“Laundry, Cultural Production, and Political Economy in Mexico City”

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Resumen:

The work of laundresses must be understood as real work, as much as constructing buildings or writing legislation, work that produced presentable wardrobes and public personas among other “goods.” While much housework including washing has gone unremunerated historically, laundering constituted a paid economic sector in urban Mexico, employing women of all ethnicities, including Creoles, often female household heads. Drawing on census samples from 1753, 1790, 1811, and 1842, archival records, and costumbrista literature and fiction, the paper shows lavanderas in Mexico City working as independent contractors, performing skilled labor-intensive work for multiple clients that produced clean white shirts and sheets, as well as polished images and respectability. Their labor also produced an income toward sustaining themselves and their households. This study contributes to and bridges literature on women’s work in a “commerce of domesticity” and urban demography as well as foundational studies in gender history. It also contributes to labor history generally, revisiting boundaries of skilled and unskilled labor, and broadening our understanding of what labor produces.

Key Words: laundry, laundress, labor, cleanliness, material culture
In an 1868 essay in *La Orquesta* by Hilarión Frías y Soto, the “typical” washerwoman—“la lavandera”—sets off on Saturday morning “in her ever-so-white pressed skirts enveloped in a cloud of swishing and pleats, rising at dawn with the force of starch and iron, heading off to make her deliveries.”¹ In this essay, I argue that the work of laundresses must be understood as real work, as much as constructing buildings or writing legislation, work that produced presentable wardrobes and public personas among other “goods.” While much housework including washing has gone unremunerated historically, laundering constituted a paid economic sector in urban Mexico, employing women of all ethnicities, including Creoles, often female household heads. Drawing on census samples from 1753, 1790, 1811, and 1842, archival records, and *costumbrista* literature and fiction, the paper shows *lavanderas* in Mexico City working as independent contractors, performing skilled labor-intensive work for multiple clients that produced clean white shirts and sheets, as well as polished images and respectability. Their labor also produced an income toward sustaining themselves and their households.

This study contributes to and bridges literature on women’s work and urban demography as well as foundational studies in gender history. Lara Putnam has linked housework and political economy in enclave economies in Central America. Edith Sparks identifies “commerce of domesticity” in laundry and boarding house businesses in San Francisco.² Recent

¹ *La Lavandera por Hilarión Frías y Soto*, México, Porrúa, 1993, 26. An 1854 book, *Mexicanos pintados por sí mismos*, included drawings and essays by Frías y Soto and several of his peers, depicting other “typical” Mexican personages such as “La Costurera,” “El Criado,” “El Abogado,” and “La Casera.” This essay and drawing published in 1868 follows the same model.

demographic studies of households and businesses in Mexico City neighborhoods help make sense of census samples, while gender studies by Silvia Arrom and Pilar Gonzalbo for Mexico City and Sandra Lauderdale Graham for Rio de Janeiro contextualize evidence on laundering and the problematic thin representation of laundresses in census data for Mexico City. Lourdes Benería, Carole Pateman, Lourdes Arizpe, and Leopoldina Fortunati offer interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives for understanding laundry work.

Laundry is one of those mundane realities basic to “life’s work”—the labor propelling human existence—in any time or place. While many residents of Mexico City could not afford to pay for others to wash their clothing and linen, some employed women who made a living washing. Generally, these women were not live-in servants, but instead independent businesswomen with multiple clients. Much laundering work was not done within a household, but instead by female specialists of diverse ethnicities and civil statuses in a service sector that

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met a “commercialization of needs” with their labor in washhouses and at public and private fountains.⁶

I have argued elsewhere that housework maintained statuses and produced public personas for the elite and small professional class in nineteenth-century Mexico City.⁷ Laundering is one of many housekeeping labors that produce polished people for political, economic and cultural marketplaces. Careful laundering produced value and preserved cloth – often a substantial investment for its owners. Skilled laundresses prolonged cloth consumption at inconspicuous and conspicuous levels, kept clothing viable as pawning collateral, and fostered the polished image of their clients that proper clothing conveyed in public.⁸ Other intersections of laundry and culture involve the work culture of those who wash for a living, shaped by infrastructure and tools of the trade. Mexican laundresses created and lived in multiple cultural circles: businesswomen paying elite neighbors and clergy for water and a place at the lavadero; contractors knowing (and keeping or sharing) intimate secrets of their clientele; and comrades developing relationships amongst themselves while working. Political culture and relationships with the state and elites determined access to the water without which no work could be done. A political economy built on gender and ethnic hierarchies as well as a mix of monopoly and

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market mechanisms, produced a steady, even growing demand for laundry services met by a female work force. The clean clothes and sheets produced by the changing cast of laundresses from the middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century hung on the courtyard tenderos (clotheslines) next to relationships, reputations, livelihoods and other products of laundering that shaped life in the city.

**Demand for those who “se mantienen de lavar”**

Women making a living in Mexico City through laundry work were noted in the occupation column of the 1753 census as “se mantiene de lavar” (maintaining themselves through washing). This notation also fits their clientele, whose public personas and images depended on the cleanliness of their clothing, and in particular the whiteness of their underclothing, shirts, collars, and sleeves. Letters from Spanish men in the eighteenth century advising their wives on what to bring to the Americas when they emigrated provide evidence of a “coincidence of need and means” from the top end of the economy, fueling the demand for laundry specialists.9 The emphasis in letters regarding New Spain is on “ropa blanca,” characterized as a key aspect of material culture in the richest Spanish American colony.10 A number of husbands even arranged for a transatlantic credit line so that their soon-to-be emigrating wives could acquire or have made the requisite quality and quantity of linen. Diego Núñez Viceo, an hacendado from Madrid living in Mexico City, was conscious of the status that having the proper clothing imparted in his adopted home. In 1706, he arranged for his wife to have at her disposal “the quantity of pesos that necessary to have clothing made, in white as well as colors,” so that she is properly decked out (“para que con todo regalo y decencia pases”) as

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she begins her trans-Atlantic journey.11 Fifteen years later, Antonio de los Ríos writes to his wife Doña Catalina Páez that in preparation for her trip to Mexico, she should see his associates, who will “give you what is necessary to endow and dress yourself (aviarte y vestirte).” He also tells her that she should bring “la señorita in your company” and that she can buy a slave “to assist you on the boat.” He assures his wife that he finds himself with “a bejeweled house” and the necessary conveniences in Mexico City “to maintain you with the decency and rest that you deserve.” A sizeable household including servants and the outfitting for genteel living would generate a lot of need for laundering services, though that work goes unmentioned in the correspondence.12 Again in 1730, the emphasis on acquiring sufficient white linen is striking in a letter from husband to wife. Jacinto de Lara y Rosales arranges credit for his wife to acquire “sufficient goods that you come with those prerequisites that I have always styled as the decency of your person; do not fail to make as much clothing as you want of fine fabric (con sus galones) and sufficient ropa blanca of all kinds and of service (de todo género y de servicio), and embroidered shawls that are the style in this kingdom.”13 How much of this is household linen such as towels, sheets and table clothes – notice the modifier “of service” – and how much is clothing we cannot know. Roche and Smith describe a “revolution in linen” that in eighteenth-century Europe, where dress shirts, underwear and stocked linen closets became crucial for

11 Diego Núñez Viceo a Doña Isabel Francisca Alconet, México, 15 octubre de 1706, in ibid., pp. 64-66.

12 Antonio de los Ríos a Doña Catalina Páez de la Cadena, México, 19 octubre 19 de 1721, en ibid., pp. 75-76. In another case two years later, Juan de Avila y Salcedo solicits his aunts and other female relatives in Spain to assist his wife and niece in acquiring “the dresses and white linen and the rest necessary” for their move to Mexico City. Juan de Avila y Salcedo a Doña Teresa González and to Doña Francisca y “demás tías y señoras”, México, 14 de noviembre de 1723, en ibid., pp. 80-82.

