

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Renee Racine
Conducted on May 19, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Elio Colavito on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Racine is a 46-year-old, bisexual woman with Scottish and Métis cultural heritage. At the time of the interview in 2021, Racine was working in a senior role at a bank while raising two children and writing novels in her spare time. The interview mostly concerns her experiences as a volunteer at the Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000. She discusses how her sexuality and connection to queer community has changed over time; her experience as volunteer security for the Pussy Palace on the night it was raided; her participation in the legal case that followed the police raid; and other topics. In the interview, Racine speaks about Toronto and Scarborough, Ontario, as well as Los Angeles, California. She speaks about the time between 1998 and 2003 as well as her present-day relationship to community, following this five-year time period and up until 2021.

Keywords: Bisexual; Invisibility; Bathhouse; Volunteer; Security; Police; Raid; Legal; Witness.

Renee Racine (00:00:00):

All right.

Elio Colavito (00:00:01):

Don't... so you just hit record. You can just leave it. All right, so I have a little spiel off the top. This is Elio Colavito from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Renee Racine or Renee Racine-Kinnear. We're not really sure. And it is May 19th, 2021. Renee, are you in Toronto?

Renee Racine (00:00:25):

I am in Toronto. I am in Riverdale.

Elio Colavito (00:00:27):

Oh, Renee is in Toronto and she's going to tell us about her experiences as a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14th, 2000. Renee, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Renee Racine (00:00:41):

You do.

Elio Colavito (00:00:42):

Awesome. Before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace itself, I'm going to ask you a few questions that will just let us know a little bit about you to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold, the categories you occupy, and how some of these categories may have shifted for you over time. So, we're going to start really simply, can you just tell me your full name, your age and your preferred gender pronouns?

Renee Racine (00:01:06):

Yeah, Renee Racine. Age, that's a terrible question to ask. Rude.

Elio Colavito (00:01:12):

We wondered if putting it in there or not, but it ended up being important somewhere along the way, we were like, "It's important to know how old these folks were when they were there so it gives us a bit of a..." You don't have to answer if you don't want to.

Renee Racine (00:01:26):

No, no, no, no. That's fair. I will admit I had to get a calculator out to figure out how old I was that night, but math is not my strong suit. So anyway, Renee Racine, I am 46 years old. And she/her is good for me.

Elio Colavito (00:01:42):

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

Renee Racine (00:01:46):

Hmm, that's an interesting one. I would say that I am still, as I was then, bisexual, but much more invisible now, given that I'm also monogamous. I'm in a long-term partnership with a man, and I have kids. People just assume that, I mean, I assume they assume. We don't talk about it much at work, so it's hard to say. But yeah, so bisexual, invisibly so.

Elio Colavito (00:02:15):

Interesting. And what about in 2000, how would you have described your gender and sexual identity around the time of the night of 2000 Pussies?

Renee Racine (00:02:29):

My early coming out years, I joined a group called BiWoT, The Bisexual Women of Toronto. And I did that, really, primarily just to explore the community to get to know people. I had just arrived in Toronto, and I needed to figure out where I fit in. So, I joined this community, and through there I met a bunch of great people, began to go to events like this, go to bars, go to Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre], all these places. And I think by 2000, I was sort of in this place where I was... I think I was outwardly presenting as lesbian because I was primarily dating women, butch women specifically. I would have called myself, back then, a femme.

Renee Racine (00:03:22):

The word bisexual, back then, there was a lot of phobia attached to it in the lesbian community. So, to even say to someone you're bisexual was to present yourself as a risk, emotional risk. Yeah. I think in 2000 I was probably kind of outwardly living as a lesbian, only dating women. But obviously, I am actually bisexual, so that hasn't changed.

Elio Colavito (00:03:47):

Right. I do have two questions based off what you just said. Do you feel that things have changed in the queer community in terms of how lesbians may or may not respond to bisexuality, or do you feel like your experience has kind of remained similar to what it was in 2000?

Renee Racine (00:04:07):

I think that we, as a community, as a society, have taken big leaps forward in the decade, the two decades that it has been. That said, I'm not very much out and about in the community anymore, and I'm fairly settled. The friends that I have are the friends that I have. I'm not really out there meeting a lot of new people. I had to kind of re-come out to all of my new gay friends that, in actuality, I am bisexual. And so, when I first dated the first guy after 10 years or so of women only, I lost a lot of friends in that moment, and it was really hard.

Renee Racine (00:04:53):

But those that stayed, stayed, and I still have those friends. So, they're obviously very accepting and open about it. But I do think that as a community, we probably are, we as a whole, are probably a lot better about not being afraid of bisexuals and understanding that who you choose to sleep with is just a piece of the puzzle, and it doesn't mean that you're... It doesn't equate to polyamorous. It doesn't equate to cheating. It doesn't equate to any of that. You can have a monogamous but bisexual partner.

Elio Colavito (00:05:28):

Amazing. And you said that you would have kind of described yourself as femme, back in the day. What did that mean for you at the time to be femme?

Renee Racine (00:05:36):

There was a significant, I would say, a significant butch/femme culture in the Toronto scene at that time. I know less so in other places. I had friends in L.A. [California], and they didn't really have that, at least not to this intensity that we had. There was not, in fact, there wasn't any transitioning happening that I was aware of at that time, until it started, right? And I honestly can't remember what year that was that some of my formerly butch friends started to say, "Butch isn't quite right for me, in fact., and now that I have this option, I want to transition, I want to do that."

