, the bathroom and the dorm room as shared spaces become desexualized zones, which in turn deny students of the right to sexual gratification, leading to clogged drains as a symptom of a larger problem, not the result of it.

On the other hand, in the second reading of the title, we find a much more complex meaning. Reading "instrucciones" as a survival guide, a literal set of instructions for successfully and safely occupying the bathroom space as a queer person, puts the podcast episode in dialogue with a long history of community-generated resources as a form of care and mutual aid. This is especially true of print culture, which has been one of the key mediums through which the queer community has been able to "share information, make contacts, build community" amongst other things (Mezo González 1). In many ways, these forms of care addressed the lack of consideration by institutions—HIV/AIDS education, for example—and shared popular knowledge through the divulgence of important information. A more contemporary example of this can be found in the works produced by Mexican American artist Leo Herrera; in particular the book (*analog*) *Cruising: A Manual* provides valuable insight into cruising culture, arguing that

cruising spots exist because of oral histories like [this book]. By sharing where these spaces are and how to be, we breathe life into them. Our instincts preserve their purpose, and this etiquette has been passed down since before Queer words were written. (Herrera 6–7)

In addition to preserving the practice of cruising as an aspect of queer culture with a long and complicated history that is at risk of being lost thanks to the development of applications, Herrera also points out that the sharing of information in the queer community was an oral tradition long before it reached print. Along the same lines as Herrera's cruising manual, I see a similar form of instructional care in *CUIR*'s episode. By sharing oral stories that are relevant to a queer audience, especially to a queer audience in 2020s Mexico, *CUIR* is providing a kind of care through the idea of the podcast as a survival guide, as well as an archival preservation of queer narratives.

With this, we finally arrive at the audio content of the podcast itself. The episode titled "Instrucciones para ir al baño" from the podcast *CUIR: Historias disidentes* focuses on personal experiences of occupying the bath space in distinct ways that go against the normative uses of the said space. Besides the bathroom being a thread that connects each of the anecdotal sections, it becomes clear that audio is a central element to each story and to the production of the episode as a whole. For this reason, the analysis of each story in the sections that follow are going to focus on two main elements: the bath space narrative and the sound design. By employing a close analytical listening and formal sound analysis approach, I will show how the combination of the elements is fundamental to understanding the potential that this episode has in the context of critical baño studies.

In the introduction to the episode, host and producer Erick Yáñez greets us from within a public bathroom. As the episode begins, Yáñez states:

Bienvenida, bienvenido y bienvenide a *CUIR: Historias disidentes*. Yo soy Erick Yáñez. Y, como escucharán, estoy en un baño público, grabando. Lo cual es muy extraño porque nadie habla en los baños públicos. O, al menos, en los baños de hombres; no sé cómo sean los de mujeres. Usualmente, siempre ponemos una

advertencia al inicio de cada episodio, pero en esta ocasión va súper en serio, que este episodio tiene escenas muy explícitas, así que tomen sus precauciones. En fin, este episodio se llama ‘Instrucciones para ir al baño’. (*Instrucciones*, 00:48-01:38)

With this introduction, Yáñez points to a couple of key ideas that define the episode. First, Yáñez explains how the gesture of recording a podcast episode in a space like a public restroom goes against the norm because “nadie habla en los baños públicos” (01:05). The taboo of speaking in the bathroom is symptomatic of the “pecado capital: el del mal gusto” that Laura Sofía Rivero describes about our societal resistance to reading (or, in this case, listening to) “lo asqueroso” (13). This leads to an important consequence: by refusing to speak about what we do in the restroom, we are self-imposing a form of biopolitical control that projects a vision of subjectivity onto our bodies that denies our own corporeality. In other words, our bodies are not allowed to *be* bodies because they are obliged to fulfill other functions, like the worker, whose body only counts for as much labor as it can produce, or the patient, whose body is the object for medicalization and curing. Secondly, in the act of speaking about what we do in the bathroom, we subtly reveal the ideologies that govern it (and us); for example, when using urinals, how do we make sense of the tension between the norm of leaving space between ourselves and others and the constant curiosity to sneak a glance at other penises? The answer is simple: by not talking about it we do not have to recognize nor deal with it.

Another issue to point out (which will also be covered with the first story) is the question of the women’s restroom. The passing comment “no sé cómo sean los de mujeres,” though meant to be an innocuous admission that women’s restrooms are not his area of expertise, is important. At one level, it proves how effective the gendering of space

is with bathrooms to the extent that men and women are generally unaware of how the other operates. This is, after all, a tool used by heteronormativity to help maintain the idea that women are pristine and not capable of the same bodily atrocities as men. However, it raises a second important issue: the invisibilizing of cis queer women and bathrooms. Narratives involving bath space and queer people are ubiquitous with gay men (cruising) and trans people (facing violence), leaving cis queer women behind.⁶⁸

Yáñez's introduction is doubly interesting because not only is he speaking in the restroom, but he is also recording it in. What I see in this gesture is an important example of embodied practice or situatedness that not only places Yáñez in the restroom as the producer of the episode, but also importantly takes the listener into the restroom as well. By allowing us to focus on the auditory element of the bathroom without being physically present in it, we are able to notice and critically engage with aspects of bathroom use that otherwise would go ignored. By turning the bathroom into a recording studio, Yáñez queers both the bath space and the act of podcasting. This has major resonances with the acknowledgement by Gloria Anzaldúa that marginalized (racialized and gendered) subjects must forget the ideal of "a room of one's own" and instead occupy any and every space to make their stories heard ("Speaking in Tongues" 168). Because of the materiality of the bathroom, namely the use of tiles on nearly every surface, it becomes not only an excellent place to capture good audio quality but also allows for the reverberation of words to bounce

⁶⁸ Admittedly this was an oversight in the original formulation of the idea for this dissertation. But, as both the complicated gender identity in *Cuerpo naufrago* from chapter one and the first story in "Instrucciones" will show, the conceptualization of a critical baño studies without queer femme narratives cannot exist.

back to the speaker. In a way, the relationship between the person and the space creates an echo which continuously amplifies and transforms both speaker and story.

To give a brief summary of the episode, it is divided into three stories: first is the story of Jessica and Lilia, a young sapphic couple experiencing an erotic moment in the pool locker room; the second story follows Leodan as he cruises in a public restroom near his house, and then at UNAM's Facultad de Filosofía y Letras; and the last story explores the growth of Alanís as she embraces her identity as a trans woman who works up the courage to use the women's restroom at school for the first time. Though somewhat different in content, each of the three stories are connected by the same thread: bath space is a space that provides the opportunity for critical reflection on gender identity and sexuality.

Loving Lilia

"Instrucciones para ir al baño" begins with a teenage sapphic story, which is doubly interesting as it decenters the androcentric perspective common in bath space narratives, as well as necessarily addresses queer youth and sexuality, a topic all-too-often deemed too taboo to discuss. The first story, written by Jessica Rito and narrated by Adriana Arzate Martínez, tells the story of a lesbian couple in high school as they become physically intimate for the first time in the locker room after physical education. This story opens by saying "comenzaré diciendo que a mí no me gusta ir al baño" (02:20). The narrator explains that people with vulvas in her generation are socialized in such a way that the bathroom becomes a hyper-antiseptic space associated with "el obsesivo cuidado de tus genitales" (06:40). On the other hand, the narrator also mentions that the bathroom is "el lugar en el

que muchas personas se masturbaron por primera vez” (07:03). What I see in these two statements, then, is a tension between the complete sanitizing of the space—both literally in the sense of hygiene and metaphorically in the sense of being devoid of affective connection—and the erotic possibilities that the bathroom space offers. It makes sense, then, why the narrator has a complicated relationship with the space.