13 Jacinto de Lara y Rosales a Doña Manuela de Lara Rosales, México, 2 de agosto de 1730, en ibid., pp. 85-86.
establishing and maintaining social status, which increasingly was pegged to cleanliness.\textsuperscript{14} Copious amounts of household linens and the luxurious clothes of the well-to-do, as well as the fancy uniforms some servants wore, needed constant care by laundresses—live-in and independent.

The currency of white linen did not abate in Mexico City. A letter from miller Antonio Manuela Herrera in 1758 alerts his wife to local fashions, and admonishes her to not skimp on the amount of white linen that she brings (“y así por lo que mira la ropa blanca no te vengas muy escasa”).\textsuperscript{15} Toward the end of the century in 1790, Don Agustín Sánchez, writing to an associate charged with arranging for his daughter to join him in Mexico City, asks that she be “habilitated with an overabundance of white clothing \textit{[la habilite sobradamente de ropa blanca]. . . and especially with twelve pairs of English Bastón stockings.”\textsuperscript{16} The 1855 book \textit{Mexicanos pintados por sí mismos} depicts Mexicans – male and female – in typical attire that suggests the continued centrality of key white articles. For the working-class occupations – water carriers, “chieras” or women selling flavored water, carriage drivers—white shirts are essential. A few of the women – seamstresses, \textit{estanquilleras} (tobacco stall vendors) – wear no white blouse, but instead a long dress with white petticoats peaking out the bottom. Some men are depicted in a variety of three

\textsuperscript{14} Daniel Roche 1996, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 384-90. In the seventeenth century, outer clothing in Europe was altered so that more of the underclothing was visible, “usually at the collar, sleeves, or hem.” This change heightened the image of those who could afford elaborate underclothes as well as those who could afford to keep it in pristine condition. Smith notes “whatever the reason for the change, the fashion stuck—not only in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, but down to the present.” Woodruff Smith, \textit{Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800}, Routledge, 2002, pp. 13-138, 60-68, quote p. 60.


\textsuperscript{16} Don Agustín Sánchez a Don Fermín Elizalde, 26 de noviembre de 1790, en \textit{ibid.}, p. 104.
piece attire – some with short coats (carriage driver, barber, clerk) another with a long formal coat (lawyer)—all with long sleeved white shirts with high collars and some kind of tie.  

In his 1818 novel *Don Catrín de la Fachenda*, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi satirizes “Dons” in Mexico City dressing the part of a respectable urbanite despite material poverty. The protagonist ties his identity to his material appearance, at one point taking offense at a slight “no debida a un caballero de mis prendas” (loosely translated, “not deserved by me a well-turned out gentlemen”) and at another point assuaging his dismay at having nothing for breakfast reminding himself that he “has sufficient clothing and decency.”

In the decades just after independence, Mexican cleric, statesman and writer José María Luis Mora observed that in the late colonial period “the cheapness of accessories from Europe” allowed even the modest classes to dress well. In the republican era, “persons on the top wrung presented themselves in public with every luxury and ornateness that is customary in more civilized countries,” with more clothes available to be well-turned out in public. But this same effect could be pulled off with a few articles of clothing carefully managed. In the story depicting “el criado” or manservant in *Mexicanos pintados por si mismos*, the writer Niceto de Zamacois invents a dialogue with his servant about the difficulty of getting stains out of his suit and repeatedly taking it to a dyer (*tintorero*) to give it new life, with the manservant musing as to why a man of his employers position who writes for political magazines can not make enough to dress better.

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17 *Mexicanos pintados, op.cit.*, pp. 28, 48, 98, 140, 176.

18 José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardí, *Don Catrín de la Fachenda y Noches Tristes y Día Alegre*, México, Porrúa, 1978, pp. 43, 48. For details on the articles in Don Catrín’s wardrobe and how he acquired them and lost them, see pp. 44, 47, 57-58, and 60-61.


Many a city resident had no money to pay a laundress or a tintorero, and neither a servant nor a wife to do clean their clothes. Lizardi gives us this scenario of Don Catrin doing his own laundry when he was down and out: “I had my undershirt to wash, hang, and iron with a mamey pit; I had knit underpants with holes that I curiously mended with a needle; . . . I had a remnant of muslin, that when washed well passed for a fine handkerchief.” Waiting for his luck to turn, the protagonist bid his time carefully washing, ironing, and mending his clothes such that “even the used goods salesmen [baratillero] would have taken them for new.” Lizardi’s satirical story illustrates even humble public image being “maintained by washing.” Niceto de Zamacois’ commentary about the emergent middle class later in the century makes fun of their dependence on the laundress’ skill: “They make use of light shirts and light friendships, but very starched, to hide the cheapness of the fabric of which they are made.”

With laundering often done outside of the clients’ homes—goods upon which the achievement and maintenance of status and public persona was so dependent—eighteenth and nineteenth century city residents who may have had a substantial investment in cloth material goods nonetheless faced material insecurity. Turning over dirty laundry to someone else was risky, and not just because of the secrets it contained. Letting the cloth leave the house was a risk because the laundress might ruin it, it may fall out of the basket as the laundress makes her way through town, it might be stolen off of the rooftop tendero, or the laundress might even pawn it. For laundry consumers on the lower end of the material wealth scale, handing over

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21 Fernández de Lizardi 1978, op. cit, pp. 78-79. The word catrín can mean a genuine gentleman, but more often a dandy or one pretending to be a gentleman in order to con others.


23 For the theft of clothing from common drying areas, see Archivo General de la Nación [hereafter AGN], Criminal, vol. 89, exp. 3, fs. 115-120; vol. 86, exp. 10, fs. 264-285v; vol. 87., exp. 2, fs. 60-69v; and vol. 89, exp. 3, f. 99. See also Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal, Mexico City [hereafter AHDF], Justicia, Juzgados Criminales, tomo 1,
scarce resources could cause anxiety. A laundress might be asked to wash a particular shirt quickly as it is the only one her client owns, and she must treat it gingerly so that it does not disintegrate from overuse.24 As such, the social success of elites which was contingent upon adequate presentation in public rested for some on fragile resources from scarcely outfitted wardrobes with minimal white linens that demanded great skill in their maintenance.25

Accounting for women who wash

Laundering cloth was not recognized as an “oficio” or formal artisan trade as were weaving cloth, dyeing cloth, shoemaking or hat-making in census data and other archival data. Even though both occupations produced clean clothing through skilled work, “tintoreros” (dyers, dry cleaners) had a guild while laundresses did not. Given the everyday nature of the necessity of cleaning clothes and household linens, and the fact that few households had direct access to water, the fact that women specializing in washing are barely visible in census manuscripts reflects the power of ideology that gendered paid and skilled work as male. Table 1 summarizes the extremely limited extent to which washerwomen appear in the census over the years.