Renee Racine (00:06:23):

But in the earlier years, you didn't hear about that. I guess it just wasn't as accessible or known about. And so, there were a lot of butch women, and it was like we were their counterpart, the femmes. We would, not to say this was everyone, but we would dress a little more femininely, play that sort of... the pink role kind of thing in the relationship. You know what I mean? Yeah, so that was me. I didn't have long hair. I didn't wear dresses necessarily, but I was always the girlier of the two partners.

Elio Colavito (00:07:01):

Yeah, for sure. And what about racial, ethnic and cultural identity, how do you express yourself through those categories?

Renee Racine (00:07:10):

I don't really. Yeah. My mother is Scottish. My father is Métis.

Elio Colavito (00:07:16):

Did you have any attachment to that Indigenous part of your family?

Renee Racine (00:07:21):

No, not as much as I would like. He doesn't. He's not very attached to it, so I wasn't really raised with a lot of knowledge of how to...

Elio Colavito (00:07:29):

Makes sense. What can you tell me about your educational and class background?

Renee Racine (00:07:35):

Oh, middle class, right up the middle, I imagine. My dad was the high school teacher. My mom was a secretary, and then she became an executive, a business lady. I grew up in Scarborough [Ontario], so suburban middle-class, very much.

Elio Colavito (00:07:55):

And how about in 2000 and then now as you've kind of separated from your parents and you have your own situation going on?

Renee Racine (00:08:05):

I like that you think so.

Elio Colavito (00:08:05):

Yeah. I mean, I hope so, but I don't know.

Renee Racine (00:08:13):

In 2000, I... Oh God, we were in the middle of the dot-com boom. I had come into the workforce in around 1995, 1996 as a writer. I wanted to be a playwright, which is silly looking back because playwrights make absolutely no money. I found that out really quickly, and so found other ways to apply my craft as a writer, and the internet was just sort of becoming. And so, I had a great job, paid really well, especially for those times, when I was unfettered, rents were so low.

Renee Racine (00:08:53):

I had this fantastic apartment on Queen West. It was like right above the Dufflet [Pastries] there, Queen West and just past Bathurst. Amazing apartment for like 700 bucks a month. I know, incredible. It's huge. Yeah, so I had this great job, I made loads of money. Those are blessed times.

Elio Colavito (00:09:18):

Sounds like it. That's great.

Renee Racine (00:09:20):

Yeah.

Elio Colavito (00:09:21):

Amazing. And what kinds of activities occupy your time these days?

Renee Racine (00:09:25):

I work a lot. I have a pretty senior role at a bank, so that takes up my working hours and a lot of mental space. But I do still write. I'm a novelist, so I always have a project on the go, which keeps me sane. And of course, I am a mother of two. I have a teenager and a ten year old, so they occupy a pretty decent chunk of my time.

Elio Colavito (00:09:54):

For sure. What was different about the things that occupied your time in 2000? What were you up to then?

Renee Racine (00:10:05):

Well, unfettered and fancy free, right? I had a big group of friends. We were very social. Even if it was a weeknight. Every night we were at someone's house. And then, Friday nights, Saturday nights, we'd be in line to get into Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre] and party until 2:00 a.m. It was really a rollercoaster of social good times, I would say, back then.

Elio Colavito (00:10:33):

Nice. That sounds lovely. And what role does religion or spirituality play in your life?

Renee Racine (00:10:38):

None.

Elio Colavito (00:10:39):

Did it ever, in 2000 or at any point?

Renee Racine (00:10:42):

No.

Elio Colavito (00:10:44):

Beautiful. And is there anything else that you think would be important for me to know about how you understand the different identities that you hold today as compared to 20 years ago?

Renee Racine (00:10:55):

No, I don't think so. I think that about covers it.

Elio Colavito (00:10:57):

Beautiful. All right. Now we're going to get into the nitty-gritty, and I want to invite you to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee is preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which is the fourth installment of the Pussy Palace series, which was the exclusive bathhouse events for lesbian women, queer women and trans folk in Toronto. How did you first learn about the Night of 2000 Pussies bathhouse event?

Renee Racine (00:11:28):

There had been an event prior to this, I believe, unless I'm completely out of my mind. I think that there was the first bathhouse event maybe a year or two prior to this.

Elio Colavito (00:11:39):

Yeah, so they had their first one, I believe, in '98 or '99. I think the one that you might be referring to is the one in Pride Month the year prior. I also know you went to it because you said it in the court transcript and I've read them. So, I think that's the one that you're referring to.

Renee Racine (00:12:00):

Yeah, that could be for sure. It was also in Club Toronto. And that was, at least that was my first experience. And I learned about that... I mean, who knows how you learn about these things? People I knew were going, maybe I saw a flyer. I'm not sure. I probably wouldn't have been brave enough to go all on my own that first time. So, most likely it was some people in my network were going. And at that point I was, like I said, steadily going out to bars, had a really nice circle of friends and was also exploring the kink scene a little bit. Going to functions like that wasn't completely out of the ordinary for me, but I really didn't know what to expect. At that first one... Do you want me to talk about the first one or you only want me to talk-

Elio Colavito (00:12:50):

Oh, yeah, it's the next question so you can just go right ahead.

Renee Racine (00:12:53):

...All right. The first experience, the very first bathhouse I attended, I think in the beginning it was a really pleasant kind of socially awkward pool party, was my initial experience. And I remember feeling how weird the space was. It felt like a man's space. Something about it just didn't feel like the spaces I was accustomed to, but that made it kind of cool. Like, we felt like we were taking over something that hadn't been ours before, right? And part of it was just walking around and marvelling at the culture that men had.

