

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Terri Robertson
Conducted on April 28, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Terri Robertson is a white, Canadian woman who identifies as a pansexual femdom and a “green witch,” with a love of gardening and a passion for pre-colonial spirituality. At the time of the interview, in 2021, Robertson was 63 years old. She was living in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic while working as an Expressive Arts Therapist. Part of her practice involves service to street-involved adults in Toronto’s downtown core. The interview mostly concerns her memories of being a volunteer dungeon mistress and body painter for the September 14, 2000 Pussy Palace bathhouse event. Robertson discusses her sense memories of the Pussy Palace; her perception of the crowd as politically divergent; her experience of seeing police outside of the club before entering; her recollection of the raid; her interactions with police officers inside the club; and other topics. Robertson shares how her resistance to the anti-sex agenda of second-wave, radical feminism coincided with the arrival of the Palace events. She also reflects on her affinity for third-wave, sex-positive, radical feminism and describes the relationship between the sex worker community’s push for decriminalization and the advent of sex-positive spaces like the Pussy Palace. The interview covers the time period from about 1981-2000, with a particular focus on 1998-2000. She mentions Toronto, Ontario; Montreal, Quebec; Vancouver, British Columbia; and San Francisco, California.

Keywords: BDSM; LGBTQ; Sex-positive; Radical Feminism; Police Raid; Trans; Maggie’s Toronto Sex Workers Action Project; Stella Montreal; Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:01):

There we go.

Terri Robertson (00:00:02):

I’m just organizing myself hang on.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:05):

Oh sure.

Terri Robertson (00:00:06):

I am just trying to figure out one thing. Okay, okay. I actually have published cartoons about the Pussy Palace.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:23):

Really?

Terri Robertson (00:00:24):

Yeah. From back then, 2001.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:28):
In what publication?

Terri Robertson (00:00:31):
Brazen Femme.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:33):
Okay.

Terri Robertson (00:00:34):
It was edited I think by Anna Camilleri. I'm just looking through it... Like, that's one of them.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:45):
Oh, wow.

Terri Robertson (00:00:47):
That was actually at the Pussy Palace, but I think... Like, I have an image in my head that I actually did a cartoon when the police raid happened. I have that image in my head, but I don't see it, I was just checking in the cartoons if that moment was there because it would be interesting for you.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:09):
Yeah, absolutely. After the interview we can chat a little bit about ephemera and Elio [Colavito] can fill you in more, and Elio [Colavito] is handling that. If you've got anything you know of, or you can take some time to look for things, we'd love to work with you to see if we can access either copies or the actual material itself, for sure. We can deal with that after. Alright, so to get going here, I'll just say this is Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and we're in Toronto, Ontario, interviewing Terri Robertson, is that right?

Terri Robertson (00:01:52):
Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:55):
It's April 28, 2021. Terri is also in Toronto and is going to tell us about the experience of being a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. So, Terri, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Terri Robertson (00:02:15):
Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:16):
Before we get into your experience actually with the Pussy Palace, I'm going to ask a few questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different categories of

identity you hold or categories that you occupy, and how at least some of these may have shifted or evolved over time. To start relatively simply, can you tell us your name, your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Terri Robertson (00:02:48):

Sure. Terri Robertson, I'm 63, he/she/us and we. Actually no, that's not right. She/her/us and we. Fake femme, I would have to say. Like, femme, but coming from... Like, my formation was a misfit in the second-wave feminism and, like, radical feminist place, I was a total misfit. I was hiding my miniskirts in the closet the whole time. I came out into third-wave, sex-positive, radical feminism, so that's where I'm at.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:37):

Can you say a little bit more about that, how you would describe your gender and sexual identity today in 2021?

Terri Robertson (00:03:44):

Same.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:47):

What about the time around the Pussy Palace in 2000? Is this when you're saying you're coming into that radical, I forget how you phrased it.

Terri Robertson (00:04:00):

Third-wave, sex-positive, radical feminism was before the Pussy Palace, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:10):

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

Terri Robertson (00:04:15):

Yes. Lesbian, cisgender, kind of pansexual. All over the map. If it consents and its breathing and wants to play, I'm game.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:35):

Can you talk a little bit about your educational and class background?

Terri Robertson (00:04:40):

Class background; grew up with a single parent with a high school education and middle-class aspirations, so very poor. Sorry, what else? Class. Oh, ethnic? I guess I'm Heinz 57 of like Amish, Cockney, potato farmers, that kind of end. I think we traced our roots back through my mom's side to herb vendors in the fourteenth century. There's always been diviners and well-wishers, midwives, in our family on my mom's side. I guess yeah, even our family name on her side means "herb vendor." It's Kimmel, so like maternal, witch name. I like to think of pre-colonial roots in paganism.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:56):

Did that kind of spirituality... Is that present in your life now or just part of your history?

Terri Robertson (00:06:03):

It's always been present; I've always been a green witch using herbs. When people were going to raves, I was making smoothies that were MDMA equivalents.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:17):

From herbs?

Terri Robertson (00:06:18):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:19):

Wow. I'd love to hear more about that.

Terri Robertson (00:06:22):

Big bang out of some of these herbs.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:27):

What kind of activities occupy your time these days? What do you do?

Terri Robertson (00:06:31):

Well, I still garden. I work a lot with homeless people. I've been working in the downtown core with people with street-involved issues, trying to create community capacity through expressive arts therapy. I'm a psychotherapist. That's my fun, heartfelt gig. We have like... When all the programming crashed during the pandemic last year, I took the group to a garden allotment. I'm actually still in touch with the group. We made a Facebook page and we've been carrying on our community effort together. We have a mindful-walking film collective, gardening collective.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:22):

Film collective as well?

Terri Robertson (00:07:24):

Yeah, we make movies on topics that are of interest like, "What do we do with gun violence?" Or, "What would public housing look like if it was done properly?" Stuff like that. Then we put it in film fests. Canadian Homelessness Film Festival; who knew?

