

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Nia Herlihy
Conducted on June 29, 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 Wales and raised in Southwestern Ontario, Nia Herlihy is a 49-year-old, white, queer femme. At the time of the interview, Herlihy was in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, living and working in Toronto, Ontario as the Chief People Officer of Pink Triangle Press. The interview concerns her experiences as a patron of the Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000. She discusses her shifting understandings of her sexuality, her long drive to and from the city both before and after the bathhouse event, her sense memories of the Pussy Palace, her recollections of encountering a police presence while inside the Palace, her involvement in the post-raid protest at 52 Division, and other topics. In the interview, Toronto, and Orangeville, Ontario are mentioned, as well as Europe and Wales, United Kingdom. The interview focuses on the year 2000.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Police Raid; Pleasure Palace; Public Sex; Kink; Bathhouse; Queer; Butch-Femme; Small-town Queer; Immigrant; Protest.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:04):

So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Nia Herlihy on June 29, 2021, and Nia's also in Toronto 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, Nia, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Nia Herlihy (00:00:33):

Yes, you do.

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 couple questions off the top that invite me to, that invite you rather, to tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity you hold or categories you occupy, and how over the past 21 years, at least some of these may have shifted or evolved over time. So, to start relatively simply, can you tell me your name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Nia Herlihy (00:01:08):

Nia Herlihy, 49, she/her.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:13):

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

Nia Herlihy (00:01:20):

I would say that I have gone more over to the queer side than I would've considered myself before. I think my gender has remained the same, relatively so.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:36):

And when you use the word queer, what does it mean for you?

Nia Herlihy (00:01:43):

To me, I use it fairly broadly in my mind. I went through a period when I was coming out when I was very rigid with myself as to what I had to be, and I needed to have a particular label for myself. I came out as lesbian first, and then I realized, “Well, if I was attracted to this particular person, then I must be bisexual.” And over the years, I’ve just come to a place where I’ve... And then, if you’re attracted to trans men, what does that say if you consider yourself a lesbian? A number of things, right? And so, I’ve just decided to let myself be me, and part of that is just embracing the term queer. Queer is what I am, who I love, whoever that is.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:25):

Yeah. And how might this description have been different for you back in 2000 around the time when the Pussy Palace event would’ve taken place?

Nia Herlihy (00:02:34):

I was very focused on being a lesbian at that period. It hadn’t been long. It wasn’t long after I came out that I went to the Pussy Palace. It was my first event of anything like that before. It was my first time, and I went by myself, and it was really, it was a big, brave thing for me to do. And so, I was really sort of trying to embrace my lesbianism at the time and figuring out what that meant for me. So, there definitely was a certain amount of rules I had for myself as to how I was to be and who I was supposed to be interested in.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:14):

Mm. Would you care to sort of expand a little bit on these rules you had for yourself?

Nia Herlihy (00:03:22):

Hmm. Well, for one, I wouldn’t have considered dating a man. I probably wouldn’t have, at that time, considered dating someone who was trans. I don’t know that I would’ve been open to any of that because coming out was so new to me, I felt like I had to really explore my identity. I felt like I needed to figure that out before I could expand my boundaries, I guess. I wouldn’t have thought about that at the time like that, but I think I really needed to figure some things out for myself to then realize where the room is for me.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:04):

Right, yeah. And what about racial, ethnic, cultural identities? How do you sort of express yourself through these types of categories?

Nia Herlihy (00:04:15):

I’m not very good with these kinds of questions. How do I identify myself? I guess I’m a recovering, small-town girl who didn’t really understand race or that there was really, other than on TV, any other colour skin than my own, so much so that at first, when I first sort of came to Toronto, I didn’t really see colour... “I didn’t see colour.” So annoying now, but anyway, I didn’t see colour because I just wasn’t used to categorizing people by race or colour of the skin. And I know how problematic that is now, but I would say that how I express myself now is very different. I’m much more aware of my privilege. Also, my daughter is Black, so there’s a lot of things I think about now as a parent of a Black child that I just wouldn’t have

considered. I didn't see microaggressions. I didn't see lack of representation. I didn't see any of that. And so, now with my work, I'm head of the diversity and equity sort of team at my work and having a Black daughter and just, I guess I do see things differently. I was just in my own world before, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:01):

And so, would you care to expand a little bit on the things that occupy your time these days professionally, or just touching on it?

Nia Herlihy (00:06:09):

Okay. Professionally, I'm the Chief People Officer of an LGBTQ2S+ media organization, Pink Triangle Press. You might know *Xtra* or *squirt.org*. But yeah, I've worked there for almost eight years now. So, that takes up a good chunk of my time. I have a five-year-old. I don't know if you can see there. I think it's probably too far away. But anyway, I have a five-year-old who also takes up quite a bit of my time. I have two aging parents, neither of them are quite well. So, that takes up a bit of time too. And I'd like to give you a litany of all these fun things I've been doing for the past year but kind of haven't been doing shit with COVID, you know?

