

**“A CENTURY IN THE BATHS”: ALLAN BÉRUBÉ, SPATIAL POLITICS
AND THE HISTORY OF GAY BATHHOUSES**

by

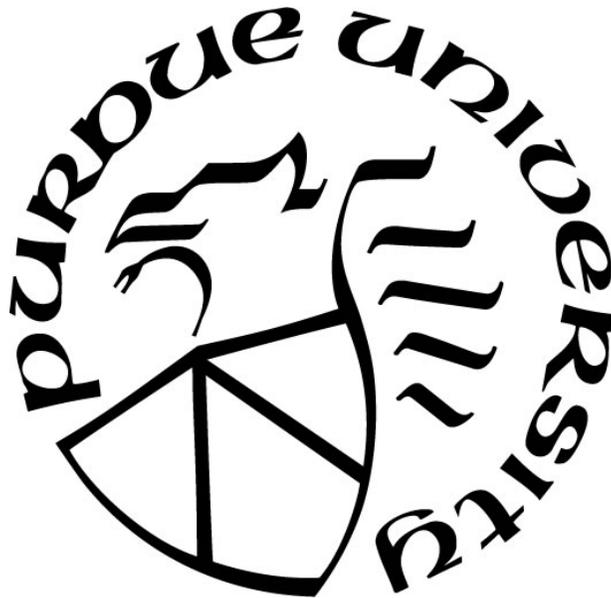
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy



American Studies Department, School of Interdisciplinary Studies

West Lafayette, Indiana

May 2019

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This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, June Ash Munt (4/6/1935-5/16/2018), whose enduring support, gentle prodding, and relentless grammar correction all helped bring this project to fruition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge debt of gratitude is owed to the members of my dissertation committee, Professor Marlo David (chair), Professor Sharra Vostral, Professor Laura Zanotti, and Professor Yvonne Pitts. Not only have your courses proven instrumental in developing my thinking relative to this project, but I remain ever grateful for the time and energy each of you devoted to reading and providing feedback. To Prof. David an especially enormous thank you is in order. Throughout this process, your trust, encouragement, and critique have empowered me—sometimes in ways that I could understand in the moment, but also in ways that I am still discovering. Thank you for believing in me, for letting me be creative even when I was not sure of my ideas, and for reining me back in when those ideas took me too far afield. It has truly been an honor to have you as my advisor and I look forward to calling you a mentor for years to come.

I am grateful to the funders and selection committees whose financial support made this research possible. The Chester E. Eisinger Research Award presented by the American Studies Program helped to fund my archival research in San Francisco, CA. A Bilsland Dissertation Fellowship awarded by the School of Interdisciplinary Studies supported me during the post-fieldwork writing phase. A PROMISE Grant from the College of Liberal Arts allowed me to present findings at a meeting of the American Men's Studies Association in Minneapolis, MN. Additionally, I also received support in the form of teaching assistantships in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program, as well as graduate assistantships in the Diversity Resource Office and the College of Veterinary Medicine's Office of Diversity Initiatives. All of these have eased the precarity of graduate study and directly contributed to the success of my project.

In much the same vein, I must acknowledge the very material contributions of Swen Marcus Ervin, secret hero of this project, who let me live with him for an entire month of fieldwork. While there is not space here to get into all of the ways that you have sustained, humbled, and emboldened me over nearly twenty years of friendship, let it suffice to say that your influence has been one of the most abiding and fecund aspects of my life. *Gratias maximas tibi ago.*

I am also grateful for the assistance I received from the staff of the Dr. John C. De Cecco Archives and Special Collections at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. Daniel Bao, Jeremy Prince, Gerard Koskovich and Patricia Delara all provided helpful information and suggestions. Special thanks to Joanna Black and Ramon Silvestre for their hospitality and for connecting me to the many of the sources analyzed in this dissertation. I also wish to thank Gayle Rubin, who bought me a latte and shared her memories of Allan Bérubé. After weeks of going through his notes, drafts, and letters, our conversation helped me connect with his memory and better understand his legacy.

A rowdy bunch of comrades have supported me over the course of this project. To Melissa Avery I give heartfelt praise and thanks for being my theoretical sparring partner, writing buddy, and cheerleader, as well as a generous and attentive reader. Our friendship remains a source of joy and inspiration for me; I am in your debt and eager to return the many favors you have paid me. To Eric Millard—roommate extraordinaire, confidant, local celebrity—my deepest gratitude for

sharing space with me and putting up with my tendency to commandeer every available surface in our house with piles of books, articles and drafts of this project. Your patience has not gone unnoticed. I would also like to thank Alex and Javin Rusco for gifting me a set of bathhouse art images, which prompted me to examine visual representations of these spaces even more broadly than I had planned. This very kind and thoughtful present has left an indelible mark on my work. Finally, to Christy Gibson, Joshua Perry and Jessica Rohr, thank you for graciously listening to me rant and rave about my work and for providing me with most fabulous distractions along the way.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their long-standing emotional (and occasionally financial) support over the course of my graduate career. To my parents, David and Yanice Munt and Petra and Mike Tungett, thank you for your love and acceptance throughout my life and for always encouraging me to push past my comfort zone and attempt the things that frighten me. To my sister and brother-in-law, Katherine and Zachary McDaniel, thank you for cheering me on and asking for updates along the way.

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ABSTRACT

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Institution: Purdue University

Degree Received: May 2019

Title: "A Century in the Baths": Allan Bérubé, Spatial Politics and the History of Gay Bathhouses.

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Building upon and extending a historical narrative composed by Allan Bérubé in 1984, this dissertation interrogates the relationship between physical space and sexual practice by engaging in a historiography of gay bathhouses and by comparing representations of these spaces in the past with contemporary narratives available online. An introduction and conclusion bracket three central chapters, each of which presents findings from a major component of the larger project: The first investigates Bérubé's sources, methods and underlying political philosophies. The second engages in a case-study of the Bulldog Baths (1979-1982), a popular but short-lived establishment in San Francisco, CA. The third presents findings from a content analysis of contemporary bathhouse websites. Throughout, attention is paid to the active role of physical spaces in sexual encounters taking place in bathhouse settings, as well as to the spatial politics of the urban settings in which these establishments have historically operated.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Sexual Territories and the Genealogy of the Bathhouse

In the fall of 1984, officials in San Francisco initiated a multi-year effort to shut down the city's gay bathhouses in response to the burgeoning HIV/AIDS crisis. Typically operated as private, men-only health clubs, the dozens of establishments affected by the closure order had only recently come into public consciousness. Alternatively referred to as "gay saunas," "the baths," or "the tubs," these spaces catered exclusively to men seeking sexual encounters with other men and offered both private rooms and open areas where sexual activity was permitted. Many people at the time, including several prominent LGBT rights advocates, saw the baths as reflective of the seedy, promiscuous side of urban gay life and, therefore, without redeeming cultural or social value. As the evidence mounted that AIDS was caused by a virus transmitted during sexual intercourse, these spaces came to be seen as playing a causal role in the crisis. The logic here was straightforward: if HIV/AIDS was transmitted through unprotected sex and gay bathhouses were spaces where large amounts of unprotected sex happened, then these establishments were at least partly to blame for encouraging the behavior that spread the disease. At the same time, newly formed community organizations, such as the Committee to Preserve our Sexual Liberties, opposed the bathhouse closure order and argued that such efforts were premature, sexually-repressive, and rooted in homophobia. They questioned the notion that bathhouses themselves had an effect on men's sexual decision-making and demanded that individual sexual liberties be protected. More than thirty years later, scholars and activists continue to question the role of bathhouses during the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis, as well as to investigate their utility as spaces in which to deploy public health interventions.

In this dissertation, I interrogate the relationship between physical space and sexual practice by engaging in a historiography of gay bathhouses and by comparing representations of these spaces in the past with contemporary narratives available online. Throughout this project, I have been most interested in understanding how gay bathhouses came to exist in the first place, how they changed over the course of the last century, and how those physical changes affected and/or responded to changes in the sexual practices taking place within them. As an

interdisciplinary inquiry, my project is informed by scholarship on gay bathhouses from a variety of fields, including history, sociology, anthropology, and public health. By synthesizing and extending existing scholarship, my hope is that this work adds to an evolving understanding of gay bathhouses in the United States from the late 19th century to the present day. Crucially, my project engages the research papers of Allan Bérubé, who attempted a history of gay bathhouses in the same year that San Francisco initiated attempts to close them.

1.2 Allan Bérubé

Born in 1946 in Springfield, Massachusetts, Allan Bérubé was a Franco-American historian, essayist, and activist who wrote widely on topics related to 20th-century gay and lesbian history.¹ Throughout his career, he often described himself as a community-based researcher or independent scholar. Although he earned a scholarship to study at the University of Chicago, he felt isolated by his working-class, Québécois background and eventually dropped out, just weeks before graduation in 1968. After participating in counter-cultural, anti-war organizing for five years and coming out as gay, he moved to San Francisco, where he became interested in gay and lesbian history. Over the next three decades, Bérubé wrote dozens of essays and one major text, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*—a social history published in 1990, which was based on extensive oral histories and archival research. Bérubé died in 2007, and an anthology of his essays, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, was published posthumously in 2011 and edited by John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman.

Among his best known scholarly works, the history of gay bathhouses that he produced was initially submitted as a declaration in the legal battle that began in 1984. In that document, Bérubé leveraged the history of gay bathhouses to argue in favor of public health interventions that might allow these establishments to play a role in containing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Re-published several times in the decades that followed, one of the most enduring aspects of this work is the way it divides that history into generational groupings, which I refer to below as Bérubé’s historical periodization of gay bathhouses. As discussed in greater length in the next chapter, he saw gay bathhouses, along with gay bars, as “sexual territories,” whose emergence at

the start of the twentieth century was tied to shifting attitudes about sexuality and which provided a place of refuge for gay men.

1.3 Spatial Politics

Throughout this dissertation, I take up Bérubé's history of gay bathhouses in order to examine his sources and methods, to provide greater detail on development of the baths, and to extend this history to the present day. Throughout, I weave key points from his work into my own research, often returning to a specific section in that text in order to contextualize his claims further. For the most part, I have found Bérubé's narrative to be well-organized and grounded in oral histories and archival research that provided detail and nuance relative to the operation of these establishments over the course of the last century. However, before turning to that history, I want to address three broad interventions that undergird this project: first, I seek to complicate the discursive power of "gay identity" as a means of understanding both the interior bathhouse environment and its relationship with its surroundings. Additionally, I call attention to the sense in which the bathhouse, throughout its history, has been an almost entirely urban phenomenon and is thus always already imbricated in the spatial politics of gender, race, and class. Finally, I emphasize the active role of physical spaces within the bathhouse with a particular focus on how they organize the sexual practices taking place.

1) *Gay bathhouses have a complicated relationship with the concept of gay identity.*

Written in 1984 and building on research collected over the preceding 10 years, Bérubé's history is very much a product of its time. To begin, his framing of bathhouses as "gay" spaces itself reflects an understanding of sexual identity that had been advanced by the white mainstream U.S. gay and lesbian movement since the late-1960s; one that tended to ignore issues related to race and class and to downplay those related to gender. In a similar fashion, Bérubé's history of the baths does not mention racial difference and none of the notes and draft versions that I reviewed point to any evidence that oral histories by queer men of color factored into his analysis of how bathhouses operated or why they were worth saving. Moreover, he does not address the ways in which white privilege or affluence may have contributed to the emergence and success of those establishments. This is not to say that race and class are absent from all of his writings, however.

Several years after the bathhouse closure crisis, in 2001, Bérubé wrote an essay titled, “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” in which he describes his efforts to examine his own white identity seriously.² Frustrated by the “so-called positive image of a generic gay community that is an upscale, mostly male, and mostly white consumer market,” his essay calls attention to the public relations decisions made by mainstream organizations and activists that have excluded queer people of color.

Such a strategy derives its power from an unexamined investment in whiteness and middle-class identification. As a result, its practitioners seemed not to take serious or even notice how their gay visibility successes at times exploited and reinforced a racialized class divide that continues to tear our nation apart, including our lesbian and gay communities.³

Looking back on his history of the bathhouses, it seems likely that Bérubé would have conceded the sense in which his narrative, too, was powered by an “unexamined investment in whiteness and middle-class identification” that allowed many of his mostly white and male activist contemporaries to connect with it.

As Elizabeth Armstrong has surmised, San Francisco’s gay and lesbian movement, like those in other parts of the country, relied heavily on identitarian logic, taking cues from the civil rights movement and, to a lesser extent, the women’s liberation movement, in their rhetoric and praxis. “Centered on the innovation of ‘coming out,’ gay identity organizations highlighted identity building, pride, and visibility...[and] defined their missions around the elaboration, protection, and cultivation of gay identity.”⁴ Writing in this milieu, Bérubé used his history to connect the baths to that process of cultivation, going so far as to claim that bathhouses, along with bars, were spaces in which that collective sense of identity was developed among gay men. Moreover, he read the City’s efforts to close these establishments as a misguided and ultimately homophobic examples of state intervention. However, as described in greater detail in the second chapter, Bérubé did later acknowledge that he was advised to use the language of gay identity by the political organizations with whom he was working at the time. While I believe this can be read as an effort to concede that his own view of sexual identity was more nuanced than it appears in his work, I have tried to maintain this tension throughout this project.

From their origins in the late-19th century to the present day, the establishments that Bérubé would come to name as “gay bathhouses” have been spaces in which men sought out sexual encounters with other men, regardless of how they identified their own sexualities. Although it may indeed be true that many gay-identified men—such as those Bérubé interviewed—recalled their own experiences in the baths of the early-20th century as positively contributing to their eventual self-identification as gay, there is not enough evidence to support a claim that all patrons felt this way. By resisting such a simplistic reading of sexual identity in this project, I call attention to the sense in which the baths have facilitated sexual contact among patrons with wide-ranging understandings of their own genders and sexualities. Moreover, insofar as I take up Jane Ward’s recent call for a renewed focus on sexual practices and a continued problematization of sexual categories, I seek to contribute to ongoing conversations within queer theory that question the assumptions embedded in static (and often quasi-essentialist) concepts like sexual orientation. In her work, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*, Ward operationalizes a re-thinking of heterosexual subjectivity not as the absence of homosexual desire, but as constituted “by an enduring investment in heterosexuality as natural, normal, and right and that disavows association with abnormal, or queer, sexual expressions.”⁵ Thus, in her reading of 20th-century sexual practices between men, for example, sexual encounters between straight-identified men can be understood not as signs of latent or closeted homosexuality, but rather as sexual interactions that are metabolized as inconsequential, playful, or even platonic. Exactly by resisting the conflation of sexual and romantic desire, Ward’s analysis reveals and troubles the discursive boundaries of sexual orientation. Taking a similar tact, I read sexual encounters in bathhouse settings as less a reflection of a shared, politicized notion of gay identity and more as impersonal expressions of erotic desire that permeate and exhaust popular understandings of sexual categories. Although closely associated with the identitarian aims of the gay and lesbian liberation movement during their so-called “Golden Era” in the late 1970s and during the early years of the HIV crisis, I argue that the baths were, by and large, far less connected to a collective sense of gay identity at other points in their history.

2) *The history of gay bathhouses is also inextricably linked to the racial and class histories of the city.* Appearing first in large cities in Europe and coastal North America, gay bathhouses emerged in the urban built environments of the late-19th century Western metropolis.

As Bérubé would come to argue, the baths tended thus to reflect and respond to shifts in social and political attitudes toward sexuality that have characterized 20th-century urban histories. After enjoying relatively relaxed sexual mores in the first third of the century, these establishments were subjected to periodic raids, entrapment schemes and other attempts at state intervention in the post-war decades. However, following the emergence of the gay and lesbian liberation movement and the rise of gay neighborhoods, the baths would come to be seen as cornerstones or landmarks of white, middle-class gay space within the larger urban cartography. As discussed in the following two chapters, such a spatial paradigm organized gay and lesbian enclaves alongside ethnic and racial neighborhoods and contributed to the tendency to analogize the struggles of the gay community with the marginalization of ethnic or racial groups.

To be clear, racialized understandings of urban space certainly pre-date the rise of gay neighborhoods in the 1970s and have operated on the baths throughout their existence. From the hiring of Turkish masseurs in the Victorian-era steam and vapor baths to Jim Crow segregation laws affecting the baths of the early 20th century to the economic impacts of white flight and gentrification in the post-war years, the location of bathhouses in urban centers calls for greater attention to themes of spatial inequality and justice. In this sense, I seek to build on the contributions of the critical geographer Edward Soja, who has championed the notion of a dialectical relationship between the social and spatial dimensions of everyday life in urban environments. “In this notion of a *socio-spatial dialectic*, as I called it some time ago, the spatiality of whatever subject you are looking at is viewed as shaping social relations and societal development just as much as social processes configure and give meaning to the human geographies or spatialities in which we live.”⁶ This recursive or dialectical relationship between the materiality of the urban landscape and the discursive power of social relations has particular import for gay bathhouses.

While individual establishments may have varied in their policies and attitudes toward racial or class inclusion, they remain imbricated in a system of urban spatial politics that privileges white men with disposable incomes as the demographic group with the most mobility. Whether visiting a local establishment, planning special trips to bathhouses in other places, or simply taking advantage of business trips to cities in which they operate, professional white

men's patronage of the baths reflects this spatial privilege. In contrast to Bérubé's emphasis on the democratizing effects of wearing only towels within the bathhouse, I have attempted to highlight the ways racial and class identities might have appeared at various times.

3) *The physical spaces within gay bathhouses actively contribute to the communicative practices through which sexual encounters are organized in the baths.* In this project, I describe a mostly non-verbal communicative schema that patrons use to signal desire for, as well as to initiate, negotiate, and terminate, sexual contact. (While some talking does occur in bathhouse environments, it tends to be restricted to private rooms and less-sexualized spaces such as lounges. Otherwise, talking is largely discouraged.) Thus, in hallways, steam rooms, saunas, and so-called fantasy environments, patrons use strategic eye-contact, posture, position in the room, and gentle touching to signal their desire for sexual encounters, which often occur in those same spaces. In these environments, I argue, the physical spaces themselves are active, agentic components of the sexual interactions taking place within them. As discussed in greater depth in the fourth chapter, for example, contemporary owners and operators of bathhouses often provide highly-designed physical spaces for sex, which spatially organize patrons according to their anticipated sexual roles.

Of these interventions, calling attention to the role of the physical spaces themselves presents the most tension when read against Bérubé's historical narrative. Perhaps because the legal question at the center of the bathhouse closure debate had so much to do with the City's regulatory power over commercial sexual establishments, his telling of bathhouse history obfuscates the mechanics of their enterprise. After all, arguing that the space itself contributed to how sex occurred might have bolstered claims that they ought to be shut down rather than elucidating their value as queer cultural institutions. That said, to the extent that this project interfaces with public health scholarship on the baths, the active role of physical space remains a major aspect of their operation. Only by understanding how sex occurs can successful public health efforts address the needs of bathhouse patrons.

1.4 Methods

This dissertation project began with a different central question than what is explored here. In earlier plans, I sought to ask how HIV impacted the urban development trajectory of San Francisco by lining up the timeline of the crisis with the City's history of development, redevelopment, and gentrification, and then exploring connection points between the two. As I began that work, the bathhouses stood out to me as perhaps the clearest example of a spatial impact of the virus; as establishments that were there before the crisis, but which went away in its wake. In deciding to shift my attention toward the baths specifically, I began by assessing available resources. In addition to Bérubé's history, a handful of other sources contained helpful background information around which to structure my research questions. An article by Christopher Disman on the bathhouse closure crisis in San Francisco, for example, provided a detailed account of the 1984 debates.⁷ A volume edited by William J. Woods and Diane Binson addressed a variety of public health interventions attempted in the baths following the HIV/AIDS crisis and attempted to theorize the bathhouse environment according to a framework developed by the social psychologist Rudolf Moos.⁸ Finally, ethnographic accounts of bathhouse environments written by Vincenzo Bavaro, Joseph Styles, Richard Tewksbury, Martin S. Weinberg and Colin Williams all provided a unique window into the observed sexual practices at various points in time.⁹ Although each ethnographer examined different bathhouses at different points in time, their accounts corroborated the existence of the non-verbal communicative schema described in the previous section. Noting this similarity, I began to ask how the physical spaces within bathhouses might be contributing to the sexual practices taking place within them.

From their origin in the late-19th century to the present day, bathhouses have undergone structural and organizational changes that have tended to reflect shifting attitudes about sex between men. In order to dig through this history for information about the relationship between physical space and sexual practice, I selected a mixed-methods approach to the research. First, I conducted two archival research trips to the Dr. John P. De Cecco Archives & Special Collections at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. On my first trip (June 2017), in addition to reviewing general bathhouse ephemera, I examined materials in the Bérubé Papers that related to his research on bathhouses, including early drafts, research notes, personal correspondence and other ephemera such as his membership cards for a number of bathhouses in

the city. Additionally, Bérubé created a multi-folder bathhouse resource packet, which contained an enormous amount of local and national press commentary, as well as publications and flyers created by local organizations. In a follow-up trip (November 2018), I examined business records and related ephemera that were donated by the former owners of the *Bulldog Baths* (1978-1982), a popular, though short-lived bathhouse in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood.

A second major research component was comprised of visual and textual analysis of artwork that represented, documented, or promoted bathhouses. Working chronologically, this included fine art by John Lawrence Giles, John Singer Sargent, George Bellows, Charles Demuth, Frank Melleno, and M. Brooks Jones, who used various media to convey the bathhouse visually. Another key focus here is the Molly Hogan Reel, a two-part unedited documentary reel filmed in the *Bulldog Baths* two years after it closed, which features a tour of the space and an interview with a former owner. Additionally, I analyzed a wide variety of marketing ephemera produced by bathhouses in San Francisco during the 1970s and 1980s, including flyers, advertisements, coupons, calendars, and membership cards. Here I examined both textual and visual elements of these materials, looking for information they might provide about the practices and events that took place within bathhouses during this era. Finally, in order to connect historical information to the present-day industry, I conducted a content analysis of websites produced by bathhouses operating in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Combining information from these websites with other digital marketing vehicles, I was able to address the number and geographical distribution of bathhouses operating today, as well as their pricing structures, common features, and key differences, such as the availability of private rooms or variations in the approach these facilities take to promoting safer-sex behaviors.

Taken together, this research agenda has yielded much more than can be reasonably included in this document. Therefore, in selecting what to discuss, I have attempted to remain as close as possible to the following question: what is the relationship between physical space and sexual practice in gay bathhouses throughout their development? In each of the chapters that follow, I take up this question in a different context, but the fundamental inquiry remains relatively constant. Below, I review and expand upon Bérubé's historical periodization, as a way

of introducing the reader to this history and calling attention to shifts in the physical space-sexual practice dynamic. Charting the development of gay bathhouses from the mid-19th century forward, the following sections below relate to *ordinary bathhouses* (c. 1850s-1890s), *favorite spots* (c. 1890s-1920s), *early gay bathhouses* (c. 1900s-1940s), *modern gay bathhouses* (c. 1950s-1980s), and, finally, *contemporary gay bathhouses* (1990s-2010s). In what follows, I add the most context to the former three categories in an effort to buttress the claims made by Bérubé about these spaces. Less supplemental information is provided for the latter two categories, which receive more attention in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation.

1.5 *Ordinary Bathhouses* (c. 1850s-1890s)

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, public baths were opened in major cities across Western Europe. Featuring pools and shower facilities, these baths reflected a post-Enlightenment theory of the relationship between disease and hygiene, and their construction was often seen as part of a larger public health effort.¹⁰ Particularly as colonial-era metropolises grew, these baths were employed to educate new arrivals on personal hygiene and prevent the spread of disease in overcrowded areas. However, beginning in the early-19th century, entrepreneurs saw another opportunity. By making use of developments in steam technology, they could create smaller, more private spaces known as steam or vapor baths, which would cater primarily (but not exclusively) to men. As built environments in the urban landscape, many of these establishments were opulent and majestic. Like the baths of the Roman Empire some two-thousand years prior, the buildings themselves asserted an imperial cultural dominance; offering a designed space that was both a product of and an escape from the urban quotidian surrounding it.

Publicly, the value of these establishments was often described as medical and some health experts at the time corroborated the claims that vigorous sweating, massage and washing were beneficial.¹¹ Collectively referred to as “hydropathy,” these treatments fell into the larger category of homeopathy, itself a 19th-century alternative to drug-based healthcare. According to

Teresa Breathnach, European interest in vapor baths can be traced to the work of an Austrian doctor named Vincent Priessnitz.

His cure was based on the belief that foreign matter entering the body's system caused illness. The combination of steam baths to encourage perspiration, cold water baths to close the pores, and sometimes the use of wet bandages and shampooing or massage was believed to expel the poison from the body thereby leaving the patient both well and rested.¹²

Although many such establishments focused their services on the wealthy and the growing middle class, some advocates of baths worked to make them available to the poor. For example, Peter Kandela describes a bathhouse in Ireland that, at the end of the week, would open its doors to “workmen, labourers, and afterwards their wives and children,” and even offered special sessions for farm animals.¹³ However, even when these perceived health benefits were made available to poor people, the overall promotion of the baths fell in line with bourgeois notions of personal improvement and societal progress which attended the rise of the leisure class in the Victorian era. In Ireland, for example,

The bath was regarded as a tool for the moral and physical advancement of society and was seen to play a part in the civilization of the ‘masses,’ and in turn the maintenance of the status quo. This was not simply about the shaping of their own class culture, but was also about the control of others, an assertion of middle-class cultural dominance.¹⁴

Beyond the role they played as an emergent leisure activity for well-to-do men, bathhouses also served to remind those *not* in the leisure class of their place in the Victorian class structure.