Alisha Stranges (00:07:48):

I didn't. There is a Canadian homeless film festival?

Terri Robertson (00:07:52):

Yeah, out of Hamilton.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:55):

Oh, wow. How long have you been doing that for, that work for?

Terri Robertson (00:07:59):

15 years.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:03):

Thinking about the Pussy Palace being back 20 years, were you involved in other kinds of work professionally around that time?

Terri Robertson (00:08:17):

Yeah. There were some complaints on the street with the lesbians that there were some players in the BDSM community that were just not safe. I got together with another person and formed a BDSM women's discussion group that included trans women or any nonbinary person who wanted to join. We still have that group happening, and that, let's see, that would have happened in 1998 or something. We hosted lots of play parties, and we still do, but maybe not now, but it's branched off. We had lots of members. We would meet at The 519 and have monthly discussion groups about any topic, and people would present something new. I got to live out all the things I wanted to live out through that group.

Terri Robertson (00:09:32):

I was invited by the Pussy Palace organizers, like Carlyle [Jansen] knew me; I know her. Asked if I — the first year of the Pussy Palace — if I would come and do lap dancing for the lesbians, and then for all the people who showed up at the... Trans women and trans men and everybody who showed up as a place of belonging for that sex radicalism, at the time. I am deeply embedded. We needed some kind of "peership" because people were getting hurt. We wanted to have a way of creating safety for people who wanted to have a community basically. Now, we're all getting old, we're talking about sex and dementia. Or like, "What are the spaces we can create for ourselves going into our old age dotage?"

Alisha Stranges (00:10:38):

Dotage.

Terri Robertson (00:10:40):

So, there we are.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:42):

What are you coming up with?

Terri Robertson (00:10:46):

Well, I always am going to, "Oh, we need a lesbian or an old queer and sex worker and trans positive farm," but that's probably not going to happen. People have spaces where they live, and we're going to have to be in

community. We'll use our bikes, we'll walk, and we will have backyard around campfire gatherings; that's the way it's going to have to be. Whoever's close, you get to be with them in times, and we're going to have to look out for each other, as we start losing our memories and stuff. Physical active possibilities become different; you know?

Alisha Stranges (00:11:35):

Yeah, absolutely. Well, before we transition to talking more about the Pussy Palace directly, is there anything else that you think would be important for us to know about how you understand the different identities you hold today as compared to 20 years ago?

Terri Robertson (00:11:54):

No, it's the same. It's exactly the same, and I'm fine with that. I still can identify as a lesbian, but I'm bigger. I'm pansexual. I enjoy playing with all sorts of people. And I'm fortunate enough to have a relationship that accommodates this, so yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:23):

Thank you. I want to invite you to travel back in time to the fall of 2000, when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. How did you first learn — if you can remember — how did you first learn about this 2000 event at the bathhouse?

Terri Robertson (00:12:50):

Somebody must have contacted me, and asked me if I would be a dungeon mistress and anything else I wanted to do. I think they had, as an option, body painting, so I signed up for that.

Alisha Stranges (00:13:10):

To work it or to participate?

Terri Robertson (00:13:15):

To volunteer to help.

Alisha Stranges (00:13:19):

Can you talk a little bit about what the role of dungeon mistress might've been?

Terri Robertson (00:13:27):

There was another dungeon mistress; there were two of us. We had a dungeon space, I guess. There was a chair. It was pretty small. I'm getting my years confused too, a little bit, because I remember there was another space upstairs, and then there seemed to be two spaces, but I'm not sure if it was in the same year. But yeah, people would come and be curious and sit with us and hang out, and we would play with them and tease them and see where they were at, and if they wanted to engage in some way.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:08):

Using tools to do this as well or just people?

Terri Robertson (00:14:12):

Yeah, no, we had our floggers and probably a strap and, what else? Oh, probably there was some feathers and things, different sensual things that could be used, cuffs probably, maybe a leash. Pretty sure I had my regular toolkit with me. Nothing super heavy happened in that space. My friend and I had a shift, I think, where we were there for four hours or something. I remember other people in the house kept coming and reporting what's happening in other areas of the house, so that was fun to get these updates. Then there was of course the swimming pool after.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:21):

Was your shift more earlier and then you were—

Terri Robertson (00:15:24):

It would have been 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m., something like that. Don't like staying up that late.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:30):

Okay. So, did you get an opportunity to be a patron, or were you mostly—

Terri Robertson (00:15:36):

Yeah, I did. Before and after I was a patron. It was really cool there was... I don't know if we're supposed to be naming names in this. I'm not naming names; I don't know why.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:48):

That's okay, that's always safer, for sure.

Terri Robertson (00:15:53):

Yeah. There was some illustrious lesbians of the time taking photographs, erotic photos. That was really fun. They had, I remember some kind of curtains and low, maybe red, lighting, and it was fun. Then I was aware there was all these rooms that people had signed up for that they could have some privacy, and then there was people playing out in public too. I remember there was a real convergence of communities. There was quite a few older dykes, gay women and baseball-dyke crowd had come and brought their curiosity. Feminists didn't, at that time, often mingle with all these different communities because they were siloed in the universities at the women centres. It was an interesting salad of identities from that perspective. I also recall that it was quite a lovely opening for trans women who hadn't been included, definitely, in feminist spaces at that time. I was aware that there were some people who were trying to create comfort for themselves in that space, and it was difficult because there were so many of these communities, what we would maybe now know as TERFS, trans-exclusive radical feminists.

