

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Karen B. K. Chan
Conducted on June 9, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Originally from Hong Kong, Karen B. K. Chan is a 44-year-old, Hong Kong-Chinese and Cantonese, genderqueer person. At the time of the interview, Chan was living in Toronto, Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic while working as a speaker, trainer, and consultant on sex education, emotional intelligence, anti-oppression, anti-racism, and other issues of equity and diversity. The interview concerns Chan's experiences as an organizer and patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse events, focusing on the Night of 2000 Pussies event that took place on September 14, 2000. Chan discusses their experience as one of two organizers of colour on the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, their efforts to increase engagement and bathhouse attendance within communities of colour, her sense memories of the physical space of the bathhouse, her recollections of the police raid, her difficult decision to resign from the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, and other topics. Chan mentions Hong Kong and Toronto, Ontario, and focuses the discussion on the time period between 1998 and 2003.

Keywords: Asian; Genderqueer; Organizing; Bathhouse; Anti-Racism; Community; Oppression; Police Raid; Public Sex.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:00):

Go ahead. All right. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing B. K. Chan on June 9, 2021. B. K., are you also in Toronto?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:00:19):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alisha Stranges (00:00:20):

So, B. K. is also in Toronto and is going to tell us a bit about the experience of being an organizer of the Pussy Palace bathhouse events. So, B. K., do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:00:33):

Yes, please.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:34):

Thank you. So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I'm just going to ask a few questions that invite you to tell us a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold or categories you occupy, and how at least some of these may have evolved or changed in the past 20 years. So, to start simply, can you just share your name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:01:06):

My name is Karen B. K. Chan. I use she or they pronouns, and I'm 44, I think.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:15):

Thank you. Thank you.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:01:21):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:25):

We're going with 44.

[crosstalk]

Karen B. K. Chan (00:01:26):

Yeah, -ish.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:30):

How would you describe your gender and sexual identity today, in 2021?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:01:37):

I would say I occupy a range of gender identities. I feel genderqueer, and in places where that's understood, that's how I would identify. I also identify as a woman. I also identify as androgynous. I also identify as queer, gay in some places. I think my identity actually often depends on who I think is receiving the information. I, for many years, identified as a dyke, I think less and less so now. And I'm polyamorous, no time to practice. And what else? I'm partnered, and I'm a parent. Those are really important identities.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:55):

Thank you. Could you unpack a little bit for us what genderqueer means for you?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:03:01):

I think today it means conscious, open, evolving, critical, curious, loving relationship to my gender. Kind of open-ended.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:34):

And you were saying that dyke was a term that you may have used before, but less and less so now. Can you share a bit about the reason for that shift?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:03:50):

I don't have a lot of receivers of that information who would understand it.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:56):

Right.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:03:57):

So, it just doesn't come up, and therefore it doesn't feel present as much.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:04):

Yes.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:04:05):

So, I think a lot about, when I'm alone in a room by myself, I don't actually identify strongly with many identity categories.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:18):

Right.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:04:18):

So, it feels very relational.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:24):

Yes. Yes. Was this always the case, this idea that identity categories are relational or...? I'm curious about...

[crosstalk]

Karen B. K. Chan (00:04:36):

Yeah. I don't think that was always the case for me. I think, for a long time, it was about stating who I am, and trying to capture some essence of me that would be unchanging or true, regardless of who was in the room or who was not in the room. It's been a while since I've had a chance to really think about my gender, and other identities. So yeah, I would say it's a more recent phenomenon that I feel not as strong an inclination to say who I am.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:23):

Yep. Well, this series of questions will be rather frustrating then, I'm sure.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:05:29):

No. Not at all. It's so interesting. I love it.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:32):

Good. So, what about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How do you express yourself through those types of categories? When called to, I suppose.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:05:46):

That comes up a lot more often and in different ways. I identify as Hong Kong-Chinese and Cantonese, which also happens to be my first language. Not my most dominant language anymore, but my first language.

