

**Pussy Palace Oral History Project**  
Oral History Interview with Pam Johnson  
Conducted on April 21, 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 the Midwestern United States, Johnson is a 62-year-old, white, queer, middle-class woman. At the time of the interview, Johnson lived and worked in Toronto, Ontario, as a community activist; as a dancer, choreographer, and live performer; and as a post-secondary teacher in Performance training institutions. The interview concerns her experiences as an activist and patron of the Pussy Palace. She discusses her sense memories of attending the protest at 52 Division in the aftermath of the September 2000 bathhouse raid, the collective outrage at the police behaviour, the outpouring of community support, and the debates circulating among fellow activists and community members concerning the language of queer resistance. She recounts her experience as a patron of the Pussy Palace in 2004, the evolved vibe of the Palace post-raid, the intricacies of cruising at a women's bathhouse, and other topics. Johnson also shares her commitment to community activism and her thoughts on the legacy of the Pussy Palace within Toronto's queer history. In the interview, Toronto, Ontario and Indiana, USA are mentioned, and the conversation addresses the following moments in time: 1981, the 90s, 2004-2005, 2009, and 2016-2020.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Queer; Activism; Dyke March; Police raid; Protest; Semantics; Cruising.

Pam Johnson (00:00:06):

Okay, it's working.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:07):

Perfect. Me too. All right. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Pam Johnson on April 21st, 2021. Pam is also in Toronto. Is that correct?

Pam Johnson (00:00:25):

Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:26):

Yes. And Pam is going to tell us about the experience of being a community activist surrounding the 2000 Pussy Palace bathhouse raid, as well as a little bit about the experience, perhaps, of attending the Pussy Palace in years after the raid. So, Pam, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Pam Johnson (00:00:46):

You do.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:47):

Perfect. So before we sort of get into the experience with the Pussy Palace, I'm going to ask a few questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself and, in particular, trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity you hold or categories you occupy, and how at least some of these may have shifted or evolved over time. So, to start relatively simply, can you tell me your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Pam Johnson (00:01:18):

My name is Pamela Sue Johnson. I'm 62 years old, and my pronouns are she/her.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:27):

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

Pam Johnson (00:01:33):

Yeah, I would describe myself as a female and as queer. And that is different than when the Pussy Palace raid happened.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:47):

Right. Well, before we get into the nuances of the difference, can you speak a little bit about how you use the word queer? So many people use it to mean different things.

Pam Johnson (00:01:59):

Yeah, I guess I use that word, and sometimes I have questions about that myself, when I look at my own history and my sexual fluidity over that period of time. And I would also be comfortable to use the term lesbian. But it feels to me like queer embraces a little bit broader scope of sexuality that I feel describes me and my history better. At the same time, I also hear questions about terminology and semantics, and understand that it can be both confusing and sometimes obfuscating. And so, I feel like if I needed to really put myself in a category, I would put myself in the category of lesbian, to make sure that it's not confusing to people, where I sit now. But I would say, looking at my personal history and how I feel about myself, that a broader term like queer covers a more sexual fluidity that has actually been my personal experience.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:26):

I see, yeah. Well, thanks for that articulation. So, you were saying that this was not always the case, perhaps. How would you have described your gender and sexual identity back in 2000 when the Pussy Palace raid was happening?

Pam Johnson (00:03:43):

Well, I would have described myself as heterosexual, but I never described myself as heterosexual to myself.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:51):

Right.

Pam Johnson (00:03:52):

So, yeah. I always had a sense, from my personal view and my own feeling state, of a sense of sexual fluidity. And I actually, I don't know, again, it's all these semantics in terms, whether I would embrace bisexuality. I would say that I've made a journey, and that I spent the first part of that journey as a heterosexual person and in heterosexual relationships, but never feeling that that was necessarily where I had to stay. And I always had, I want to say, engagements with women, some sexual, some not. But that seemed very normal to me. And then I just decided to shift over. I didn't have a coming out crisis. I didn't have a sense that I was embracing something that I had been trying to push away or that I had been feeling that I couldn't go towards, or that I had been shamed about.