This idea is furthered when the narrator presents the instructions to go to the bathroom for individuals with vulvas. This comprehensive list of steps, which is transcribed below, include such things as lifting the toilet seat with your foot, placing toilet paper on the seat or hovering above it, and cautioning that your business in the bathroom should be quickly because there is less of a chance of being attacked the less time you spend there. However, when we listen to the steps as they are read by the narrator, we can note various important sound elements, which are indicated in the transcription by bold (to represent polyphonic sound) and italics (to highlight added sound effects):

Uno. Si la tapa del excusado está abajo, levántala con la punta del zapato. / **Dos.** Verifica que no haya orines o excremento dentro. / **Tres.** Una vez que jales la palanca o encuentres un váter sin contenido, asegúrate que haya mucho, mucho papel higiénico. [*paper ripping*] / **Cuatro.** Cierra bien la puerta. Nadie puede ni sospechar que de tu cuerpo perfecto salga tanta cosa asquerosa. Además, si no lo haces, básicamente le estás dando oportunidad a que alguien entre y decida violentarte. / **Cinco.** Corta largas tiras de papel de baño para ponerlas en el asiento del váter. Tus nalgas no deben tocar la superficie, **aunque lo ideal** sería que no te sentaras, sino que hagas tu expulsión de aguilita. Es decir, de cuclillas con las nalgas en alto. / **Seis.** [*splash*] **Haz lo tuyo. Hazlo rápido, lo más rápido que puedas. Allá fuera hay una fila impresionante de personas que están esperando su turno.** / **Siete.** Hay dos opciones de limpieza. Si orinaste, debes limpiar tu vulva hacia adelante. Si defecaste, es del ano hacia atrás. / **Ocho.** Jala la cadena. Puedes usar un cuadrito de papel porque... Quién sabe quién ha estado ahí. [*flush with electronic music*]

Multiple sound effects are added to emphasize what is being described, such as the sound of paper ripping and the toilet flushing. I argue that the sound effects operate both on the aesthetic level in the sense that they form part of the overall auditory motif of the episode—this can be characterized as a kind of electro-pop sound guided by the music created to accompany the stories—and narratively as they guide us through the steps of using the toilet.

As mentioned previously, the above transcription is annotated so as to indicate which phrases are spoken with a polyphonic effect; by this I mean that a reverberation effect is applied to the narrator's voice so that it sounds like multiple tracks of audio are being played simultaneously. In most cases, this seems to have a punctuating effect, with the numbers providing an emphatic indication that the next tip is beginning. In the other three instances, the polyphonic effect suggests something else; the first case of this is in step five, in which the number is not emphasized, but rather the phrase “aunque lo ideal.” Evoking an ideal use of the toilet, this suggestion is operating within the framework of normativity, which in this case, emphasizes the importance of avoiding contact with the surface of the toilet seat. This creates a tension between what Laura Sofía Rivero describes in terms of the contact with others while using the bathroom: “los baños públicos nos obligan al contacto íntimo con los desconocidos; cuerpos desmemoriados que se presentan en secreciones y manchas, aferrándose a mantener su presencia latente” (76). In a way, this tip is both a way of avoiding contact with the latent presence of a previous toilet user and to prevent your presence from being perceived by the next person.

The other example that deviates from the other tips is step six, which is entirely spoken with the voice effect with only a small break between the number and the instruction by the sound of a splash. Step six, with the reverberation effect, establishes the connection between the individual (“lo tuyo”) and the outside world, specifically making note of the multitude of people who will be waiting to use the same toilet. Again, we make the connection to the tensions of perception mentioned above; by emphasizing the need to finish quickly because of an ever-growing line of people waiting to use the toilet, it creates a hyper awareness of others. At the material level, this points to the structural issue of bathroom accessibility for people with vulvas, which is many times inadequate because of the amount of space that toilet cubicles require (in comparison to a line of urinals, for example, which is able to accommodate many more users). Putting these two steps in dialogue with one another reveals a larger issue: people with vulvas are faced with an impossible challenge in the bathroom. On one hand, subjects who are gendered as feminine are socially required to be more aware and accommodating to others in comparison to subjects who are gendered as masculine. This results in the pressure to use the restroom “lo más rápido que puedas.” Yet, at the same time, these steps point to the necessity to take the proper precautions for the sake of hygiene and safety. This perhaps explains the speed at which the audio is played, which in itself creates a sense of urgency.

The third and final step that can be seen as distinctly different from the others is step seven. This is the only step in the instructions to not include any kind of distortion or polyphonic effect, nor does it contain added sounds. For that reason, the lack of sound design makes this step stand out. In it, the narrator describes the proper process of wiping,

depending on if you urinated or defecated. In a way, it functions as the sonic foil to step six. If the previous step used the distortive effect to emphasize the multitude of people waiting for the toilet, then this step suggests the opposite; wiping is the most intimate step in the sense that it is the only time that either the vulva or anus are touched directly. The lack of audio design in this step provides the kind of necessary privacy in order to wipe, a kind of intimate moment between someone and their own body that is regarded as singular, sacred. With these two examples, then, we can see that the sound design (reverberation versus no reverberation) is utilized to emphasize the collectiveness and individual intimacy of these instructions respectively.

Returning to the title of this episode, it is clear to see how these step-by-step instructions serve a clear educational purpose for people with vulvas. In the context of the complicated relationship between obsessive genital care and erotics, it is clear that this nearly two-minute segment speaks more to the hygienic aspect of bath space. After the final flushing sound effect marks the end of the steps, the listeners are transported back to the encounter between the narrator and her girlfriend, indicating the shift back to the erotic side of the bath space (09:40).

As mentioned previously, one of the most important parts of this episode is the way that it challenges the dominant narrative of cruising and bath space erotics, which has largely been centered around (gay) men. Sharing a feminine perspective, the narrative explains how the bathroom was difficult to think of as a safe space, and considering it an erotic space was, for her, out of the question. In contrast to the argument that I propose in this dissertation, the narrator suggests that though there are more “posibilidades para cruzar

miradas dentro del baño” in spaces like LGBTQ bars, the real connection happens in the lines waiting for a stall to open up (10:00-10:35).⁶⁹ The narrator emphasizes this by stating

O quizás las chicas lencas, bisexuales, pansexuales o queer, con vulvas, jamás hemos pensado en los baños públicos como espacios erotizables... [*pause while club music fades*]... [*no additional sound*] A menos que sea un vestidor de gimnasio. (10:38-11:04)

What this highlights is the difference in affective occupation within bath space for queer people with and without vulvas. Pointing out these differences in affective occupation indicates a much more complex relationship between space and erotic possibility that otherwise would not be as evident had the episode not emphasized the importance of sapphic bath space stories by beginning with this one.

Much like the other descriptions of normative uses of bath space explored throughout this dissertation, the next segment of the story is dedicated to outlining—and then defying—the normative uses of the locker room space. With the sound of the shower running, the narrator explains that despite the nudity and underlying sexual tensions, the locker rooms “son lugares donde también actuamos el pudor” (11:15). This kind of modesty is centered around covering the body, which is ironic given the nature of the space. Here the episode turns towards audio design to emphasize the point being made; as the narrator explains that “nosotras no enseñamos nuestros [cuerpos]. Nuestros [censored] pueden tener vellos, nuestras [censored] pueden no ser esterilizadas. Nos tapamos casi mecánicamente los [censored], las [censored], los [censored], [censored, [censored]]” (11:45). Beginning with the word “cuerpos,” which is rendered barely audible, the censored

⁶⁹ To emphasize the idea of being concretely situated in a queer bar, the background audio is filled with the rhythmic pumping of club music typical of queer establishments.

words are completely erased by the technical difficulties sound. The effect that this creates is a total fragmentation of a woman's body, as if she can only exist as part of a body, rather than a whole. This can be understood as a prime example of the way that the audio design in *CUIR* is used to underscore arguments, especially ideological ones like this.