If we extrapolate the minimal percentage of laundresses in the sample to the population of over 125,000, perhaps a thousand laundresses worked in Mexico City in 1753 to meet the

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24 La Lavandera, op. cit, pp. 21, 23.

demand for clean white shirts and underskirts and household linens. The 1790 census is the most extreme of the Mexico City censuses in ignoring work done by women, and hence absent from Table 1. The only laundresses appearing in the 1790 census manuscript pages were employed by institutions such as convents and hospitals, with monasteries apparently employing men to do this work. For example, the Casa de Recogimiento de los Mujeres Dementes in 1790 housed 66 people (55 residents and 11 staff), all of them generating dirty clothes and linens, with only one laundress to handle it: Marta Andrea del Castillo, a 36-year-old mulata widow native to the city. The 1790 census enumerators omitted any working women outside of the servant categories (listing housekeepers, chambermaids, and cooks as well as more generic “mozas” and “sirvientas”) – even seamstresses are absent. While we do find working women in the 1811 census, it also does not capture the realities for working women, especially white women who may not report working for reasons of honor, but also other women who might have multiple occupations such as vending, errand-running, washing, and sewing, but only “count” in one

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26 I sampled the 1753 census ten pages at a time. The sample includes 286 addresses; and 564 separate households at those 286 addresses. From the cohort of 21 laundresses (0.9 percent of sample) among the sample of 2,441 residents, extrapolating to the population of 126,477 arrives at 1,138 laundresses in Mexico City in 1753. AGN, Padrones, vol. 52, 1753. For a nuanced análisis of the 1753 census, see Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, “Familias y viviendas en la capital del virreinato,” Rosalba Loreto López 2001b, op.cit., pp. 75-108.

27 Censo de población de la Ciudad de México, 1790: Censo de Revillagigedo. 2 CD-ROMs, México, El Colegio de México; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2003. Cuartel 1, Disco 1. Male seminaries might have a male lavandero for the laundry, working in concert with male cooks and other male servants. For example, the Convento de San Diego housed 70 religious men and 2 male servants, including Pedro Jose Contreras, identified as an “Yndio viudo” and only 17 years old, employed as “lavadero.” Cuartel 23, Disco 2. For in-depth analysis of the 1790 census, see Sonia Pérez Toledo 2004, op. cit.; and Manuel Miño Grijalva and Sonia Pérez Toledo 2004, op.cit. The Hospicio de Pobres, which opened in 1774, employed laundresses, both live-in and contractors, generally indias or castas. Silvia Arrom, Containing the Poor: The Mexico City Poor House, 1774-1871, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 128,140-41.

28 Large households in 1790 have female servants listed, but no other working women, and no laundresses per say. It may be that some of the “mozas” or “sirvientas” did laundry. Censo de población de la Ciudad de México, 1790, Disc 1. While enumerating the many households living within casas de vecindades and identifying many female household heads in those households as was true for the 1753 and 1811 censuses, the 1790 count does not identify occupations for female household heads. There is the occasional notation of a business at an address (for example a Chocolateria at an accesoria in Cuartel 23) with a household living in it made up entirely of women (in the same example, Doña María Francisca Torres, “española de México, doncella de 49 años,” with three adult sisters), but it is not clearly in the census notations that the women work at that occupation. Cuartel 23, Disc 2.
Among the more than 4,000 city residents in two samples for 1811, only six laundresses appear. Independent laundresses, of course, did not disappear between the census years of 1753 and 1811 in Mexico City, but went uncounted. In addition to the generalized invisibility of female labor to those counting residents, one interpretation of a relatively thin number of laundresses in census data is as an indication of limited demand: most people could not afford to pay a professional to wash their clothes, and/or had so little clothing that they did it themselves, as noted above. But, Daniel Roche’s study of Paris suggests that demand for laundering on the market might also come precisely from those with fewer clothes as the thinner stock needed more regular attention than the wealthier with dozens of shirts or underskirts.

Of the 21 women identified as making a living doing laundry in the 1753 census sample for Mexico City, 10 were “españolas,” eight mulatas, two mestizas, and one’s ethnicity was not identified. This is in contrast to the Portuguese colony of Brazil and Bourbon Buenos Aires,

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29 Susie S. Porter, Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931, Tucson, University of Arizona, 2003, p. 155. The 1811 census manuscripts are found in AGN, Padrones, vols. 54-57. Of the over 150 white women in my 1811 census sample (23 of them widowed), only 12 reported occupations, none of them laundresses, only one of them a widow: four seamstresses (all single, 24, two 30, and 57); three servants (all single, 14, 15, and 40); two cooks (one single and 35, one widowed and 40); one nanny (single and 19); and one chambermaid (single and 20). The only married white woman listed her occupation as storeowner.

30 My sample for 1811 consists of 735 individuals in 124 households from Cuartel Mayor 9. The sample constitutes 20 percent of the 3,611 residents of the cuartel (the population of the city was approximately 168,000). AGN, Padrones vols. 53, 54, 55, and 57. Arrom’s 1811 sample totals 3,356 residents from one downtown “center” neighborhood and three neighborhoods from the eastern “periphery.” She found five laundresses. Silvia Arrom 1985, op. cit., pp. 156-159, 163, 271-273. The one laundress in my 1811 sample was an Indian servant living at Calle de Jesus no. 3, downtown. The laundress María Perfecta lived in the household of spinster Creole sisters Doñas María Josefa and María Concepción Olvera. The sisters also employed two other Indian servants: a general servant, 28-year-old Antonio Hernández; and a cook, 25-year-old María Basilia. Antonio was from the same place as the laundress, the town of Yurina, as were two other residents of the household, the 26 year-old mestiza Mariana Alcántara, and an Indian boy named Antonio, 7 years old. It may be that María Perfecta and Antonio Hernández were a couple, and little Antonio their son (no last name is given for the boy). In any case, María Perfecta was no doubt kept busy washing clothing and linens for this seven-member household. She might also have taken in outside laundry as well.

where laundresses were virtually all African or mulata, both slave and free. \footnote{Lauderdale Graham does mention one “Portuguese laundress.” Sandra Lauderdale Graham 1988, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 14; Italian immigrant women displaced Afro-Brazilians by the end of the nineteenth century in the washing work force. George Reid Andrews, “Race versus Class Association: The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1850-1900,” \textit{Journal of Latin American Studies}, vol. 11, no. 1, 1979.} Eleven of the laundresses in the mid-eighteenth century sample were widows, and six of those widows were Spanish Creole women born in New Spain. According to the census entry for her household, Maria Ibarra, a 30-year-old Spanish widow with three small children under eight years old “maintained herself washing clothes.” She and her children lived downtown in Alcaiceria a few blocks from the zócalo in an \textit{asesoria}, or single room dwelling facing the street. Another Spanish widow Maria Valle and her 28-year-old daughter Antonia (married to an absent traveling salesman) supported four grandchildren and children with washing on Calle de Donceles in 1753. \footnote{AGN, Padrones, vol. 52, 1753, f. 165v.}

Maria Herrera, another 30-year-old Spanish widow, had living “in her company” a free single mulata named Maria, both of them making a living washing clothes. Next door to the two Marias in the same \textit{casa de vecindad} in the second block of Calle Tacuba lived Anna de Ortega and her sister Juana, both of them Spanish widows in their thirties, who along with Anna’s three grown but single daughters (Rita 20, Maria 18, and Lugarda 16) all “expressed that they maintained themselves by washing.” \footnote{Ibid., fs. 67v and 24.} Other neighbors in the same building included an upstairs apartment with the family of a creole clothing merchant, consisting of a couple, five children and two servants; another upstairs apartment with a single Spanish merchant and his mestiza maid Maria; and a downstairs apartment with a weaver, his wife, and daughter. Might the Marias and the Ortega women have competed for the dirty laundry of these neighbors? In contrast, the
mulata Salcedo sisters at no. 60 Donceles, 20- and 28-year-old doncellas, were the only lavanderas on their block. Did their clients include the many tailors, weavers, and embroiderers in their neighborhood, or the licenciado, merchant, or accountant families down the street?35