Pam Johnson (00:05:10):

I mean, certainly growing up middle-class in middle America in the U.S. there were obviously all those sanctions that were there, but I didn't really feel that. That wasn't happening to me. I didn't have that kind of a crisis. So, I feel like I just changed teams. I mean, that is my feeling. And at the same time, I'm really comfortable on this, on the lesbian team. That's what I feel like. I'm really happy here. But I don't feel inside myself that I have really made some sort of gigantic change or shift, or doing something that wasn't me before. I hope that makes sense.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:59):

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

Pam Johnson (00:06:09):

White. Yeah, white, white, white. White, white middle-class. Born in the U.S., born in Indiana, and all white, white, white. And culturally, yeah, very much part of the middle class, not the upper middle class. My family, there were working class people in my family and my immediate family, white collar-ish professionals, mostly teachers. There were immigrants like first- and second-generation immigrants from white countries in Europe. So, there's a little bit of that sprinkling of my great-grandmother spoke Swedish, didn't really speak English, on my father's side. And on my mother's side, we go back to the daughters of the American revolution. So, some connection to 1776 in the U.S. So that is what I guess my class and cultural position is.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:26):

Can you speak a little bit about your history of education, things you pursued there?

Pam Johnson (00:07:34):

Yeah. I graduated high school, and I went to college. In the U.S., everything's college. And I started in English literature. Then I realized I could actually do a degree in dance. So, then I'm like, "Wow, okay, I'm doing that." So, I switched over and yeah, I did my undergraduate at Indiana University. I came to Canada, which is its own little story. I did my MA at York University, and then I started my professional art career, which as you know "professional," put some quotes around that. But at the time, honestly, in the 80s there was money. And so, yeah. And I had a lovely professional art career, and I traveled the world, and did many, many things. And yeah, and also started teaching theater performance and dance performance schools.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:41):

Right. And I'm just thinking, "What must that have been like," for there to be money?

Pam Johnson (00:08:47):

Yeah, right.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:50):

But I'm curious, could you tell us a little bit about where you are now professionally? What occupies your time?

Pam Johnson (00:08:59):

Well, I have continued to teach, and I have... The last really big show that I made of my own work, I made a show in 2016-17, and then a big show in 2009. But so much money and resources. It makes it difficult to actually present my own work. And I've done lots of producing of smaller events or other people's work and working with both people in theatre and people in music and other performance dance. So that has occupied some of my time. Teaching has occupied some of my time. And then really what's occupying most of my time, and where I'm really, increasingly, wanting to put all of my time is in activism. So, that is really where I'm located now. And certainly, for the last year, because of COVID, the opportunity to do any live performance art is gone.

Pam Johnson (00:10:17):

For a long time, I was very involved in the Contact Dance community, which was a professional/non-professional grouping. And that was a way for me to be able to dance very regularly, doing the form that I liked the most and I was most proficient at, but that is also done. Right? It's just done because people can't do that. But I had stepped away from the organizing of that awhile ago. So yeah, so I'm doing a lot of activism, and I'm in my 60s now. So, I enjoy being active and doing some little dancing on my own, but that's pretty much it.

Pam Johnson (00:11:02):

And in terms of art, it has become hugely problematic in the sense of everything about the institutional, industry side of our profession has become a problem, first with the Me Too movement, racial discrimination, and just how much the industry reflects all of those things that are happening in other institutions in society. So, it's been a very difficult time over the last few years, well before COVID, to find a place to engage that felt comfortable. It's very competitive, very scarce resources. Yeah, I just found the whole situation in the art world to be fraught. It has nothing to do with how I feel as an artist, but participating in the industry has been very difficult, and I haven't been very interested in it. So, I've done a lot of things of my own.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:13):

Well, I'm taking an about face here, but I'm curious about what role, if any, that religion or spirituality might play in your life currently?

Pam Johnson (00:12:24):

Zero.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:25):

Zero.

Pam Johnson (00:12:27):

Zero. Yeah. I mean, I grew up very minimal religion, but church-goin', as many Americans are. Not Evangelical or right-wing or anything like that, but church-goin'. And there was a moment when I flirted with some sort of Jesus thing, when I was a teenager, because there was guitar music and singing. Anyway, so I had a moment. But then I think really, as a young adult, I absolutely came to reject religion. I don't have any problem with anybody. I don't believe that atheism is a way forward. If people want religion, they feel good about it, I'm on for that, as many of my family members are. I'm not. And in terms of spirituality, my feeling as I became more involved with dance, and also more connected with my body, I just understood the notion

of spirituality as more about an energy; connectedness to other people. So, all the mystical elements, all of the ritual, I appreciate that and I know some people really, really thrive with that, so I don't have any judgment. But for me, no. It's real people in the real world is my spiritual interest.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:01):

Yeah, I see. Is there anything else that you think would be important for us to know about how you understand the different identities you hold today, as opposed to 20 years back?