I am Asian, East Asian. I am a person of colour, and I'm racialized. I'm point five-generation, migrant. Immigrant slash emigrant settler here from Hong Kong. Those are some of the words I use.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:41):

What about educational and/or class background? What are your affiliations there?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:06:51):

Educational background? I have a master's degree in Sociology and Equity Studies, and I have a bachelor's degree in Molecular Biology. I feel, educationally, I'm looking for better ways to talk about it. I have a lot of informal education in all the different ways that we learn things now. Yeah. Wish there was a better way of talking about it. It feels very unsatisfying, but there you go. I am middle-class. I come from two parents who were working-class and poor when they were younger, and then became middle-class. When I was a child, I think there were some major class shifting when my dad moved up in his job, and our lifestyle also changed. So that happened in Hong Kong. So, by the time we immigrated, when I was 11, I think we were squarely middle-class.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:32):

I'm very curious about the transition from molecular biology to sociology.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:08:38):

Yeah. Me too.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:41):

Could you say a little more about that?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:08:43):

Yeah. I think I was sort of destined to go to medical school and do the things that many of my peers who are immigrant, only-children in Hong Kong-Chinese families feel the pressure to do or feel inspired to do. I couldn't do it, and I actually really hated... I love science, but I really hated my program, and I finished it because I should. But my love, at the time, way back when was actually my minor, which was in women's studies. I felt like it kept me alive. Then, I actually worked in molecular biology for a few years. I tried to make it work, but I was miserable. And so, I think I just jumped ship and trying to align what I did closer to what matters to me, which was a lot of justice issues. I mean, I'm sure it actually had a lot to do with my queerness. Because I was looking for community, and in many ways my queer Asian communities connected me to then a number of jobs within social services, within HIV prevention work. That's how I actually ended up becoming a sex educator, and I went back to school for my master's much later. So yeah, it was a struggle, and then it was, "Ah, okay, better."

Alisha Stranges (00:10:48):

And would you be able to share a little bit more about what occupies your time these days professionally?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:10:55):

Yeah. I work for myself. I have for three years exclusively. So, for the last three years I've only worked for myself and for 10 years before that, I was working a full-time job and trying to build a business that I could

eventually do exclusively. I am a speaker and a trainer, and I work in sex education, emotional intelligence, and anti-oppression, anti-racism, equity, diversity, inclusion kinds of stuff.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:37):

With young adults?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:11:40):

Everybody. My youngest, the people that I work with who are young, are four years old, those are the youngest ones. We talk about emotions and diversity. And I work with professionals. I just finished talking to a bunch of clinicians who make products for other clinicians to use, and they want to do it in a more inclusive and less biased way. I work with universities talking about consent. I work with school boards with their curricula. I do a lot of talks with whoever wants to be talked at. I will do it.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:32):

I see. So, the last sort of question in this vein of thought is about religion and spirituality. Do either of these play a role in your life currently or at any point?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:12:47):

I was raised Catholic at my grandmother's insistence so that I could get into Catholic schools, which were the good schools in Hong Kong. Then, not really practice and then made a very pointed exit around 15 years old, 16. Part of coming to be and feeling that it was a violent structure that I didn't want to be a part of. Since then, I haven't been officially part of any religious denomination. I've tried... I've been part of things that are religiously affiliated, right? Some mindfulness practices that are connected to certain kinds of Buddhism or... Yeah. And then, I have an ex-partner who, through her, I learned a lot about Judaism and specifically sort of more radical Judaism. Feel very connected to some of the practices, although not Jewish myself. Then, been longing really for a religious community and thinking about Unitarian, maybe. I just want a place where I can actually feel part of a bunch of people who take seriously the wonder and the awe of an entity, a being. I want to do that stuff. Express gratitude and joy, and be humble and small, and that's something I long for still, but hasn't really been in my life.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:26):

Thank you for sharing those.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:15:28):

Thank you for asking. That's awesome.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:32):

Is there anything else you think it would be important for the eventual listener to know about how you understand the different aspects of identity that you hold today as compared to 20 years ago?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:15:50):

I would maybe just also say that I think a lot has changed in terms of how I position myself politically. Not where I vote politically, but how I believe justice can be done and how it can be carried out. Yeah. So, I think we'll probably get into more nuances.

Alisha Stranges (00:16:22):

Sure. Yeah. Yeah. Sure. Let's shift. I'm curious about, first of all, your involvement with the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, and how and when did you become a member of the committee?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:16:37):

I don't know. I want to say, for the record, I have a terrible memory of most of my life. So, at some point... Oh, I do know how I got involved with the bathhouse, period. An ex-partner was very much involved. So, this ex-partner was a volunteer, and her ex... I mean, at that time, she was seeing both of us. So, her other partner, at the time, I think had a hand in putting it on in the beginning and was organizing it, imagining it, and also worked within, I think, worked in a sex store in Toronto. So, they were very connected. The two of them were very connected to building a bathhouse scene in Toronto with the people at the time. And so, I think I just became really endeared to the bathhouse as, at that time, a total novelty and didn't really imagine it would exist, could exist.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:18:09):