Renee Racine (00:13:41):

There were glory holes in the walls between the rooms. There were obviously open showers, and saunas, and hot tubs, and... porn viewing room. It was just something totally outside of my experience, I was just like, "Wow, look at this." That you could actually just go somewhere like this anytime you want was amazing to me. Yeah, so that's kind of my experience of the first one.

Elio Colavito (00:14:10):

And did you enjoy the first one? How did you feel being there, other than just kind of amazed that this sexual culture exists, and it isn't yours at any other time of the year, but tonight it gets to be yours?

Renee Racine (00:14:24):

Yeah. I think in a lot of ways I treated it sort of like a night at Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre]. It was sort of around seeing who was there and doing a little bit of flirting. And I took part in some of the lighter activities, like the lap dancing contest on the pool deck, and I wandered around the rooms. But I'm, as a person, I'm fairly reserved, so I didn't fully dive in. I kind of treated it as a cruising op.

Elio Colavito (00:14:57):

I'm curious about the space and time during which you went from being someone who decided to attend the Pussy Palace event and then someone who becomes an official patron. Do you remember where you may have been before you made your way to Club Toronto on the night that the bathhouse was raided?

Renee Racine (00:15:17):

It's funny, I was thinking about that, and I honestly have no memory of going to the event, or where I was or where I came from. In all likelihood, I was living Queen West, so I probably took a street car, I probably took a subway over. I don't remember anything prior to the arrival that night, but I do know I arrived fairly early. As you already know, I was volunteering that night. And, the how and why I was volunteering is actually maybe an interesting moment.

Renee Racine (00:15:56):

I had met Tad who was a friend of JP [Hornick]'s, and this was... I'm not sure how much earlier... maybe a few months before that, and they were looking for people to help at the Pride Parade, specifically, I think is when I, the first time that I did a volunteer security shift. And I loved that idea. I'm not normally a volunteering kind of person. I don't kind of make time in my schedule to do something, and I should, that sounds terrible to admit. But it's not my M.O. Don't judge me, Elio.

Elio Colavito (00:16:38):

No, I won't. I won't. I'm not going to act like I do any volunteering in my spare time either, so you're all good. Go ahead.

Renee Racine (00:16:44):

Amazing. Couple of selfish creatures. Anyway. Not my M.O., but I wanted to do it, in one part because I was still branching out and expanding my network in the community, and that seemed like a great way to do it. And in another way, and this thought came to me last night as I was considering what I would talk about, another part of it, I think was, I was interested in doing service to the community because of that hidden shame that I was talking about earlier.

Renee Racine (00:17:18):

Because I was bisexual, trying to make my way in a genuinely lesbian circle, I felt this need to give back or to excuse my presence in some way. And I think that was maybe, if not my primary, then a strong secondary motivating factor for why I wanted to volunteer with JP [Hornick's] group. This particular night, in 2000, I was volunteering. But my shift wasn't until quite late. I think I probably came on, I think, around midnight, but I'm not certain about the time. I remember showing up at the bathhouse that night, early, with this pretty silly idea that I might get like a nap in. Only I go to a bathhouse to take a nap.

Elio Colavito (00:18:15):

I did read that in the transcripts and remember thinking that was a strange choice to make. "Ah, I'm going to go nap at the bathhouse." Perfect.

Renee Racine (00:18:25):

Did I say that? Oh my God.

Elio Colavito (00:18:25):

Yeah, you did in the court, it was hilarious.

Renee Racine (00:18:26):

Oh, hilarious. Well, there we go. So, now what I'm saying it again. This was honestly my plan, hilariously, because I've never been one to stay up. I'm not a night owl. I don't stay up late well, and so I was worried that I was going to come on to this midnight shift all tired and groggy. So, I came early. I can't remember exactly what time, but it was still pretty quiet in the building, so it must have been right around opening, like maybe 6:00 p.m., 6:30 p.m., something like that.

Renee Racine (00:18:55):

And I got the room that they had given all of us as volunteers, and I kind of put my stuff out, laid down. And of course, I couldn't sleep because it's just, it's hectic, right? And all I remember hearing through the walls are laughing and the sound of women having fun, and I couldn't sleep. Pretty soon I gave up on that idea.

Elio Colavito (00:19:19):

I'm curious, you get there quite early, you plan to take a nap. Did you encounter anyone that you knew on the way in, were you with anybody that you were buddies with at the time, or was this a solo mission?

Renee Racine (00:19:33):

I was more solo this time than I had been at the first one. There were people there that I knew, for sure. I know once I kind of got out and started walking around, I ran into an ex-lover. Yeah, at least one, a couple probably. I knew people, but I wasn't there that night with anybody. There was a woman that I was dating at the time, as well as someone I would, and still do, call my very best friend. It sounds like silly language, but like BFF [Best Friends Forever].

Renee Racine (00:20:08):

And both of them, butch women. And neither of them wanted to go. They were vehemently, "No way. Not for me. That's not my scene. Go have fun, but you're flying solo for this one." And I was actually talking to my best friend about it recently, just trying to relive the memory, and they were like, "I wouldn't have said so at the time, but I had such ingrained body issues. As, sort of, a large butch woman, I didn't want to be anywhere near a bathhouse, which seemed to imply nudity and being okay with your body."

Renee Racine (00:20:50):

And we talked about it and we're like, "It's such a shame because, in fact, that was really what it was all about." When you're in that space, you look around, you're like... All the shapes, all the sizes, they're all represented here. Right? Everyone had a place. I think I derailed that question somewhat.

Elio Colavito (00:21:08):

It's actually really interesting and not something that we've really heard anyone speak to yet, so it's important. It's interesting. Do you recall how you would have been feeling, arriving early, hoping to take a nap, hearing all of this fun occurring through the walls? What was happening internally?

