

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Tera Mallette
Conducted on May 25, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Originally from rural Ontario, Tera Mallette is a 46-year-old, white, pansexual, trans, non-binary person. At the time of the interview, Mallette was in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, living and working in Toronto, Ontario as a manager for Pink Triangle Press in their quality assurance department. The interview concerns Mallette's experiences as a volunteer security member and patron of the Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000. They discuss their duties as a volunteer security member stationed at the Palace's front door, her experience as a patron following her security shift, their recollection of the bathhouse raid and observations of the police officers' behaviour, her experiences as a trans femme person in the queer women's community in general and at the Pussy Palace in particular, and other topics. The primary geographical location mentioned in the interview is Toronto, Ontario. Michigan, USA is also mentioned. The date range discussed spans from 1992-2021, with a focus on Toronto in 2000.

Keywords: Trans; Non-binary; Bathhouse; Pink Triangle Press; Xtra; Transition; Sex Work; Lesbian; Michigan Womyn's Music Festival; Trans Exclusion; Trans Inclusion; Sexual Misconduct; Police.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:00):

Perfect. All right, so this is Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and we're here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Tera Mallette on May 25, 2021. And Tera is also in Toronto, and is going to tell us about the experience of being a volunteer organizer for the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. So, before we begin here, Tera, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Tera Mallette (00:00:36):

Yep.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:37):

Perfect. So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, we just want to ask a few questions that invite you to tell us a bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold, and how at least maybe some of these might have shifted or evolved over time. So, to start simply, can you tell us your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Tera Mallette (00:01:04):

Sure. My name is Tera, Tera Mallette. What was the second thing?

Alisha Stranges (00:01:13):

Your age. Your age and—

Tera Mallette (00:01:14):

Right. Okay, so I'm 46, and my preferred pronouns are she/her/they/them.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:21):

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

Tera Mallette (00:01:29):

Today?

Alisha Stranges (00:01:29):

Yeah.

Tera Mallette (00:01:30):

I would say that I'm a pansexual, trans, non-binary.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:36):

Pansexual, trans, non-binary. And can you unpack those terms a little bit for us? Different people use terminology in different ways, so would love to hear how they make sense for you.

Tera Mallette (00:01:52):

Sorry, I have one of my things making a lot of noise.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:57):

That's okay. We can... Do you want us to pause for a sec?

Tera Mallette (00:02:00):

Yeah, I'm just trying to figure out how to mute them. So, you want an explanation of how pansexual, trans, non-binary works for me?

Alisha Stranges (00:02:11):

Yeah.

Tera Mallette (00:02:13):

For the longest time, my identity was simply queer, because I didn't... Jesus Christ.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:22):

I'll pause it again. All right, you're good to go.

Tera Mallette (00:02:27):

All right, so with regards to pansexual, trans, non-binary, for the longest time, my identity was queer in terms of my sexual identity. And the reason for that was it was hard to pin down where my attractions lie. And it's only been in the last 10 years that I've realized that some of the folks that I find attractive... Well, the largesse of the people I've dated turn out to be NB, non-binary. But I have dabbled on both sides of the divide, of the dichotomy as it were. So, I go with pansexual because although I'm primarily attracted to a specific quality

set... And when I mean quality, I don't mean physical attributes, but I mean the way that people approach things, the way that people think. And often, those are affiliated with AFAB people, they are not entirely and not always. So yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:52):

Just for anyone who doesn't know out there, AFAB, you mean assigned—

Tera Mallette (00:03:56):

Assigned female at birth, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:59):

And how might these have been, these kinds of understandings been different back in 2000, when the Pussy Palace event was happening?

Tera Mallette (00:04:07):

Well, I've been around a really long time. I transitioned in the 90s. I can tell you that the trans community has changed and shifted dramatically since then. When I first came in, transgender wasn't even a term. And then when it came in, there was this huge debate in the trans community, which at the time was the transsexual community, which was like, "We can't let the transgender people in because then the umbrella will become too big, and then how important special are we?" And I was identifying as transgender at the time, rather than transsexual, because my own identity is more fluid than that. And then likewise, with queerness, and queerness being this catchall for things that fall outside of gay, lesbian, and bi, because there wasn't always a clear-cut delineation in terms of attraction, just to say, "Oh, no, I'm bi." Bi just felt too dichotomous at the time. But it's not anymore, and it wasn't then. It just felt too dichotomous for me at the time. Likewise, as the language has changed, now we have cis, which we didn't have back then, cisgender didn't even exist. Now we have terms like pansexual and such.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:35):

And what about racial and—? Oh, sorry, go on. Sorry, go on.

Tera Mallette (00:05:42):

Yeah, and in terms of the trans, non-binary, so yeah, when I first transitioned, it was transsexual, then it was transgender, and then it became trans. And only in the last few years have I realized that my identity shifts and is fluid in terms of both masculine and feminine representations. And so, I've drifted towards a more non-binary approach to how I view myself. And so, trans, non-binary. And I want to keep the trans there, because I feel like it's really important that I made that change in my life, so I don't want to forget it. There is another aspect in there that I didn't mention, which is the demisexual, or the demi graysexual, because relationships are difficult, and some of us are pickier than others, and it's hard to form real good connections with people.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:47):

Did you want to say more about demi graysexual?