Unsurprisingly, the play on audio continues. In describing the norms of changing in the locker room, the narrator explains that

Nadie se atreve a quitarse la toalla o la bata en un vestidor. [las nalgas]. Hasta que alguien valiente se atreve a mostrar un poco su piel. [los pechos]. Y de pronto [las nalgas] Es más fácil ver y dejarse ver [los genitales]. Al menos un poco. (11:45-12:10)

However, unlike the previous clip, the bracketed words here are not entirely censored. Instead, they begin by being barely audible ("las nalgas") and become increasingly easier to hear. Again, to insist on the comparison to the previous part of the clip, this portion of the audio is less about suggesting an ideological posture and rather is a good example of the way that audio design can be used in tandem to the spoken word as a narrative device. By this I mean that the audio coyly reflects the slow process of revealing more and more skin in an almost sensual stripping of their towels as it becomes increasingly easier to hear.

It is in this nakedness that we reach the key point of this portion of the episode: the relationship between bodies, space, and nudity allows for a deeper reflection on all three. This reflection, for the narrator, starts with a series of rhetorical questions before calling for a revolution:

¿Por qué en este lugar aún no podemos ser libres y disfrutar de la libertad de nuestros cuerpos? No hay nadie viéndonos. ¿Por qué tenemos que seguir actuando como nos enseñaron? ¿Por qué esta farsa performativa que nos han impuesto nos persigue hasta los rincones más privados que habitamos? Este es nuestro espacio.

Ese era mi llamado a conquistar al baño, a retirarnos las batas, a ser nosotras. Todas estaban invitadas a la revolución de los cuerpos, sáficas o no. (12:15-13:20)

This reflection directly confronts the logic of bath space: why is the control of gendered bodies so ubiquitous that it even dictates behavior in the most private of public spaces? The use of language here is particularly interesting to me; with phrases like “como nos enseñaron” and “farsa performativa,” this reflection establishes a direct and clear connection to the idea of gender performativity. In other words, the normative behaviors that the narrator has described throughout her story are representative of a larger gender ideology. Yet, this kind of relationship is dependent on the perception of Others—this is the performance part of performativity. However, the narrator makes the point that there is “nadie viéndonos,” suggesting that the women in the room are not Others but one another with shared similarities. This is what makes this reflection (or call to revolution) so impactful: with the symbolic stripping of the robes, there is an overcoming of the control of gendered bodies in bath space, which is a way of imagining a radically different word for all feminine subjects, not just lesbians.⁷⁰

In all, Jessica and Lilia’s story is a strong start to a critical approach to bath space through podcasting. From the narrative content to the audio design, this section of the episode makes the tensions between the obsessive, sanitized vision of bath space with its erotic and liberatory potential clear. This defiance of the norms of the locker room (bath space) and the overcoming of its generationally instilled stigmas to reach what the narrator

⁷⁰ In a way, we can think of this bodily revolution as being united in “sororidad,” a specific call to sisterhood that sees cis-heteronormativity not only as an issue that directly affects lesbians, but rather all fem-identifying people.

calls “la fantasía por excelencia” represents another set of instructions (15:41), a revolutionary one, that allows for a sapphic reimagining and reorientation of the bath space towards the erotic and the liberated, even if they did not reach climax in the moment.

Cruising with Leodan

For its part, the second story, produced and recorded by Leodan Morales, features a scene of cruising in the men’s restrooms. Of the three stories in the episode, it is the most recognizable in the sense that it follows much of the stereotypical representation of (gay) men’s search for sexual gratification in public spaces. Leodan’s story begins with his own personal experience with cruising, which in turn functions as an introduction to its norms. At the beginning of the story, Leodan finds himself in the restroom on a public street near his house. The restroom

tiene las lámparas parpadeantes, se ve que no le dan mantenimiento porque es un baño de cinco pesos. Los cestos de basura están medianamente llenos. Veo que hay condones en los cestos de basura. Huele... huele a baño público y he escuchado que aquí hay encuentros entre hombres... encuentros casuales. (17:34-18:06)

From this preliminary description of the bathroom, we can extract a couple of key ideas. First, from the narration itself, this story sets itself apart from the previous one via the use of audio design. In this fragment, Leodan’s voice fills the foreground of the audio, while the background features a static, tinkling that mimics the sound that outdated fluorescent lightbulbs produce. This effect sonically brings the audience into the restroom with Leodan while at the same time producing an affective response to this ominous sound, as if we are meant to feel the same nervousness that Leodan describes during his first visit to the cruising spot.

The second important element from this description is the spatial construction that the narration achieves. The combination of the blinking lights and the semi-full trash cans provide the listener with a distinct image of the half-dilapidated public restroom that Leodan describes. To further this point, he mentions explicitly that the restroom looks as if no one maintains it; what this shows, then, is a lack of vigilance in the sense that no one is looking after the state of the restroom. The visible presence of the condoms in the trash can, however, takes this idea even further. Not only is nobody looking after the state of cleanliness in the restroom, but it also seems that they have turned a blind eye to the casual sexual encounters between men that frequently occur there as well. This idea suggests an important connection between sexual freedom—i.e. the possibility to freely have sex in the public restroom—and a certain level of dirtiness, especially in terms of smell (“huele a baño público”). As Paul Preciado would say, the creation of this kind of “fetid circle” is what ultimately allows men the chance “to look at each other, to touch each other... to wallow in their own bodily fluids” (34–35).

After entering the bathroom, Leodan makes his way toward an open cubicle, which functions as the main part of the bathroom that is used during cruising for privacy, though it is not entirely uncommon for it to occur at the urinals for a more voyeuristic experience as well. The cubicle that Leodan enters is filthy (what else did you expect?), specifically noting that the door is “rayada” (18:15). On the walls of the cubicle are notes with phone numbers that read “estoy buscando verga, llama a tal número, soy pasivo, marca tal número” (18:20). Interestingly, when Leodan reads these messages, the audio changes from stereo to mono sound, which while listening with headphones, plays distinctly on the

left side. Not only does this suggest that the message itself is written on the left wall of the cubicle, but it also represents a larger strategy of audio design that uses sound intentionally to produce a specific spatial orientation between the listener and the bath space, even if we are not physically present in the same way that Leodan is.

The cubicle is also important in the way that it plays with temporalities. The stains on the door, which is the first thing that Leodan mentions, function as evidence of past sexual encounters. I would even go as far as to argue that these stains represent a similar kind of ghostliness and ephemeral traces of pleasure that Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia* in the sense that they can be understood as physical markers of the “structures of feeling that haunt gay men on both sides of the generational divide that is formed by and through the catastrophe of AIDS” (41). This is especially notable since ejaculate embodies such a complex relationship between arousal and disgust (exacerbated because of the context of HIV/AIDS). If the stains on the door represent the past, then the four feet that Leodan sees in the stall next to him represents the present, as the two men are currently engaging in sexual intercourse. That leaves Leodan as the future, or better said, a kind of cruising futurity, the possibility of sexual gratification that has not yet come to fruition.