Terri Robertson (00:17:40):

I remember that term came out later, but I identified the behaviour and the ideology and the framework was out of radical lesbianism, at the time, and separatism. That's still with us today unfortunately. I started talking about TIRF as T-I-R-F as trans-inclusive radical feminist. Whenever I meet a TERF, I mention that, T-I-R-F instead, and that I don't agree with them. Also, there was an anti-sex worker radical feminist thing happening in the 80s. A segue of information is, I remember being in one of the early Take Back the Night marches in Vancouver in the early 80s, and noticing that there was an Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes. I was at the women's collective at UBC [University of British Columbia], and I made a poster for an Andrea Dworkin talk

on how the right organizes, and is so strong, compared to the left. I was somewhat aware; I must've been somewhat aware of feminist ideology at the time, but Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin had not announced their anti-porn stuff at that time yet. So, my mind was open, and when I saw the Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes, I thought, "That makes so much sense."

Terri Robertson (00:19:33):

What they're doing is work, and that should be supported as a labour issue. That makes so much sense, and I'm so glad they're here with all these feminists because isn't that wonderful? I moved to Montreal and, by then, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin had already gone on their anti-porn tirade, so really anti-sex. At that time, I think it was Marie Arrington from that Vancouver Alliance came to give a talk. I was in the Concordia Women's Collective at that time and made the poster for her to come. There was a panel discussion with Dworkin, no maybe it was Catharine MacKinnon, and I think somebody from Stella's [Montreal], and I think Susan Cole was there from *NOW Magazine* and Marie Arrington.

Terri Robertson (00:20:28):

That was an intersection of where all of these things meant, and I realized, "Oh my God. These radical feminists are actually against sex." I was really, really shocked, and I disidentified with second-wave feminism at that point, that was my big rupture with it. I thought, "No, I'm not part of that. I'm for the labour rates of sex workers and choice over our bodies no matter what we do." That's feminist to me. What they're espousing is not, it's some kind of white, middle-class tunnel vision. From there I moved to Toronto, and that's the moment when I arrived here was with this new horizon to explore.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:20):

I guess I'm assuming that what you're saying is the Pussy Palace events folded in nicely to the realizations you were coming to politically?

Terri Robertson (00:21:31):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:31):

I see.

Terri Robertson (00:21:32):

Yeah, and it made me stronger in that. I felt support and not invisible. I felt visible and like I was contributing to people's health and wellbeing through more sex positivity. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:22:02):

Thank you. I'm going to backtrack just a little bit here. I'm trying to slow down the time between when someone has decided to attend a Pussy Palace event and when they become an official patron or volunteer. I'm wondering if you can remember back to where you were in Toronto before you made your way to the club.

Terri Robertson (00:22:33):

This is only the night that got raided?

Alisha Stranges (00:22:36):

If you can focus it there, that would be helpful. That would've been September 14, 2000.

Terri Robertson (00:22:46):

I was someplace in the gay village, and it was night, and I was walking down Mutual [Street] from the north side of Carlton [Street]. I paused because I saw a police car there with someone who presented as a dyke, wearing a Mac jacket with short hair, kind of scruffy, infiltrator. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. I wonder what they're up to?"

Alisha Stranges (00:23:20):

How many people did you see?

Terri Robertson (00:23:22):

They were three. There was two white, male cops and one short lesbian in a Macintosh jacket with jeans and runners, with short hair.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:38):

Do you remember where and what time that would have been?

Terri Robertson (00:23:41):

Yeah, it would have been around 7:30 in the evening because I was on my way to my shift.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:49):

Right, okay. And they were on Mutual Street, you were saying?

Terri Robertson (00:23:50):

Yeah. On the north side parked against the sidewalk. I just flagged it. Then I continued walking south, and the lights were on the street, and there was no line-up at that point, so I just walked in and signed in. I know that person was an infiltrator because I saw them later inside.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:26):

Did you tell anybody about that?

Terri Robertson (00:24:31):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:33):

At the night, in the Palace, you had mentioned it?

Terri Robertson (00:24:36):

Yeah. "I noticed... Did you see? I just came in there's this police car out there. There's this person dressed as a lesbian." Probably they are, but who knows; it's not my business. I told whoever was around me.

Alisha Stranges (00:24:55):

What was the response? Or is it something you were able to just say, "I'm not sure what's going on, but I'm going to go on with my night?"

Terri Robertson (00:25:05):

Yeah, I just carried on. I didn't actually think there would be a raid. Who would think that?

Alisha Stranges (00:25:16):

Aside from this strange, hard to untangle moment before you entered the club, how were you feeling about the night? How were you feeling?

Terri Robertson (00:25:26):

Excited. I was going to see my friends. I was going to work with my girlfriend and play with people and see what happened. We had a plan to go swim later after our shift. There were things to look forward to.

[crosstalk]

Alisha Stranges (00:25:50):

Sorry.

Terri Robertson (00:25:51):

I was going to do body painting, and I'd never done body painting and I was thinking... My background is as a fine artist. Like, I should know how to do painting. But I didn't know, "Is there something special you're supposed to do?" Like, maybe you're supposed to know tattoo designs and paint them. I wasn't quite sure what it meant, but I found out.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:15):

Well there'll be a little bit of time just a little bit later for you to maybe go into more detail about that. But I just want to pause here and say if you could freeze this moment in time, when you're just about to enter the club and take up your shift as a dungeon mistress, and you could express this moment as a sound, what would the sound of that moment be?

Terri Robertson (00:26:48):

Kind of, mmmmm. Like that. It was a good feeling. I would say that.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:55):

Great thank you. Elio I'm going to pass it over to you.

Elio Colavito (00:27:02):

Awesome. Can you recall anything about what you would have worn that evening?

Terri Robertson (00:27:11):

What, street clothes or inside?

Elio Colavito (00:27:15):

On the street, inside take us through the whole thing from leaving the house or apartment or wherever to arriving.

Terri Robertson (00:27:24):

I was coming from work, so I would have been in some kind of work clothes, probably pants, some kind of slacks and walking shoes. I remember not being in eight-inch-tall stiletto shoes. I was dressed for being out on the street, in a comfortable outfit. It would have been September, so I would have had a jacket. I did not have my outfit on that I was going to be in the rest of the night. But when I got there, I found a space to get changed. Well, they've got locker rooms, right, so I went there and... Actually, I don't remember if they had locker rooms at that time. I don't know if they did, I don't remember.