Renee Racine (00:21:33):

I think I probably was just eager to get out there and be part of it and see what was going on. It seemed silly to be hiding in a room by myself. Yeah, so I did go out. And I walked around the rooms. One thing I do remember is that the space in the building itself, the vibe of the place was much warmer the second time, in the 2000 event. Much warmer than the 1999 or 1998 event. And whether that's because I had been in this space before and already sort of knew what it was like, and had mapped it out in my brain, or maybe the bathhouse committee had done more around the decor or the music or the lighting. I'm not sure what it was, but I definitely have a memory of it being warmer, more female-positive, just felt more like a women's space that night than it had the first time.

Elio Colavito (00:22:32):

Yeah, that's interesting. And if you could freeze the moment in time where you're just about to become a patron of the Pussy Palace, it's a bit of a weird question, but if you had to express it sonically, what is the sound of the moment?

Renee Racine (00:22:50):

Just the sound of women laughing, just having fun, right? In a way that... When you're out at a bar, if I was out at The Rose, or maybe it was Pope Joan by then, or at Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre] there's always, there's music, right? Like, loud thumping music. And so, you don't have the same sonic sense of a hundred women in a space or 200, 300. There, the music was lower. It wasn't a dance club. Yeah, so I'd say that the standout thing for me is the sound of that many women having a really good time together.

Elio Colavito (00:23:35):

Interesting. Do you recall what you would have worn that evening?

Renee Racine (00:23:43):

I thought about that. For sure, some kind of boy-fit jeans because I do remember that later. And I had this tight little T-shirt with the word "slut" emblazoned across the chest in rhinestones, which I was very proud of, and wore that a lot. So, I almost certainly was wearing my "slut" T-shirt.

Elio Colavito (00:24:05):

And how did you go about choosing what you would wear? What sort of deliberations were going through your mind? What were you trying to communicate to other people with your outfit, and what were you trying to feel yourself with your "slut" T-shirt and your jeans?

Renee Racine (00:24:23):

Well, when one chooses a "slut" T-shirt, one is making a statement.

Elio Colavito (00:24:28):

I have to ask the question, but I think you kind of told me already.

Renee Racine (00:24:34):

Yeah, for sure. I think that night, as often, or really whenever I wore that shirt, or really, or just generally whenever I went out, I was putting out there that I had broken away from the way I was raised, my parents'

expectations of me, the world's expectations of me that I would be straight and not that into sex. Yeah, I was saying, "This is a break. This is me breaking from that."

Elio Colavito (00:25:10):

Well put. So, you arrive at Club Toronto, describe the scene outside of it.

Renee Racine (00:25:18):

There, if I recall correctly, it wasn't sunny that day. I think it might even have been drizzling. But I'm not sure about that. I just remember it being kind of grey. There was a line-up at the door. Again though, I might be mixing up my first and second event. Yeah. And I don't think I had to wait in the line because I was volunteering.

Elio Colavito (00:25:42):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you recall the process of being admitted into the bathhouse, what that looked like?

Renee Racine (00:25:47):

Not really. No. I have a sense that there was someone at the door, maybe JP [Hornick] or someone else, but, like, checking tickets.

Elio Colavito (00:25:58):

Right. And once, you kind of already did this, but once you were inside, how would you describe the space itself?

Renee Racine (00:26:07):

I remember how much warmer it was than the first time I had been. Everything felt like it had been redecorated. And maybe it had been, maybe Club Toronto had redecorated in the intervening years. I remember red velvet. I remember the bar set-up right in the front. I don't think I drank at all that night, which was pretty usual. I don't think I drank all that much in those days. I remember a darker room sort off the bar. Yeah, I think I'll just stick with... it was warmer. It felt like more of a women's space than the first time I'd been there.

Elio Colavito (00:26:54):

And what kind of spaces and activities did you gravitate towards in your time there?

Renee Racine (00:27:00):

I think I continued, and I still am, to be fairly reserved, so I didn't dive into the activities that were going on, but I was certainly enthusiastically observing. I think I remember clapping for a lap dance contest. There was a dark room. I do actually remember this quite well. There was a dark room with a bunch of chairs set up, and I can't remember what it was called, but I think of it as the blindfold room.

Renee Racine (00:27:31):

So, you would go in and you would get a blindfold on, and then you would sit on a chair and an unknown person, with your consent, obviously, an unknown person would be there and they would do things to you, to whatever degree that was. I remember watching that room for a while just thinking, "Wow, so much trust." But, that in itself, right, was evidence of how safe and accepting the vibe was.

Elio Colavito (00:28:06):

And we've heard that there was a photo room where patrons could take Polaroids of themselves documenting their night at the bathhouse. Do you recall spending any time in that room?

Renee Racine (00:28:14):

I don't, no. In fact, I don't remember that.

Elio Colavito (00:28:18):

And before we kind of move on to the next set, I want to know what your volunteering capacity was supposed to look like that night.

Renee Racine (00:28:28):

Wearing a headset and looking cute. Besides that, that was my goal.

Elio Colavito (00:28:35):

That was your goal, but what was JP [Hornick]'s goal for you?

Renee Racine (00:28:38):

Right, right. Volunteer only, right? Obviously, I'm not a trained security person by any means. As I recall, my instructions were to kind of make sure there were no alcohol infractions. I think that, if I remember correctly, there was no alcohol on the pool, like outside. On the pool deck, you couldn't have any. I was to do regular loops around there, just to make sure no one had cups or beer, or anything like that out there. And then just generally to walk around, just make sure everything's copacetic.

