

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

Summary: Andrea Ridgley is a 52-year-old, white, settler, cisgender, queer woman. At the time of the interview, Ridgley was working as the manager of the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at Ryerson University. The interview concerns Ridgley's experiences as a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. Ridgley discusses her work in queer community and her evolved understanding of politics and activism, her sense memories of the Pussy Palace, her feelings about having missed the police raid, her reflections on the rights-based discourse that seemed to dominate political responses to the raid, her close engagement with the civil proceedings that followed the raid, and other topics. Ridgley mentions Toronto, Ontario and Chiapas, Mexico. She speaks of the 1990s to 2021 with a focus on the year 2000.

Keywords: Queer; Dyke; Activism; Politics; Legal Case; Police Raid; Queer Youth; Trauma.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:01):

Okay. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Andrea Ridgley on June 25, 2021. And Andrea, are you also in Toronto?

Andrea Ridgley (00:00:18):

I am.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:19):

Okay. Andrea is also in Toronto and is going to tell us a bit about the experience of being a patron of the Pussy Palace on the night of September 14, 2000. So, Andrea, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Andrea Ridgley (00:00:34):

You do. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:35):

Thank you. So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I'm just going to ask a few questions here that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity you hold, categories you occupy, and how, perhaps at least, some of these may have shifted or evolved over the past 20 years. So, if you could start, simply just tell me your name, your age and your preferred gender pronouns.

Andrea Ridgley (00:01:09):

So, my name is Andrea Ridgley, and I'm 52 years old. And my pronouns that I use are she and her.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:18):

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

Andrea Ridgley (00:01:26):

Gender, cisgendered woman. My sexuality, I define as queer and in other spaces I claim dyke very intentionally.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:37):

Can you tell us a little bit about what those terms mean for you and in which sort of spaces you would claim them?

Andrea Ridgley (00:01:45):

Yeah. So queer, really, I think is, when I think about all the ways that I am political in my life and my world, and the way that I'm sexual in my world and my gender expression, it's the only word that kind of encapsulates all of those. And it was really important to me, at some point, to recognize the diversity of gender expressions and sexualities. So, the words that had been around during my earlier, formative years when I first came out were so limiting, and queer really helped with that. And then dyke is really kind of a fun one. I work at a pretty mainstream establishment, and it just brings back a history and an ethos around visibility that's different for me, personally, than lesbian. So, I'll do that just to kind of stir the pot in spaces that I feel that I'm comfortable in. I definitely don't use gay. Lesbian sometimes has been another way of expressing difference when it comes to sexuality, for sure. And that context would be more at work, for example. Yeah. So, dyke and lesbian have slightly different connotations to me. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:21):

Do you care to sort of expand on what you mean there?

Andrea Ridgley (00:03:27):

I, and with absolute reverence, give lesbian this early, feminist, wonderful expression of activism and change that occurred that was really about empowerment and change. And then, the shifting into dyke was a personal shift that happened for me in the 90s, really, and my growing political nature and involvement in community politics. So, lesbian will do, like it's a bit of a tip of the hat in certain circles to pay homage to that history. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:09):

I see. Thank you. I mean, maybe you've already sort of touched on this, but curious if this description of gender and sexual identity might have been different around 2000 when the Pussy Palace events took place.

Andrea Ridgley (00:04:23):

Yeah. I think the only thing would be that I held bisexual in a really stronger place because I identified as bisexual at the time, recognizing the complexities of dating a trans man and that being complicated. But also, there was a politic at the time that was about visibility and the need to say that. So, I don't use that as much anymore, so that might've been a shift for sure. And then, obviously, recognizing more the importance of naming being assigned female at birth and my cisgender-ness.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:06):

Right. This came later?

Andrea Ridgley (00:05:08):

Yes. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:11):

And what about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How do you express yourself through those types of categories?

Andrea Ridgley (00:05:19):

So, white, settler, able-bodied, of Scottish descent would be how I would recognize myself in those categories. In terms of class, coming from lots of privilege in terms of grandparents and middle-class, middle-upper-class, and then raised by a single mom. But that's still entitled me to lots even in our poverty. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:58):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what can you share about your particular educational path either inside or outside of traditional institutions?

Andrea Ridgley (00:06:08):

Yeah. Raised at the breast of feminism and intergenerational feminism of my grandmother who was also a single mom of three, baker, hairdresser. And that gave me a very particular kind of education. And my mother also was very much in the 70s, so more radical feminism. So, that was a very particular kind of education. I never thought that I would go to do anything other than my undergrad. So, after I did University of Toronto, Women Studies and Political Science, then went on to work. And then, as I was working in youth development, community development, I was like, "I want to do more specialized work," and so I went and got my master's after a couple of years. And then, that's it.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:07):

And what was your master's in?