The city’s population as a whole in the eighteenth century was whiter than not, so more white working women is to some degree to be expected. Yet, the prevalence of white widows among washerwomen is surprising in that laundering in most cases would take women into the streets and public fountains and into other people’s homes to fetch and deliver clothes, something that honor-conscious women might avoid. On the other hand, washing is an entrepreneurial activity in line with other employment undertaken by white women, including running small stores and boarding houses. An alternative employment for needy white widows without capital to invest in a store was work sewing clothes, employment less likely to take one into the street, and a category with a higher representation in the sample. White women dominated the ranks of costureras in the 1753 sample (33 out of 39), with close to half of the white seamstresses also widowed.36 Turning back to those washing instead of making clothes for a living, of the remaining widowed laundresses in the 1753 sample, three were mulatas, and one mestiza. There are only two married laundresses in the sample: the Spanish woman listed above with the traveling salesman husband, and Anna Salmeron, whose husband was incapacitated. Coincidentally, both married laundresses lived in the same casa de vecindad on Puente de Amaya.37 In addition to the widowed single, eight doncellas (unmarried, or rather never-married) are in the 1753 sample (five mulatas and three españolas).

35 AGN, Padrones, vol. 52, 1753, fs. 103v.
36 Ibid., fs. 26-27, 45, 46v, 63-65, 86v, 123-124, 126v, 144-145v, 164v, 166-167.
While inadequate counting in the first decades following independence in 1821 continues to inhibit gauging changes in the depth of the laundering work force in the city, we can consider changes in the demographic breakdown for those who are identified as making a living washing in 1753 and 1842. In a sample of close to 1,500 residents in a downtown neighborhood in 1842, 78 women are identified as such. According to a statistical analysis of the entire 1842 census, out of over six thousand women identified employed in “oficios domésticos,” 594 were laundresses (second to the more than 4,000 “sirvientas y criadas”), and 20 “planchadoras”, or ironers.38 My sample of 78 laundresses, then, accounts for 13 percent of those reported in the 1842 municipal census.39 Table 2 compares data for the samples from 1753 and 1842. In both years, laundresses in these small samples were most likely to be widowed, living with other laundresses, and in their age range was in the 30s and 40s. Of the 78 in the 1842 sample, 39 were widowed (50 percent), 6 were married (though none of them lived with their husbands), and 33 were single.40 Motherhood did not characterize the household status of most laundresses; only sixteen of the laundresses in the 1842 sample lived with their children, 5 of them with children under 10.

38 Sonia Pérez Toledo 2004, op. cit., 216. The cohort of 78 laundresses represents 5.3 percent of my sample of 1,485 residents. If the same percentage of residents worked doing wash in the population at large (about 200,000), there would have been more than 10,000 doing so. That the official count of laundresses as reported by Pérez Toledo is under 600 is remarkable. It could be the neighborhoods sampled had more laundresses than most other neighborhoods, or an extreme case of undercounting of female workers in general as well as invisibility of laundry work combined with other work, as noted above. Among the blocks sampled, Manzanas 3, 6 and 7 had no laundresses at all. The 1842 census is located in AHDF, Vols. 3406 and 3407. The sample draws from downtown neighborhoods in Cuarteles Mayores 1 and 2, Manzanas 1 through 29.


40 The single laundresses were differentiated as “doncellas” (21), “soltera” (11), and “hija” (1). The 1842 has different patterns of reporting block by block – in some all unmarried women were listed as doncella, in others soltera, and in others either one.
In 1842, there was no column in the census manuscript for “calidad” as had been true for colonial censuses so there is no way to determine the ethnic makeup of this group. There was not consistent use of titles, either. In Manazanas 4 and 8, for example, all women were listed with the title Doña, and all men with “C.” for “ciudadano,” while in Manzana 9 there were no residents at all listed with titles. Among the laundresses, 11 were listed as “Doña:” 4 single and 7 widows (2 of each in blocks where all women are so listed). With the absent ethnic identifies and muddy titles, it is impossible to measure the degree to which white widowhood continued to turn to washing as a profession as the data suggests was the case in the 1750s. One laundress, 30-year-old doncella Dolores Davalo, was not herself listed with the title “Doña,” but she lived with female household head Doña Cesaria Davalos (mother? older sister?), a 50 year old widowed seamstress, living in a downstairs room in the casa de vecindad at no. 9 Callejon de la Olla in Manzana 2. Twenty-eight laundresses in the sample were migrants to the city, some from nearby (for example, Tlanepantla), others from further away (for example, Querétaro and Celaya).

Although not all the 1842 manuscript pages break out the households at a given address, for those that do it was common for laundresses to live together (N=31), whether or not they were related to each other. For example, Dorotea and Martina Garcia, widowed sisters ages 38 and 36, respectively, lived in a room with Martina’s 6-year-old son and 1 year old daughter. The Garcia’s casa de vecindad at no. 24 Calle de la Aguila housed 23 people in all, including four silversmiths, three shoemakers, three office workers (empleados), two coach drivers, a store clerk, pulquero, a seamstress, a furniture maker, and school teacher. An example of apparently unrelated laundresses are 60 year old Luz Monroy, 31 year old Ysidadora Arrivar, and 23-year-old Ana Morales, all doncellas, who lived in the upstairs vivienda no. 3 at no. 1 Callejon de la
Condesa. At least 12 laundresses in the sample lived alone in rooms in vecindades. Only 6 of the 78 laundresses clearly worked as live-in washerwomen for large households. For example, the household of renowned statesman and historian Don Lucas Alamán employed two seamstresses at no. 1 Calle de San Francisco to meet the demand for clean clothing for his family of nine. The 55-year-old widow Hilaria Yañez and the 22-year-old soltera Pascuala Perez, both native to Mexico, lived and worked in the Alamán house, along with two single seamstresses and at least six servants (two wives of male servants are not identified themselves as servants, as well as 4 children of servants).

The casa de vecindad at no. 9 Callejon de Gachupines was home to no fewer than 11 washerwomen: Guadalupe Medina, 43-year-old widow, living with her 22-year-old daughter (perhaps also a laundress, she has no occupation listed); 32-year-old single Gertrudis Hernandez, living with her 16-year-old sister; and 40-year-old widow Rosario Escobedo, Maria Encarnacion Perez, Maria Dolores Rodriguez, and Micaela Palacios, all living in rooms by themselves. Room 15 housed four women, three of them laundresses (22-year-old widow Juana Diaz; 44-year-old Juana Manillo, and Manillo’s 25-year-old daughter Ignacia Pardo). Housing such a concentration of laundresses, this building likely had a fountain, or was close to a lavadero. No. 1 Callejon de la Condesa also has the character of a lavadero, with 12 laundresses living there. To the extent that some of their work was done in the vecindad, the rooftop and patio tenderos at these addresses were likely full of clothing and linens hung out to dry.