In addition to their materialization of class dominance, bathhouses during this time period also appropriated and romanticized bathing practices from Turkish and Russian culture. By the 19th century, the Turkish *hammam* was common throughout the Ottoman Empire, although its origins as a cultural practice date back several centuries earlier. For example, in Figure 1—a painting by the 15th century Persian artist Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād—the *hammam* is depicted as an ornately decorated, all-male space made up of separate chambers.¹⁵



Figure 1 Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād, *Harun al-Rashid in the Bath* (1494)

Differences in the heat of those chambers are suggested by the varying amounts of clothing. To the left of the entrance is a cooler room where figures dress and undress, while figures in the chamber on the far left wear only towels wrapped around their waists. Moreover, the pair of figures in the upper left of the image depict what would later become a key fixture in the Victorian interpretation of the *hammam*: a vigorous massage. European travelers to the bathhouses of the Ottoman Empire were particularly taken with the effects of the massage and

believed it compounded the benefits of steam-bathing generally. David Urquart, a prominent advocate of the *hammam* in London, described of his own massage experience: “The body has come forth shining like alabaster, fragrant as the cistus, sleek as satin and soft as velvet...”¹⁶ In the context of the painting, the figure receiving the massage is Harun al-Rashid, an 8th-century caliph who ruled during the Islamic Golden Age. His presence as the recipient of the massage thus emphasizes the class dynamic that European travelers such as Urquart sought to emulate.

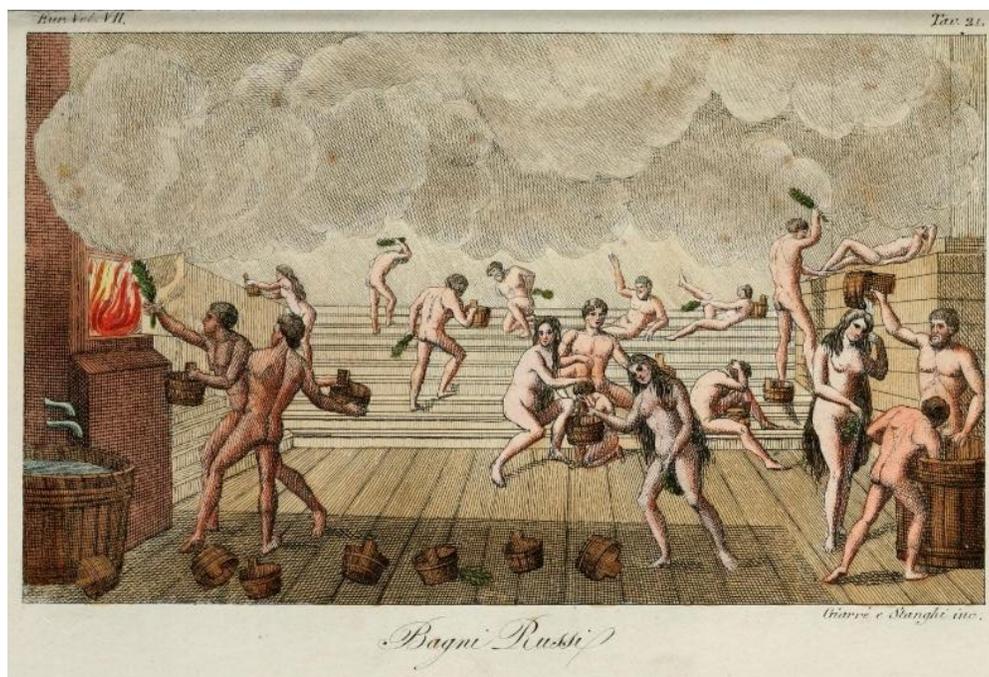


Figure 2 Giarre and Stanghi, *Bagni Russi* [Russian Baths] (c. 1831)

By contrast, the Russian *banya* was often a more intimate, family affair. Typically smaller than its Turkish counterpart, a traditional Russian bathhouse may have had a small foyer or washing room, but the warmth was typically contained to one central room. Such a dynamic can be seen in Figure 2; a copperplate engraving included in an 1831 cultural encyclopedia.¹⁷ Beginning on the far left, the fire of a woodstove is controlled by two figures holding water buckets, while the excess smoke drifts up and away from the scene. Throughout the rest of the image, men, women and children gather together, fully nude. In addition to rinsing themselves with water, the figures use birch twigs to massage themselves and each other, which was believed to increase circulation.

Taking design inspiration from the Turkish *hammam* and Russian *banya*, Victorian-era bathhouses combined the latest heating technology, opulent interior design features, and a staff of attendants to create an exotic oasis in the bustle of the 19th-century metropolis. As John Potvin describes in his review of London's Jermyn Street Hammam, providing a "total sensory experience" was often seen as the goal of such establishments.¹⁸

Boundaries were quickly established between outside and inside, between cleanliness and dirtiness, and between the clothing of the urban bourgeoisie and the bathing towels, which in their sartorial simplicity reorient the bathers back to a primordial, simpler, and essential self.¹⁹

In a similar style, a lithograph by John Lawrence Giles circa 1877 (not pictured) emphasizes the architectural grandeur of steam and vapor baths in the United States. The image depicts New York's Russian Baths on Lafayette Place, which were founded in the mid-1850s by Dr. Edward Guttman, a physician who had immigrated from Germany.²⁰ Inspired by the "strength and vigor" of Russian troops he had come across in Europe, and attributing their vitality to the *banya*, Guttman advocated steam bathing "as a means of rechanneling one's vital energy."²¹ In his depiction of the space, Giles highlights the interior architectural features. Pools, showers and reclining benches are arranged symmetrically under an ornately decorated ceiling and men are seen partaking in the rituals of the bath throughout. At the center of the image, another chamber is barely visible, further emphasizing the enormity of the building.

Particularly in the case of Turkish-style bathhouses, patrons were guided by attendants through the various chambers as they partook in a ritualized process of herbal skin treatments, massage, exfoliation, and washing. These attendants and masseurs were typically Turkish themselves and their presence thus echoed the Orientalist design of the space. As Potvin surmises, "racialized labour became the acceptable boundary which make same-sex touching and corporal proximity liveable and amenable."²² Patrons could then soak at their leisure in the pools, sample Turkish coffees, desserts and tobacco, or bond casually with other patrons. "At once non-verbal, somatic, and embedded in the rules of propriety, the hidden language of the bathing ritual occasioned an initiation and denoted how specialized and removed the inner sanctum of the Turkish bath was from the day-to-day experiences of bourgeois urban London."²³ In this way, as a place apart from everyday life, the baths provided an opportunity for men to renegotiate

homosociality, exploring forms of male-male intimacy that were otherwise prohibited by the social structures of their time.

Despite the fact that these bathhouses did not operate as venues for sex *per se*—and may have actively prohibited sexual encounters between patrons—existing Orientalist logics likely coded the bathhouse as a sexualized space. For example, as Ralph Poole has described, the literary genre of sex tourism had already been established as a place for men to describe adventures abroad during which they sought out sexual encounters with other men. “For Europeans since the nineteenth century, North Africa and the Middle East were the favorite destinations to explore the cultural differences within homosexual relations.”²⁴ Thus, the exotified and colonized “Orient” had become not only a sexualized location far away from the industrialized Western metropolis, but also key component of the Western sexual imagination. Moreover, “Oriental sex” became a commodity that could be reproduced and sold in Western urban settings. Thus, whether or not actual sex acts were condoned, the exotified space and services provided in Russian and Turkish baths of this time period constituted a new commodity: opportunities for homosocial interaction that were otherwise unavailable. That said, as both Chauncey and Bérubé note, *ordinary bathhouses* were more likely to serve as a place to meet potential sexual partners—with whom one would then make arrangements to meet elsewhere—than as venues for such encounters.

1.6 *Favorite Spots* (c. 1890s-1920s)

By the start of the 20th century, Turkish and Russian baths had opened in major cities throughout Europe and the United States. Although support for their alleged health benefits had diminished, the baths themselves remained popular, in part because of the opportunities for sexual encounters between men. Here, George Chauncey describes those in New York City.

[E]legant Turkish, Roman, and Electric baths were established by entrepreneurs as virtual temples to the body for wealthier New Yorkers. They varied markedly in the quality and range of their facilities, the social class of patrons they attracted, and the social and sexual possibilities they offered gay men.²⁵

In the case of New York, police records and court proceedings from bathhouse raids, as well as personal correspondence from the time period, all corroborate the existence of baths in which same-sex sexual activity was common. According to Bérubé, some of these *ordinary bathhouses* became *favorite spots* for men who were interested in pursuing sexual encounters with other men. He argues that this process occurred for one (or both) of two reasons: either a locale became known for having friendly staff who were willing to ignore same-sex sexual activity altogether, or because it developed a reputation for gay sex at certain times during the day. As word spread about these *favorite spots* their owners reacted in two different ways: some attempted to prevent same-sex sexual activity from occurring by engaging law enforcement or hiring private security; others, keen to take advantage of the monetary benefits of being a *favorite spot*, sought to pay off local law enforcement and instructed their employees to maintain discretion.

Once the bathhouse owners and management permitted same-sex activity to occur, a thriving sexual subculture emerged. One example given by Chauncey comes from the records of an undercover police operation at the *Ariston Baths* in 1903. “The extent of the overt homosexual activity witnessed by police at the *Ariston* makes it clear that the activity must have been countenanced by management and that everyone who bathed there must have been aware of it. Men felt free to approach other men in the common rooms and hallways and to invite them back to their private dressing rooms.”²⁶ Later, he adds, “[w]idely understood (and therefore unspoken) conventions of conduct governed the men’s sexual interactions.”²⁷ Here Chauncey points to an important aspect of bathhouse culture beginning in *favorite spots*. Once these spaces gained reputations as venues in which to seek out sexual encounters, a nonverbal communicative schema emerged; what 1970s ethnographers of the bathhouse would later refer to as “road maps.”²⁸ Rather than use spoken language—and risk either offending or being rebuffed by others—patrons likely used strategic eye contact, gestures, and position in the room to signal interest in and negotiate sexual encounters. Importantly, *favorite spots* became well known to men seeking sexual encounters with other men, whether or not they identified as homosexual. However, the boundaries between sex/gender and sexuality were drawn differently at that time and, crucially, the identities we now consider “proto-gay” had more to do with gender identity

and presentation than with sexuality. In his work on this time period in New York City, Chauncey describes a vibrant community of men who identified as “fairies” or “pansies.”

The determinative criterion in the identification of men as fairies was not the extent of their same-sex desire or activity (their ‘sexuality’), but rather the gender persona and status they assumed. It was only the men who assumed the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women who identified themselves--and were identified by others--as fairies.²⁹



Figure 3 George Bellows, *Shower-Bath, First State* (1918)

A key component of the cultural roles assumed by fairies at the turn of the century was that they sought out sexual encounters with straight-identified men; referred to as “trade.” This dynamic is suggested in a 1917 lithograph by George Bellows, titled “Shower-Bath, First State” (Figure 4).³⁰ Bellows was married to a woman and did not identify as gay. However, this piece is one of several examples of homoerotic themes in his work.³¹ As a depiction of an unknown bathhouse environment, this work emphasizes the dichotomy between “fairies” and the “trade” with whom they sought sexual encounters. In the image, nude men gather in a bathhouse, where

a pool, showers, and lockers are visible. Among the men, subtle differences in stature and posture suggest varying sexual identities. In the case of the pair of men in the center foreground of the lithograph, the man on the right is larger and more muscular than his counterpart, and his wristwatch and shower shoes distinguish him from most other figures.

Moreover, he holds his towel over his pubic area as he looks toward the man on the left, who is fully nude and holds his left thigh as he poses with one foot on the edge of the pool. The man on the left looks back at the man on the right, smiling. This dynamic is echoed further left in the background of the image, where another smaller nude figure whispers into the ear of another more muscular patron, who, once again, covers himself with a towel. In my reading, these figures represent the sexual dynamic between gay-identified and straight-identified men in the turn-of-the-century bathhouse and, thus, provide further evidence of the practices described by Bérubé and Chauncey.

By contrast, the 1918 watercolor painting “Turkish Bath with Self Portrait” by Charles Demuth (Figure 5) reflects a far greater sense of homogeneity among the patrons.³² The left two-thirds of the painting depict a close-up of three men gathered in a shadowed area. We see the faces of two of the men: a nude man with red hair stands casually to the right of a darker-haired figure (a self-portrayal of the artist); he is also nude and his recently discarded towel can be seen at his feet. The third man, a blonde who wears a towel draped over his shoulders, faces the other two. At right, in the foreground, another man looks up from a pool, presumably at another figure whose arm is only barely visible. Beyond the pool, two men engaged in oral sex appear in the distance. Unlike Bellows, Demuth identified as gay and often used his work to document the evolving gay male cruising scene in New York City.

Together, these images reflect the transition from *ordinary bathhouses* and *favorite spots* toward *early gay bathhouses*. As discussed in the next sub-section, the atmosphere evoked by Demuth’s painting—one of sexual camaraderie among similarly-identified men—became the defining characteristic of a new generation of bathhouses that were more explicit in catering to gay men.



Figure 4 Charles Demuth, *Turkish Bath with Self-Portrait* (1917)

1.7 *Early Gay Bathhouses (1900s-1940s)*

By the interwar period, the possibility of making money on the enterprise of sex between men led to the development of a new category in Bérubé's periodization, *early gay bathhouses*. In the case of San Francisco, Bérubé describes these establishments as physically indistinct from the previous two categories, "except that sex was permitted in closed and locked cubicles."³³ Although these establishments were sometimes raided by vice squads, he notes that "[t]he owners sometimes tried to protect their patrons from arrest, blackmail and violence if at all possible without hurting their businesses."³⁴

In addition to providing cubicles or private rooms, *early gay bathhouses* differed from their predecessors in another important way: they not only catered to gay-identified men, but began to actively exclude straight-identified patrons. Thus, the emergence of these baths affected a significant change in sexual practices of gay men, as Bérubé notes.

When these gay bathhouses emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, they offered homosexual men a new option; they could meet and have sex in a gay bathhouse, in addition to having sex with heterosexual men in a public bathhouse. Many men who came out before there were any gay baths looked down on having sex with other gay men. They had learned to prefer 'servicing' straight men in semipublic places.³⁵

Echoing Bérubé, Chauncey's account of the baths in New York City during the same time period emphasizes a distinction between two types of bathhouses:

[G]ay patronage and sexual activity were concentrated at two kinds of baths: baths visited by straight as well as gay men but whose management tolerated limited homosexual activity (which I have termed 'mixed' or 'gay-tolerant' baths), and those that catered to gay men by excluding non-homosexual patrons and creating an environment in which homosexual activity was encouraged and safeguarded (which are properly termed 'gay baths').³⁶

Writing that these were the earliest such establishments "that anyone alive today remembers," Bérubé suggests that his history is based on interviews with older gay men. In my archival research in the GLBT Historical Society, I found that Bérubé personally collected more than a dozen oral histories from older gay men and lesbians during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, because he does not cite those interviews directly, it is difficult to say how many of them corroborate these claims. That said, in his official declaration Bérubé quotes from at least two men who visited gay bathhouses in San Francisco in the 1930s and 1940s and he leverages

these accounts to argue that the decision to restrict clientele to gay men only affected a larger shift in sexual practice.

It was a later generation of gay men who, partly by using the gay bathhouses, learned to enjoy having sex with and loving other gay men. At a time when no one was saying ‘gay is good,’ the creation of an institution in which gay men were encouraged to appreciate each other was a major step toward gay pride. Since then, several generations of gay men—partly because of the opportunities provided them by gay bathhouses and, later, gay bars—have learned to prefer sexual partners who are also gay. The bathhouses, thus, are partly responsible for this major change in the sexual behavior and self-acceptance of gay men.³⁷

Although Chauncey notes that the baths were a social and sexual refuge for “married men leading otherwise conventional lives”, he, too, acknowledges the significant effect they had on gay men’s lives: “The baths also played an important role in the social lives of many men more fully integrated into the gay world, both in the early decades of the century, when relatively few other gay institutions existed, and in later years, when the streets and bars grew more dangerous because of increased police activity.”³⁸ For both Chauncey and Bérubé, then, these *early gay bathhouses* had important effects on gay men’s social lives. Although the pursuit of sexual encounters remained the primary goal of bathhouse visits during this time period, physical changes within the bathhouse changed the how those encounters occurred.

1.8 *Modern Gay Bathhouses* (1950s-1980s)

The first generation of *modern gay bathhouses* opened in San Francisco in the 1950s.³⁹ Although Bérubé references the anti-vice crackdowns of this era (those under the Christopher administration), he argues again that “the protective anonymity at the baths helped many gay men survive” these crackdowns.⁴⁰ However, despite these raids and anti-vice movements in the city, more baths and bars continued to open over the following decade. Especially during the late-1960s and early 1970s, these *modern gay bathhouses* underwent significant changes that reflected the social and political changes taking place at local and national levels. For example, Bérubé cites the 1967 “Summer of Love” in San Francisco as a pivotal moment in this history. Influenced by the new communal ethic of the so-called hippies, group sex became more popular, prompting bathhouse owners to create “orgy rooms,” or open areas within the baths where sex was allowed. Other open areas within the gay bathhouses became venues for gay cultural

production. Several bathhouses commissioned erotic murals by gay artists beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s. Others added venues for live entertainment. In San Francisco, Bérubé notes the opening of a cabaret in one bathhouse, as well as the creation of a Western night, featuring country music acts, at another.

By the late 1970s, technological developments in media allowed for the installation of video rooms where patrons could watch pornographic films. Bérubé argues that this increased the acceptability of masturbation in *modern gay bathhouses*. However, perhaps the most significant interior change to these spaces was the installation of what he called, “fantasy environments.” Similar to the orgy rooms created earlier, these spaces were open to all patrons and specifically designed with sexual encounters in mind.

[F]antasy environments were installed that recreated the erotic situations that still were illegal, public and dangerous outside the walls of the baths. Glory holes recreated the toilets. Mazes recreated park bushes and undergrowth. Steam rooms and gyms recreated the YMCA and Video rooms recreated the balconies and back rows of movie theaters. Cells recreated and transformed the environment of prisons and jails, where generations of gay men have ended up for risking sex in toilets, parks, and the YMCA.⁴¹

Years later, these fantasy environments would figure centrally in the bathhouse closure debates, as public health officials, judges, and activists debated the effects of glory holes and mazes on the transmission of HIV. Again applying a common-sense logic to the predicaments of the HIV/AIDS crisis, those in favor of closing the gay bathhouses saw these spaces as enabling or encouraging risky or unsafe sexual behaviors. However, in his opposition to the closure order, Bérubé argues that, in comparison to the public cruising areas they imitated, these spaces actually made sexual activity less risky, more private, and more protected from hostile surveillance. Moreover, he upends the conclusion that the fantasy environments led to sexual practices by effectively arguing the reverse: it was (shifts in) gay men’s sexual practices which led to the development of the fantasy environments.

From the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, *modern gay bathhouses* clearly benefited from the blurred line between commercial and cultural enterprises in gay neighborhoods across North America. As social, cultural spaces, Bérubé argues that they they invoked a sense of gay identity and became meeting points for the gay male community. As commercial, sexual spaces

they not only provided a refuge for local men seeking sexual encounters with other men, but also became well-known tourist stops for men visiting from around the world. However, their rapid proliferation during this time would come to work against them. With the start of the HIV crisis in the early 1980s, gay bathhouses quickly developed a negative reputation—not only as places associated with the spread of AIDS, but as locations that exemplified stereotypes of gay men as hedonistic, insatiable, and reckless.

1.9 *Contemporary Gay Bathhouses* (1990s-2010s)

As previously discussed, some cities in the United States undertook efforts to close gay bathhouses in the 1980s. However, these attempts were neither ubiquitous nor universally successful, and many baths remain open to the present day. Building again on Bérubé's historical periodization, I refer to these establishments as *contemporary gay bathhouses*. In terms of physical space, most *contemporary gay bathhouses* resemble the *modern gay bathhouses* that preceded them. In response to the HIV crisis, these establishments committed themselves to providing condoms, lubricants, and other safer-sex resources. Moreover, the advent of the World Wide Web provided these establishments with new marketing vehicles which appear to have increased their popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In addition to promoting their services on their own Web pages, *contemporary gay bathhouses* are aggregated in online directories, which allow users to look up basic information about baths around the world. As discussed at greater length in the fourth chapter, these establishments remain especially popular in North America and Europe and constitute nodes on a global circuit of gay tourism. Although they face competition from smartphone applications that connect users to other men seeking sex, some *contemporary gay bathhouses* have formed a business alliance in order to coordinate discounts with suppliers and share costs related to advertising. Moreover, in some marketing campaigns, they have rebranded themselves as venues that host sexual encounters between men who meet outside their walls, rather than as spaces in which to find sexual partners.

1.10 Dissertation Structure

This dissertation follows a standard five-chapter format; the present introduction and a conclusion bracket the central three chapters, each of which presents findings from a major component of the larger project. The second chapter, “Allan Bérubé and the 1984 Bathhouse Closure Crisis,” focuses on the events leading up to Bérubé’s involvement in the lawsuit that would eventually close the baths in San Francisco. In particular, I examine his philosophy of the baths as “sexual territories,” and his conceptualization of “the politics of sexual desire,” which animated much of his writing. Finally, working chronologically through 1984, I demonstrate how his thinking about the baths was influenced by ongoing dialogue with other activists in the Bay Area and conclude by reviewing the “afterlife” of his declaration.

The third chapter, “Making the *Modern Gay Bathhouse*,” moves backward along the timeline to examine these establishments during the so-called “Golden Era” of the 1970s. Here, I ask how the owners and operators of *modern gay bathhouses* conceived of their enterprise by putting forward a critique of Bérubé’s historical declaration. Insofar as that narrative foregrounds the social and political saliency of the baths as a major institution in the emergent gay and lesbian community, it also obfuscates the active, strategic role often played by the investors who profited off of these establishments. Taking up the case of the *Bulldog Baths*, I examine the material and discursive manipulations through which its owners designed, marketed and defended their commercial territory in the context of a major housing crisis in the city.

The fourth chapter, “Examining Representations of *Contemporary Gay Bathhouses*,” jumps to the present day. Although the HIV/AIDS crisis, along with the reactionary regulatory efforts that followed it, caused many gay bathhouses to shut down in the 1980s, some not only survived, but were joined by a wave of new establishments in the 1990s. Grounded primarily in a snapshot sample of 70 *contemporary gay bathhouses* in operation today, this chapter examines the effects of another major historical event in the story of these spaces: the advent of the World Wide Web, which allowed these establishments to reach potential customers much more effectively than in the past and provides a robust record of their facilities, services, and promotions. However, more recent Internet-based developments, such as mobile dating/hook-up apps, pose a threat to the baths. Respondent to these challenges, *contemporary gay bathhouses*

have formed a national business association that provides coordinated marketing campaigns, secures business-to-business discounts for its members, and promotes a new articulation of the bathhouse; not as a place to meet other men for sexual encounters, but as a safe venue in which to pursue sex with men one finds outside of its walls.

Finally, the conclusion takes a few steps back in order to recapitulate central claims, before returning to the concern that animated Allan Bérubé's work: the future of gay bathhouses. Writing in 1984, Bérubé not only believed passionately that history could be used to inform political decision making, but, more importantly, that the history of gay bathhouses could inform their future. Where cynical public health officials saw physical spaces that harbored or encouraged high-risk sexual practices, Bérubé saw dynamic sexual territories that were animated by the psycho-sexual development of gay men.

1.11 Notes

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- ¹ In this section, I draw on biographical details offered in D’Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman, “Introduction: Allan Bérubé and the Power of Community History,” in Bérubé, Allan. *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, ed. John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-37.
- ² Allan Bérubé. “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke University Press), 234-265.
- ³ *Ibid*, 235.
- ⁴ Elizabeth A. Armstrong. *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994*. University of Chicago Press, 2002, 21.
- ⁵ Jane Ward. *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*. NYU Press, 2015, 35.
- ⁶ Edward W. Soja. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. U of Minnesota Press, 2013, 4.
- ⁷ Christopher Dismas. “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3/4 (2003): 71–129.
- ⁸ William J. Woods and Diane Binson. *Gay Bathhouses and Public Health Policy*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2003.
- ⁹ Vincenzo Bavaro. “Cruising the Gay Bathhouse.” AISNA, 2012. Joseph Styles. “OUTSIDER/INSIDER: Researching Gay Baths.” *Urban Life* 8, no. 2 (1979): 135–52. Richard Tewksbury. “Bathhouse intercourse: Structural and behavioral aspects of an erotic oasis.” *Deviant Behavior* 23, no. 1 (2002): 75-112. Martin S. Weinberg and Colin Williams. “Gay Baths and the Social Organization of Impersonal Sex.” *Social Problems* 23, no. 2 (1975): 124–36.
- ¹⁰ Ann F. La Berge, *Mission and Method: The Early-Nineteenth-Century French Public Health Movement* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- ¹¹ Peter Kandela, “The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Bath in Victorian England,” *International Journal of Dermatology* 39 (2000): 70–74.
- ¹² Teresa Breathnach, “For Health and Pleasure: The Turkish Bath in Victorian Ireland,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2004): 162.
- ¹³ Kandela, 73.
- ¹⁴ Breathnach, 165.
- ¹⁵ Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād, *Harun al-Rashid in the Bath*, 1494, Persian miniature on paper, approx. 20 x 26 in. Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bihhzad_001.jpg
- ¹⁶ Kandela, 73.
- ¹⁷ Giarre and Stanghi, *Bagni Russi [Russian Baths]*, c. 1831, hand-painted copperplate engraving. Public Domain. <https://archive.org/details/ilcostumeanticoe72ferr/page/n261>, image from Giulio Ferrario, *Il Costume Antico E Moderno O Storia Del Governo, Della Milizia, Della Religione, Delle Arti, Scienze Ed Usanze Di Tutti I Popoli Antichi E Moderni*, vol. 7, Pt. 2 (Florence, Italy: Vincenzo Batelli, 1831).
- ¹⁸ John Potvin, “Vapour and Steam: The Victorian Turkish Bath, Homosocial Health, and Male Bodies on Display,” *Design History Society* 18, no. 4 (2005): 321.
- ¹⁹ Potvin, 321.
- ²⁰ John Lawrence Giles, *Scene in the New Russian Baths, No. 18 La Fayette Place*, c. 1876-1978, lithograph printed by Charles Hart. Public Domain.
- ²¹ Marilyn F. Symmes, *Impressions of New York: Prints from the New-York Historical Society* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 114.
- ²² Potvin, 330.
- ²³ Potvin, 327.
- ²⁴ Ralph Poole, “Cannibal Cruising, Or, ‘to the Careful Student of the Unnatural History of Civilization,’” *Amerikastudien* 46, no. 1 (2001): 72.
- ²⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 208.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 212.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 214.