Elio Colavito (00:28:21):

A few patrons have reported saying that they remember there being a locker room, so I think you're right.

Terri Robertson (00:28:28):

There was way less locker rooms than there is now, that's for sure. They wouldn't have had a locker for every single person. I think I probably stashed my stuff someplace close, like behind the dungeon chair. Anyway, I know exactly what I was wearing. I had a black corset and a black, push-up bra and fishnet stockings that I think were really big diamonds. I had these really great sandals that were platform with a heel that was shaped like that. Actually, I've got a picture of that. That's what I wore. [displays cartoon to camera] That's the shoe. That's the fishnets. I had a leather G-string. There's me giving a lap dance. And then, that cartoon is about me and my friend working and then going swimming, and how on the fire escape we could see so-and-so getting it up the butt by so-and-so, and that was really fun and hot and sexy.

Elio Colavito (00:30:06):

I want to bring you back to the outfit for a quick second. What were you trying to go for with that outfit? How were you trying to feel or portray yourself that night?

Terri Robertson (00:30:17):

Leather femdom.

Elio Colavito (00:30:18):

Do you want to say a little bit more about what that is for the happy listeners, one day?

Terri Robertson (00:30:26):

For the happy listeners? Okay, I remember taking extra care with my hair and curling my hair, and making sure that I had lipstick, and having the shaving of the body so that it's nice and smooth for rubbing up against people, and a nice manicure and pedicure. The proper preparations for a femme to go out. The leather dom part just the fun, playful, open, curious attitude that inspires play and welcomes something to happen, some kind of phenomenon.

Elio Colavito (00:31:22):

Sure, it's up to you. All right so you arrive at the club, 231 Mutual Street, describe the scene outside of the club. What do you remember from before you went in?

Terri Robertson (00:31:32):

It was completely vacant because everybody was having fun inside. At the moment that I arrived, everybody had already gone in. It was like an Edward Hopper painting of night without light on the sidewalk; it was very peaceful and theatrical.

Elio Colavito (00:31:50):

There was no line at the time that you got there. What do you recall about the process of being admitted into the bathhouse?

Terri Robertson (00:32:00):

Well, you have to sign in. I think you got this curly thing with a key. It could be a confused memory, I practically lived there, so it's like partly memories that get stuck. You get a couple of towels. You go in, there was carpet on the floor at some point. The smell. It was when it was mostly a guy's bathhouse, so lots of testosterone. Smell of old splooge clinging on the wall. I don't think they kept it very clean, probably slurp ramp city. It was kind of disgusting and fine. All the furniture had imploded with body fluid. Every seam and any sofa couch is, like, suspect. I'm surprised we didn't all get a cold or something. It smelled like germs in there. And I'm not a clean freak. I love body fluids and stuff, but that place needed to have a clean-up, which I'm glad it finally did. Boys didn't really care so much about stuff like that, at the time.

Elio Colavito (00:33:23):

Right. So, you've mentioned a bit about the space itself. What kind of spaces would you gravitate towards while you were there?

Terri Robertson (00:33:31):

All of them. I wanted to see everything and experience the whole kit. There was a policy of no closed doors, which was great because you could always be looking around and not interfering, but there is...

Alisha Stranges (00:33:52):

Is that even in the private rooms?

Terri Robertson (00:33:54):

Yeah. Maybe I'm wrong, I thought there was a no door shut policy for safety reasons, but I don't know if that's real or not real actually. Could be an invention of my mind.

Elio Colavito (00:34:15):

So, what would you say to the atmosphere of the crowd was like once you were actually inside the club?

Terri Robertson (00:34:22):

Really diverse communities that would never find themselves together any other time. You had this mashup. Like, the bar crowd, like the gay girls and the baseball dykes, who in my opinion are less politicized. You've got them. Kind of judge-y coming up. Unaware or unconscious of sex-positivity and what that might mean. Not having had those conversations, I guess. There was a lot of judgment. At the same time, it's the same... Like, some of the older dykes would be propositioning me and my girlfriend when we would do lap dances, said, "Well, could you come back to our place we'd like to play with you more there." It's like, "Wow." Like, a boundary issue. There was an assumption that actually we were there to be paid, for instance. There was no tipping that I noticed, maybe I wasn't a very good lap dancer. I didn't see exchange like that happening, so it felt inappropriate when that propositioning was happening.

Elio Colavito (00:35:47):

I have two questions based off of what you just said. The first being how did you feel about not being tipped and not being paid to do the work that you did at the event, at the time?

Terri Robertson (00:35:58):

Well, I was there as a volunteer, so I didn't anticipate there would even be tipping. But to my recollection, I did not receive any tipping. Maybe other people did. Maybe some people thought it was super fun to be tipped, and even went off and had some fun and got paid; that's entirely a possibility. That would be an appropriate place for that, but I did not want to cross that particular line with that community.

Elio Colavito (00:36:35):

You mentioned that this space was fairly welcoming, there were lots of diversity in terms of what kind of subcultures and communities were present at the event. How did you feel that they mingled with each other, or did you feel like they remained quite—

Terri Robertson (00:36:50):

No, I don't think they were mingling.

Elio Colavito (00:36:53):

No?

Terri Robertson (00:36:54):

No, I did not see a lot of mingling. I saw people together who would normally appear together, and I saw some people who were kind of isolated. I think there was some kind of... Little bit of drugs that... I remember one person was having a difficult time.

Elio Colavito (00:37:14):

So then, the energy in the room, would you say it was still fairly excitable, happy and pleasant, or were there some tensions? If you had to describe a vibe, what would you say?

