Spaces tell us how to inhabit them. A feeling of openness, a sudden cohesion of lines into corners, a smell: these are things that say at every threshold “you are welcome” or “walk carefully,” often both. This sense is a combination of the intuitive and the learned: for example, most grand holy places have high ceilings, vaults suggesting the infinite bound in mortar, but only other people can tell us the way to genuflect correctly or the name of the captive god. The architect of a labyrinth wants you to feel a certain suspense, experience the space as you would the movements of a song, bar building upon bar and twist upon twist. The acts and rituals carried out in a space are bound by what the walls and floors tell the people in it. Although seemingly simple, this shifting nature defies reduction; to understand a space is to grapple with its history and even its subjectivity, the way the corners shift and the distances alter as you move about a room.

So let’s walk into a locker room. Uncomfortable? Good; the space invites self-consciousness. Locker rooms in general are places with ceilings high enough to discourage coziness but not high enough to nudge us towards transcendence. They are white and stark; they smell of Clorox and mildew. There are rows and columns of lockers standing at Roman attention. Everything is easily wiped; sitting is discouraged; it’s a place to be exited from, and quickly, a place designed for steam but not for warmth. I would mark these features down to school budget cuts, but even well-funded adult gyms and public pool changing rooms follow this pattern. It’s a practical room for a practical goal: getting many people clean and presentable enough to rejoin humanity. This simple process, though, is loaded with tension and significance.

Why is the character of this specific space such a big deal? It’s just a changing room. We don’t have to analyze it. I, at least, am decidedly under its spell. I bated changing for gym. I was deeply and truly not comfortable soaping up with my peers. As far back as I can remember, public exposure was something that’s always held a particular terror for me.
This fascination is valuable, though: a spade is never just a spade when it comes to humanity. You can’t talk about the body, or about dirtiness, without talking about morality and normality. The metaphors have become ingrained—cleanliness is next to godliness, to be clean is to be good, to be acceptable. It is ritualistic—water allows one to enter into a compact with the community, whether it be through a baptism or the ducking of freshman in the fountain by upperclassmen. Getting clean together is a way to codify standards of hygiene and self-perception. How much a society thinks about cleanliness, and what they think about it, speaks volumes.

Consider a 1915 ad for Sunlight Soap: a gallant fighting man aims his gun over the lip of a trench wall, crates of soap around him. Above him hangs the message “The CLEANEST fighter in the World—the British Tommy!” In the background, a soldier washes his face in a bucket. The audience for this ad was most likely made up of those who had family in the war, and they were likely desperate for the strength and cleanliness promised by Sunlight Soap, by smiling tommies lathering up in buckets. Waging war requires a notion of being on the right side, of order amidst chaos. Those concepts had to be preserved in order for the warring nation to stay together psychologically. The war was being, in this image, quite literally sanitized, and it worked. The brand is still going strong under Unilever.

Soaps, though, for all that they do to make us touchable and clean and nice-smelling, somehow subtract from our corporeality. In soap commercials nothing is ever being washed off—the soap isn’t there to remove something but to augment or replace what is already there: the smell of skin, the smell of a person. The ads are flirty, winking at us, promising us an unseen smeller and toucher, but that conspiratorial nature is all somehow neutralized, defanged. The soapy, perfumed body is covered and denied as well as cleaned.

The word “touchable” occurs in nearly all personal hygiene advertisements, from those of the cutting-edge, cheekily subversive new companies to the painfully wholesome campaigns of Proctor & Gamble. It hints at the erotic and the connective. But while scent is a wonderful sense to play and accessorize with, much like the colors and textures of our clothes, and while these things can be delightful to ourselves and others, the way they are sexy is to actual sex as wrapping paper is to a Christmas present. It all comes off when you get to the good stuff. When you get to the body-as-it-is. When scientists do studies on chemical attraction, they don’t use Chanel No. 5 or Axe—they use sweat.