²⁸ Martin S. Weinberg and Williams, Colin, “Gay Baths and the Social Organization of Impersonal Sex,” *Social Problems* 23, no. 2 (1975): 124–36.

²⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 48.

³⁰ George Bellows, *Shower-Bath, First State*, 1918, lithograph, 56 x 81 cm. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

³¹ Haywood, Robert. “George Bellows’s ‘Stag at Sharkey’s’: Boxing, Violence, and Male Identity,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3-15.

³² Charles Demuth, *Turkish Bath with Self-Portrait*, 1917, watercolor. Public domain.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Demuth_Charles_Turkish_Bath_with_Self_Portrait_1918.jpg

³³ Allan Bérubé, “Declaration of Allan Berube in Support of Memorandum of Points and Authorities in Support of Ex Parte Application for Leave to Intervene,” November 5, 1984, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 24, Folder 20, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center, 36.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

³⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 209.

³⁷ Bérubé, 38.

³⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 221.

³⁹ Bérubé, 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 40.

CHAPTER 2. ALLAN BÉRUBÉ AND THE 1984 BATHHOUSE CLOSURE CRISIS

2.1 History in Action

This chapter, like the history it examines, begins at the end. Gay bathhouses had already existed for nearly a century before their history was first published in the 1980s and, even then, it seemed to come too late. By 1984, the City of San Francisco had announced its intentions to shut down the baths in response to the HIV crisis, igniting a multiyear legal battle that would prompt many of these establishments to close on their own. Similar actions followed in Los Angeles and New York City, pushing debates about the fate of these spaces into the public eye. For many people, gay bathhouses were either totally unknown or easily understood as part of the pantheon of physical environments that constituted lesbian and gay urban space in the post-Stonewall era. Along with gay bars, bookstores, video arcades, community centers, flower shops, and cafes, these spaces represented a claiming of territory by the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Perhaps especially in the nation's largest cities, the development of "gay neighborhoods" throughout the 1970s had rendered white gay men (and, to a lesser extent, white lesbians) legible in the cartography of urban politics.

Alongside working-class, Black, Asian, or Latinx enclaves in the city, gay neighborhoods became spatial representations of a politically-identifiable group of people. It is in this political milieu that the HIV crisis came to bear on gay bathhouses; operating explicitly as venues for sexual encounters between men, they were marked by the emerging epidemiology of HIV as spaces that were contributing to the spread of the disease. Moreover, as "gay businesses," their continued operation in spite of the crisis implicated the larger gay community. Thus, many of those who advocated for their closure were gay people who believed the baths ought to be forfeited in the name of preserving the political respectability of the community. Such arguments eventually won out and by 1987 the last of San Francisco's bathhouses had closed its doors. Allan Bérubé, attempted to prevent that outcome by compiling and publishing a historical narrative that accounted for the initial development of the baths, the ways they changed over time, and the possible role they might play in mitigating the spread of AIDS. Assembled initially as a declaration in the legal battle that ensued, Bérubé's text used history as political

intervention. Leveraging a narrative of their development throughout the 20th century, he argued that bathhouses had redeeming value as cultural institutions for the gay community and that efforts to shut them down tended to be short-sighted, homophobic and, ultimately, ineffective. Centering on events in 1984, this chapter contextualizes Bérubé’s work by looking to materials from the Bérubé papers for more information on the political and philosophical perspectives he brought to bear on his work. Finally, I discuss the impact of his initial declaration, as well as the multiple iterations of that narrative, as it was re-published in the years that followed.

2.2 Attending to the Relationship between Physical Space and Sexual Practice

Throughout my dissertation project, I investigate the relationship between physical space and sexual practice in bathhouse environments. Here, “physical space” refers to the interior design and architecture of these establishments, while “sexual practice” refers both to sex acts themselves and to the embodied practice of “cruising” through which one signals interest in, negotiates, and terminates sexual encounters within bathhouse settings.

By the turn of the century, bathhouses became well-known as venues for sexual encounters between men. Whether sex on the premises was condoned by the operators, these *favorite spots* gained a reputation that made them attractive to men who sought sexual encounters with other men, creating a kind of feedback loop that only increased the likelihood that such encounters would occur. Within a few decades, even as the popularity of the *ordinary bathhouses* would wane, savvy owners and entrepreneurs had identified a marketable niche, and *favorite spots* were replaced by establishments where sexual encounters between men were explicitly facilitated—what Bérubé called *early gay bathhouses*. Otherwise physically indistinct from their predecessors, these spaces offered one key architectural innovation: cabins or small private rooms that could be locked and where sex was allowed.

This addition had a few important impacts. Generally speaking, these private rooms appear to have served as a materialization of the establishment’s purpose. By designating specific space within the bathhouse for sex to occur, they signaled to patrons that they condoned and encouraged such encounters—unlike *ordinary bathhouses* and *favorite spots*, where

surreptitious sex came with fear of being discovered, ejected, or arrested. More specifically, however, once provided with an intimate, private space, men could spend more time together away from the gaze of other patrons. For Bérubé, this change was accompanied by a larger shift in bathhouse sexual practices. Although *ordinary bathhouses* and *favorite spots* had served as venues for sex between men, these encounters tended to be transactional insofar as gay-identified men sought out straight-identified men for whom they could perform passive roles in oral and anal sex. By contrast, *early gay bathhouses* provided gay-identified men with an opportunity to seek out one another and to negotiate longer, more intimate encounters.

This contribution of Bérubé's declaration would later inspire the historian George Chauncey. In a chapter in his groundbreaking 1994 text, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, Chauncey examines the history of gay bathhouses in New York City at the turn of the century.¹ Explicitly challenging the cultural myths that named the mid-century gay liberation movement as the starting point of gay culture in the United States, Chauncey's text provides vivid accounts of gay identities, practices, events, and institutions dating back to the late-19th century. Moreover, in contrast to the view that "gay history in particular consists of a steady movement toward freedom," Chauncey argues provocatively that "gay life in New York was *less* tolerated, *less* visible to outsiders, and *more* rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first."² Weaving together information from police records, newspaper articles, personal papers, and oral histories, Chauncey describes the vibrancy of gay bathhouse culture in New York at the turn of the century. "The baths," he summarizes, "exemplify the manner in which men built a social world on the basis of a shared marginalized sexuality."³ An endnote to that sentence makes clear the influence that Bérubé's work had on his conceptualization of the baths.

I have found Allan Berube's history of the baths in San Francisco...very useful as I have thought through the history of New York's baths. His argument about the sexual culture promoted by the bathhouses is especially illuminating. My research suggests that exclusively gay bathhouses developed much earlier in New York than in San Francisco.⁴

Moreover, he also emphasizes the demographic shift that attended this transition—instead of seeking sex with straight-identified men in *ordinary bathhouses*, gay-identified men in New York began to seek out liaisons with one another in the emerging world of the gay baths.

However, unlike Bérubé, Chauncey offers a greater degree of detail in his description of how sexual practices between men developed during this period.

The investigators at the Ariston Baths in 1903, for instance, observed a scene that would have been almost inconceivable to the fairies and “normal” men at the Bowery resorts: two men spent a considerable amount of time lying on a couch, embracing and kissing, and each played both “active” and “passive” roles.⁵

Here Chauncey contrasts the sexual practices found in gay bathhouses with those found in other parts of the urban sexual landscape of turn-of-the-century New York City. Like Bérubé, he emphasizes that the effects of *early gay bathhouses* on sexual practices: more prolonged physical intimacy, as well as role-sharing in penetrative acts.

Correspondence between the two authors also demonstrates the influence Bérubé’s “History” had on his work. Following a visit to San Francisco in late 1984, Chauncey wrote to thank Bérubé for providing him with a copy of his text. “I’m so impressed that you wrote it in ten half-days,” he gushed, before going on to praise the article’s use of history to contextualize opposition to the bathhouse closure.⁶ At the time, Chauncey was in graduate school and had already begun working on the dissertation that would later become *Gay New York*.

Foreshadowing the passage above, Chauncey was intrigued by Bérubé’s assertion that the baths affected a shift in the sexual practices of gay men and saw connections to his own research.

I have been struck by the ‘egalitarian’ nature of the sexual activity I’ve seen described in bathhouses in NY at the turn of the century: most other sources describe sexual relationships in terms of queers servicing men... Several modes of sexual relating appear to have coexisted for quite some time, but norms (and ‘fashions’ in actual behavior, though that’s too shallow a term) have clearly changed.⁷

In a handwritten postscript at the end of the letter, Chauncey continues,

[O]ne of the things I liked about your paper was simply your description of the sexual geography of SF and your specific references to the involvement of ‘straight’ as well as ‘gay’ men in [homosexual] encounters (e.g. your explanations of why WW2 soldiers found the baths desirable). This is just the sort of thing we need to be mapping and analyzing and you’re doing it so well.⁸

In my reading, these passages emphasize the the influence of Bérubé’s “History” on the project of historicizing gay identity in the United States. Although his main goal was to register opposition to the closure of the bathhouses in the 1980s, the history he uncovered led him to ask more complex questions about how gay subjectivities might have changed over time. As

Chauncey's work would later affirm, gay bathhouses—as sites in the urban sexual landscape—played an active role in the development of both gay identity and sexual practices between men throughout the 20th century.

Thus, throughout the history of their development, changes in the physical space within bathhouses have reflected and affected changes in the sexual practices of their patrons. Below, I return to an analysis of Bérubé's history of gay bathhouses, addressed at length in the introduction, in order to describe the larger philosophical perspective he brought to his work. In particular, I examine how he developed his thinking about bathhouses as sexual territories, whose complicated history made them, paradoxically, both a radical, sex-positive sanctuary for urban gay men and a target for perennial state intervention. In the following section, I contextualize the time-period during which Bérubé researched and wrote his history, looking at key moments in 1984 that reflect his thinking. Based on documents in the Bérubé Papers, these examples clarify his perspective on the value of history in times of crisis, his fundamental suspicion of government intervention in gay and lesbian sexual territories, and his belief in the power of safer sex practices to slow the advancement of the AIDS crisis. In this section, I describe Bérubé's conceptualization of “sexual territories”—such as bathhouses and bars—as spaces that were at once claimed by gay and lesbian people and targeted by homophobic state interventions. Further, I discuss his view of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian politics as fundamentally bifurcated; divided between “the politics of minority rights” and “the politics of sexual desire.” Although the aim of Bérubé's “History” was, in some sense, to balance these competing political agendas, his description of “the politics of sexual desire” as a creative force helps to explain the process by which *ordinary bathhouses* and *favorite spots* developed into *early gay bathhouses* and *modern gay bathhouses*. Finally, I look again at “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” highlighting key differences between the court declaration and the *Coming Up!* article that followed it and describing the impact of Bérubé's work on other scholarship.

2.3 History in Crisis

By 1984 Allan Bérubé had been living in the Bay Area for more than a decade and already established himself as a community historian. At thirty-seven years old, he had published

essays, participated in professional conferences, and given presentations at events hosted by local community groups, as well as co-founded the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project. Working as a collective, Bérubé and his colleagues had only just begun the project of uncovering and preserving the city's queer history before the arrival of HIV amplified their efforts. During this time, they amassed archives in their apartments and spare garages, pulling together periodical collections, ephemera and personal papers alongside copies of materials they had identified in established archives. This is all to say that the project of historicizing gay bathhouses—that is, the project of composing a historical narrative of their emergence and development throughout the twentieth-century—was inextricably tied to the larger, decidedly radical project of historicizing queerness itself. Moreover, “the History Project believed that understanding history endowed individuals and communities with the power to act more effectively in their world. Bérubé especially wanted the history he was uncovering to be shared with the community.”⁹ This was certainly true in the case of the bathhouse crisis. “20 or 30 years from now,” he wrote on a scrap piece of paper affixed to an early draft, “we will look back on this bathhouse controversy as a panic [and] want to know ~~why~~ how it happened.”¹⁰ In his role as a community historian, he saw an obligation not only to share the history of gay bathhouses, but to document the controversy itself as it unfolded in the 1980s.

In the midst of the crisis, Bérubé gave talks, presented slide shows, and published articles in the queer press relating to the history of San Francisco's bars and bathhouses. Moreover, he attended conferences and town hall meetings, speaking passionately about a political bifurcation he had observed over the course of the gay and lesbian liberation movement: there were some who championed a representational identity politics that located the gay and lesbian community alongside ethnic and racial minorities, and there were others who advocated for a radical sexual politics that was less interested in earning the respect of straight society. Although he demonstrated respect for both positions in his work, Bérubé's own political commitments placed him in the radical, sex-positive camp. Even prior to the HIV crisis, he had been an advocate for safer sex practices and believed that the gay male community in particular could benefit from an open dialogue about sex that might help them shed self-inflicted stigmas and internalized homophobia. For Bérubé, telling the story of gay bathhouses—perhaps especially in the midst of an active campaign to close them—lined up with these commitments.

The public debate that would come to be known as the bathhouse closure crisis had many sides and stakeholders, but it was instigated by just one thing: the rapidly increasing number of AIDS diagnoses among gay men in San Francisco. As Christopher Disman recounts, “the baths emerged as a point of friction among certain city officials and community members, over what were the most appropriate methods to fight AIDS.”¹¹ By reviewing local arguments with a focus on the AIDS-containment strategies considered by city officials alongside responses to those strategies by community activists, Disman highlights questions about the legal feasibility and epidemiological necessity of closing the baths as primary components of the ongoing public discourse at the time. That said, the emerging epidemiology of AIDS did not line up with the final decision. “Eventual policy decisions disregarded which sexual activities were considered high or low risk for AIDS, and disregarded research findings available in mid-1984 indicating that attendance at San Francisco’s baths was not correlated with AIDS risk.”¹² Taking a broader view not restricted to San Francisco, Jason Hendrickson observes that the baths “have served as sites for debate over sexual repression and liberation, gender, the proper and effective response to the AIDS epidemic and, indeed, the meaning and place of sex and sexuality.”¹³ Charting these debates, Hendrickson reviews how proponents of the baths in the 1970s often saw them as the physical epitome of the sexual liberation movement, while others criticized them for promoting sexual objectification and exacerbating, rather than transcending, the power dynamics traditionally associated with sex. Although the AIDS crisis of the 1980s intensified these debates, they continued to be “centered on primarily on the issue of sexual freedom.”¹⁴

Through his research, writing and speaking engagements in 1984, Bérubé would come to describe gay bathhouses as a kind of vulnerable sanctuary—providing noticeably more safety than other cruising spaces such as parks and docks but also still historically imbricated in the larger anti-gay trends of society. In his view, the gay bathhouse was “a refuge from judgmentalism, from moralism” because it was separated from the larger homophobic society and served a clientele of men who were interested in sex between men.¹⁵ “We were paying money to get in there, and sometimes it was too much, but we weren’t paying for sex. We were paying for the territory—to get in there.”¹⁶ Throughout this section, I examine how Bérubé’s perspective on the bathhouse closure controversy developed with two particular points of

emphasis: the recurrent theme in his work that bathhouses and bars constituted sexual territories (as opposed to primarily social spaces), and his views on the politics of sexual desire. Working chronologically through 1984, I describe moments in which Bérubé articulated these ideas.

2.4 April 1984 | Washington Post Article

On Thursday, April 19th, 1984, Cynthia Gorney quoted Allan Bérubé in an article she wrote on the bathhouse closure crisis for *Washington Post*.¹⁷ Reporting from the Bay, Gorney's story explored the many ideological rifts surfaced by San Francisco's recently announced efforts to prohibit sexual activity in gay bathhouses. Although the gay community had achieved significant political power over the course of the preceding decade, new cases of AIDS were being diagnosed almost daily and 176 people had already died. Given the growing scientific and medical consensus that AIDS was caused by a probably-viral pathogen transmitted during sexual activity, many gay men believed decisive action needed to be taken to slow the epidemic, but they remained divided on exactly what measures were called for. Bérubé, for example, opposed the ban and argued that making safer-sex educational resources available within bathhouses would lead patrons toward safer sexual practices, thereby slowing the epidemic. Others, such as the prominent gay activist Larry Littlejohn, disagreed and remained unconvinced that bathhouse owners and patrons would take the necessary steps to reduce the risk of transmission. For nine months, Gorney reports, Littlejohn had been arguing unsuccessfully for the closure of the baths in correspondence with the City's public health officials. Eventually, he gave up hope that the City would implement his recommendations and decided to take matters into his own hands.

On March 27th, Littlejohn announced a petition for a ballot initiative that would ban sexual activity in gay bathhouses. Although the petition attracted the ire of many in the gay community and led to his being described as a moralizing traitor in the queer press, it succeeded in amplifying his cause. On April 9th—in a major reverse of course—public health director Mervyn F. Silverman declared the City's own intention to ban such activity. "Baths that allowed 'sexual activity between individuals' would risk losing their licenses, Silverman said, and the city would use some similar if still undetermined procedure to ban sexual activity in the private clubs and bookstores that gay men sometimes frequent for liaisons."¹⁸ The move was

unprecedented among cities grappling with the AIDS crisis and quickly attracted national attention, but it was not a decisive victory for proponents of the bathhouse closure. Although four bathhouses closed voluntarily within a few months, most were defiant. On October 10th the City filed a court case in the matter, *People vs. Owen et al.*, naming fourteen establishments as defendants and seeking both temporary injunctions to close the baths while the case was being decided and permanent injunctions to prevent them from ever re-opening. However, like the debate in public discourse that it sought to adjudicate, the case quickly became more complex; as the rights of owners and patrons were weighed against the City's public health responsibility, the bathhouses would be closed, reopened, and closed again by various judges until a final ruling several years later. As Gorney reported, the debate was “about more than disease or standards of cleanliness or the licensing requirements” of establishments that most people, she suggests, “would not recognize from the street.”¹⁹

It is also about sex, about sexual behavior so foreign and so unnerving to many heterosexuals that at the mention of the bathhouses here the gulf between gays and straights widens suddenly into nearly impassable distance. The most common heterosexual response to the San Francisco bathhouses is a kind of collective shudder: why can't they stop it and go home.²⁰

It is in this context of intense public debate and legal uncertainty that Allan Bérubé began to contemplate ways to bridge that “impassable distance”. Foreshadowing the larger contributions to public discourse that he would make over the following year, Gorney described Bérubé's skepticism of the City's publicly-stated motives. In his comments, he emphasized the history of raids, entrapment schemes and other forms of state intervention that had taken place in gay bathhouses throughout the 20th century. Still, according to Bérubé, these establishments had managed to provide refuge to a highly-stigmatized sexual minority, which gave them important symbolic value. “They provided places to have sex that were safe... The institution was as much in jeopardy as you were, so you weren't alone.”²¹

2.5 April 1984 | “Don't Save Us From Our Sexuality”

Shortly after Larry Littlejohn's petition was announced in March, Bérubé published an essay in the April edition of *Coming Up!* titled “Don't Save Us from our Sexuality.” Writing in opposition to the closure of the baths, Bérubé's essay made connections between the 1900

Bubonic plague in San Francisco and the AIDS crisis of the early 1980s. Drawing from a 1978 article that detailed the scapegoating of the city's Chinese community during the plague crisis, he argued that anti-gay, sex-negative stigma operated to make the gay community more vulnerable in the wake of AIDS just as anti-Chinese stigma had fueled racist public health responses at the turn of the century. Just one day after the first official case of Bubonic plague was diagnosed in a Chinese male, Bérubé recounted, the whole area of Chinatown was roped off and placed under local police surveillance. Moreover, both Chinese and Japanese Californians were prohibited from leaving the state without federally-issued medical certificates and plans were drawn up to set up detention facilities for more than 14,000 people of Asian descent. When legal actions successfully challenged those detention plans, public health inspectors began searching residences in Chinatown and the state Board of Health ultimately recommended the total destruction of the neighborhood. However, before such plans came to fruition, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed most of downtown, including Chinatown.²²

Bérubé saw deep, foreboding connections between the turn-of-the-century plague outbreak and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. "The gay community in 1984 is as vulnerable to health panics and scapegoating as was the Chinese community in 1900," he wrote. "Both communities have been forced into urban undergrounds and stigmatized as sources of disease."²³ In particular, Bérubé saw gay bathhouses as physical spaces that were the target of stigmatizing efforts. In spite of "decades of harassment, entrapment, arrests, raids, license challenges, arson, and physical attacks on patrons," gay bathhouses had persisted in the city as places of refuge for gay men.²⁴ "They are unique, ever-changing erotic territories with their own rituals, folklore, language and traditions. It is their mere presence as erotic territory that triggers the sex fears of gay and straight people alike and has made them one of the most vulnerable and defended gay institutions."²⁵

Undergirding Bérubé's convictions was his work with the Gay and Lesbian History Project (which would later become the GLBT Historical Society). Since the group's founding, he had been meticulously collecting resources on the city's gay and lesbian history. Although many of his efforts focused on the World War II and post-war eras (in anticipation of his first full-length book on gays and lesbians during that period), he had been particularly fascinated by the

evolving sexual landscape of the city. Given their shared history of state intervention in the form of raids and entrapment schemes, Bérubé considered both bars and bathhouses to be inherently sexual territories; a slide show presentation that he developed on that history, “Resorts for Sex Perverts,” took its name from language in a 1955 law that attempted to shut down establishments that catered to or allowed homosexual contact. In this way, Bérubé understood the role that regulations of physical space played in gay political history and saw the real goal of those efforts as being to constrain the political capital of the community. Like Chinatown in 1900, Bérubé feared, the existence of a disease that was closely associated with the gay population would only speed up this process and help to obscure the anti-gay intentions.

2.6 July 1984 | “Two Kinds of Politics”

As the bathhouse closure debates raged on into the summer of 1984, Bérubé turned his attention to the various reactions from within the gay community. In July, he participated in a forum titled “AIDS: Blaming the Victim,” hosted by the San Francisco political group, Socialist Action. Beginning by highlighting the increasingly urgent rhetoric of the New Right and quoting Jerry Falwell’s call for nation-wide closure of gay bathhouses, his remarks provided a play-by-play of efforts to control the spread of AIDS, including ideas floated by the gay community to surrender the baths in order to gain favor in the eyes of the political establishment. In his remarks, Bérubé described “two kinds of sexual politics” that developed out of the emergence of gay and lesbian communities in the United States: “the politics of sexual desire” and “the politics of minority rights”.²⁶ The former he described as “a kind of creative force;” one capable of transforming otherwise-public, physical spaces such as bars, bathhouses, parks and streets in to implicitly sexual spaces.

It puts sexual meaning onto non-sexual things, like the word gay, transforming it into a sexual word. It eroticizes DA haircuts, motorcycles, color handkerchiefs, gestures. It’s a way of extending sexuality out into a sex-negative culture. It has a history of being secret, coded, underground, illegal. It’s defiant, yet vulnerable to exposure and attack. When exposed, it defends itself by fighting back or risking arrest and jail for sexual offenses. This politics of sexual desire is unorganized and very hard to defend verbally without using embarrassingly sexual language.²⁷

This passage emphasizes the productive or creative power of the politics of sexual desire; one that has both discursive and material consequences. That is, Bérubé conceived of the politics of sexual desire not as a position from which to defend sexual things (words, haircuts, gestures, etc.), but rather as the force that sexualized those things in the first place. However, despite this material-discursive power, that force had limitations. Namely, in a society that does not value sexual expression—and which is especially hostile to queer sexual expressions—the politics of sexual desire is itself difficult to articulate.

Bérubé saw the the latter kind of politics within the gay and lesbian community—that of minority rights—as based on queer interpretations of the black Civil Rights Movement. However, despite the sense in which it emulates an ethno-racial political subjectivity, this form of politics still relies on (homo)sexual desire to constitute itself.

It needs the politics of sexual desire to create a critical mass of perverts large enough to be organized and identify as a minority group. It is a very powerful, defensive politics that uses civil rights arguments to attack discrimination and inequality. It creates political organizations, uses electoral politics and public forums, acts as a lobby group to make government responsive to its interests. It represents one of the major advances of the gay movement in the last 30 years.²⁸

Although Bérubé acknowledged the ways in which the politics of minority rights tangentially defended sexual desire—through its defense of the right to privacy, the right to due process and the right to gather in public—such defenses were limited. In his view, “the growth of minority politics in many ways desexualizes homosexuals.”²⁹ Because the politics of minority rights can successfully use sex-negative discourse to defend the rights of sexually marginalized people, he argued, it is often seen as more respectable. By contrast, the politics of sexual desire, as a fundamentally creative, discursive force, uses language to place “sexual meaning onto non-sexual things” and is therefore “often seen as a threat to the accomplishments of minority rights.”³⁰ Moreover, this tension was exacerbated by deep associations that had been made between AIDS and the sex practices of gay men. “When the gay community is attacked for its sexual practices,” he cautioned, “as it [has] been in the bathhouse panic and will continue to be until a cure for AIDS is found, the temptation is there to scapegoat the people and institutions that are most visibly sexual and different.”³¹ Here, in the face of direct attacks on the basis of sexual practices, he argues, the politics of sexual desire becomes necessary as the only way to

name and honor the ways gay men were being affected by disease itself, as well as the stigmas being operationalized in efforts to regulate sexual liberty. By resisting appeals to respectability and eschewing sex-negative language, he believed, the gay community could develop strategic responses to the challenges posed by the HIV crisis.

The politics of sexual desire is alive today, in the safe sex literature, forums, and posters that affirm our sexuality, encourage us to talk about and negotiate what we want to do sexually. It is alive in the calmly written bathhouse report by Michael Helquist and Rick Osmon in the current *Coming Up!* that is a sensible response to the confidential, steamy report commissioned by the mayor and written by heterosexual police spies. And it is alive in the daily decisions that gay men are making to be close and sexually safe with other gay men.³²

Moreover, Bérubé emphasized that gay men needed to “stop thinking of ourselves as victims” and embrace the sense in which queer sexuality produces knowledge that could advance the sexual freedom of all people.

To me, this means learning how to act with power – learning self-defense, being proud of our sexuality, offering people who are not gay what we have learned about intimacy between men and between women, working to create a society in which we all are sexually safe and in which fear of disease, sexual desire and death can no longer be used as weapons against anyone who is different.³³

In these comments, Bérubé departs noticeably from the rhetoric of his “Don’t Save Us from Our Sexuality” article. By emphasizing the productive and creative capacity of the politics of sexual desire, he moves away from constructing gay bathhouses and those who frequent them as victims of state intervention and toward a greater embrace of the positive, life-affirming aspects of sexuality.