Pam Johnson (00:14:14):

No, I can't think of anything.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:17):

Yeah. So, I'm going to invite you to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth installment of the Pussy Palace. This event as you know, as we all know, was ultimately raided by the Toronto police. So, prior to media coverage of the bathhouse raid, how familiar were you with the Pussy Palace events?

Pam Johnson (00:14:47):

I was aware because, even though I wasn't out at that time, it was part of the political conversation about queer women's sexuality that had really been pushed forward in the 90s when the Dyke March started. So, I was on the first Dyke March, mostly as a political activist. But it was connecting me into the community. Also, some of the people I was working with as activists were queer women. So, I was hearing bits and pieces. I was learning through that time also about the 1981 Bathhouse Raids on the men's bathhouse that had been a part of the political history of queer liberation struggles in Toronto.

Pam Johnson (00:15:44):

And I believe at that time, and I'm trying to remember, and I would have to go back and look at the dates, some of the first activism around same-sex, spousal benefits, and I think this was pre the equal marriage, specifically that thing. But the idea of spouses being able to access the benefits of their same-sex partners for work; those were issues that I was active around. So, I had a little connection into what was going on, and I was aware of the Pussy Palace. But yeah, not as part of that sphere of what was going on in the queer world.

Alisha Stranges (00:16:30):

Yeah, I hear you. When did you come, ultimately, to learn that the 2000 Bathhouse event was raided?

Pam Johnson (00:16:39):

Well, right away when it was happening because it was news, and it flew around the circle of people that I was connected to, politically, because I mean, honestly, it was such a shock. It seemed like such an overreach. It was so heavy-handed, and it seemed at the time, 2000, so out of reach and beyond what could be happening. And such an obvious attempt to shut down both women and specifically women seeking something of their own pleasure or own interest. And yeah, it was quite shocking, I have to say, to hear what actually transpired and then going in and walking through Club Toronto. Yeah, I have to say, it was shocking. And everybody was shocked and immediately thought about how the police responded in 1981. And seeing that, I think the feeling was, "Wow, this is a surprise. But look, things have not changed." They took the opportunity in the most brutal way to attack this entity. Many men's bathhouses operating all that time had happened and now,

just because it was women, they were being attacked by the police. It was a really... Everybody was very aware in my circles.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:21):

Yeah. It's a... Shock is a word that is often used to describe finding out about the raid, and I feel like you have articulated what's contained in the shock. Is there anything else that you can say about, I don't know, on a visceral level, what is it that was so shocking?

Pam Johnson (00:18:45):

I have to think about myself possibly being partially clothed in a place where I would have felt was very contained, with a very specific understanding of what was going on and sharing that with the other people there, and then just having somebody come in. The vulnerability, that sense of that feeling, I remember, was palpable then. And how much I can imagine it must have been, that sense of just being completely feeling vulnerable and not knowing how to defend yourself with people who are armed, male, demanding answers to questions. It's just, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:46):

Yeah, I see. And did you know anyone who was present?

Pam Johnson (00:19:49):

I was trying to think if I knew somebody who was actually present during the raid. I did know people, but I didn't speak to them specifically about that at that time, just because they weren't people who were really close to me. So, it was only later that I talked to some people who were directly involved. But many people that I knew had attended one of the earlier events and did express that, "Oh my gosh, if that had happened when I was there, I would have been so overwhelmed and so upset and so scared." So, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:36):

Yeah. What do you know about the legal proceedings that ended up following the raid?

Pam Johnson (00:20:43):

Well, as an activist, people were following all of that activity. I don't have a lot of memory just right now, and I didn't go and review the specifics of it, but I think everybody was incredibly happy that there was a hard and relentless pursuit of justice through the legal system and that it did eventually bear some fruit. So, I think everybody was pleased. I can remember there being some fundraisers, and there was regular reporting on what was happening. And the activism was happening. It was separate from the legal. The legal thing was happening in its own track, in a sense. And of course, that was separate from what people were doing in terms of reporting on it, being involved in the activism. And there was a point at which... My memory is that there was less activism and more legal, so that channel continued forward. Yeah, that's my memory of it.

Pam Johnson (00:22:02):

I think everybody was pleased that there was a legal pursuit of what happened and holding the police accountable to their actions, which I thought was very, very well done by the people involved. The people involved in organizing the Pussy Palace and the security for it. Being willing to be spokespeople. Some of those people I'm working with today, strangely, in the college setting. And yeah, I've been really pleased to see. Also, just a little side note, possibly 2018 or 2019, the police attempted to get an apology for both the

1981 Bathhouse Raids and the Pussy Palace Raid. They wanted to do a formal apology, and the Pussy Palace team would not accept. So, I have to say, I'm quite proud of that. It wasn't so much in the spirit of, "We don't want to move forward." It was in the spirit of, "You're apologizing, but you never took responsibility in the first place. What's happening to trans people now; what are you doing to protect women who are meeting violence?" All these things. So, I have to say, that was a really... Appreciated that.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:35):

Well, why don't you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in the community activism following the raid?