All this subtext lives in and so defines the space of a locker room, and so too any space concerned with the human body. It doesn’t end there, though;
this sanitized way of thinking about the body is complicated by what Vivona and Gomillon call “the social fiction of neutrality” in their article “Situational Morality of Bathroom Nudity” (134). They discuss a perfect sample case for this sanitization of concepts: a tiny college bathroom in a women’s dorm used by many people at the same time. Interestingly, it is a space that was intended to be a large private bathroom and thus to be free of the communal trappings of a public locker room—several of the new girls describe being reprimanded for locking the door, not knowing that it was a shared space. The architecture betrayed them and lulled them into a false sense of privacy, and so made them believe they could remain neutral and alone there, made accepting the space as a public one even more jarring than usual.

How do people reconcile with the reality of public bathing in an era of great privacy and modesty? What allows them to strip off and soap up in front of acquaintances with a more or less untroubled heart, to remain neutral and unashamed, especially if they usually balk at the idea of revealing their body to another person? One of the young women interviewed by Vivona and Gomillon distilled it beautifully:

If I think of the person as a body and not as an exposed person, there’s no embarrassment. . . . If you think of it as a body, it’s an impersonal thing, an object, and there aren’t really personal objectives or thoughts involved. If you see the person as an exposed person, however . . . your thoughts could be personal. This could be embarrassing because you could make the other person uncomfortable. . . . I suppose that questions of some kind of sexual interest could be raised in that case. (133)

For public bathing to be safe or neutral, she implies that you have to think of the other person’s body, and your own, as just objects. To do otherwise would be, the woman insinuates, bordering on the sexual and the taboo. In fact, the pains taken not to seem gay are something that the interviewees mention repeatedly: “it would be embarrassing for both of you if they saw you looking at them . . . it might imply a homosexual interest” (133). One suggests, “maybe you’re more interested than you’re supposed to be” (133).

All these women, to my knowledge, are straight, and yet the specter of homosexuality looms over and defines all their interactions just as the specter of “dirty war” loomed over advertising and public thought in 1918. These women are trying to disprove something, not prove a positive: they don’t obsess over acting straight, but over acting not gay.

Locker rooms, then, are spaces with an inherent tension of identity. The struggle of reconciling other human bodies with our perceptions of sexuality...
and of ourselves defines much of the behavior therein, and is particularly relevant to the non-straight or non-straight-passing people. Whenever people joke about finding gay people in such a space, they always point to the men who slap each other’s asses and the girls who help each other unhook bras. But that’s not a come-on, that’s a theatrical reassurance of straightness. Look in the corner. See the girl who can change shirts in thirty seconds without showing a single strip of skin, one shirt nested inside the other, the boy who sits on the very end of the bench to tie his shoes so he won’t accidentally get flashed. There they are, those for whom public nakedness is dangerous, has an extra layer of meaning. There I am, sliding my uniform shorts on under a skirt I wore explicitly for that purpose.

This desire for secrecy being perceived as a sign of inversion or weakness isn’t new. When I was eight, surrounded by books of Greek mythology in my backyard, Hercules taught me that the strength of the body and of the mind are one; Cartesian dualism was to his culture and era an alien concept lurking in a distant future. The brave fight and train naked. They have nothing to hide. To the ancients, the concept of desiring bodily privacy would be downright antisocial. The public baths of the ancient Mediterranean and North Africa were designed to be bustling social centers. They were comprised of a succession of low-ceilinged, boxy rooms lined with benches and shelves for lounging, decorated with mosaics and graffiti slandering opposing chariot teams—warm, communal spaces. A place of leisure open to senators and slaves. Business meetings were conducted there; friends talked for hours; two or three generations would mill about at once, shouting and laughing (Bowman). I was fascinated.

Of course, the Greeks also fucked each other. Achilles mourned Patroclus, Sappho pined for Anactoria. I picked up on that early; I was looking for it.