Excited that it's a thing, not necessarily excited as much personally. I don't think my immediate excitement was like, "Oh, that's what I need." It was more like, "This is the right thing." So, and then I became a volunteer, and so I would do various things at the bathhouse. Maybe a coat check shift in one and maybe I was a tour guide in another bathhouse. I did some volunteering. Became more and more familiar with it, and then I really don't remember how I became part of the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee. I do know that it had something to do with the fact that we-slash-they needed more people of colour on the committee. And so, I joined, and when I joined, there was one other person of colour, a Black woman, who was on the committee.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:13):

Right. So, you were saying earlier that things have changed about how you position yourself politically. How do those changes figure into this moment in time? I'm just thinking about what it might be like to consider joining in what... I don't know if this is what you're saying, but there's an element of tokenism that you seem to be pointing to, but that may not be true. I don't know.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:19:44):

I think it's a hard one. I think there's an element of tokenism, but I don't think it was the predominant energy of it. I think it was that, really, not a lot of people of colour were connected to that scene. And so, when it became a thing and there was a committee and it became more and more established, and teams of people would be security. And these would be the programming team, and all these teams becoming more and more established. Like, there were always people of colour around, but it was predominantly white, and the people who wanted to go to bathhouses were white women. And I had a lot of queer Asian, specifically, friends who would not go to a bathhouse. Who would scoff at it, say "ew" or "no." Many of, I mean, some of my groups of Asian, queer friends were also not connected to Downtown Toronto life. They didn't really feel affiliated with Downtown.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:21:20):

So, a real split in that friend group was about, "No, that's a very Downtown town thing. We don't want to do that. We like to do Uptown things." And Uptown meaning Richmond Hill and that kind of area. And so, I understand that it's complicated to want more people of colour, to not really have access or connection to a lot of people of colour. And when I even have connection to people of colour, they actually don't feel connected to the event. We tried a number of different ways to create people-of-colour-only events, to sell

tickets early, because they would sell out. People would buy them so quickly. To have preferred times or priority times for people of colour to buy the tickets. We try all these different things, and it was efforts to right this imbalance.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:22:32):

And I really learned at the end of it, that just some things are not meant to look a certain way. I think that's how I would look back on it, and that we really endeavoured to have diversity in a thing that I just really don't know how many people want to be part of. I don't know, I could be totally wrong. If a primarily group of people of colour had put together the first bathhouse, whether then it would just be a thing, and everyone would love it. So, I didn't feel particularly tokenized. It was sort of a willing and understood thing. Like, this has to happen. I don't have to just happen to be a person of color who everyone is connected to and happen to want to be on the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee. I was happy to be one of the people who is going to help make this thing more diverse.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:43):

We know the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee was also interested in hosting events that were trans-inclusive. Do you have any memory about how the committee went about trying to create a trans-inclusive space?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:23:56):

I feel like that happened towards, like, later on, not right from the beginning. It was the time in our queer community history where it wasn't taken for granted that trans people would be part of who is included. That it was called the "Pussy" Palace to start with... I already didn't really feel connected to that myself, but it was just understood as sort of the queer women's aesthetic. Cats are cool and pussy is how we talk about sexy things. So, that already has a very specific to flavour to it. So, I don't remember very explicitly when it started, but it wasn't from the beginning. And then, there were some obviously trans folks around, but not many. It felt like a very different time then. We had discussions of: How do we do trans inclusive, women-specific spaces? We had conversations, I think also about trans women and trans men. And I think these conversations led to spaces being, and language around, how do we talk about this? It was all forming at the time. How do we talk about a space that basically is saying, if you're a cis-man, then you shouldn't come, but anybody else, really, is welcome?

Alisha Stranges (00:26:01):

Yeah. I'm curious if you have any memories about what the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee was trying to do, and all the work and discussion and action you were trying to take to kind of bring these intentions to fruition versus when the events were actually hosted. Was there any kind of dissonance between how patrons were working inside of what you were trying to create?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:26:35):

Are you saying, is there a dissonance between what we're hoping to do and what would actually happen and how they felt?