Alisha Stranges (00:07:01):

Yeah.

Nia Herlihy (00:07:02):

So, just kind of getting by, I guess.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:07):

Yeah. And what about back in 2000? What kind of things were you up to back then?

Nia Herlihy (00:07:14):

Back in 2000, I had my own business at the time. I was a personal chef, and I had just gotten back from a tour of backpacking around Europe by myself. So, that was pretty fun. And I was just about to enter into university, and I was just kind of coming out, so very kind of obsessed with that, thinking about that a lot, and I was in the process of moving to the city. I was still living in a small town at that point. So, I remember the night of the Pussy Palace, I drove an hour and a half to get there, so I'd committed.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:58):

Right, I see. So, you weren't actually quite yet living in Toronto?

Nia Herlihy (00:08:04):

No.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:05):

Yeah. What can you tell me about your sort of educational path, class background? Anything you want to share there?

Nia Herlihy (00:08:14):

Okay. Let's see. My family immigrated here when I was four from Wales, and I will say we were precariously middle-class. We should have been middle-class, but my parents were really bad with money. So, we were always kind of struggling in ways that we shouldn't have had to be. Yeah, growing up in a small town, kind of feeling different. It was a small town full of people who had always been there. So, even just coming from Europe, we were outsiders, and I always felt relatively isolated growing up, and I didn't sort of pick up on the fact that I was queer when I was younger, at least nothing conscious, but I do always feel like there was something that was marked out as different about me, and ended up... Is this the direction you want me to go? I'm not sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:20):

Absolutely, yeah.

Nia Herlihy (00:09:21):

Okay. I don't know. There was a lot of bullying which, yeah, happens, but yeah, I was bullied most of my childhood years probably until I was about 17.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:39):

Right. And what was that like for you, given you were sort of saying that you wouldn't have necessarily understood consciously that there was something different? I'm curious how you received that sort of ostracization when you're not quite sure yourself what it's for.

Nia Herlihy (00:10:01):

Well, I received it the way that I was told it. So, I was the ugly kid. I was the kid who kind of walked funny with a limp. And I guess to me, at that age, I felt like, well, clearly that's enough. Clearly, that's enough to be ostracized and to be bullied. This is fair.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:26):

Mm. Anything more you want to share there?

Nia Herlihy (00:10:42):

Yeah, I think that most of my friends and a good number of people I've had relationships with, but especially my friends, have been bullied growing up. And I feel like, it's weird to say, but I think that the experience of being bullied makes you, I don't want to say a better person. I don't think that's it. It gives you an insight on what it feels like to be left out, to be ostracized. I think it can, it doesn't always, but I think it can make you a kinder, more thoughtful person, and that's who I sort of gravitate towards now.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:31):

Mm. Earlier you were sharing that around 2000 is when you would've been entering university. What did you study?

Nia Herlihy (00:11:41):

I studied psychology and women and gender studies, and I went to school late. I didn't go to school right after high school because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. So, I worked for about a decade, I guess, and

then backpacked around Europe, and then came back and said, “Okay. Now I got to figure out the rest of my life.” I’m not actually working in what I went to school with, but I don’t regret it. I mean, especially the women and gender studies, my life changed. My life changed after that. I thought in completely different ways. So, it was such an experience for me, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:25):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes, I can completely relate. It resonates deeply with me as well, yeah. What role, if any, does religion or spirituality play in your life currently or at any point?

Nia Herlihy (00:12:38):

Well, my uncle is a canon in the Anglican church. So, a canon is like kind of up there, and so when we came here, we were kind of like the go-to-church-twice-a-week family, members of the choir, always volunteer at the church, and I had to go to Sunday school, and “God is watching you, don’t mess up.” All of that. And then a combination of things, hitting around 15 or 16, discovering Depeche Mode and just really starting to think for myself, and also my parents kind of separating without actually separating, just having that sort of... Like, my mom stopped going to church, and so we got to stop.

Nia Herlihy (00:13:30):

And then I guess I went through atheism and agnosticism, and then I went through a period where I just wanted to study. Like, every month I studied a different kind of religion or spirituality just to figure out... I also studied Satanism. I just wanted to know what was going on and what the choices were, and in the end, I felt like agnosticism is for me. If there’s something out there, I’ll find out when I die. And if there isn’t, I won’t even know I had a question. So, there.

Nia Herlihy (00:14:06):

But religion has a special, hellish place in my heart because I guess it was maybe about 12 years ago, my sister became a fundamentalist Christian, and it was at that point that our relationship, at first slowly, and then very quickly fell apart. Her particular religion said that being queer was against God. I was always getting lectures. I was being told I was going to go to hell. It was very, very serious with us, and she just couldn’t let it go. She didn’t want me to go to hell. And I’m like, “Well, clearly all the cool people are going there.” So, it was very painful, but she’s out of it now, and our relationship is better. I mean, she still has some form of religion, but it’s not like it was. One of her children is now trans, and she has handled it so well. She’s kind of like the poster child for the perfect parent you want when you’re a trans child. I got goose bumps. I don’t know. She’s just made such a turnaround. And her boyfriend is genderqueer. So, things change, right?

