

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with T'Hayla Ferguson
Conducted on June 23, 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: T'Hayla Ferguson is a 56-year-old, white, butch dyke. At the time of the interview, T'Hayla was living through the COVID-19 pandemic and working in an upper management position for Statistics Canada - Census in Toronto, Ontario. In addition to her years of government service, she also holds accreditations as an acupuncturist, a shiatsu therapist and is completing her accreditations as a Kink Aware Gestalt psychotherapist. The interview concerns T'Hayla's experience as patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse events, focusing on the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was held on September 14, 2000. T'Hayla discusses her investment in the leather dyke SM scene, the significance of her preferred bathhouse attire, the differences between queer and heteronormative public sex events as well as masculine-of-centre and feminine-of-centre play spaces, the types of activities she gravitated towards while at the Palace, her sense memories of the physical space, her recollections of the police raid, and other topics. T'Hayla mentions Canada and the United States with a focus on Toronto, Ontario. The interview addresses the years 1998 to 2021 with a focus on the year 2000.

Keywords: Leather; SM; Dyke; Police Raid; Bathhouse; Public Sex; Dominant; Organizing; Protest.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:00):

Okay, perfect. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing T'Hayla Ferguson on June 23, 2021. T'Hayla is also in Toronto and is going to tell us a bit about the experience of being a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. So T'Hayla, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:00:34):

Absolutely. Yes, please.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:36):

Thank you. So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I just have a couple questions here that sort of invite you to tell me 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 over the past 20 years, perhaps some of these have shifted or evolved. So, to start simply, tell us your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:01:05):

Excellent. T'Hayla Ferguson. I'm 56, and I use all the gender pronouns. So, people respond to me from different places from masculine to feminine, but I am a feminist at my core. So, she and her never offend me, and at no point am I not female. So, it's a different corner of the whole perspective.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:31):

Well, how about back in 2000? Can you think back to how you might have...how you would've described your gender and sexual identity back in the early 2000s?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:01:43):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). In the early 2000s, I was already very well aware of the trans movement, but transitioning was never something I needed to do personally. But I've always identified as butch and as a butch female and a masculine butch female. So that's where the use of masculine pronouns, but I never want to use masculine pronouns, even then, to eradicate the feminine nature of who I am or to promote misogyny. It was always an edge of staying within the female perspective as a butch and being proud of that part of me.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:22):

Yeah. What about today? Is that sort of still how you feel?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:02:27):

Yeah. Yeah. I have very few butch friends now, mostly I have trans male friends, which is kind of cool, but I've always just stayed in the category of butch female. I use all of the gender pronouns to address the masculine energy that I possess. At times I was very ill at ease with being female, but it's kind of where I live in this body, and I'm content with that, and I've found my peace with it within my butch nature, and within a population now that's much more aware of a dynamic nature of feminine rather than just hyper-femininity. So yeah, at this point, butch female, and I do use all the gender pronouns.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:13):

Got you. Thank you. What about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How do you express yourself through those types of categories?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:03:24):

I have had so much learning in the last 20 years. Wouldn't have known to expand on the sentence beyond saying Caucasian back in 2000, but now I know as a settler, as somebody who's from a history of settlers... I don't have a lot of genetic background because I was an adopted child. But my understanding is that my birth parents were of Northern-European descent and that my adoptive family was first-generation Canadian. So, I identify as a Canadian, but I recognize that I come from a long lineage of settlers and that my racial definition, according to census and other things would be Caucasian. That is how I identify myself as a white settler, female butch lesbian. I very rarely use the word lesbian, more dyke. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:25):

And what can you tell me about your sort of particular educational path or social class background?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:04:33):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Absolutely. My adoptive family was not affluent at all. We lived in an affluent neighbourhood only because the affluent neighbourhood came up around us. So, I spent my childhood being very acutely aware of class. Started working when I was 11, so as to keep up with my colleagues and my cohort because they were moneyed and I wasn't. Even with that, I was extremely lucky. I've got a lot of education under my belt. I have two undergraduate degrees and a master's degree. And I'm a psychotherapist, and I'm an acupuncturist, and I'm a Shiatsuist. So, I had a great deal of opportunity. I have other educational degrees as well that don't come into play in that channel, but a lot of opportunity, a lot of hard work, and grants and scholarships got me through all that because there wasn't the money. But also recognized the giant amount of privilege coming up as a poor kid to be able to access all that and was really grateful for it.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:36):

Would you be interested to tell us a bit more about the things that occupy your time these days, professionally?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:05:45):

Professionally, yes. Actually, I do contract government work, and right now I'm the... It's hard to describe. They have their very own specific language, but I'm a high up in the management of Canada Census for Toronto. So, running census for Toronto here during COVID, which is a teeny bit of a nightmare, but really interesting in its own way. I also have done professional HR for the government. So, doing HR hiring and such like that, but mostly management, upper management with government agencies. So, it's kind of cool.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:27):

How might this configuration have been different in 2000? You said you've had quite a few credentials, educational credentials. What about in 2000, what were you up to then?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:06:39):

Just finishing my master's degree and teaching. I was a teaching assistant in a department where we were given more opportunity to teach rather than just run tutorials. So that was really cool and that was at York [University], and then stepped out of York [University] after finishing my master's and worked in the film industry for quite a few years, which is loads of fun and crazy. It's a lot of up-down employment where you're working 50 hours a week, and then you're not working for 10 weeks. So, real change in economics at this point. So, much more established and settled, and working consistently with a real paycheque for quite a few years now, which is fabulous and so different from where I started.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:27):

One more question in this sort of line of questioning is what role, if any, religion, or spirituality plays in your life currently?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:07:36):