2.7 August 1984 | Littlejohn Letter Exchange

In July of 1984, Larry Littlejohn, the well-known opponent of gay bathhouses and instigator of their closure, responded to Bérubé’s article, “Don’t Save Us from Our Sexuality,” in a letter to the editor of *Coming Up!*. In the missive, Littlejohn admonishes Bérubé for suggesting that monogamy and celibacy are “desperate attempts to find simple solutions” and accuses him of distorting the role played by public health officials during the 1900 bubonic plague crisis in

San Francisco.³⁴ A copy of Littlejohn's letter was provided to Bérubé in advance and his response was printed alongside the letter in the August issue of the magazine.

Littlejohn begins by arguing that Bérubé's article displayed a "rather nasty prejudice" by grouping monogamy and celibacy within a litany of simplistic attempts to solve the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS, such as closing gay restaurants or passing new anti-sodomy laws.³⁵ In his critique, Littlejohn points out that monogamy and celibacy were practiced by "many gay persons" even before the advent of the crisis and questions the way these options are "put down" by Bérubé and others.³⁶ "Promiscuity," he continues, "is not the sine qua non of being gay."³⁷

Moreover, Littlejohn contends that Bérubé's article distorted the history and significance of the 1900 bubonic plague crisis in the city. Countering Bérubé's claim that "the gay community in 1984 is as vulnerable to health panics and scapegoating as was the Chinese community in 1900," Littlejohn cites three separate sources on the 1900 and 1907 bubonic plague outbreaks and leverages the following quote in rebuttal of Bérubé's assertion.³⁸

The account of bubonic plague in San Francisco is one of the darkest pages in the history of North American medicine. It is the story of a relentless fight by a small group of doctors, not against a dread disease, but against recalcitrance, stupidity, and greed.³⁹

Here, Littlejohn attempts to use Bérubé's example against him. By engaging in a politics of citation (something Bérubé's article does not do), Littlejohn zeroes in on the phrase "recalcitrance, stupidity, and greed" in order to turn the tables against Bérubé's argument. Rather than acknowledging the critical differences between the two historical moments, Littlejohn's intention is for the phrase to stick on bathhouse operators and patrons.

Although he admits that the Chinese community faced "extreme racial prejudice" prior to and following the Bubonic plague epidemics, he rejects Bérubé's claim that they faced such prejudice from public health officials at the time. As such, he seeks to undermine the analogy Bérubé drew between the public health response to Bubonic plague and that in response to HIV/AIDS. Instead, Littlejohn asserts, "[t]he lesson to be learned... is the importance of public health measures... and how public opinion, politicians, and community leaders deter or contribute to the success of those public health measures."⁴⁰

Bérubé's response spares no punches; quickly countering Littlejohn's retelling of history and contending that the "white physicians were as guided by 'extreme racial prejudice' as public officials."⁴¹ If their responses to the crisis were not racist, Bérubé asks rhetorically, then how does one explain the "attacks on Chinese medical practices while denying Chinese San Franciscans access to City Hospital," or the "quarantining [of] the Japanese in California when the plague was attacking Chinese people," or the "plans to intern [sic] all the Chinese" and "to set their homes, schools, stores, pharmacies and clinics on fire and then saturate the ashes with poisonous acids?"⁴² In light of these desperate and misguided efforts to contain Bubonic plague, Bérubé concludes that the public health officials, whom he says "had no cure for the plague and little knowledge about how it was transmitted," responded to the crisis in ways that were based on fear and racism and were ultimately grounded in "attempting to protect white San Franciscans by scapegoating the Chinese community."⁴³ Reading this history according to Littlejohn's lens, he concludes, is "both inaccurate and unfair."⁴⁴

Further countering Littlejohn's leveraging of the phrase "recalcitrance, stupidity and greed," Bérubé extends his response by reiterating the central claims of his article. In the absence of "medical evidence for banning sex in bathhouses," he contends that the proposed bathhouse closure "reflects San Francisco politics and a general squeamishness about sex."⁴⁵ Furthermore, and in spite of the political sparring within the gay community, Bérubé sought to bring to light the "remarkable adaptability, intelligence and concern" demonstrated by the gay community in the wake of HIV/AIDS.⁴⁶

We gay men have been educating ourselves about AIDS and safe sex practices, and have made unprecedented and dramatic changes in our sexual behavior both inside and outside the baths... If every gay man has not yet totally converted to safe sex practices, the solution is to provide more safety, more support and better information for making these difficult choices. Anything that encourages the cycle of fear, guilt, panic and scapegoating – from closing the baths to quarantining the sick and dying – can only make that task even harder.⁴⁷

Against this backdrop, Bérubé argues that such sexual scapegoating "makes us all the more suspicious of each other, more eager to identify traitors, and more defensive of our right to exist as sexual people."⁴⁸ Finally, he reprises the analogy to the 1900 Bubonic plague, suggesting

again that actions rooted in fear and blame do more harm than good to public health. “Sexual scapegoating,” he concludes, “will only paralyze us, make us more isolated, pit us against each other, and prevent us from making the changes that will save our lives.”⁴⁹

The letter exchange between Bérubé and Littlejohn demonstrates the “two kinds of politics” that Bérubé identified within the gay and lesbian movement. Littlejohn’s appeals to respectability, the offense he takes at Bérubé’s discounting of monogamy and celibacy, and the lessons he gleans from the Bubonic plague episode in Chinatown all play into the desexualized politics of minority rights. Perhaps especially because he was the one who started the petition to ban sex in bathhouses in the first place, Littlejohn’s actions are a great example of the political desire to “surrender” the bathhouses as a way of gaining political credibility in the eyes of the City and among San Franciscans. In addition to challenging Littlejohn’s reading of history, Bérubé’s response emphasizes the need to embrace sexuality—even in the face of the AIDS crisis.

2.8 December 1984 | Submitting the Declaration

By the fall of 1984, Bérubé’s efforts to use history as a method of political intervention intensified. At some point in September or October of that year, Bérubé connected with Roberta Achtenberg, a local lawyer who worked with a group called Bay Area Lawyers for Individual Freedom (BALIF). In cooperation with the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, BALIF was preparing to become involved in the bathhouse closure court case. On October 15, the two organizations petitioned the SF Superior Court for permission to file *amici curiae* briefs in *People v. Owen et al.*⁵⁰ In their petition, the groups described their concern for the constitutional rights affected by the City’s attempts to close the bathhouses. Officially, the groups argued for a strict standard of review in the case, which placed the burden of proof on the City to prove that “(1) the order issued by the Director of Public Health seeks to achieve a compelling governmental interest; (2) the closure of the bathhouses, bookstores and theatres is necessary to achieve that compelling interest; and (3) there is no available means to achieve the government’s interest that is less restrictive to the exercise of protected constitutional rights.”⁵¹

Explicitly opposed to their closure and advocating for educational measures that would allow gay bathhouses to help reduce the spread of the disease, Bérubé's declaration used the history of these establishments to intervene in an on-going legal and political debate over both their right to continue to operate and the sexual liberties of the men who frequented them. Submitted under penalty of perjury, the forty-five-page document was submitted to the courts on November 5, 1984.⁵² The case itself dragged on for several years, finally ending in 1987 with the closure of the last bathhouse in the city. Despite the ultimate closure of the bathhouses in San Francisco, major excerpts from Bérubé's declaration have been re-published several times and his research continues to be cited by scholars in a wide range of disciplines.

Central to this narrative is Bérubé's conviction that the baths, along with gay bars, "are an integral part of gay political history."⁵³ In the document's preface, he introduces his qualifications as an active community historian whose work has been presented at conferences and appears in a variety of publications, including academic journals. In the introduction that follows, Bérubé enumerates four ways in which the baths have contributed to the gay community's ability to (1) "overcome isolation and develop a sense of community and pride in their sexuality," (2) "gain their right to sexual privacy," (3) "win their right to associate with each other in public," and (4) "create 'safety zones' where gay men could be intimate with each other with a minimal threat of violence, blackmail, loss of employment, arrest, imprisonment and humiliation."⁵⁴ Expanding upon those claims, the next two sections review the early history of the baths nationally and in San Francisco specifically. The following section examines the history of raids, closures, and surveillance on gay and lesbian establishments, arguing that "these campaigns against gay bars and baths have developed in urban politics since the 19th century as a strategy toward attaining specific political goals."⁵⁵ Although the means and rationale of these attacks changed over that time, Bérubé asserts that the goals "are usually to discredit and divide the gay and lesbian community, to deny gay men and women places to meet, and to make the gay and lesbian communities vulnerable to further attacks by shocking the public with a sexuality it often doesn't understand."⁵⁶ Looking at three specific campaigns in San Francisco (a raid on the Baker Street Club in 1918 and the World War II Morals Drive in 1943) and Toronto (Bathhouse Raids in 1981), a subsequent section details the goals, targets, and agents of those actions along with a discussion of the social and financial costs borne by the gay community and

by the City itself. In all three cases, he notes, these campaigns failed to achieve their stated goals; gay communities and the spaces in which they gathered continued to exist in both cities.

Bringing this history to bear on the bathhouse closure crisis, the penultimate section reviews San Francisco's attempts to close gay and lesbian bars between 1954 and 1965 and argues that the closure of the bathhouses follows a similarly misguided path: the campaign came with social, financial, and health-related costs that outweighed the alleged benefits. In his conclusion, Bérubé suggests that bathhouses be "used as a community resource to promote safe sex and safe sex education" and "preserved as zones of safety, privacy and peer support as long as gay men are attacked for their sexuality."⁵⁷ Moreover, he contends, "[a] working relationship of cooperation and trust between the city and the gay community is critical in the fight against AIDS."⁵⁸ This conclusion underscores the sense in which Bérubé believed his history could contribute to efforts to keep the baths open; in spite of perennial efforts to raid, surveil and close them, gay bathhouses had a unique history as spaces of refuge for gay men and as sites where gay sexual practices changed over time.

Bérubé described his broader research agenda as focusing on gay and lesbian institutions that served the social, political, and cultural needs of those communities. In the following passage, he describes the scope of that work.

I have studied the relation of these institutions to the policies and legal histories of city, state and federal governments; their role in urban politics; their place in the individual lives of lesbians and gay men; their role in creating gay communities and the ways that they have contributed to the development of the gay political movement.⁵⁹

Bérubé goes on to note that the declaration was based on six years of research and that it incorporates a wide range of sources, including "oral history interviews, newspaper clippings, court records, police records, declassified military and FBI documents, manuscript letters, diaries, medical journals and gay and lesbian publications."⁶⁰ Woven together, he believed these sources provided a sense of how the baths developed and operated, as well as the relationship they had to City agencies.

Using some rare historical documents and oral history interviews, I have been able to piece together a sketchy picture of what the baths were like in the first three stages of their emergence as gay meeting places. These accounts describe why some men chose to go to the baths to meet sexual partners rather than to other public places, how gay men and public officials first found out about the 'early gay bathhouses,' how the police kept

baths under surveillance but let them stay open, and how the baths were affected by the local politics of each city.⁶¹

Relative to the larger questions of my project, Bérubé's declaration puts forward three key points regarding the development of the baths over the course of the twentieth century: a) he establishes his historical periodization of the baths; b) he describes changes in the physical space of gay bathhouses alongside shifts in sexual practices within them; and c) he emphasizes the role the baths played as sites in which gay identity itself was developed. In my reading, these aspects of the declaration have greatly contributed to its continued relevance to scholarship on twentieth-century gay and lesbian life, on broader explorations of the history of sexuality in the United States, and on the relationship between physical spaces and sexual practices in the urban sexual landscape.

2.9 Charting the Influence of Bérubé's "History"

Following Bérubé's submission of the declaration in *People v. Owen et al.*, large excerpts of the document were published as an article in the December 1984 issue of *Coming Up!*, a Bay Area gay and lesbian publication.⁶² Over the course of the next three decades, that version of his scholarship would be published another five times. In this conclusion, I describe and contextualize several of these publications as a way of both rearticulating the influence of his work and emphasizing his ongoing political motivations.

Appearing under the title "The History of Gay Bathhouses," the *Coming Up!* version differed from the legal declaration in several ways. First and foremost, it offered the historical narrative as a contribution to broader public discourse, reflecting Bérubé's conviction that the gay community should be actively engaged in discussions about the fate of the baths and underscoring his own political commitments to their preservation. Moreover, the *Coming Up!* version omitted several passages appearing in the declaration, including the preface describing his qualifications, as well as the aforementioned notes on his sources and methods. Also omitted were a handful of specific examples of bathhouse culture drawn from archival research and oral histories collected by Bérubé, as well as several sub-sections in which he described the rationale and social costs of surveillance and closure campaigns in San Francisco. Other differences

related to formatting; while the declaration followed the legal standard of double-spaced text arranged into numbered paragraphs, the *Coming Up!* version featured the bulk of the text in newsprint columns and moved Bérubé's comparisons of the Baker Street Club raid, the World War II Morals Drive and the Toronto bathhouse raids to supplemental tables. Finally, a set of historic bathhouse advertisements selected by Bérubé were incorporated throughout the article, further illustrating the transition from "Early" to "Modern Gay Bathhouses." Despite these alterations, the *Coming Up!* version of Bérubé's "History" took the place of the declaration as the primary source. It was the version that would be republished several times over the following decades, and it continues to be the version cited by most scholars who reference his work on gay bathhouses. Moreover, it further underscores the sense in which Bérubé saw his history as a contribution to the public discourse of the bathhouse closure crisis.

Just over a decade after its initial publication in *Coming Up!*, Bérubé's "History" was included in the 1996 edited volume, *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*.⁶³ Officially edited by a radical collective known as Dangerous Bedfellows, the contributors (journalists, artists, sex workers and academics) responded to controversies involving the opening of a new bathhouse in New York City. Like the San Francisco bathhouse closure crisis before it, public discourse on the new establishment uncovered divisions within the queer community as self-appointed gay spokesmen urged the City to regulate the establishments. In a prologue to the text, Lisa Duggan addresses the controversy as "a crisis of representation, both discursive and political. What do 'gay' people want, and who can represent us?"⁶⁴ In her view, the contributors addressed this crisis "not by trying to 'save' identity politics, or by imposing their own version of what's best for 'gay' people, but by struggling to rework the terms of representation, and thus of alliance and intervention."⁶⁵ In this sense, the inclusion of Bérubé's "History" speaks to the continued relevance of that piece to the broader themes of sexual identity and state regulation of sexual practice. In anticipation of the reprint, Bérubé composed a short note on his sources and goals when writing the original declaration. Here, he describes his decision to foreground sexual practices and desires, rather than attempt to sanitize the baths as a purely social institution.

The dominant legal defense of gay baths at the time was based on a right to privacy argument that attempted to avoid explicit discussions of gay male sexuality and desire. I wanted to construct an alternative defense of gay baths that was based on their long

history as sexual institutions and the right of gay citizens to use them for associational purposes that were sexual as well as social and political.⁶⁶

As this passage makes clear, Bérubé saw his declaration as a departure from the dominant legal defense of the baths. Rather than create another right-to-privacy argument, which would invoke the politics of minority rights by desexualizing the baths, he chose to foreground the sense in which they are sexual institutions. However, despite this explicit desire to re-center sexuality in his declaration, Bérubé also describes taking cues on language from the legal team with which he was working.

The language in the declaration uses terms and concepts, such as ‘gay people,’ that were prevalent in the 1980s among white gay male activists like myself, and other terms, such as ‘physical intimacy’ rather than ‘sex,’ that the attorneys believed would be more likely to reach and persuade our intended audience of judges. The audience turned out to be much broader.⁶⁷

Over the course of the following decades, that audience would continue to grow. Diane Binson and William J. Woods, for example, included Bérubé’s history in their 2003 edited volume, *Gay Bathhouses and Public Health Policy*,⁶⁸ which was simultaneously published in the *Journal of Homosexuality*⁶⁹ and then later reprinted in 2013.⁷⁰ Finally, the article was reprinted again in a posthumous collection of Bérubé’s work.⁷¹

In this chapter, I articulated the value of Bérubé’s “History” in two ways: both as an important contribution to the history of sexual practices between men in the United States and as a political intervention in its own time. Detailed, well-researched, and readable, Bérubé’s scholarship provides an invaluable window into this vulnerable sanctuary. By the 1980s, gay bathhouses in San Francisco reflected the expansion and diversification of gay sexual practices in a material way. This materiality, however, made those establishments a primary target for state intervention during the HIV crisis. Not only did the ensuing bathhouse closure controversy motivate Bérubé to write his “History,” but also it helped him see the radical potential of those spaces. As sexual territories, gay bathhouses (along with bars and nightclubs) had long been the target of homophobic and shortsighted attempts at state intervention, making them a vulnerable sanctuary for gay men throughout most of the century. However, in the wake of the gay liberation movement, they became spaces that inhabited the tension between the politics of sexual desire and the politics of minority rights. Although Bérubé understood the value of

cooperating with the politics of minority rights, his views at the time point to a radically sex-positive commitment to the politics of minority rights. From this vantage point, he crafted a history of gay bathhouses that celebrated their role in the development of gay culture and sexual practice, defended their value as dynamic spaces of erotic expression, and cemented their place as a fixture in the study of sexuality in the 20th century.

2.10 Notes

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- ¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 207-226. One possible reason for the twenty-year delay in the development of *early gay bathhouses* in San Francisco would be the 1906 earthquake, which had devastating effects on the city.
- ² *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 208.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 426.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ⁶ Letter from George Chauncey (12/28/84), Series II.D Professional Papers: Correspondence, Allan Bérubé Papers (1995-17), The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.* The bracketed term “homosexual” appears in writing as “h/s”.
- ⁹ D’Emilio, John and Freedman, Estelle B. “Introduction: Allan Bérubé and the Power of Community History,” *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, edited by John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, The University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 11.
- ¹⁰ Allan Bérubé. Handwritten note on an unpublished draft. Allan B Papers Box 24, Folder 14
- ¹¹ Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3/4 (2003): 73.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 73.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ¹⁴ Jason Hendrickson, “Conflicts at the Tubs: Bathhouses and Gay Culture and Politics in the United States,” in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2011), 336.
- ¹⁵ Cynthia Gorney, “The Bathhouse War; San Francisco’s Move to Fight AIDS Creates Rift Among Gays,” *The Washington Post*, April 19, 1984, sec. STYLE.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² For a more detailed analysis of public health responses to the 1900 Bubonic plague, as well as a discussion of how Chinese and Chinese American activists responded to those campaigns, see Shah, Nayan. *Contagious divides: Epidemics and race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*. University of California Press, 2001.
- ²³ Allan Bérubé, “Don’t Save Us from Our Sexuality,” in *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 64.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ²⁶ Allan Bérubé, “Remarks for ‘AIDS: Blaming the Victim’ Forum,” July 1984, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 13, Folder 22, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Allan Bérubé, “Reply to Littlejohn’s Letter to the Editor,” undated, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 13, Folder 24, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*

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- ³⁹ Ibid. Bérubé references Silvio J. Onesti, Jr. in “Plague, Press, and Politics”, *Stanford Medical Bulletin*, February 1955.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ The term *amici curiae* (Latin, “friend of the court”) here refers to legal declarations and briefs filed by knowledgeable parties not otherwise involved in a case. In this sense, Bérubé’s contribution was purely on paper; he was not called as an expert witness in court proceedings.
- ⁵¹ Bérubé, “Declaration of Allan Berube in Support of Memorandum of Points and Authorities in Support of Ex Parte Application for Leave to Intervene.”
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 4.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 22.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 22.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 42-43.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 43.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 9.
- ⁶² Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” *Coming Up!*, December 1984, sec. 15-19.
- ⁶³ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, ed. Ephen Glenn Colter (New York: South End Press, 1996), 187–220.
- ⁶⁴ Lisa Duggan, “Prologue,” in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, ed. Ephen Glenn Colter (New York: South End Press, 1996), xi.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, xi.
- ⁶⁶ Allan Bérubé, “Note on Sources for Republication of History of Gay Bathhouses,” 1996, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 18, Folder 13, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” in *Gay Bathhouses and Public Health Policy*, ed. Diane Binson and William J Woods (New York: Harrington Park Press (The Hayworth Press), 2003), 33–54.
- ⁶⁹ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3/4 (2003): 33–53.
- ⁷⁰ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” in *Gay Bathhouses and Public Health Policy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 33–54.
- ⁷¹ Allan Bérubé, “Resorts for Sex Perverts: A History of Gay Bathhouses,” in *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community and Labor History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 67–81.

CHAPTER 3. MAKING THE MODERN GAY BATHHOUSE

In many large cities like San Francisco, the late-1970s offered myriad opportunities for sexual encounters between men. From traditional cruising spots in parks, public restrooms, and vacant industrial spaces like dockyards to the bars, video arcades, and private sex clubs that had sprung up over the preceding decade, the urban sexual landscape of this time period provided men with a diverse assortment of physical spaces in which to connect with potential partners for brief, impersonal and (typically) anonymous trysts.¹ In light of the volume and variation of these sexual territories, it may be hard at first to see the appeal of gay bathhouses during this era. After all, one paid to enter a bathhouse, while other spaces were accessible at no cost. John Alan Lee, for example, described the baths at center in a system of redundancies that allowed men to move from one location to the next, should they be unsuccessful initially.² By contrast, Martin Weinberg and Colin Williams argued that the environment of the bathhouse during this time period provided men with an increased sense of security—both physical (i.e., they were less likely to be harassed or attacked in the baths than in parks and dockyards) and psychological (in the sense that, unlike the other men present in a dockyard, the patrons of a gay bathhouse shared a common understanding of the purpose of the space).³ In this chapter I investigate the production of *modern gay bathhouses* in the late 1970s by reframing them as commercial enterprises that actively competed with one another, and, in a sense, with other more public cruising areas in the urban sexual landscape. In fact, as Bérubé described, many *modern gay bathhouses* actually altered the physical space within their buildings to recreate or imitate those public cruising areas.

Chronicling his own adventures through the urban sexual landscapes of Europe and North America, the French writer Renaud Camus' 1978 quasi-autobiographical volume, *TRICKS*, spares no superlatives in differentiating cruising in the baths from other locales.⁴ In a chapter titled, "A Perfect Fuck," Camus' narrator and his friend Tony visit *8709*, a popular bathhouse in Los Angeles. Shortly after arriving and changing into towels, the two men set off to explore and the narrator is quickly enamored.

I have always enjoyed large establishments with their innumerable and complicated corridors, their infinite honeycombs, where new detours, new perspectives, new doors

keep presenting themselves, so that you never know, at least on your first visit, whether or not you've already been in this or that place. Constantly disoriented and lost, you never quite feel that you've discovered all the possibilities.⁵

This initial depiction points to the sense in which gay bathhouses, past and present, are often experienced as a kind of spatio-temporal distortion wherein crossing the threshold is like stepping through a portal to a dimension outside of chrononormative and heteronormative arrangements of space and time. Unlike other cruising venues, the windowless, multi-story architectural design of most bathhouses has separated patrons from the outside world since the late-19th century. After surrendering personal effects for safekeeping at the check-in counter and stowing clothing in a locker or private room, generations of patrons lost track of time while cruising in the baths. When not engaged in sexual encounters themselves, these men likely paced circuits from the steam room to the sauna to the showers and back again or meandered down dimly-lit corridors of private rooms to see which doors were open. By the 1970s, however, these cruising practices were augmented by what Allan Bérubé would call “fantasy environments;” new open spaces designed with sex in mind. Among the most common of these new additions, literal mazes accentuated the time-space disorientation experienced by patrons. An absent-minded left turn off of a main corridor, for example, may lead one to an even darker space wherein multiple paths twist and turn around small cubicles or benches. Following one path might lead to an antechamber set up with a sling and mirrored walls, while following another might cause one to stumble into another patron who is crouched down in the shadows, looking through a glory hole into another space entirely. Here, Camus' narrator continues, describing his excitement as the pair find themselves within such an environment.

But that such emporia, labyrinthine in essence, should further contain in their midst a real labyrinth, expressly conceived as such—that, in the state I was in, was enchantment itself. There, between the dark mirrored walls, in almost total obscurity, the most symbolic figures of myth and literature merged wildly and grotesquely in my excited imagination, their bizarre and absurd combinations a source of intoxication and delight.⁶

Here the narrator raises two themes that are central to the establishments of this era: the notion of the bathhouse as being intentionally-designed (i.e., incorporating spaces for sex that are “expressly conceived as such”) and the sense in which these establishments, even in their darkness and spatial-disorientation, are animated by sexual archetypes (here, “symbolic figures of myth and literature”) through which men both expressed themselves and identified the objects

of their desire. By the time of Camus' writing, bathhouses across the country had been transformed from simple venues for sex into profitable commercial enterprises with brand identities, target demographics, and promotional campaigns that leveraged the latest amenities and fantasy environments.

This transition that was first chronicled by Allan Bérubé in his 1984 declaration, "The History of Gay Bathhouses."⁷ Putting forth a historical periodization that distinguished *early gay bathhouses* (1920s-1940s) from *modern gay bathhouses* (1950s-1980s), his analysis emphasized the development of these interior spaces. Although showers, steam rooms, and saunas were still common among *modern gay bathhouses*, these features were now complemented by the fantasy environments described above, as well as venues for live performances or the projection of pornographic media. As I discuss further on, Bérubé saw these changes both as reflective of the shifting (and expanding) sexual habits of gay men and as indicative of the flexibility and innovation of the bathhouse itself—which he believed could be put to use to increase awareness and education about safer sex practices in the wake of the HIV crisis. While I do not argue against the logic or conclusions of Bérubé's history *per se*, this chapter takes as its starting position that Bérubé's emphasis on the socio-cultural significance they had for gay men (as a category) obscures the sense in which these establishments are commercial enterprises. Whether because of or in spite of his stated desire to defend them from closure, the resulting historical narrative draws attention away from the people who secured, generated, and reinvested capital in the course of their operation.

Intervening on this history through archival research and visual/textual analysis, this chapter interrogates the *modern gay bathhouse* not as socio-cultural productions with deep connections to gay identity, but rather as marketing creations—the result of strategic decisions made by entrepreneurs in their pursuit of profit. In what follows, I undertake a case-study of the Bulldog Baths, a popular bathhouse that operated in San Francisco from 1979 to 1982 and one that Bérubé himself patronized. Reading together documentary film footage and artwork from inside the Bulldog, as well as promotional materials and advertisements, I examine the material and discursive processes through which that establishment was created, marketed and defended.