Elio Colavito (00:29:15):

Do you remember having to give anyone a tough time about alcohol infractions and things like that, or was it mostly smooth sailin'?

Renee Racine (00:29:24):

It was pretty smooth. I think I might have found a cup or two on the pool deck and just removed them, but no one was attached to them so it was hard to say.

Elio Colavito (00:29:32):

Interesting. And I want to get a sense of the impression that the space made on your senses. I'm going to invite you to soften your gaze, or if you feel comfortable, you can close your eyes. Breathe, and with each inhale, allow your body to re-inhabit a specific location within the Pussy Palace, whichever space calls to you. And from this contemplative space, I want you to tell me what you're seeing.

Renee Racine (00:30:06):

I spent a fair amount of time in the locker area, before my shift, because there were hours before I went on shift. I was talking to someone; she had recently been broken up with by her girlfriend. She was awfully cute, and I was just consoling her. And the locker room itself... We were sitting on the floor with our backs against the lockers. It smelled like chlorine, a little bit like sweat. Yeah. And it was greenish. The lighting reminds me of green, I think, for some reason.

Elio Colavito (00:30:50):

Is it safe to say that if you could distill the space into a single colour, it would be that greenish hue?

Renee Racine (00:30:58):

In that moment. But, overall, it was that warm red of the lobby that I would call out as my overarching colour.

Elio Colavito (00:31:08):

Okay. And if the space could it express itself through sound, what would it sound like?

Renee Racine (00:31:15):

Voices. Loud laughs. I remember there was a moment when I was sitting in the locker room, someone, I can't remember her name now, not that I would use it, but I think I had seen her around quite a lot, she came bursting into the area, laughing and talking about how she had completely natural pubic hair and she was from the 70s. And she was like just, she was just having a great time and being really silly and funny. Yeah, like just laughter, gales of laughter.

Elio Colavito (00:31:54):

And what does it smell like? Are there any lingering odours?

Renee Racine (00:31:59):

Chlorine.

Elio Colavito (00:32:00):

Yeah. And if you had to imagine that a part of your body was brushing against a part of the space, what are you touching and what does it feel like?

Renee Racine (00:32:12):

Wow, what an interesting question. I would go with the steam. The wet walls of the shower and the steam areas and the hot tubs. Slippery under your touch. Something that is... It's transient; it's only for a minute and then it's gone.

Elio Colavito (00:32:43):

And if you could taste the space, what would its flavour be?

Renee Racine (00:32:51):

I'd like to think salty, but probably like chlorine.

Elio Colavito (00:32:57):

Thank you. You can let that space go in your mind. The next set of questions are going to focus on your perception of the crowd. We're curious about who else was there. How many people would you say were in the space that evening?

Renee Racine (00:33:12):

I'm probably not a great judge of numbers, but I would... I mean, hundreds. There were many floors, right? And the rooms were large, and there was definitely a sense of the place being at capacity. It was brimming with people, so hundreds.

Elio Colavito (00:33:31):

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

Renee Racine (00:33:38):

Honestly, I don't remember. It just felt like everybody. It just felt like everybody.

Elio Colavito (00:33:48):

And thinking about your own positionality, how did it feel to exist in your body in the crowd that night?

Renee Racine (00:33:58):

Physically, I'm very comfortable. I was comfortable with my body. This was a community that I was part of, and I knew so many of the faces, so I was quite comfortable there. In terms of what we talked about earlier, the fact that I was a bisexual who was suffering a little bit of shame around that, that would explain my holding back slightly, which I think I always did. I just held that little piece of myself back a little bit.

Elio Colavito (00:34:38):

the Pussy Palace has been described as a space that was publicly inclusive of lesbian women, queer ciswomen and trans folks. What was your impression of the relationship between these differently gendered groups at the Pussy Palace the night that you were there?

Renee Racine (00:34:59):

It's a bigger question than it seems off the top. I think I was aware, at the time, of a conversation that was going on around trans men and whether or not people felt safe having them in this space. It sounds terrible. I feel like I was actively unpolitical and didn't know enough to have an opinion. Certainly, knew enough butch women to understand that being butch and/or trans or just male-identifying wasn't scary and wasn't a risk to me.

Renee Racine (00:35:55):

I had no issue, but I do know that there were women who did. So, I think I was probably aware at a sort of undercurrent level of some frictions or tensions that might have been there, but I didn't see any evidence of it personally. Then again, I probably wasn't really watching for it.

Elio Colavito (00:36:15):

Right. Interesting. I'm trying to think if I want to ask more about that or if I should just leave it as it is. The one thing I am curious about, I guess, in that vein is how outspoken folks were on either side of that issue and how heavily talked about it would have been at the time leading up to the Pussy Palace event?

Renee Racine (00:36:50):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I knew four people at that time who were either in active transition, so had begun taking hormones, or who at least had fully adopted he/him and were living their truth that way. And I know that a lot of my friends, so they were also my friends, but a lot of my friends who weren't them, who were maybe butch, didn't love it. There was some open talk behind people's backs around, like, "Who does she think she is?"

Renee Racine (00:37:33):

I remember one of my friends saying about another one who had made the choice to transition, like... This was the stupidest thing, she said, "She's afraid of spiders. How does she think she can transition and be a man?" Which obviously is stupid. It's stupid, and it's unconnected, completely disconnected. It means nothing. But there was a fair amount of judgment flying around at the time. It would not have been an easy time.

Elio Colavito (00:38:03):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And did any of your trans friends, any of those four, attend any of the events? Did they ever think about attending and voice why they wouldn't, or it just wasn't something that was talked about?