Tera Mallette (00:06:51):

Well, most people probably know demisexual is people who can form sexual relationships with people, but usually only after forming a good emotional bond first, whereas a graysexual is, well, they're almost asexual. They're this mixture between asexual and demisexual, where they could run the gamut from sexual indifference to sexual amorousness. But it can go all over the place. I like graysexual because I do go through long periods of asexuality, where I'm just, I have no interest in sex, and yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:45):

Yeah, thank you. What about the categories racial, ethnic, cultural? How do you express yourself through those types of categories?

Tera Mallette (00:07:56):

Well, I'm white. I don't have any ties to it. Yeah, and in terms of ethnic, I don't have any ties to any ethnicities. My first language was French. I don't speak it anymore, or at least not very well. So, I guess that would be my cultural background. But no, I'm empty there in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:34):

And what can you tell us about your educational and class background today, in 2021?

Tera Mallette (00:08:44):

In terms of my journey there, or where I am as of this moment?

Alisha Stranges (00:08:49):

Well, I think they're probably interrelated, so wherever you want to start would be fine.

Tera Mallette (00:08:53):

Okay. I grew up poor, very, very poor, in rural Ontario, and it's a different kind of poor in rural Ontario. You still have a house, but you don't have any food, that kind of thing. And that changed sometime in my teenage years. And then I left home as soon as I could for a variety of reasons. I went through a period of poverty on my own, but managed to pull myself together, and now I would say that I am probably just below middle class. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:47):

And what about education? Did you—?

Tera Mallette (00:09:51):

Oh, my education, yes. So, I did go to university. I didn't finish. I transitioned... I started my transition as soon as I turned 18. While I was going to university, it became a problem, because this was in the 90s, and a lot of the professors weren't all that welcoming. So, it was a very frustrating experience back then. And so instead, I decided to join the workforce, where it was actually a little easier.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:25):

And what kinds of things did you get into professionally [inaudible]?

Tera Mallette (00:10:31):

So, the job I transitioned on was actually phone sex. I was a phone sex operator for about four years. I was pretty good at it too. Never translated to my personal life, but yeah. And then after I came out as queer, because I wasn't... I didn't know what my sexuality was, I just knew I had to resolve my gender issues before I resolved my sexuality. So, once I figured out my gender, although life has shown me that figuring out your gender is a lifelong thing, once I figured out my gender at the time, I was like, "Shit, I'm queer. I want to do something with my life that's focused around that identity." And so, I was like, "All right, who can I work for that will further me socially in that environment, but also, ethically do so?" And so, I specifically sought out a job with Pink Triangle Press, which is, they run *Xtra*, the newspaper. And so, I've been with them for 21, 22 years.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:49):

In what capacity? In what capacity?

Tera Mallette (00:11:53):

I've held several positions with them over the years. I started with them as a CSR, then eventually became the manager of the CSRs, and moved into the business side. And now I run a portion of the tech department, I run their QA.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:08):

And CSR means?

Tera Mallette (00:12:11):

Customer service representation.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:13):

I see.

Tera Mallette (00:12:14):

So, people who answer the phones, process the things, did copy editing for the paper even, handled the front desk stuff, that's what I used to do. And now, it's quality assurance, which is basically going over code that's put into the various websites that Pink Triangle Press runs, and making sure that the code quality is sufficient.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:40):

And is there a role that something like religion or spirituality plays in your life today or at some other point in your life?

Tera Mallette (00:12:49):

I used to be a devout, devout Catholic in high school, but I lost my faith pretty hard after my uncle died of HIV. At the time, this is the 80s, the church was very vocal in its abuse of gay men. And realizing that they hated somebody I loved, and looked up to, and admired, and respected... How do you negotiate a relationship with a religion that's not willing to negotiate with you? Because then, I started to internalize that. I was like, "Well, if this is how they feel about this lovely man, who I love, then how do they feel about me?"

Alisha Stranges (00:13:46):

And did you ever make your way to a resolution or find something different that you wanted to believe in?

Tera Mallette (00:13:58):

No, I think I'm of the whole Universal Consciousness thing, where the entirety of the universe is basically one single consciousness. We're all just aspects of it. It's almost like... Not Buddhism, per se, but there are aspects of Buddhism within it.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:20):

And is there anything—?

Tera Mallette (00:14:21):

[inaudible]

Alisha Stranges (00:14:23):

Oh, say that again?

Tera Mallette (00:14:24):

It happened after a really great drug trip.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:26):

Oh, do you want to expand?

Tera Mallette (00:14:31):

For my 30th birthday, my partner got me some MDMA, but I think it was laced with ketamine. So, we just hung out in High Park in the middle of the night. And at one point, I saw this latticework reaching from the ground all the way into infinity. And I was just like, "Oh, my God, everything's connected. We're all part of this rhizomatic relationship with each other, with the universe, and everything." And it was just this amazing and overwhelming sense of profundity, and I loved it. In retrospect, I realized that the latticework was probably just me perceiving my own rods and cones in my eye. But even that, even still, it still seems to me like a beautiful thing. And I've held to it ever since.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:35):

Well, is there anything else that you think would be important for us to know about how you understand parts of your identity today, as opposed to 20 years ago?

Tera Mallette (00:15:47):

Nothing leaps to mind. I'm sure something might come up.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:52):

Sure, yeah. So, I want to invite you now to travel back in time to the fall of 2000, when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, as you know, was preparing to host the "Night of 2000 Pussies," the fourth instalment of the Palace series. How would you have first learned about this particular bathhouse event?

Tera Mallette (00:16:15):

I was working with this woman who I briefly dated, who was good friends with JP [Hornick] and Richard [Aitchison], who I then became friends with. And they suggested that I volunteer and do security. I presented very... Not masculine, but not feminine. And they thought, "Oh, yeah. Hey, you, trans girl, kind of masculine, why don't you do security?" I was like, "Okay, whatever."