Continuing the story, Leodan provides a brief contextualization of his own personal relationship with cruising, which he started doing at sixteen or seventeen years old, when his “hormonas estaban explotando a todo lo que daba” (19:15). Though this may seem like a young age to begin cruising, the reality is that many young queer people resort to similar practices because of the lack of adequate space and opportunity to exercise their sexuality. With this explanation of his background with cruising, Leodan also indirectly points to a

key aspect of practices of public sexuality: the politics of care. In addition to the unshakeable arousal that the riskiness of the situation provokes, there is always the fear that “entre alguien y, pues, nos cache” (19:00). What the risk of being caught does, then, is create a situation of mutual care in which both—or all, in the case that there are more than two sexual partners—must keep an eye out for one another. This is part of the reason why cruising can seem so paradoxical in terms of intimacy; on one hand, you have the affective distance created by anonymity and not knowing one another, yet on the other hand, there is a great deal of intimacy that comes with this form of care.

However, in this particular instance, the fear that Leodan feels is double: on top of the fear of being caught, Leodan feels an extra level of discomfort because he has an audio recording device with him. About this he says that

Tenía que hallar una manera de ocultarla, la grabadora que llevaba, porque incluso yo mismo me sentía invadido con la grabadora. Entonces si yo, que lo llevaba me sentía invadido, entonces las personas que lo llegaban a notar se iban a sentir muchísimo más invadidas en ese sentido. Pero la intención de esto, de esto que estuve realizando, era grabar sonidos... (19:30-20:15)

In the context of the podcast episode, this effort in recording cruising sounds to include as part of the signature sound design for the podcast will become clear later in the story where part of the actual audio that Leodan records is used. However, it also opens an opportunity to critically examine the relationship between the auditory and the visual in erotic settings. In their 2017 article, Sharif Mowlabocus and Andy Medhurst discuss the way that “porn studies has been deaf to the sounds of the pornographic” despite the recent explosion in porn-related scholarship (210). By flipping the script on the visual-aural hierarchy of the pornographic, this episode of *CUIR* guides the audience through a sensorial erotic

experience that is often neglected. This is a commonality between both pornography and cruising, which are many times consumed and practiced (respectively) in a quiet way so as to not be caught. With Leodan's story, we are invited to a more full-body erotic experience. After all, "sound envelops us and is inescapable—we can look away but we cannot stop listening" (Mowlabocus and Medhurst 214).

Unfortunately for Leodan, he does not find a sexual partner in the public restroom which is frequented by "chóferes de micros, chóferes de combis, cargantes de mercado" (20:40). The choice to try to record in this bathroom is fueled by the fetishization of this specific archetype of Mexican masculinities. Particularly resonant here is the image of the *chacal*, typically a masculine, racialized figure from a lower socio-economic status whose body is kept in shape by manual labor and who does not embody any specific sexuality—in other words, their identity is less defined by sexual practice (i.e. they are decidedly not gay) and more so by their masculinity, work, and body.⁷¹ However, as Leodan fails to secure an encounter here, he decides to travel to UNAM to the Facultad de Filosofía to try his cruising luck there.

At the Facultad, Leodan enters and finds that the "cubículo más codiciado" is empty and free to use (25:00). As he sits on the toilet, waiting, Leodan reflects on the practice of cruising, all the while the sounds of toilets flushing and paper towels ripping firmly situate us in the bathroom with him. Like before with the messages on the wall, the audio

71 Ricardo Soria and I explore this figure further in our forthcoming dictionary entry on the *Chacal* in the *Diccionario de Intraducibles: Género, sexualidad, sexodisidencias y feminismos en América Latina y el Caribe*, edited by Moira Fradigner et al.

production of Leodan's voice juggles between mono sound (in either the right or left ear) and stereo. The phrases spoken in mono sound that come from the right and left function almost as a type of metacommentary on cruising. Amongst these reflections, Leodan mentions that there should be a course on cruising to understand the codes and looks used to communicate—here Leo Herrera's (*analog*) *Cruising* is helpful—and a very insightful comment on phallocentricity. In the grammars of cruising, touching and adjusting one's bulge ("paquete") is a major indication of an intent to cruise, but as Leodan explains "nunca se tocan las nalgas" (26:00). What this demonstrates is that the top (penetrator) is privileged with the phallus maintaining the erotic focus.

As Leodan makes eye contact with a handsome guy who quickly makes his way over to the stall, thus begins the most explicit portion of the episode. Leodan describes the entire encounter in great detail:

abre el cubículo, se me queda viendo, y la cierra. Obviamente, no hay presentaciones. [Ajá, no puedes hacer ruido cuando haces cruising]. Y [no sé, es una ley implícita que no puedes hacer ruido] cuando cierra la puerta, yo creo ya tenía mis manos en su cinturón, ya se lo estaba quitando. [¿Quieres verga?] Que ni se habla, o sea, la conversación es con la mirada. [¿La traerá limpia?] Dejo caer la bermuda porque es un poquito [Que me antojas] y le bajo los bóxers. Entonces ahí salta, salta su pene, erecto. Olía bien bonito. Esa madre olía bien bonito una vez que le bajé los bóxers. [¿Ya se la habrá mamado a alguien antes que...?] No, no saltaron flores, o sea, saltó como que olor a... [haces la figura de como si estuvieras agarrando una verga] No, pues, olía bien rico, o sea, olía y me la metí a la boca. [*sounds of fellatio*] [Se habla muy poco, y no, o sea...] si llevaba hambre de verga, creo que me sacié, o sea, me sacié, porque... [me di cuenta de que aprendimos a reprimir los gemidos... vas inmutado, vas...] y el güey que empieza a gemir [*moans*]. Y yo así de [se va a venir] hazme lo que quieras, ya que nos lleve quien nos tenga que llevar. [Estoy rompiendo las reglas por tener sexo en un lugar público] Fue de las pocas veces que he lagrimeado. Le lamí todo su huevo, y empezó como de, la verga [*intense moaning*] a los pezones, como que soltó todo, en respiración, en gemido. Me los echó en la cara, me los echó en la cara. Ahí me di cuenta de que era gay porque me pasó un papel para que me limpiara. (26:50-29:00)

As mentioned previously, one of the major characteristics of CUIR is the sound design, and this cruising encounter is no exception; in addition to describing in detail the entire sexual experience, from the moment the door opens to completion, the story is interpellated by small asides (represented in brackets). These asides, used in the same way as the dramatic device, speak directly to the audience, which provides valuable insight into the practice of cruising and the internal thoughts of Leodan, as he is unable to speak while fellating another man.

Additionally, the use of recorded sounds of fellatio and the added moaning effects present another necessary element to critically examine; going beyond the decentralizing of the visual in erotic scenarios that I argued for above, I posit that the use of Leodan real oral sex audio succeeds in producing a specific relationship between the listener and the narrator. In a way, the audio element creates an interesting orientation towards the story in the sense that the audience is not invited into the scene as a spectator per se, but rather it shows that the listener, like Leodan in the first bathroom, is in the stall next to where the action happens. At the same time, it denies our voyeuristic desire to see oral sex happen and instead focuses all our concentration into the aural and the listener's own erotic imaginations. From just the sounds comes a series of questions: is it big? Is Leodan good at oral sex? Did they finish already? Where? Without Leodan's narration, these questions are left unanswered by the audio alone, and the possibility of erotic imagination is what makes this dynamic so arousing and effective as sound-based media.

The small comment at the end of the encounter likewise functions as a transition into the rest of Leodan's segment, which centers on reflections of queerness, space, and

cruising. The affirmation that “ahí me di cuenta de que era gay porque me pasó un papel para que me limpiara” implies a level of care and understanding that is not always present. Its other implication is that not all men who cruise are gay. As Leodan reflects, “me atrevo a decir que un porcentaje grande son hetero... lo que van a buscar es alguien que se las mame. Te usan y se van, ¿no? Así de como que le regresa...la heterosexualidad” (29:05). What this underlines is the necessity to differentiate between sexual orientation in terms of identity and sexual practice, which can either be partially or totally disconnected from how one identifies.