Andrea Ridgley (00:07:09):

Social work. Yeah. Yeah. I had been volunteering at what's called the Supporting our Youth Project at its very beginning. So, I was looking for volunteer work, after I graduated, that was within queer community because it was like I had just started to come out. I had been out for a couple years, but wanting to get more involved in the queer community. And that was one way to do it, is volunteering, which I still recommend highly. And so, through that experience is how I identify going to do my master's in social work because it was community-based project working... Bringing queer adults and youth together in many different facets. It still exists.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:58):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And do you care to sort of expand a bit on the kinds of activities that occupy your life these days, professionally?

Andrea Ridgley (00:08:09):

Sure. So, I went from working in social work in terms of community development and running groups, as well as doing community-based healthcare work to then deciding that I wanted to not go contract to contract anymore. So, I started working at George Brown teaching the Assaulted Women and Children's Counsellor/Advocate program. But I could not get a full-time job there, it still was contract to contract. So, then I went to do a contract at Ryerson University and then fortunately was able to get a full-time, permanent position. And now I am currently the manager of what's called the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:55):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Excellent. Thank you.

Andrea Ridgley (00:08:57):

Perfect. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:59):

And how about back in 2000? What kind of things were you up to then, professionally?

Andrea Ridgley (00:09:04):

Yeah, I had to think about... I'm sure you're having a lot of people say that, right? Like who the heck... What was I doing? So, I had just graduated, or I was just in my master's program at that time and working in community and the Supporting our Youth project. And in 1999, I and Franco Boni from Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and a woman named Adrian who's a visual artist, created what was called the Buddies Summer Youth Project in 1999. So, I was working on that as well as going to school.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:46):

Oh, my goodness, Andrea, this is wild. I worked in the Buddies Youth Program from 2000... So, I was a participant there in 2006, in PrideCab.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:00):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:02):

And then, I went on in 2010 to 2015 to be a teaching-artist in PrideCab, just sort of like running PrideCab. And I've heard this story of the evolution of the project and that at one point it included a social worker, and I meet you. This is wild.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:24):

Oh, that's so great. Oh wow.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:26):

Sorry to hijack your interview.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:29):

No, that's great. Who was the artistic...? Who was there? Was it Brendan [Healy], when you were there?

Alisha Stranges (00:10:36):

Well at first... Well, from 2006, I can't remember. It might've been somebody else.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:42):

David Oye.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:43):

David Oye. But for a time, most of my time it was Brendan [Healy] and then, later, Evalyn Parry.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:50):

That's so funny.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:52):

Yeah. This is just wild.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:54):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:55):

Well, maybe that'll be a separate, private conversation.

Andrea Ridgley (00:10:59):

I would be very interested. Yeah, that program has changed quite a bit. Yeah. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:03):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrea Ridgley (00:11:04):

Oh, that's amazing.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:05):

Yeah, absolutely. Oh, well this is a bit of a hard right here, but we're also curious, what role, if any, religion or spirituality plays in your life?

Andrea Ridgley (00:11:19):

I always like... I would say I'm a spiritual person when I give myself space to be. I come from a background of an atheist grandmother. Science was her religion, and I grew up being very indoctrinated with anything

anti-religion was definitely seen as one of the problems in our society and in terms of equity. And then that shifted more in the 2000s, probably, with my own personal development and some projects I was working on that kind of opened up the idea of spirituality. So yeah, I would say I'm interested and in engaged in thinking about spirituality, but I haven't done anything focused in terms of figuring out what that means entirely.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:21):

Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. Is there anything else that you think would be important for folks to know about how you understand your different identities today as compared to 20 years ago?

Andrea Ridgley (00:12:41):

I guess just... I made that comment in terms of being able to acknowledge and understand more about gender and gender expression, I would say the same in terms of my understanding of activism. And as a settler and when I went to school and the political movements I was a part of, it was very outward focused in terms of what I can do to change the world rather than I think a shift that's happened is really, "Okay, who am I? And how am I contributing in who I am in terms of white supremacy and anti-black racism," for example. Like, how is that...? My responsibilities there. I think that would be another major shift that has happened within my own identity that shows up in lots of different ways, including my gender and sexuality, I'd say. Yeah. So, yeah, I mean, lots has changed. I probably don't hold as much of a... Yeah, no, you know what? Never mind. TMI.

Alisha Stranges (00:13:59):

Okay. Well, thank you for the small snippet. I appreciate it. So, I'm going to invite you now to travel back in time to the fall of 2000, when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse [Committee] would have been preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. What do you recall about how you may have first learned about the Night of 2000 Pussies bathhouse event?

Andrea Ridgley (00:14:30):

It was... Because I was involved in youth work at the time and was involved at Central Toronto Youth Services, which had a lot of queer, it also had an LGBT, at that time, program for adults, queer adults, gay and lesbian, trans adults, there was a big component of social, right? The social and being involved in community. So, I would've probably learned about it there as well as within my friendship groups. I had just been dating someone who worked at the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre or was on the board. And yeah, I think that's probably how I found out about it.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:21):

Right. And before deciding to attend that night, had you been to any other Pussy Palace event or other public sex event before?