While fleeting in the census data, in the middle of the nineteenth century independent laundresses were common enough to be among the “typical” Mexican occupations depicted in costumbrista literature cited at the opening of the paper. While the mid-eighteenth century typical laundress found in census data was more likely to be white than not, the portrait drawn in
the mid-nineteenth century by Frías y Soto highlights non-white characteristics: “brown, beautiful, of muscular arms toasted by the sun, wide hips, black course hair, very white teeth, Mexican eyes and a large mouth.”41 By the end of the nineteenth century, more than 5,500 women (and over a hundred men) reportedly worked washing and ironing in the city of almost 330,000 people.42 Some of them worked in guest houses in Mexico City, where laundry was included in the fees (along with board, it cost twice as much a month to have clean clothes covered).43

Laundresses maintained themselves and their families through their labor washing clothes; their work also maintained the status of their clients. As Frías y Soto satirized, the greatest value of the laundress’ work is its association with her “high social mission” as “the police of the human race, and without her, beauty would be a myth, paradox, or fable.” Indeed, it is impossible for the author to imagine a beautiful woman without a laundress: there is no such thing as “a beauty with dirty clothes.”44

*The business of washing*

While also done by many for themselves and families for no pay, laundry constituted a business sector in the political economy of Mexico City, earning income for laundresses as well as for those who sold them water and access to a washing site. Most of the laundresses uncovered in census manuscripts were businesswomen, not resident servants of a household. As

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41 *La Lavandera*, op. cit., p. 20.


43 Adolfo Prantl y José L. Grosó, *La Ciudad de México. Novísima Guía Universal de la capital de la República Mexicana. Directorio de clasificado de vecinos y prontuario de las organización y funciones del gobierno federal oficiales de su dependencia*, Madrid, Juan Buxó y Compañía, editores/Librería Madrliña, 1901, p. 34. Guest house prices varied from 15 to 60 pesos for just a room, to 20 to 120 pesos including food and clean clothes.

44 *La Lavandera*, op. cit., p. 20.
businesswomen, they faced challenges in securing water, as well as competition for clientele. The labor performed during the cleaning, drying, and ironing of clothing and linens was done in patios and plazas, interior rooms and rooftops, and lavaderos (same word indicates both wash stations within a dwelling and wash houses run as businesses where laundresses paid for access to water and wash stations). The skilled labor of washing, drying, and ironing of clothes—the production of the cultural standing of urban residents—was done beyond domestic walls in public spaces and in places of business that doubled as domestic spaces for those doing the laundry. Recent analyses of the changes in use of space in downtown Mexico City highlights the increased use of accesorias for workshops and sites for sale of their goods nearby but separate from households where artisan families lived. Laundresses were like artisans in that they had a specific skill set and sold their services to multiple clients, but their work and sales had long been spread out across the city. Many laundresses worked where they lived, at least for part of the washing cycle, washing on the terrace (azotehuela). Others (more?) washed diverse clients’ clothing at a lavadero in the neighborhood, but then carried it wet and heavy back home to hang it on their clothes lines and iron it in their living space, before carting it through town in baskets, as depicted in a photograph entitled “La Lavandera” from the 1860s Cruces y Campa collection [Image 1].

We saw in the demographic discussion above that there might be multiple laundry businesses in one casa de vecindad. One factor in running a successful business as an

45 On the skill involved in the many stage laundry process in nineteenth-century Mexico, see Pepe Monteserín, La Lavandera, Madrid, Ediciones Lengua del Trapo, 2007, pp. 69-73.

independent laundress had to be discretion. A nineteenth century laundress in a recent Spanish novel comments when asked about whether she knows a particular family: “I know them little; they wash their dirty clothes in their own house.”\textsuperscript{47} An author in \textit{Mexicanos pintados por si mismos} notes that confessors, laundresses, and aguadores (who trapsed through households with their muddy boots), in that order, were the guardians of secrets and guarantors of discretion.\textsuperscript{48} The costumbrista portrait of Mexico’s typical “La Lavandera” satirically highlights the discussions of laundresses around the lavadero, who were busy “judging the representations, the integrities, and the scandalous histories of the family whose clothing is present, to suffer a purification that will never reach its owners.”\textsuperscript{49} A costumbrista spin on laundresses from 1851 Spain suggests long-term relationships that were professional yet intimate between commercial laundresses, sometimes generations of them, and client families. Indeed, it was said to be hard to fire a laundress, with all she knew.\textsuperscript{50}

Of paramount concern for the professional laundress was access to water. Municipal archive documents suggest that they had to secure access to water at a fountain or a washhouse to accomplish their work, or rely on the daily deliveries of \textit{aguadores}, though that water had to meet multiple needs of households such as bathing and cooking.\textsuperscript{51} Mexico City residents faced

\footnote{\textsuperscript{47} Pepe Monteserín 2007, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 77.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Mexicanos pintados}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 2.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{49} \textit{La Lavandera}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21. Sandra Lauderdale Graham highlights the degree to which “washing afforded the chance for camaderie” in Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century, and Roche is able to use police and notary records to describe the “diverse, turbulent, and canny milieu” of eighteenth century Parisian washerwoman with the “gift of the gab” and an “aggressive linguistic sovereignty, displayed at the expense of the police, the port security, sailors, bathers, washing-boat lessees, indeed of men in general.” Sandra Lauderdale Graham 1988, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 52.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{50} Manuel Breton de los Herreros, “La Lavandera,” in \textit{Los Españoles pintados por si mismos, por varios autores}, Madrid, Gaspar y Roig, 1851, 93.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Mexicanos pintados}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 1-3.}
water scarcities and cramped living.52 In 1790 in Mexico City there was a water shortage during
the dry season from February to June, and reports came into the Ayuntamiento that in poor
barrios the “very numerous population had not a drop of water . . . from the acequías that serve
for cleaning and other purposes.” At the same time, *aguadores*, or water carriers/vendors, raised
their prices for the increasingly poor-quality water they were able to get from the aqueduct,
wells, and fountains. Again in 1791 and 1815, lack of water in the public fountains led to
“exhorbitant” prices as the water carriers are forced into distant barrios looking for water.53

Access to water shaped the supply side for the laundry business in Mexico City. Two
kinds of water ran through pipes in the city. The first—“grueza” (thick) or “pesada” (heavy)
water and “poco saludable” (not very healthy)—came from the lake at Chapultepec via the Belen
aqueduct, and was generally abundant in the southern part of the city. The second source, called
“delgada” (thin) water and considered healthy, ran from manantiales (springs) at a distance of
three leagues, much of the way running in the open through the country side, entering the city
into a distribution system of “cañería de plomo” (lead pipes) and fountains. Reform of the water
distribution system began with a *bando* calling for new and more pipes in 1790, though the
construction does not seem to have begun until 1800.54 In that year, there were complaints of
water carriers only making one or two trips to and from the public fountains for a medio real,
when it should have been four trips. Investigation found that the price hike was due again to the
water carriers having to go far afield to fill their jugs for delivery to households in the city.

52 Roche notes that in eighteenth century Paris, the majority of the population turned to laundry specialists, “since
neither the inadequate supply of water nor the conditions of lower-class housing made washing easy.” Daniel Roche

53 AHDF Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, Sección Aguas, v. 19, exp. 52; vol. 21, exp. 107, fs. 11-18.