Along these same lines, another key reflection that Leodan provides focuses on the invasion of cruising spaces by heterosexual couples; he explains that “me he encontrado parejas heteros en lugares de cruising donde van a coger porque ahí pueden coger como se les dé la gana sin todos estos parámetros que la sociedad les impone” (31:11). Here what Leodan is ultimately describing is the difference between cruising as an act of survival (as it has been historically for the queer community) and cruising as a sexual excursion, almost as if it is a kind of roleplaying sexual oppression in which heterosexual couples are “forced” into the same context in which cruising began.⁷² One such place where this occurs is the “último vagón”, the last streetcar of Mexico City’s metro, an iconic cruising spot. In these spaces, cis heterosexual couples “quieren venir a conquistar los pocos sitios que [la] comunidad gay hemos tenido que crear” (31:49). In other words, the narrator critiques straight couples who participate in cruising because it is not a subversive or necessary act;

⁷² In a lot of ways, I think this can be likened to the fantasy of oppression that is common in things like dark tourism and other kinds of activities that allow people in positions of power to temporarily exist in oppressive situations for no other reason than to satisfy their own morbid fascination.

on the contrary, it is an oppressive one that appropriates and then attempts to reiterate the practice in heteronormative terms. One example of this was a controversy with a straight woman OnlyFans creator who filmed a video in front of non-consenting passengers in Mexico City's metro, which resulted in further demonization of cruising practices by gay men.

But as Leodan says near the end of his segment, “está chidísimo que estemos orillados y en la periferia porque... te da la posibilidad de experimentar, de mandar a la chingada muchas cosas que son socialmente aceptables... es como una especie de vanguardia artística” (32:07). It is precisely this framing of the potentiality of queerness that José Esteban Muñoz calls the “anticipatory illumination of the utopian” in *Cruising Utopia*. Through this portion of the podcast episode, it becomes clear how cruising as a practice has the potential to elicit critiques of hegemonic uses and control of space and sexuality. Leodan's critical reflections while actively being engaged in sexual encounters takes many of the ideas from the realm of Queer Theory and puts it into queer praxis.

Becoming Alanís

After the end of the previous fragment, a shift between stories is indicated by the rise of the music soundtrack, followed by approaching footsteps, the opening of a bathroom stall door, dripping sounds, and finally a flush. This particular moment in the episode gives the impression of the confessional, as one narrator leaves and the other arrives, with the full visual anonymity that the podcast medium provides (very much like the bathroom stall-turned-confession-booth). With the flush sounds distorted by the characteristic *CUIR* audio mixing, the sound transitions us to the final story, written by Elisa Ayala and recorded by

Dante Ureta, which centers on the story of a trans woman named Alanís. The narrative explores Alanís' fears and frustrations as she does not feel ready to begin using the women's restroom. For Alanís, the relationship that she has with the bathroom becomes an allegory for her journey of becoming. Alanís begins by stating

ya tomé conciencia de que soy una mujer: soy Alanís, pero, obviamente, aún no puedo entrar al baño de chicas porque mi apariencia aún no es de chica... estaba en mi transición interna y estaba trabajando más mi situación, mis constructos internos. Por fuera, no estaba haciendo mucho cambio (36:15-36:40)

Of this first part of her narrative, the word that stands out the most is “obviamente” because it implies a naturalized association between gender expression (through appearance) and belonging, while at the same time highlighting transitioning as a process that occurs in multiple stages over a period of time.

This first part of the narrative also provides valuable insight into the process of transitioning, which commonly happens at two levels: internally and externally. Here it is necessary to pause and unpack some of the discourse surrounding transitioning and particularly the aspirations of passing. As mentioned in a previous chapter, *passing* is the act of not being recognized (“clocked”) as a gender dissident person, in this case a trans person. In trans discourse, it has been pointed out that the aspirations of passing can be problematic in the way that they reinforce gendered stereotypes and for centering passing individuals as authentic embodiments of gender.⁷³ I argue that it would be erroneous to write off Alanís' story simply because of her desire to embody a more passing, feminine

⁷³ At the same time, passing individuals are not free from violence, as they are typically on the receiving end of violence for being “deceptive” in their gender (Billard). Ultimately, there is no winning for trans folks.

gender expression. Instead, her story gives valuable insight into the process of transitioning and the changing relationship with spaces like the bathroom that such a process implies.

The incongruencies with Alanís' gender expression and gender identity created within her many feelings of frustration and discomfort. She describes this when she reflects on her time at university, explaining that

Tengo muy bien, muy marcadas las imágenes en la universidad, que tenía que entrar al baño de hombres, porque yo no me animaba todavía al de las chicas, y era la sensación de muy extraña, porque, aunque ya iba empezándome a irme aquí de repente con el labial o de repente con el tintero de ojos, pero aun así me pareciera bastante, bastante masculina, y sí me generaba cierta frustración. (36:45-37:10)

While Alanís reflects on these feelings of frustration, an electric keyboard plays sporadically throughout the segment. Borrowing the term from music theory, we can describe the keyboard sounds as dissonant because of the lack of harmony between the notes themselves and the unequal intervals in which they are played. More generally, we can say that there is a feeling of discordance between the notes, which creates a sonic effect of clashing or disagreement, reaffirming the message of frustration and unbelonging expressed by Alanís.

As the narrator shifts to speaking about a specific instance of needing to go pee while at the university, a classmate encourages Alanís to use the women's restroom. As Alanís leaves the classroom, the same discordant notes continue to play, but this time the music builds, slowly becoming a more harmonious melody with the addition of percussion instruments that create cohesion. In this sense, the music reflects Alanís' growing confidence to use the women's restroom but, as she describes in detail the spatial configuration of the university, she points out the gardens where there had been "chicas y

chicos ahí cotorreando” (37:45). As soon as the group turns to see Alanís coming down the stairs, the music abruptly stops, indicating the total abandonment of the confidence that she had just moments ago. In her words, “fue así de no, no, no, no, no, no, no me atrevo... había varias personas y pues me miran porque obviamente... Nosotras, las personas trans que captamos miradas, eso es inevitable” (37:45-37:58). This incident shows how effective gender-bathroom ideology can be in controlling people through the fear of surveillance.

For Alanís, the bathroom is not the only struggle; since she goes to the gym before going to the university or to work, she must shower in the locker rooms. In that space, she says that you feel “más vulnerabilidad” because of the way that “tu cuerpo que está ahí más presente sin tanta ropa” (39:15). The use of the word “presente” is particularly important first because of the way that it highlights the presence, or existence, of her trans body. I see this as being intrinsically related to the idea of not only seeing, as in the optical perception of her, but also in the witnessing of her existence, as in the Spanish verb *presenciar*. The second important connection here is the way that we can think of presentness in its connection to mindfulness; by being in a situation in which clothing does not provide an extra layer of protection, Alanís is pushed into a state of hyperawareness of her own body. The body, when naked, requires being acknowledged.⁷⁴

When Alanís begins to slowly incorporate more and more feminine clothing into her daily wardrobe, her journey continues with what her therapist calls a “prueba de vida”

⁷⁴ For Alanís, this acknowledgement comes in the form of a reflection on her corporeality and the current out-of-placeness that she would have in the women’s locker room with just her earrings and “peluquita,” as she says.