Andrea Ridgley (00:15:32):

It's hard to remember the chronology of my involvement because that was not the first one. Right? So that was third, in 2000. Was it the...?

Alisha Stranges (00:15:49):

I think the fourth, actually.

Andrea Ridgley (00:15:50):

The fourth, okay. So yes, I had been to previous ones before, absolutely. And I was with a fairly new friendship group who was very interested and engaged in, like, play and play parties, but nothing formalized outside of these more social gatherings. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:16:14):

And what was it about the Pussy Palace events that intrigued you or captivated your attention, personally?

Andrea Ridgley (00:16:27):

When I first came out, I was with my friendship group, was very serial monogamous. And I was feeling like I was shifting and changing in terms of the kinds of politics I was interested in engaging in, and sexuality that I was interested in engaging in. I started to really identify with femme identity in a political way that my friendship group at the time wasn't as engaged with. And I wanted a little bit more with the G20 and there was a number of different political events that had happened that I started becoming a little bit more radical, comparatively, to my friendship group. So, I was really looking to shift friendship. And my new friendship group was really interested and engaged in it. And for me, personally, I was so curious, so curious about what it was to express my sexuality in a very public way that I certainly had never thought was even a possibility or something that I might be... So, there was definitely a burgeoning kind of interest in being part of that and what that meant for me and my sexuality.

Andrea Ridgley (00:17:54):

And it just felt so powerful, right? Like, it was completely different than anything that had existed, politically. Right? There was, like, the way that I was brought up in my feminism to think that it had to be intellectual. Right? So, if we acknowledge and own our sexuality in it, other than like in intimate partner experiences, then it was degrading our political message or political objectives. And to have those two, my queerness and my politics, start to join was really amazing, it was really... Yeah. Yeah. But it scared the shit out of me. I think I was so up my own... Like, at that age, I at least was assuming everyone was looking at me. So, it took a lot to get me to kind of own that space in any way I did, which was not very much. Until later. Like, I kept going to when it became Oasis [Aqualounge] and then I felt a burgeoning embodiment of the space in a different kind of way for my own evolution. But back then, it felt a little bit different. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:14):

So, my next set of questions may seem a little inconsequential, but I'm curious about that space and time during which a person goes from deciding to attend an event like this to becoming an official patron. So, what can you remember about where you were before you made your way to Club Toronto that night?

Andrea Ridgley (00:19:38):

There was a lot of debate within our community, in working with queer youth, whether or not it was appropriate for us to go. We had an ethos around, if that's the correct term, around, "should we ever...?" And we always talked about this in group with... I co-ran a coming out group for young women. And if we were to see each other publicly, and they wanted to acknowledge us, cool. If they didn't, we would do what we could to exit the situation. So, the importance of queer youth taking up space in queer community. So, I was conflicted about it because I assumed that there would be youth there that I was working with. At the time, I don't think I was working, I wasn't facilitating that group anymore, but I certainly involved in the Buddies Youth Project and those gals were definitely going. So, it was complicated. So, I went with the intention of showing support and being present. Yeah. Yeah. I can't remember your original question.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:52):

I'm curious, I guess. So, you're speaking now about kind of where you were maybe psychologically, emotionally. But I'm also curious about, literally, where were you in space. Coming from work or...

Andrea Ridgley (00:21:09):

Yeah. Where would I have been coming from? I would have had to have gone home to change. Definitely. Yeah, I don't really remember that particular night with any distinction.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:29):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's okay.

Andrea Ridgley (00:21:30):

Yeah. Yeah. I was trying to remember; did I take a cab or would I have ridden my bike? Do you know? But I think I took a cab because I remember leaving and taking a cab. Yeah. Anyway...

Alisha Stranges (00:21:43):

And where you planning to go together with somebody or on your own to meet people?

Andrea Ridgley (00:21:50):

I think I went on my own, but I was definitely meeting people there. And most of my friends that were planning on engaging in a more substantive way in terms of play or rooms, I was feeling like, because of my youth work piece, that I would be visiting, and I did, but I wasn't participating as much, I think. Yeah. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:22:20):

And do you recall how long you would have been planning to stay, knowing that it went all night?

Andrea Ridgley (00:22:28):

I think, to be honest, and I can't remember if it was this night or previous nights, I never got propositioned once at any bathhouse for any action, except with the friends that I played with. So, I tried to play the games, I filled out my thing and put it on the thing. So, I think, by that one, I probably made the intention that I was going to support and it was more of a social thing. Like, I was going to go and hang out and dance and all the rest of it, that if I was going to go, that was okay by that point. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:19):

Got you. Yeah.