Terri Robertson (00:37:28):

I would say there was excitement and tension. Because it's in moments that you're going to come up with these different realities. It's not all one or the other; it's like whatever's happening in the moment. That was my experience anyway.

Elio Colavito (00:37:50):

Do you think you can walk us through the activities that you participated maybe in order, not in order, however you can recall them? But I want you to think about what drew you to them. Can you take us through that?

Terri Robertson (00:38:05):

Me and my friend are kind of loners anyway. We're not public exhibitionist-oriented, and we're fine with that. So, we were really mostly comfortable having something to do, and a place, and a role. When we were playing, it was by invitation. People would step into the room and either play with us or observe or not play with us. That happened for four hours. Let's see, what could I say about that? We were curious about what was going on in other rooms too. I remember the photography room was really fun.

Elio Colavito (00:39:04):

Did you spend any time in that photo room?

Terri Robertson (00:39:07):

Yeah, I just wanted to be there and experience this herstory that was happening. This was the first kind of... Well, I guess it was the fourth one, but to have a repeat was amazing. The first one was really super amazing because it was blowing everybody's mind. I'd only heard about this kind of thing happening in San Francisco at the women's bathhouse there, and it wasn't a sex party. This was fabulous and affirming. I remember me and my friend, I'll just say her name is Petra, had a flow of going inside the house to outside the house. There was this really great... Like, we didn't have our clothes on at one point. We kept our shoes on and not clothes because it was a little bit like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the no clothes. But then we went swimming in our shoes, and that was a really fabulous moment. Because we got to have our femme identities with our lipstick and our hair and shoes in the swimming pool. That was a wonderful moment for us to be swimming, and it wrecked my shoes, but I was still happy.

Elio Colavito (00:40:34):

I want to talk about the Polaroid again for a moment. Do you remember what photographs you took in the room?

Terri Robertson (00:40:42):

I was watching them. Chloë [Brushwood Rose] and Leanne [Powers] were taking the photos, but I guess anybody who showed up with a camera could take photos, I guess, of each other. That would make sense at the time because we didn't have digital photography yet. I was interested in how they got people to disarm and be comfortable in front of the camera. I recall some kind of a smaller space, it was like maybe a red bed kind of a space with lights, I think. It was like combinations of different people. There was some poly action happening, to open that up in that way.

Elio Colavito (00:41:36):

Do you feel that the photographs being taken in that room captured anything unique about the Palace?

Terri Robertson (00:41:47):

Well, the possibility that it could be there was definitely capturing for posterity. That this event definitely happened. Because I think we weren't allowed to take photos just randomly because of privacy issues. That was a space where it could be recorded, and I think people really liked that and gravitated there to create the images. All through the 80s and 90s there was a lack of any kind of sexuality for women and trans people. There was nothing out there. There was this idea that, "Oh, well, we have to create this imagery, otherwise it's not going to be there for anybody later." I think that really fit into that, as part of the puzzle.

Terri Robertson (00:42:42):

I remember Daphne Marlatt, I think, and her lover — I forget the other person's name — had written a book of like lesbian sex poems. Daphne Marlatt and I forget who it is, but anyway. I remember, at the time, that was when I was still in Vancouver, I was in art school, and I filled up an entire sketchbook of responses to their lesbian sex poems and showed them, and they were very touched by that. I know for sure, that would have been 1981 or something, that there was nothing out there. We were not seeing images of any kind of female sexuality or women's sexuality, and there was a need for that. So many years later, that would have been a continuum of that. There still wasn't enough imagery out there to actually feel like you belonged anywhere.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:59):

Can you talk a little bit about what you found out body painting, in the end, turned out to be?

Terri Robertson (00:44:06):

Yeah, sure. I was there with someone who is quite... Very well-known in our community. I was painting her breasts, and I had done a cartoon with Harris Taylor for *Kinesis* out in Vancouver called "The Saga of Little Melon" about two lesbians who want to have a baby, and they end up with a watermelon as their baby. But the melon is quite radical and gets into all sorts of trouble. My idea was, the breast was like this little melon. I forget what I painted on there, but that was the imagery that was coming. That's actually when the raid happened, when I was painting on this person's breast. It seemed very close to me that there was somebody there because we were in quite a small room when I was painting. I looked, and it was a police officer, the one from the car, with a blonde wig; a long-haired, blonde wig.

Terri Robertson (00:45:29):

The police are so crappy at costuming; they're really out of it. They're the worst at figuring these things out. Even at the G7 they'll have a perfectly brand-new baseball cap and a perfectly brand-new backpack. They don't put any effort into their stupid shtick. So, this officer was right there at my shoulder with my paintee. It was really like a compression of worlds suddenly. I was kind of... Like, I felt... I felt... Like, I wasn't afraid. Normal response to a police officer being right there would probably, in me, be fear, but that did not come up. What came up was like, "Why are you trying to look like a lesbian in a police uniform wearing that blonde wig? That is just so weird and stupid. That is just stupid. Leave now." But that was the moment of the raid. We then all had to pack up and shut everything down.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:01):

Did she say anything to you or just hovering there?

Terri Robertson (00:47:06):

It was a man.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:07):

Oh, in a blonde women's wig?

Terri Robertson (00:47:10):

Yes. It was one of the police officers in that cop car.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:17):

Oh, okay. I have definitely misheard this entire bit here. Could you explain that a little more? This person came up—

Terri Robertson (00:47:31):

I was concentrating on this person's breasts. I guess, that's why it was like, "What did I paint on the breast?" is in the foreground is because this thing happened. That was like the advent of everybody having to leave. I was concentrating, but I was aware of this presence of this big person next to me, at my shoulder. When I looked over, I saw tangled mess of blonde wig, with bangs and a guy inside. A man. Like, cisgendered, het guy; not anybody who's supposed to be there. My curiosity was like, "Why is this police officer in a uniform wearing a blonde wig?" That makes no sense. That is just weird. It's like—

Alisha Stranges (00:48:37):

What do you think the wig was...? What we've read and, up until this moment, I've understood about the moment that the police entered, is that they were in plainclothes, so not full uniform but something in between uniform and undercover. I didn't understand what would have been the purpose of them coming in, in a pseudo disguise?