Alisha Stranges (00:26:43):

Yeah.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:26:43):

To the people who were there? I think there was always some kind of dissonance only because... And I actually don't think that's a bad thing. From my perspective that comes from it being such an unscripted experience. So, when folks showed up, they showed up however they were. I think, in my head, I imagine a certain scene, and in everyone's head there was a certain outcome for each bathhouse, and then people would show up and be as they are. So, how much nudity there was, and we really wanted to be open and at the same time okay if you're not. How much kink there was, and how do we have spaces for different practices and be people who are into different things? How it would manifest also... Some of it was controlled, right? We would have to set up times to sign up, to visit the priestess.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:28:01):

So, those things were the structures. But how many people end up on the dance floor? Who showed up? How long they stayed for? Was there people having sex in the open? Or did everyone sort of sit around and watch? Was there a lot of awkward chatting? Or was there a lot of sexy hooking up? It all depended on what people did. And so, I think there often was a difference between what we may have imagined. But I don't think it was like, "This failed or that didn't work." It was always, at least how I read it, quite an open, improvised experience. And then we would discuss how to improve it and other things to do to make things more exciting. And have ways of making sure that people have safer sex supplies, and make sure there was lube, and how often would lube be replenished, and how would we know if a certain room ran out of lube. Very logistical concerns, when the lube wasn't there at all times, or gloves were not equally distributed between this place and that place. Yeah. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:38):

Well, I want to focus a little more closely on your experience. I don't know. Would you have been an organizer yet at the September 2000 bathhouse event or more a volunteer at that time?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:29:50):

Is that the one where we were raided?

Alisha Stranges (00:29:52):

Yes.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:29:53):

Yeah. I was an organizer.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:55):

Okay.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:29:56):

I was actually, I think, debating leaving the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee at that point. So, I had been part of the committee, and we struggled through all these different ways of increasing inclusion and diversity. It was really hard to do all that, and then it wasn't very successful. Folks that I knew were just really were not that interested, or they would show up and they would feel very out of place and kind of uncomfortable. And kind of just only hang around each other and then not come back. And so, at some point I became quite burnt out, and it was probably around that time that I was debating like, "What am I

going to do? How do I tell my committee that it was actually ill suited?” I’m not a great committee member for hosting a bathhouse. I just really believe in it, but it’s not my strength. And so, there was a lot of things we were doing that I felt kind of out of my league in. And many of the people who were on the committee are very connected, well established, white queer women who kind of run in similar circles. And so, they would be very competent at a lot of things that I wasn’t. And so, I actually think I was struggling myself to really see my worth, to really feel well used. And I struggled, and so I think at some point I quit, and I think I quit shortly after. I was planning on quitting shortly after the raid, and then the raid happened. So, it kind of delayed my exit. And it was weird to be caught up in a thing and not feel that much a part of it. But suddenly my name is on a lawsuit and we’re having meetings with Frank Addario, and I’m like, “I was just about to read you guys my resignation letter.” And it was a terrible time to be like, “Okay, see you.” And suddenly we’re in a very different kind of crisis. Anyway, so I was a member.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:55):

Okay. Okay.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:32:57):

In other words.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:59):

There’ll be time to sort of unpack these things that you’re gesturing towards a little bit later. But for now, I kind of want to focus more on what you may have done that night. Or let’s start with, as an organizer, what do you recall about what you might have worn to your shift? What kind of outfit would be suitable for whatever you were doing that night?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:33:25):

Well, I think every bathhouse I had imagined as a series of, like, chunks of hours. So, depending on when I was on and when I was off, it would change. And so, I might have been wearing, at some point, jean shorts. At other points, maybe boxer briefs and various points, maybe a sports bra, maybe... I think at one or a number of them, I just put black electrical tape on my nipples and wore jeans or something. Oh, I think at that one I wore a leather vest just by itself, and I don’t remember what’s on the bottom, maybe some little shorts or something. And at various points boots or sandals, depending on if it’s pool time or not pool time, barefoot. And then, why am I thinking about some pink? At some point I wore something very pink. Maybe it feels like... What was it? Something pink, and loud, and fun, and wacky.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:03):

Well, with these various sort of outfits you’re describing — the boxers, or boxer briefs, jean shorts, electrical tape on the nipples, leather vest, something pink and loud — what do you think you were trying to feel or to communicate to others with these looks?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:35:24):

I was experimenting with what it would feel like to be sexualized on terms that are mine. I think, my early life was the opposite of that. I felt zero sexualization as a not out but out just because of how I looked, ostracized, freak of nature. Throughout, I think up until maybe even university, until I really looked for queer community. So, I think for a long time, and I identify as someone who was sexually curious very early. And so, it felt I had been waiting for two decades to be a sexual person. So, I had a lot of catching up to do, and I really wanted to be seen as desirable. And I think it was around that time that I was really growing into some

power of my own sexual being. So, I was experimenting with: What does it mean to be a sexualizable, to be a desirable person? And then, I was also having fun.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:37:12):