Renee Racine (00:38:17):

One of them didn't, wouldn't, said like, "That's not my scene." But one of them would have. Yes. Although I don't remember seeing him there that night. That doesn't mean he wasn't there. Because we had dated and then we weren't dating at that point. But I would see him around at other events, like kink events and things like that. So, could have been.

Elio Colavito (00:38:43):

Interesting. All right. Well, we've arrived at the moment. 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?

Renee Racine (00:38:54):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elio Colavito (00:38:55):

And what were you doing when the police arrived?

Renee Racine (00:38:58):

I had just come on shift, not sure how much before that. Doesn't feel like very long before that. I'd maybe done a couple of rounds of sweeping the pool deck for cups and making sure everything was okay. And I heard it over the headset. And it didn't make any sense to me. I didn't understand what they were talking about. I don't even know who was it, whether it was Carlyle [Jansen] or JP [Hornick] or someone's voice who would have been at the front of the building.

Renee Racine (00:39:31):

And they were saying something about men coming into the space. And I wasn't clear, I wasn't clear even at first that they were policemen. I just knew that they were men. And the voice in my ear or the voices in my ear were saying like, "Tell people quietly. Don't make a big scene, but let people know if you can that there are men in the space." And so, that is what I think I set about doing, and it felt surreal. I hadn't seen them, yet, I did eventually. I hadn't seen them yet. Just, it was like this concept, that there could be.

Renee Racine (00:40:20):

And I think part of me thought, "That's not... That can't be right. It must be a mistake." But I did start gently going around. And I think I started in the hot tub area and then I was in the showers, just letting people know, "There's been a report that there are men in the building and you might want to grab a towel. Can I get you one?" Just, sort of, raising the alarm softly. Do you want me to keep...?

Elio Colavito (00:40:49):

Yeah, keep going.

Renee Racine (00:40:52):

Eventually, I did see them. I think they were coming up the stairs, or I was going up the stairs, and I realized they were ahead of me. I saw them first on the stairs, and there were two of them, I think, together. Two or three of them. And they were dressed like... I think they were wearing jeans. They did not look like police. They looked like big, beefy guys, and it was so, oh, so weird to see them in that space.

Renee Racine (00:41:27):

I followed them, the two or three that were on the stairs. I was following them at a distance because now the folks on the headset were saying like, "All we can do is just watch them. Stay behind them at a distance. Keep an eye on what they're doing, and warn people if you can before they get there." I left the stairs. They had gone down a hallway, and they were standing at the door of a room. It was like a private room.

Renee Racine (00:42:04):

It had a swing in it. And there were I think only two. There were two women in there, who I had seen around, were part of my community, and they were being grilled. These two, I think it was two at that point, two men standing at the door, kind of blocking the door to the room. And I was standing a few feet back just trying to see who was in the room and what they were doing. And the men didn't go in the room, but they stood in that doorway.

Renee Racine (00:42:41):

I mean, I couldn't tell you, it felt like maybe half an hour. They were there far too long. I tried to see what the state of dress was for the women who were being questioned, and they, at least the one that I can recall, was wearing like a pretty sexy like bustier kind of thing, and I remember thinking, "She can't be comfortable being interrogated in this way, in this room."

Elio Colavito (00:43:17):

I'm going to walk you back a little bit. You hear on the headsets that there are men in the space. What's the tone of whoever's on the other end of the headset?

Renee Racine (00:43:33):

The voice was... I wouldn't say panicked. Panicked would imply out of control, like freaking out, but there was such a high-pitched concern, is what I would characterize it as.

Elio Colavito (00:43:50):

And then when you were going around telling the other women in the space that, "Hey, there are men here," what were their reactions like? What do you recall from them?

Renee Racine (00:44:02):

From a lot of them disbelief. Probably, just like my first reaction when I heard it, "That can't be right. What? No, that can't be right." But others, and the ones that I remember, that really stick out, are the ones who got scared, who were very clearly afraid. Their eyes widened; their pupils dilated. They grabbed for towels, grabbed for things. I remember, I think I remember anyway, one woman just being like, "I have to get out of here." Like, just almost like a panic, like, "I need to leave. I need to get my stuff." And she was floundering to pull her stuff together.

Renee Racine (00:44:50):

But yeah, I mean, everywhere you look, and this is almost the only thing I remember from the court testimony talking about, was everywhere I would look there were women covering themselves, holding themselves. They just look scared and unprepared. And I don't know if they felt like they were going to get arrested or just that it was terrifying to have a man in a space that 10 minutes ago had been so open and so positive.

Elio Colavito (00:45:26):

And at what point did you figure out they were police officers and not just random men who were infiltrating the space?

Renee Racine (00:45:36):

That news came over the headset as well because there was something about... They were asking for the liquor license, something like that. And that's when the news came out that there were plain-clothed police officers.

Elio Colavito (00:45:52):

Right. And then you recalled seeing the two women quarantined in the room by the officers. Do you recall what the woman would have looked like, what she looked to be feeling? I'm not sure if you could hear what they were saying, but what do you recall from her body language, or what have you?

Renee Racine (00:46:14):

Yeah. I could hear that the men were asking them questions, and they were baseless questions. They were not questions that should have been asked. They were things like, "Where do you live? How old are you? Why are you here?" I'm like, "What are they...?" If they're here for a liquor license, what is this about? And from what I could tell, I could see that there were two women in the room. I could only see the one's face, so the other one I couldn't see, but she was sitting in the swing that was in the room. And she was...

