

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Deb Singh
Conducted on June 16, 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: Deb Singh is a 42-year-old, queer, polyamorous, cisgender, Indo-Caribbean, working-class woman. At the time of the interview, Singh was an activist and counsellor at the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape and a parent living through the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto, Ontario. The interview primarily concerns Singh's time as a member of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. In particular, Singh details her experience as a member of the subcommittee that organized the Sugar Shack events, a BIPOC-led bathhouse series for BIPOC queers. In her interview, Singh discusses the evolution of her work as an activist and community organizer; the practical, emotional, and political nuances of planning and executing the Sugar Shack events; her sense memories of being inside the Sugar Shack; navigating racism and white ignorance both at the Sugar Shack and within the more white-centric Pussy Palace events; the triumphs and challenges the Committee experienced when asked to think seriously about the politics of space, race, and embodiment at the Palace; and other topics. Singh discusses Toronto, Ontario from the years 2006 to 2010. India, Trinidad, and Pakistan are also mentioned.

Keywords: Queer; BIPOC; Race; Femme; Embodiment; Activism; Organizing; Sugar Shack; Pussy Palace; Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee; Transgender, Polyamory

Deb Singh (00:00:05):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:06):

Perfect. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project. And I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Deb Singh. Deb, am I pronouncing your last name correctly?

Deb Singh (00:00:17):

Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:18):

And it's June 16, 2021. And Deb's going to tell me a little bit about the experience of volunteering for the Pussy Palace bathhouse events, and later organizing as a member of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. So, Deb, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Deb Singh (00:00:36):

Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:38):

So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I'm just going to ask you a couple of questions that invite you to tell me a bit about yourself. We're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that folks hold, categories you occupy, and how at least some of these may have shifted or evolved over the

past 15, 20 years. So just to start simply, can you tell us your name, your age and your preferred gender pronouns?

Deb Singh (00:01:04):

Yeah. My name is Deb Singh. I am 42 years old, and I prefer she and her pronouns.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:14):

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

Deb Singh (00:01:21):

Queer, cisgender, a woman. And yea. I can say more... You just said gender, right?

Alisha Stranges (00:01:31):

Gender and sexual identity, but you sort of encapsulated it. The follow-up for me would just be, what does queer mean for you? It means different things to so many. So, curious about that.

Deb Singh (00:01:42):

Yeah. Well, when I was 14, I thought I was bisexual. And that's the word that they had. I was probably 10 or 11 when I knew I was into both boy-type people and girl-type people. But back then, you just got boy and girl. I didn't have a concept of gender nonconforming or gender diverse folks. But I always knew it was very equal, and it was energies and humans. It wasn't necessarily body parts or certain signifiers. But when I came into the community in my 20s, early 20s, I was bisexual, I guess, and then I used omnisexual for a while and that word was a thing. And then, some people around me used pansexual, but I never felt comfortable enough to use that one. And I think probably mid to late 20s, when queer was more in our vernacular, in a positive way, I was like, "Yeah, that's it." So, I've been calling myself queer since I was 28.

Deb Singh (00:02:53):

When I got to my job at 27, which I'm an activist and counsellor at the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape, I've been there for 15 years. They called me a femme, and I was like, "What the fuck? What does that mean?" And so, I guess I was girly or whatever. But I realized that there's way more diverse understandings of the identity of femme and what that means when we extrapolate feminine and masculine from — femininity and masculinity — from woman-ness and man-ness, whatever those things mean. So, I think I've encompassed and owned that identity a lot more in terms of the femme identity, especially because my partner at one point identified as a Butch. And so, there was this opposite thing happening, and then they now identify using pronouns they/them, and use the term non-binary or genderqueer. So, it's really interesting that language. And then we interplay because we've been together for 14 years. So, like there's a dance of queerness around femme, Butch, cis, non-binary. I'm really attracted to masculine energy. I love masculine women-type people, but femme boy-type people. Anyways, whatever.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:18):

Thank you. Well, what about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How do you express yourself through these types of categories?