Pam Johnson (00:23:46):

Immediately, we were hearing about what was going on in my political circle and looking for ways to connect up. The meeting at The 519 that instigated the Pussies Bite Back moment, and I'm not even clear on all these details. I was not at The 519. I'm not sure if anybody in my political circle was at that meeting. But we were at what was called the Panty Raid at 52 Division. And that I remember so clearly. It was strong, it was big, it was hilarious, honestly. People with their panties, and people were using that moment to really assert the irony of the situation. And the media had played with the "pussy" designation. And so, we're like, "Yeah, we're Pussies. We got our panties. Here we go." It was a really great moment. It was a wonderful event to be at 52 Division, and having so many people there, and really shaming the police into trying to have some reasonable explanation for what they had done. And also, to be angry about what had happened.

Pam Johnson (00:25:15):

But I just remember that as being something that pulled back some power for us in that moment. So, that was good. And I actually don't remember all of the specific... There weren't a lot of other large moments. That, I think, I feel like that was the biggest moment in terms of numbers on the street in relation to this, but there were ongoing events. So, that's the one I remember being at. And there may have been smaller things that I'm just, it is a long time ago. But definitely very connected to the journey that was happening and all the time that was... People were attempting to keep the information in the news. It was part of what we were reporting on in my little socialist newspaper and what people were trying to stay informed about, even when there were not specific activities to engage with.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:17):

Right. Well, I'd love to spend a little more time with the Pussies Bite Back moment then; the Panty Raid. I know it's been a long time, and maybe you don't have much of the specifics, but do you remember how long, let's say after the raid, that event would have taken place?

Pam Johnson (00:26:43):

It wasn't too long. I mean, it was fairly, yeah, I would have to go and look at the actual dates. I'm sorry, I didn't get a chance to go do that research. I could find it. But the anger became a pretty strong swell that pushed things forward. And I would say too, something that had been a little bit, I would say the Pussy Palace was, I'm not going to say on the fringe, but it was a particular crowd of people that were involved. The more urban, cosmopolitan people. But when that happened, it burst that whole situation into a much bigger awareness and a much bigger group of people; men, heterosexual people, got pulled together. And it felt like that also really propelled forward other activism.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:54):

You were just referencing... There was a lot of people there. About how many would you say?

Pam Johnson (00:28:02):

There were hundreds there. I remember that space in front of 52 Division is very big, and it was filled, but also people were, it was Dundas, Dundas [Street] and University [Avenue]. People were lined up along Dundas Street. We didn't take over the street, I don't think at that time. But we filled that space in front of 52 Division, and there were people coming from other places. And I remember people were coming in and coming in. Incredibly celebratory. So, even though there was anger, it was like, "You took us on; here we are." And so, it had a very celebratory feel at that moment.

Alisha Stranges (00:28:50):

I'm wondering if you'll indulge me here on a little bit of a reflective, meditative, contemplative exercise, just wanting to get a sense of the impact that that event may have had on your senses. So, I want to invite you into little exercise where you soften your gaze, and I'll do it with you as well. And if you feel comfortable, you can even close your eyes, and just breathe. And with each inhale, allowing your body to re-inhabit the space outside 52 Division on that night, amid the crowd. And from this contemplative, embodied space, look around and tell me what it is you're seeing. Describe what you're seeing.

Pam Johnson (00:30:11):

I very much remember just looking around, and everybody was looking around to see who was there. And we were all smiling and laughing. At the same time, people were carrying their anger. And it was a very strong feeling of feeling like we were together, doing something important and right in that moment about the situation. And also doing it in a way that wasn't just completely, I don't want to say negative, but dreary. It was like, "Yeah, we're here. We're going to also celebrate our sexuality with a whole lot of people who aren't necessarily share that same sexuality." And yeah, that was the feeling I had. I think everybody recognized everybody else because most people, I would say, didn't know each other. It was that big of a crowd. So, it was like, "Wow, you came, you came, you came, we came; we did this. We came together." That was my biggest memory, my felt sense of that moment.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:32):

And stay with it, take another breath, and think about if you could distill the energy of this public space and the crowd into a single colour, what color would it be?