54 It was the opinion of investigator Balthasar Ladrón de Guvera that a shortage of “thin” water in 1797 was due to it
being diverted by hacienda and orchard owners along the Riviera de San Cosme, as well as damage to pipes
“continually hit by carriages.” AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Aguas, v. 21, exp. 107; exp. 112, exp. 115.
suggested reform was to allow the water carriers to obtain water from private fountains in casas de vecindades and convents.\textsuperscript{55} The “typical” aguador by the mid-nineteenth century still had to go sometimes long distances from water source to delivery sites, and as a result was running late already by seven in the morning, which angered his “patroncitas” awaiting their daily water deliveries\textsuperscript{56}.

For large loads of laundry, the water brought into a household by the aguadero would be insufficient. In Mexico City’s downtown neighborhoods, the Plaza del Factor and Plazuela de Loreto were among those with public fountains where more water was available. In 1762, an order by Domingo de Trespalacios y Escandón, judge of the Real Audiencia of New Spain, prohibited washing clothes as well as horses and carriages at public fountains.\textsuperscript{57} While it is not clear how long this prohibition was in place, people could turn to the private fountains in interior courtyards of establishments and residences with mercedes de agua. The San Andres Hospital had 10 fountains, while the Hospital de Locas, the lavadero Los Canonigos at no. 7 Plazuela de la Santísima, and the Baño de las Manzares at No. 4 Calle de las Moscas each had two fountains. Private access to “thin” water in the city was through mercedes granted to a minority.\textsuperscript{58}

In 1796, in the San Francisco neighborhood to the south of the Zócalo, 64 mercedes de agua were held by an assortment of elites and institutions.\textsuperscript{59} The two boarding houses with Mercedes


\textsuperscript{56} Mexicanos pintados, op. cit., 3.

\textsuperscript{57} AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Aguas, v. 16, exp. 27.

\textsuperscript{58} AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Aguas, v. 21, exp. 107, f. 13.

\textsuperscript{59} Mercedes were granted to twenty-nine people with the honorific “Don;” eleven noble men (Marqueses and Condés); four noble women (Marquesas and one Condesa); five religious institutions (four convents and the Casa Profesa); three medical establishments (two hospitals and one botica); the Dirección de Tabaco (a royal monopoly, which held two mercedes); two colegios; two clergymen; two casas de vecindad; two “widows;” one “Senora;” and one bathhouse. Ibid., exp. 106, fs. 4-8.
in this district were No. 15 Zuleta Street and No. 17 Callejón Espiritu Santo. Laundresses living in casas de vecindad might have access to water close at hand in their own building (as appears to be the case for the Gachupines and Condesa houses in the 1842 census above), as most neighborhoods seemed to have at least one with a water concession, but many laundresses would have had to rely on public fountains or pay the owner of a bathhouse and/or washhouse for water access. Some laundresses might go to work inside their clients’ household on a weekly or bi-weekly washday, as larger households did not generally employ live in laundresses, but they did have terraces, or *azhotehuelas*, where “wells, fountains, tubes delivering the mercedes, and drains” were located.60 The administrator of the properties held by the Convent of San Lorenzo suggested that the convent’s washhouse located in a casa de vecindad at No. 5 Callejon Cerrado de Dolores “served to provide that neighborhood with the benefit of water.” It is not clear if the convent ran a laundry business competing with neighborhood laundresses for clients.61

A water grant facilitated the establishment of a washhouse to serve laundresses. Table 3 lists lavaderos found in municipal archive documents from around the time that they had to renew licenses and/or be inspected. Only those bathhouses for which a washhouse was specified in documents are listed, though it is likely that others also had clothes washing stations available, especially women’s bathhouses. The Bourbon state recognized the need for access to water for washing clothing. Article 7 of the *Bando sobre arreglo de baños, temascales, y lavaderos* issued on August 21, 1793 stated “it would be convenient for all bath houses to have said offices [lavaderos] attached.”62 The owners of lavaderos and baños with lavaderos – part of


61 AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Baños y Lavanderos, vol. 3621, exp. 11, f. 2.

62 “Bando de baños publicos, temascales y lavaderos, fechado el 21 de agosto de 1793,” en *Coleccion de leyes, supremas ordenes, bando, disposiciones de policia y reglamentos municipales de administracion del Distrito Federal*, México, Empresa por Castillo Velasco e hijos, 1874, pp. 72-76, articles 6 and 7.
the “means of production” for laundresses—were generally men or religious institutions, and examples of each with multiple lavaderos appear in the documents. Some lavaderos were in business a long time – the one on Callejon de Dolores owned by the San Lorenzo Convent, for example, appears in documents in 1792 and again 30 years later. A number of washhouse businesses changed owners. The lavadero “La Culebrita” appears to have changed hands from religious institution to private individual to a different religious institution. No individual women are listed in the documents at hand as owners of washhouses, though they do appear as owners of bathhouses that do not specify also having wash stations. A number of women – including noblewomen and perhaps poorer widows – did have mercedes de agua, so they likely made money selling water in some way, whether to aguadores or laundresses. In 1813, just after the 1811 census where few women listed occupations, Don Manuel Antonio Valdez, owner of a women’s bathhouse and washhouse on Zuleta Street, sought the business license in the name of his step daughter Doña Guadalupe Calderón, “as this is a business appropriate for her sex.”

One inspection at the end of June 1794 found the women’s bathhouse and “labadero de ropa” named “El Rosario” in the barrio Santa Veracruz to be sufficiently clean and comfortable “corresponding to the public’s benefit,” but that a door connecting to the casa de vecindad needed to be closed off. The inspection of the bathhouse and two lavaderos in the business named “El Tanquito” in 1795 found the bathing area very clean, and one of the washing areas “large, and in good shape,” but “the other small one right next to the tank” had a roof that was “very mistreated, threatening ruin.” The owner was given three days to make repairs to the fence

63 For example, Doña Ynes Espinoza owned the Baño de San Antonio in San Pablo in 1814. AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Aguas, vol. 21, exp. 139.

64 AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Baños y Lavanderos, vol. 3621, exp. 22, f. 4.

65 Ibid., exp. 9, f. 8.
between it and the neighboring house so as to “avoid the frank entry and communication to the
lavaderos and the dangers [perjuicios] that this could offer the Public.”

Although bathhouses heated water for bathing, apparently the washing in Mexico City
lavaderos in the eighteenth century was done with cold water, as a royal inspector confirmed that
what had been a bathhouse and washhouse proved now to be only a lavadero because “already
demolished is the tinaco which was the principal method of heating the water.”

Whether or not hot water was introduced by the middle of the nineteenth century, Frías y Soto’s rendition of the
labor involved in laundering leaves no doubt to its back-breaking nature, leaving the
washerwomen at the end of their lives with “lung disease or paralysis” after spending so much
time with half the body in the water and the other half beaten by the sun. 

By the end of the
nineteenth century, access to the state water works was broader than in the last years of colonial
rule, with almost 6,000 houses and establishments reported on the 1900 tax roll for being “with
water from the city” (2,414 “agua gorda” and 3,495 “agua delgada”).

According to
architectural historian Vicente Martín Hernández, however, the arrival of water to residential
areas was very slow into the twentieth century.

In 1899, there were 58 lavaderos publicos
reported as paying taxes in the city, with the beginning of a transition to commercial laundries
evident.