Deb Singh (00:04:27):

Yeah. So, it's kind of cool that you're breaking it down because normally, because of what I do all day and because of the communities I've come from, I put them all in the same... Like, they wouldn't be separated. So, this is why I was like, just gender? I would say all of them at the same time.

Deb Singh (00:04:42):

So, my parents were born in Trinidad. I identify as Indo-Caribbean. Some people like to put me in a South-Asian diaspora place, but definitely Western. I'm first-generation Canadian. My son is second generation Canadian. So, five generations ago, we would have come from India. My mum would have come from Pakistan, her ancestors. My mom's maiden name was Mohammed. So, I have Muslim roots and cultures and religion in my blood. But my dad is a Singh, a Hindu. And so, I'm a mix up of three different pieces of land in my space, in my body.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:23):

And what about your particular educational path, social class background? What would you like to share or what can you share about these things?

Deb Singh (00:05:34):

Yeah. I grew up with a single mom. I would definitely identify as working-class, but I live in a sort of middle-class world in terms of my geography and the community around me. But I definitely resonate with working class values a lot more. I'm non-disabled. I am university educated, but I do not have a master's or PhD, but I've worked in the community-based, gender-based violence sector for 20 years in Toronto. So, that's its own education I'd like to think. And so, I'm definitely coerced and indoctrinated by the non-profit industrial complex in Toronto.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:13):

Did you want to say a little bit more about the things that occupy your time professionally these days? You sort of touched on it, but if you want to say any more about it?

Deb Singh (00:06:21):

Yeah. I think for anyone who's listening or for the usefulness of this, the work that I had done as a committee member on the [Toronto Women's] Bathhouse Committee is that it was in contrast and always in conjunction with working with survivors and relationships and sex, sexuality. Sex in itself. So, while I'm a survivor myself, and I worked in many different non-profits in gender-based violence in Toronto, I worked at a sex shop, Come As You Are, for many years. And that was an amazing community to be part of. The [Toronto Women's] Bathhouse Committee was a community because I worked around five years or so, as a volunteer and then committee member, so that was always in conjunction with supporting people around sexual health, but also sexual survivorship and gender-based survivorship, and all genders.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:24):

So, a little bit of a right turn, but what role, if any, does religion or spirituality play in your life currently?

Deb Singh (00:07:33):

Yeah. I'm a settler on Turtle Island, so Indigenous knowledge is really important to me and my community in terms of trying to uphold it, revere it, listen to it. But I went to all-girl, Catholic school. So, it was hot in one

way, but all the other ways, it was just, like, not. And so, that place was very like, “don’t question anything.” So, I really became a person... It really stifled my energy in who I was from 14 to 19. So, not about that. Recovering Catholic, definitely, in the identifier. But I feel Islam in my blood. I feel being a Hindu person in my blood. It’s not religion I resonate with at all. I’m against Christianity and Catholicism in so much as it’s really taking down communities of queer people, women, people of colour, divorced people. Just so much... People who want to have choice over their bodies. Their shit’s messed up, and then circled back to their responsibilities in terms of colonization and genocide for Indigenous people.

Deb Singh (00:08:52):

So, not about that. But I have so many elders, Indigenous elders, in my life. We talk about spiritual energy in my world and my friendships and my communities. I’m a Pisces. Queer astrology is like a religion. So, I think that there’s something to be taken from all these different places as opposed to rejecting anything personally. So, for me, it’s definitely about anything that helps us understand ourselves better. Let’s get the good and be critical of the rest.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:31):

I hear you. I’m a Scorpio. So, technically, we should be best friends.

Deb Singh (00:09:35):

Yeah. No, totally. My partner is a Scorpio. But y’all are intense.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:43):

Yeah. All that water flowing. All right. Well, is there anything else—?

Deb Singh (00:09:50):

I also want to say, one of my other parts of my identity is I’m a mom, and I’m poly. So, I’ve been in open relationships all my life, and that’s a huge part of the identity. But it’s always harder to talk about that. It’s easier to talk about queerness these days than talking about being non-monogamous, open, or poly.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:07):

Anything more you want to add to the difficulty?