Alisha Stranges (00:15:36):

Yeah, absolutely.

Nia Herlihy (00:15:37):

Yeah, but yeah, for me, religion is like, “Don’t talk to me about it,” because I definitely have a barrier that I’m not very open to hearing. If someone tries to push something on me, I will be defensive about it.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:53):

I see. Mm-hmm (affirmative). You sort of touched on all the things I'm curious about in this sort of vein of questioning, but I'll just leave a little space here if you had anything else you thought would be important to share about how you understand the different identities you hold today as compared to 20 years ago.

Nia Herlihy (00:16:17):

Yeah, I will say that when I first came out, I didn't know what butch/femme was, and when I discovered what that was, something clicked with me because I had always been attracted to people who were on the more masculine side. The very first girlfriend I ever had was embarrassed when I would go out wearing a dress and heels with her because that's not how she wanted me to look, and I remember feeling a certain sense of shame. I remember cutting my hair short. I don't know why. I remember trying to take up smoking. I wore cords all the time. I tried to be a particular thing because I thought that's what was expected of me in the community. And I just felt like I was wearing somebody else's clothes, just trying to be somebody else. And so, once I heard about butch/femme, I really embraced that. And I think that that still, not I think, I know that that still informs who I am now. I would say I'm a queer femme, but the first is queer. Yeah, I used to say that I'm a high femme, but I don't have time for that anymore.

Alisha Stranges (00:17:41):

I see. Okay. Well, thank you so much, Nia, for sort of taking us through a little bit of that sort of life biography. I'm going to invite you now to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. This is when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee would've been preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies which was at the time, the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. How do you remember first learning about the Night of 2000 Pussies bathhouse event?

Nia Herlihy (00:18:17):

I learned about it through a friend of mine, an ex of mine, who had gone to all of them so far, and she was very excited. She always told me stories. And I remember at the time I would say, "Wow, you're so brave. I could never do something like that. It just seems so freeing." And then I decided, "Well, why can't I do something like that?" So, I remember I deliberately didn't say I was going to anybody because I thought that means I can always change my mind at the last minute.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:46):

Okay.

Nia Herlihy (00:18:48):

And I'm usually fine with going to stuff by myself. I don't need to be in a group of people. And so, yeah, I heard about it through my friend and decided to just go.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:58):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what intrigued you about this particular kind of event? What captivated your attention about it?

Nia Herlihy (00:19:09):

The sexual freedom of it. I knew it would push my boundaries, and I knew that I needed to do that. Yeah, I'm somebody who tends to be very comfortable with my boundaries, and I'll stay firmly within them, even if

they're tight. So, I know that I need to widen them sometimes. I just wanted to be adventurous and do something different. And I was curious. I was curious. I'd heard so much about it, and I couldn't imagine what it would feel like to walk through a space like that, where people were sometimes naked, sometimes half-naked, sometimes you look over there and two people are fucking in the corner. You don't know. I'd heard so many things. I just wanted to see what it was all about.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:07):

Yeah, I'm very curious about... What do you think, what kind of sort of resource inside you made space for you to kind of know that your boundaries can be firm, but that you still have the desire to push them? What allows you to do that?

Nia Herlihy (00:20:24):

Compartmentalization.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:26):

Okay.

Nia Herlihy (00:20:27):

So, yeah. It's like, "Yeah, your boundaries are here, blah, blah, blah. I'm going to put one foot in front of the other, and I'm going to do this, and I'll process it afterwards."

Alisha Stranges (00:20:34):

I see. Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, my next set of questions here might feel a little inconsequential, but remember that so many folks coming to the Pussy Palace are coming from different spaces. Some people had been before. Some people, like yourself, never had been, so curious about the space and time during which a person goes from being someone who's decided they're going to attend the event to someone who is an official, becomes an official patron. So, what do you recall about the process of making your way to Club Toronto? Can you talk a little bit about your journey to the club?

Nia Herlihy (00:21:10):

Yeah, I mean, I drove there from Orangeville, [Ontario], where I lived at the time. I think, I feel like the biggest thing on my mind, and this may have been me distracting myself from the fact that I was actually going to do this, was I was freaking out about my outfit.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:26):

Okay.

Nia Herlihy (00:21:26):

And I was like, "Oh, did I choose the right outfit? Did I not? Are people going to be like, 'What was she thinking?' I don't know. This is a silly outfit. I should have brought a second one. It's too exposing." Do you mean the journey, like the physical journey or do you mean how I was thinking and feeling?