Andrea Ridgley (00:23:20):

Yeah... which is what ended up happening.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:21):

Okay. So, curious about the look you might've been going for. What do you recall about what you might've worn?

Andrea Ridgley (00:23:37):

I gravitated, at that time, towards what was called then, maybe it still is now, kind of like a diesel femme kind of thing. So, that strong persona of, like, miniskirt and ripped fish nets and little top and bangles and really dark mascara and eyeliner and flattened hair and crimps. And boots instead of high heels, although high heels did come out later, but yeah, yeah. So, it was like sexy, strong, and feminine empowerment, was probably the look.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:26):

Right. Right. And any particular colour palette?

Andrea Ridgley (00:24:29):

Yeah. Black and red. Those were my colours, black and red. Which, looking back at the pictures, that was a lot of our colours. A lot of us who were doing this kind of thing.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:42):

How did this deviate from what you would kind of wear normally outside the Pussy Palace? Is this sort of in keeping with it, or is this specifically for the Pussy Palace?

Andrea Ridgley (00:24:53):

Probably, as a youth worker, it was probably specific. Not that you couldn't be sexy working with youth. No, it wasn't... It was probably just amped up more and a little bit intentionally sexual or provocative. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:13):

And what were you trying to feel in the outfit or to communicate to others?

Andrea Ridgley (00:25:20):

Power, sexiness. Could be sexy and powerful and femme.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:27):

Yep.

Andrea Ridgley (00:25:28):

Yeah. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:30):

So, curious now about the space itself. So, you see you get inside, can you describe what you remember about the space?

Andrea Ridgley (00:25:42):

It is kind of merging a little bit with Oasis [Aqualounge], right, so I might be wrong. But definitely the check-in area, I remember it was so great that the people who worked the desk were so kind and friendly and welcoming, and there was a real sense of... That, that was an important, intentional piece, right? That

people... When you first come in... And then, if I'm not mistaken, the bar, and then the dance floor was right there. And going back, the showers and the pool. And then, upstairs is still a bit of a labyrinth in my brain. It does have the upstairs, downstairs aspect of it. But I remember it being dark and amazing music and sweaty bodies and amazing outfits and so much joy, like, so much joy. That's what I remember. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:48):

And which parts of the space would you gravitate towards?

Andrea Ridgley (00:26:54):

I would hang out in rooms with friends, like the sling room and stuff that was, if I remember correctly, kind of a bigger space. Dance floor, for sure. Poolside was a great place to go and chat and hang out. So, those were the main places. And then I definitely visited the other rooms to check out what was going on, for sure. Yeah. Yeah. The pool and dance floor and private rooms.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:26):

And what was the atmosphere like inside the club at its height?

Andrea Ridgley (00:27:32):

I said before, just joyful essence and celebration. But there was always an underlying, in which was my own projection, I'm sure, of anxiety. Right? Sort of this nervousness, this idea of, who's there? Who's seeing me? Who am I seeing? The classic ex, is my ex here? What's going to happen if I see them? What I learned later about myself is that even though I express myself outwardly, I'm actually quite anxious. I am a bit of an introvert, but that extroverted introvert kind of idea. So, when I get anxious, I tend to get bigger rather than... So, I have lots of memories of, like, the next day going, "Oh my God, what did I say? What did I do?" So, that would be the two biggest emotions, absolute joy and freedom, and intense anxiety and nervousness. Yeah. They can exist mutually.

Alisha Stranges (00:28:54):

We've been told that there was a photo room where patrons could have Polaroids of themselves taken. Did you spend any time in that room?

Andrea Ridgley (00:29:06):

I did. At that time, Chloë Brushwood Rose, who was the photographer, she was kind of dating my roommate but from before. And so, I knew her and I looked up to her. And I watched photos happening. I went to my storage unit to try to find all my stuff, but it's buried in the back, so I didn't get to pull out much of my things. But I don't think I would've posed for a photo unless it was a group shot like with my friends, and I don't recall that. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:49):

Is there anything you can remember vividly about the experience of sort of bearing witness to photos being taken?

Andrea Ridgley (00:29:57):

Yeah. I remember that... I think, if I'm not mistaken, there were two chairs or one chair, the way that it was set up, there was definitely space given for voyeurism. Right? But there was something really amazing about watching people pose and take up that kind of space and that it was okay to do. Growing up having been socialized female, that we're not allowed to do that, we're not supposed to do that. People being really interested and engaged in showing off was wonderful. Yeah, but I still didn't see myself doing it at the time.

Alisha Stranges (00:30:44):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I want to get a sense for the impression that the space made on your senses, if anything is still kind of lingering. So, I'm going to invite you into a little bit of an exercise here. I hope it doesn't feel too funky, but just go with me to the best of your ability and I'll kind of do it with you. So, if you can just sort of really get comfortable in your seat, so you can feel the weight of your body sinking into your couch.