Cool. I'm a Unitarian Universalist. So, Unitarianism is a non-creedal based faith. It's a set of guiding principles more than a, "You'll go to heaven or hell." It's a very intellectual type of spirituality because we take all of the texts and creeds and approaches of different faiths, and examine them and bring them to see how they fit with our own heart. So, often you can have many different types of Unitarians sitting in the same room. Unitarianism is the closest to Quakerism. So, it's very similar to that. I haven't been, obviously this year, I haven't been to sitting in a room on a Sunday kind of approach of faith, but my faith is also online. They have weekend projections of discussions and sermons, but I do find that part of the guiding principles is to be aware of our interconnectivity to the world and to each other, and to work with principles that respect that. And that really works for me because that's a hard line for me is that if your actions have impact and you need to be prepared to stand with those actions, and stand with the impact of those actions. And that has been a guiding principle for me, that you behave in a way with each other that you are prepared to stand beside and be responsible for.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:15):

Have you always been involved with Unitarianism? At what point in your life did you find that?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:09:24):

No. I grew up in the United Church as a kid, but as a young kid, I didn't know at that point that I was queer, and that wasn't clear for me for a long time. But because I was adopted, my first minister took me aside when I was quite young and told me that it was impossible for me to go to heaven because I was born out of wedlock. So, as a person, I was going to have to try very hard to achieve a good life. And yet, even still, I would never go to heaven, and that was when I was about seven or eight. So that pushed me away from organized religion for a long time, because I just saw it as a very big bag of BS. You know how queers often sit outside the social norms or the dominant hegemony, and they can see it differently? That started that path from me very early, where I was like, "Oh, this is all about money and power and not actually about who I am as a person or where I'm going to go with my life or any sense of connection with the divine. This is about money and power." So, as a real young kid I was like, "Oh, this is bullshit." So, I can take a different path that I make for myself now. And that was the beginning of me living like that, and that's when I came out as queer. It was like, "Oh, this is just another part of my path. Cool." And it was really good.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:47):

Very cool. Thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else before we move on that you think'd be important for the listener to know about how you understand the different identities you hold today as compared to 20 years ago?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:11:00):

Sure. 20 years ago, I had only just come out. I was late coming out for a lot of reasons. Very rough childhood, lots of inappropriate behaviour back there that mucked me up pretty fiercely. But at that point I was just beginning my path as an out leather-dyke. And that path brought together a lot of all those disparate pieces of who I am into a cohesive person, where I finally found a place where I felt like I belonged on every level and that I could stand in my power, and it wasn't negative to have that power, it wasn't abusive to wield power. It was a place where it could be gentle and beautiful, and masculine and feminine, and me. So, it was just the beginning of coming out as a leather dyke. And now, years later, I've stood in that place the whole time, and I feel so much more contained in myself and empowered in myself and at ease with myself. So, it's been a path.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:07):

Yes, indeed. Well, thank you for sharing all of that about yourself. I'm going to invite you now to sort of travel back in time to the fall of 2000 when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was, at the time, the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. Do you recall how you would've first learned about the Night of 2000 Pussies bathhouse event?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:12:39):

Oh yeah. Back then, I mean, there's still a great network of people who email or talk to each other via phone or whatever. But there was also *Xtra* and *Siren* and posters, and all of those ways that we would find out about things. At that point, I think actually around 2000, I was probably... Wasn't writing for *Icon* or *Fab* at that point. I think I'd finished that part of my life, but I was probably... I might have still been selling advertising for *Siren* at that point. So, I worked for all of the newspapers. So, I would catch it that way, but there was also a large group of people that were already congregating around women and leather. So, there was a network of people sharing information. And I think at that point a friend of mine was already on the executive for the Pussy Palace. So, I would've had multiple emails and phone calls going, "Hey, this is happening. You need to be there."

Alisha Stranges (00:13:30):

Right. Well, in that case, had you ever been to another Pussy Palace event beforehand or other public sex event?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:13:39):

Oh yeah. Yeah. I'd been to all the other Pussy Palaces at that point. And I also, at that point, because I was on my leather path, I'd been both in Canada and the United States to other play events and social events involved, whether it was sex or SM or both.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:01):

What intrigued you about the Pussy Palace events? What about these events captivated your attention?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:14:09):

It was amazing to be in a space that was all women. At that point, Harvest is a thing that you'll probably end up hearing about at some point. It's a women's conference that was happening in Canada at that point where women were getting together to have weekend conference around all of this kind of stuff. I'm pretty sure they were happening by the 2000s. I'd have to coordinate my dates on that. But to be in a space where it's all women or people who identified somehow with the women's spectrum, and to have people running around and having fun, and the joy in the space, and the fun and the fervour. You don't get it anywhere else in our world, anywhere. It was just a magnet. It was a magnet for a really amazingly good time.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:04):

Yeah. You said you kind of were on a path inside the leather community. Had you been to other kind of leather SM events?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:15:15):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yep. At that point... Go ahead.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:19):

I was just wondering; how would you say they were sort of different or the same as the Pussy Palace events?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:15:29):

Okay. At that point, I had already been to a couple events in the United States, big events like Black Rose. Which in 2000, I was at Black Rose and Fakir Musafar was there. He's the father of modern primitives for tattooists. He was one of the keynote speakers. And there were, I think, 2,000 attendees. So, huge event, and their party took place in an underground garage that was 5,000 square feet. But the percentage of women oriented towards women, or even just women at the event; hugely small. So, to find a queer vibe or a women attracted to being both women from whatever orientation they started, really small number of people. So, great fun, fabulous to be in a mixed-gendered event, mostly heteronormative. So, fun, but compared to being at Pussy Palace where it's, I think their mass attendance might have been 175 or 200 people over a period of an evening, still just night-and-day energy. The difference in the energy and the way people interacted, it's typical to our whole society.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:16:53):

I mean, when you're in a room full of women and, I've been in those big rooms where little, little amounts of space, because it's hardly any room. And people are sharing a chair in order to them both to have space, to have intimacy with their best bud. And, no problem. Just kind of, "Oh, here, let us move over so you can have your three inches of space so you can fuck there while we fuck here." It's like, "And don't mind if I look occasionally because you're really cute and hot." That kind of atmosphere, not so much at the heterosexual, pan-gendered events. More a, "We're going to go over here and turn our back so you can't even see us." It's like, "Oh, come on. Everybody take a deep breath." So yeah, Pussy Palace was amazing. I mean, the fact that Carlyle Jansen decided at some point to start up a group of people, to start an event, to bring women together in Toronto was life changing for all of us.