Alisha Stranges (00:21:49):

Well, both are included. I mean, for sure, if there's anything more to share about the physical journey, I would love to hear it. But also, if you wanted to talk a bit about journey in another sense, I'm happy to hear that as well.

Nia Herlihy (00:22:03):

Yeah, I mean the physical journey was about an hour and a half, and I was nervous, but kind of putting that on the back burner as much as possible, and just worrying about my outfit instead. When I actually got there and found parking, there was a line-up outside, and that's when the nervousness hit me. That's when my stomach went into a knot. I'm pretty introverted, and on top of that, kind of quiet for the most part. So, suddenly, I felt like, "Oh no, there's a line-up. I might have to talk to people. People might not talk to me." I was nervous about all the things that could be. I guess, once I got inside the door, then I was committed.

Alisha Stranges (00:22:55):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). How long were you planning on staying?

Nia Herlihy (00:22:58):

I didn't even think.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:00):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nia Herlihy (00:23:01):

No.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:03):

I'd love to hear a little bit more about your outfit. What do you recall about what you wore that night?

Nia Herlihy (00:23:11):

I just wore this sort of... It was a bikini of mine, a black bikini with a little black sarong around it. I think I just went around barefoot, which ugh. Now I think about it, especially after COVID, I'm a little bit germophobic. But anyway, that's what I did.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:29):

Was the idea...? Oh, sorry, go ahead.

Nia Herlihy (00:23:31):

No, no, go ahead.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:32):

I was just curious, was the idea that you were driving from Orangeville, [Ontario], to Club Toronto in the outfit or you're going to change when you got there?

Nia Herlihy (00:23:44):

Can I remember that? I must have changed when I got in because there's no way that I drove in the car in a bikini. No, I would've remembered that.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:54):

And what were you trying to feel in this outfit or to communicate to other people?

Nia Herlihy (00:23:59):

I was trying to feel open and, dare I say, a bit sexy. And I was trying to communicate... I didn't want to be too high maintenance looking because I didn't want anyone to feel like... Even my own father has been like, "You're not easily approachable." So, I didn't want to do the feather boa thing or anything. I just wanted to be like, "Hi, I'm simple." Not simple. Anyway, I wanted to be approachable but yet communicate to people that I'm dressed in a particular way because I would be open to being sexy.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:37):

Yeah. Well, is there anything you remember vividly about your time in the line? Did you end up talking to somebody or how did that all go down for you?

Nia Herlihy (00:24:46):

I'm going to say that I don't remember. I don't remember.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:54):

That's fair. That's fair. And then once you got inside the club, can you tell me a little bit about the club? Can you just sort of describe the inside of the club for me?

Nia Herlihy (00:25:05):

So, it was loud at first going in because there was music playing, and there was people everywhere. I looked around and there was sort of like rooms on one side, small rooms slash closets on the one side, and then there was this main area that was, I guess, a dance floor slash communal hangout area, and that's where I entered into. And the first thing I did was just do a tour of the entire place, just to see where everything was situated. I knew that there was going to be three floors, and I knew the top floor was kind of like the kinky area. I wanted to check that out. And also, as is my habit when I'm uncomfortable in a situation, just keep moving. You know? Go from place to place and settle yourself down. So, that did happen eventually.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:04):

Right. So, I've heard before that there were actually sort of planned, scheduled tours. Is that what you mean? You went on a tour with a group or by yourself?

Nia Herlihy (00:26:12):

By myself.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:13):

I see. Okay. And what was the atmosphere like inside the club?

Nia Herlihy (00:26:21):

Celebratory, sexual, open, fun, and kind. I felt like nobody was putting on airs. There were smiles for strangers. I think we were all here wanting to enjoy ourselves, and I think we were all glad that the other was there.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:50):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You said you may have known folks who were attending. Did you end up meeting up with friends once you got inside?

Nia Herlihy (00:27:00):

Yeah, I ended up knowing quite a few people there. I didn't hang out, hang out. When I saw people, I talked to them for a bit, and then went ahead and did my own thing. But yeah, there was probably a good 20 people I knew there.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:16):

Right. And which parts of the space did you gravitate towards?

Nia Herlihy (00:27:19):

Depends on what part of the night, really. When I went to the top floor. I got my first ever flogging which was really interesting. So, that was fun. The main level, someone was giving out massages. So, I checked that. I didn't actually get one. I was very interested in the... Oh my goodness. I'm forgetting the name, the Pussy Palace, the main person that you could see. I'm forgetting her name, like the name of it.

Alisha Stranges (00:28:01):

I think you might mean the Temple Priestess?

Nia Herlihy (00:28:03):

Temple Priestess, yeah. I knew her, know her, so I was curious in that, but I know there's a lot of things going on. I didn't end up going to the body painter. That was really fun, and we'd made a deal to hook up later. That was my first hook-up which didn't end up happening. Thank you very much, police. But yeah, I just kind of went around. No, I didn't go in the pool, but I think I dipped my feet in there. I really went sort of up and down and everywhere. I don't know. How graphic do you want this to get?