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66 Ibid, exp. 11, f. 8.
67 Ibid, exp. 11, f. 5.
68 La Lavandera, op. cit., pp. 20-21, 28
69 Adolfo Prantl y José L. Groso 1901, op. cit., p. 982.
70 Vicente Martín Hernández, Arquitectura doméstica de la ciudad de México (1890-1925), México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1981, p. 115.
71 Adolfo Prantl y José L. Groso 1901, op. cit., p. 974.
Spaces within casas de vecindad where most laundresses lived—much of it communal—constituted laundry rooms for the various stages of the wash cycle, as might the open interiors of elite households. For women who washed for multiple clients, they could do so within the household compound of the client at a lavadero wash station off the service patio or the terrace, or they more likely took the clothes away from the client’s home and washed them at public lavaderos or fountains and then hung them in the shared patios. Sometimes casas de vecindad had communal wash stations built in as well, which would cut down the travel time carrying heavy wet clothes for laundresses who hung their client’s clothing and linens on the clotheslines in their casa de vecindad.\(^\text{72}\) The story of Doña Gorgina Ruiz that emerges in notary documents from 1841 suggests not only that some “white” women continued in the laundry business, but also something about combining public and private work spaces in the capital. She worked as a laundress while living in her widowed father’s home, doing well enough to lend him 200 pesos, half the capital he needed to buy a small adobe house across from the Baño de los Delicias on the Callejón del Olivo. In her married life, Doña Gorgina continued her laundry business. Did she hang wet clothes in the patio of her father’s new house, where she would not have to carry the bundles of heavy wet clothes further than across the street?\(^\text{73}\)

The drying and ironing of clients’ clothing is the most invisible in archival sources at hand, though we have some great images to ponder. In the drawing by Frías y Soto accompanying “La Lavandera,” the laundress is on her tiptoes to reach the clothesline to hang the wet sheets [Image 2]. Some details from this image have not changed in a century and a half: rooftop and patio tendederos throughout Mexico City still rely on a brick to tether the pole


\(^{73}\) Archivo General de Notarías del Distrito Federal, Notario José Lopez Guazo, vol. 2346, 1841, f. 50v-53 and f. 119v-120.
holding the clothesline. Toward the end of any given laundry cycle came the ironing. In a posed photograph taken by the photographers Antíoco Cruces y Luis Campa ca. 1860 entitled “La Planchadora,” we see a woman in a relatively humble room pressing what appears to be a table cloth with a flat iron on a small work table, with her basket of clothing and linens no doubt fresh from the clothesline at her side [Image 3]. Charcoal was the heat source for irons, which were made of steel. Frías y Soto characterizes the ironing work as so tough that “it would kill even the most robust man.”

There is no indication in the sources of the accounting practices used to keep track of the number of pieces washed and returned, the proverbial “laundry list.” Frías y Soto depicts those receiving their cleaned clothes back from their washerwomen as not satisfied with her image-producing work, with “neither the girls ever thinking their skirts are stiff enough, nor the señor his shirts sufficiently white.”

The work culture produced by the supply and demand of laundresses in Mexico City had a collective air when the work was done in a public washing place. Washerwomen are often mentioned in the plural in documents about washhouses, suggesting they were not isolated in the workplace. The inspection report for the lavadero attached to the women’s bathhouse La Quema in the barrio of San Pablo notes that the washing areas were separated from the bathing area, that the lavadero was roomy, with easy access to water “for supplying the lavanderas, with a very fine stone patio.” Plans for building a new lavadero submitted for approval by Mexico City officials in 1813 show a half dozen washing stations, again evidence that multiple women

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76 AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Baños y Lavanderos, vol. 3621, exp. 12, f. 8.
washed at the same time.\textsuperscript{77} In mid-nineteenth century Madrid, “many women got together in the same lavadero,” and passed the time in “delicious talk” of their adventures and complaints about their men.\textsuperscript{78} The communal clothesline and wash stations in the patios of the vecindades also fostered a shared work experience for washerwomen.\textsuperscript{79} To the extent that fiction might mirror real life, Monteserín’s protagonist lived in a rented room at the Santa Brígida ex-convent in the mid-nineteenth century, which was a “multi-use building with a huge lavadero” at which she washed for years, alongside eighteen other women, much like a postcard of laundresses at a lavadero ca. 1900 [Image 4].\textsuperscript{80}

While the hard work of laundering may have produced camaraderie among laundresses, it was not a lucrative business. The widows and single moms found in the 1753 census supporting young children through laundry work might not have produced more than a subsistence culture for their children. While earnings are not found in the eighteenth-century sources, in the middle of the nineteenth century, washerwomen earned 4 to 12 pesos a month.\textsuperscript{81} Arrom found a laundress to be the highest paid women listed in an 1849 census, yet she only earned 3 pesos a week.\textsuperscript{82} Earnings need to be balanced with the fees paid for lavadero use or aguadero fees, as well as costs for soap and other supplies. Frias y Soto notes that his typical laundress after making her Saturday deliveries, “tucked into her belt the modest honoraria with which she feeds her family and even her husband, because this is the dowry of the women of our people: to

\textsuperscript{77} AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Baños y Lavanderos, vol. 3621, exp. 22, f. 4.

\textsuperscript{78} Manuel Breton de los Herreros 1851, “La Lavandera,” p. 91.

\textsuperscript{79} Vicente Martín Hernández 1981, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 113.

\textsuperscript{80} Pepe Monteserín 2007, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 66-69.

\textsuperscript{81} Marie Francois 2006, \textit{op.cit}, p. 90; Silva Arrom 2000, \textit{op.cit}, p. 213.

\textsuperscript{82} Silvia Arrom 1985, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 198.
sustain the man; this helps very little with the household budget.” This costumbrista commentator argues that the laundress of the single man or of the student, in contrast, is happy because she can charge what she wants and even obtain loans that go unpaid in exchange for doing little things for her clients, like sewing buttons back on shirts and patching the knees of pants.83 A success story might be Doña Gorgina Ruiz, mentioned above, who earned enough to invest in real estate with her father. Perhaps Gorgina was part of a tradition of successful laundry businesswomen dating back a century.

The laundry business produced incomes for some who did no washing at all. The owners of lavaderos lived on the rents paid by the local laundresses. The nuns of the San José de Gracia convent on Calle de Mesones rented out a “casa de baños” that included a lavadero.84 Don Martín Plaza owned at least three washhouses in 1796, each with two fountains, two off the principal branch of the cañeria de San Lorenzo, and one at the corner of Pila Seca.85 The priest Br. Don Manuel Jose Perez benefited from a Capellania funded through “a house destined as washhouse, named Los Pescaditos; what it yields is precisely what the women who come there to wash pay, . . . and from this I can maintain myself and my family.”86 Other beneficiaries of the labor of laundresses were the members of the religious institutions that owned washhouses (see Table 1). When the costs of renovating the bathhouse owned by the Convent of Santa Catarina was too costly in 1794, the convent petitioned to just continue running the lavadero, “so as to not

83 La Lavandera, op.cit., p. 27.
84 Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru 2001b, op. cit., pp. 89-90.
86 AHDF, Ayuntamiento, Baños y Lavaderos, v. 3621, exp. 11, f. 1.
lose totally what this property produces.”87 That laundry was productive work was not lost on the sisters.