Pam Johnson (00:31:52):

Oh, it's like pink and white. I think that was the panty colours, I don't know. It was, yeah, it was bright colours in my mind, in my memory. And I couldn't even say... I think it was afternoon turning into evening. I can't even remember exactly what time of day, but I just remember bright-ish colours, which might've been lights, or I don't know.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:19):

And if the space could somehow magically call out to you, if it could express itself as a sound, what's the sound of this moment?



Pam Johnson (00:32:30):

I think it is a cheer. It was just like, “Wow, we’re here and we know why.” So yeah, a very celebratory cheer.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:46):

And if some part of your body could brush up against something in the crowd, what are you touching and what are its textures?

Pam Johnson (00:32:58):

Well, it’s so funny thinking about COVID, but people were... It was a big crowd, and we were close together. So, there was just the feeling of lots of us were there. Not tightly squished, but it was just the feeling of being close with a whole bunch of people and being in a common purpose.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:22):

Yeah, and any lingering odours?

Pam Johnson (00:33:31):

Yeah, I’m not getting anything particularly. Yeah, I felt like I was taking in lots of visual information.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:43):

Yeah.

Pam Johnson (00:33:44):

And we were also, I have to say, we were a little bit vigilant, everybody, about if we would get any blowback from the police. But basically, they were hiding inside 52 Division. We didn’t know if they’d try to push us back. They were completely stand down. But I think there was a little bit of vigilance, I’m just remembering that, about what the response might be.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:08):

Yeah. Anything else sensory coming up for you?

Pam Johnson (00:34:14):

No, it’s actually an incredibly happy memory, and I’ve done a lot of activism and had some similar moments. But this was a very bright moment. And I think it was a moment too, in terms of a very public, almost mainstream acknowledgement of women’s sexuality, really queer and otherwise. It felt like a very strong public moment for that.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:50):

And you can let that go, and open your eyes if they’ve been closed. Thanks for indulging me. Just a few more questions here about your involvement with the activism, really your perception. I’m curious about if there were a sense of any conflict or disagreement among activists at the time?

Pam Johnson (00:35:12):

The one thing I can recall, and this was a debate that was happening in many different ways. There were questions, especially with the... who are not involved in this, as I said, contained community of cosmopolitan queers who use that term, co-opting the term "pussy." People had some debates about that and question it. And I remember having some specific debates with really good, and this was women who were involved in the political activism and wanted to be involved, and were saying like, "Why are they using this term if they want to be taken seriously," was the debate. And I think using terms like queer, for example, were also ... I know, I would say I'm using that term with you. And when I'm talking more broadly, publicly, I would say LGBTQ probably.

Pam Johnson (00:36:18):

But that terminology and that notion, and I think this happens in communities that experience some form of oppression, that you take on the oppressor's words to re-empower. There's certainly that debate going on in other communities. And I would say that the debate especially in the Black community around the N-word, it's like, "No, people have to use that term really sparingly. It's not going to be co-opted until we have a little bit more justice." But I think we're in a different place right now within the queer community, although I am seeing a lot of... The official words seem to be LGBTQ, the official thing.

Pam Johnson (00:37:19):

So, I wonder too, if there's a little bit of questioning about that. And I personally don't have a problem with the use, because I understand that it is people trying to re-empower, take away the words from the people who have used them derogatorily. But yeah, that was a debate. And I certainly argued on the side of "This is what people wanted to call it. That doesn't take away from what it is, and that doesn't mean that they don't deserve support. You could quibble with them about that term, but it's not really relevant, and that's what they're choosing." So, that was the only debate that I can recall. But I do remember that one coming up.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:11):

Right. So, it was about fearing that if we continue to use that word, the word pussy, we're going to maybe put ourselves at a disadvantage in our pursuit for justice?

Pam Johnson (00:38:26):

Right, exactly.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:27):

I see. Okay. Well, I'll jump ahead here just because you're on the topic. At some point, we know that the events were changed, the name of the event was changed from Pussy Palace to Pleasure Palace. Do you know what prompted that shift?

Pam Johnson (00:38:42):

You know, I don't know. And by the time I went, that had changed. It was also just kind more generally as, my memory, referred to as the women's bathhouse and wasn't really called the Pussy Palace. So yeah, I don't know anything about how that happened or how that came about.

Alisha Stranges (00:39:01):

Yeah, okay. Well, that's a great segue. At some point, as you say, you decided to attend a Palace event. I'll just call it a Palace event.

Pam Johnson (00:39:11):

Yeah, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:39:12):

So, you're saying by this time it was called the Pleasure Palace?