Alisha Stranges (00:28:43):

That's entirely up to you. Happy to receive any story you want to tell. You don't have to reveal anything that you don't want to reveal.

Nia Herlihy (00:28:53):

Oh, I mean I'm pretty open with it. Wow. Are you in Toronto? Are you seeing this rain?

Alisha Stranges (00:28:59):

I can't see it from here, but yes, it was massive.

Nia Herlihy (00:29:04):

This looks like tornado rain, but we're in Toronto, so that's not going to happen. I would've been afraid of that in my hometown, but anyway. So, I guess I had a number of firsts there. I had my first almost hook-up. I had my first body paint. I had my first flogging. And then I had my first, what I call my first accidental gang banging.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:29):

Okay.

Nia Herlihy (00:29:31):

I just saw a whole bunch of women lined up for something, and they were all sort of chatting, and they were lined up, and I was curious as to like, "Oh, what are they lined up for? What is this?" So, I went past them to just kind of peek my head in. And then it was the girlfriend of my ex who was kind of heading this event, and she saw me, and she must have thought I was in line, and I remember she had this stricken, panicked look on her face, I guess because I was the ex of one of the women in there that was supposed to be doing this.

Nia Herlihy (00:30:00):

Anyway, they clearly worked it out, and all of a sudden, I was brought into the room and blindfolded, but I didn't know what actually was going on. So, I decided to just go with it. So, I was blindfolded, told to kneel on a chair, given somebody to fondle in the front. I think it was a minute at a time. There was three or four different people banging, and then you got three or four different people to feel up at the same time. I remember walking out of there going, "I can't believe that just happened, and I'm sorry for butting in line, everybody. I didn't mean it." But it wasn't long after that, that the police came.

Nia Herlihy (00:30:45):

I went upstairs, and I finally decided I'm going to line up to get a massage, and we were sort of in the main space on the second floor, which it all looks different now because Oasis [Aqualounge]. But I guess it was near where the kinky room is right now. And suddenly, a woman just kind of wrapped in a towel, nothing on top, runs up the stairs saying, "The cops are here. The cops are here." And, at first, I thought, "What? Why are the cops here?" And then my second thought was, "Am I going to get arrested?" I went into a panic. I didn't know the rules. I didn't know the law. Like, "Am I not allowed to be here? What's going to happen?"

Nia Herlihy (00:31:28):

And I remember just kind of being a little bit like I wasn't making sense to myself. I thought, "Well, I'm wearing black. If I just go into a corner, no one will see me." Right? Never. My skin is as white as anything. But anyway, I just thought, "Maybe no one will see me." I was just kind of in a corner watching what was happening, and the cops walked past. And the one thing that sticks with me is that one of them was whistling a kind of "do-do-do-do-do" kind of whistle. And I thought, "Well, that's odd. That's a strange thing to be doing when you're supposedly raiding."

Nia Herlihy (00:32:04):

Anyway, I didn't stay much longer after that. Clearly, the vibe had just gone "whoosh." But yeah, I remember thinking, "Great, my first Pussy Palace, and the cops come to it." And of course, nothing was the same after that.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:30):

That night or...?

Nia Herlihy (00:32:39):

That night. That night, and of course, any subsequent Palaces were different. We all had that in our minds, right, that this could happen, that this could be done to us. Again, still living up north and pre-lots of connections on internet, that kind of thing, I didn't know that there was going to be a protest, but I happened to be sitting in a coffee shop, the old Second Cup on Church Street, talking to a friend when the people starting the protest ran by. And so, one friend that was in it saw my face in the door and said, "Come on, you have to come to this." And so, I was suddenly in the protest.

Nia Herlihy (00:33:25):

So, yeah, we went to the police station, and some people had a few things to say with a megaphone, and then after that, I went home. It was really interesting that I happened to be there. I was glad to be a part of it. I'm glad that, yeah... I don't know how to word this. I'm not one of those people to be a part of a protest and raise my fist and yell or anything like that, but just have been a part of it, just to be walking along with the other people that were there, and just putting my body there as part of a group who is here to support, that was good for me.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:25):

In what way? Can you say a bit more?

Nia Herlihy (00:34:30):

That I was there to register my disapproval. It makes me sound like the queen or something, but no, this was not okay. And for me, I have friends who were interrupted in the middle of having sex. I have friends who felt trauma because they have negative experiences with police in the past. Right? Compared to them, I can't really call it trauma. I was freaked out, but it was more for them, and I felt like it was important to have, if not my voice heard, then my presence there.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:21):

Yeah. It was later revealed that before the plainclothes police officers entered the club, there were two women police officers attending undercover. When did you learn about that? How did it feel to sort of learn later that there had been folks surveilling patrons?