Queers have a complicated relationship to history. We try to coax the future towards us by manipulating the baits of the past. We grasp at lines of poems, hidden glances in black-and-white photos. If we existed then, it means we’re allowed to exist now. We have a precedent.

Ancient Greece has become a safe haven for a lot of gay people over the centuries. A historical example that helps explain and vindicate the pervasive shame and estrangement in modern locker rooms. Victorians and Edwardians sometimes even referred to sodomy as “the Greek sin”—it is also from this time and place that we get the term “Sapphic.” This longing, for the normalcy of homosexuality of the past, is the subject of Tom Stoppard’s play *The Invention of Love*, a work about Victorian poet A.E. Housman’s life-
long desire for his friend Moses Jackson. Housman, confronted by Jackson about the rumors one day, initially denies them but then says:

Theseus and Pirithous . . . They loved each other, as men loved each other in the heroic age, in virtue . . . Virtue! What happened to it? It had a good run—centuries!—it was still virtue in Socrates to admire a beautiful youth, virtue to be beautiful and admired . . . Well, not any more, eh, Mo? Virtue is what women have to lose, the rest is vice. (76)

In the 50s and 60s, partly to reclaim the Greek ideal, gay bathhouses emerged in major cities. They functioned, too, as sort of reclaimation and joyful subversion of the concept of moral and physical cleansness, of the ritual of public bathing. No place for us in the locker rooms? Fine. We have our own place.

Except—isn’t the recreating of the “Greek ideal,” the clutching at history, just another form of sanitizing? The thing about the Greeks is that, no matter who they wrote their love poetry to, they, like every culture, had a group of sexual outsiders whom they mocked and found hideous. In The Clouds, a comedy by Aristophanes, any sign of gender nonconformity or same-age relationships between people of the same sex is roundly mocked; characters talk with disgust of the boys these days “prancing” and “simper[ing] softly to [their] lover[s]” (978-79). And yet somehow the myth of past equality persists; the need for that story is still there.

Denial, the “sanitizing” of the world or the false performance of an ingrained cultural narrative, is a process that is personal for everyone but that nevertheless hinges upon the mass reaction and interpretation of the culture. The body collective of repeating tropes and ideas about cleanliness and sexuality, or really any issue, needs to be recognized and shared by society as a whole to become entrenched in us as individuals. I see it as kind of a collective social immune response: the symptoms of a cold arise as the body’s way to defend against a real threat. Autoimmune disorders, however, come about because your body mistakenly believes its fighting a bigger viral threat than it actually is. A defense response is a part of having a body in a world filled with germs; overreaction, though, can be deadly. The girls in the bathing study, faced with the reality of peeing next to a bathing, naked near-stranger, used denial as a tool to give them a little peace and dignity. But this freedom, to so regularly deny the humanity of others, and so too the validity of your own body, is a dangerous one. It becomes an automatic response. It follows you. I once caught myself getting changed under my towel alone in my bedroom.
Consider the insidious dangers of transcending the body, of slipping out to some ascetic place and looking down at your hands as you would a rake or a fork. It was something I needed to do to get along in groups. Straight people do this too, of course, but I and those like me take the performativity to a different level. We stretch it to the point of breaking—but you can see some interesting patterns in the fault lines of an ill-made mask.

Take the effects of my paranoia. When I was eight, I hid the fact that I had pneumonia for three months. I focused incessantly on not coughing, and then on coughing quietly when that proved impossible. I hid a stash of cough drops. I ignored the choked, bubbling feeling growing in my lungs, the crackling noise when I breathed in. Whenever anyone mentioned it, I said that it felt like it was going away.

These activities took up a staggering amount of time and effort, but I really didn’t allow myself to notice the progression of the illness. I thought of it as something to be hidden, if I thought of it at all, but I never considered it as something that could truly hurt me. So I turned the rattling into just another noise, no more or less important to me than the sound of the air conditioner or the hum of the freeway. Then I almost drowned on my own bodily fluids.