Alisha Stranges (00:17:57):

Well, I have a few questions here that may seem a little bit inconsequential, but we are curious about, not just what happened when you're at the Palace, but sort of the process of making your way there. So, I'm wondering if you can recall where you were before you made your way to Club Toronto that night? Tell me about the journey to the club.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:18:19):

Oh, okay. Yeah. At that point I was living at Church [Street] and Wellesley [Street]. So, I lived right in the Gaybourhood. I am not a shy person. So, for me to put on boots, leather pants, a vest, suspenders, chaps, whatever I had, and then also to be dragging along behind me a rolling bag of fun toys and walk right down the centre of Church Street to get to Club Toronto would likely have been the path I took. It was, yeah, no ifs or ands or buts. I'm going to Pussy Palace. We're going to go do fun things that might spin your head. Could you move aside so I can get down the sidewalk? Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:01):

Can you talk a little bit more about your outfit? What do you recall about what you might have worn?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:19:06):

Oh, I still have it all. I still have the first pair of leather pants I ever got. A friend of mine bought for me as a gift to acknowledge who I was as a leather dyke. They're still my favourite leather pants actually. They were laces up the side, laces up the front. They were basically 501 Levi's made into lace-front leather pants. Probably a black t-shirt because that's all I ever seemed to wear. Then, maybe an arm cuff, I might have been wearing a Muir cap at that point, maybe not, might have been a little early. I received a Muir cap as the ceremonial gift — it's a symbolism within our culture — and big old army boots, stomping right down the sidewalk to go have fun with all those really cool women.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:00):

I must admit, I've never heard the term Muir cap before. How do you spell Muir cap?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:20:09):

M-U-I-R. It's a company, surprisingly in Toronto. If you go to a gay male leather event, you'll see hundreds of men wearing them. They're those, it's almost like a police cap. It's a shiny brim, it's a black cap. It usually denotes somebody who's a top or dominant within a sexual experience or within their culture. Some people go and buy them and some people are awarded them through ceremony, through culture. It's usually a symbolism of, "I want to run the game. Do you want to be the person who is the participant in the game?"

Alisha Stranges (00:20:47):

I see. What do you remember about what you were trying to feel in this outfit or to communicate to others aside from that you want to run the game?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:21:00):

Yeah. I am a fairly dominant person and enjoy dominant sexual activities. Also, it's that feeling of being in your body, in your power, and feeling sexy, and safe, and happy. When I wear my leather, I'm happy. It's that when you ease into an outfit that makes you feel powerful and sexy, and you just kind of have the, "and we're home." It's on you, and it's going with you.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:35):

I've been told by our mutual pal, Nancy Irwin, that it's not the outfit that's important, necessarily. It's what's in the bag. So, I've heard a little bit about what Nancy [Irwin] may have brought. What might have been in your accoutrement bag?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:21:56):

So, our mutual friend and colleague once accused me, playfully, of having a bedazzling toy bag. My toy bag has included, oh gosh, everything. I'm literally picturing my toy bag. Everything from bull whips, to single tails, to floggers, to paddles, to a full array of blood sports and cutting tools and piercing tools, to electrolysis machines, to branding machines like the gamut, everything. Even back then. When I hit the leather community and the BDSM community, it was like a kid in a toy store. I'm extremely skilled at branding and cutting and piercing. I'm viciously accurate with a single tail. I can hit the same spot a hundred times in a row, no matter what. It's just joyful, fun to say the least. The person that I play with has to be happy and enjoying themselves. But the idea that I run the fuck, is a fun phrase, but there's a mutuality to that. If you're a dominant person and you're not invested in the person you're with having fun, well, then you're a creep. But when you're both having fun, it is mind-blowingly fun. That's the kind of stuff we did at the Pussy Palace, and there were tons of people doing it at the same time. There was an energy level in the room that would just keep going up and up. It's the version of a non-toxic high. You would just come out pumped, happy.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:57):

Well, why don't we talk a bit about the space you. So, you got all dressed up. You're trucking down Church Street with your outfit and your bag. You get to the Club Toronto, you're inside. Can you describe the space for me?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:24:13):

Yeah. It's not quite a labyrinth of space, but it's a lot of small rooms, a ton of stairs. This place is not accessible. Like, that wouldn't even been on our radar, unfortunately, in the 2000s. Nowadays, all the people who have any kind of accessibility issues can't get there. But the first level's a bar. Most people who were there had no interest in the bar, they were going straight up to the next level, which was all the little rooms where you could play and have fun. And then, there was a whole other level of little... The rooms that the guys use all the time where they're just little doorways. The difference between boys and girls at a playhouse or at a sex club is hilarious because the lights are all on. People are standing in the hall talking. People are in the next room having sex, and people from the room are yelling out, "Does anybody have lube?" And three bottles of lube go in like bombs because it's like, "Oh you need lube? Here, have lube."