The first main section below revisits Bérubé's claims about the development of *modern gay bathhouses* writ large, which posit internal spatial developments as both reflective of and respondent to sociopolitical changes taking place from the late-1960s through the 1970s. Although much of the foregoing discussion supports this historical narrative, I also offer a critique. Namely, I contend that Bérubé's focus on the political saliency of *modern gay bathhouses* shifts attention away from their existence as commercial enterprises. While Bérubé's telling of this history suggests a collaborative process through which bathhouses modified and expanded their facilities, I describe the calculated, entrepreneurial strategy through which the Bulldog Baths pursued profit in the context of San Francisco's shift to a tourism-focused economy. In the subsection that follows, I turn to scholarship on urban development patterns in the Bay Area, with particular focus on policies that affected the real estate market. During this period in San Francisco's history, shifts in property tax law incentivized commercial growth while de-incentivizing the creation of low-income housing, culminating in a housing shortage in many parts of the city and a dramatic increase in the population of San Franciscans experiencing homelessness. Given its location in the Tenderloin neighborhood, the Bulldog faced problems due to these demographic changes, even as its owners unironically strove for an interior aesthetic that recreated the gritty, formerly-industrial ambiance of public cruising areas.

Looking to the Molly Hogan Reel and erotic murals by M. Brooks Jones for more detail on the Bulldog's aesthetics, as well as to business records from its operation, the second main section begins by walking through the purchase and renovation of the building. Here I describe several ways the Bulldog expressed its brand identity in spatial terms. In an initial subsection, I begin by gathering the various sexual archetypes leveraged by the Bulldog under the category that I call the "Itinerant Alpha"-- a conglomeration of character tropes that center on a highly-eroticized white working-class masculinity. Comparing these aesthetic choices with those made by another bathhouse at the time, the Fair Oaks Baths, I call attention to the spatial mechanics of the Bulldog's brand identity. Returning specifically to the Bulldog in the subsection that follows, I investigate the building's three main fantasy environments: the truck stop restaurant, a themed café decorated to invoke a highway rest stop for long-haul truckers; the cell block, a two-story steel structure composed of replica jail cells; and the sex slave auction platform, a space used

during the Bulldog's popular slave and master parties, during which volunteers were auctioned off to other patrons using fake, branded currency.

A final main section returns to the question of spatial politics in the case of the Bulldog by examining former owner Glen Gerber's commentary about the establishment's closure in 1982. Addressing this history repeatedly in the Molly Hogan Reel, Gerber describes ongoing problems with the neighborhood's homeless population as main reason for their decision to close down the operation. Here I question the extent to which this narrative can be read as a distraction; either from the HIV/AIDS crisis or from a legal dispute that arose between the investors. Ultimately I conclude that, regardless of Gerber's motivation, the racialized spatial politics of the Tenderloin were a key factor in the Bulldog's demise.

3.1 Bérubé on the Development of *Modern Gay Bathhouses* in San Francisco

Bérubé argues that throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, gay bathhouses “finally established themselves as a major gay institution that could both shape and respond to the rapid social, sexual and political changes that were taking place.”⁸ In the context of the overall argument being made in “History of Gay Bathhouses,” this point serves a central function. By describing the bathhouse as having finally achieved political saliency, he builds on previous claims that *early gay bathhouses* developed a positive sense of collective identity among gay men and, more importantly, helped to break down early 20th century taboos that prevented gay-identified men from seeking sexual encounters with one another. It is in this sense, as the realization of a multigenerational project to bring gay-identified men together, that the development and proliferation of *modern gay bathhouses* can be read as political win. Despite intermittent vice campaigns and raids in the 1950s and 1960s, Bérubé continues, San Francisco's baths persisted as spaces of refuge that provided an alternative to more dangerous forms of cruising and remained committed to community building throughout the 1970s.

Supporting this claim in the declaration is a bulleted list of important changes that either catalyzed or reflected the development trajectory of *modern gay bathhouses*. Following the passage of legislation in 1976, sexual encounters between men were no longer illegal in

California, so long as they took place in private and between consenting adults. Two years later, according to Bérubé, “to test whether this new law applied to bathhouses, officers from the [San Francisco Police Department’s] Northern Station raided the Liberty Baths on Post Street and arrested three patrons for ‘lewd conduct’ in a public place.”⁹ However, charges were eventually dropped by the District Attorney’s Office, which Bérubé quotes as having decided that there was “no question [the bathhouse] was a private place.”¹⁰ With sex between men no longer considered a crime and the possibility of raids removed, bathhouse owners surely breathed more easily in the knowledge that they could publicize their establishments, operating more explicitly as venues for sexual encounters. With the advent of the gay and lesbian press in the 1970s, not only could the baths advertise their facilities and amenities directly to gay men, but they also became distribution points for a variety of these publications. Crucially, *modern gay bathhouses* had more to advertise than their predecessors. By the 1970s, the installation of erotic artwork and the so-called “fantasy environments” gave each bathhouse an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Some establishments also added dance floors, cafes, and workout facilities. Technological advances, such as the availability of VHS players, projectors and improved sound-systems, allowed the baths to screen pornography featuring sex between men. Other innovations include the development of a robust calendar. In addition to hosting health clinics where patrons could be tested for sexually transmitted infections, *modern gay bathhouses* began to put on live performances, movie nights, fundraisers for local organizations, holiday parties and other themed events.

Taken together, Bérubé’s enumeration of these advancements in the bathhouse point to a modification their business model. While previous generations operated purely as venues for cruising, more or less offering the architectural arrangement of the 19th-century Turkish or Russian bathhouse as a physical backdrop for pursuing partners, the *modern gay bathhouse* had become a multi-modal or mixed-use space bolstered by a wide range of amenities, services, and events. Again, Bérubé attributes these adaptations to a reciprocal relationship with social, sexual and political changes and, thus, reads the proliferation of these spaces as an indication of their role as a “major gay institution.” However, in his focus on changes *within* the baths, his narrative fails to address to other key economic factors that would both benefit and challenge establishments like the Bulldog Baths.

3.2 Spatial Politics and the Emergence of the *Modern Gay Bathhouse*

As Alex Schafran has surmised, “[i]t is virtually impossible to tell a Californian story about the neoliberal era without beginning with Proposition 13, California’s notorious 1978 property-tax referendum,” which capped residential, commercial and industrial property taxes and established a 2/3s majority requirement for new property taxes and other budgetary matters within the state legislature.¹¹ The primary effect of the referendum lay in the fiscalization of land use. With property taxes held steady, municipalities were pushed into making land-use decisions based on other forms of contribution to the tax base such as retail and payroll tax. The resulting hierarchy highly incentivized retail establishments and disincentivized the creation of new housing. In the context of San Francisco, this shift accelerated the rate at which capital was directed away from the development of residential communities and toward commercial enterprises that supported the city’s vision of itself.

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, San Francisco sought to develop itself as a major tourist destination, a gateway through which Pacific-Rim business partnerships could be negotiated, and a high-class metropolis that attracted and retained upper-income professionals across many industries.¹² Particularly after the decision to transfer the Port of San Francisco to the Port of Oakland, the availability of low-income work in the city dropped significantly. During this period, many formerly industrial areas of the city were effectively emptied while others became the landing-zone for residents who were displaced by these economic shifts, such as the Tenderloin neighborhood, where the Bulldog Baths was located. As Robinson has noted, “[r]eal estate papers in the 1970s and 1980s were filled with ads for vacant or underutilized Tenderloin properties ripe for rehabilitation or demolition: an investor’s gold mine.”¹³ Among these would surely have been the site of the former Club Turkish Baths, had it not been purchased right away by the investors who would turn it into the Bulldog Baths. However, as a consumer-facing commercial establishment in the Tenderloin during this time period, the Bulldog was both bolstered and disadvantaged by the patterns of urban development occurring around it. On the plus side, baths like the Bulldog stood to gain from increased tourism and convention-trade, which added potential patrons to the city. Given the Tenderloin’s central location in San Francisco’s predominantly commercial northeast quadrant, the Bulldog was

accessible to visitors who may have been less familiar with the city and its transit options. Moreover, because it was located outside of the three predominantly gay neighborhoods at the time, it may have appealed to men who did not identify as gay or see themselves as part of the gay community, but who still sought to seek out sexual encounters with other men while in the area.¹⁴

However, these forms of development carried a steep price for the Tenderloin—the intensification of a housing crisis that had been brewing throughout the post-war decades. Despite the fact that many of these urban development projects took place outside of the Tenderloin’s borders, the conversion of housing units into commercially-zoned spaces carved out large swaths of the city and displaced thousands of residents. Given its relatively cheap housing options, the Tenderloin had, by the 1960s, become a landing zone for people displaced from other neighborhoods in the city. By the 1970s, however, those development projects inched closer and closer.

A variety of upscale developments threatened the Tenderloin: conversion of low-income apartments into condominiums, high-rent apartments, or executive suites; demolition of low-income residential hotels or their conversion to tourist hotels; and new retail centers cropping up on the borders.¹⁵

Together, these projects had a dramatic effect on the neighborhood. Between 1960 and 1980, overall housing stock in the Tenderloin went down by 20%; the largest portion of which resulted from the reduction of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel units. “Between 1975 and 1985, 5 SRO hotels were vacated, 5 were demolished, 1 was converted to commercial use, 6 were converted to apartments, and 28 were refurbished as tourist hotels.”¹⁶ In time, the remaining housing units became less viable as options for long-term stay. From 1977 to 1986, while the average rent in San Francisco overall increased by an average of 100%, rent for apartments in the Tenderloin jumped by 337%. During the same period, rent for SRO units increased by 385% and evictions rose by 32%.¹⁷ In the years that followed, rents and associated housing costs continued to rise dramatically, which led to a growing and increasingly visible population of San Franciscans experiencing homelessness—a trend which as continued to the present day. Some developers and pro-growth activists have blamed rezoning laws for this problem and have argued that a repeal of those policies would allow for more higher-density buildings, which would in turn reduce rents in the long term. However, in his rebuttal of such arguments, Karl Beitel has

demonstrated that “the market is systematically biased against the production of housing affordable to the majority of San Francisco’s residents.”¹⁸

This urban development trajectory put some *modern gay bathhouses*—especially the Bulldog Baths—in a complicated position. Clearly benefiting from reforms such as the 1978 property tax referendum and the transition from an industrial hub to a tourist-focused economy, investment in large commercially-zoned properties was seen as profitable and sustainable. Combined with the socio-political changes addressed by Bérubé, the late-1970s “Golden Era” of gay bathhouses allowed these businesses to reinvest in capital improvements, diversify their facilities and offerings, and market directly to a large community of potential patrons. However, the economic impacts of San Francisco’s urban development made the city less livable for low-income earners and ultimately drove up the homelessness rate, especially in the Tenderloin. Operating in this milieu, the Bulldog Baths pursued a nuanced brand identity, rehabilitated and redesigned the building in which they were located, and embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign. As the following discussion shows, this enterprise was highly successful for at least part of the three years during which they were open. Ultimately, however, the owners developed a tense relationship with their surroundings and, as late as 1984, would cite homelessness and vagrancy in the Tenderloin as the reason for their decision to close down. In what follows, I examine the tension between how its owners and operators conceived of the interior space and how the establishment came to interface with the Tenderloin neighborhood.

3.3 Building the Bulldog Brand

Near the start of the Molly Hogan Reel, two men stand in the foyer of 132 Turk Street, about halfway up the set of marble stairs leading to the check-in window.¹⁹ Behind the camera, Molly Hogan and an assistant from the Institute for the Advanced Study of Sexuality wrangle lighting rigs and extension cables before giving the signal to begin. Over the next fifty minutes, Clark Taylor, another colleague of Hogan’s, interviews Glen Gerber, one of the owners of the former Bulldog Baths. Prompted throughout by Taylor’s questions about the space, Gerber’s commentary provides a vivid account of its development. He, along with a handful of other investors, purchased the building at 132 Turk Street in February of 1979. It had been operated as

the Club Turkish Baths since the 1930s and Gerber repeatedly emphasizes the amount of refurbishment the building needed. Although he mentions over \$30,000 worth of investment into the interior design of the Bulldog, as well as advertising campaigns to support its opening, the total amount spent was much higher. Although certain features were retained, such as the marble staircase, a steam room and the original locker room, most other areas were dramatically updated. Gerber describes the Bulldog as “a dream put together by several of us—another concept in the bathhouse.”²⁰ He and four fellow investors owned other baths and knew the business landscape well. In his comments, Gerber distinguishes between newer *modern gay bathhouses* (which he describes as “very fine-looking and very new and very different”) and those older *early gay bathhouses* still in operation (which were “not well-maintained, but yet they were the only other places that were available”).²¹ Thus, when the former Club Turkish Baths building hit the market, the investors jumped on the opportunity to re-imagine the latter type.

We thought that we could offer something close to that type of operation, and give ‘em a choice, and still have it look like a nice, clean operation and offer something that was a fantasy house for them. And it did work that way. People did like coming here. Customers enjoyed it.²²

Forming a California limited partnership in order to finance the purchase and develop the building, the investors strove for an innovative blend of past and present. On the one hand, they leveraged the historic appeal of the building, which had been constructed in 1923, as a connection to the *early gay bathhouse* culture. On the other hand, however, the Bulldog’s amenities and aesthetics were clearly characteristic *modern gay bathhouses*. Thus, combining strategic advertising and promotional marketing campaigns with the extensive remodel, the Bulldog Baths opened in October of 1979, billing itself as the largest bathhouse in the country, based on square footage.

Over the preceding five months, the investors had contracted artists, welders, and carpenters to create a physical space that projected “the theme of trucks, leather, [and] slave and master scenes.”²³ Interior décor featuring a palette of blue, black, and grey was used extensively. Ceiling beams and other support structures were painted to resemble the cruising areas found underneath bridges or in industrial parks and even received a special coating of spray paint to make them look dirty and worn. A draft advertisement script in the desk log gives a sense of the point of these stylizations.

Breaker 1 9

the Bulldog the largest bathhouse in the USA is now open. The Bulldog is a private membership club fully equipped for hard driving action. The Bulldog is located at 132 Turk Street between Jones and Taylor Sts. Our rates are

Weekdays	lockers [\$]4
	rooms [\$]6
and Weekend	lockers [\$]5
	rooms [\$]7

Membership is required and the yearly rate is \$9. A Special Introductory 69-day membership is only \$3. Our Truckstop Diner is open 24 hrs. For additional information call 775-TURK.

Follow the Convoy to the Bulldog.

Catch you on the Flip Flop good Buddies.²⁴

Borrowing from the coded language used on Citizen Band (CB) radio frequencies by long-haul truckers, the script emphasizes the Bulldog's "hard-driving," industrial aesthetic. Phrases like "Breaker 1 9" (a request to join a conversation already in progress) and "Catch you on the Flip Flop" (or, "see you again on my return trip") evoke the hypermasculine trucking culture of the 1970s and 80s, which had recently entered the public imagination through films like 1977's *Smokey and the Bandit*, starring Burt Reynolds, Jackie Gleason and Sally Field. Like the physical spaces described below, these marketing choices were meant to create associations between the bathhouse and the cruising culture of truck stops. While patrons may not be able to find a suitable Burt Reynolds look-alike in the baths, these cues helped to create an exciting backdrop for the sexual encounters that did occur. Upon check-in, patrons proceeded to one of the building's four hundred lockers or approximately fifty private rooms, which were also decorated to repeat the trucking theme.

There's a lot of detail in this. Each room has its own little stainless-steel table. We painted little paintings on the walls and in most of the rooms and each room is named after a state license plate. And these are authentic from the state license plates directly around the country... And so each room has a number and a corresponding state and a color code to go with it, too.²⁵

As the two men make their way through the building's several floors, they pass through long corridors with variously sized private rooms, open play spaces with slings, and mazes full of glory holes. At various points, Gerber extols the virtues of the renovated building by pointing out the thousand-gallon capacity of the water heater or the historic but revolutionary pitched-ceiling design of the steam room (which kept condensation from dripping on patrons' heads by routing it outward and down the walls instead). Also apparently innovative was the Bulldog's provision of

douching stations in the restroom area. Although this is a standard or even mundane feature of *contemporary gay bathhouses*, Gerber's explanation beams with technological pride.

Yeah, this is one of the douche facilities we had put together by a plumber and, as you notice, it has regulation controls on it so that water pressure's controlled and water temperature's controlled, so that it was a very safe thing to use. And some reasonable instructions here. We had available about a thirty-inch hose that we sold to the patrons.²⁶

He goes on to share a comedic story about purchasing the plastic hose in bulk at a local hardware store, whose employees seemed perplexed by the rate at which the Bulldog needed to resupply. Indeed, business records from the establishment contain numerous references to restocking key inventory such as poppers and lubricants. Moreover, despite the renovations, these records also indicate frequent service calls to address plumbing issues, loose railing, and jammed locks.

Customer counts are also included, although they appear infrequently and seem to note especially low or high attendance rather than tracking daily rates, which makes it difficult to gage the average attendance. However, early records show a slow but steady increase in daytime and weeknight traffic ranging from just a handful of customers over the course of a day to dozens of men at a time. On Saturday, January 5, 1980, for example, after just over two months in operation, 66 patrons were recorded; six months later, on Tuesday, June 24, staff logs estimated "about 95-100 people."²⁷ Although available records do not make it clear how profitable the Bulldog was during its operation, these numbers suggest that the establishment fared well against the dozens of bathhouses and private sex clubs against which it competed for business. In my reading, a primary factor in their success was the elaborate development of a specific brand identity that was designed to distinguish the Bulldog from other locations.

3.4 The Itinerant Alpha

When describing these efforts, Gerber repeatedly mentions the image or scene that the owners wanted to project: a conglomeration of macho archetypes that I refer to as the Itinerant Alpha. Perhaps a biker, a trucker, or a soldier on leave, the Itinerant Alpha is stereotypically hypermasculine. He is tall, muscular, and tattooed, and, when not depicted as fully nude, he wears heavy work boots or the remnants of military or service uniforms. Because he lives on the

road, encounters with him are typically furtive and ephemeral, and he is usually imagined to take the dominant sexual role. Beyond the name of the establishment itself, which was borrowed from “a very macho bar” in Atlanta called The Bulldog Trucking Company, the first sign of the Itinerant Alpha was one of two large Mack trucks that had been taken apart and moved inside the building before being partially reassembled in the interior foyer.²⁸ As the first thing patrons would see after checking in, the truck was meant to evoke these sexual archetypes.

More nuanced than the lean, younger, normatively masculine figures that appeared in advertisements for earlier bathhouses, the Itinerant Alpha was not simply attractive, but powerful and sexually assertive. Through its interior design, promotions and advertising campaign, the Bulldog Baths appealed both to patrons who saw themselves as the Itinerant Alpha as well as those who desired him. Crucially, these marketing choices not only reflected the increased popularity of leather and BDSM eroticism in the gay male community of the 1970s, but they also responded to the increased competition faced by bathhouses from private sex clubs, which had proliferated in the years prior and were often centered around BDSM sex practices. As Ira Tattelman has argued, the aesthetics associated with such clubs helped to transform the self-image of many gay men.

The economic and ideological environment of most of these clubs created an arena for the masculinization of the gay male. The clubs overturned cultural stereotypes of effeminacy; the mythic power of male images and materials became fundamental to the appearance, attraction, and imagination of these domains. A journey through the clubs, through points of transition, choreographed the transformation from repression to performance.²⁹

Tattelman goes on to describe how the design of the physical spaces within the clubs drew on stereotypically masculine materials and props – and suggests that such clubs were “both creator and product” of the emergent hypermasculinity among younger gay men.³⁰ So ubiquitous was this process in major cities across the United States that the men it produced would come to be known as “clones.”

The clubs were their image guides; the clone was created. Gay men took the visual appearance of working-class masculinity, building their bodies, growing mustaches, and replicating a butch attitude. They reformulated the archetypal male to fit into the context of an urban gay male identity.³¹

In much the same vein, the detailed erotic murals produced by M. Brooks Jones depict these characters as larger than life. Commissioned by the Bulldog's owners, Jones was paid \$10,000 to paint the murals directly onto the sheet rock walls throughout the building. Although it isn't clear if all of his work was preserved, the GLBT Historical Society holds ten panels that are approximately 4 feet by 10 feet tall; each of these can be seen in the Molly Hogan Reel, along with a handful of smaller paintings that were not preserved.

Throughout, hypermasculine figures (including a few self-portraits of the artist) wear hard hats, leather and military gear, dog tags, jock straps, cock rings, and work boots. Their muscular and tattooed bodies are heavily stylized to appear shadowed or glistening with sweat. Although some nods to racial diversity appear, most of the figures exude an eroticized aesthetic centering on white working class male identity; that is, a so-called man's man who makes a living through physical labor. A few figures stand alone, but most are engaged in sexual acts with one another. Poppers and cans of Crisco are scattered around scenes depicting both oral and anal sex, as well as voyeurism and public masturbation. No condoms appear in any of the mural artwork that I have reviewed.³² Background artwork is minimal and when does appear, the various settings reflect the Bulldog's brand identity in their depictions of highway truck stops, public restrooms, vacated industrial zones. Additionally, some figures appear to interact with others from across the room. For example, in one scene, a lone figure stands against the doorway to a restroom. With a cigarette held at his mouth by one hand and his penis grasped by the other, the object of his gaze is revealed only by the reflection in his mirrored sunglasses; he's watching another sex scene on the other side of the mural. Other scenes are nested inside of one another, forming a recursive image that operates on multiple scales. For example, a set of panels in a main hallway foreground a man kneeling while giving a blowjob to another man, whose body is held from behind by a third figure. Zooming out, the shadows behind the triad reveal themselves to depict more sex acts, such as anilingus and masturbation, occurring between larger than life figures.

Taking up Tattleman's suggestion that such imagery staged and choreographed sexual practices between men during this period, Jones' murals offer a window into how the Bulldog's owners conceived of their establishment. Notably, none of the murals include any symbols of

gay liberation (such as pride flags, pink triangles, etc.) nor do they depict any meaningful variation in gender presentation the figures. Instead, they exclusively imagine sex between men who would be read as straight in most circumstances. Like Tattleman, I see the sense in which these images point to a radical project of unmaking stereotypes of gay men as effeminate, weak, or docile by replacing them with hypermasculine archetypes like the Itinerant Alpha. However, relative to Bérubé's claims about *modern gay bathhouses* writ large, it is important to contextualize the Bulldog's approach here as only one example of a bathhouse brand identity represented in spatial and visual terms during this time period.

Perhaps by necessity, visual records of the interior design of gay bathhouses during this era remain hard to find. One notable exception, however, may prove useful as a comparison. In Frank Mellon's Fair Oaks Project, polaroid pictures from the Fair Oaks Baths taken in 1978 depict a youthful, diverse crowd of gay men.³³ In an essay accompanying the photo project, Mark Thompson describes the photographer's connection to the space.

He'd been a member of the '70s gay commune that went on to purchase and convert a faded but wonderfully intact Victorian apartment building on the edge of a black ghetto into a gay bathhouse. San Francisco was filled with establishments like this — ranging from the outright seedy to gaily grandiose — but there was no place quite like the Fair Oaks Hotel. It literally stood alone, at the intersection of Oak and Steiner streets, perched on a hill overlooking the lower Hayes Valley district; an urban patch not yet gentrified by the city's swelling tide of gay Boomers and some distance from the neighborhoods they typically occupied.³⁴

These images have been grouped into three categories. The first, Costume Parties, captures life at the Fair Oaks' many themed parties, during which men wore a variety of costumes, including drag. Life at the Bathhouse, the next category, includes everyday moments such as the front desk clerk on the phone or someone reading (fully dressed) in a comfortable chair. The third category, Affection, is comprised of moments of intimacy including men doing each others' hair, sleeping next to one another and hanging out. Most of the men are younger, but their racial diversity and varying gender presentations stand in stark contrast to the figures depicted in the Bulldog. However, one of the most striking differences is in the background of these images: the domestic scene created by the building's aesthetics. Here, Thompson describes what one saw after checking in.

The next room was a relaxed lounge with overstuffed '40s furniture adjacent to a snack bar and an open DJ booth. One could hangout on the aptly named “Joan Crawford Suite” or play a round of pool with buddies clad in nothing but towels. A big wooden staircase, decorated with Art Deco designs of horses and trees, led up to the second through fourth floors. Some of the rooms were fully furnished and decorated with pieces of erotic art by the men who lived there on a semi-permanent basis. Weekly rates were low, too. So more than just a funky place to fuck, the Fair Oaks Hotel was a lifestyle for many.³⁵

Unlike the Bulldog’s foregrounding of itinerancy and ephemerality through the aesthetics of the truck stop or highway underpass, the Fair Oaks embraced the spatial dynamics of the large Victorian apartment building in which it was located. As Thompson notes, some patrons actually lived there for short periods of time and their regular party schedule was punctuated by a wide variety of communal activities such as group counseling and classes on topics like life drawing and Tantric massage. Although short-lived (1977-1979), the radical, communal philosophy that animated the Fair Oaks brings contrast to the strategic entrepreneurial spirit behind the Bulldog Baths. To be clear, both establishments were collaborative attempts to generate profits by selling access to space for sexual encounters between men. However, the spatial dynamics of the Fair Oaks provided for a friendly, domestic ambiance that encouraged platonic connection and non-sexual intimacy, while the dimly-lit, weathered and industrial themes of the Bulldog likely cultivated furtive, ephemeral sexual encounters. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in the Bulldog’s various fantasy environments.

3.5 The Bulldog’s Fantasy Environments

As previously mentioned, one major hallmark of the transition between *early gay bathhouses* and *modern gay bathhouses* was the installation of various open play spaces, which Bérubé referred to as fantasy environments. He described their creation as a kind of homage to public cruising practices—particularly those that were seen as unnecessarily risky in the Golden Era of gay bathhouses. Mazes, he interpreted, recreated the bushy undergrowth of parks at night, while glory holes imitated public toilets (or “tearooms”) and variously-sized cages or cells reproduced jails and prisons. While it is not clear exactly how many of these public spaces were installed in the Bulldog Baths during its extensive renovation, three of these environments took the project of *re-creation* to the next level: the truck stop restaurant, the cell block, and the sex

slave auction platform.³⁶ In this section, I review each of these spaces, drawing on Glen Gerber's descriptions to add context to their installation and use.