(41:30). The narrator explains that this is an important stage in the process of transitioning in which one begins to present more consistently as their gender (i.e. dressing femininely full-time). As part of this stage, her first challenge is using the women's restroom. It is in this moment that Alanís describes a major breakthrough that she has with the therapist; she says “ya te vas a hablar como Alanís, te vas en todo momento, te vas a expresar de ella en todo momento, aunque los otros se expresen, se expresen de ti, de él, ya depende de ellos... pero ya tú vas a adueñarte de tu espacio, ¿no?” (42:30-42:45). This idea of owning space is particularly poignant as it insists on a certain sense of belonging in a way that inhabiting or occupying space does not. It also creates parallels between space and identity in the sense that Alanís' identity as a woman is not periodically or temporarily “occupied,” but rather that she has the agency of owning her identity as a woman.

The turning point comes when Alanís has to use the bathroom at the university, but rather than going alone, she goes with a friend. The two head to the bathroom together and:

Cuando entramos ella va delante de mí, pero bien linda, porque así como que pues ella muy natural, ¿no? O sea, como todas las mujeres, vamos a acompañadas al baño en la mayoría de los casos. Y estaba la intendente una señora y recuerdo que ella estaba con el trapeador y me mira, pues me dice “es el baño de chicas”. Y mi amiga que iba adelante, le dice, “sí, por eso” y ya como que agarró el rollo, la señora, la Doñita fue como que ah okay, pero me gustó porque ella afianzó, ella fue como que sí por eso. Ya fue como que la que me ayudó a impulsarme. Mi amiga se da media vuelta, gira y me mira y me dice “Esto es tuyo. Aprópiate.” (43:41-44:27)

As the narrator says this final phrase, the music—a stereotypical angelic sound—heavily-handedly suggests a kind of transcendence now that Alanís has used the women's restroom. Though this scene is touching in the way that it shows a deep sense of sisterhood between

Alanís and her friend,⁷⁵ I am skeptical of the idea of a cis woman needing to give a trans woman permission to make the space hers, an idea that Alanís also expresses in the conversation with her therapist who likewise gives her “permission” to fully embody her existence as Alanís.

Regardless of this critique, as Alanís says, the experience marks an important threshold in her transition (45:24). As her part of the episode comes to an end, Alanís recounts an experience that she had while going out to a bar with her friends. After having a few beers, she goes to the bathroom and is met by walls that “estaba lleno de mensajes, lleno de grafitis, lleno de textos, dibujitos, corazones, árboles y todos con mensajes muy constructivos y positivos para nosotras. O había mensajes de unidad, de... No estás sola” (47:48-48:00). This experience in the bathroom creates a full circle moment: whereas the bathroom before caused Alanís much anxiety and frustration, her story ends with being embraced by messages of unity and sisterhood in the bar’s restroom. What’s more, it is through this positive reorientation to the bath space that Alanís embraces herself fully as a trans woman.

Conclusion

As I finish this chapter, I have noticed a commonality in the stories told in this episode of *CUIR: Historias disidentes* that I am ashamed to admit that I did not notice on my first time listening to it. Not only do these narratives come from the bathroom, they all also specifically have connections to a school setting. From Jessica and Lilia’s lovemaking

⁷⁵ Alternatively, this can be read as a prime example of the kind of socialization in bathroom space that differentiates women (social bathroom experience) and men (solitary bathroom experience) (Molotch 7).

in the locker room showers to Leodan's oral sex sounds at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras to Alanís finding courage to be herself in the university bathroom stall, I am left with the question: what does this say about the dynamics of education, knowledge production, bath space and questions of gender and sexuality?

In some ways, this reaffirms an inkling that I have had for a while now: some of the most interesting and impactful cultural critique can be found in the places where we least suspect it. Whether it be the erotic reclamation of a space that is synonymous with militant sanitization for people with vulvas, critical reflection on and the engaging in marginalized practices of public sexuality, or the subversion of trans bathroom narratives as fatalistically tragic, this episode of *CUIR: Historias disidentes* shows that other ways of producing knowledge and other ways of being queer in contemporary Mexico are possible. Through the use of effective and creative sound design, *CUIR* invites a sonic affective occupation of the bathroom.

Conclusion

As I finish using the restroom, I approach the sink. My reflection looks back at me as I scrub away at my hands. “Wash your hands on the way out.” It is a phrase so ubiquitous to daily public life, but I cannot clearly recall the last time I actually paid close attention to the signs that remind us to wash our hands before we leave the restroom; instead my mind wanders to anything else: what to have for lunch, the homework I need to grade, the next book I want to start. Yet it is an all-important step not only in the individual practice of using bathrooms, but also in the greater context of how bathrooms are seen socially as necessarily hygienic spaces. It is one of the last things that we do before we say goodbye to bath space. In a way, this conclusion is like that sign; it is a final call to attention before mentally leaving critical baño studies as I have presented it here.

The bathroom is everywhere. As a space it serves its function when we need it, but once our business is done, we are very quick to forget about it. Between our trips to the restroom, it sits there, almost scheming, as the ideologies that govern its use and users not-so-silently and not-so-invisibly exercise its power over us. Precisely because we do not want to think about it—much less talk about it—that power remains critically unchecked, only becoming visible when that violence manifests itself in spectacular ways (see the story of Laura Glover in the introduction, for example). As we experience the current hemispheric shift towards conservatism, it is paramount to name these violent structures of power and how the abuse of them is used as ammunition against some of the most vulnerable groups in our society.

This has been the principal aim of this dissertation. In these pages, I have sought to bring critical attention to bath space and how queer subjects affectively occupy it. *Epistemologies of the Baño* started as a search for pleasurable narratives, ones that, by centering the *goce* of being queer, resist the dominant strain of trauma, memory, and post-memory that is prevalent in Spanish departments in the United States. This is especially true of the (little) queer representation that I encountered as an undergraduate, with many episodes of violence and pain: queerness and the *Guerra sucia* in *El beso de la mujer araña*; gay panic and transfeminicide in *El lugar sin límites*; and the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS as told by US-Latinx cultural production, to name a few. With so much space (figurative and literal) dedicated to the negative aspects of queerness, I could not help but ask: where was the joy? Where was the pleasure?

These questions guided me into my postgraduate program, and thankfully so; being alert to moments of pleasure, I read Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* not as a story entirely dominated by tragedy—though, admittedly it is tragic—but as a novella with brief glimpses into the radical possibility of imagining a different kind of queerness, a queerness concreted situated in the Mexican context that foregrounded experiences (and spaces) of pleasure as being fundamental to the story. Not surprisingly, one of these representations was the unnamed narrator's frequent trips to the bathhouse, setting me on a journey of critical inquiry into one of the most recurrent, paradoxical spaces in contemporary queer Mexican narrative.

In reality, the aim of *Epistemologies of the Baño* has been twofold: first, I set out to make sense of the seemingly conflicting uses of bath space as it is simultaneously

provokes disgust and arousal, portrays violence and pleasure, and represents both hegemonic ordering of gendered bodies through spatial design and the opportunity to radically imagine different modes of being and being in space. Second, and perhaps more ambitious, I sought to establish critical baño studies as a way of culturally situating this kind of critique in a distinctly Mexican context, as the bulk of the existing scholarship on bathrooms has been produced in the anglophone world and is firmly rooted in the Social Sciences. The scholarship that does explore bath space in the Humanities, generally speaking, has yet to turn an eye towards Latin America. As for the scholastic production from and about Latin America, it is few and far between, but what does exist is more than noteworthy; my goal with Critical Baño Studies, then, is to invite more critical attention to a space that we all engage with yet seem very eager to ignore.