Alisha Stranges (00:16:54):

Had you ever done security at— ?

Tera Mallette (00:16:56):

No.

Alisha Stranges (00:16:57):

Okay.

Tera Mallette (00:16:58):

Wait, well, had I? Now I'm wondering, because I did do stuff for Ember Swift at some point, but I don't remember if that was before or after.

Alisha Stranges (00:17:08):

Well, fair enough. Aside from how this peer group of yours thought maybe you'd be a good fit for the role, was there anything in particular that intrigued you about the event?

Tera Mallette (00:17:22):

Well, as a trans woman, late 90s, early 2000s, it didn't really feel very comfortable being in queer women's spaces. Yeah, it didn't feel very comfortable, and I wasn't going to go. There was no way I was going to go. Some friends really wanted me to go. And this felt like the way I could go without feeling obliged to do anything I didn't want to do. I did end up doing some stuff with some people, but not... Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:14):

And so, I'm curious about this period of time during which a person goes from being someone who's considering or deciding that they're going to attend the event to someone who either arrives as either a patron or a volunteer. Can you remember back to where you might have been before you made your way to the club?

Tera Mallette (00:18:39):

Yeah, I actually had dropped my bike off at the office, which was just down the street.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:45):

The office?

Tera Mallette (00:18:46):

Yeah, so because I worked for *Xtra*, the *Xtra* office was at Church [Street] and Wellesley [Street], so it's literally just a very short walk away.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:54):

I see. And so then, you just walked over?

Tera Mallette (00:18:59):

Yep.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:00):

And around what time would you have had to arrive?

Tera Mallette (00:19:04):

I had to arrive before everything started because I started working the front door as it opened. So, I was there before it opened.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:15):

Do you remember what time of day that might have been?

Tera Mallette (00:19:18):

I feel like it was... I'm trying to remember what time it actually opened. Was it 8:00 p.m.? Do you know?

Alisha Stranges (00:19:28):

We've heard different things.

Tera Mallette (00:19:30):

I know the sun was up. I know that I had a good opportunity to walk all around the premises to get a good feel for what I was supposed to be guarding, and to settle in. And so, I think it was sometime around 6:00 p.m.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:55):

And how long were you planning on staying? When was your first shift, or was it just one shift?

Tera Mallette (00:20:02):

It was just the one shift. But I assumed, I presumed that I would leave pretty much immediately afterwards. I didn't though. I actually stayed, not officially working, but not officially not working. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:28):

And if you could freeze this moment in time before everything started, what were you feeling?

Tera Mallette (00:20:39):

Trepidation, nervousness, a little fear.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:47):

What were you anticipating? What kinds of things were you anticipating?

Tera Mallette (00:20:51):

Well, like I said, at the time, the late 90s early aughts were not exactly... It wasn't exactly the best time to be a trans woman in the queer women's community. So, I was a little worried about some people not being accepting.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:17):

I see. And did you ever encounter anything like that on your shift?

Tera Mallette (00:21:20):

No. No, actually I didn't. Everyone was great.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:24):

Excuse me, sorry. And what about when you moved into sort of off duty and as a patron?

Tera Mallette (00:21:31):

No, actually, it was... People were great.

Elio Colavito (00:21:35):

And I'm curious, you said that it wasn't necessarily the most amazing time to be a trans woman in the lesbian women's scene, queer women's scene. Do you mind, just for the record's sake, painting a little bit more of a picture of why that was, and what the debates around transness were that made you feel uncomfortable?

Tera Mallette (00:21:58):

Sure. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

Elio Colavito (00:22:03):

I knew it was coming.

Tera Mallette (00:22:06):

Yeah? You knew it, eh? It was the pinnacle. I listened to all of those bands, like Bikini Kill, Le Tigre, all of those fucking bands, I loved them. And the idea of going to the festival was one of those things that I just was aspiring to, and then finding out, nope, nope, nope, you're not allowed. That was devastating. But then

realizing as you have those conversations with the queer women in your life, and them actually defending that kind of decision, suggesting that they thought that there was a distinction between a trans woman and a “real” woman. And that kind of breaks your heart. Because it’s a debate about something that’s far away, but then suddenly, it comes hitting home fairly hard.

Elio Colavito (00:23:11):

Yeah. And so, you had these aspirations to attend the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, had these debates, felt a little bit uncomfortable. Did you ever try going out to women’s scenes in Toronto, or did you just—?

Tera Mallette (00:23:26):

Oh, yeah, I actually, I used to be on the Clit Lit. There was a Clit Lit circuit that ran in the early aughts. So, I did some poetry stuff, and what have you. I went to some events. I did things. I had fun with people. Yeah, I would always run away before things got too serious. But yeah, I still did things. I think I passed enough to not have to worry about first-time encounters. It wasn’t until we got into more in depth conversation, where... And I didn’t hide anything. It’s just, if I meet you in a club, I’m not going to be like, “By the way...” No, I wouldn’t do that because... But yeah. And even if I make out with you in a club, I’m still not going to be like, “By the way...” It was like, if I took you home, or if we were going to go home, that’s when I would be like, “All right, here’s the deal.”

Elio Colavito (00:24:37):

Yeah, for sure.

Tera Mallette (00:24:39):

So, yeah. No, I did do stuff. It’s just the disappointing part, the part that hurt was when you’d have those conversations with friends. Friends.