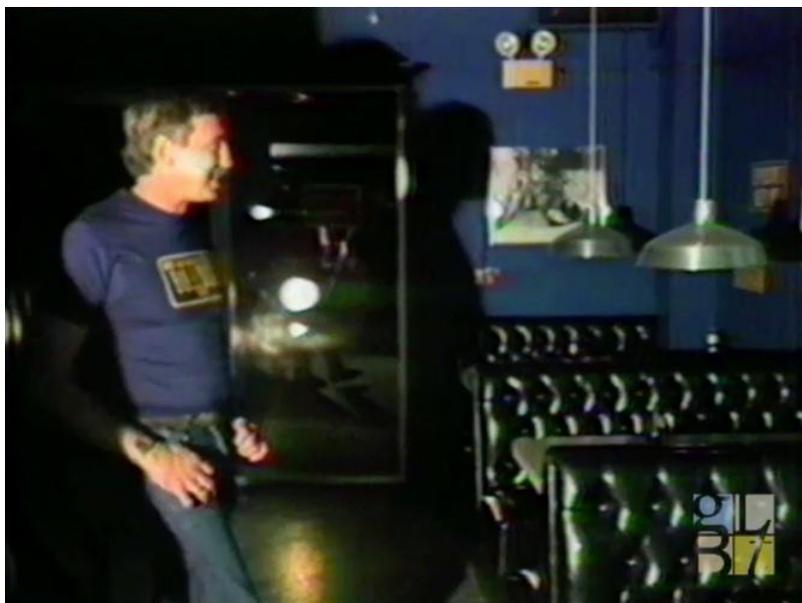


Figure 5 The Truck Stop Restaurant

The Bulldog's truck stop restaurant was a large area with several booths and tables lining one wall, which was decorated with road signs and other items related to trucking. As shown in Figure 6, the area was quite convincing as a restaurant when viewed from the right angle.³⁷ Archived signage and management records indicate that a limited menu of short-order food was available, although it is not clear if this was the case throughout its operation.³⁸ Nevertheless, as Gerber explains, the space was primarily meant to evoke the experience of cruising for sex at a truck stop and great efforts were undertaken to make it look authentic. This included the installation of a vintage glass storefront that led to a smaller chamber, where a second large truck cab had been reassembled.

It was eleven hundred dollars just for that glass right there. We put another truck outside of there and the lights are burning all the time and it made it appear like as you're sitting in the restaurant here and look[ing] out these glass windows in the front door of the restaurant there was a big semi parked out there. And on each side of the truck are painted on the walls pictures of trucks that are sitting in the back parking lot and that the drivers are here in the restaurant, getting some food today.³⁹

Beyond the truck's function as a backdrop for the cruising fantasy while inside the restaurant, it was also "available to customers on a private basis to smoke marijuana" and "to sit at there at the steering wheel and have sex."⁴⁰ Drawing on Bérubé's verbiage again, it is easy to see the ways the restaurant and truck *recreated* semi-public environments within the context of the bathhouse walls. Moreover, in the case of the Bulldog, these architectural flourishes clearly supported the establishment's brand identity. Whether one saw oneself as the trucker or projected that role onto others, the materiality of the truck stop actively contributed to the imaginative work through which the itinerant alpha was signaled and interpellated.



Figure 6 The Cell Block Area

However, if the truck stop restaurant was meant to signal the transience of the Itinerant Alpha, then the cell block area, shown in Figure 7, was its dramatic opposite. In the narrative of the archetype, being locked up meant losing that itinerancy.⁴¹ Beyond this, however, persistent associations with circumstantial homosexuality in prison only heightened the sexual appeal of the cell block area. It is clear from the interview that Gerber saw this zone as the Bulldog's *pièce de résistance*. During the building's renovation, the owners contracted a professional welder to assemble the two-story cell block using steel bars in a basement area that had been used as an office/apartment by the previous owner.

We ripped everything out, started over and we decided we wanted a double-story cell block here and we wanted to incorporate all the features of a natural jail cell scene, right to the point of having an open area bed where people would be sleeping in the center of the room. We put in cell blocks into private cells and cell bars that could be locked up and handcuffs.⁴²

Along one wall, eight life-sized jail cells are stacked in two floors of four cells each, and patrons could enter the room on either level. A catwalk spanned the width of the room, allowing patrons an excellent view of the open area below, which included a full size bathtub in addition to the beds Gerber mentions above. For the sake of alleged authenticity, steel-framed beds, urinals and toilets (without seats) were installed in several of the cells, although a few small murals referencing the truck stop theme punctuate this illusion. Described by Gerber as the primary space in which orgies occurred, the cell block area was immensely popular, especially during events.

Well, parties, you couldn't get into the room. It was too full. In fact, we were afraid the place would fall down, cause that's a steel beam. I didn't know, even though we had a welder come in here and weld it up...But normally, this is the main activity room with people and there were a lot of people in here all the time. This is where everybody came.⁴³

As the main space for public play, the cell block was a key feature in marketing the Bulldog. During the 1980 San Francisco Pride Parade, for example, the Bulldog promoted its post-parade cell block party by distributing blue and silver doubloons, which granted free membership or free admission, respectively. Advertisements for the event describe a variety of attractions, including the screening of pornography, a live DJ set and a bootblack on hand to polish leatherware. Shown in Figure 8, the flyer also features excerpts from positive reviews of the Bulldog, which appeared in various gay publications after its opening.⁴⁴ Taking such reviews into consideration, along with the information Gerber shares about these events, one can conclude that they were successful and brought hundreds of men into the Bulldog at a time.

IN CO-OPERATION WITH
DRUMMER Mag.

**CELL
 BLOCK
 PARTY**

**JUNE 29
 5-PM
 (AFTER THE PARADE)**

ANY BLUE DUBLOON (from the parade) GOOD FOR FREE MEMBERSHIP
 ANY SILVER DUBLOON (from the parade) GOOD FOR ADMITTANCE TO PARTY

VHS Films by COLT—Slide Show by BROOKS JONES
 Music by DAVID MARKHAM—LUBE with any Accommodation
 HARDWARE to first 300 men through the door
 MAX the original Bulldog—BOOTBLACK at your service

"A two-story prison tier that is so incredibly real (real cells, real bars, real toilets. . .) that when you see a guard standing on the second tier looking down on you, you're ready to kneel down. . ."
Drummer

"Two floors of jail cells with cots and urinals. . . might put you in the mood for bad behavior. Overhead are fuck-film screens with the latest fantasies filling in the gaps."
In Touch

"Indulge it to the limit at San Francisco's newest and largest bath — BULLDOG. It does provide. . . jail cells, catwalks, two real truck cabs. . ."
Blueboy

"Innovative, imaginative, unique, kinky. . . a definite turn-on!"
The Alternate

"The advertising slogan 'Truckers Welcome' tells it like it is. . . you can do your own fantasy bit in two stories of jail cells with catwalks. . . plenty of very interesting play spaces."
The Advocate

BULLDOG

132 Turk St. **BATHS** (415) 775-5511

THE LARGEST BATH IN THE USA 1980
 Motorcycle parking available across Turk St.

Figure 7 Bulldog Baths' "Cell Block Party" Flyer

In his declaration, Bérubé argues that such spaces “recreated and transformed the environment of prisons and jails, where generations of gay men have ended up for risking sex in toilets, parks, and the YMCA.”⁴⁵ Again, the basic logic behind his interpretation of these spaces is that they provided a creative outlet for gay men to act out sexual fantasies that were otherwise dangerous or illegal. Moreover, I read such a space as accentuating sexual power dynamics and, like the leather scene in private sex clubs described above, as offering gay-identified men a opportunity to act out a butch masculinity or to seek out a sexual partner who would.

The final fantasy environment discussed herein is the sex slave auction platform. Further accentuating the power dynamics between patrons, this space was center stage for the Bulldog's popular sex slave auctions. Detailed records from these parties do not exist, but combining Gerber's discussion in the Molly Hogan Reel with the business records provides a rough sketch of how these events unfolded. Raised a few steps above the ground, a carpeted platform on one side of a large room provided a space for the volunteer sex slaves and the emcee auctioneer to stand. On the left side one finds a concrete pillar with steel hooks onto to which restraints could be secured; to the right, a large cage with a small door. Here, Gerber and Taylor discuss the space and give a sense of the auction itself.

GERBER. And this is where a lot of the slaves were handcuffed and kept for long periods of time. Notice the low-hanging door. They had to crawl through to get in. There's hooks on the wall—you could use those for the slave auction. We'd handcuff people to that. These were there and there's wax on the floor. See where they poured wax all over the carpet? And this is wax [pointing].

TAYLOR. Was that before sale or after?

GERBER. During the sale. They were...they were trying to make the slave look better, so they would...they wanted to show how much torture the slave could...

TAYLOR. Enjoy?

GERBER. Enjoy... or accept or tolerate.⁴⁶

As this brief exchange evidences, volunteers for auction were guided through the space in restraints and paraded across the platform to be bid on by other attendees. The details of the final arrangements are unclear, but Gerber's descriptions suggest that the participant with the winning bid would be paired up with the volunteer sex slave and allowed to head off for a sexual encounter together for the duration of the party. To be clear, Gerber describes the whole point of the auctions as a promotional marketing campaign. Because "Bulldog Bucks" (see Figure 9) were distributed at check-in on a regular basis, patrons were incentivized to visit often in order to accumulate the play currency.⁴⁷

Typically what would happen is that when you come in we would offer you some slave money in connection with your visit...and you could use that then to purchase a slave on a later date. So that the slave auctions would come up once a month. And slaves could then be purchased with this play money and it wasn't anything that was illegal, it's just a promotion or in-house thing. And we also had master parties where slaves could purchase masters.⁴⁸

Although Gerber's mention of "master parties" adds important context to these events, it is worth noting that this idea appears to have first come up in February of 1982, so the vast majority of the parties were "slave parties".



Figure 8 Bulldog Baths' "Bulldog Bucks" Promotional Currency

In this way, these events underscore the performative power dynamics that animated the Bulldog's fantasy environments. Each revolving around different incarnations of the Itinerant Alpha, the truck stop restaurant, cell block area, and sex slave auction platform all leveraged unique spatial arrangements to stage and choreograph sexual encounters between men. While such environments were common (but not ubiquitous) among *modern gay bathhouses*, the Bulldog remains an especially clear example of this fundamental shift in the development of the baths during the 1970s. In the years that followed, rising concerns about HIV/AIDS would test the resolve of these establishments, as the very same fantasy environments would be pointed to as evidence of a hedonistic recklessness that might be causally related to the rapid spread of the virus. However, when the Bulldog closed its doors in 1982, a markedly different narrative of their closure would emerge: one that named persistent problems with unhoused Tenderloin residents, and not the specter of HIV, as the major reason for the investors' decision to cease operation.

3.6 Spatial Politics and the Closure of the Bulldog Baths

Early in the documentary, Taylor recalls that the bathhouse once served as a point of refuge. As a patron of the previous Club Turkish Baths, he remembers making his way through the Tenderloin to the entrance of 132 Turk Street. “When you got into these stairs in the fifties, you were safe from the street people. How was it when you were here?”⁴⁹ Perhaps suggestive of a previous conversation off-camera, Gerber immediately picks up on his use of the phrase “street people,” which he goes on to use several times throughout the remainder of the interview.

Well that didn’t change from the time we took it over in seventy-nine. And it was just as bad from the standpoint of the street people. That’s the major reason why we discontinued operation here. The street people made too much trouble for customers and employees alike. We were just afraid somebody would get hurt and we felt that we didn’t want to be responsible for that.⁵⁰

Here, Gerber first voices that he and the other investors were motivated to close the Bulldog by a concern for protecting patrons from the so-called “street people.” I take this phrase to refer either to people experiencing homelessness or “the people of a neighborhood, especially a crowded big-city neighborhood or ghetto, who frequent the streets of their area.”⁵¹ As discussed above, several decades of urban development projects had concentrated low-income San Franciscans in the vicinity of the Bulldog. As housing costs rose in the late 1970s and SRO hotels were demolished or converted for other uses, both the Tenderloin and the neighboring Civic Center neighborhood saw a dramatic increase in the number of unhoused residents, many of whom spent their days on the pavement amid the bustle of the city.

Prior even to the Bulldog’s opening, a tense relationship had developed between the investors and these residents. For example, when describing the process of buying the Mack trucks and having them delivered piece-by-piece, Gerber recalls that “the street people saw them bringing this junk truck stuff in here—wheels, axels, bumpers, and things, and everything else, winches—and they said, ‘what are you gonna do in there?’ And I told them we were making a used truck parts store.”⁵² Though offered as a humorous anecdote, the deception implied here bespeaks the owners’ conviction that the neighborhood’s residents were *not* presumed to be potential customers.

Later on, when Taylor asks Gerber to describe the intended clientele of the Bulldog, he responds by first emphasizing the scene they were going for, stating that they were “very selective in trying to build up the clientele that would be representative of the Bulldog” and that such a clientele would reflect the brand identity that animated their advertising campaigns and internal aesthetics. Then, otherwise unprompted, he veers back to the “street people.”⁵³

We did not discriminate. We allowed people to come in if they qualified, and so from that stand point, as most things do in different neighborhoods of the city, this was not an easy neighborhood to deal with the street people. A lot of the gay people who did start coming here would not come back because of being accosted in the street by the street people and run into trouble with that, so it did change substantially from the beginning to the end of the operation.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, Gerber does not expand on the process through which potential patrons qualified for entry, his commentary seems to suggest that their policy of not discriminating brought its own challenges. Moreover, by pointing again to a narrative in which patrons were harassed by those living in the Tenderloin, he further emphasizes the challenges he perceived as resulting from the establishment’s location in that neighborhood. Later on, Gerber outlines a few proactive measures taken by the owners, such as planting trees and regularly washing the sidewalks on the block. “It’s a battle that’ll never end,” he concludes, “It’s always necessary to be down on the street patrolling the street and monitoring what the activity of the people there [is]. It was difficult.”⁵⁵

It is at this point Taylor reframes the conversation more specifically around race, recalling racial diversity in the previous Club Turkish Baths and asking if the same was true for the Bulldog.

That’s pretty typical of what our operation was, too. You’re in a neighborhood where these people are living and go out and wanna spend time and so consequently there was that activity. We would not let it become a flop house, so we would not let people come and stay hours at a time. We restricted their visit to eight hours so they would not be staying, and using it for a flop house. The previous owner allowed ‘em to stay 24 hours or long times and that’s when it becomes a flop house. Thus it became dangerous, it became very drug-orientated, and it was difficult for him to manage the business as well. So, with certain simple rules, you can control that, if you are inclined to do so.⁵⁶

There is a lot to be said about this response and the sense in which it draws on racist tropes about vagrancy and drug use, all of which seem predicated by his use of the phrase “these people.”

However, absent further explanation of whom Gerber was referring to, it remains unclear whether the “simple rules” he mentions were used to unfairly target patrons of color. Moreover, available desk logs and management minutes from the Bulldog are similarly vague and contain no direct references to patrons being turned away or kicked out for violating these rules. In fact, of all of the records I reviewed, only one set of minutes from a management meeting on July 14, 1980 directly addresses the question of racial diversity. Following a discussion on the “need for a variety of looks” in the Bulldog (as well as the other establishments run by the same owners), a vote is recorded.⁵⁷ With three of those present at the meeting voting “to start hiring blacks” and two opposed, no consensus was reached and the question does not come up again.⁵⁸

Although the ongoing problems with the neighborhood were repeatedly given as the main reason for the Bulldog’s closure, Gerber briefly mentions another aspect of this decision near the end of the interview.

The primary reason that we did close the bathhouse up... We do own the real estate, too, you see. We had some disgruntled investors. There were five who owned it, but we ended up with three investors. And we were so upset with the whole problem of dealing with that and the street scene, again the people out in the street that we felt that were just no longer interested and decided to just close it up and sell the real estate. So that’s what happened.⁵⁹

Indeed, the two of the investors were so disgruntled that they filed a lawsuit to press for dissolution of the limited partnership. Also contained in the Bulldog’s archival records, the complaint alleges a wide range of maltreatment by Gerber and the other investors, including extortion and conspiracy to defraud.

Reading all of this together, one finds several competing explanations for the ultimate closure of the Bulldog Baths in 1982. Early on in this project, when first reviewing the Molly Hogan Reel, I hypothesized that Gerber’s repeated claims about the “street people” were a means of distracting from the more realistic explanation that rapid rise of HIV/AIDS cases in San Francisco prompted the owners to fold their cards. (Although Gerber does ultimately address HIV, the Bulldog closed several years before the final court order that shuttered establishments across the city.) However, it is also possible that he was attempting to distract from the lawsuit by framing the closure as respondent to an external challenge that unfortunately left his co-

investors disgruntled. More research, particularly interviews with those involved, may shed light on these remaining questions in the future. However, given the available evidence, it is clear that an antagonistic relationship between the Bulldog and the neighborhood's residents was a significant strain on the establishment.

Taking the point of view of the so-called “street people,” for example, helps to illustrate this point. At a time when housing availability was rapidly diminishing and low-income jobs were becoming scarce in the city, homelessness skyrocketed, especially in the Tenderloin. For many people, the demolition or conversion of SRO hotels, which offered low-cost, short-term stay, was a final straw. In this milieu, it is hard to overestimate the ire with which they might have reacted to the Bulldog's opening. With hundreds of lockers and dozens of private rooms, as well as a large assortment of bathing facilities, a bathhouse—in its most literal sense—understandably appealed to people living without such amenities. Yet Gerber and his colleagues actively prevented their establishment from being utilized by this population.

Moreover, although San Francisco's unhoused population certainly included (and includes today) people of many different racial backgrounds, the extant history of urban development during this period makes it clear that the effects of gentrification were felt most strongly by Black and Latino San Franciscans. In this way, taking Gerber's slippage between “street people” and “these people” as thinly-veiled racism reveals a final aspect of history. Ultimately, whether and how often people of color were welcomed at the Bulldog remains unclear. However, folding Gerber's commentary together with the ways in which the Bulldog's brand identity invoked the white, working-class masculinity of the Itinerant Alpha, one can conclude that the ideal demographic envisioned by the owners was not racially diverse.

3.7 Conclusion

Like many *modern gay bathhouses* operating from the late-1960s to the early 1980s, the Bulldog Baths employed a nuanced and calculated marketing strategy to encourage and sustain business. Benefitting from shifts away from industrial economies and toward development plans that focused on attracting tourism and high-income employment, many bathhouses likely saw an

increase in patronage. In the case of the Bulldog, however, the negative effects of those development programs led to a tense relationship with their surrounding neighborhood, which ultimately drove them to close down. Whether other bathhouses faced similar situations is not clear, however, due to the overwhelming effects of HIV/AIDS in the years that followed.

Although this project is informed by anti-capitalist theoretical frameworks which I bring to bear on the commercial enterprise called “the *modern gay bathhouse*,” my intention here is not simply to rehearse an argument *against* these spaces. Neither do I seek to redeem or redefine them as Foucauldian heterotopias by enumerating the ways in which they did radical queer work in a deeply sex-negative, classist, and heteronormative society. Rather, my focus is on the manipulation of materiality and discourse through which bathhouses were enacted by the people who owned and operated them. Principally, I have argued that Bérubé’s account of the development of the *modern gay bathhouse* fails to capture an inherent contradiction: in spite of all of its work as a quasi-sacred sexual refuge for an imagined community of gay men writ large, the *modern gay bathhouse* was operated and marketed according to the logics of liberal and neo-liberal capitalism—processes through which consumers are hierarchized according to race, gender, age, body-type and available means. In contrast to the narrative that bathhouses (“in their sartorial simplicity”) resolved class barriers and eased interracial encounters, my analysis of the Bulldog Baths finds not only that racialized notions of class and belonging informed who was welcome and who was not, but that the discursive point-of-gravity in the Bulldog’s aesthetic—an amalgam of sexual archetypes that I call the “Itinerant Alpha”—itself implies a similar contradiction. Through the Bulldog’s aesthetic theme, interior design and marketing campaigns, its owners and operators fetishized images of itinerant, working-class hypermasculinity while concurrently antagonizing those actually experiencing homelessness. Moreover, while benefiting from the deindustrialization of the city and the shift toward a tourist economy, the Bulldog recreated the gritty, industrial scenery of urban cruising culture as the backdrop to ephemeral, furtive sex.

From a Marxist perspective, such contradictions can be understood as arising from capital accumulation. Granted new legitimacy by privacy laws and the decriminalization of sex between men, *modern gay bathhouses* existed during an exciting era of U.S. history that saw

visible, proud LGBT/queer communities emerge in major cities. Taking advantage of an array of queer publications, festivals and other opportunities for advertising, the *modern gay bathhouse* had far greater access to potential patrons than did its predecessor, which allowed for capital to be both generated and reinvested the development of physical spaces. Allan Bérubé clearly saw this as an expression of sexual creativity and a reflection of major socio-political shifts, but his *History* otherwise obfuscates the active role played by bathhouse owners and operators in designing and executing their businesses.

3.8 Notes

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- ¹ Barry Reay, "Promiscuous Intimacies: Rethinking the History of American Casual Sex," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2014): 1–24.
- ² John Alan Lee, "The Gay Connection," *Urban Life* 8, no. 2 (1979): 175–98.
- ³ Martin S. Weinberg and Williams, Colin, "Gay Baths and the Social Organization of Impersonal Sex," *Social Problems* 23, no. 2 (1975): 124–36.
- ⁴ Renaud Camus, "XXIV: A Perfect Fuck," in *TRICKS: A Sexual Odyssey Man-to-Man* (New York: Ace Charter Books, 1981), 235–38. Published originally in French by Mazarine in 1978.
- ⁵ Camus, 235.
- ⁶ Camus, 235.
- ⁷ Allan Bérubé, "Declaration of Allan Berube in Support of Memorandum of Points and Authorities in Support of Ex Parte Application for Leave to Intervene," November 5, 1984, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 24, Folder 20, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center.
- ⁸ Bérubé, 39.
- ⁹ Bérubé, 39.
- ¹⁰ Bérubé, 39.
- ¹¹ Alex Schafran, "Origins of an Urban Crisis: The Restructuring of the San Francisco Bay Area and the Geography of Foreclosure," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 2 (2013): 663–88.
- ¹² Richard Edward DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992).
- ¹³ Tony Robinson, "Gentrification and Grassroots Resistance in San Francisco's Tenderloin," *Urban Affairs Review* 30, no. 4 (1995): 489.
- ¹⁴ Gayle, Rubin. "Elegy for the Valley of the Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981-1996." *Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*: 107. Rubin recounts the following neighborhood names in the local gay argot: the "Valley of the Kings," a leather scene in South of Market; the "Valley of the Queens," comprised of Polk Street bars that catered to an older, more effeminate clientele, and the "Valley of the Dolls," which referred to the Castro neighborhood famous for its throngs of young gay men, many of whom were new to the city.
- ¹⁵ Robinson, 489.
- ¹⁶ Robinson, 493.
- ¹⁷ Robinson, 489.
- ¹⁸ Karl Beitel, "Did Overzealous Activists Destroy Housing Affordability in San Francisco?," *Urban Affairs Review* 42, no. 5 (2007): 753.
- ¹⁹ Bulldog Tape 1 (Carton 1), Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Desk Logs (Box 1), Bulldog Bathhouse Records and Memorabilia, 1986-03, The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society. Compare to prices/hours at closure: double rooms were \$18, single rooms \$10, and lockers \$7; Sunday-Thursday open 9:00 p.m. to 9:00 a.m., Friday and Saturday 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 a.m., and closed Monday.
- ²⁵ Bulldog Tape 1, Carton 1, Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Desk Logs (Box 1), Bulldog Bathhouse Records and Memorabilia, 1986-03, The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.
- ²⁸ Bulldog Tape 1, Carton 1, Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society. The other Mack truck was reassembled as part of the Bulldog's truck stop restaurant, discussed below.
- ²⁹ Ira Tattelman, "Staging Sex and Masculinity at the Mineshaft," *Men and Masculinities* 7, no. 3 (2005): 300.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Tattelman, 307.

³² This claim is based on the images shown in the Molly Hogan Reel. The murals themselves, while preserved in the GLBT Historical Society's archives, have not been digitized and were not otherwise available to view during my visits.

³³ The Fair Oaks Project, <http://www.fairoaks-project.com/> (Accessed February 21, 2019).

³⁴ Mark Thompson, Advocate.com. <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/art/photography/2014/06/28/photos-bathhouse-history-lesson> (Accessed February 21, 2019).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Although Gerber, Taylor, and much of the advertising copy uses the term, "slave auction," I have chosen to use "sex slave auction," as well as "sex slave" and "sex master," to disambiguate these terms from references to chattel slavery.

³⁷ Still image from "Bulldog Tape 1 [36:16]," Molly Hogan videotapes, 1992-10, Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

³⁸ Bulldog Signage (Oversized Box), Bulldog Bathhouse Records and Memorabilia, 1986-03, The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

³⁹ Bulldog Tape 1, Carton 1, Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Still image from "Bulldog Tape 1 [40:35]," Molly Hogan videotapes, 1992-10, Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴² Bulldog Tape 1, Carton 1, Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Image of Bulldog Baths' "Cell Block Party" flyer, San Francisco LGBT General Ephemera Collection, SUB EPH, Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴⁵ Allan Bérubé, "Declaration of Allan Berube in Support of Memorandum of Points and Authorities in Support of Ex Parte Application for Leave to Intervene," November 5, 1984, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 24, Folder 20, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center.

⁴⁶ Bulldog Tape 1, Carton 1, Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴⁷ Image of Bulldog Baths' "Bulldog Bucks" promotional currency, San Francisco LGBT General Subjects Ephemera Collection, SUB EPH, Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴⁸ Bulldog Tape 1, Carton 1, Molly Hogan Videotapes, 1992-10 The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Street people," Dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/street-people> (Accessed February 25, 2019). A third definition listed refers to "people who make their living on the streets".