Deb Singh (00:10:10):

Of...

Alisha Stranges (00:10:13):

Speaking to the difficulty that you’re describing?

Deb Singh (00:10:16):

Oh, just that I think that we live in a really monogamous world, and it’s probably a really good way to open the door to talking about the bathhouse work in so many contexts. But one being about the ways in which queer people, trans people, gender diverse people, and queer women have always opened themselves up to different ways of relating to each other and ourselves. And so, open relationships or poly relationships, just

opening ourselves up to more love and less of the ways in which monogamy confines and defines hetero relationships is definitely some of the amazingness that I got from the work that I did back then.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:08):

Thank you. All right. Well, let's shift gears now and invite you to try to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. Well, this is when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which at the time was the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. As you know, this event was ultimately rated by the Toronto police. And I'm curious, prior to media coverage, how familiar were you with the Palace events?

Deb Singh (00:11:37):

I was 21 years old, and I had no idea about any of it. So, I did not know about the raids and its impact on community until a bit later, but not that much later.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:55):

Yeah. I guess that takes us right into how you got involved with volunteering. You've shared that you first got involved with the Palace events as a volunteer. When about did you first become a volunteer?

Deb Singh (00:12:12):

Can I go back a little bit more?

Alisha Stranges (00:12:15):

Of course.

Deb Singh (00:12:15):

Yeah. So, the work is great, but the first time... I was working at Come As You Are in Toronto when they had a bricks and mortar. And that space was awesome. So great, amazing activism that came out of that co-op for a sex boutique and sex store, sex shop. And I was working there, and I was selling dildos full time. And I sold a bunch that day because so many people came in and they were like, "Hey, a bathhouse is happening tonight. I have to get some new gear," whatever.

Deb Singh (00:12:51):

So, I sold... I remember two people in particular, I sold one glass dildo to. I was like, "Oh my God, that's so intense." And I was young. I was probably 25, maybe. And I sold the harness and a silicone double dildo to someone. And a friend of mine was like, "Let's go to the bathhouse." And I was like, "Okay." And so, I got dressed in my virgin outfit, obviously. I was wearing all white. I was totally on my rag. So, I fully had a tampon in. And it was a bathhouse lite, in Club Toronto, before the renos. And I didn't understand the difference between a bathhouse lite and a bathhouse. Run by the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. A bathhouse lite was none of the bells and whistles, just fucking in the space. No rooms, no volunteers, no lap dances, no performances, nothing. Just go in, get it on, get out.

Deb Singh (00:14:06):

And I went in and it was very dark. None of the sexy lights. I don't remember it like that. I remember just super dark. And I saw one of the people I sold the dildo to. And then I immediately left Club Toronto, got a

cab, because there's so many on College [Street]. Just like got in the cab and went home. I was super freaked out. I must've lasted, like, 30 minutes. And I was just like freaked the fuck... I don't even think I told my friend I was leaving. And that was my first experience. I was virgin of that space.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:42):

Can I pause you there, because I hadn't heard of this term, "bathhouse lite?" Who ran it?

Deb Singh (00:14:52):

Yeah. So, it was still run by the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, because of course Club Toronto did not allow women in that space, unless it was negotiated by the committee and it was one night and they had to pay all this money, and they wanted to not lose money off of men because they could make that money back so easily. And I guess the [Toronto Women's] Bathhouse Committee had multiple different kinds of events, and one was a less organized space, where they didn't have the G-spot room or the anal play room or this many dancers or this many meet-and-greeters or whatever. There was not that. It was just "get it done. You can go in."

Deb Singh (00:15:35):

And at that time, my friend was a trans woman. And so, there was all kinds of people who were allowed into that space, but it wasn't necessarily as publicized that it was as inclusive as it came to be as the years went on in terms of changing it from Pussy Palace to Pleasure Palace or talking about folks of colour in the space and the dynamics and politics of desire of BIPOC bodies versus white bodies. But yeah, that space I remember it being a bathhouse lite, whatever that meant. And I had no idea what that meant, because that was the first time I had ever gone. I hadn't gone to something that had more of the amenities.