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:25:16):

It's social. I mean, I know the guys that go to the bathhouse all the time. They never talk to anybody, they never look anybody in the eye, they don't know anybody's name, and they would not interact with each other. It's like, "Oh hell." We're women. We're here, we're going to talk in the stairwell. We're going to be standing in the kitchen gabbing about stuff while somebody's boiling a dick in a bowl to get it clean for the next player. It's way more communal. And then, the pool out the back because there's play area around the pool, and everybody after they finish playing at some point is in the pool naked or in lingerie. It's just like, "Wow, this is great. Can we live here? Can we just take the place over permanently?"

Alisha Stranges (00:26:02):

Which parts of the space did you gravitate toward?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:26:05):

I would often end up in the mini dungeon for several hours having fun. It would just be a fun chorus line of events because it wasn't always that you were there just with one person, you would play with a bunch of people. And then, inevitably at some point in the pool, relaxing afterwards.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:23):

We heard that there was often a photo room on offer where you could take Polaroids, have Polaroids of yourself taken. Do you know about this room? Spend any time there?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:26:34):

The photo tent that was outside?

Alisha Stranges (00:26:38):

Oh, okay. So, we had heard that that night, it may have been sort of up top, on the top level?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:26:45):

Yeah. Yeah. One year it was down by the pool, and another time they put it way up top. I would never end up there. I was always too busy. I remember, I don't think it was that year. I think another year I ended up doing demonstrations because they would have people demo stuff. I remember, they asked me to demo for an hour, and somebody came up later and said, "Are you guys going to wrap it up soon?" I was, "Oh okay. Is our time up?" They were like, "Oh T'Hayla, it's been four and a half hours since you started." And I was like, "Oh! Oh, I kind of just fell into having fun." So, it's that kind of space.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:23):

Right. Can you talk more about this idea of demoing? Haven't heard this before.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:27:29):

Yeah. Yeah. I remember one year they wanted people to, because there were so many people interested in light SM at that point. It wasn't always the cutting or the piercing or the really more intense stuff, but they wanted to safely engaged in things like rope play. So, I would end up doing rope demos for hours. Like, here's how you tie your ankles together. Here's how you tie your hands together. Here's how you put on a Japanese rope harness. Here's how you can use that Japanese rope harness. And often worked with people

who are coming up as couples. This one wants to tie and that one wants to be tied. So, I would tie the person up who wanted to be tied and show the person who wanted to learn how to tie and how to do it safely. Because there's loads of ways that, with all of this stuff, that you can make mistakes, and you don't want to have harm, you want to have fun. So yeah, and it would just be hours of showing people how to tie simple, easy rope bondage to go have sex and have fun. Inevitably, I would not use my good rope. I would use rope that I brought for the demonstration, and I would let them walk away with it. Because it's like, "Oh, okay. You really like... Okay. Go ahead, take it. Go have fun. And no, I don't want it back because I know what you're about to do."

Alisha Stranges (00:28:48):

So, is this the kind of thing...? You said you're kind of working with couples. Are you kind of working with, in small groups, or is it the public demonstration working one-on-one with people?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:28:59):

That event, it would usually be small groups because of the space, but I've also taught all over North America now, all kinds of demonstrations and also done all kinds of lecturing, since then at all kinds of really large events.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:12):

Wow. Very cool. Well, you kind of talked about this already, but I'm just curious more directly your take on the atmosphere when inside the club at its height.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:29:25):

Absolutely amazing. I'm just going to plug in my phone so it keeps charging while we're doing this. It was the laughter and the joy, and the sound of people running around having fun all over the place was just... It was going to go. Going to go. Can you still hear me when I do it this way?

Alisha Stranges (00:29:46):

I can hear you, yeah.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:29:50):

Just a sec. I think. No. I just need to figure out how to charge and be on the thing at the same time here.

Alisha Stranges (00:30:07):

That's okay.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:30:07):

The phone is giving me... Oh my gosh, we're running.

[recording pauses and resumes]

Alisha Stranges (00:30:11):

Sure. Okay. All right. So, you were talking about the atmosphere in the club. Can you tell me... Let's get back into that. Love to hear more about your take on the atmosphere inside the club.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:30:24):

You bet. It was electric. If you can only imagine that many people in a room, having that much fun and no judgment. There was so very little judgment. It was like, "Oh, you're doing that thing? That's not my thing. I'm going to go over here because this is my thing. You have fun with your thing, and I'll see you at the pool later." So, there was no attitude. It's like, if you saw people over there doing clowning and sex, you'd be like, "That's different. Okay." You know? That doesn't happen everywhere. Like, you don't get that kind of freedom or that opportunity to do your thing in a space where people are... You still have witnesses and community observation, but it doesn't come with judgment. It comes with joy. It's kind of like, "Wow, that's kind of wild. It's not my game, but hey, more power to you. Do you need anything?" It's kind of cool. Cool and rare.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:33):

Yeah. I'm curious about the rarity, the factor of rareness. What do you think it was that's contributing to the ability to have the space that is so rare, so free from judgment?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:31:48):

I think it's truly, it's all about what the organization was pushing. They were trying to make it very well known that judgment wasn't welcome. It's probably the first place that I saw trans language being spoken very quickly. At university, trans language came into play pretty quick, but not everywhere else. You didn't see people automatically start talking about trans women welcome. Or, how do we still include trans men who feel they're attached to the women's community? How do we make space if you've got people who are dealing with trauma around masculinity and men in the same space with women and their trans partners who still feel they belong in that space, but their appearance is still a learning process at that point? They were at the front of those conversations and they were having conversations in a non-judgmental way.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:32:50):