And so a cultivated social response used only for practical means—the proverbial “cold”—develops into a full-blown autoimmune response. The body attacks itself, perceiving its own white blood cells, its own sexuality, as an external threat, and nearly dies for it. This happens in large-scale social movements too—see the panicked Red Scare directly after WWII in America, or the widespread rioting during the post-Civil War Reconstruction. A society can’t just turn off a wartime mentality like a light switch. Neither can individual people.

Fiction, myth, denial, and lying are all facets of the same extremely powerful construct—I suppose you could call this thing “crafted untruth,” or a “shared lie.” Humans are narrative creatures; we think using stories. We embellish, idolize, and drift naturally towards the picturesque and the “correct”—sometimes to our salvation, sometimes to our destruction.

But the dangerous thing about the natural tendency to perform narratives is that our lives go on even after the climaxes. We cannot simply end the process of fiction and denial; it would be equivalent to ending our humanity. Ending a cultural era would necessarily leave a terrible lacuna within us: it’s dangerous to think that we know ourselves entirely, or that we have reached some sort of mountaintop of self-knowledge. Every person contains at least one entire city—a multifaceted, half-grown, half-built structure populated
with endless versions of themselves. Ill-lit bars full of decanted desires; huge libraries of books they’ll never write; every citizen a different self. A place like this cannot be glanced at and known; its narrative is never simply “over.” Paradigms can shift, but they cannot simply be destroyed.

Our relationships to the stories we tell are not one-dimensional. I think there is another thing to take from the ancient Greeks and the tendency of some homosexuals to latch on to their myths and their history: the story of descent into the underworld. Usually it begins with the hero being set to a task: he must go under and walk among the dead before being allowed back into the world. For all that I’ve pointed to in the idealization of the Greeks as problematic and based on fuzzy historical rigor, the LGBTQ community picked these stories for a reason, and it’s not just about the sex. There are obvious parallels with going through the sort of “initiation ritual” that closeting has become in the past few decades: both are trials usually completed in early adulthood; both are shared experiences of travel difficult to describe to outsiders. But there is also a connection to and respect for the past in both cases. Odysseus meets his hero Achilles in hell. Orpheus attempts but fails to save Eurydice and goes back to the world alone, full of new songs (D’Aulaires 104).

The incorporeality of this type of myth, the disconnectedness of such a descent made in order to connect, is the natural complement to the other strand of myth leading to the bathhouses, that of fiercely joyful Maenads and beautiful temple acolytes, of exuberance and joy and celebration of the flesh (D’Aulaires 66). It’s impossible to connect to one without feeling the echo of the other, but in today’s society we seem determined to miss the connection. How did the function of public bathing spaces shift so radically? It has to do with cleanliness as a component of our sense of morality, I think. We have metaphor in our blood. Ancient morality and modern morality differ enormously; although we hold many of the same things to be sins—murder, incest, cowardice, disloyalty, theft, and yes, queerness—we have entirely different ways of quantifying culpability and guilt. Morality has become internal. Honor used to be defined by how you related to the community—now I change under my towel, flinch at my own dishonorable thoughts. What is there to flinch at? I didn’t do anything. We have become creatures of motive and guilt rather than of acts and public shame, sojourners into the underworld where all is shadow and disquiet. We have created gods who can look into our hearts. Aphrodite could bite a heart, bewitch it, control it, destroy it, but never read it. We have invented souls that detach from the body, nations
that detach from the land; we are couched more in concept than in action or being. And that can create a need for a different brand of story.

That’s not to say that the ancients lacked the capability to imagine the body and spirit as separate; they just saw no need to. There was no real compartmentalization of a sense of the divine—ritual was constant, fluid, physical; it permeated society. Temples were extensions of a casual and constant exchange with the gods—places to organize divinity, not contain it. There was no reason to trap gods in structures; they existed primarily in the physical realm. We, humanity, existed in the physical realm. Olympus was a tall mountain and Hades the endpoint of a deep, deep cave. Who are we to live above the body, to make our baths into bastions of a strange order, instead of just extensions of the way of things?