Methodologically, this happens in three main ways. I first turned towards studies of space and place to begin to make sense of the physical construction of bath space and how those spaces gain meaning in sociocultural contexts. In this exploration of space and place, I engaged with an array of thinkers from the foundational work of Henri Lefebvre to the sociological approaches to space and place afforded by Marc Augé and Pierre Bourdieu. With this base of spatial studies, I was able to move towards the philosophical, briefly passing by Maurice Merleau-Ponty before arriving at what would become one of the theoretical cruxes of *Epistemologies*: the work of Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed affirms that “Orientation shapes not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” (3). It is not much of an exaggeration to say that

Ahmed's conceptualization of orientations is one of the two main intellectual influences that has orientated and shaped not only this project, but the trajectory of my scholarly journey as well.

What studies of space and place tell us is that all space is constructed materially, politically, and ideologically. It asks us to critically examine space, especially those spaces that have been naturalized as if they always existed in the same way. This is particularly true of bath space; given the great lengths we go to as a society to repress what goes on in the bathroom by not thinking about it—and much less speaking about it—the forces responsible for its construction and governance as a semi-public space commonly remain unchecked. We must not forget what Harvey Molotch tells us: “we have in the toilet an instrument and an institution that both reflects how people and societies operate and also reinforces the existing pattern” of social organization (4).

The second pillar of this project is queer theory. Since its conception by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990, the field has only continued to grow in new and exciting ways. Notably influential to this project is the development of Queer of Color Critique which has expanded greatly since its original formulation in the context of Black America. Queer of Color Critique responds to the need for

a study of racial formations that will not oblige heteropatriarchy, an analysis of sexuality not severed from and material relations, an interrogation of African American culture that keeps company with other racial formations, and an American studies not beguiled by the United States. (Ferguson 29)

Ferguson goes on to cite Angela Davis, insisting that Queer of Color Critique is a positive step towards what Davis calls “unlikely and unprecedented coalitions” (29). The theoretical and conceptual archive that I have constructed in an attempt to intellectual ground critical

baño studies in both queer theory and queer of color critique is one such coalition. By bringing together the work of a host of thinkers from across many disciplines, I have laid the groundwork which I will only continue to refine and rearticulate.

This scholarly archive has been largely orientated by the work of Sara Ahmed, whose words in *Queer Phenomenology* have given direction in what otherwise would be a disorienting project. With Ahmed, I have found a guide through questions of affect, the body, the body in space, and of space itself; I continuously find myself coming back to Ahmed affirmation that

The work of inhabitation involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into space that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space. If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails. Or we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others. (11)

At its core, this project is a way of fighting for that room that has been denied to queer and trans bodies in the context of Mexican cultural production.

The last major pillar of *Epistemologies of the Baño* falls under what can only be called cruising as theory and methodology, which in a way, is the love child of space studies and queer theory. In this field falls my engagement with pleasure narratives and particularly to the distinction of pleasure and jouissance à la Roland Barthes. I have been identifying in contemporary queer Mexican cultural production not only an enjoyment found as an audience consuming these texts, but also in the very act of creating them; as Anal Magazine says about itself, “disfruten esta revista que está hecha para leerse a una sola mano, puesto que la otra seguramente la tendrán ocupada” (6). But pleasure alone does not provide all the answers that I seek; for that reason, I have turned to cruising both as a methodology

and also as a theoretical framework through my engagement with José Esteban Muñoz. For the methodological side, cruising as a sexual practice is predicated on understanding its language; it requires a certain recognition of gestures, norms, and spatial indications that point towards it. In this sense, *Epistemologies of the Baño* has been a task of following these trails to find the answers to the questions that have guided this project—a kind of cruising bath space to find new queer epistemologies, if you will.

As for Muñoz, I have already spoken at some length about the profound impact that his work has had on my intellectual development. From *Dissidentifications* to *Cruising Utopia*—and to an extent *The Sense of Brown*—Muñoz’s sharp scholarly engagement with Latinx identity, performance, and sexualities has become a model for the kind of academic intervention that I wish to have, both in terms of being an intellectual exercise and in terms of shaping the future directions of the field of (queer) Mexican studies. More personally, Muñoz has inspired me to keep going; amidst the hellscape of the global events of the past decade, from COVID to genocide to political unrest, it has not been easy to see much purpose in writing about the bathroom. Yet, in those moments of doubt, I return to Muñoz’s insistence on hope as both “a critical affect and a methodology” (*Cruising Utopia*, 10th Anniversary Edition 4). “Hope as a critical methodology,” Muñoz writes, “can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (*Cruising Utopia*, 10th Anniversary Edition 4). The more pessimistic amongst us are quick to point out that hope always runs the risk of leading to disappointment; nonetheless, Muñoz shows us that hope is essential in overcoming the impasses that inform the disappointing present. This insistence on hope in the face of contemporary issues and with the looming possibility of

disappointment is also what keeps me moving forward. Writing these final words in *Epistemologies of the Baño* is, in a way, my own practice of glancing backwards to imagine a brighter future.

In the preceding chapters, I have shown this in various ways. First, in chapter 1, I examined Ana Clavel's novel *Cuerpo náufrago* with new light shining on the bath space. Whereas previous scholarship has focused on the potentially problematic process of identity formation that the protagonist, Antonia, experiences because of the moments of gender stereotypes and essentialism that she embodies in her newly masculine body. In the chapter, I show that the novel has much more to offer beyond the problematic aspects; with a critical approach to Antonia's obsession with urinals, the novel provides an interesting reflection on the little-considered erotic design and the erotic potential of the relationship between user and object. However, the most impactful contribution that this chapter has to the study of Clavel's novel is the focus that I provide on the bathhouse scene; through an application of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and *habitus clivé*, I show how Antonia's experience in the bathhouse and the fear of being found out as a trespasser in the homosocial space is mediated with the erotic tensions of nudity and the queer horizons that are made possible, but ultimately not explored, within the narrative. These approximations to both types of bath space (bathrooms with the urinals and the bathhouse), the novel's use of hybridity gains another level of understanding. Antonia, at the end of the novel embraces her identity as a *Mingitauro*, the chimera-esque figure that grants Antonia the liberty to avoid the binary choice of living as either a man or woman, but that a third, more authentic option exists for her.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the dissertation comes from chapter 2. In the larger cultural and academic landscape, the films *El Callejón de los Milagros* (1995) and *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (1985) occupy a significant position. *El Callejón* in particular has a wider global impact, capturing the attention of an international audience and launching the career of Salma Hayek. For its part, *Doña Herlinda* occupies a much smaller space internationally, but the film has had a much larger impact in Mexico, especially in queer contexts. Putting aside *El Callejón* because of the plentitude that has already been said about it, the scholarly attention given to *Doña Herlinda* is particularly interesting to me; scholars such as Vinodh Venkatesh, have discussed the contradictions of the queer relationship between Rodolfo and Ramón and the heteronormative force of the domestic space. This is to say that Doña Herlinda's house maintains the structure of domesticity that ultimately upholds the matriarch's heterosexual expectations for her son. However, within the film, the representation of the sauna has been insufficiently explored. In the chapter I argued for an understanding of the sauna as a refuge for the couple from Rodolfo's heterosexual relationship, transforming into the stage on which the tensions between the lovers are ultimately processed. But, as Venkatesh has shown, the film falls flat in the political potential that it has to imagine a radically queer future for Ramón and Rodolfo.