Alisha Stranges (00:16:19):

All right. Well, why don't you talk me through then, so you go to the bathhouse lite. How do you go from there to you volunteering?

Deb Singh (00:16:28):

Yeah. So, you know what? I don't really remember. What I remember next, my biggest memories next are that, of course, as a woman of colour and always feeling, as a bisexual woman, not gay enough, people in community not necessarily thinking my body is super cache at that time. There were certain kinds of bodies that are hot and on trend and femmes, we just work hard. We get, like, no love. And so, only certain kinds of love. We're doing emotional labour. You know how it is. And so, I remember there was a call out for...

Deb Singh (00:17:14):

I can't remember if I started as a volunteer or I went right on the committee, but I know that I was really green, and there was a call out to be on a subcommittee. That's it. That was it. On the subcommittee, for the first ever Sugar Shack. And my mentor, who was also a worker-volunteer, long-time centre member at the TRCC [Toronto Rape Crisis Centre], who was my mentor, also did some of this work on the committee. And her name was Deidre Walton.

Deb Singh (00:17:53):

And I guess she probably told me about it and told me to sit on the committee with her. And I did. And I can name names, but you're not supposed to. But there was all kinds of people who we know in the world who

are famous queers now, who are super awesome humans. Queer, Black, lesbian, people of colour who were on that committee who had much more experience than me. So, I just sat there like a freaking baby dyke, listening at this meeting, going like, “What the fuck is this?” I have no idea what I’m doing.

Deb Singh (00:18:29):

And I’m probably sure that I had gone to a bigger Pride bathhouse, because I’d always go to that one. And those spaces made more sense, but they were party spaces. But I think that, based on the work I was doing, I was already volunteering and working in gender-based violence. I’d done lots of different kinds of work in sex health or sex education. And at that time, it was working at a sex shop. It just made sense to kind of move into a radical space, a folks of colour bathhouse, especially because I always felt, personally, that racism and lateral violence stuff around my brown body in spaces like that, you know? So, I just thought that I’d get more play if I volunteered for people of colour bathhouse. And if we did that, then everyone would feel more comfortable because I knew that already the idea made me feel more seen and more comfortable.

Deb Singh (00:19:52):

And so, I spent actually, because we did two of them together. There might’ve been more after that, but I wouldn’t know because I might’ve been like, “Oh, I got to get rid of that work after five years of doing it.” But I know those first two, the second one I was very integral in planning it, with Deidre [Walton] and we did a lot of the work after the second one. But the first one, I definitely learned the ropes from others who might be five, 10 years older than me now. But I was definitely just learning in that space, especially that first meeting and being like, “What does it take? Okay, this is what it takes. This is interesting.”

Alisha Stranges (00:20:37):

Can you talk a little bit about what the Sugar Shack is?

Deb Singh (00:20:40):

Yeah. So, the Sugar Shack was an idea. I think the name came from Deidre [Walton], but maybe it came from somewhere else. But I remember her presenting the name to me and me being like, “Love it. So cute.” And it was an offshoot of a committee. So, there was the main Toronto Women’s Bathhouse Committee at that time. And they wanted to create a subcommittee of BIPOC people. We didn’t even use the word BIPOC before. So, it was Black and people of colour on the subcommittee. The Toronto Women’s Bathhouse Committee gave us the money and gave us sort of like, didn’t give it to us per se, because we were still a subcommittee of the larger group, but the larger Toronto Women’s Bathhouse Committee funded and helped us have access to these spaces.

Deb Singh (00:21:33):

And because we knew that it might be smaller, we had two Sugar Shacks at Central Spa, which was at Dundas West in the west end. I don’t know at, like, Dufferin [Street] or something. Maybe Lansdowne [Avenue]. And so not at Club Toronto, because you’re really racking my brain. I had to go through my emails. I was like, “Thank you, Yahoo for keeping all my emails from 2006.” And so, there was a committee of folks and it was interesting, but easy in some ways.