It's like, okay, you've got somebody who born female, gender at birth was female, but now is transitioning towards masculine or all the way towards male. Where's that line? Where is the line where they go join the men's bathhouse, versus they come to the women's bathhouse? And those conversations were happening and they were hard conversations not everybody agreed, but nobody shut anybody down. It was, we've got to talk all the way through the whole sentence to figure out where we stand with the sentence. As women, there was often a... And we don't want to leave anybody out because there's so few places for us that sometimes you found that what might have been a small circle that was being created, kept expanding to include others. Not everybody's happy, there were people who were like, "Hey, why don't we keep this circle really small?" But then we'd get into a political conversation about it and talk about how that small circle isn't enough.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:33:52):

There was also conversations where if somebody is going all the way over to the corner of male, that there's a point where they will have to go to that corner. They have to move over to that corner, but that's not an easy step because it's not like there was open door. It wasn't like the men's community was having the conversation. So, it was just so politically aware and politically progressive, and having the hard conversations and trying to get to useful, applicable space where everybody got to stand in the way they needed to stand and the door was still open. That's tough. That's tough work, and it wasn't always easy, and they weren't always

easy conversations that were calm conversations. But they allowed for that vigour to work its way through to what was going to happen, what was going to be possible.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:49):

Well, right now I'd like to sort of get a sense for the way that the, or the impression that the space made on your senses. So, we've been doing this little exercise with folks and sort of just go with me to the best of your ability, and I'll do it kind of along with you. So, if I can invite you to sort of, really get comfortable in your seat, so you can feel the weight of your body sinking into your chair. Soften your gaze, or even close your eyes, if you feel comfortable to do that, and just breathe. Just take a couple breaths in and out. Relaxing your jaw. And with each inhale, allow your body to re-inhabit some or other space inside the Pussy Palace. Don't be too worried about which space comes to mind first, whichever one comes to mind is the perfect one to work with. And from this contemplative space, as you're sort of looking around this particular location, tell me what it is that you can see.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:36:15):

So, it would probably be the second floor up the first flight of stairs, off to your right there's a large room that has an old fireplace mantle in it. It's a large room with an archway. At the left, at the left end of the room is all kinds of toys. So, paddle benches and a St. Andrew's cross and a few other accoutrements. It's not big room, probably no more than 15 by 20, but you can bet there's got to be 30 to 35 people in that room. So, it's quite congested, but even within the congestion, they're making space for each other. Like, circles of space where people are doing a random bunch of activities, but everybody's happy. Everybody's smiling. There's people standing in the doorway, looking in, trying to get a peek at what's going on. There's people doing all kinds of fabulous play, having fun, having joy, squeals of delight, groans, moans, all the fun stuff, and everybody's smiling.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:37:32):

There's just this overall kind of joyful energy going on. And from the sounds beyond the room, you could hear other people engaging in all kinds of activities that just sound fun, and hot, and sexy, and there's squealing and giggling. There's feet thundering up and down the staircase. So, people running up to see other people and people yelling down the staircase, "Hey, have you seen so and so. Oh my gosh." It's warm, the whole place. The body heat in the place is just cranking up. It's got to be 78 to 80 degrees in there, and people are peeling off clothes to accommodate the warmth and each other. That's just adding to a visual of the space. Lots of semi-naked people running around. Just the biggest adult-sex sleepover party you've ever seen. The different shaped bodies, it's an array of colours, and ethnicities, and sizes, and activities. You just kind of standing there thinking, "Wow, this is what it's supposed to be like. This is what it's supposed to be like to go have fun without shame and without any kind of bodily judgment, and just fucking have fun."

Alisha Stranges (00:39:03):

That's a beautiful description. Thank you. I'll just get a little more specific, you've touched on a lot of it. But are there any kind of lingering odours in the space? What can you smell?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:39:14):

Oh, well, there's nothing like getting really warm in your leathers because you can smell the leather. You can actually smell the heat of the leather coming up off your body. Also, just the smell of women that are having fun and the smell of sex in the air. At that point, in that year, there would've been the smell of perfume. Lots of people wearing different scents and perfumes. Lots of people sweating and just the really nice smell of hot, warm, happy bodies. For me also then just the smell of leather all mixed in with that, it's just like, "Okay,

we're in heaven now." We just made it to that happy warm place. All of the sounds of sex, all of that kind of flesh thumping against flesh, and the kind of squeegee wet sounds and all the happy joyful sounds, and the little teeny sounds of people coming and then the great big sounds of people coming. Then, the people who are on that edge, who can't quite get to it and there's that kind of tremor of waiting to go over the edge. It's pure joy. Pure joy.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:29):

And if some part of your body could reach out right now and touch some part of the space, what are you touching? What are its textures?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:40:38):

Oh, I probably have something leather in my hand. So, there's that warmth in my hand as well, probably pretty snuggled up to someone else. So, there's the feel of a warm body and the gentleness of skin. I think there's that moment when you're in that space, when you're with somebody where just your naked skin is touching their naked skin, and it just feels like the peak of humanity. That moment, it's divine. It's that moment where you're connected not just physically or emotionally, but you're connected at a deeper level. You're just in a place where you know that you're safe, and you're having fun. You're also having fun in a space where you can cross into all kinds of challenging moments and spaces, and be together and it all be good. If you want to challenge the norms, challenge the social norms in that moment together. It's hard to describe. It's just joyful. I remember coming out of Pussy Palaces thinking, I had such gratitude. I was exhausted. I was kind of used and used up, and fatigued and dazed from the hours. Like, you would be there for seven and eight hours straight, and you'd come out just rung out, but stupefying-ly joyful. It's like, you couldn't say thank you enough to the organizers.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:26):

This is a bit of an odd question, but somehow if you could taste the space, what might its flavour be?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:42:39):