Andrea Ridgley (00:31:11):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alisha Stranges (00:31:14):

Yeah. Take a sip of water, relaxing in your arms, let them lie in your lap. Soften your gaze, or even close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that. And then, just take a couple breaths here, in and out. Relaxing your jaw, and with each inhale, allowing yourself to sort of re-inhabit the space of the Pussy Palace. Imagine you're trying to get back to one or another location within the Pussy Palace. Don't worry too much about which location is coming to mind, whichever one is coming to mind is a perfect one to work with. And from this sort of embodied, breathy, the contemplative space, just look around and tell me what it is you can see.

Andrea Ridgley (00:32:39):

I see I'm in a room, and my friends are in the room, strangers are in the room, watching. My friends are in a sling. And at this point, it's not so much watching sex as much as it is hanging out and talking and just being in that space.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:27):

And if you could distil this space into a single colour, what's the predominant colour that's coming through?

Andrea Ridgley (00:33:34):

Black.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:37):

And what can you hear?

Andrea Ridgley (00:33:43):

Muffled music and talking and laughter.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:57):

And what are the sort of lingering smells? What are the odours that might be there?

Andrea Ridgley (00:34:09):

It always felt damp. There's, like, a dampness, slight mustiness. Yeah. Sometimes the smell of like flavoured, scented lube that's gone slightly off. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:47):

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

Andrea Ridgley (00:35:00):

Initially, when you first asked that, I was reaching out to my friends who are on the sling. We still do actually have quite an intimacy with each other, and it would be about touching their skin or touching the sling itself and pushing on the sling. So, the feel of the material of the sling and their skin.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:28):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And it's a bit of a strange one, but if somehow, magically, you could taste this space that you're describing, what might its flavour be?

Andrea Ridgley (00:35:43):

Salty sweat. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:49):

And you can let that go and open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you. So, I'm curious about who else was there. This next set of questions sort of focuses on your perception of the crowd? How many people about would you say were there?

Andrea Ridgley (00:36:13):

It seemed to ebb and flow in numbers and depending where you were, like, there were definitely parts... I can remember not spending a lot of time on the dance floor because it was always crowded, which is great. I love a sweaty dance floor, don't get me wrong. But it's such a small dance floor, if I remember correctly, and there was always other things to do. Yeah. What was the question again?

Alisha Stranges (00:36:45):

How many people?

Andrea Ridgley (00:36:45):

I'm still there.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:50):

I should have taken more time.

Andrea Ridgley (00:36:53):

Yeah. So, it varied, like, to hear afterwards, what was the estimated? Like, 350 people or something like that? I don't know if it ever felt like that, but there were definitely places that were very congested. Yeah. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:11):

And how would you—

Andrea Ridgley (00:37:12):

So, lots of people, lots of people coming and going, passing each other. There was kind of a way of moving through the space. That “stop and linger...” Because there was always someone behind you or in front of you, unless you were in very particular places in the space, you would have to stop traffic to stop and linger. So, I think that inhibited some voyeurism or checking out spaces that might have been more possible for people. So, I remember that definitely, that sense of having to go, “Okay, I'm turning right here.”

Alisha Stranges (00:37:56):

Right.

Andrea Ridgley (00:37:56):

Good luck. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:00):

So, almost like no capacity to really assess how many people were there because you're not in any one space for too long?

Andrea Ridgley (00:38:07):

Yeah. I mean, this is what was really lovely about the pool area and about the individual rooms where my friends would hang out and play is that those were like oases, those were, like, special places where you can just like... Oh, and everyone used to smoke outside. Part of the pleasure of smoking outside of a bar or club was just that ability to just kind of ground yourself and connect in a more substantive way with other people who were there. Yeah. Yeah. So, there were definitely quiet spaces, but yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:48):

I don't know how much you'll remember about this, especially since you're dodging left and right, but how would you describe the composition of the crowd along lines of gender, sexuality, race, things like this?

Andrea Ridgley (00:39:02):

Yeah. I was part of conversations at that time that was very much about what that space should look like and feel like. I remember that the women and who worked at the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre were kind of like goddesses to me because they were real leaders in our community that I didn't know or have access to, and their ethic... They seemed ahead of trying to create spaces in terms of recognizing intersectionality, especially for racialized people. And then the conversations, like, we had just had, if I'm not mistaken, it was like, I remember at the time being really interested and engaged with Viviane Namaste had just come earlier to speak. And Kyle Scanlon at The 519 who I always partnered with around the youth work. There was a real

conversation happening about what constitute women's space and what it was to reach out and ensure inclusion of trans people.