Terri Robertson (00:49:04):

Because they're really stupid at fashion. They've never gotten it right.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:10):

My mind is blown right now. I'm going to pause this for a second because we'll get to, I don't want to take away... Elio's going to take you through a bit more of the time of the raid. I'm going to pause here because I really want to get a sense of the impression that the space has left on your senses, the impression of the space before the raid. I want to walk you through a little bit of an exercise, and I'll do it with you, sort of enter a contemplative embodied moment. Get comfortable in your chair so you can feel your feet on the ground, you can feel your legs on the chair, your back against the back rest. You can soften your gaze and lower it to the floor, or even close your eyes if you feel comfortable, and just breathe. With each inhale, allow your body to re-inhabit some or another space in the Pussy Palace before the raid took place. It doesn't really matter which space is coming to mind just the first one that comes to mind is the best one. Breathing your body back into that space, from this contemplative embodied space that you're creating right now, look around and tell us what it is that you're seeing.

Terri Robertson (00:51:03):

Okay, so, just tell you now?

Alisha Stranges (00:51:12):

Yeah.

Terri Robertson (00:51:16):

Small rooms, dark, dusty, there's people. There's lots and lots of people, very crowded, not even possible to differentiate people. It was dark, and I didn't recognize most of the people because they were from so many different communities. Closeness. There was lots of brushing up against people and lots of texture. You would feel people's outfits as you were passing them or possibly their warm skin. I can't remember if there was a no perfume policy at the time, I don't know. I remember lots of body smells, body-oriented smells, like lots of estrogen- and testosterone-type smells and... Let's see.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:25):

If you could distil-

Terri Robertson (00:52:27):

Staleness.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:28):

Staleness?

Terri Robertson (00:52:29):

Yeah, they hadn't freshened the place up. Oh, and the floor was really wet. Somebody must've dropped beer. There was a damp, wet, yucky thing going on, on the floor in several of the spaces. There was the upstairs front bedroom or living room was a kind of stage area, I think. The outdoor spaces and the lattice of the fire escapes I always found really intriguing because you could tie people up there and have your way with them. The wetness of the warm pool also. The temperature that was so nice in mid-September to jump into a warm pool was really lovely. People sitting around on the cold wet concrete with their feet hanging in the pool, taking a break around it and splashing. There was the whirlpool. At that time, the steam bath and the hot sauna were working. Actually, I had my own hydrotherapy business, so I was doing a Celestina hydrotherapy for women at that time. I was checking out the difference and similarities in what I did and what the Pussy Palace had to offer, so there was that going on.

Alisha Stranges (00:54:05):

You had talked about the sound outside the club as being a hum. What is the sound in these spaces you're describing now?

Terri Robertson (00:54:17):

Joyous. Out in the pool it was full of laughter and people having conversations. Nobody was actually having a scene out by the pool while I was there anyway. But to be outside at night in a pool naked was completely awesome, and still is. There was a little bit of play going on in the whirlpool baths. There was checking out

definitely going on in the saunas. I don't know that they had a pool at that time. I don't think they did, but I don't really remember. I don't remember where it would have been.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:09):

If you could take all of these spaces that you're describing and walking us through and distil them into a single colour, if they could somehow express themselves just as a single colour, what would it be?

Terri Robertson (00:55:27):

I would say dusty red, like stage curtain, like velvet curtain, dusty red.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:41):

You can let that go open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you for indulging us.

Elio Colavito (00:55:49):

Before we move on to the next part, I want to give you the option to take a little lap, get a drink, go to the bathroom, whatever you've got to do like a little two, five-minute break.

Terri Robertson (00:56:00):

I'll take two minutes and come back.

Elio Colavito (00:56:02):

Sure, sounds good.

[interview breaks and returns]

Elio Colavito (00:56:03):

Good if you're good. All right so we're a bit curious about who else was there, and the next set of questions is going to focus on your perception of the crowd. If you could estimate how many people were there that night, what would you estimate?

Terri Robertson (00:56:24):

I have no clue because the rooms are quite small, and I don't even know how many rooms. It just seemed really crowded, maybe there was 50 out by the pool, so maybe 200? Do you guys actually know how many people were there? Like, they would have put a limit on how many people they were allowed in.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:48):

Some estimates are 350 something like that.

Terri Robertson (00:56:54):

I was going to say 300 people.

Elio Colavito (00:56:55):

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

Terri Robertson (00:57:11):

Well, I would say it was like a convergence of a bunch of different communities, mostly white. I remember some BIPOC people were definitely there, Indigenous and Black members of the community were definitely there. People who would have normally gone to [Crews &] Tango were definitely there. That crowd definitely heard about this scene.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:43):

Just want to clarify for the record here, you're talking about Crews & Tango the club on Church Street, right?

Terri Robertson (00:57:51):

Yeah. The trans and... Well, the leather community from The Eagle was definitely there as well. And there were some dykes who used to go to Woody's; they were there. As I've mentioned, the baseball crowd and the gay girl crowd was present, and the sex worker crowd was there. Artists, mostly... Like the people I knew were in the arts crowd, so we all knew each other. There was trans women who were up and coming academics who were there, I remember. A few people came. Early, like, proto-trans men were coming, like Alex and Carey [Gray] and different people were definitely central and there. And like Joel and Mick and Patricia [Salah]. All those guys were all there. Deb Anderson, all of us. We were all there because we knew each other from the art scene, and some from the BDSM community.

Elio Colavito (00:59:32):

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

Terri Robertson (00:59:41):

I felt in my own body. I was happy to be able to express myself in that leather, femdom way and just have acceptance. You know, you can't walk down Yonge Street dressed like that and not get catcalled. It was good from that point of view.