Elio Colavito (00:24:49):

And was there anything about the Pussy Palace events that felt more inclusive of trans women than other spaces you had been to, or just all the same shit?

Tera Mallette (00:25:01):

No, no, the organizing committee — and specifically JP [Hornick] and Richard [Aitcheson] because that was my in — they were all very welcoming. They made me feel like it was no big deal. Everybody’s welcome. It felt more at ease in that respect. I still, obviously, had all my own internalized stuff, but coming from the organizing committee, it was quite welcoming. I think Carly [Carlyle Jansen], and Chanelle [Gallant], and one of the Leslies. There was a lot of Leslies.

Elio Colavito (00:25:56):

Amazing. I want to shift away from the trans element of things, and get back into standardized questioning. What was the look that you were going for that evening, and what do you recall about what you would have worn to your shift?

Tera Mallette (00:26:12):

So, I had a particular look at that time. It was very of that time, maybe a little past that time. It was very raver, so I had these huge, huge pants with these 23-inch bells on each leg. Oh, no, they were amazing. Amazing. They were men's pants, and I would wear them with a really tight tank top, and usually a military shirt or jacket on top. And I think that's what I wore then, was a military jacket over those pants and a tank top underneath.

Elio Colavito (00:27:01):

And was there—?

Tera Mallette (00:27:02):

And probably a military cap with an anarchist symbol on it.

Elio Colavito (00:27:09):

I love it. That's so cool. Your military cap just totally took me off track for a second. What were you trying to feel internally with that outfit, and what were you trying to communicate to the people around you with that outfit?

Tera Mallette (00:27:28):

Well, when I wore that outfit, it felt safer to be in queer women's spaces with a more masculine presentation because it made it easier to pass. [Colavito's phone rings] It wasn't me this time.

Elio Colavito (00:27:46):

It was me. I didn't turn my thing on do not disturb.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:49):

Do not disturb.

Elio Colavito (00:27:51):

Sorry.

Tera Mallette (00:27:54):

It made me feel safer being in queer women's spaces because it made it harder for me to be gauged as trans by people. So, I would often take on a more masculine presentation so that people didn't, you know...? "Oh, trans woman."

Elio Colavito (00:28:18):

And so, you arrive at Club Toronto. Can you describe the scene outside of the club a little bit?

Tera Mallette (00:28:25):

It was early, so they hadn't started letting people in. But there was already a line. It was very short. And yeah, I just, I walked past the line. I gave my info, walked in, got my little card and my walkie talkie, and found out

what my shift was, and got my breakdown of what my responsibilities were. And then met some of the other people, and got the tour.

Elio Colavito (00:29:05):

And can you describe the space itself once you got the tour?

Tera Mallette (00:29:15):

Yeah, it's an interesting space because, at the time, it was primarily a men's bathhouse. And it felt like a men's bathhouse. You walk in, and you've got the doors and what have you, and then you have the lockers, and the changerooms, and then as you go up, you've got the pool and the... What do you call it? The hot tub in the other room, and then you have the cells upstairs. The inside, the structure, it's dark, kind of dank and doesn't smell very good. But as you move up, it opens up a little, and it feels more like an entertainment space. And some of the rooms are interesting.

Elio Colavito (00:30:12):

So we've heard. Do you mind just taking us through a little bit of a rundown of what happened while you were actually on shift?

Tera Mallette (00:30:27):

So, while I was actually on shift, it was really boring. I was working the front door. I was checking people's ID, rejecting anyone who didn't have any ID, even if they were significantly over the age of... What do you call it? Drinking. The drinking age. Just because there were concerns about possible policing. So, we were very strict. Sent everybody home who didn't have their ID. So, I didn't make a lot of friends at the front door, I'll tell you that much. So, I did that. That was it. I was processing people... [inaudible] All right, go ahead.

Elio Colavito (00:31:16):

And this diligence, what was the tone that you got from the organizing committee around fear of police presence and stuff like that?

Tera Mallette (00:31:26):

Well, I think it was just like, "Well, you never know." So, because we're serving alcohol, let's make extra sure that there's no reason for them to come by. And so, yeah, we took that to mean, okay, let's be strict. Let's be careful. Let's make sure that everyone here is covered, and there's not a possibility for someone coming in without ID, and then even worse, being actually underage.

Elio Colavito (00:32:01):

Alisha [Stranges], I think it's a good time to transition—

Alisha Stranges (00:32:04):

Sure.

Elio Colavito (00:32:05):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:06):

Well, I'm curious then, when you got off your shift, what did you get up to?

Tera Mallette (00:32:12):

So, after I got off my shift, I started to wander, and look around, see what was happening. There was some scenes going on, and I watched some. Yeah, I watched some, I flirted with this really, oh, my gosh, so cute. She was so cute. Even now, I'm like, I can't believe she was even talking to me. So cute. And I had been dating this girl, who I will not mention, who took me away from this person. We had a poly relationship, but they were like, "No, you're not allowed to talk to this person." And... God damnit. I'm still mad about that, by the way. Yeah. Anyway, so that person took me away, and then we went and did some stuff.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:27):

Elsewhere, yeah.

Tera Mallette (00:33:28):

In a room.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:31):

Well, how did... I've heard that there's different ways that kind of connection might happen at a Pussy Palace event. Was it non-verbal, or--?