So, I've always felt very restricted by fashion. Just what is understood as either fashionable, which a lot of people will have to agree on. Or, like, avant-garde, which is so out there that you're leading the way for fashion. But neither of those are particularly interesting to me. And so, I really saw the bathhouse as a fun place where anything goes. If I want to wear a rubber duck on my head, then that's great. The more I was a part of organizing it, the more freedom I felt to say, "This is my house. So, I can be how I want." So, I think those two primary things was what I was doing, saying, "I can do whatever I want." And so, I also really wanted to play with, what is sexy? What isn't? Like, I find giant, yellow flip-flops really fun and sexy, and they're not leather and lace. You know? So, I was really into feeling some liberation.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:48):

And when you were a patron, as opposed to being on shift for your volunteer shift. What parts of the space did you gravitate towards?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:38:59):

Oh, I was often outside by the pool, I think. I could be wrong. Is it because I was smoking, or I was smoking weed or smoking cigarettes, or maybe there was no smoking allowed? Anyway, I was often outside. I would be hanging out. I liked talking to people by the pool. I liked talking to random strangers and just chatting them up. I met a number of sexual partners that way, that I would have sex with or be sexual with at the bathhouse. I hung out in the porn room once in a while just to be like, "Hey, let's see what this is like." So, I was always a little bit out of place, I think, because a bathhouse is really not my idea of a good time. A lot of sweaty people in and out of wet damp places changing clothes. I hate having damp clothes on. Having my shorts be kind of wet from sitting on the side of the pool. It's not my thing.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:40:26):

Anonymous sex, like I really wanted to like it, but I don't like it. So, it was just really... It felt like an amusement park when I was just like, "Oh, what about this? Oh, what about that? No. Don't like it. Not into that either." And sometimes I would go with my friends because I'm trying to get them to go. So, I'd be trying to hang out with them a little bit, get them be comfortable, but then really made a pact with myself. I'm not going to just sit with my friends all night. Sometimes I would meet dates that I would prearrange and see each other at the bathhouse. Sometimes I'm just walking around because I'm lost. Like having a really bad memory, I also have a really terrible sense of direction. And so, truly I think about 25 percent of the time that I've spent in any bathhouse, I was lost and trying to get somewhere, and I couldn't.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:39):

I've heard that, I mean a lot of people speak about the space in a way that is very... It's very clear, it's a confusing space, a maze-like space.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:41:50):

Yeah. I mean many spaces feel like that to me, spaces that people find perfectly okay. It was like that to me. I still couldn't really tell you what's connected to what. It's all fragmented.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:06):

What do you recall you were...? What service were you volunteering? What position were you volunteering in that night? Do you remember? It may have been X or Y.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:42:22):

Well, it was definitely not at the door. I was never the person at the door because it felt like a scary position. Because that was also where people would get turned away or asked for ID, and it felt like someone who's much more powerful, their job. I might have had... I really couldn't tell you. Are you able to tell me what some of the job roles were, based on your listening so far from others?

Alisha Stranges (00:43:09):

Yes. Sure. Sure. Sure.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:43:11):

Cause I could tell you.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:12):

Let's go at it that way. So, I mean, I've heard there was folks who were involved in various kinds of security positions at the door, like you were saying. But also circulating throughout trying to figure out, making sure that the liquor license or, sorry, the special occasions permit rules were being followed. But then there were people who, yeah, were working in the cage up front. People handing out flyers, people giving tours, flyers, information about the night. Then, it sounds like there were people who were offering specific kinds of services. They might have been working the bar or in one of the sort of activity rooms, like the temple priestess or body painting. These are some of the kind of volunteer positions I've heard about.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:44:10):

I might have...

Alisha Stranges (00:44:15):

But you sort of alluded to at the beginning that I never even thought about that, right? There's a bunch of logistical things that you're always trying to keep track of, like supplying spaces with lube and gloves, for example. I didn't know about that as an activity.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:44:30):

Yeah. So, I thought it might have been one thing I did. Yeah. I wasn't offering services. I might have done some tours.

Alisha Stranges (00:44:51):

Do you recall spending any time in the photo room?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:44:54):

No.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:02):

Well, I'd love to—

Karen B. K. Chan (00:45:02):

What I have been taking photos or have photos taken of me?