Precisely this lack of radical imagination is what fuels my analysis of post-2000 bathhouse film; beginning with *Cuatro lunas* (2014), I trace the use of the bathhouse in one of the four narratives present in the film: that of Joaquín and Gilberto. Despite *Cuatro lunas* being widely critiqued for lacking quality in the stories told within the film, Joaquín's parts of the films provide valuable insight into male sexuality and sexual behavior. Through

the perspective of porn studies, my reading of the film avoids the stereotypical analysis of Joaquín and Gilberto's relationship as being the story of the chichifo; instead, I shift the focus from the transactionality of sex work to the affective connection between the men that transcends their relationship as the (potentially) gay, older man seeks for sexual gratification with the hot, young, straight man. The formal visual analysis of the film through the lens of critical baño studies provides the tool by which this particular understanding of homosocial affective relationships can be understood in a larger context.

I continue this use of the bathhouse as a critical tool for formal film analysis in the newer, more aesthetic short film *Salón rojo* (2024). By turning towards the work of José Esteban Muñoz, I show how the bath space within the film answers to the moment of crisis within the film (being the COVID-19 crisis in this case). By establishing affective resonances between the COVID-19 pandemic and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, I argue that the film effectively utilizes stylized shots of bath space and bath space as part of the narrative that are characteristic of my conceptualization of bathhouse film as a genre.

Finally, in the last content chapter, I argue for a shift towards the aural as an important aspect of bath space. While sound is present in the filmic representations of bath space in chapter 2, it continues to take a backseat to visual, despite all efforts to insist in a haptic approach to the films. This, however, is not the case in the example of *CUIR: Historias disidentes*. As a podcast, the aural is given priority, thereby forcing the audience (listener) to engage with a sense that is often used as secondary to other senses. As I point out in the chapter, the masterful use of sound design and audio effects in the episode "Instrucciones para ir al baño" perfectly shows the potential that sound has in creating

specific affective orientations between the listener, bath space, and the narrative at hand. Told in three parts, the podcast episode takes us along as a lesbian couple discovers the erotic potential of the bathroom, a space that is hyper-sanitized for people with vulvas; to public restrooms as a gay man critically reflects on the practice of cruising; and as a trans woman finds the courage to tackle the restroom as a major milestone in her process of becoming herself. By applying a formal analysis of both the narratives being told as well as the sound design that accompanies them, I succeed in establishing the connection between the aural and the process of storytelling in the podcast. This is an important contribution to my conceptualization of critical baño studies in that it shows the importance of engaging multiple (or all) senses as we critically examine our relationship with bath space.

Other Desire Paths

Though this dissertation is finished, the research that it represents is far from being complete. In these pages I have reflected on bath space as a critical site of pleasure in contemporary queer Mexican narrative, but one aspect of this is glaringly missing. As I have defined it, bath space is an umbrella term that can be used to refer to any spatial configuration in which water, leisure, and hygiene come together. Put another way, my use of bath space symbolically extracts the “bath” in bathroom and bathhouse in order to neatly refer to both spaces. Yet originally there was another space—and another play on the verb to bathe—that importantly also fits within the theoretical analysis that I have done here. In the original dissertation plan, there was to be a chapter that represents a major shift in the spaces that I analyze, spaces outside of the urban sphere; this chapter would explore the

use of beaches and ports (and respective journeys to these locations) as another site of possibility. This is a trope that has been present in Mexican cultural production for a while, typically used as a way to compare the differences in lifestyles between the major urban areas (Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey) and the coastal regions.⁷⁶ Whereas the city is represented as suppressive with schedules and routines required of its inhabitants, a space that also imposes a sense of anonymity within the masses, the beach has always been a space of tranquility, of freedom, of discovery of oneself.⁷⁷ This can be seen for example in María Novaro's 1991 film *Danzón*, in which Julia, a telephone center employee, journeys to the port of Veracruz to find the man that she used to dance with. In the process, and importantly with the help of Suzie, a queer figure, Julia finds her independence as a woman. Bringing this idea into the context of queer cultural production in the 21st century, films such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and Ernesto Contreras' *Sueño en otro idioma* (2017) show the way that the coastal region and (journey to the) beach creates the possibility to explore and act upon homoerotic desires in a different way than in Mexico's urban centers. This is equally present in written text, such as the short stories of Fernando Yacamán's *El demonio que nos habita* and Fernanda Melchor's novel, *Temporada de huracanes*.⁷⁸ This would constitute a major addition to the book manuscript of this project.

⁷⁶ In his chapter "Locas, chichifos, mayates y machos calados: Historia y homosexualidad en el cine," Michael K. Schuessler highlights an interesting historical precedent for the characterization of the coast as being inherently queer, looking back to Bernal Díaz del Castillo who noted that those who lived on the coast or in warmer climates were sodomites (200).

⁷⁷ At the 2024 LASA congress, Ana Luengo referred to this kind of movement as an "epistemological journey," a term that I will also adopt in future projects that journey to the coastal regions.

⁷⁸ This imagined beach chapter will appear in the book manuscript version of this dissertation. It will be a fundamental contribution to the study of bath space and to Mexican studies writ large.

More immediately, though, my argument for Critical Baño Studies deserves further articulation. Taking much of what I have presented in these pages, and especially from the introduction, my next task will be to formulate a stand-alone piece to make the case for this particular approach to Mexican cultural studies. This is an important contribution to the field in the way that it dialogues with established scholarly conversations about space and identity, while bringing in the necessary critical attention to bath space in particular.

Looking even further into the future, there are still many recurrent spaces in contemporary queer Mexican narrative that deserve the kind of examination that I have done here. One such space was to be explored in another chapter that did not make it into *Epistemologies* that focuses on the metro in Mexico City as an emblematic space not only in the popular cultural imaginary, but also in the queer one. I argue that the metro in CDMX is also present as a symbol of the nation, perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that developments to the metro system has been a major talking point for the last couple of presidencies, above all in that of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. In this way, a queer reading of affective occupations in the metro system, which is commonly referred to as *el metreo* or simply referencing the *último vagón* (last car) or *cajita feliz* (happy car), permits a queering of the national imaginary as well. Moreover, this space, a constant, liminal one of motion, encapsulates the essence of cruising in the way that a non-place like the metro system is given meaning through its pleasure uses by men looking for sexual and/or erotic connections with other men. To this end, a novel like *De Balderas a Potrero* by Rogelio Ávalos Ortiz would be fundamental; likewise, Aldo Martínez Sandoval's play *Percusiones*

and Tavo Ruiz's short film *Línea 9* (2017) would undoubtedly form part of the corpus of this next space project.

Finally, the least developed idea turns toward the Northern part of Mexico, focusing on what I would call the desert(ed) space. Pulling inspiration from the typical perceived “lawlessness” of *charro* culture, this chapter would explore the desert as potential, permitting a self-discovery with a major focus on discovering pleasure. One key text in this chapter would be Omar Flores Sarabia's film *Peyote* (2013), which explores the relationship between two men as they venture into the desert to find and consume the psychedelic plant. A shift towards the North also naturally allows for a transnational approach, looking at the way that queer culture production “cruises”/ “cruces” the border(lands) as well. In this sense, a novel like Ángel Valenzuela's *Hacia las luces del norte* would be a central text.

I mention this deviation from my original dissertation plan not to highlight the “failures” of not following the plan, but rather to point out the important ways in which this project has developed over the last couple of years. By allowing myself to focus on a narrower vision of bath space, I have been able to delve deeper into the analysis of the objects of study included in each of the three chapters, as well as being able to better (and more deeply) theorize bath space itself. Equally important, these ideas have not died; rather, they represent a roadmap of future scholarly work. Though the future of academia hangs by a thread, threatening to disappear fully as we know it now, I cannot help to be hopeful in the future directions of this project and of my research as a whole. Following

the map I have made for myself, my orientation towards queer spatial studies in Mexican culture production is particularly exciting.

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