**Concluding thoughts**

Pilar Gonzalbo notes in her study of everyday life that “the conservation and care of clothing has occupied the attention of women during many centuries.”88 With laundering often done outside of the household to which the clothing belongs, it is different from other subsistence work such as housecleaning and cooking done within the confines of the home.89 When not done by wives and mothers, the washing of clothes and linens constituted paid work, or Josefa Amar de Borbon put it in the eighteenth century, “a costo de dinero,” with service secured in the marketplace.90 Nonetheless, recent studies of women working for a living do not characterize laundering as engaged in a business as it does for seamstresses, tortilleras, and midwives—providing a service on the market—but rather only as a category of domestic servant. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the elision of this skilled work with housekeeping

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87 *Ibid.*, exp. 11, f. 3. Religious institutions in Puebla also benefitted financially from the value of water due to their privileged access to mercedes. See Rosalva Loreto Lopes, “De aguas dulces y aguas amargas o de cómo se distribuía el agua en la ciudad de Puebla durante los siglos xviii y xix,” en Loreto L. and Francisco J. Cervantes B., coords., *Limpiar y Obedecer. La basura, el agua y la muerte en la Puebla de Los Ángeles (1650-1925)*, Puebla, Universidad Autónoma de Puebla,1994, pp. 11-67.


89 Though it is important to point out that in Mexico City and no doubt other urban settings in the nineteenth century, kitchen and cooking facilities often did not obtain inside households, with cooked food purchased on the street and in *fondas* with regularity.

90 Spanish elites such as Aragonese Josefa Amar y Borbon, daughter of a doctor, wife of a magistrate, and Enlightenment author recognized the economic benefit of and the costs associated with good housekeeping: “These labors are of great utility to the house; because as they are absolutely necessary in all homes, if the senoras don’t do them or their *criadas*, it is necessary to send out to have them done at some expense [*a costo de dinero*].” Josefa Amar y Borbon, *Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de la mujeres.* 1790. Edición de Ma. Victoria López-Cordón. Madrid, Ediciones Cátedra, 1994, p. 160.
colluded with patriarchal norms equating paid workers with men to keep washerwomen unaccounted for in census data.\textsuperscript{91}

I, too, have argued elsewhere that laundry is part of a housekeeping category. Yet laundry is also a good filter for the gendered business of material culture, the different chains of people and systems tied to the supply of and demand for clean clothes: consumers of clothes and services; skilled laundry practitioners performing back-breaking work; owners of washhouses and water access. Examining laundry, even with the limited statistical evidence at hand, also reveals that housekeeping divisions of labor in terms of gender and ethnicity are constructed. Laundry was not naturally done by family women in private homes, or only by women of color. Urban living and material circumstances, an increased consumption of ropa blanca, female household headship in a patriarchal political economy with limited work opportunities for women, limited access to water for most city residents – all of these factors structured the who, what, and where of laundry work. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the laundry business was shared by a multi-ethnic lot, with a majority presence of Spanish widows; it was not the racialized service sector it was in other settings, or that it apparently became by the end of the nineteenth century in Mexico City as white women apparently receded from the ranks of the lavanderas.\textsuperscript{92} The places associated with the labor-intensive work of these cleaning specialists are arenas of intersection where public and private spheres overlap, separations of production and reproduction break down, and social relations produce and are produced by demands of material life.

\textsuperscript{91} For example, Sonia Pérez Toledo 2004, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 208-237.

This project makes visible everyday work processes that are crucial for human existence, tracing the changing labor force and social geography of laundering. It links identity formation, the production of respectable reputations, and commercial activities surrounding wardrobe maintenance and class-based standards. It insists that individual men and women – whether protagonists on the national political stage, matriarchs running families, or those with fragile personas built on limited cloth goods – are not ready-made, but are products of multiple labor processes. The findings of this project belie liberal justification for ignoring reproductive work because it is unpaid and done in private, as laundry often was paid and done in public washhouses, fountains, and communal patios. They also broaden understandings of women’s experiences running businesses and establishing social and economic networks in this primary Mexican city during a pivotal period. Contracts, intimacy, trust, mistrust, respect, status, reputation, hierarchy, government regulation and reform, and skill and extremely hard work are bundled among the sheets and shirts and skirts in the baskets hauled through the streets of Mexico City by lavanderas.
TABLE 1. Laundresses and the Mexico City Censuses, 1753-1895

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Laundresses in sample</th>
<th>Total residents in sample</th>
<th>Laundresses in aggregate census data</th>
<th>Population of Mexico City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1753</td>
<td>21 (0.9%)</td>
<td>2,441</td>
<td></td>
<td>126,477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>6 (0.1%)</td>
<td>4,091</td>
<td></td>
<td>168,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>78 (5.3%)</td>
<td>1,485</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td></td>
<td>5,673</td>
<td></td>
<td>329,774</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2. Characteristics of laundresses, 1753 and 1842

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1753</th>
<th>1842</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2,441 residents sampled</td>
<td>1,485 residents sampled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 21</td>
<td>N = 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>10 (48%)</td>
<td>39 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>8 (38%)</td>
<td>33 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living alone</td>
<td>5 (24%)</td>
<td>12 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with own children 10 years of age and younger</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with other laundresses</td>
<td>11 (52%)</td>
<td>31 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live-in</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years of age and younger</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>9 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30 years of age</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>20 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31- 40 years of age</td>
<td>9 (43%)</td>
<td>23 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 years of age</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 years of age or older</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 3. Lavaderos in Mexico City, 1796-1824

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>El Rosario</td>
<td>Plazuela de Santa Vera Cruz</td>
<td>Don Francisco Salinas</td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Los Pescaditos</td>
<td>Callejon Cerrado de Dolores Casa No. 5</td>
<td>Convento de San Lorenzo</td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Calle de la Misericordia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Convento de Santa Catarina</td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Don Andrea</td>
<td>Calle de la Pila de Monserrate al Salto de Agua</td>
<td>Oratorio de San Felipe de Neri</td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>La Culebrita</td>
<td>Plazuela de la Cruz del Factor</td>
<td>Oratorio de San Felipe de Neri</td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Calzada de Chapultepec/Arqueria de Belem</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don Albaro de Figueroa</td>
<td>1794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>El Tanquito</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don Francisco Villalva</td>
<td>1795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>La Quema</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oratorio de San Felipe de Neri</td>
<td>1795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Calzada de Chiconautla</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Estampa de la Concepcion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don Martin Plaza</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Los Canonigos</td>
<td>Plazuela de la Santisima no. 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Calle del Factor No. 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>El Tanquito</td>
<td>Estampa de la Concepcion</td>
<td>Don Martin Plaza</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>La Culebrita</td>
<td>Plaza del Factor</td>
<td>Don Manuel Corona</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>El Paraiso</td>
<td>de Santa Catarina</td>
<td>Don Martin Plaza</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Tepozan</td>
<td></td>
<td>de la Encarnacion</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Chiconautla</td>
<td></td>
<td>de Regina</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Servantana</td>
<td>Estampa de Sta Catarina de Martir</td>
<td>Convento de Santa Catarina</td>
<td>1796</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Plazuela de Regina No. 11</td>
<td></td>
<td>P. Perez -- capellanía</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bano y lavadero</td>
<td>Calle de Zuleta</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don Manuel Antonio Valdes</td>
<td>1813</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Calle del Factor No. 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>La Profesa</td>
<td>1824</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Callejon de Dolores</td>
<td>Callejon de Dolores</td>
<td>Convento de San Lorenzo</td>
<td>1824</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lavadero</td>
<td>Calle de la cerca de Sto Domingo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Convento de San Jose de Gracia</td>
<td>1824</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: ADHF, Ayuntamiento, Baños y lavaderos, v. 3621, exp. 8, f. 9; exp. 11, fs.1-10; exp. 12, fs. 3, 8; Aguas, v. 21, exp. 102, fs. 10-15; exp. 153