Andrea Ridgley (00:40:25):

So, I remember there was an older generation of people, like these women from the TRCC [Toronto Rape Crisis Centre] and MWAR [Multicultural Women Against Rape], but there wasn't anyone older that I can remember. Right? So, the intergenerational piece wasn't as present. People of differing abilities. I remember there being some lip service to that, but how to actualize that in that kind of space... But the other kinds of intersections, it was definitely one of the only spaces I personally had been to in a queer space that had a mix in terms of racialization. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:07):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And thinking about your own positionality, how did it feel for you to exist in your body in that crowd?

Andrea Ridgley (00:41:19):

I was not aware of my privilege moving through that space. Yeah. I think not having really grounded or claimed my inner kind of acceptance of who I was and what I was doing there prevented me from... Yeah, I think I was more nervous than anything. So, that probably prohibited my expression a little bit.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:00):

So, we're kind of getting down to the bit here, what I'd like to get into, what your experience was around the raid, if any. So, we know at 12:45 a.m., five men, all plainclothes police officers, entered the club and stayed about 90 minutes. Were you still in the Pussy Palace when they arrived?

Andrea Ridgley (00:42:22):

I was not. I had left.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:25):

And around what time did you leave?

Andrea Ridgley (00:42:30):

I think I must've left just shortly before. Like, I have a weird, vague memory of something... It's hard to think if it was this time or another time where... And it might've been after, like the follow-up times, there seemed to be an odd feeling or presence outside when I left. So, not like a cop car or anything like that. But I don't remember if after that, if other bathhouses, the cops were present outside. But I have, and I don't know if it was that night or not... But yeah, I was unaware of what happened until I got texted. Texted? It would've been... What was it, like, called probably by friends? Fax machined

Alisha Stranges (00:43:32):

Carrier pigeon-ed.

Andrea Ridgley (00:43:33):

That's right.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:37):

Well, what do you recall about what would have prompted your decision to leave? Just done or—

Andrea Ridgley (00:43:44):

Not getting action and seeing too many youth that I worked with. It was their space; it was their time. It was a constant thing in my life at that time. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:54):

Right. So, somebody called you to kind of let that the raid would have happened. What are your thoughts or feelings about having missed that part of the evening?

Andrea Ridgley (00:44:14):

My thoughts and feelings? It was interesting. There was kind of a division in my friend group around... I was involved in some actions previous to this where interactions with police... And in Mexico I was involved in what was called a Caravan to Chiapas and having direct experience with state authorities. I think I would have liked to have been there to help. I think the people who were there did an amazing job. But this is in hindsight, who knows what I would have been like at the time. So, that would be, just to put my skills, potentially, to use. There's some regret around that, but I definitely got very involved after the raid, for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:19):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrea Ridgley (00:45:19):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:22):

And so, I'm assuming that you would have known folks who were present when the space was raided. Do you have any reflections to share on what you perceive to be the impacts of that experience among folks in your peer group or perhaps youth you were working with?

Andrea Ridgley (00:45:41):

Yeah, it was really mixed. I'm thinking of two people who you've interviewed, who really had a "whatever" kind of attitude of like, "Yeah, just try it. I don't care. Do what you need to do. We're going to continue to be and express ourselves and who we are and that doesn't..." And there were other people who had that kind of anger and understanding their own experience of it, but not necessarily thinking about what it would have been like for the other folks who were there. It wasn't until weeks after, I think, with some of the fundraisers that I started to really understand more of the complexity of what it would have been like for a racialized body in that space to have had. And for the youth I work with, the trauma survivors and what they would have experienced in that place.

Andrea Ridgley (00:47:05):

But at least in my immediate community, even though I worked at a counselling centre, it seemed like the politics... Having had our rights violated was the narrative, rather than the experience of trauma that might've happened for people. I think that trauma-informed work for myself, and this is purely my own observation, really only came later. I'm sure it was happening in other spaces and other places, but within my... I don't remember having a real sense that that work would be really important to be doing in that moment, in addition to the activism, and the organizing, fundraising. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:58):

So, when you say this feeling that that trauma may have been present there and something that we need to think through this idea for you or a realization came much, much later, like, years later? Or it's in retrospect, which you realize that? Or...

Andrea Ridgley (00:48:19):

No, I think I would have recognized it and been able to name it. But it's only in my growing understanding of the day-to-day experiences of people in my community that I can embody it more. My ability to understand what that might've been like has grown. So, I think I had an intellectual understanding of it and my own kind of feeling about it. Do you know what? Yeah. So, it's just deepened. How about that? It's just deepened over the years as my own awareness and consciousness has grown. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:00):

Yeah. And you shared just a little earlier that you'd got more involved. In what ways did you get involved, in the community activism, I'm assuming?

Andrea Ridgley (00:49:11):

Yeah, I went to all of the things. It was my favourite kind of activism. All of my previous work, even though there were queer people present in my previous political work, it was the first fully-embodied, queer experience of activism. So, whether it was the going to the 51 Division party protest where I met one of my best friends who I was friends with until very recently. I went to all the fundraisers at Pope Joan. Yeah. And then I went to every single day and every single moment of the court case. I was obsessed with it.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:12):

Can you say a little bit more about what prompted the obsession?