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Management Meeting Minutes (Box 1, Folder 10), Bulldog Bathhouse Records and Memorabilia, 1986-03, The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4. REPRESENTATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY GAY BATHHOUSES

Although the original HBO television series *Looking* (2014-2015) is set in contemporary San Francisco, an episode in first season features what has been consistently described as the show's "bathhouse scene," despite both the fact that the word "bathhouse" is not mentioned and that the establishment in which the scene is filmed is technically a "sex club" called *Eros*.¹ After all, the city's gay "bathhouses" were shut down in the mid-1980s and *Eros*' technical designation as a "safer sex club" hinges on the fact that there are no private rooms available, such that all sexual activity can be monitored for condom usage. Still, because the building contains several features commonly-associated with bathhouses (e.g., locker rooms, a steam room, a sauna, and open play areas), *Looking* is able to leverage these key discursive elements to create a scene in which the spatio-temporal location of "in the bathhouse" is both depicted and interrogated. In what follows, I use this scene as a jumping-off point for an investigation of *contemporary gay bathhouses*, with particular focus on Web content and other digital narratives developed by bathhouses more than three decades after Allan Bérubé's declaration.

In this scene, a main character named Dom, who is a server with dreams of opening his own restaurant, meets Lynn, a co-owner of a flower shop described in the show as a cornerstone establishment in the gay Castro neighborhood. Dom, played by Murray Bartlett, is 39 at this point in the series and thus the oldest of the three best friends who make up the show's core characters. Although Lynn's age is not given specifically, he's played by a 60-year old Scott Bakula and his identity as a member of a generation older than Dom's functions productively throughout the series. By this point, Dom has already been established as the sexually self-actualized member of his group of friends, and the scene's opening shot of him stowing his clothing in a locker as club music plays overhead immediately locates him in what is supposed to read as a gay bathhouse. The camera follows as he moves down the hallway, passing a wall covered in posters and advertisements and pausing momentarily to make eye-contact with a man in the shower area. Eventually, he ends up in the steam room with Lynn, who quickly strikes up a conversation.

LYNN. No one really likes to talk in these places anymore, do they?

DOM. Did they ever?

LYNN. Sure, they used to. Had bands sometimes, food. Still had sex, but it was...friendlier.²

Lynn closes his eyes and smiles, nostalgically. After a brief pause, Dom re-initiates conversation.

DOM. You always lived in the city?

LYNN. Well, I wasn't born here, of course, but I heard the siren and west I came.

DOM. I bet it was cool back then.

LYNN. "*Back then...*" Suddenly feel like I'm a hundred and three...

DOM. Oh, I'm sorry.

LYNN. No, but it was...it really was. And then it wasn't.³

Although they do not interact beyond the steam room in this episode, Lynn's use of the phrase "these places" expands the discursive boundaries of their conversation to encompass not just the establishment in which the scene is set, but the larger material-discursive category of bathhouses overall—both as they exist today and as they have existed in the past. Within the context of the larger series, Lynn's brief reverie for the baths of the past reflects his character's subject position as an older gay man in San Francisco; as someone who survived the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. These initial contributions to his backstory feel familiar—*of course he was not born there; of course he arrived "back then" and from an unnamed eastern elsewhere to live openly as a gay man in San Francisco; and of course it was cool until it wasn't*. In this way, both Lynn's presence and the dialogue he contributes intra-act with physical setting of their conversation, insofar as his story reflects and reproduces the story of gay bathhouses, of gay history in the city, and of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, given his mention of conversation, entertainment, food, and "friendlier" sex, the resulting narrative is decidedly positive—momentarily eliding the devastation of the crisis and recounting the sexual camaraderie of the so-called "Golden Era." But what, if anything, do such narratives have to say about *contemporary gay bathhouses*? Are they to be understood (either nostalgically or critically) as mere relics of pre-HIV gay life; as vestigial structures whose purpose has long been served? Or does their persistence across more than a century of U.S. urban history evidence a timelessness in their enterprise and, thereby, encourage a recognition that there will always be demand for venues in which men can seek out sex with other men?

Throughout this project, I have repeatedly encountered narratives that contextualize gay bathhouses as things-of-the-past, which, even if they do still exist, do so as ruins of a bygone era when sexuality was repressed and societal pressure forced openly gay and closeted men alike into shadowy sexual encounters that ultimately accelerated the HIV epidemic. So clear, it seems, are the alleged connections between HIV and gay bathhouses that many people have reacted with utter shock at the continued existence of the baths today, more than thirty years after cities like San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles first moved to shut them down. Others, especially those more knowledgeable of this history, have cautioned me against making claims about the relationship between bathhouses and HIV altogether and argued that causal logics connecting the two are foundationally homophobic and center on a distorted sense of “risky sex,” which has led to the continued hyper-surveillance of sex between men. And yet, still others with whom I have spoken—especially gay men around my age and much older—have either immediately regaled me with their own bathhouse stories or, eager to compare notes, asked me to list out all of the baths I have visited. In my view, these widely-divergent receptions speak to how, after the 1980s, the baths largely retreated from public consciousness. No longer considered the proverbial “ground zero” for the transmission of HIV, they were mostly forgotten by the mainstream press and often avoided by major LGBT rights groups.

Returning to the bathhouse scene from *Looking*, it is important to remember that the scene is not a flashback, but rather an interrogation of the present moment in spatial terms. In fact, the urban sexual landscape of San Francisco is a major component of the series.⁴ In other episodes, a furtive hookup is attempted behind some bushes in a park; the labor of a sex worker is casually negotiated in a coffee shop; a conversation about moving in with one’s boyfriend takes place in an apartment in Oakland; an affair begins in the chic downtown office of a tech company; all of the main characters rotate through the same multi-room historic apartment in the Castro; and dozens of scenes are set in the city’s bars, restaurants, and street festivals. In this context, however, the bathhouse seems at once at home on the larger list of spaces within the urban sexual landscape, and yet, also like the odd-one-out; both a vision of the past and a reminder that some version of “these places” still exists. Of course, many still do. At present, a few hundred *contemporary gay bathhouses* operate not only in the so-called gay neighborhoods

of European and North American metropolises, but also in smaller, tourism-focused locales in Central America and amongst the suburban sprawl of midwestern U.S. cities.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to these present-day establishments, asking what forms they take, how their operation differs from past generations of bathhouses, and also what challenges they face today. Taking a mixed-methods approach, I engage the category of *contemporary gay bathhouses* through a content analysis of websites produced by establishments operating in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Drawing on scholarship and mainstream press articles to contextualize them further, I seek again to uncover the relationship between physical space in the baths and the sexual practices that occur within those spaces. Building upon Allan Bérubé's historical periodization, which separated *early gay bathhouses* (1900-1940s) from the *modern gay bathhouses* (1950s-1980s) which followed them, I propose the category of *contemporary gay bathhouses* to account for those operating from the 1990s through the current decade. As discussed in previous chapters, Bérubé's distinctions between these categories relied in large part on physical changes that took place in the bathhouse environment. *Early gay bathhouses* added private cubicles or small rooms, which could be locked to provide privacy, to the physical structure of the 19th-century Victorian bathhouse. *Modern gay bathhouses*, as demonstrated in the previous chapter by the *Bulldog Baths*, augmented the structure of the *early gay bathhouse* by installing fantasy environments, recreational areas, and venues for both live performance and the projection of pornographic media. In all cases, these changes in the physical space of the bathhouse both reflected and affected sexual practices in those spaces in a recursive, co-constitutive way.

By comparison, there are no such physical changes that distinguish *contemporary gay bathhouses* from *modern gay bathhouses*. If anything, these spaces today seem to represent a kind of leveling out or normalizing of the wide variety of innovations introduced by the latter category. While there are some notable exceptions, *contemporary gay bathhouses* function much like their predecessors: they sell access to a physical space comprised of lockers, private rooms, saunas, steam rooms, hot-tubs, showers, recreational lounges, and fantasy environments. Some also feature pools, sun decks, gyms, tanning booths, and small theaters. The most recent of these, according to Bérubé, would be the gyms and other workout facilities, which he described as

having been added in the 1980s. As such, my decision to separate out *contemporary gay bathhouses* as a category is not based on an important change in the physical space. Rather, it reflects two important historical events that impacted how these baths are conceived of and managed as businesses: the HIV/AIDS crisis and the advent of the World Wide Web. The effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic were felt both in terms of the closure of many baths during the late 1980s and in terms of how those that remained open embraced the concept of safer sex by offering condoms, lubricants, STI testing, and other sexual health resources. In the wake of the crisis, changes in local-level regulations affected both how establishments were licensed and, in some limited cases, how the interior physical space could be arranged. As described further below, this has resulted in a slight degree of variation among *contemporary gay bathhouses*; although many mainstay features of the baths remain virtually ubiquitous, both the availability of private rooms and the rules determining conduct in open spaces are location-dependent. In what follows, as I examine digital representations of these spaces, I further unpack these variations, as well as the underlying philosophies that fuel such private/public distinctions *within* the context of the baths.

The second major historical event, the advent of the World Wide Web, has had a slower, but longer-reaching effect. As discussed in the previous chapter, *modern gay bathhouses* contrasted greatly with their predecessors in terms of how explicitly they could operate. Bolstered by the emergent gay and lesbian press, as well as by the development of printed international gay guides, the establishments of that era were able to attract tourists from around the world, compel locals to participate in a robust schedule of parties, and incentivize regular patrons with nuanced promotional marketing campaigns. To put it bluntly, the Web made all of that a whole lot easier and more effective. Although some *contemporary gay bathhouses* continue to place print advertisements, the development of the Web provided each bathhouse with an opportunity to establish their own digital territory. By designing and maintaining web pages that publicize their location, hours, pricing structures, events, and promotions (as well as showcase key facilities and so-called fantasy environments), gay bathhouses could reach potential patrons wherever they had Internet access. Moreover, as printed guides gave way to travel websites and other online directories, *contemporary gay bathhouses* were folded into ever more global circuits of gay tourism. Although I focus below on establishments in the United

States, Canada, and Mexico, I do so with a concomitant interest in the transnational network of which they are a part.

4.1 Bérubé on the Future of the Baths

In his 1984 declaration in *California v. Owen, et al.*, Allan Bérubé concluded by offering three suggestions relative to bathhouses that would “avoid unexpected social problems and still take strong measures to halt the spread of AIDS.”⁵ As discussed in previous chapters, the purpose of the declaration was straightforward; Bérubé sought to leverage historical information about bathhouses and their development in the twentieth century to argue against their closure. As in the declaration overall, Bérubé begins his elaboration of this point by calling attention to the dynamic history of development in these establishments. Despite enormous risk, he argues that gay men’s efforts transformed bathhouses into an important component of gay communities and, therefore, that “[t]hey can function as erotic environments where safe sex activity can be encouraged and where men can enjoy sexual intimacy and affection in an environment that is safe, clean and pro-gay.”⁶ Here his logic suggests that past evidence of change/development is a good predictor of future potential and that by closing these establishments altogether, the City would be losing out on an opportunity to use them to counter the burgeoning HIV/AIDS crisis in San Francisco. Secondly, Bérubé suggests that, in spite of political gains made within and outside of bathhouses, anti-gay sentiment continued in San Francisco and around the country. After referencing the assassination of Supervisor Harvey Milk and citing a National Gay Task Force survey reporting that more than 90% of gay men and lesbians had been victimized in some way because of their sexuality, Bérubé writes that bathhouses and bars serving the gay community are necessary as “zones of safety, privacy and peer support.”⁷ Finally, Bérubé contends that “a working relationship of cooperation and trust between the city and the gay community is critical in the fight against AIDS.”⁸ Here, he reiterates what is perhaps the most central claim of the entire declaration: that previous efforts on the part of city agencies to control gay bathhouses were marred by anti-gay intentions and, thus, led those in the gay community to be suspicious of the city’s motives. The only solution, according to Bérubé, was for that relationship to be mended; for both patrons and operators of bathhouses to work with representatives from city government to design interventions together.

Records and personal correspondence from the Bérubé Papers make it clear that he was committed to this project for many years after the declaration was written in the San Francisco case and that he went on to make similar contributions in Los Angeles and New York. However, although his history would be republished several times, no significant alterations or updates were ever made and his papers do not make it clear if he continued to conduct research on the topic after 1984. For this reason, the connection to Bérubé's writing on bathhouses is less direct in this chapter. However, as the foregoing discussion will address, several aspects of Bérubé's prescription manifested. By and large, *contemporary gay bathhouses* took the provision of safer-sex education and resources seriously and many developed or maintained ties to local LGBT rights and cultural organizations.

4.2 By the Numbers

At various times, scholars have attempted to quantify the size of the bathhouse industry. In the past, printed gay tourism guides have been useful in this work. For example, a 2003 study by Woods, Tracy and Binson estimated the number and distribution of gay bathhouses in the United States and Canada during the last third of the twentieth century by reviewing issues of the *Damron Men's Travel Guide*.⁹ During this period, the total number of establishments in Canada remained under 50 and only varied slightly. However, in the United States, the so-called "Golden Era" of bathhouses was visible as a noticeable increase lasting from 1972 to 1986, when the total exceeded 100 bathhouses. Moreover, from 1978 to 1985, the authors state that the total number exceeded 150. From 1968 to 1999 gay bathhouses operated in four-fifths of the United States, including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, as well as half of the provinces of Canada. By collecting data from 4,685 gay bathhouse listing across 32 guidebooks, the authors provide a year-to-year analysis "suggest[ing] that there was a precipitous increase in the number of listings from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, followed by a steady decline from 1982 until 1991. A new increase began in 1990, though not as dramatic as the first rise."¹⁰ Notably, the number of bathhouses in Canada did not follow the same trajectory; fewer bathhouses closed there than in the United States. This trend is also visible in the following figure, which compares the total

number of bathhouses in the six cities with the greatest numbers for both countries. While Los Angeles, New York City and San Francisco can each be seen to have a dramatic reduction, particularly after 1984, the number of gay bathhouses operating in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal remained comparatively steady. Moreover, the authors point to a similarity between their findings for the United States and those from another 1992 study of European bathhouses, which found that “the number of saunas in some of the larger cities declined, but in most cities the number of saunas operating in 1992 were the same as had been operating in 1984.”¹¹

In part, the resurgence of the 1990s can be attributed to deregulation following advances in the fight against AIDS and an explicit commitment on the part of bathhouse operators to take recommendations from public health officials seriously. Indeed, most bathhouses operating from the 1990s to the current decade have taken a decidedly proactive approach by providing education and resources to patrons and, in some cases, by policing sexual behaviors. For example, a 2001 study of 63 bathhouses found that 100% of those establishments provided free condoms (compared to 67% providing free lubricants).¹² “All but one facility reported having rules for safer sex behavior in their venue. The vast majority also provided HIV/AIDS education through flyers and posters.”¹³ Additionally, the authors note that safer sex behavior was sometimes promoted through special events, including onsite HIV testing in 40% of establishments.

The question of how safer sex is mandated in these establishments bears further discussion. On the whole, interdictions about “unsafe” or “risky” sexual behaviors relate to penetrative anal sex without a condom and are codified either in a “club rules” or “frequently asked questions” portion of the websites. Violation of these rules may result in expulsion from the facility, especially after repeated offenses or outright refusal to comply. Although patrons may also be encouraged to report others for such violations, the labor of monitoring and responding to such activities sometimes fall on the custodial staff, who move throughout the facility while turning over rooms and cleaning public play areas.¹⁴ Another important aspect of these rules is the curiously different approach that bathhouses have taken to where and how sex is allowed to occur. Due to variations in local health regulations, a bathhouse in one part of the country may not allow any sex at all in public areas (pushing the burden of safer-sex compliance

onto individual patrons in private rooms), while another may not have private rooms at all (ensuring that all sex occurs in public areas where patrons' sexual choices can be monitored). Thus, whether mandated by local regulations or taken on voluntarily by bathhouse operators, such rules often intervene on individual behavior through material changes to the spatial dynamics.

4.3 Signaling the Contemporary Gay Bathhouse

In the scene described at the beginning of this chapter, the television series *Looking* waded into the temporal questions surrounding bathhouses in San Francisco, while simultaneously cheating on a technicality, since it was filmed in a sex club, called *Eros*. That said, its physical structure serves as the perfect setting; the features shown in the scene described above effectively communicate “bathhouse” even as they fail to qualify for an official designation as such: lockers, towels, showers and a steam room, all occupied by otherwise nude men whose largely non-verbal communication suggests they are cruising for sex. From city to city, exact designations vary and establishments which might be considered gay bathhouses by their patrons are sometimes officially licensed as health clubs, spas, gyms, or sex clubs. For example, on their website, *Eros* self-describes as “SAN FRANCISCO’S ACCLAIMED 18+ SAFE SEX CLUB FOR GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN.” Notably, the website does not include the word “bathhouse” and makes no reference to them; it simply describes features, rates, and services. However, the textual and visual cues of the bathhouse can be easily activated to suggest this designation. Advertisements for *Eros* tend to include representations of tiled walls, visible steam, and nude figures, as well as the icons advertising WiFi, the availability of lubricants and gym facilities.

Across the bay, however, one finds a more explicit connection to the legacy of the baths at the Berkeley location of Steamworks Baths, a large chain of bathhouses operating throughout North America.

Steamworks Baths has been providing men with a safe, comfortable, stylish and clean place to meet other men for over 40 years. Relax, work out and play. Open 24/7 365 days a year with locations in Chicago, Toronto, Berkeley, Seattle and Vancouver. Steamworks Baths strives to be the standard setting bathhouse experience in the world. Steamworks is

also committed to being an engaged community partner and has been involved with a wide range of community based arts, health, political and service organizations in the cities where we do business.¹⁵

Although it is not clear from the website exactly when the Berkeley location first opened, features added during a recent renovation are prominently described on the website. Many of these would be familiar to bathhouse patrons in the 1970s, such as deluxe private rooms, private douching stations, hot tubs, showers and steam rooms. Other features bespeak the state-of-the-art aesthetic that Steamworks strives for, such as flat screen monitors throughout the club, free WiFi, and up-to-date gym equipment, as well as satellite television in the lounge and 19 digital channels of video pornography to select from in the private rooms. In my reading, these descriptions underscore the sense in which these spaces have more to do with sexual practices than sexual identity. That is, the selling points that are offered have little to do with “gay culture” or even with establishing a sense of community or camaraderie. Rather, they communicate a space that is not only already staged for sex, but, in the best case, already bustling with potential partners. In a similar fashion, *The Clubs*—which features locations in Columbus, Dallas, Ft. Lauderdale, Houston, Indianapolis, Orlando, St. Louis, and Miami—describes its locations with the words “sauna” and “gym.”

The clubs are seven private saunas and gyms for adult gay and bisexual men. For more than 50 years, we have made it our commitment to promote health and provide a place for men to meet in a safe, healthy and fun environment. Membership is required and you must be at least 18 years of age and show picture ID.¹⁶

Like *Steamworks*, this description of *The Clubs* chain emphasizes its long history and each of their location-specific websites expand on the facilities and amenities available. One important difference, however, is found in the specific language used to describe the target demographic. In the first example, the establishment is described as “providing men with a...place to meet other men,” while the latter describes itself as “for adult gay and bisexual men.” This difference also extends to the ways various *contemporary gay bathhouses* describe themselves; some use the phrase “gay bathhouse” straightforwardly, while others may use more subtle language, such as “private alternative men’s club” or, as seen above, “private saunas and gyms.” In my reading, these differences suggest that each establishment makes calculated decisions in search of advertising language that will appeal to men seeking sexual encounters with other men, while not offending or putting off those who do not identify as gay or bisexual.

4.4 Finding the Baths

As described above, the development of the Web has triggered the development of both individual bathhouse Web pages, as well as sites that aggregate information about bathhouses around the world. For example, a popular gay tourism website, Spartacus.com, signals the globalness of the contemporary bathhouse. On the main page for their branded “Spartacus Saunaguide,” users are presented with a search function that defaults to San Francisco, USA and a set of country-specific listings, grouped by continent.¹⁷ Throughout the guide, photographs of nude or semi-nude men are accompanied by photographs of popular tourist destinations, such as the Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate or the Sydney Opera House.

The Spartacus website, along with its associated downloadable app and various social media channels, is currently owned by GayGuide UG, a limited liability corporation based in Berlin, Germany. The enterprise is the latest in a string to own the Spartacus brand, which was originally founded in the 1970s as an annually-published gay travel guidebook. However, that publication ceased in 2017, and the current owners seem to be pursuing a digital-only approach. In addition to the Saunaguide, the Spartacus website also aggregates information on Pride festivals around the world and provides travel-related content such as hotel reviews, discount offers, and a country-by-country analysis of laws relating to LGBT rights. Moreover, the website provides helpful hints or additional contextual information for various places. For example, an overview paragraph for the bathhouses in the United States warns European travelers of some differences they might encounter.

Saunas are more commonly known as "bath houses" in North America. Often the bath houses in the USA don't meet European standards and generally the sauna culture is not prevalent in the USA. The saunas in New York for example don't mirror to the fame of the city with its diversity. Same in San Francisco, where bath houses are still officially closed, replaced by "sex clubs" with no private rooms, just curtains. This doesn't mean you won't find what you're looking for! Don't forget, for the established saunas in most cities in the USA, you need membership. Most offer a one-day membership option. So don't forget your ID, which is usually required.¹⁸

This passage points to a few possible differences between bathhouse culture in the United States and that in Europe. Apart from the nomenclature (i.e., “sauna” having more currency throughout Europe than “bathhouse” or “baths”), there is the general sentiment that bathhouses are less

prevalent or popular in the United States. Moreover, in places like North Africa and East Asia, care is taken on the website to distinguish between baths that are venues for sexual encounters and other more traditional bathing environments, such as the Ottoman-style *hammam* or the Korean *jjimjilbang*, where sexual encounters are less likely and pose greater risks.¹⁹

Using both the Spartacus Saunaguide and my own web-searching, I identified 70 *contemporary gay bathhouses* in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Of these, 60 had functional websites (46 in the USA, 10 in Canada, and 4 in Mexico), while 4 websites showed a “domain expired” message and 6 did not have websites at all. In most cases, the website was the primary digital vehicle for these establishments, but some websites also contained links to Twitter or Facebook profiles. Ultimately, it is unclear how this sample compares to the total set of *contemporary gay bathhouses* operating today in these three countries. Because listings in the Saunaguide cost money, some establishments may choose other forms of advertising. Moreover, it is possible that some of those included in the following discussion have recently shuttered their operations. In what follows, I describe some major takeaways from that dataset.

4.5 Memberships, Lockers, and Private Rooms

Of the total sample, 43 bathhouses required membership for entry, including one which charged an “entrance fee,” but did not maintain membership records. Almost all of these offered a variety of membership levels, typically based on the duration of the agreement. Beyond this, the higher-cost membership tiers also vary in terms of what benefits or special perks they include. For example, some annual memberships come with free room upgrades or allow patrons to jump to the top of waiting lists if rooms are at capacity. In order to establish a baseline, I determined the lowest-cost membership option for each establishment, as reported on their website. The below table lists this information. Of the 43 bathhouses that charge an entrance fee, more than half offer one-time or one-day agreements and one-month agreements are also common. These options are summarized below in Table 1.

Table 1 Lowest-Cost Membership Options by Frequency

Number of Bathhouses	Lowest-Cost Membership Option
25	One-time / one-day
9	One-month
1	Three-month
1	Five-month
5	Six-month
1	One-year
15	No membership fee
3	Unclear

Adjusting Canadian and Mexican price structures into US dollars, these lowest-cost membership options averaged \$13.07 (n=42), while one-time or one-day memberships averaged \$10.54 (n=25).²⁰ Following the payment of a membership or entrance fee, patrons of contemporary gay bathhouses are typically offered either a locker or private room, with pricing structures for both tending to differentiate between weekdays and weekends. Based on this dataset, the weekday average for locker rental is \$14.98 and the weekend average is \$16.98 (n=58 for both figures). In the case of private room rentals, weekday versus weekend rates varied similarly, averaging \$23.07 for Monday through Thursday, and \$25.26 for Friday through Sunday (n=58 for both). While determining the average total cost for a first-time visit to a bathhouse is complicated by location, time of the week, and preference for a locker or private room, these figures suggest a general range between \$30.00 and \$40.00. Towels, as well as condoms and lubricants, are almost always included and a few establishments even throw in disposable flip-flops.

However, it is important to note that these calculations are based on the lowest-cost options for private rooms; while lockers generally come in only one size, available options and related prices for private rooms vary wildly. In most cases, private rooms are made up of thin cubicle walls that do not reach the ceiling. One practical effect of this design is that sounds carry

throughout the space, such that, even with the door closed, one can hear both the music being played throughout the establishment and the sound of other patrons having sex near by. In addition to the locking door, basic private rooms typically contain a bed with a small single mattress, a shelf or small side table, and a lockable cubby hole or safe in which to stow clothing and other personal items. Although not ubiquitous, common features of these basic rooms include a dimmable light, walls with mirrors on them, and a video monitor with access to in-house pornography channels. Recently, larger and more-upscale bathhouses have installed USB charging ports in these rooms and may offer free WiFi as well. Scaling up from basic to more deluxe options, both the size of the bed and of the room overall increase. Such upscale rooms may include sex slings, a private glory hole that opens up into a public area, or even a private washroom. Weekend rates for such rooms can get quite expensive. For example, weekend rental of an “Xtreme Room/Porn Star Room” at Steamworks Seattle costs \$60.00 USD for 8 hours, while weekend rental of a “Suite” at Toronto’s Spa Excess is listed at \$82.00 CAD for 12 hours.

As mentioned previously, *Eros*, does not offer private rooms, and of the 60 operational websites that I reviewed, it was the only establishment adhering to this structure. By contrast, *Chute Spa* in Phoenix, Arizona, restricts sex acts to private rooms only, citing local law for the prohibition of sex in the open areas.