Deb Singh (00:22:10):

I don’t remember it feeling hard because we all were queers. We were all in community kind of thing. We were all public-facing or whatever, in terms of knowing people and being out and about. And so, it was kind of easy to try to stack the space with volunteers of colour, try to create promotional material that showed our

bodies. And definitely not just racialized bodies, but fat bodies and masculine-of-centre bodies or trans and non-binary, gender diverse bodies. I think that there was definitely always that in the bathhouse space.

Deb Singh (00:22:52):

But I absolutely remember many times having arguments with people on the larger committee. Once Carlyle [Jansen] asked me, “Hey, come on the bigger committee. You’ve done this work here. You’re awesome. Come on there.” I remember that first time going into that committee and being like, “Whoa, okay. This is interesting. This is a very different space because of whiteness in the space and what that means and what that looks like in macro and micro kinds of ways.”

Deb Singh (00:23:21):

So, planning the first Sugar Shack, I feel like I was a major rookie. So, of course, if you’re a major rookie and you’re a performer and a storyteller and/or an exhibitionist like myself, you choose being a lap dancer. And so, that’s your first way to get in, but also get much play because everybody wants to dance. Not everybody wants to go into the anal room. So, it’s about the numbers game or whatever.

Deb Singh (00:24:00):

So, we plan the thing. And I think I must’ve supported with different tasks, but again, I was very green. And so, the major players, those women before me kind of took on the major work, but I did a lot more of the major work for the second Sugar Shack. So, helping with the promotional material, doing all the volunteer coordination and stuff like that. And so, the first one, I danced, and that was it. I think I worked a lot and supported a lot. I’m a grassroots activist. So, I’m always there at the end of the night, hauling the water back into the truck or whatever. Those days, that’s definitely the places you would find me is the practical work that needed to be done. But it was also amazing, to be honest with you, to watch particularly a lot of Black folks. But there were other folks in there, too. And to see what the nuances and what it took to create a space that was more like a sexy, sexy space for people of colour and what the differences were around our experiences as queer people of colour, our internalized stuff, our cultural stuff. Just general diversity and experiences we have in relationships we have, period, but also with our families that are in contrast to white queer spaces.

Deb Singh (00:25:29):

And I didn’t realize that there was these differences necessarily until I got to larger bathhouse spaces. I guess if I could describe it in a metaphor, the Sugar Shack was smaller, intimate, raw, and kind of just one of those intense... I remember being at some BLM meetings having done work with them in the past five years in Toronto, and how intimate it started out as in people’s houses and intense and so full of fire, but so full of healing energy at the same time. Whereas the white, larger, say Pride bathhouse, which was usually the biggest one for the year, was like the circus. Bells and whistles, cotton candy, apple, bobbing apples, just so much going on around you that you’re just mental, visual, physical sensation overload, in a good way, but depending on how you manage those spaces.

Deb Singh (00:26:42):

But I started with the small and I went to the big, so it was really interesting because those elders, I will call them now, or those leaders in that time, really taught us how to move into a people of colour bathhouse with an immense amount of sensitivity and self-awareness around our bodies, and how our brown bodies and Black bodies and racialized bodies are seen in the world and interacted with, based on our experiences of racism. So those bathhouses, I didn’t drink at those bathhouses. I made the choice to never get high. Also, because I volunteered, but it wasn’t just that. It was about, like... I learned more about how to really respect

myself and come into that space with a lot of consent and integrity, and in consent and integrity for other people's bodies.

Deb Singh (00:27:50):

And I didn't mind if people drank or other people who needed to drink. Of course, that was a space where people could do what they felt good for them, but I made the choice to not numb myself for random, sexy interactions, but also to have a paramount amount of respect as a consent activist in what I do all day or what I've been doing for 20 years. To be really hyper aware of what was going to happen in this space. And then on top of that, being a volunteer and stuff, I got to keep track of shit, so that it didn't happen if I was drinking.