Mmm. Oh, the taste. Sweat, sex, lip gloss. Just all those tastes that you get when you actually get to be that close to somebody. It's so warm that you're sweating so you'd be licking your upper lip, and it's just covered in sweat. But there's also that kind of sneaky joy that comes with that much sweating for that reason. It's like, sweating for sex is great, just great. It's not like when you're sweating when you're working, which is abominable. But when you're sweating because you have a and sex and playing, and fucking and doing physical, really physical activities with people. It's just like, "Okay, this is good. This is good sweat." And the person you're with is usually covered in sweat too because it's so congested and it's so small a space, but you're both just glowing. And when you kiss somebody in that point, you get the joy of kissing their mouth and you can taste their sweat and you can taste them. And then, with all that other aroma, the smell of the leather and the smell of the other people, and the smell of the room, it's like an aphrodisiac all on its own.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:59):

Wow. Thank you. You can open your eyes if they've been closed. Brilliant. Thank you so much for taking me there. So, at this point, I kind of want to bring your attention more toward the moment when the police entered. We're told that at 12:45 a.m. five men, all plainclothes police officers, entered the club and stayed about 90 minutes. Were you still in the Pussy Palace when they were around?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:44:28):

Yep.

Alisha Stranges (00:44:32):

Do you recall what you were doing when they arrived?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:44:35):

I think I'd just finished playing with somebody, and I had moved back towards the locker room. The locker room is on the same level as that room with the fireplace where the dungeon space is. So, I had been wandering, I'd probably taken my toy back and thrown it in the locker. I found out fairly quickly that there were police in the building, and there were... A lot of people were really thrown off. It was kind of like, "What?" A lot of people felt very vulnerable. So, there was a lot of people walking around just doing the reassuring: "Just slow down. The organizers have got it. If you want to cover yourself up, that's fine, but there's no need to leave. We're not doing anything wrong."

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:45:26):

That there was always a runner ahead of the cops telling people in the rooms that they were moving to this area. So, it wasn't they were just meandering. The organizers had individuals going ahead saying, "They're coming up the stairs now. They're going into this room now." So, we were well aware of where they were moving through the building. And there was also... All of that high anxiety had an immediate undertone of pissed off. It's like, "What do they want? What are they doing here? Or what's the ramification of them being here?" Yeah. It changed the energy in the space immediately.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:07):

Yeah. Did you end up seeing or talking to the police?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:46:12):

Oh yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:14):

Oh yeah. Okay. Tell me about that.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:46:19):

I think this knack for always being the one that they end up talking to. So, I was in the change room. So, if you can imagine, I still have all my army boots, my leather pants, and nothing else. And I'm not a light person, so I'm a fairly large person. And I'm maybe masculine-identified, but I'm also very heavily chested. So, it's that crisscross, and I think I was wearing a leather harness. So, it would crisscross and there'd be a circle in the centre, but it would go right under my breast. So, it was kind of a crisscross bra, but no bra cover. So, it was kind of like, the girls are out, the girls are busy tonight. So, and I remember a police officer, I was with somebody else who was quite... I think you've already spoken to her. She talks about that evening as being really, really scared, and I was just pissed. Police officer walks up to us and he asked her a question and she answers, but she literally is moving towards my body, snuggling up, kind of like, "Get that guy away from me." And the cop, I have no pity for him because he doesn't know where to look, because he is looking at my breasts, and he is trying to look up at my face, and he keeps looking at my breasts, and I'm like, "Can I help you?" Flushed full red. And he finally looked up and I said, "Is there something I can help you with?" And he

didn't know what to say, and I'm just like, "Dude, you're the cop. If you've got a question, ask it." And he's like, "No, no, I have no questions. Thank you." I'm like, you're out of bounds and you know it. So, at that moment, he just stood there for a minute and I just stood staring at him, and I said, "Again, is there something I can help you with?" And he eventually backed away just kind of in that almost like a cartoon version of, "No, no, no, sorry, sorry. I'm in your space. I'm out." I was just like, "Go away." It was really annoying.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:23):

Is that sort of the main feeling you had, annoyed, pissed off?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:48:29):

Annoyed, pissed off, because I came out of a childhood was such misbehaviour on the part of adults. As a adult myself I've taken a long time to learn how to be protective of myself and to stand in the right place with misbehaviour now, which is a lack of tolerance for it. I wasn't frightened by this person. He posed no physical threat to me because in the sense that my belief was, "You're in the wrong. You're not going to take the risk. And, in fact, I hold the power in this moment because you're out of bounds." But I know not everybody in the building felt that way. There were loads of people who were very scared.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:49:13):

So, I moved into my dominant self and just thought, "What do you want? You're in my space right now. You're interfering with my night, and you shouldn't be here," which he felt very clearly. Whereas, most of the people around me were covering up, leaving, going to other spaces so that they feel away from the cops, and it just was one of those, "Dude, you are making a mess of something really beautiful, and you need to get the hell out of here." Not just pissed off but angry. It's like, you're violating our space. We went to a lot of trouble to have this space. We paid for this space. We're not doing anything wrong and here you are just fucking round.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:50:01):

It was immediately clear to me that they didn't have any clarity of what they were going to do. They weren't coming into arrest. They weren't prepared to arrest anybody. They were just coming in to muck with us. And it was like, "Go to hell. Go to hell quickly because you're being completely inappropriate." I just have higher expectations of people, and that was the lowest expectation I could have of somebody, and I think he knew it. He was just like, "Whoa, okay." I don't know. I don't know how to describe it. Because afterwards it was like, we were all mad, but there were quite a few of us that didn't want to lose what we had created to this moment of stupidity by a bunch of men.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:50:51):

I think we've all encountered more than enough misogyny and stupidity of men. It was that moment of deciding how much do I give to them in that moment, and I wasn't willing to give much. But I recognized the women around me were falling into giving up all the joy they'd just had to this loss. And that makes me more mad than anything else. It's all that risk that people took to be there, to experience that. And some of them, that was the first time they'd ever crossed the doorway of anything like that. And they were being traumatized by it, and it just felt way the fuck out of bounds. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:41):