Nia Herlihy (00:35:46):

It felt dirty. It felt like, "How dare you." I felt indignant about it because I feel like women and trans people, especially at that time, no, even now, what am I saying, have so few spaces where they can be sexual and feel free without having eyes on you. We have to fight for space so often. You think about, when I came out, there was quite a few women's bars. There was The Rose and Slack Alice was [inaudible] anyway, a women's place. There was a few places, and it's been whittled down and whittled down over the years until really, there's nothing. There's nothing. And the men had their, like, seven or eight bathhouses across the city that they could go to at any time they chose. And we had, like, once a year; one time to go. And it always had to be on a shitty night that the men didn't want anyway. And so, it pissed me off. It pissed me off that this just couldn't be left, that we couldn't have this space.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:10):

Yeah. Did you follow the court proceedings that kind of unfolded following the raid?

Nia Herlihy (00:37:21):

I did to a degree, I mostly wanted to was what was happening to the two organizers, rather than the details of what was happening with the case.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:30):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Anything you recall about that particular part of the aftermath?

Nia Herlihy (00:37:39):

I remember feeling like they were taking on so much. Here they were trying to create this space for this community, and that in itself was a lot of work and taking up a lot of their resources, and suddenly, they're embroiled in this which they never, never expected. And I feel like, fair or not, here they are, and I wonder if they got enough support from the community, what they needed, but I'm so happy in the end that they were exonerated, I guess is the word, but it took long enough.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:29):

Yeah. Before we kind of move on here, I wanted to see if we could... I don't know if you'd want to go back in time for this or not, but I'm curious about the impression that the space made on your senses, that it's left on your senses. And so, I've got a little exercise here that I want to invite you into, and then I'll do it with you, and just kind of go with me to the best of your ability.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:50):

So, just kind of get comfortable in your chair, really allowing the weight of your body to sink into your chair, and soften your gaze, or even close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that, and just take a couple deep breaths in and out. Relaxing your jaw, and with each inhale, allowing your body to re-inhabit some or other location within the Pussy Palace. It might be before the raid, during the raid, after it. And don't worry too much about which space and time is coming to mind, whichever one comes to mind first is perfect one to work with. And from this contemplative space, if you can look around and, in your mind's eye, tell me what it is that you can see.

Nia Herlihy (00:40:07):

I can see lots of people. I can hear music. The lights are not as dark as I would've liked. Smells like a lot of different things. I can smell some perfume, some sex, a bit of underlying mustiness. Like, the place, it was not the cleanest space, I guess, but in a way, it added to the experience.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:59):

And where are you within the Pussy Palace right now?

Nia Herlihy (00:41:05):

I'm on the second floor. I'm at the top of the stairs in the clearing area. I've just said goodbye to a few friends who were... I don't think they were leaving. I think they were just going somewhere else. And I just connected with a bunch of women that I knew from the bi community, and we decided to line up... No, we

weren't lining up for a massage. That's right. We decided to give each other massages. That's what we were doing.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:52):

And if you could distil this area into a single colour, what would its colour be?

Nia Herlihy (00:42:01):

Orange.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:02):

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

Nia Herlihy (00:42:19):

I think it would be the banister. It had sort of a fancy top to it, and it was wood, and it had sort of this old sort of old-house feeling to it. It's rough-hewn, a little bit rough-hewn. You could feel the grain. It wasn't perfectly smooth.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:46):

Mm. And it's a bit of a strange question, but if you could somehow taste this space, what would its flavour be?

Nia Herlihy (00:42:58):

Mm. Lube and flowers. That sounds weird.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:13):

What kind of flowers?

Nia Herlihy (00:43:15):

The edible flowers you can put on salads, like pansies. They have a floral taste to them, but they also just kind of taste kind of earthy and green.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:28):

Mm. And you can let that go and open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you for taking me there. I just have a few questions right now about the crowd or your perception of the crowd. First of all, how many people would you say were there kind of in the height of the event?

Nia Herlihy (00:43:47):

I'm bad at estimating these kind of things, but I would maybe say, I bet you 200's too much, but that's my estimation.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:59):

Yeah, about 200. And how would you describe the composition of the crowd along lines of gender, sexuality, race, culture? Would you have been clocking that?

Nia Herlihy (00:44:11):

I know that it was very white. I'm somewhat affected by the crowd that I run in, in so that I would've noticed them the most. I would've noticed people who are more on the butch end of the spectrum or more genderqueer, that kind of thing, and more kinky because that was my crowd, is my crowd. But I think I would say probably for the whole, most people were cisgendered and more on the lesbian spectrum at that point.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:05):

And thinking about your own positionality then, how did it feel for you to exist in your body in that space that night?

Nia Herlihy (00:45:19):

I guess on the surface I probably fit in, but I never feel like I fit in. No, not never. It takes me a very long time to feel like I fit in anywhere. So, even though my gender and my skin colour put me in the majority, I didn't feel like I fit in.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:44):

Yeah. What about this feeling kind of says to you, "I don't quite fit in here even though in some ways I do?"