Deb Singh (00:28:24):

But that kind of stuff, in terms of respecting racialized bodies. That work taught me to come into myself and to come into brown and Black bodies in a different way than I might approach other bodies. And trans and non-binary bodies, gender queer bodies as well. To really deepen our understandings of practical ways of doing consent and care and sexual health and healing work through being in a bathhouse space.

Alisha Stranges (00:28:58):

Yeah. You've answered a lot of the things I'm curious about, but there's a couple things I want to touch on here. Do you remember when the first Sugar Shack took place? What year?

Deb Singh (00:29:11):

2006. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:12):

2006. And do you know for how many years that it ran?

Deb Singh (00:29:17):

So, there was one in 2006. And then I keep forgetting it. Sorry, I took one screenshot today, be like 2006, and then the next one would have happened in 2008. So, the first one I would have been really green, but then the second one happened in April of 2008. And I think they both happened at Central Spa.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:55):

I'm curious about Central Spa. We've heard from organizers of the Pussy Palace that it was a struggle to find space for a number of reasons. Do you recall the process of securing a physical space to hold this event?

Deb Singh (00:30:11):

Yeah, I do. We visited... We already knew what Club Toronto looked like, but I don't think they would even give it to us because they didn't think that we would make enough money. And they always said that kind of stuff. Before, the old owners, before, it's now Oasis Aqua[lounge]. They were just like, "We're not going to rent you unless we know for sure you're going to make that, whatever, 1200 bucks back." I remember the amount of 1200 bucks so much.

Deb Singh (00:30:39):

And then Steamworks was never going to give us the fuckin' space. We were just like, "Screw you guys." But obviously, it would be so hot if we were in there. And then we were just like, "Well, who else?" So, we went to a couple spaces. And I remember some of us committee members going in and being all fully clothed and not men, and just going into those spaces and being... I remember when it was raining one day and we were just like, "Yeah, okay." Like, standing at the door, they were not even letting us fully be in. They were letting us kind of stick our head in, but we couldn't really walk around because they didn't want to close it. And we weren't going to go at 3:00 a.m. or wait 'til 4:00 p.m. We were there at 10:00 p.m. They were like, "You can kind of look in." We're like, "Okay. Clearly, other people are fucking in there right now."

Alisha Stranges (00:31:30):

I see. You kind of had to make an assessment based on very little visual knowledge of the space?

Deb Singh (00:31:38):

Yeah. I feel that we might've gotten to see Central Spa fully, take a walk through. And that the other one we didn't get to, and so then we were just like, "Okay. Central Spa is good enough. It has showers. It has a room that we could call a dom room. Good enough." We wanted diversity of spaces, politics of space. Those bathhouses definitely taught me about the politics of space in so many different ways as well. But spaces where a diversity of activities could happen simultaneously was definitely a thing for us because, of course, we wanted to be able to offer something to every person at every level of moving into a space such as this. Because, obvs, we were really aware that most people would never have been to a bathhouse just for folks of colour. Period. It didn't exist in Toronto. They might've been at parties. But, again, they're very different than official, made for sex, physical space. And then a group of queer trans people putting it on, who are people of colour. Many people would have many different needs and levels of comfort in that space. And so, we wanted to accommodate as much as possible.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:59):

And can you describe the space itself once inside, once you had it all set up the way you wanted it for Sugar Shack?

Deb Singh (00:33:06):

You had to go up a huge flight of stairs. And then you went in and there was a little ticket booth thingy with a plexiglass, and you had to go up to it. Then you pay your money. It was dark, very dark. You stand at the thing, somebody inside a little tiny room would be sitting on a chair. They'd let you in. You'd pay your money, whatever. They'd buzz you in. You'd have to be buzzed in. Then you could go through the front door.