Tera Mallette (00:33:42):

There were bars around where you could purchase alcohol. And so, the cute girl I mentioned earlier, the one I was talking up, she was hanging out in this... I think it was on the second floor, there was this opening in this area. And I was talking to her there, just by the bar. I don't think I had a drink. No, I don't think I was drinking.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:12):

Did you ever make your way up to the floor that had the photo room?

Tera Mallette (00:34:18):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:19):

And spend any time in the photo room?

Tera Mallette (00:34:21):

No, I didn't.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:22):

Any particular... Just not for you, or...?

Tera Mallette (00:34:27):

No, it was not for me.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:29):

Well, what I want to get a sense of is the impression that this space made on your senses. So, I'm going to do a little exercise here, and I'll do it with you, sort of a contemplative exercise. So, just go with me to the best of your ability. Get comfortable wherever you're sitting, letting your weight relax into your seat. You can soften your gaze, or even close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that with me. And just take a few breaths in and out, just studying your energy for a moment. And with each inhale, allowing your body to journey back to re-inhabit the space of the Pussy Palace, let's say maybe after you got off shift. And from this contemplative space, allowing some visual to come to mind, you're placing yourself in some location or other inside the Palace. Don't worry too much about which space, whatever space comes up first is a perfect space. And look around and tell me what it is that you're seeing.

Tera Mallette (00:36:01):

So, it's the place I was describing earlier, where I was talking to the girl. So, the one thing I remember are the walls because they were this weird red. It was like a burgundy red. And there was a railing, and there were people gathered in cloisters, but also chairs against the wall. Little tables. And yeah, and hallways, more stairs.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:44):

And are there any kind of sounds coming up? What can you hear from this space?

Tera Mallette (00:36:52):

There's music, and there's a lot of talking, quite loud. It's very loud.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:59):

Can you describe the energy of the people or—?

Tera Mallette (00:37:04):

Oh, it's fantastic. Everyone's really happy and smiling. There's a lot of laughing. There are people walking around in towels. Some people just completely naked, other people fully clothed. Most people have a drink in hand. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:29):

Any smells coming to mind? Lingering odours?

Tera Mallette (00:37:35):

It's just a little musty. And occasionally, you catch a sniff of someone's perfume, or the sweetness of someone's drink.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:52):

And imagining that some part of your body could reach out and touch, make contact with something or other in the space, what are you imagining being able to touch? What are its textures?

Tera Mallette (00:38:07):

The chairs are... I don't know if they're real leather or fake leather, but they're that... If you didn't have pants on, you'd just stick to. Sometimes I'm wondering, "Why are you sitting on that?" I just don't want to touch it.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:30):

And if somehow, if you could magically taste the space, what might its flavour be?

Tera Mallette (00:38:39):

That's a good question. Like a daiquiri.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:45):

Any particular flavour of daiquiri?

Tera Mallette (00:38:48):

Green apple because it's a little bit sour, but sweet.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:55):

Thank you. You can let that go and open your eyes if they've been closed. Thanks for going on that little experiment with me.

Elio Colavito (00:39:03):

Yes, thank you. The next set of questions is just going to ask about your perception of the crowd a little bit. More or less, how many people would you say were in the building?

Tera Mallette (00:39:15):

Say at least a couple hundred.

Elio Colavito (00:39:19):

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

Tera Mallette (00:39:25):

So, it was... I would say it was a relatively diverse crowd in terms of queer lesbians. But then that's not actually true. I'd say it was about 90% white, and then 10% people of colour. For instance, the cute girl that I was talking about earlier, Spanish from Mexico. So adorable. And most of the friends that were working were white. And in terms of the rest of the crowd, it was a diversity of age. So, you had everything from baby queers all the way up to very... Queer folk who are not baby queers. And then you had very femme-presenting folk, and then you had very masculine-presenting folks. There were some trans guys there, more than a few, but almost no trans women. Almost none.

Elio Colavito (00:40:55):

Interesting.

Tera Mallette (00:40:56):

I can't remember running into any trans women there. In that respect, I felt very alone.

Elio Colavito (00:41:08):

And what was your impression of the relationship between trans men in this space with all of these otherwise women identified folks?

Tera Mallette (00:41:19):

Well, they were very popular, the trans men were, but I don't know if you remember the early aughts, but it was... I really felt for a lot of trans men back then, because there was a lot of erasure of their identity in the queer women's community, and it felt like some of that was happening there. But at the same time, they seemed to be okay with it, so... There was a lot of exoticization happening.

Elio Colavito (00:41:53):

Do you mind speaking about both that erasure and that exoticization a little bit?

Tera Mallette (00:41:58):

Sure. I guess the best way to describe it is with an old argument that I've heard before. I'm not going to express my opinion on it, but the argument is, lesbian-identifying people sleeping with trans men, and that specifically, and how it relates... And how that can cause an erasure of identity. Because are they actually seeing the trans men as men if they're sitting there identifying as lesbian? Is this just a one-time thing, where you're like, "Ah, I'm lesbian, but every so often, I'll sleep with a guy." Or is this like, "I really like trans guys, but I'm a lesbian because they're not really guys." Yeah.

Elio Colavito (00:43:26):

Interesting.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:28):

How does the exoticization fit into that?

Tera Mallette (00:43:31):

Well, they're really popular. They were really popular. Everyone wanted a piece of a trans guy back then. A lot of people. Honestly, this feels bad to say, I almost traded on it. Being a trans woman who presented in a masculine way, sometimes I would be perceived as a trans guy. There was actually... I was part of this founding trans group at The 519. And there was, I don't know, six of us in that group. And I had been with them for several months. And then at one point, one of my friends made mention about how I was a trans woman, and then half the group was like... Lost their shit because they thought I was the other way. So, certainly, I have some insight into it just because I was trading on it a bit. Highly unethical, I realize.