What subverted this way of thinking? God, what didn’t? Falling empires, fracturing group identities, diaspora upon diaspora. The concept of original sin, of individuals fighting lifelong battles against themselves, as part of the self as evil and not just unruly or mischievous. Human society shifts, complicates, and necessitates different forms of denial, so of course things change—but at root, I think, is a complicated reminder of a desire to reach out. If we are narrative creatures, we need others to hear the story.

Performance artist Regina José Galindo’s piece “Alud” (“Landslide”) reveals the urgency, the primal nature of cleanliness, of what it means to a community and its sense of physical health. The artist lies on a metal table used for washing corpses—asleep, or at least insensate. She is naked and absolutely caked with mud. It matts her hair; it is in the whorls of her ears. The audience stands along the walls, watching. They notice the towels and showerhead near her—they move forward. As Galindo says in her statement about the piece: “La posición pasiva del público como observadores reemplazado por la acción de participar y limpiar el cuerpo, motivados, quizás, por cierta empatía hacia ese individuo desconocido, escondido detrás del lodo” ‘The public’s passive position as observer is replaced by the action of participating and cleansing the body, motivated, perhaps, by some empathy for the unknown individual, hidden behind the mud’ (Galindo; my translation). A man in a plaid shirt bends over her, gently wiping at her cheek. An older woman and a younger one, clearly mother and daughter, roll her onto her side to wash her back. Someone lifts her leg to hose down the back of her thigh; anonymous hands rinse and run through her hair. Soon a pack of people surround her, joined together in basic human kindness. The indignity of being handled by strangers is transformed by the inherent dignity of what they are doing: restoring her humanity, taking responsibility for it. Removing
that which has made her an object, like one of the dead, the audience surpasses the awkward dehumanization of the locker room. There are only human bodies here.

We are programmed to touch, to check in with others. The mental gymnastics of modern public bathing are a moving-away from the actual fact of the act; the process has become unbearable to us. And so we tell ourselves stories. We distance ourselves from the body. We engage in denial, in a shared lie. But stories told skillfully, like the immersive narrative of “Alud,” can also bring us back, remind us of what we’re actually doing in our daily rituals. They can bring the deliberately suppressed thoughts to the surface. Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* was such a story for me. The description of protagonist Calliope changing for gym was like a slap in the face of compassion and understanding. I didn’t even *think* about the intricate maneuvers I would take to get undressed until I saw them reflected back at me in print, and suddenly I didn’t feel alone in Hades.

Such recognition of oneself, is in its essence an escape from time and space, a transcendence of the self through identification. Having the ghosts of Calliope and the Grecians around me made the locker room bearable; it transformed the space, broadened its walls, put it in a wider context.

I don’t mean to sound like a drama queen: “oh closeting was just literally hell!” I had it easy. I know people who didn’t. At least I was in the hell of the Greeks, which is different from the Christian hell: it’s quieter. The people punish themselves there, no demons necessary. They roll their own personal rocks up hills over and over; they reach up for the fruit they planted in life. Consider Persephone: she spends half the year underground, half above. Her descent and ascent are never done—it is a state of being, a perpetual cycle.

So how do we keep ourselves from sleepwalking into toxic patterns of denial and replacing one sanitized version of the world with another, over and over again? Part of the answer is that we can’t. We may as well try to stop ourselves from having allergies—this is just a way that a body reacts. But, accepting this inevitability, we must discover ways to identify patterns and narrative inclinations within ourselves and examine them for their value or their rottenness. We must become responsible storytellers of our own lives—lucid dreamers, aware of all the dreams that came before and helped shape the spaces we are in. Look around yourself; what are you drawn to? What spaces do you avoid, and why? Who are your gods, and are they proud of you? Know these things. Learn how to live with the beauty of the human penchant for narrative, the inexorable pull towards the creation of stories, in an open-eyed way. Look at your life as a story amidst stories. It is one.
WORKS CITED