Deb Singh (00:33:38):

Once you walk through the front door, I think there was a little hallway, but eventually, there was an open space. And maybe 30 people could be in that open space. I remember there being a coffee table. So, it could be like the games room. Like an old-school kitschy kind of den, where there was a few couches, a low coffee table, and a space that might be like a bar. I feel like that's how it was. And then to the walls of the room, it was maybe 15 by 20, maybe, feet.

Deb Singh (00:34:17):

And by the walls of the room, there was seating. You could sit with your back against the wall, or there was chairs that you could turn toward someone. That's what I think I remember, man, but whatever. It was late, and 13 years ago. So, I don't know, like, more than that. And then there was a hallway, and there were multiple rooms. And it's all very blurry, because Club Toronto versus Central Spa versus which bathhouse it was, which night it was.

Deb Singh (00:34:56):

But I think I remember there was a room that was very dark and that we use that for G-spot rooms or anal rooms or any sort of SM play. And then there were rooms with beds. Small, small rooms. There was a shower room, very open, with shower heads. No stalls. Just an open space for shower heads. I can't remember more than that because I've been in Club Toronto so many more times.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:32):

No, that's great, what you offered. At present, we don't have anything. So, this is amazing. Thank you. Do you recall how the Sugar Shack subcommittee got the word out to folks about this event? What sort of promotional strategies you used?

Deb Singh (00:35:48):

Yeah. Basically, I don't remember the first one so much, but I know that they had something where they called... Open call to community members to be part of a photo shoot to create images for Sugar Shack, period. Knowing that we wanted to have more than one, we wanted to have a cache to be able to go through. And so, they did one photo shoot, I know for sure. Maybe more.

Deb Singh (00:36:16):

I was never in charge of that, so I don't have any of the images, unfortunately. But I remember the cards that came out at the end of it, and they were adorable and great and sexy. And again, this is all memory, recall memory, muscle memory and stuff. And I remember feeling, when I saw the card, that I'd never seen a card like this before. I don't even know if this is about whether or not the card looks good. Yeah, sure, I might have not chosen this font. But again, I think the whole shack part was, "Oh, you're in a shack with somebody in the woods. And obviously, shit goes down when it's dark." But I remember being like, "Damn, I can't believe we created this." This wasn't made by somebody else for us. This was made by us. And I'd never seen anything like that before. And I'd never felt it. Even with any of the promo materials for bigger, larger bathhouses, I don't remember it looking the same until years later, maybe. And again, that first time I saw that card, I have it in my memory.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:34):

Can you describe what you're seeing in your memory?

Deb Singh (00:37:37):

Yeah. I don't know why it's purple. Because it was cards. We actually had paper back then. I think they put it on some sort of purply card stock, and there was a picture of Deidre [Walton] on there. She was total exhibitionist too and love to have her picture taken just like me. And there were a bunch of different bodies on there. And I think that, again, I think seeing Black bodies, seeing fat bodies was not the same as it might feel or be now. It was a different time that those... All these folks still exist, always have existed, but to have them be up and set up front, front and centre as sexy, was something that it was new to me.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:29):

Yeah. What about the community response from the patrons who attended? What's your sense?

Deb Singh (00:38:38):

It was ridiculous. It was like everybody and their mom was going to go to that thing. Okay? If you want it to have anonymous sex, good luck with that, because you know everybody's going. So, it was definitely the event to go to. And I didn't... Especially when I was more novice at organizing at that point, it felt super exciting that people felt so much excitement for something. It wasn't just, "Oh yeah, it's probably, I'll see you there. Like, obvs, I'll see you there." Like, "I'll be there between 8:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. because I have to work the next day, whatever." This was, "No, no, no. I'm coming." But I also remember, which is shitty that you always remember the most adverse stuff like, is that why people wanted to come? And they were like, "How do we get in?" And so they challenged the committee to... Like, many white fucking idiots who didn't realize that they were perpetrating racism in these moments, moved with their entitlement to, like, "Hi, white people, white-skin people should be able to come."