Elio Colavito (00:44:51):

It is what it is at this point. So, at 12:45 a.m., five men, all plainclothes police officers, enter the club and stay about 90 minutes. Were you still in the Pussy Palace?

Tera Mallette (00:45:02):

I was.

Elio Colavito (00:45:04):

Okay. And do you remember what you were doing when the police arrived?

Tera Mallette (00:45:08):

So, as soon as it happened, I was near somebody with a radio, or I had a radio, I can't remember. I might have gone back on shift because I was awake and available. And so, as soon as we were alerted that police were on site, we all spread out, all of security spread out to warn people to make sure that they were clothed if they had alcohol, and that there were men on the premises, so that people were prepared for that encounter.

Elio Colavito (00:45:51):

And is there anything about that moment that you remember really vividly?

Tera Mallette (00:45:56):

Yeah, I remember not running, but going as quickly as I could from room to room, from floor to floor, just being like, "Hey, here's the situation. Please make sure that you have some clothes on when walking in public areas, and especially if you have a drink. And if you do have a drink, make sure you're within the bar area, and not outside of those areas, so that we're not violating any license issue things." And I do remember a lot of people responding nonchalantly. It was a little frustrating because I'm like, "Hey, this is serious. If you want to keep doing this, you might need to tone it down a bit." Yeah, and I do remember some people getting a little combative.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:52):

With you?

Tera Mallette (00:46:52):

Yeah. Not because of what I was saying, but like, "Fuck them. I can take them. Blah, blah, blah," that kind of thing. Especially some of the older folk.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:06):

The not so baby queers?

Tera Mallette (00:47:08):

The not so baby queers, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:09):

I see.

Elio Colavito (00:47:12):

And how did the atmosphere of the club change once maybe things settled in a little bit that this was really happening, and the not so baby queers got their shit together, so to speak?

Tera Mallette (00:47:28):

So, I think we lowered the music or we turned it off. I can't remember which. The tone got a lot more serious, and people... The laughter and the talking became different. It became more hushed, and the people who weren't combative were more hushed and, like, "Oh, shit." And some people did respond, but they were getting dressed and trying to get out of there, whereas some people were like, "Well, fuck this. I'm going to walk around naked and have my drink. I don't give a shit."

Elio Colavito (00:48:09):

And did you see or speak to the police at all?

Tera Mallette (00:48:14):

I did see them. I don't know if I saw five. I think I saw three. They were all plainclothes. And they were laughing and pointing as they walked through. Oh, my God, yes. Laughing and pointing and talking to each other. It didn't feel like a raid. What it felt like were a couple of tourists at a zoo.

Elio Colavito (00:48:45):

So, were they poking their heads into rooms and laughing, or what space did you witness them in?

Tera Mallette (00:48:51):

I saw them on two different floors. I didn't see them going into specific rooms. I saw them just wandering the halls, laughing and talking.

Elio Colavito (00:49:05):

Did you hear any of what they were saying?

Tera Mallette (00:49:10):

Nothing leaps to mind, no.

Elio Colavito (00:49:13):

And how did you feel about there being a police presence or a cis male presence in the space?

Tera Mallette (00:49:24):

As a trans person from the 90s, I was terrified of the police, especially as a trans woman. Because, at the time, there were a lot of... Especially as somebody who was doing volunteer outreach through The 519 to the queer community, specifically the trans community, there were so many stories I'd heard from trans women,

especially street workers, where cops had arrested them and then put them into a male jail cell. So, I was personally terrified. I didn't want to get arrested. I hadn't done anything though, so I wasn't afraid of whether I had done something. I was just afraid that they were there.

Elio Colavito (00:50:20):

So, when did you decide to leave?

Tera Mallette (00:50:24):

Not until after they left.

Elio Colavito (00:50:27):

So, after they left, did you hang around a little bit and touch base with some folks?

Tera Mallette (00:50:33):

Yeah, I believe I touched... This is where my memory is a bit fuzzy.

Elio Colavito (00:50:38):

That's okay.

Tera Mallette (00:50:39):

Yeah, because it's been, what, 20 years? I feel like I did because the Pussy Palace after that, because JP [Hornick] and Richard [Aitcheson] couldn't run it, they made me the OOD for the next one, which is the Officer on Duty. So, I must have done something that they liked.

Elio Colavito (00:51:07):

Interesting. And then, so why did you decide to leave?

Tera Mallette (00:51:12):

Eventually? Because it was over. The situation was over. The thing was over. People were leaving. And everything that was going to happen had happened.

Elio Colavito (00:51:28):

And it was later revealed that before the plainclothes officers were in the building, there were actually two undercover and women officers. Did you learn of that later on?

Tera Mallette (00:51:40):

I didn't. That's interesting.

Elio Colavito (00:51:44):

Yeah. It's one of those things that some people who followed with the legal case ended up finding out about, and oftentimes were very outraged about, and sometimes we're telling narrators for the first time.

Tera Mallette (00:51:58):

Yeah, that's... Now I'm going back through all of the people I let in through the door, and wondering who of them could have been it?

Elio Colavito (00:52:07):

Well, from what we've been told, and what we've read in the literature, it seems that maybe the two women were actually members of the queer community and on the police force, and therefore were able to very easily blend in. But we've also heard of folks thinking that they saw total outsiders who were clearly pretending. It's a mixed bag of what actually these folks were like, but you know...