Pam Johnson (00:39:15):

Yeah. It must've been. I don't remember Pleasure Palace. But yeah. I just remember, women's bathhouse. I think that was how people were referring to it more generally.

Alisha Stranges (00:39:24):

Okay. When about did you attend your first bathhouse event?

Pam Johnson (00:39:29):

Well this was, I thought it was closer to the time of the raid, but this was several years later. It must've been 2004, I think, 2004 or 2005. So, and then I was thinking, "Wow, it must have not been much longer after that, that they actually were not running anymore."

Alisha Stranges (00:39:46):

Right.

Pam Johnson (00:39:46):

So, yeah. But it was still on Mutual Street, Club Toronto. Same location at that time. I think later it may have moved somewhere else, but that's where it was. And I attended once, and it was, I think, on its way out by the time I was going. And you probably, yeah, I'm sure you have more information than I do. I can't quite remember all the details. But yeah, I attended once in 2004 or '05.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:24):

Right. And what intrigued you about the event? What prompted your decision to attend?

Pam Johnson (00:40:31):

Probably the same as everybody else. It was exciting, titillating, curiosity. And for me at that time, I was inhabiting my queer... I was inhabiting my lesbian sexuality. And I did have a brief and sort embarrassing, considering I was in my mid-40s, almost return to adolescent sexual awakening for a short period of time. Oh my gosh, that's so embarrassing in a way. And so that was part of, "Oh my gosh, let's check this out." And I knew many people who were going, and it was a little, I don't want to say status thing. But it had carried that cache, "Did you go to the bathhouse?" "Yeah, I did," kind of thing. Again, that's so embarrassing to have to tell you that. But why not? I'll just tell you the truth.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:38):

I appreciate it. No, I didn't know that—

Pam Johnson (00:41:39):

That's what got me there.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:40):

I didn't know that it was a status thing to have attended.

Pam Johnson (00:41:48):

I don't think status, but it was like, "Are you cool enough to have actually gone to the bathhouse?"

Alisha Stranges (00:41:53):

I see. Do you think that that may have been...? You were involved in the activism, it sounds, deeply. Did that impact your decision to attend the Palace?

Pam Johnson (00:42:08):

I think only that it made me, because I was a little bit more familiar, I probably felt a little more confident about doing it. And I knew... Because, again, it really was the downtown, progressive, many artists were in the community who had organized and put the bathhouse together, and political activists that I knew. So, I knew many people who were going and who had been, so it was a little bit of familiarity. If it had been really something I was not personally connected with in any way, I might not have done it.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:54):

I'm curious about the space and time during which you would have gone from being someone who's deciding to attend the event to someone who becomes an official patron, and what is that process? Do you recall what the look you were going for that evening...? What do you recall about what you wore?

Pam Johnson (00:43:15):

Yeah, I think I was probably going for the look that I could pull off, which was, I was in my mid-40s but quite fit. And I think I had some nice leggings that were bell-bottom and a little bit of midriff showing. I was going for trying to be attractive to others. I thought about that, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:48):

How did you actually feel in what you chose to wear?

Pam Johnson (00:43:53):

I felt comfortable, which I'm glad I hadn't chosen something that, you know? I was comfortable. So, I felt like myself, and I hadn't chosen something that was really not me in that moment. So, good on me for that. Yeah, so I was comfortable.

Alisha Stranges (00:44:13):

So, you arrive at 231 Mutual Street. Can you describe the scene outside the club?

Pam Johnson (00:44:20):

Yeah, I'm trying to remember. There was a bit of protocol. I don't even remember all the details... Really, related to the raid, about getting in and how... And I don't remember all those details. I went by myself and yeah, I remember just being outside, and I think there may have been a bag search. There was security outside on our way in, but it wasn't a big deal, as I recall.

Alisha Stranges (00:44:57):

Did you have to wait in line to get in?

Pam Johnson (00:45:00):

I think there were a couple of people ahead of me in line. Yeah, it wasn't a big long wait or... It wasn't a big deal. But I just remember there was a protocol to get in the door.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:11):

Once you were inside, how would you describe the space itself?

Pam Johnson (00:45:14):

Well, I hadn't been in there before, and I went in, and I could see it was many different spaces on different floors, and it was dark-ish. There were places to sit, and it had a dim lit ambience. I don't remember there being... There might've been music, but I don't remember there being music playing. Probably there was, but it was a very low level if it was. And mostly it was, my impression was, and I don't know if I expected it to be more like a club where there'd be music playing and, like, clubs. Maybe I did, but it was incredibly chill, and everybody was just hanging around. And then there was some spaces going on where there was public sex. And then there was some places, spaces where there were private, small rooms. And then, but most people are just hanging out. And I remember just wandering around. There were several levels, and there was a pool area. And so just wandering around is my memory. And you know, sorry go ahead.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:37):

No go ahead, go ahead.