Alisha Stranges (00:45:07):

Yeah. So, patrons, when you're functioning in your role as a patron, you could go into this photo room and there's a photographer who was volunteering for a certain number of hours in the night to take Polaroids of folks in sort of anyway they wanted to as a way to have a tangible souvenir of your night.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:45:31):

Right. Right. Right. I'd forgotten about that. What a great idea. No. No. I was never in there.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:36):

Okay. Okay. So, before we move into more kind of curiosities around the raid itself, I just wanted to do a little exercise with you trying to get a sense of the impression that the space made on your senses. So, I'll do it with you. So, if I can invite you to soften your gaze, or if you feel comfortable, you can even close your eyes. Just really feeling the weight of your body sinking into whatever you're sitting on, if there's a wall behind you or chair back. And just breathe, a couple deep breaths in and out. And relaxing your jaw, and with each inhale, allowing your body to re-inhabit some or other space, location within the Pussy Palace. Don't worry too much about which location is coming to mind, whichever one comes to mind is the perfect one to work with. And from this somewhat contemplative space, just looking around that location, tell me what it is you can see.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:47:20):

I see the pool. I see bubbles from the jets in the pool. I see the pool as a deep turquoise colour lit from below. I see a lot of people kind of draped and hanging out around the perimeter of the pool area, on benches. Some in the pool, some kind of parts of themselves in the pool, but outside of the pool. I see lawn furniture, lawn tables and chairs, and lounge-y tables, sorry, lounge-y chairs. Different people chatting, sitting, looking around, laughing. People are in various states of dress and undress. Someone's walking by with a stack of towels, walking through trying to get back to the laundry room. The night is cool, and the sky is dark, and there's a breeze.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:49):

Aside from what you can hear, chatter and laughter, is there any other sounds coming to mind?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:48:56):

There's faint music coming from inside and it gets louder every time somebody opens the door. Then, the door slams shut, and that door has steam on it because just inside, around the other corner, is a steam room, hot tub room that's close-ish to where the dance floor is, and I keep hearing, like, ice in my glass. Although, I think we weren't allowed to drink on the patio. So, but that's part of the feeling of having a gin and tonic.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:50):

Any lingering odours in the air?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:50:00):

Smells like summer, smells like gin, smells like marijuana, maybe from the alley, maybe from the pool area. It feels kind of misty, kind of foggy. It feels magical, like a stolen summer night.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:30):

Sort of last question a bit, a strange one maybe, but if somehow you could taste the space, what might its flavour be?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:50:44):

Pineapple?

Alisha Stranges (00:50:45):

Oh, and I'll ask also if some part of your body could somehow reach out right now and brush up against some part of this space you're taking us through, what are you touching and what are its textures?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:51:03):

I'm going into the pool, like sitting down into the pool and the water is warmish and is silky and soft. And it's just sort of swishing, swishing around. I think it was very turquoise in the water.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:40):

Yeah. I'm totally there. You can let that go. Open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you for going there.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:51:50):

That was fun. Thank you.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:55):

No problem. All right. So, we're going to kind of get down to it here with the curiosities around the time of the raid. We know that around 12:45 a.m. is when five men, all plainclothes police officers, entered the club and apparently stayed about 90 minutes. Were you still in inside the Palace when they were there?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:52:14):

Yeah. I was in a room by myself. I think I was by myself. I was sleeping. So, if I was with someone, they were also sleeping. I was just understood to be taking a nap. So, it took me a while to sort of come to and understand that something... There's something different about something. There was sounds that were different, there was talking, there was walking, but all these sounds are also normal. So, I don't know what cued me in, it could have been deeper voices. It could have been lights being turned on. But there was no way for the other organizers to know where I was. I was not on, at the time, and I didn't carry my phone with me, I wasn't pageable or something. So, I was kind of lost.