Do you recall, did you sort of stick around through to the end of them being there? When did you leave the bathhouse?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:51:47):

Oh, I left several hours after that. I was there throughout it. We were kept informed all the way along of when they were in the building, when they left. And I stayed for hours after that, just hanging out, being with people, going to swim and just being around people while they decompressed. But it was probably only a couple hours after that, and then left because the energy, the tenor in the building just changed. It was like the whole place deflated. It was just, it deflated but it deflated into a quiet simmering rage, anger, and you knew it wasn't done. There were lots of people already talking about doing a demonstration or picketing or anything. It was immediately... Typical powerful, political women, it shifted from we're busy fucking and having fun, to now we've been violated, to now how do we organize to make it known that we're pissed. You could already tell there were people in the room thinking about writing articles and going out and organizing demonstrations.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:53):

Did you get involved in any of that community activism?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:52:57):

Yep. Went to the demonstrations for sure. Nancy [Irwin]'s article that she wrote for *Siren*, I'm quoted in it and talked about it. It was just immediately like, "They don't get to do this anymore." And I think there were three or four demonstrations. There were a couple people who did big demonstrations in front of the police department. There was also a demonstration on Church Street. It was a bunch of fervour, and people were in contact and in dialogue. I think there was actually two or three meetings at The 519 about it all. Where they unpacked it and talked and just started to plan what they were going to do about it all.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:53:38):

And it was interesting because the men's leather community was very quick to say, "What can we do to help?" That's always a double-edged sword because the guys really do want to help, but they don't know how to help in a way that they don't end up rolling over the women. So, they were trying to come at the conversation in a way of, "How do we actually offer you help without getting in your way?" That was cool to see with a lot of the leather men in Toronto, trying to actually navigate this pretty volatile space and find ways to actually help.

Alisha Stranges (00:54:11):

Do you have any examples of ways in which they tried to help without getting in the way?

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:54:19):

There were lots of guys who were immediately asking... Often, men first offer money. So, there were guys saying, "Do you need money? Do you need money to get some articles written? Do you need money for legal representation?" And then, there were other guys that were like, "Why do you only get the bathhouse once a year? Why do we have..." At that point, I think there were four men's bathhouses, and the women got to rent one once a year, and immediately like, "Why is that? Why can't you rent them more often?" There was always the guys who were like, "Nope, never be in the bathhouse. It's ours. Get out." Fine. But I saw lots of the guys around... And that was a moment of intersection for them where they started to know that we were

having dialogue about how to include trans men, and they were, “What do you mean? What kind of conversation is that?”

T’Hayla Ferguson (00:55:14):

Because the men’s leather community was slower to coming to understanding about gender and the huge diversity of gender. They were always surprised by how much inclusion was happening on the women’s end. They were, “Wow, we don’t do that. If you’re a dude, you’re a dude, and if you’re not a dude, don’t come.” Wonderfully limited thinking. So, it was interesting talking to men that I knew that were in the leather community and leaders in the leather community who were like, “What can we do? What can we offer?” Also, just a broad lack of awareness of how hard it is at the other end of the stick. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:56):

You know it was later revealed that before the five male police officers entered, there were two undercover women officers. How did it feel to sort of learn later that there were outsiders in the space surveilling you?

T’Hayla Ferguson (00:56:17):

This is my gender bias that I work on hardly. I always have a higher standard for women than I have for men. I try really hard to recognize there are men that will meet the benchmark. I think they, in my world, they fail more often than pass. But when women turn around and do stuff like that, you’re like, “What the hell? What up? How can you do that? What are you getting out of that? Are you currying male favour by going in and scoping the space out so that the male cops can go in?” It was pathetic. It was just kind of like, “Really? Are you that unaware of what you’re actually doing?” The answer is probably, yes.

T’Hayla Ferguson (00:57:12):

The women that came through, I think I saw one of them, the people I know who did see them, they were obviously uncomfortable, not comfortable in the space with a very pan-gendered approach to sex. In that they weren’t comfortable in a sex space. So, they were walking through like, “Whoa, what the hell am I seeing here?” At that point, then don’t come in. So, it is always shocking when women turn on women, and it still happens to this day, and I’m kind of like, “Wow.” Like, lack of awareness.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:48):

Yeah. Can you tell me...? I mean, I feel I know the answer to this, but I want to ask. What was your expectation? How did your expectations for the night compare in the end to your lived experience of the night there?

T’Hayla Ferguson (00:58:05):

I think my expectation of the night was based on previous Pussy Palaces, and I knew it was going to be fantastic, and it was. Up until the moment that the cops arrived, it was a rocking, fabulous night. The cops arrived, and there’s a bit of a deflation, but it also galvanized people because there’s always people, even in an aware group, who don’t understand the privilege they hold or the challenges other people have. There was a bit of a wake-up moment for a lot of people where they didn’t understand the risks that the organizers were taking. They didn’t understand the work they were doing to get us to have that space. So, sometimes there’s the difference between the people who are making it happen and the people who are just consumers. At that time, the women’s culture was still mostly people trying to make shit happen.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:59:04):

So, it was a very large proportion of the people there had had some activity that they were doing to make it happen. So, it wasn't really a consumer culture, but there was a small number of consumers who were just kind of like, "Well, okay, that's hard work, too bad. Are we having another one?" We were like, "Oh, come on. Pick up a placard, put up a poster. Remember, this only happens if we all work." But it did galvanize people around. It felt like we had gained something by Pussy Palaces. It was a... This thing that has been alluding us is now within our grasp and something that we can partake in, we're not going to lose it. So, I found it's right in and around then that a lot of women really got to the point of, if I have to be constantly politically active in order to maintain the standing we're at, I am prepared.