Nia Herlihy (00:45:51):

I rarely feel like I belong. That has definitely changed. That has gotten better, I guess you could say, over the past decade. I spent a lot of time sort of hiding my sexuality. I often feel like I don't deserve to take up space. Even when I was a kid, I felt like that. I always tried to disappear, which was my first response when I saw the cops. Right? Oh, I'll just disappear. No one will notice me because I'm fairly inconsequential. So, if I just stand back here, no one will notice.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:41):

Right.

Nia Herlihy (00:46:43):

So, I think that's more of a me thing than the night.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:47):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you for sharing that. This sort of question's a little bit different here, but I'm curious. The Pussy Palace, it's been described as a space that was at least publicly inclusive of lesbian women, queer women, and sort of trans, non-binary, gender-expansive folks. What do you recall about the relationship between these differently gendered groups at the Pussy Palace?

Nia Herlihy (00:47:24):

My personal experience is that there was a lot of harmony, that there was a lot of openness, and that people generally made an effort to be welcoming and inclusive of people. We want people to come to something like this. We want people to feel welcome. We want this to keep happening. My group was more sort of diverse. My group was more from high femmes to hard butches. I mean, I only heard positive things as far as how people were sort of experienced... How they experienced that space and in terms of their identity. I imagine that there were different experiences for some that attended.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:38):

Mm. Can you expand a bit?

Nia Herlihy (00:48:44):

It's law of averages. No one's always going to feel included. There's always going to be some jerks out there, even amongst queer women and queer people. Yeah, it's bound to be that someone had a shitty time there because someone wasn't inclusive of them or said something. Yeah, but it wasn't my experience and it wasn't the experience of any of my friends that night.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:11):

I see. Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. So, we're kind of nearing the end here. I just have a couple more questions for you. I'm curious what's your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace, its sort of reason for being?

Nia Herlihy (00:49:31):

I feel like, and this just came to me like this, just right now, it's like I'm thinking back to the Take Back the Night marches. Right? I feel like this was almost like take back the pussy. It's like we are going to be sexual, and we're going to be loud about it, and we're going to be proud about it, and we're going to create a space for it.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:52):

Yeah. And one of the often-cited goals of the event organizers was to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. And prior to the first Pussy Palace event in 1998, what do you think was contributing to this lack of visibility for queer women's sexuality?

Nia Herlihy (00:50:18):

I think it was partially that we have been taught as women to not be open about it, to keep our legs closed like good girls, and that it was not our place to be brazenly, openly sexual, and that that space was for men, and in our community, for queer men. Queer men were the sexual... They were sexual and we were homebodies. We had their second date with our moving van, and we nested, and that was a lesbian's life. I think partly upbringing and then what we saw in the community. But I also think that if there's not a word for it, if there's not a space for it, I think some things come into being when you know how to say it, or you get into a space where you can do it. Does that make any sense?

Alisha Stranges (00:51:31):

Yeah, absolutely.

Nia Herlihy (00:51:34):

Yeah, I think the fact that the space was created, and you go into this space, and I know so many women are like, "I'm going there, but I'm just going to look. I'm just going to watch. I just want to be a part of it." Not all of them didn't do nothing in the end, but just to go and be in a space where you're seeing other people around you experiencing their sexuality. Just being by the pool and opening their legs, and just deciding, "This is how I'm going to be right now," whatever it was. And seeing people not feeling shame for being blatantly sexual, for wearing a "slutty" outfit, these things that we're not supposed to do, and we're doing them in droves, and we're practically high-fiving each other for it. So, it was very freeing.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:37):

Yeah. When you made the decision to go, to attend the event that night, what were you hoping to experience?

Nia Herlihy (00:52:49):

I didn't think I would do anything. I wanted to feel the space. I wanted to feel what it was like, and I wanted to be the person who had attended Pussy Palace. Yeah, I wanted to make myself do it, and I kind of let the experience, as far as what I wanted to get from it, I let that happen. I didn't have a lot of expectations.

Alisha Stranges (00:53:19):

And then by the end of the night, what would you say, or how would you say your expectations, whatever they were, compared to your lived experience of it?

Nia Herlihy (00:53:34):

I definitely had more fun than I thought I would. I definitely was more brave than I thought I would be. And then, with the police thing, it was such a weird feeling leaving, and I had that good hour and a half in the car to just think about what the evening had been like. It was such a mixture. Right? Such a mixture of things, and I wonder sort of how I would have ended that night if the raid hadn't happened. Right? I was really on a high. There was lots of good things happening, and I was connecting with people, and about to get a massage, and... I got off into my own head. What was the question?

Alisha Stranges (00:54:30):

Oh, just, you've sort of answered it. It's just what your lived experience of the night, how it compared to your expectation going in.