Karen B. K. Chan (00:53:19):

So, it took me a while to come to, and then I left my room. I went down to try to find the front entrance, and in my moving around the house, I think I was lost. I ran into different people in different parts of the house. And it was very strange. It was not what I expected. People were putting their clothes back on, mumbling, saying stuff. I didn't see any of the cops for a long time. So, I just ran into people, and they would be whispering. I'd be like, "What's going on," and people would say different things. And so, I did not understand at all what was happening until I got closer to the front, and there, I saw a few of the men, maybe two or three. There was some arguments connected to the cage and arguing about coming in, not coming in. I think I see a few of the organizers doing that. That's where I was when I realized, okay, this is happening.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:01):

Right. Is there anything you remember vividly about...? You finally encounter them; you start to understand what's going on. What happens for you next?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:55:14):

I think I've never really thought about this, but I think what happened to me was I dissociated, which I did a lot as a younger person and still do sometimes. So, which is why I have a terrible memory to begin with, and even more terrible when it comes to that evening. Because after I realized what was happening, everything else becomes kind of timeless and not clear. Don't know sequence. Don't really recall a lot. I do remember feeling just confused. Confused like, "Is this a big deal? Is this a small deal? Are we all going to die? Or is this one of those things where we're given a hassle and then it finishes, and nobody even things twice about it?" I had no idea, were we on the brink of something or nothing?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:56:39):

I don't really remember talking to anyone or what I did. I don't remember if I spoke to any of the men. I have a part of me that says, "I did, I was questioned," and a part of me said, "That wasn't you." So, I don't know. I do remember a guy with a mullet and a moustache. I don't know if that's real or a composite of men I saw. The other thing I remember is just thinking, "Wow, men are really tall." Because once they entered the space, it became so clear that the rest of us were so small.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:41):

Yeah. It was reported later that before the five plainclothes police officers entered, there were two undercover women police officers. How did it feel to learn later that prior to these five men entering there were outsiders already in this space, surveilling everyone?

Karen B. K. Chan (00:58:14):

How did it feel? It didn't feel that different. It felt like they're all connected with same action. I think part of my privileged position of not being worried about, and not having been in conflict with the law and having citizenship and status, and stuff like that. I don't feel personally endangered by the undercover officers. So, to me it feels like the same action that they were trying to take down something. So, they have to go collect the evidence, and to get us on liquor license violations was going to be the way. It's legit, but it's also legit that if you would send undercover officers to most weddings, you'd find a violation as well. So yeah, I didn't feel particularly, additionally betrayed. Yeah. I haven't, because I don't have a reference point for feeling endangered for being illegitimate in some way. For being queer, for my sexual practices, for being out, for being genderqueer, or anything like that.

Alisha Stranges (01:00:20):

Some folks have said that the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee was already aware of the possibility of a police presence that night. Do you remember learning about that and the strategies you might take to prepare folks?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:00:35):

I don't remember details, but I feel like, as part of our preparations, we were always briefed on how to explain what happens in a bathhouse, if somebody were to come to the door. If somebody were to accost us or a patron in line, what are our rights? What are the licenses that allow us to do this? What is this not? And so forth. But I don't remember that we were heading into it expecting a raid. And if we were, I either missed that conversation or I tuned it out or wilfully ignore.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:26):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, what about the sort of aftermath of the raid? You sort of had mentioned that you were already planning to resign, but then this crisis sort of interrupted that process for you. But we know there was a lot of community activism, protest work, everything involved in the legal... Raising money for the legal defence and the court case itself. I mean, what about this time period, what happened for you? How are you involved in all of that?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:02:04):

It felt like there was a lot to do, and it was very complicated because of how I already didn't feel a part. And then, everyone became more heightened in their involvement and integration. And I felt, I think, more of an outsider because of that contrast. I participated in the various events to fundraise and to mobilize, and to go to protest and mobilize people to be part of things. There were meetings and updates and learning a lot about legal stuff and phone calls or in-person meetings with Pam Cross, I think, and Frank Addario and all these lawyers. People coming forward and reading the news, and clipping the papers, and keeping the stories, and forwarding each other stuff. Buying buttons, selling buttons, explaining it to people.

Karen B. K. Chan (01:03:57):

It just felt like a lot of commotion. And I still felt quite disassociated. I think it was like, if I had a task, I just do it. I wasn't particularly present at the time, and things like this really overwhelm me. If I felt I was out of my expertise in being a committee that puts on a big bathhouse, I was even further out of my expertise too. Half the things that people said, I didn't understand, that were about the law or that were about fighting or that were about political lobbying and trying to get politicians to sign on and influence. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:05:06):

Did it ever come to a breaking point for you? Or did you sort of see it through to the end? I mean, I know it carried on for quite a number of years, the work, following the raid.

Karen B. K. Chan (01:05:20):

I think it was already pretty obvious that I was outside. Although, because I was still there, and I was in name a part of the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee and became part of the complaint and became one of the people that the police settled with. It carried on, and I continued to be there in name, but I think it was pretty clear to all of us without there really being time to sit down and say, "Hey, are you really feeling a part of this?" It wasn't the right time. So, I think it was a gradual exit and the key players kind of rose to the key positions. And the people who were named and who were charged, people were really trying to support them.