Elio Colavito (01:00:08):

Now, we're going to shift towards the raid, which you've already said you were present at the time and you recall painting somebody's chest, and then there's a police officer standing over you in a wig. Is there anything more about that moment that you remember really vividly that you want to share?

Terri Robertson (01:00:26):

Sure. Just the stupid expression on that guy's face. It was such a misfit, a mismatch of what was actually happening. I think the police always fall into this because, I don't know, they think they're special or something, but there was no compassion. There was no empathy about actually what they were part of, no recognition. I think I even remember there was no smile. It was blank affect, like zero. Just this pasty face under this fringe wig. It was very, very odd.

Elio Colavito (01:01:17):

Did you happen to exchange words with any of the officers?

Terri Robertson (01:01:21):

Yeah, because they indicated that this was the end of the party and people had to pack up and leave. I was not arrested. I didn't think of it as a raid actually. That's what it was. But it's not like we were manhandled and then carried off in a bus; it wasn't like that. I was surprised when I found out that it was a raid over a beer or liquor infraction. That's not a reason. I guess they waited until right at 1:00 a.m. or something, and then came in the house.

Elio Colavito (01:02:09):

What was it like for you being confronted with a police presence, a male presence in this space?

Terri Robertson (01:02:18):

Well, I was very annoyed and angry that this was happening and disturbing our peaceful, consensual evening of just hanging out and doing stuff we wanted to. It seemed ridiculous that they would be there in the first place.

Elio Colavito (01:02:34):

Do you recall when you actually left?

Terri Robertson (01:02:42):

Well, yes. We had to get dressed and go. I guess I did have my bag of stuff with me because I didn't go back to a locker. Then there was these police, so then weird getting dressed in front of police. I don't recall that blonde lingering. I think they went off into a different room to tell people it's over, party's over. Go home now. It wasn't like an alarmist thing. It was under the wire, which was suspect.

Elio Colavito (01:03:27):

This is where it gets interesting because it appears that you may have seen the plainclothes women police officers on your way into the club. You said that you recall looking at that scene, registering it as something, but then going on your merry way.

Terri Robertson (01:03:46):

I don't believe that that was a police officer in that Mac jacket.

Elio Colavito (01:03:50):

No?

Terri Robertson (01:03:51):

No. They were an informer. I believe that because I don't believe that person could possibly be a police officer.

Elio Colavito (01:04:06):

So, then you saw this potential informer back in the space, and you mentioned that you said to your friends like, "Hey, this is that weird person thing that I saw going on outside, I don't really know what to make of this." You didn't say anything to that person?

Terri Robertson (01:04:23):

I don't know that I saw that short person. They're too short to be a police officer basically. You can't be a police officer at that height. They were shorter than me. I did not see them inside.

Elio Colavito (01:04:38):

Oh, I'm sorry I thought you said that you had seen them inside.

Terri Robertson (01:04:41):

I saw the police officer inside.

Elio Colavito (01:04:44):

This is this where I think Alisha and I got confused. This makes a lot more sense. Well then, in that case, after the fact, after the raid it was revealed that before the plainclothes officers entered the club, there were two women police officers attending the event undercover. Did you ever find out about that, in that way?

Terri Robertson (01:05:04):

I heard that, but I don't know who those people would have been. But I don't think that woman that I saw outside was one of the... I think they sent informers in. I did not see any police officer-like people, and I know enough women police officers, I would have recognized them. Maybe they had secret police women officers, I don't know. But anybody who's a lesbian in the police force, we knew who they were at that time. I didn't see those people. But there could be people that I didn't know as well. Police force is pretty big. I can't 100% say that, that person I think is an informant, that I didn't see them inside. I can't say that because it's possible I did. There was just so many people in there. They didn't stand out; I didn't notice further. But it did seem like she was leaning over into the police car, talking with them. Like, who does that? I would never lean into a police car and start hobnobbing with the police. There would have to be a reason. That is why I think that it was probably an informant and not a police officer who went into the Pussy Palace.

Elio Colavito (01:06:35):

Sorry go ahead.

Terri Robertson (01:06:36):

Because we knew who the police officers in the police force who were women were. Yeah. We knew who was on the sex crimes division. There's different people that were identified in the community who would walk in the Pride parade with the police, when police were allowed in the Pride parade — march.

Elio Colavito (01:07:04):

Did you follow the legal proceedings that unfolded, following the raid at all?

Terri Robertson (01:07:09):

No.

Elio Colavito (01:07:11):

Do you recall hearing about it here and there?

Terri Robertson (01:07:15):

Yes. Yes, definitely I believe I was on an e-list for a long time, and there was what happened in the newspapers.

Elio Colavito (01:07:28):

Do you recall how you felt about all of that stuff at the time?

Terri Robertson (01:07:33):

About the litigation?

Elio Colavito (01:07:35):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Terri Robertson (01:07:37):

Big disappointment that that happened, huge disappointment.

Elio Colavito (01:07:44):

Before I transition back to Alisha, I'm just going to leave you at the Palace, so to speak. When you made the decision to attend the event, what were you hoping to experience, and how did your expectations for the night compare to what you had hoped to experience?

Terri Robertson (01:08:04):

I was hoping to experience a sex-positive community in a safe, connecting environment, in the same way that, or better, as the first three. I had big hopes that this could continue and grow. It just seemed like an error that it got shut down. Like, "What are you thinking? This is a good thing. Stop this nonsense." Bring people out of their shells. Have sex-positivity and no repression.

Alisha Stranges (01:08:57):

Our last set of questions here focuses on the impact of the Pussy Palace as a community initiative. You've talked a lot about this already, but I'll just ask some more pointed questions. One of the oft-cited goals for the event organizers was to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. Prior to the first Palace event in '98, it sounds like you would agree that queer women's sexuality was somewhat invisible in the public sphere. What do you think was contributing?