Renee Racine (00:46:53):

I mean, I didn't know her personally. I had seen her before. She's a hardcore bitch. She's not someone that you fuck around with. I'm sorry, I probably shouldn't do that. She had some guts, and she had some presence about her. And so, I remember almost thinking like, "Those guys don't know what they're messing with." She looked pissed off. She didn't look particularly afraid, but she looked properly angry about being in there. I wasn't necessarily worried about her mental state, if you know what I mean. She was handling it, but—

Elio Colavito (00:47:36):

And is this the femme person in the room or the butch person in the room?

Renee Racine (00:47:40):

...This was the femme person in the room. Yeah. I just remember thinking like, the real problem to me was that they were in that doorway for so long, that they were asking all these questions that had like baseless, purposeless questions.

Elio Colavito (00:48:01):

And then, so the police eventually leave. How did the atmosphere change after the cops left?

Renee Racine (00:48:10):

It's like the lights went out. When I first came into the space that night, it felt warmer, it felt... There was this kind of red glow. It felt like velvet and warmth and all that stuff. That was gone. When they left... And I honestly don't remember the moment where they were there and then they weren't there, it was just at some point they were gone. You couldn't be sure. I felt like you couldn't be sure they were gone. I was still looking for them everywhere, as would the patrons of the place have felt like they were still there. The party was over.

Elio Colavito (00:48:57):

Yeah. Did you still have to kind of finish up with your volunteer-ship, or did that completely get kyboshed by the whole change of events?

Renee Racine (00:49:10):

I honestly can't remember.

Elio Colavito (00:49:12):

Do you remember when you decided to leave?

Renee Racine (00:49:14):

No, I don't. I don't. I have no memory of it. I think, unless my memory is mistaken, I believe there was a time after that where there was like consoling and comforting happening. Women, obviously, talking to each other, "What the hell just happened? Are you okay? How do you feel?" There was that. I have a memory of that. But I don't have any memory of leaving for the night or how that must have felt, which is crazy. You think you'd walk out of there and be like, "What the hell just happened?" Not just like (whistles). Going back to my apartment.

Elio Colavito (00:49:56):

Yeah. I guess maybe it's had such an impact that you kind of focus on anything else. We've heard a bunch of that from people who are like, "It's shocking that I can't remember this part of the night. You'd think I'd be able to, but I can't." You're not alone in that. But it was later revealed that before the plainclothes officers entered the club, there were two women police officers who actually attended the event undercover. How did it feel to learn later that there were outsiders in the space surveilling everyone?

Renee Racine (00:50:33):

I don't think I ever realized that. I mean, I think until I read through your questions, I was like, "Whoa! Were there?"

Elio Colavito (00:50:41):

Yeah, there were two undercover women who apparently were walking around trying to find infractions of some sort, and then they reported back to their five buddies, wherever those guys were, and then they infiltrated the space. That's all right that you didn't know. And obviously you know about the legal proceedings that followed the raid because you were a part of them in some capacity. Were you involved in any other way, other than testifying in court?

Renee Racine (00:51:12):

No. No, that was it. Frank Addario reached out by email, and it felt like a long time after. I'm sure it was, right? You have to raise money for the defense, et cetera. Frank [Addario] reached out after and said, "My name was on a list of people who had been there and who had been volunteering," and he wanted to chat with me about it, and I said, "Absolutely." And I remember meeting him and someone from his team for lunch at the Terroni on Queen Street, where he outlined... This is going to sound funny, but he outlined for me why what happened that night was not okay.

Renee Racine (00:51:58):

I had just absorbed it. It was just something that happened. It wasn't a positive thing, but it was just one of those things there... That's what you get, I guess. I was just taking it on board. And it took him sort of saying like, "That's not okay, and this is what we're going to do about it. We're going to put together a defense." And he asked me a bunch of questions; I answered them, obviously, much more fresh in my mind back then — 20 years ago — than I am now, but yeah, that was it.

Renee Racine (00:52:30):

He was like, “Okay. If you feel comfortable, can you please come on this day? And I’d like to ask you a few short questions, not a big deal.” And I think I did debate it because I was nervous about it, but ultimately there seemed no option but to go and do that right thing, because if I could help at all, I wanted to. And so, I went.

Elio Colavito (00:52:51):

I’m curious about what [Frank] Addario, what his little spiel was when he told you, “This is why it’s wrong.” Do you recall the themes that he pointed to of why this is wrong?

Renee Racine (00:53:05):

I mean, I think that the major themes were, like, it’s an abuse of power on a vulnerable community. The fact that they weren’t in uniform, that they were basically plainclothes men in a women’s space was much more threatening than it needed to be. So, even if they had, had a real reason to be in there, which in itself was kind of doubtful, they should have been more clearly police officers. They really didn’t need to be roaming around the space. Yeah, I think that was kind of the main thrust of that message.

Elio Colavito (00:53:42):

And then so you decided to go on the day that you were asked to go, and you did take the stand. What do you recall about that experience of being examined by [Frank] Addario and then also the Crown’s attorney?

Renee Racine (00:53:57):

I don’t remember that much about what Frank [Addario] asked me. There would have been the questions that I was expecting, I assume. But what stands out for me is the Crown. Is that what they were called? The other lawyer. Their questions were so ridiculous. They were like... I mean, you’ve seen the transcripts so you’ll know better, but my memory is like they were asking something along the lines of, “If you’re all lesbians, what difference does it make if some men see you naked?” (Laughter).

Renee Racine (00:54:46):

It didn’t make any sense to me at all. And I remember describing the fear and the women trying to cover themselves. “How do you know they were afraid,” I think, is what the lawyer said. “How can you prove they were afraid?” Or, “How do you know?” or something like that. And so, talking about the physicality of fear was very clear. Yeah. And then some other stupid question.