Tera Mallette (00:52:36):

The thing about that, or when people say stuff like that, I feel like that comes from a place of internalized homophobia because saying people don't fit in, it's like, well, what does a queer look like? We come in all different shapes, sizes, presentations.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:59):

Right. And how do you even go undercover to blend into that community then?

Tera Mallette (00:53:06):

Right?

Elio Colavito (00:53:08):

According to some, a narrator, wasn't there a wig involved, or a crappy haircut, or something like that? I would love to see that. So, that being said, did you end up following any of the legal proceedings that unfolded following the raid?

Tera Mallette (00:53:28):

Not in detail. Obviously, I was worried for my friends, JP [Hornick] and Richard [Aitcheson], since they were up for the bulk of the charges. I had a friend who was constantly giving me updates, so it was less about me following actively and more just listening if people told me.

Elio Colavito (00:53:57):

And did you attend any community events that were protests, fundraisers, things like that?

Tera Mallette (00:54:06):

I did not. Because again, I had been to some... Prior to all of this, I had done some activism. But I had stopped going to activist events after I got tackled. Unrelated to anything, I was at an anarchist event. I got tackled. It was not fun. And after that, I was like, "What if it had been a cop? I don't want to get arrested." So, after that, I just stayed away from activist events.

Alisha Stranges (00:54:48):

I've got a question. So, we know *Xtra* actually really publicized heavily the Pussy Palace event, especially after it was found out that it was raided. So, were you aware of things that were going to press through *Xtra* about the raid?

Tera Mallette (00:55:09):

To a point. I don't recall, honestly. That's one thing I don't recall.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:20):

Yeah, no worries.

Tera Mallette (00:55:20):

The thing about working for a newspaper is that you stop reading it.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:25):

Right.

Tera Mallette (00:55:26):

No, before I started working at *Xtra*, I read it religiously. And the minute, the minute I started working there, I stopped.

Elio Colavito (00:55:36):

Do you recall any office chatter about the event?

Tera Mallette (00:55:41):

No. The office at the time was mostly... Well, actually, that's not true. The CSR pool was primarily AFAB, but the rest of the press was AMAB.

Elio Colavito (00:55:59):

Right. So, at *Xtra* even, there was the sense that gay men weren't really concerned with what had happened or what was going on?

Tera Mallette (00:56:10):

Yes. It's funny in that respect. I don't know if you know the history of Pink Triangle Press, but a lot of it is built on the backs of the gay bathhouse raids. So, it is something that was important to the press, but I can't recall how important it was. But it didn't have the same prominence that you would look back to the gay bathhouse raids. And I always think it's funny because sometimes they'll go back in their history, and they'll be like, "Well, I was at the gay bathhouse raids in 1984." And I'm like, "Well, I was at the Pussy Palace raid in 2000."

Elio Colavito (00:56:56):

Interesting. It's interesting because you worked at *Xtra*, and I've spoken to... I've interviewed a journalist for this project that said that when [Julian] Fantino became the head of the TPS [Toronto Police Service], that the office was expecting some kind of trouble at some point down the line. Do you recall any of what that was like, pre-Pussy Palace?

Tera Mallette (00:57:17):

Yeah, I do remember that. And I do remember that everyone in the office was expecting something from [Julian] Fantino specifically around either bathhouse raids, or cruising location raids, where guys cruise, either in Queen's Park, or Cherry Beach, or just trying to think of all of the primary cruising spots where gay men cruise. Those are the two that jumped in my head. Have you ever been to Queen's Park at 3:00 a.m.?

Alisha Stranges (00:57:49):

No, not at 3:00 a.m.

Elio Colavito (00:57:51):

I've seen it with my own two eyeballs.

Tera Mallette (00:57:55):

Yeah.

Elio Colavito (00:57:55):

So yeah. Before we move on to the last chapter of questions, I just want to ask how your expectations for the night compared with your lived experience of it?

Tera Mallette (00:58:09):

Up until the raid, it surpassed my expectations. I had expected to go do my shift and then leave and not to enjoy myself. And after my shift, I actually had fun. There was an incident that occurred that I didn't like, that happened specifically to me. But other than that, I had fun, and it was nice. I didn't feel excluded. I was a bit alone, as I said earlier, just as I don't recall seeing any other trans women. Until that moment, it was nice.

Elio Colavito (00:59:01):

Do you feel comfortable disclosing what that one uncomfortable moment would have been?

Tera Mallette (00:59:11):

Somebody pushed me to do... I'm not the most sexual of beings, as I've described earlier, but someone... I felt pushed into doing some things in a public fashion that I don't even know if I would have done in a private one. And I didn't like the manner in which it occurred. I felt used, really.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:56):

I'm sorry to hear that.

Tera Mallette (00:59:58):

It happened.

Alisha Stranges (01:00:02):

Do you think there's anything about the nature of the environment that allowed for that, or this is about individual behaviour as opposed to the culture in the space?

Tera Mallette (01:00:16):

Well, I think there's something about the space, obviously, because you have hundreds of... Well, a couple hundred women in the building, but also dozens of women around you, and they're all having a good time doing things. So, there's maybe that kind of pressure, but also a single-focus pressure on you. And then there's also an internal thing for me, where I don't always have the best boundaries. And so, it's easy for people to run roughshod over them.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:10):

Right, people not respecting your boundaries.