Andrea Ridgley (00:50:18):

Yeah. Well, it was the first time... It was also a big shift for me and my understandings, my political understanding of... So again, my intellectual, having graduated in political science, my early activism, I was fortunate to learn from some amazing people at UofT [University of Toronto], NourbeSe Philip being involved with the *Into the Heart of Africa* piece and the Saigon. There was all these pieces, but this was... So, I was aware and engaged in how the state worked. But this was my first experience, I think, of actually really seeing... I think Chanelle [Gallant] has talked about this. I thought that we could reform things. I thought that change could be about working the system from within. Or I gave lip service to the idea of activism making change, because historically it has. This was the first time I actually witnessed right in front of me state intention to lie, to deceive, to gaslight the embedded misogyny, the homophobia, the transphobia, the arrogance of the police.

Andrea Ridgley (00:51:56):

Yeah. And I thought it was really important and I had the luxury of time at the time to be able to do this. It was important for me to bear witness to that process and also to provide support when I could. I'm getting emotional. The people who had to get on that stand and withstand what happened and what was being said to them, it was really important for me to be present for them and to let them know that they weren't alone. And there weren't a lot of us who were able to go to those court dates. So yeah, it was a combination of all of those pieces together. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:44):

Yeah. Well, what was it like for you to sort of have this, I don't know if you'd call it a moment of realization or just a very profound... Something you can't turn away from, like, what you thought was possible in the world suddenly might not be. What was that like for you?

Andrea Ridgley (00:53:04):

I think it was intensely motivating in terms of helping me decide what my life purpose was and what I was going to be doing. I was at a time of transition career-wise, or thinking about future. It helped solidify those pieces of me, and just solidified as well the importance of queer activism. So, understanding more, especially through the Buddies Youth Project, the whole original intent of that project was to bring... A good portion of our money came from Heritage Canada, right, so it was about bringing elders and youth together and recognizing and understanding our history and carrying on that legacy. And that also was further enforced for me, like, that there needed to be an understanding of what was happening in a historical context. Right?

Andrea Ridgley (00:54:08):

So, I think about the bathhouse raids, right, I mean, that was one of the best things about being in that space, Club Toronto, was taking up these gay male spaces. Right? That I had, up until then, really felt... Like, gay men were kind of alien to me in a lot of ways because they weren't feminists necessarily, at least the gay men that I had contact with. And so, I felt like there was this separation in our communities. Whereas during that work of that time, really making those connections and seeing that there was diversity within the gay male community as well.

Alisha Stranges (00:54:48):

Yeah. Well, it was later revealed that, before the plainclothes officers entered the space, there were two undercover women officers, which I believe came out in the court proceedings. How did it feel to learn later that there were outsiders in this space surveilling patrons?

Andrea Ridgley (00:55:11):

I always assumed we're being surveilled. Yeah. I was part of many groups that there was such a time, at that time, of infiltration, CSIS [Canadian Security Intelligence Service] infiltration in different activist groups. The work that I was doing in Chiapas [Mexico] was definitely being monitored. There would be an assumption that it would be surveilled. The fact that it was women in the space, I can't say that I would have assumed that, necessarily. Yeah. Yeah. That feels different. Definitely, in terms of the way that people would have been or could have been vulnerable. And those women, like, what the...? I'm trying to remember. I know I have a journal somewhere where I wrote my reflections of the trial down. And I don't know if this is true at all, but I kind of remember one of the women being more sympathetic. I don't remember. I don't know if I'm making that up, but I'm determined now to go back and find those journals because I remember something about... Yeah. Yeah. But I don't remember when I became aware of that, that had happened. That there were those officers. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:54):

Well, when you made the decision to attend the events, I'm curious, what you might've been hoping to experience and how your lived experience of the night compared with your expectations for it.

Andrea Ridgley (00:57:10):

Disappointing.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:14):

Well, yes. You were not propositioned.

Andrea Ridgley (00:57:16):

I was not propositioned. Until more recently, like in the last 10 years probably, I think I would have said that it was an unwelcoming space in some ways. Even though the beginning part of being welcomed into the space, I think I might've said back then that it was clique-y. Like, I might have said that there were people who knew each other and that the cruising was very particular. But in retrospect, I'm not sure if that's true. In retrospect, I'm wondering how much of it was just my own. Like, if I had put myself... Like, why was I waiting for someone to proposition me? Why did I not proposition them? All of this kind of rethinking that you tend to do, reframe some of those initial pieces. Yeah. Yeah. But other than that, the historical significance of it was not lost on me. And it was fun to take what was starting off at, at that time, my own kind of experience of exploring play with people in the more organized space was kind of interesting that that was possible. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:50):

Well, we're nearing the end here. I just have a few more questions. I'm going to sort of pick and choose 'cause I'm mindful of time. But I'm curious about your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace. For you, what is its reason for being?