Renee Racine (00:55:16):

And then I had to, for some reason, reveal that I was bisexual. And that felt like the ultimate slap in the face because this was the thing that I was never quite comfortable with, right? Like never quite revealing about. But because of the questions that this lawyer was asking, I felt like I had to say... Maybe it was that, “If you’re all lesbians, why do you care if men see you naked?” or something like that. Anyway, and it felt like the moment to say that, “Well, I’m bisexual, and of course I care who sees me naked either way. Not that, that has anything to do with my sexuality.”

Elio Colavito (00:55:55):

Yeah. And how did it make you feel having to reveal that about yourself when you otherwise felt a lot of shame and hesitation about speaking about that kind of stuff?

Renee Racine (00:56:09):

Yeah. I mean, I wish I could say it was like this great moment of self-acceptance; it wasn't. I feel like I put it out there because the question demanded it, and it felt like a "fuck you." I was able to use it in a way that brought us some power back, and so that's what I did.

Elio Colavito (00:56:32):

Is there anything else that you want to speak to about your experience at the Palace or in the legal case before we move on to the final set of questions?

Renee Racine (00:56:44):

No.

Elio Colavito (00:56:44):

We are nearing the end and the last set of questions are going to focus on the impact of the Pussy Palace as a community initiative. What's your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace, its reason for being?

Renee Racine (00:57:02):

I think it was to give women a space and the permission to use the space to be sexual.

Elio Colavito (00:57:16):

And in what ways did the Palace succeed in delivering on its intentions, and then in what ways did it fail?

Renee Racine (00:57:26):

I don't think it failed. I think it did a lot for our community at that time, for the people who went anyway. For the people that were into it, who wanted that, it gave them a place to do it. Like I was saying earlier, people who were wanting to break from everyone else's expectations of them, it gave them a place to go do that. I mean, these were things that were happening anyway in other areas.

Renee Racine (00:58:02):

You could go to a kink club and you could get a little bit of that. You could go to a bar and make out in the bathrooms pretty aggressively. You could do all these things. But this was a space specifically zoned for it, right? Which was awfully empowering, and exciting, and a little naughty, and all these things that we hadn't had, really, as a community.

Elio Colavito (00:58:31):

It's interesting you say that. One of the off-cited goals of the event organizers was to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. And prior to the first Palace event in '98, would you agree that queer women's sexuality was somewhat invisible in the public sphere?

Renee Racine (00:58:53):

Yeah, I do. I do agree with that. I think that, just to speak to what society thinks a lesbian culture is, you hear, or at least you did then, things have probably changed, you hear about the “U-Haul relationship,” you hear about “lesbian bed death.” It’s not known for its ripe sexual tenor, which is not completely false. But I think that what the [Toronto Women’s] Bathhouse Committee did by putting this together was to really say to the world, and probably upset the world in doing so a little bit, to say that, “We, as a community, we are sexual. Women in general. Lesbian, bi, queer, straight, all of us. We are sexual beings. We have appetites, and we have interests, and we have secret fantasies, and we actually do things about them.”

Elio Colavito (01:00:01):

And what are your thoughts on the name of the event, the Pussy Palace? Did it feel fitting that it was called that?

Renee Racine (01:00:07):

Yeah. Yeah, I liked it. I loved it, and at the same time it was a bit like, “Hmm. That’s really right on the nose, isn’t it?”

Elio Colavito (01:00:11):

What about it made you feel that it was fitting?

Renee Racine (01:00:21):

Well, it’s a naughty word, right? It’s a word that the public, society in general, is going to hear and go, “Oh, I’m a little bit uncomfortable with that.” And so, it served its purpose in that way.

Elio Colavito (01:00:40):

At some point, the name of the series was actually changed from the Pussy Palace to the Pleasure Palace to try to account for some more inclusivity, I think. Were you aware of this shift?

Renee Racine (01:00:54):

No, I really, I wasn’t, but it makes sense. I mean, I can see why, yeah, I can see why calling it the Pussy Palace might have been less inclusive than it should have been.

Elio Colavito (01:01:03):

Yeah. Do you know what would have prompted that shift in language or...?

Renee Racine (01:01:09):

No, I don’t.

Elio Colavito (01:01:12):

And how do you think that the Pussy Palace has impacted lesbian, queer women’s, and trans sexual culture in Toronto, if it had an impact at all?

Renee Racine (01:01:22):

I would like to think it did. I don't know because I'm not out, and in the scene, and going to bars, and going to events like this anymore. But I expect that it did. I mean, just the fact of its existence would have meant that it was okay to have spaces like this and that people would have come to expect them. And I know that similar things have popped up in other cities, and that other women's communities are now getting to enjoy them as well. So, I think it probably did have a really profound, long-term effect on the community.

Elio Colavito (01:02:07):

Well, the last question, we've reached the end, is there anything else that you would want to share about your experience that my questions haven't allowed you to speak to?

Renee Racine (01:02:16):

I think I've talked your ear off. No, I think I got to everything.

Elio Colavito (01:02:22):

Well, I think this was the perfect amount of time for an interview, in my opinion. But if there is anything else that you feel like is relevant or that you want to say, now is your time, so go ahead.

Renee Racine (01:02:34):

No, I'm good. I think I'm good.

Elio Colavito (01:02:36):

All right. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share your account of the night, the space, your lived experience of it. We appreciate it, the whole project team so much, so thank you. We can stop the recording. You can stop your recording; I can stop mine.

Renee Racine (01:02:52):

Okay.