Pam Johnson (00:46:37):

Go ahead.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:40):

I'm just curious what parts of the space that you ultimately did gravitate towards?

Pam Johnson (00:46:45):

I think I went everywhere, and I was aware, of course, that I was looking to hook up with somebody. And so, I was looking for who was looking at me, and eventually at some point, that happened. And yeah, and I don't

remember ... I didn't spend any time in one specific place, as I recall. I was just traveling around. And it was not a terribly long time until I met somebody, and hooked up, and had sex.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:32):

All right. Can you talk about how a connection like that would begin in the space? Is it non-verbal, or is it something else... Physical?

Pam Johnson (00:47:44):

Yeah, it's non verbal. And, I have to say, my overall experience after I left there was, I was like, "This is not the scene for me" because it was weirdly, I think, not like men's bathhouses where it's really specifically about going to hookup, very anonymous. It felt like a social space where there was also this arch, "Hey," hooking up thing going on as well." So, it was awkward, honestly. It was awkward and it felt awkward like it would in a club or any space. And at the same time, there was this attempt at casual social-ness, which was, for me, contrasted with that arch little, "Hey, are you looking at me? Am I looking at you? You want to?" That kind of thing. That was my experience.

Pam Johnson (00:48:47):

I was in my mid-40s too. So, that could have been something, if I was 20, maybe I would've had a different feeling about. But yeah, in my mid-40s I was like, "Okay, this is weird," for me. It was like, "This is awkward, weird." But not in a bad way, but that was just like, "Okay, this isn't probably the best space for me to feel like this is my place." So yeah, I think it was, I mean, I've talked about this with my current partner and other people. The attempt to have it replicate men's bathhouses. But it doesn't really have the same, whatever social, cultural... It just, it didn't work out that way. So, I don't want to postulate that there's differences between men's and women's sexuality exactly. But this particular format just seemed not quite organic to me in ways.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:00):

I see. Can you talk a little bit about whatever remains of your perception of the crowds? How many people were there when you were there?

Pam Johnson (00:50:14):

It was a good crowd in the sense that there were people in different spaces. I couldn't estimate how many people were there, 50 people in the whole place. I'm not sure. And mostly it was people, there were lots of people just sitting around, talking to each other. Very chill, social kind of thing. And then occasionally, I think, like me, people are cruising around. Talk to somebody here, talk to somebody there. I knew a number of people there, and that was the other thing that was a little bit awkward. Because it wasn't like you go, "Hey, how are you doing?" It was everybody was like, "Well, I know you, but because we're in this bathhouse, I'm not going to... I'll just kind of..." It was awkward a little bit. So yeah, but it was fine. It wasn't creepy or anything, but it just was a little bit like, "Okay."

Alisha Stranges (00:51:14):

That's interesting, so it's not... Perhaps, I might've assumed that it's a space where you don't necessarily have to... Sorry, I feel like there's somebody, there's a lot going on outside. There's a dog, a baby, and knocking at doors, but I don't think it's mine.

Pam Johnson (00:51:35):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:36):

What am I trying to say here? That maybe in the space of the bathhouse, you can allow who you are outside the bathhouse to disappear. But you're saying that, no; in a way, you were respecting that with one another, like maybe we don't do this here either.

Pam Johnson (00:51:54):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:54):

Right, okay.

Pam Johnson (00:51:57):

Yeah, I think people were attempting to respect everybody else's anonymity, even though you knew people. I mean, I think that was an okay choice. It was just, it was awkward, awkward way to socialize.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:16):

Right. And how would you describe the space, the composition of the crowd rather, along lines of gender, sexuality, race, culture?

Pam Johnson (00:52:28):

I would say it was overwhelmingly white and mostly middle-aged. And, I would say, maybe the 30 to 50 range. Probably 30s and maybe some late 20s. There were a few young women, but not a lot. So, I would say it was mostly maybe 25 to 45 or 50. There were some older people there. That's my... Yeah, and mostly white.

Alisha Stranges (00:53:03):

And folks, mostly feminine-of-centre?

Pam Johnson (00:53:10):

No, a range, a range, certainly, in presentation. But I mean, that, to me, it looked like the community of lesbians that I knew and would normally encounter. That range of presentation.