So, I don't really know when my official resignation was, and I don't really think it mattered that much. Because I was already quite apart.

Alisha Stranges (01:06:46):

Yeah.

Karen B. K. Chan (01:06:48):

I was having trouble not just because I was one of the two people of colour and that I felt frustrated. But I think I actually had some significant issues with the other person of colour and that made it very, very hard to be there.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:27):

Is that something you want to unpack further or just to say?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:07:31):

I think I just want to leave it at that. I think it was mostly, not even personality, it was just I didn't feel connected and understand a lot. I literally didn't understand some of her ideas, and I was trying to share my ideas. So, it was just like that. It wasn't personalities. There was disagreements, and then I felt very disempowered in myself. So that sort of also, like, all these streams moved at the same time, you know? And it felt like I already could give in a small, only a small way, and that way became no way once we were then embroiled in this lawsuit and this fight. And I think another member, a white woman, also felt more and more outside through no fault of anyone's. It was just not our...yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:05):

Well, what was that like for you, I mean, to sort of come into it with this sense that, "I really believe in this thing, it may not be my thing, but I want to try to get in there and do something with it," and then this crisis happens? What you were able to do is now become even more limited and kind of out with a whimper for you, it sounds like. What was that experience like for you, leaving that way, I guess?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:09:32):

Yeah. I think I felt really torn, and I felt really ashamed that I wasn't a better organizer. I want to be a very good one. And I think I had the belief that it was really a game or an experience that's much more meant for the type of personality that was same as some of the more dominant members. Which was like femme, top, tall, established, personable, vivacious, extrovert. Yeah. And so, I just felt like a little brown, quiet mouse on the side. So that, I think, that was my experience because it just echoed some experiences from my past. I don't think it itself was exactly that. I think I could have been a different person and thrived and been contributive in a significant way. I just didn't know how to thrive in that environment.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:14):

Sure. Did you ever have an opportunity in later years to debrief about these feelings and experiences?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:11:22):

No. I didn't, and it wasn't important to me. I wrote a resignation letter, and I read it to the group. It was cathartic enough to just tell the truth to the group, and say, "I feel small here, and I don't like it, and I don't

want to. This is hard and it was harder than I expected, but I needed to do this and thank you. And also, I don't know if this is going to work.”

Alisha Stranges (01:12:03):

This being?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:12:06):

I don't know if a women's bathhouse or a women and trans bathhouse that isn't primarily white right in Toronto. So, I left thinking, yeah, the project that I felt like I was a part of, I don't know if it's going to work.

Alisha Stranges (01:12:30):

That's really interesting. I didn't know that that kind of a discussion took place. Did you get any feedback in the moment, people supportive?

Karen B. K. Chan (01:12:45):

I think people were just very loving and supportive. I think people in my memory probably some of them wanted to make sure that they weren't, like, they didn't do... Or they wanted to know if they did harm. And I was like, "I don't think so." It was a conversation we had been having leading up to it when we're struggling. What about tickets? What about two for one? What about cheaper? Is that a bad feeling to get a cheaper ticket to go to a thing? Or is that a good feeling? I think we've had all these conversations before and I had, after a few bathhouses of it not really materializing, additional people coming who are of colour, I was musing with folks that I'm like, "I don't think my people want to come. Not in this year, not in this time, not in this place.”

Alisha Stranges (01:13:59):

Right. Well, I'm tempted to sort of invite us to kind of close around here, but I wanted to leave a little bit of space here. If there's anything that you wanted to share coming in today, that maybe my questions didn't encourage you to speak to about your experiences or memories...

Karen B. K. Chan (01:14:42):

I guess the only thing I want to say is that I found the experience of being part of the [Toronto Women's] Bathhouse Committee, as well as just having participated in the bathhouse through its years, to be so transformative and so important. And I'm so thankful. It was such hard work on, I don't feel it was that much of hard work on my part, but for many people's very, very hard work, and I think it was very important.

Alisha Stranges (01:15:31):

Thank you, B. K.

Karen B. K. Chan (01:15:32):

You're welcome.

Alisha Stranges (01:15:33):

Yeah. Thank you so much for your sort of openness and vulnerability, and sort of patient way that you move through reflecting. Thank you.

Karen B. K. Chan (01:15:47):

Thank you for listening and for your great questions.