Terri Robertson (01:09:31):

Any women's sexuality was invisible, but yeah especially queer.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:37):

What do you think was contributing to that lack of visibility?

Terri Robertson (01:09:42):

Well, sexual repression in Western civilization. The... What would you call it? The hegemony of heterosexuality as a political regime designed to mess us all up, and have control and power over us.

Alisha Stranges (01:10:03):

What are your thoughts on the—

Terri Robertson (01:10:05):

That was Monique Wittig.

Alisha Stranges (01:10:08):

What's that?

Terri Robertson (01:10:08):

That was Monique Wittig.

Alisha Stranges (01:10:12):

Monique Wittig, yes. Thank you for the reminder. What about the name of the event? We know it changed at some point from the Pussy Palace to the Pleasure Palace. Were you aware of that shift?

Terri Robertson (01:10:24):

Yeah, I thought Pussy Palace was fine as a handle, but I didn't really care. They had a reason to change the name and that was fine because they were the ones organizing it, so that's fine. Pleasure Palace, it de-sexualizes doesn't it? Pleasure because it's not "pussy" any longer, then it's more a place of belonging to more, different identities. It's more embracing, so that totally makes sense that they would change it.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:09):

How do you think that Pussy Palace has impacted lesbian, queer women's, and trans sexual culture in Toronto?

Terri Robertson (01:11:21):

Well, I think it was a really good modelling. I think it was a moment of openness and hope, and a pretty good attempt at trying to bust open a space for people's expression, whatever the expression might be. At the same time, I'm aware that we had a whole parallel thing that was much more ongoing of the BDSM community, that was equally belongingness and trying to provide space for different positionalities, which still continues. I saw it more of like a marquee that could be very public and very useful, and I think it morphed into the porn awards. The porn awards had a similar embracing energy and welcoming. I think some of that energy got shifted there.

Alisha Stranges (01:12:34):

I believe that one of the organizers is the one who started the Feminist Porn Awards.

Terri Robertson (01:12:45):

Chanelle [Gallant].

Alisha Stranges (01:12:45):

Chanelle [Gallant], yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative). Thinking about the Pussy Palace as a whole series of events, do you think there's anything it could have done differently to succeed more fully in its intentions or anything it failed to do?

Terri Robertson (01:13:10):

I think these things are not necessarily to be long-lived, and it's okay. I'm sad that there was such a legal crisis and mess. That wasn't necessary. That was bad judgment on the police, parts of the police. Yeah. That was unnecessary. That work is still going on. Lots of people are continuing to do different projects in different ways, and the whole burlesque scene emerged out of that era. That was a beautiful thing. At one point there was thousands of burlesque performers right here in Toronto, and there's a queer burlesque, International Queer Burlesque Festival that was totally awesome, that had a similar energy. Annie Sprinkle came with her eco-sexuality stuff. Stuff continues to be generated out of that moment. It was part of a bigger rising, I think. I think we really needed to address the second-wave feminism of Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. What happened there was just not good, in my opinion. I think it was a really good uplifting of what needed to happen for that moment.

Alisha Stranges (01:14:57):

Is there anything else that you would want to share about your experience that our questions—

Terri Robertson (01:15:02):

This is a really good point to make about the intersection of the role of sex workers in opening up these spaces, and being leaders in sex-positivity. For all the stigma attached to sex work, there's been a lot of work. A lot of people put their lives on the line, keeping their dungeons open, and to this day are still at risk. The decriminalization movement has been instrumental in moving this whole agenda of sex-positivity. It didn't just start with backlash to second-wave feminism, it actually came out of third-wave, sex-positive radicalism. There was a lot of hopping on and hopping off the bus along the way, as sex work became a popular wagon to jump on.

Terri Robertson (01:16:28):

I think there was a lot of middle-class, white appropriation, feminist appropriation, of an area of labour, really, that some people actually need that space. There was a cross-connecting in not an entirely positive way of too many privileged, entitled people taking up spaces of sex workers that actually were survival sex workers. There's something there. I don't know how to articulate it really well. There was this popularization of sex-positivity, and suddenly there's all these people doing sex work, like social workers and psychotherapists, people who had jobs and careers. I thought it was better placed in the burlesque movement, where it's like you do it for fun and enjoyment and not take up that space where there's an economy that actually is feeding kids.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:47):

Are you saying that... The Pussy Palace events, where do they fit in to this divide that you're talking about?

Terri Robertson (01:18:01):

I think that it can't be criticism because none of this had happened. Like, we hadn't seen this before. I think it's excellent that the Pussy Palace happened, and there's also awareness that the sex-positive agenda also took up space off people's tables who actually needed that money because they weren't doing other stuff to make money. There's a little bit of clawing away of territory there, that's all.

Alisha Stranges (01:18:39):

I see. I want to give you a little bit of space to say anything else if you want. Maybe you don't want to leave it there or you're comfortable to leave it there.

Terri Robertson (01:18:58):

Sure. I would have to say that the sex workers' movement. Like, people in Maggie's [Toronto Sex Workers Action Project] or Stella's [Montreal] or some of the other ones, were informed by an international sex workers movement. It's not like it was a little tiny bubble of people; it's not like that. I think the Pussy Palace was informed by the political atmosphere that the sex workers were in touch with at that time. I think there was an informing from that place. I want to just acknowledge that.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:50):

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much Terri this was so fun to talk with you, and thank you for taking the time to journey back and grab at whatever you can grab at, it was really informative for us and thank you.

Terri Robertson (01:20:07):

You're welcome. Good luck in your paper and how this gets disseminated into the archive.

Alisha Stranges (01:20:13):

Yeah, no problem. I'm going to stop the recording now, and then we can just touch base here before we leave okay?

Terri Robertson (01:20:21):

Okay.