Due to Phoenix Municipal By-Law, no sexual activity in the “public” areas of the club can be tolerated, this includes the gym, steam room, washrooms, video lounges, retail area, coffee lounge and all other open areas of the club. Members are encouraged to enjoy themselves in the privacy of their rooms. If there is more than one person in a room the door must be closed and locked. No public displays of sexual activity will be allowed. If you contravene this rule you may be asked to leave the club. If you cannot follow this rule you may be barred.²¹

A follow-up note encourages patrons who disagree with the regulation to contact their local Phoenix City Council representatives to complain. Without further information, such as the specifics of the municipal laws governing *Chute Spa*, it is hard to say much more about this arrangement. However, in contrast to the San Francisco regulations governing *Eros*, this example points to contradictory perspectives on the distinction between public and private spaces in bathhouse environments. By relegating all sexual activity to the open areas of sex clubs, San Francisco’s stance shifts the responsibility of monitoring sexual behavior to staff and other

patrons, while the Phoenix approach, as it relegates all sexual behavior to behind closed doors, absolves the staff and other patrons of such responsibilities. Moreover, such regulations reduce the likelihood of group sex, since most private rooms are simply too small for more than three or four patrons, if even that many.

For the most part, however, *contemporary gay bathhouses* allow sex between patrons both in private rooms and in open play areas. In reviewing the 60 functional websites for these establishments, I found that 44 establishments (roughly 73%) contained direct references to open areas or fantasy environments that were explicitly designed for sex. Similar to those described in the previous chapter, these range in size and style, but tend to be composed of dark, mirrored rooms with slings, benches and glory holes. For example, at *Steamworks'* Chicago location, patrons are treated to several play areas, two of which are specially branded.

Six Public play areas on two floors including our infamous “Windy City Blowholes” with multiple TVs and private booth play areas, suck ramps, a public sling, two fuck benches, viewing area and our infamous Sexagon 6 sided glory hole booths.²²

Note here the shifting distinctions between “public” and “private.” In this example, the word “public” marks the space as visible to other patrons, while the word “private” signals that a space is in some way obscured from view. Yet, even when these spaces are somewhat hidden, such as the “Sexagon,” the way that these areas are constructed often invites participants to observe one another as they enter and exit the booths. Grouped together in two back-to-back rows, each booth door has clearance above and below, such that one can tell whether a booth is occupied from the outside. Moreover, glory holes positioned on the interior walls make it possible for a patron in one booth to interact with or observe patrons in the all of the booths that share a wall with his. In this way, such “private” spaces are also interactive and social. Along with slings, ramps, pommel horses and benches, these physical features within the fantasy environments help to position patrons relative to their desired sexual encounters. In the case of a “suck ramp,” for example, one typically finds a raised platform running the length of a wall, with either railing or a half wall with glory holes further separating the space overall. In such an area, patrons signal interest in receiving oral sex by standing on the raised area, while those interested in performing oral sex wait below; the practical implication here being that the space itself contributes to the nonverbal communicative schema by spatially organizing patrons by their anticipated sexual roles.

These findings from the website content are also consistent with more recent scholarship on the structural components of *contemporary gay bathhouses*. Investigating two midwestern bathhouses through more than forty hours of participant-observation, Richard Tewksbury distinguishes between “communal, semi-private” and “communal, public” areas in these establishments.²³ He uses the former to denote what Bérubé called “fantasy environments” and the latter to categorize, “hallways, restrooms, snack areas, and gyms.”²⁴ In particular, he emphasizes the performative component of the fantasy environments; describing them as spaces in which patrons can attract partners (including the attention of voyeurs).

The communal, semi-private areas of the bathhouse, then, are the truly sexualized--and most sexually active--regions; although the bathhouse as a whole serves as a host and facilitator of sexual activity, it is in these communal, semi-private areas that sexual activities are most strongly facilitated and (apparently) most commonly performed.²⁵

By contrast, he notes, “communal, public areas” are not spaces in which sex occurs, although interactions in those spaces may precede sexual encounters that occur elsewhere. For example, a patron may initiate contact in a hallway, “going so far as briefly groping another or exposing their genitals,” before suggesting the pair move to a private room or fantasy environment.²⁶ In this way, fantasy environments, which first installed in *modern gay bathhouses*, have continued to function in much the same way over the last three decades. Providing a backdrop for sex and allowing individual bathhouses to differentiate themselves from their competitors, these areas remain a key structural component to *contemporary gay bathhouses*.

4.6 Challenges & Responses

While the rapid growth of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and early 2000s had tremendous and positive impact on gay bathhouses, more recent Internet-based developments have posed new challenges. Like other gay establishments, *contemporary gay bathhouses* now compete with mobile dating apps, such as Grindr or Scruff. Generally speaking, these platforms allow men to seek out sexual encounters in their geographical vicinity—often literally presenting a grid of other user profiles, arranged from nearest to farthest. Such platforms thus provide men with a digital alternative to seeking sex in physical spaces throughout the urban sexual

landscape. Popular commentary casting mobile apps as the death of bathhouses and bars is plentiful and tends to conflate users of the apps with younger generations of gay men. For example, a 2014 Associated Press article, provocatively titled “Gay bathhouses across US face an uncertain future,” describes efforts by many establishments to remain open by attracting newer and younger patrons.²⁷

Some are doing aggressive online advertising and community outreach. Others tout upscale amenities like plush towels and marble baths. A bathhouse in Ohio has even added hotel rooms and a nightclub. Gone are the days when bathhouses drew crowds just by offering a discreet place for gay men to meet, share saunas, and, often, have sex.²⁸

In response to these contemporary challenges, many in the bathhouse industry have taken a decidedly collaborative approach. Formed in 2012, the North American Bathhouse Association (NABA) is composed of a few dozen bathhouses, as well as closely-aligned media companies and other establishments doing business with bathhouses, such as condom suppliers and insurance agencies. Of the 63 members listed on their website, all are located in the United States and Canada, except for one bathhouse in the Netherlands. The organization’s “About Us” description emphasizes their collaborative orientation; one based on recognizing shared challenges and coordinating responses more efficiently.

The North American Bathhouse Association is formed with one goal in mind, to strengthen and grow the bathhouse industry. We endeavor to accomplish this by assisting member clubs in providing clean safe environments for men to have sex with men, by forming alliances with government and non-governmental agencies who share this goal and by facilitating the exchange of ideas and information between member clubs. Through this association our member clubs will be in a stronger position to address many significant challenges which may affect our industry.²⁹

NABA’s website goes on to describe several efforts in order to achieve these goals. These include facilitating the exchange of best practices, promoting gay bathhouses among men who have sex with men, coordinating group discounts for member clubs, disseminating sexual health information, and sharing updates regarding regulatory compliance. In addition to these efforts, NABA also provides graphics for a social media campaign organized under the hashtag “WeCanHost.”

On the one hand, the #WeCanHost campaign strategically emphasizes a core component of the business model that has served bathhouses for more than a century; namely, that the baths

provide space for men to engage in sexual encounters with other men. However, in accompanying advertisement copy, the campaign shifts attention away from the bathhouse as a place to meet men and, instead, emphasizes the establishments role as a venue for sexual encounters between men who have already found one another. “It’s late...you’ve just met a hot guy. Where do you go from here? Find and take him to a local gay bathhouse/sauna that’s clean, safe and discreet.”³⁰ Here “safety” takes on a new meaning, as the bathhouse is offered as a kind of neutral territory in which these sexual encounters can take place. Here, the Associated Press quotes Peter Sykes, owner of a bathhouse in Los Angeles, who elaborates on this point.

“You’re either hooking up online or you are here, or you go to bars in West Hollywood, get drunk and hook up.” said Sparks, acknowledging that although the bathhouse crowd skews older, it’s not as risky as going home with a stranger. “Here it’s a safer environment - there’s condoms and other protection.”³¹

For those who cannot host in their own homes and/or do not feel comfortable going to the home of a stranger, options are often quickly reduced to public sex or paying for a hotel room. In this milieu, *contemporary gay bathhouses* stand out as a third-way alternative; cheaper than hotels and safer than a public place.

Some bathhouse operators have turned to special promotions to attract younger patrons. Following the Associated Press article in August, Brian Moylan from *VICE* interviewed Dennis Holding, then 75 years old, who opened his first bathhouse in Indianapolis in 1972. While in town on business related to the Indy 500, he met up with some friends who bemoaned the city’s lack of baths. After realizing that there was not a bathhouse within 100 miles, he decided to get involved.

And that’s how it came to be. A couple weeks later, I met the principals of the Club Baths chain [which had 42 bathhouses in its prime]. At that time, six or eight guys would throw in some money, and one guy agreed to go build it, and that’s how they were built. It was the 70s, so things were going great guns.³²

After reminiscing about the Golden Era of the late 1960s and 1970s—a period during which he says the clubs were busy “social place[s]”—then the conversation shifts to contemporary challenges. In particular, he addresses the notion that younger men are less likely to patronize gay bathhouses today. In response, Holding (like many other bathhouse operators) turned to promotions.

We've done various promotions where 18- to 24-year-olds get free entry. Pretty soon someone would come by and he would try the bathhouse and he would tell his friends and we'd get three or four guys. As long as they don't cluster and giggle and enjoy themselves.³³

Such efforts have made an impact according to Holding, who describes the average age in his clubs as having fallen from the upper forties to the mid-thirties. Other attempts to attract younger members have centered on the use of social media and other digital marketing platforms. To be clear, attempts to incentivize younger patrons have a long history among gay bathhouses, even if such efforts are more common today. In most cases, these special promotions target patrons under the age of 25, although other demographic groups are sometimes included. For example, a digital advertisement for *Club Pittsburgh* combines both younger patrons and transgender patrons into a "Trans & Twink Tuesday" event during which "[t]rans men and women, cross dressers, and men under 25 receive a \$1 locker."³⁴

Although the underlying logic of such a decision remains unclear, it points to another challenge faced by *contemporary gay bathhouses*. In terms of their website content, these establishments vary in their approach to trans-inclusion. In the above ad, *Club Pittsburgh* suggests that trans men and women are welcome at all times, but receive a special discount on Tuesday evenings. Other bathhouses are more narrow in their acceptance and only allow transgender men. In many cases, these rules appear to be tied to each bathhouse's licensing arrangement. For example, at *Steam Portland*, "all members must be male, or by all definitions under state law identify as male and have 'M' or Male on your legal ID."³⁵ Although this policy is nominally inclusive of transwomen ("as long as you are still legally male on your ID"), it remains unclear whether such customers may present as women at the time of check-in. Of the websites I reviewed, only two varied from the general male-presenting-men-only rule. One in Washington, D.C. proclaims, "We do not discriminate against females. Yes, women are allowed! 99.8% of our visitors are male and think this place is just for males only;" although they note that, rarely, private parties will be men-only.³⁶ Another establishment in Denver advises that they "have an all gender, all sexual orientation party a few times a year when [women] are allowed."³⁷

Several aspects of these policies remain unclear and further investigation would be necessary to understand how they impact patron experiences. For example, perhaps especially

given the largely non-verbal communicative schema used in bathhouse environments—one in which gentle groping is often seen as an acceptable way to signal interest in another patron—transmen, transwomen and non-binary individuals may face greater scrutiny from other patrons. Further, although special promotions and all-gender parties do exist, the websites alone do not provide information on how popular these events are or, more importantly to this project, how such events change the existing relationship between physical spaces and sexual practices in the baths.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed content from sixty websites created by *contemporary gay bathhouses* and made connections between those findings and narratives found in scholarly and popular publications. Comparing these establishments to other eras in the history of bathhouses, I have found that no significant structural changes have occurred since the expansion that occurred in *modern gay bathhouses*. While their numbers declined in the United States in the mid-1980s, *contemporary gay bathhouses* experienced a resurgence in the age of the World Wide Web. Today, amidst narratives about the challenges they face from mobile dating apps, these establishments continue to innovate by upgrading interior spaces and embarking on digital marketing campaigns. Moreover, through industry groups such as the North American Bathhouse Association, many baths have begun to collaborate on shared challenges.

Further echoing the core argument of NABA's #WeCanHost campaign, Dennis Holding calls attention to the variety of potential patrons who may not be able to coordinate sexual encounters with other men in their own homes.

In Miami, probably 50 percent of our people live at home with a mother or a wife and kids or partner or some combination, and they can't play at home. We see pairs and couples meeting up and using the club—that's how it works. The bisexuals are another ingredient. Bisexual folks are still very much a part of our business and they need a discreet place to go. That's not going to change.³⁸

In addition to the sense in which the bathhouse provides neutral territory for sexual encounters, Holding's final comments here speak to the continued relevance of these spaces for men who do not identify as gay, but still seek out sexual encounters with men. Here *contemporary gay*

bathhouses, like their predecessors, can be greatly contrasted from gay bars or even the apps discussed above. In both cases, patrons and users make use of language—spoken or typed—to signal interest in, negotiate, and terminate sexual encounters. For men who do not identify as gay, or prefer a greater degree of discretion or anonymity, the bathhouse provides a venue for sexual encounters that may be entirely non-verbal. Because patrons signal interest in sex with other men by virtue of their presence in the space, the language of sexual identity is rendered either irrelevant or, if it comes up, an after-thought.

Writing in 1984, Allan Bérubé must have imagined the very worst possible outcome in the San Francisco bathhouse closure crisis: that the city's actions would trigger a cascade effect by which all other major U.S. cities closed their bathhouses with similar regulations. In his declaration, he leveraged the connection they had to the development of collective gay identity in his arguments that bathhouses could be a site in which successful public health efforts slowed the spread of HIV. In the years that followed, bathhouses that remained open took up these suggestions and worked to incorporate safer sex information and resources without changing their basic design. Today, these spaces remain present in the United States, Canada and Mexico, as well as around the world, and continue to serve men seeking sexual encounters with other men, regardless of sexual orientation.

4.8 Notes

¹ *Looking*, season 1, episode 3, "Looking at Your Browser History," directed by Andrew Haigh, written by Michael Lannan and Andrew Haigh, aired February 1, 2014, on Home Box Office (HBO).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ After all, the show's name, *Looking*, itself references both the men's literal search for lasting sexual, romantic and emotional satisfaction and the relative ubiquity of a contemporary gay male shorthand for "looking for sex," which is typically used in messages sent through gay dating apps like Grindr and Scruff.

⁵ Bérubé, Allan. "Declaration of Allan Berube in Support of Memorandum of Points and Authorities in Support of Ex Parte Application for Leave to Intervene," November 5, 1984. Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 24, Folder 20. GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center, 42

⁶ Ibid, 43.

⁷ Ibid, 52.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Woods, William J., Daniel Tracy, and Diane Binson. "Number and distribution of gay bathhouses in the United States and Canada." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003): 55-70.

¹⁰ Ibid. 61.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 67. Comparison made to Bolton, Ralph, John Vincke, and Rudolf Mak. "Venues of HIV transmission or AIDS prevention?" *National AIDS Bulletin* 9 (1992): 22-26.

¹² Woods, William J., Diane Binson, Tracy J. Mayne, L. Robert Gore, and Greg M. Rebchook. "Facilities and HIV prevention in bathhouse and sex club environments." *Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 1 (2001): 72.

¹³ *Ibid*, 72.

¹⁴ For further discussion on this topic, see Woods, William J., Nicolas Sheon, Joseph A. Morris, and Diane Binson. "Gay bathhouse HIV prevention: The use of staff monitoring of patron sexual behavior." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 10, no. 2 (2013): 77-86.

¹⁵ Steamworks Baths, "About Us." SteamworksBaths.com <http://www.steamworksbaths.com/about/> (Accessed February 18, 2019).

¹⁶ The Clubs. "Landing Page: About Us." TheClubs.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019). <http://www.theclubs.com/>

¹⁷ Spartacus. "Saunaguide: Main Page." Spartacus.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019).

<https://spartacus.gayguide.travel/saunas/>

¹⁸ Spartacus. "Saunaguide: USA." Spartacus.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019).

<https://spartacus.gayguide.travel/saunas/northamerica/usa>

¹⁹ Spartacus. "Saunaguide: Egypt." Spartacus.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019).

<https://spartacus.gayguide.travel/saunas/africa/egypt>

²⁰ Calculated using the following exchange rates: \$1.00 CAD = \$0.75 USD and \$1.00 MXN = \$0.052 USD

²¹ Chute. "Rules & Policies." ChuteAZ.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019).

<https://www.chuteaz.com/content/policies.php>

²² Steamworks Chicago. "Club Features." SteamworksBaths.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019).

www.steamworksbaths.com/chicago/features

²³ Tewksbury, Richard. "Bathhouse Intercourse: Structural and Behavioral Aspects of an Erotic Oasis." *Deviant Behavior* 23, no. 1 (2002): 96.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Associated Press, "Gay bathhouses across US face an uncertain future," *USA Today* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 23, 2014.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ North American Bathhouse Association. "About Us." GayBathhouseSauna.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019). www.gaybathhousesauna.com/page.cfm?page=AboutUs

³⁰ North American Bathhouse Association. "Main Landing Page." GayBathhouseSauna.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019). www.gaybathhousesauna.com

³¹ Associated Press, "Gay bathhouses across US face an uncertain future," *USA Today* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 23, 2014.

³² Moylan, Brian, “Can we make gay bathhouses cool again?,” *VICE* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct. 14, 2014. Parenthetical note about the Club Baths chain presumably added by Moylan; the chain is currently comprised of eight locations.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ North American Bathhouse Association. “Member Ads.” GayBathhouseSauna.com. (Accessed February 19, 2019). www.gaybathhousesauna.com/commonG2D/PhotoViewer.cfm?photoID=192221

³⁵ Steam Portland. “Ask the Steam Guy (FAQ).” SteamPortland.com. (Accessed March 20, 2019). www.steamportland.com/steamguy.html

³⁶ Glorious Health Club and Art Gallery. “Who May Enter.” GHCDC.com. (Accessed March 20, 2019). <https://www.ghcdc.com/who-may-enter.html>

³⁷ Midtowne Spas. “Frequently Asked Questions.” Midtowne.com. (Accessed March 20, 2019).

³⁸ Moylan, Brian, “Can we make gay bathhouses cool again?,” *VICE* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct. 14, 2014.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Among the earliest written accounts of gay bathhouses is a passage in Edward Prime-Stevenson's sprawling depiction of gay life, *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexuality as a Problem in Social Life*, which he published in 1908. In much the same vein as the literary genre of sex tourism mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, Prime-Stevenson's narrative reported on the existence of around fifty bathhouses throughout Europe at the end of the 19th century. Although extant rules of propriety prohibited these spaces from operating explicitly as venues for sexual encounters between men, many had developed wide-spread reputations as such and, generally, were ignored by local police forces despite being both patronized and staffed by homosexuals. For example, in one such bath, the true purpose of the space was made immediately clear when one observed the men gathered in a large pool located just past the entrance.

[I]t is also full of a most mixed multitude of homosexuals, all naked (the ironical towel being made into an equation of nothing) and all immersed in the water up to their shoulders.—decorously enough. All are promenading together, in a sort of friendly *cotillon*; their hands kept under water, not for swimming, but for—mutual investigations, which are to be expected when one enters the pool.¹

Repeatedly, Prime-Stevenson emphasized the sense in which all types of men could be found in the baths; reciting a range of occupations and class-inflected categories that included hard laborers, artists, aristocrats, sex workers, soldiers, and so on. In this way, his narrative expands on the discursive category of the homosexual at the turn of the century, offering a tantalizing litany of male archetypes alongside advice on how to pursue sexual encounters (which were relegated to private changing-rooms). Moreover, this description offers a window into the origins of gay bathhouses as venues in which a nonverbal communicative schema (here, “a sort of friendly *cotillon*” leading to “mutual investigations”) operated to connect patrons for sexual encounters.

Prime-Stevenson's writing certainly influenced Allan Bérubé when he prepared the legal declaration that would later become “The History of Gay Bathhouses.”² Not only do his research notes include references to that text, but he actually quotes from it without citation. Here's Prime-Stevenson, after mentioning laws against homosexuality that threatened the baths.

But nothing seems likely to be done to close this temple; first because it seems an absolutely necessary **outlet for the vast homosexual life of the city**; second, because it is managed with outward decorum; and especially because its clientage is so much of the **best citizens** in the place, along with the rabble of the town, that it has a sort of inherent and general protection.³

And here's Bérubé, recapitulating the advantages of *modern gay bathhouses*.

The management and employees often tried to protect the patrons from violence and blackmail: the police generally allowed the bathhouses to stay open because they were discreet "**outlets for the vast homosexual life of the city**" and because some of the "**best citizens**" went there.⁴

As the earliest and most direct piece of evidence of the origins of gay bathhouses, these passages from *The Intersexes* must have been exciting, if not paradigm-shifting, for Bérubé, whose own project was so focused on the arguing against the closure of these establishments almost eighty years later. Like Prime-Stevenson before him, he would come to describe the gay bathhouse as a uniquely urban phenomenon, as an enduring place of refuge for gay men facing stigma and harassment, and as a dynamic environment in which sexual desires were mapped onto the physical space itself.

5.1 Spatial Politics / Sexual Practices

Writing on gay bathhouses well into the 21st century, I, too, am mindful of their long history, which I have attempted to render as clearly as possible throughout this dissertation. Taking such a transhistorical view, however, has allowed for three key aspects of the bathhouse to become visible. First, across time and around the world today, gay bathhouses have generally been contained to large metropolitan areas. Like the "traditional" bathhouses of the 18th century, these spaces are at once products of and escapes from the urban quotidian surrounding them. It is for this reason that the history of gay bathhouses cannot be fully extracted from the spatial politics of urban development and gentrification, as well as the processes which resulted in identitarian territories like "gay neighborhoods." Additionally, gay bathhouses are, in the words of Bérubé, "sexual territories." Like gay and lesbian bars, the baths have served as a refuge for sexually-minoritized populations and a place to meet potential partners, and their existence thus played a role in the development of gay identity. Unlike bars, however, bathhouses by the first

decades of the 20th century had also become venues where sex itself could occur. In other writing and speaking engagements, Bérubé described “the politics of sexual desire” as a creative force that imbues otherwise non-sexual things with sexual meaning. Such a politics, I think, was at work in the development of *modern gay bathhouses* later in the century, as these spaces diversified their offerings and provided spaces in which patrons could explore a range of sexual practices. Finally, gay bathhouses are sites for sexual encounters that are initiated, negotiated, and terminated using a largely nonverbal communicative schema. Such a system facilitates sexual encounters without the need to discuss sexual identities. It is because of this communicative schema that the baths stand in contrast to the gay bars and other cultural institutions. For men seeking sexual encounters who do not identify as gay, the nonverbal communicative schema provides cover. It also facilitates sexual encounters across linguistic difference; both in terms of language overall and also accents, which often carry associations such as class or educational background. Like the towel-only dress code, the nonverbal communicative schema levels out a number of social differences, allowing men who may not even share a common language an opportunity to negotiate sexual activities. Within the bathhouse, this nonverbal communicative schema operates through intra-action with the physical space. In this entanglement, strategic eye contact, position in the room, gestures, gentle groping, and touching are all given greater salience by the arrangement of physical space. Although many aspects of this schema may also function in public cruising areas such as parks or so-called “tearooms,” the physical spaces developed within bathhouses accelerate these encounters by arranging patrons according to the sexual acts they are interested in pursuing.

5.2 Limitations & Possible Future Directions

Building upon Bérubé’s historical periodization, this dissertation examined gay bathhouses at three points in their history. Here, I return to these historical categories in order to address limitations and possible future research.

In the introduction, I discussed the emergence of *early gay bathhouses* and noted how the addition of private rooms set them apart from the traditional bathhouses which preceded them. In Bérubé’s reading, this change resulted in patrons spending more time with one another,

becoming more intimate in their encounters, and also engaging in sexual role-sharing; all of which points, for him, toward an embrace of gay identity and a rejection of previously-held stigmas against gay men seeking sex with one another. Further elaborated in the second chapter, Berubé philosophized that a “politics of sexual desire” powered these changes. However, access to direct, primary source material about *early gay bathhouses* remains nearly as limited today as it did for him. Although I used scholarship on traditional bathhouses to add context to and extend Bérubé’s historical periodization, more research might provide additional information about these early spaces. For example, another research project might return to the many oral histories that Bérubé conducted in order to better understand how sexual encounters during that time period might have differed from those coming later.

In the third chapter, I turned to *modern gay bathhouses*, taking up a case-study of the *Bulldog Baths* and also comparing that establishment with the *Fairoaks Hotel*, which pointed to a divergence in the politics of sexual desire. The *Bulldog* cultivated the marketing power of the Itinerant Alpha and recreated the industrial aesthetics of the truckstop and cell block. As a result sexual practices there were augmented by sexual fantasies of furtive, impersonal sex, as well as slave/master scenes, which heightened existing power dynamics between patrons. By contrast the *Fairoaks*’ physical location in a large Victorian imbued that establishment with a domestic vibe which was accompanied by more intimate connections, as well as platonic camaraderie. However, as just two of the dozens of bathhouses operating in the United States during this era, it remains impossible to make too many generalizable claims about the aesthetics across the category. While advertisements, flyers, calendars, and other marketing ephemera, especially in the case of San Francisco, empowered me to address how bathhouse owners conceived of their establishments, one aspect that remains largely underexplored is the soundscapes of these spaces. A future study might investigate the employment of music, especially DJ-produced soundtracks, in the development of the *modern gay bathhouse*.

In the fourth chapter, I turned my attention to *contemporary gay bathhouses*, which remain a decidedly urban and transnational phenomenon. In creating a new category building on Bérubé’s historical periodization, I called attention to two key historical events that distinguish these establishments from their predecessors: The HIV/AIDS crisis and the advent of the World

Wide Web, which allowed the baths to reach potential patrons more effectively. However, the development of hook-up websites and, more recently, mobile apps have further altered the urban sexual landscape of which these spaces are a part and many now worry about their future. Importantly, this chapter's contributions are based on visual and textual narratives of the bathhouse and, thus, do not provide what interviewing or participant-observation would. As such, another future research project of value would expand on the transnational perspective mentioned in the last chapter and might compare the dynamic between physical spaces and sexual practices across geopolitical borders.

5.3 Notes

¹ Prime-Stevenson, Edward (as Xavier Maynes). *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexuality as a Problem in Social Life*. Privately printed, 1908: 439.

² Allan Bérubé, "Declaration of Allan Berube in Support of Memorandum of Points and Authorities in Support of Ex Parte Application for Leave to Intervene," November 5, 1984, Allan Bérubé Papers (#1995-17), Box 24, Folder 20, GLBT Historical Society Archives & Research Center.

³ Prime-Stevenson, 440. Emphasis Munt.

⁴ Bérubé, 37. Emphasis Munt.

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2014/08/23/gay-bathhouses-nationwide-face-uncertain-future/14491371/>
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