Andrea Ridgley (00:59:15):

I think there were many different reasons for it being, whether from the organizer standpoint or the people who attended. In terms of creating what was at the time called a safe space, that we'd now probably say more, trying to create a "safer space" for all gender expressions to be present, to express sexuality. At that time, there was the Women Get AIDS, Get Active kind of movement happening of recognizing HIV and AIDS within the women's community and trying to figure out fun ways to do that work within community was one of the motivations. But it does seem like one of the main thrusts because I don't remember, and again, the main piece was about creating space that people could just be themselves in and explore their sexuality.

Alisha Stranges (01:00:28):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And one of the often-cited goals from event organizers, at the time anyhow, was they wanted to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality, queer women and lesbian women's sexuality. Prior to the first Pussy Palace event, which happened in 1998, what do you think might've been contributing to this lack of visibility for queer women, lesbian women.

Andrea Ridgley (01:01:00):

Just this idea that feminists weren't supposed to be sexual or that we wouldn't be listened to or heard or held. There's a long history of homophobia within the feminist movement, never mind racism, ableism. So, the

personal shame that some of us grow up to feel about our sexuality and the expressions of it would be all contributing to that, I think.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:37):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). We know at some point that the name of the series changed from Pussy Palace to Pleasure Palace. Curious if you knew if that shift took place, when it took place, what might've prompted it?

Andrea Ridgley (01:01:51):

I don't remember that. But I do remember the conversations about the presence of particularly trans men. And I know this because I'd started dating someone shortly after who identified as trans, and he was really clear that he didn't think that was his space. Right? So, there was this interesting piece happening around trans people, non-binary people feeling that that was their space and ensuring that that felt like it was to them versus those who... Not versus, but in addition to. Although it got heated, right, about that being that they shouldn't be there, but they themselves saying they should be there, trans men. And then, the long legacy of TERFism within lesbian feminist movement. So, I imagine it might've had something to do with the fact that not all women have pussies, if I was to guess, but I don't recall.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:10):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, I just want to leave some space here for you to kind of offer any final reflections, share anything about your experience that maybe my questions didn't really allow you to speak to.

Andrea Ridgley (01:03:33):

Since you and the ArQuives have started this project, a couple of times, I've raised it with friends about, would we want this now? Like, would you go to a Pleasure Palace? Would you do this? And I was asking a sex worker friend of mine if they still exist, not just during COVID. But I know that play parties still exist, even during COVID. But I think about all the places that have closed down, did she think that they would reopen again? Like, would there be...? So, thinking on one hand about not wanting it to be historically part of a particular time and place, same in terms of queerness, like queer sexuality. Yeah, so those are some of the things that I think about. And then also, the fact that police continue to invade our spaces, and they continue to disregard our rights, and they continue to ensure fear as best to their ability, and that the feminist movements and our queer communities do, because of structural inequities and other reasons, divide over particular pieces around sexuality. And yeah. Yeah. I think these issues and the questions that come up from that raid continue to this day. Yeah. So that would be the only other thing I think I didn't really address.

Alisha Stranges (01:05:22):

Is that where you'd like to leave it, Andrea?

Andrea Ridgley (01:05:27):

I guess so. I've talked a lot.

Alisha Stranges (01:05:34):

And I've loved that you have, yes.

Andrea Ridgley (01:05:39):

You're lovely. Thank you. I mean, I think it's always kind of an eye roll when people get nostalgic. But there were lots of problems with that time, and I'm sure that there was lots of ways that that space was exclusionary and privileged and... Tons and tons of ways. But the activism that happened afterward was so special to me personally and to my friends. And that was the rise also of trans rights, but sexuality and femme and resurgence of butch-femme, and then also sex workers rights and inclusion in our work, right, as activists. That all kind of happened around the same time, and I think about it like Revenue Rez, there was like the occupation, and Indigenous movements, the G20. There's lots of shit happening now, don't get me wrong. And BLM [Black Lives Matter] is a great example. Another example is, like, the intersection of sexuality and trans rights and sex work and ableism. But I guess, it's just a little bit nostalgic for me because it was such a special time in my own awakening and engagements in queer community. Yeah. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:04):

Well, thank you so much, Andrea.

Andrea Ridgley (01:07:04):

Blah, blah, blah.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:07):

No, no, no, I love it. I love it. Thank you so much for sort of taking the time to journey back 20 years. I know it can be a challenge, but it's an honour to bear witness to your reflections and memories and experience. Thank you.

Andrea Ridgley (01:07:20):

Thank you. How has it been for you? Are you exhausted?

Alisha Stranges (01:07:27):

Well, maybe we should just pause the recording first, and then I'll go into it.