T'Hayla Ferguson (00:59:59):

So, I found a lot of people started having bigger conversations about what it means to be out and queer. It is also the period of time where I found that a lot of dykes and lesbians stopped getting along so well. Because the dykes were like, grab the placards, get on Yonge Street, sit down, make the traffic stop, make them listen. Some of the people, there are always people who are more, "I'm going back to the suburbs. I'm going to hide. I don't want to talk about this. Don't affiliate it to me." You're like, "Come on. We all have to row the boat, all of us, everywhere." So, it was interesting seeing some of those political discussions start to formulate and even then, looking back now, 23 years later, it was a lot of white girls at the table. All talking very fast about what we could get things done.

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:00:48):

There were some really powerful people of colour who stepped up and said, "You're not leaving us behind in this. We're in at the beginning, not in the middle, not at the end." That was the first time I saw that. That was when I started just to recognize another level of my privilege and realizing, "Yeah, why is everybody at this table white?" That was the beginning of, I think some of the really powerful voices that come out in the women of colour in Toronto. That you started seeing them stand up and go, "Hell no, I want to be at this party as much as everybody else. I've been working for it, and I'm going to continue to work for it." So, that was a cool part of my learning at that point was just who the power players are and how hard they work.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:36):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, just nearing the end here. Just a few more questions for you. Curious about what is your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace? Its whole reason for being?

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:01:54):

I think I've known Carlyle [Jansen] on and off for years. I think her first intent, she laughed when she says this, was to get laid. "I'm going to start a party so I can get laid the way I want to get laid in the places where I want to get laid." I think that was facetiously the first step, but I think the bigger step was just, we want the big slice of the pie, too. I think the intention was to make women's sexuality and women's play just normal. Just not such a sideshow. Just, we want to have the same fun that everybody else is having. We want to have a place to go and get naked and fuck and play, and it not be unusual, that it be fun. And that it be really blatant, feminine language, like not, "Oh, we're going to have a tea party." No. We're going somewhere to fuck and play, and do all the things and wear all the things and not wear all the things, and do it together. And I think there was a real, we're just going to put this right out there on the table and quit pretending like it doesn't exist.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:09):

Yeah. I hear you.

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:03:10):

Yep.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:13):

One often cited goal from the event organizers is they wanted to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. So, curious prior to the first Pussy Palace event, which would've been in 1998, what do you think was contributing to the lack of visibility?

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:03:31):

Oh, come on. All the usual things that make women invisible, which just all male driven culture, male driven everything. My partner actually, occasionally uses the phrase of "basement feminism." That we were so used to not being able to rent good spaces, that we would rent the basement of a rotten old church that was dripping with water and be thrilled that we got a space, and feel like we'd achieved something prior to that. So, it was all that. We would always take the leftovers and the seconds and the day olds because that's what we thought we deserved. It was really a coming of a time when it was like, "Screw that. I want to rent the bathhouse. The nice bathhouse with a pool and have the fun things, and do the things and have advertisement about it, and open discussions about it and just come out of the shadows and have this space we should have." We're still doing some of that work, which is kind of sad and pathetic, but just so real that I think the big push was we're done not being acknowledged.

Alisha Stranges (01:04:45):

Yeah. Did you ever attend another a Pussy Palace event after the raid?

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:04:53):

Yeah. Yeah. That's that kind of thing where you just take a line where it's like, "You're not going to yuck my yum. I'm going to have fun. Screw you."

Alisha Stranges (01:05:01):

Got you. Well, is there anything else that you wanted to share about your memories, your experiences that maybe the questions didn't sort of invite you to speak to?

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:05:09):

I think, it's funny. I sit here and I think the fact that I actually have a history degree. So, archives are important to me, and I love archives actually. I've worked at the ArQuives years ago, back when they were on Temperance Street. Just the fact that you're taking the time to capture this is that moment of recognizing that somewhere down the line, when people look at retrospectives, they forget the little moments that lead to political awareness and political activism, and changes in political approaches to things on a broader spectrum. All of these little moments in queer history usually get lost. Nobody talks about them. Nobody sees them. It's just suddenly we went from being not allowed to get married to, "Oh yeah, there's a bunch of married queers." Not allowed to have children, to suddenly everybody's got kids.

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:06:10):

But there's steps in there, little minute steps where people experience violence or experienced tragedy and had things taken away, tried to take away. Or they encountered the systemic backlash about who they are. And this is one of those little moments where it's like, you don't think about the police in your country, actively

hating you and trying to diminish who you are or eliminate who you are. Most of us don't encounter that. Most Canadians have a healthy fear of the police because that's what they want us to have, but we haven't experienced the attempt to erase us. I think sometimes our sisters of colour have a lot more to say about that than I do. But this is that moment where they can...

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:07:08):

I remember standing talking with one of my sisters of colour and she said, "Well, you guys all just got the first taste of what we live with every day," and it was like, "Are you shitting me? Is that really the kind of level of bullshit you experience every day?" And that made it more aware to me that, well, the fight's not done. The awareness isn't done because if, at that age, I didn't understand that that could be somebody's daily lived life experience. Wow. Time to educate. And that was the beginning of me becoming way more aware of what our world is actually like. Not the pretty wrapper that we think it is. So, that you're capturing this is just absolutely brilliant.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:57):

Well, it's our pleasure. Thank you so much, T'Hayla, for agreeing to sort of sit down with me for this length of time and remember back to something that happened 20 years ago. I know that can be a challenge but you've offered just wonderful reflections, and really compelling sort of narratives, beautifully descriptive. Thank you so much.

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:08:19):

Thank you. Thank you. It's hard to believe it was 20 years ago.

Alisha Stranges (01:08:23):

Yeah. 21, actually.

T'Hayla Ferguson (01:08:27):

Go on.