Nia Herlihy (00:54:42):

Oh, so my lived experience was much more intense, and for the most part, pleasurable than my... I very well considered that I might just go walk around for a little while, feel super uncomfortable and leave, but at least I'd gone. I'd given myself permission to do that. So, yeah, I was also a bit proud of myself for going. Coming out of that, police aside, I realized that I could be the person that goes to sex parties. I could be the person that does some of these things, and I do feel like, after that, I was more open with my sexuality, and I did go to subsequent Pleasure Palaces, and that sort of thing, with less trepidation, more curiosity.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:47):

Yeah. You mentioned the renaming. We know that at some point it became the Pleasure Palace. Do you know kind of when that happened or what prompted that shift?

Nia Herlihy (00:55:59):

I'm bad with dates, so I don't know when it happened, but I know that the reason for the name change was to honour and account for and include people who didn't have pussies.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:15):

Right.

Nia Herlihy (00:56:16):

Not everybody there had a pussy, or that anyone that was there maybe that had one didn't identify with it.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:26):

Right.

Nia Herlihy (00:56:27):

So, to call it the Pleasure Palace is just... Why not reduce the potential for ick or uncomfortableness, and open it? There may be some people who wouldn't have attended if it's called Pussy Palace versus people who would if it wasn't. So, yeah, I think it was an inclusive decision.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:49):

Yeah. I'm going to just journey back here because I'm very curious. I just had a flash, an image of you driving back home to Orangeville, [Ontario], and I'm wondering if there is anything sort of that you can recall vividly about that drive home after such an eventful night where you were driving down there, feeling nervous, not sure what was going to happen. Get in there, you're having fun, the police show up. The night sounded like... Nothing that happened there sounded expected. So, I'm curious about that drive home.

Nia Herlihy (00:57:27):

I was dazed, a little bit dazed. I would say there was a lot of, sort of, worrying around in my head. I would say, at first, I pushed the police raid down in my mind. I really wanted to focus on the good part of the night and the good things that I'd experienced. I didn't get really mad about the raid until after. There was indignancy, if that's a word, but it wasn't until after that I really processed it. I have a habit of, when something's big or difficult to process, I will compartmentalize it and say, "Okay, later." So, really, when I was going home, it was all about the fun things that I did, and "I can't believe that happened. Oh my god. Too bad that hook-up didn't happen." Yeah, and then also very strange because I was going home to a household, because I still lived with my father at the time, where I wasn't going to go home and sit at the kitchen table and say, "Well, you won't believe my evening. Can't believe this happened."

Alisha Stranges (00:58:57):

Yeah. That's a question I had. I mean, when you were in the Second Cup and your friends saw you and pulled you into the march, right, I mean, prior to that, did you have an opportunity to process what happened with your friend group?

Nia Herlihy (00:59:15):

I did with the one friend who actually pulled me in and who was the same person that actually told me about this from the beginning. So, I had that opportunity. But other than that, I hadn't processed it.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:33):

Yeah.

Nia Herlihy (00:59:34):

I was very much used to processing stuff on my own or figuring things out on my own.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:44):

Yeah. What was that like for you? Was this just sort of one among many things or was this an extra big thing?

Nia Herlihy (01:00:05):

Yeah. Mm. Yeah, I think that was just sort of my personal habit. Wait, are you asking about why processing on my own or are you asking about something else?

Alisha Stranges (01:00:19):

Yeah. No, just the idea that you, kind of, mostly had to process this event and what took place there, the good and the unfortunate, mostly on your own. I'm just curious. This was just one among many instances?

Nia Herlihy (01:00:34):

Yeah. One among many. Yeah, I'm definitely more open now, very much so, but back then, I kept most things to myself. And so, I don't know what difference it might have made to be able to process it more fulsomely with people, at the time. Yeah, I don't know.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:17):

Well, is there anything else about your experience that night or in the aftermath that you wanted to speak to that maybe my questions sort of didn't invite you to speak to?

Nia Herlihy (01:01:29):

Hmm. I don't think so.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:54):

Okay. Do you want to leave it there then?

Nia Herlihy (01:01:57):

Sure, yeah. I feel like... Is there something? But I can't immediately think of anything.

Alisha Stranges (01:02:02):

Yeah, and that's fine. That's more than fine. Well, I wanted to say a brief thank you now, and we can pause the recording in a second for a little follow-up. But thank you, Nia, so much for sort of taking this time to journey back so far back in time.

Nia Herlihy (01:02:24):

Makes me feel old.

Alisha Stranges (01:02:28):

I understand, but yeah, just wonderful to bear witness to your reflections.

Nia Herlihy (01:02:33):

Thank you.

Alisha Stranges (01:02:34):

Yeah.

Nia Herlihy (01:02:35):

And thanks for doing this. There's a few things, I'm like, "Oh, I remember that. I didn't know that I even knew that anymore." Yeah.