Alisha Stranges (00:53:33):

I see. And thinking about your own positionality, how did it feel for you to exist in your body, in that crowd, on that night?

Pam Johnson (00:53:41):

Yeah, as I said, it felt a little bit awkward. I felt like myself, so I didn't feel like I had to pretend to be something else. So, in that way it was good. I wasn't having to dissociate from who I was or in any way

feeling that it would be threatening or uncomfortable to be myself. But yeah, but at the same time, if it was supposed to be a warm and fuzzy, I wasn't quite getting that. If it was supposed to be anonymous sexual gratification time, it wasn't quite that. And so, yeah, it was in a bit of an odd place. That's how I experienced it.

Alisha Stranges (00:54:24):

And what time did you leave the event, about?

Pam Johnson (00:54:30):

I was probably there a couple of hours. I think I went with the thought that I might stay longer. But I remember there being a point at which I kind of like, "Oh, okay. This is what's happening here. I'm good. I've experienced it. I think I've experienced everything that I wanted to. I understand what this place is." And certainly, all the time that I was an activist around the raid, I didn't have a personal experience of the space. So, that was something that was a nice full-circle activity to go, "Oh, okay, here I am in this space, and this is where this happened." So yeah, that was, I guess, my feeling.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:30):

When you made the decision to attend the event, what were you actually hoping to experience?

Pam Johnson (00:55:39):

I did want to experience the place as a whole. I was looking for sex. So yeah, those things were fulfilled.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:55):

Yeah. And so, but you are saying that there's a bit of... You realized what it was as you were in it, and that maybe it wasn't for you. So, how did your expectations for the night, compare in the end to your lived experience of it?

Pam Johnson (00:56:16):

I think I probably had higher expectations, but when I think about it now, it was probably the expectations that were quite unreal for anything.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:28):

I see.

Pam Johnson (00:56:31):

And, yeah. At the same time, it was quite, I guess I want to say, a comfort. It was good to see what that space was. And in a way, I think, at that time, as I was still in half of my adolescent brain in my coming out time, I also got over any sort of FOMO: "Am I missing something? Am I missing something cool that I should be a part of?" So, I was like, "Not really, this is okay. But, been here, done it."



Alisha Stranges (00:57:08):

All right. All right, well we're nearing the end here. I just have a few, last few questions, that sort of focus on the impact of the Pussy Palace, Pleasure Palace as a community initiative. What's your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace, its reason for being?

Pam Johnson (00:57:29):

Right. I definitely saw it, along with the Dyke March, was an assertion of queer women's sexuality as valid, as something that needed real space, places where it could happen. I felt the need, and many people felt the need for women's queer sexuality to be on par with men's, which because of liberation struggles, but also because of the AIDS crisis, had been pushed way into the mainstream. People were aware of things, and there was, I think, a feeling among queer women of invisibility and lack of, I guess, equality in understanding our existence and struggles. So, I felt like that was the spirit of it. And certainly, when I think about The Village, Church and Wellesley, which no longer has the same space identification, that it felt like there was not enough spaces for queer women there, even though that was also our home. And so, I think that was the attempt to try and create a little bit more visible space for queer women.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:07):

And in what ways would you say that the Pussy Palace succeeded or failed in delivering on this intention?

Pam Johnson (00:59:14):

I think it succeeded wonderfully, and it's... I think everybody would have been happy I'm sure for it to just go on without the damn raid. But on the other hand, in a way that also pushed some of the visibility of women's sexuality forward in Toronto and raised some of the questions that people were trying to raise with things like the Dyke March. And I think that kept the march of bringing women's sexuality, queer sexuality into equality with men's queer sexuality. And also, then what's followed from that is trans identity has also, I felt like it's been able to ride that same journey in a way that queer women have pushed forward. So, I see it as really a significant event, and I'm really very proud of the organizers and the fact that they carried forward with their strong push for accountability, that the community was there for them. And it's fantastic that you are archiving the event because I think it should be a part of history in the way that the 1981 Bathhouse Raids are a part of history, of queer history in Toronto.

Alisha Stranges (01:00:50):

Yeah. Well, is there anything else that you wanted to share about your experiences, either as an activist or a patron that maybe my questions didn't allow you to speak to?

Pam Johnson (01:01:02):

No, that was pretty good. I can't think of anything that I haven't mentioned, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:13):

Perfect. Well, thank you so much, Pam, for agreeing to hold space to travel back in time and offer up whatever it is that remains. I'm going to stop the recording. You can stop yours and then we'll hang on the call.

Pam Johnson (01:01:32):

Okay.