Tera Mallette (01:01:14):

And sometimes me not even realizing that that's what they've done until later. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:27):

Well, thank you for sharing that and letting us in on it a little bit. The last set of questions here is going to focus more on a little bit on your sense of the impact of the Pussy Palace as a community initiative. Curious of what your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace was, its reason for being. What do you think?

Tera Mallette (01:01:57):

The whole concept as a whole?

Alisha Stranges (01:01:59):

Yeah.

Tera Mallette (01:02:00):

Well, women's sexual identities, especially queer women's sexual identities, which honestly feels like the wrong term because it's not just women. But gay men have dominated this whole sexual space in the queer community, and to the exclusion of all other identities. And I felt like the Pussy Palace was all about reclaiming some of that space for the rest of us. And I liked that because it shouldn't just... Men aren't the only sexual beings. Cis men are not the be all and end all of sex. Sure, they might have high sex drives, but I've known women who could... Well, I've known women with some seriously high sex drives. It's not a purely cis man thing to have a high sex drive. And there's something freeing about being able to go to a space, meet someone that you've never met before, and just connect in however way you want that connection to occur.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:25):

What's your sense of the ways in which the Pussy Palace succeeded in delivering on those intentions you're describing, or some of the ways it may have failed?

Tera Mallette (01:03:38):

I think it succeeded because it brought a bunch of people together in what was, for many people, a very sexually liberating experience. Clearly, a lot of people were having a lot of fun, just by what I saw walking around. It wasn't the Bacchanalia that you would have seen in a gay men's bathhouse. People weren't fucking on the floor and everywhere. That's not what you were seeing. It was a lot more like a party at a house, where everybody would be talking outside, and then you go into rooms, and then there, people are fucking, just in the corners or what have you. It felt a lot more like a house party. But at the same time, it brought people together. It made people feel like they had the sexual license to do things that they may not have felt like they had before. And I thought that was nice. Even if I was reluctant to participate.

Alisha Stranges (01:04:53):

Yeah, there was space for that.

Tera Mallette (01:04:55):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:04:59):

So, oftentimes, we'll hear or read that one of the goals of the organizing committee was to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. So, prior to the first Palace event in 1998, did you have a perception about queer women's sexuality being somewhat invisible in the public sphere?

Tera Mallette (01:05:27):

Well, I've been in the queer community since '92, '93. And queer women have been part of my life since then. I was aware of queer woman's sexuality. Yeah, I'm not entirely certain on how to answer that question.

Alisha Stranges (01:06:01):

Yeah, that's okay.

Tera Mallette (01:06:02):

But I was aware that women were sexual beings, and that while they didn't have the spaces that were available to gay men, they still managed to do it. I don't know, I remember going to Buddies in Bad Times [Theatre], and all you had to do is go to the women's washroom, and it was happening. Most of those stalls were being used for something other than using the stalls for something which they were intended.

Alisha Stranges (01:06:37):

I've got a question, sort of follow-up, that I'm not quite sure how to phrase it. But though you felt welcome in that space, would you say that there was something more you needed to feel like the space was addressing the invisibility of trans women's sexuality?

Tera Mallette (01:07:00):

Well, at the time, we were mostly... We were still fighting at the time for some foothold in the larger community, and people still drawing lines about "real" versus "trans." So, yes, before this, I felt invisible. Wait, what was the question?

Alisha Stranges (01:07:37):

If the Palace could have done something different that would have felt like it was not only addressing queer women's sexuality, but also trans women's sexuality.

Tera Mallette (01:07:49):

I'm not sure. Maybe if there had been trans women on the organizing committee, I don't believe that there was. It was nice to be included as a volunteer. And I know that subsequent Pussy Palaces had a much larger contingent of trans women. But I don't know, 2000, it's a very different time. And most of the things that I think they could have done have since been incorporated, like having more inclusive language, making sure to do outreach to trans communities, and people who do outreach to those communities, be they Supporting Our Youth or The 519 or... Shit, I can't think of anything else at the time. I don't know, maybe you could have flavoured some of the posters or ads to more directly contact trans people, but I don't know. It was 2000. I don't know if people were totally ready.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:16):

How did that feel for you?

Tera Mallette (01:09:23):

How did that feel for me?

Alisha Stranges (01:09:24):

That people weren't totally ready.

Tera Mallette (01:09:33):

So much of my life has been filled with people seeing me as their first, in terms of trans woman. And I don't mean that, like, the people I've dated. Although, that too, but for many of my friends, I was the first trans person they knew. For many people I dated, I was the first trans person that they dated. For the places that I worked, I was the first trans person. For many of the volunteer groups, first trans person, first trans woman. The way that I looked at it was about trying to create space so that people didn't have to fight as hard for me... Didn't have to fight as hard as I did. So yeah, had a lot of fights. Thankfully, though, I wasn't the only one doing the fighting.

Alisha Stranges (01:10:46):

Yeah. Well, my last question is more of an open ended one, and just want to give you have the opportunity to speak to anything else about your experience that night that our questions didn't really give you an opportunity to speak to. Anything there remaining you wanted to share?

Tera Mallette (01:11:19):

Not really. Nothing really leaps to mind. It was great. Your questions were fairly thorough. I even went into things I did not expect to talk about. Yeah, I can't believe it's been 20 years, though.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:39):

Yeah. I know. And we appreciate so much your making the effort to journey back there. I sometimes can't remember what I did on Monday, so thank you. Thank you so much, Tera, for sitting down with us and offering up your story and letting us bear witness to it.

Tera Mallette (01:11:59):

Sure. I'm happy to.