Deb Singh (00:39:53):

And so that was a conversation that we freaking spent a lot of damn time on the committee that... Our time might have been better used to have sexy situations happen at the bathhouse. But we were also navigating what our community was pushing through. So, there was a time, that I do not remember. I think that the final agreement had to be at both of the bathhouses, and I maybe was wrong. Maybe I'm wrong about the first one, but I know for sure for the second one, you had to be accompanied by a person of colour. So, you couldn't just show up as a white person at the door and we would let you in. But again, that's also before a politic where you could be Indigenous and be super light skinned. You know what I mean? And we weren't asking people like, "Are you white?" You know what I mean?

Deb Singh (00:40:50):

But at that time, it was also much easier to be, "No, no, you're a person of colour, you're a person of colour." You self-identify. We're not going to tell you. "Oh, you're white. You're Latina. And you're super light or whatever. And you're not allowed to come to this space." That wasn't where we were at, at all. We weren't policing people's skin tone. We were like, "But if you're white, and you're calling me to complain right now, or you're emailing me to say it's not fair that you can't get in, that's messed up."

Deb Singh (00:41:15):

And so, we were like, okay. Easiest way to do this without completely policing all kinds of bodies is that if you're white identified, and you're accompanied by a person of colour, fine you can come. Like, fuck, what's your problem? I don't know. It's weird. Go to the other ones, man. Why do you need to be at this space so bad? It was hot. It was so cool to be in that space at that time, I remember. And all ages were at that space. And I remember that because my partner, who was not my partner, I remember meeting my partner at there, but they weren't my partner at the time. I worked with them through my volunteering stuff. And they're 20 years older than me. And I was in my 20s. So, there weren't that many younger people there, but there was everybody older than that. There were people in their 50s. People were there because they were like, "What the shit? This is for people of colour? I'm jamming out." So, it was definitely its own circus, but in such a well thought out and purposeful, intentional, creative, supportive space.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:31):

Yeah. And I'm really curious about, and throughout this project, been curious about the sense memories that remain for folks of being in these spaces. And so, I wanted to sort of invite you into a bit of an exercise here.

And I'll do it with you. And do your best... To the best of your ability, follow along. So, just kind of get comfortable in your seat, allowing the weight of your body to just relax into the couch there, soften your gaze, or you can even close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that, and just breathe for a few breaths in and out here, relaxing your jaw.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:17):

And with each inhale, allowing your body to inhabit some or other location within the Sugar Shack. Really trying to travel back there. And don't worry too much about which space, which night is coming up for you. It doesn't matter. Whichever comes first is a great one to focus on. And from this embodied contemplative space, look around and tell me what it is you can see.

Deb Singh (00:44:01):

I see the rings, the fruit rings that we bought for people to eat and snack on while they were there. I see one of the elevated beds that I had sex in with someone. And I feel like it was elevated. I felt like we were high up. Maybe not a bunk bed, but something like that. I see the outside space, all the way at the bottom of the stairs on Dundas West. I'm smoking my first cigarette after like seven hours of lap dancing for people. I see the hallway, kind of.

Deb Singh (00:44:52):

I see the shower room, for sure, because so many people were in the shower room. So many people go in and out of the shower room. But I also see, I don't know... It's kind of hard to, I'm embodying... I'm also in the memories that I have. And so, this is kind of being here, but we had a lot of supplies and so there was a storage room. So, we had all the things we needed to set up all the spaces. All the different rooms, all the different sex toys, all the different signs. And I see the storage room where we had everything.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:38):

And if you could distil this collection of spaces you're describing into a single colour, what would the colour be?

Deb Singh (00:45:46):

It'd be like brown and beige. The carpets were beige. The doors were like an earthy tone, like a mossy brown. And the carpets were beige.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:05):

Any lingering odours? What does the space smell like?

Deb Singh (00:46:10):

Sweat. It smells a bit like sweat.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:17):

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

Deb Singh (00:46:29):

The hardness of the door, waiting for my turn to go into the SM room. There was a black door. I don't know if I'm looking at the black door or the black door is behind me, but a hard kind of wood, acrylic, painted type of door. Shiny and sticky on my naked skin.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:56):

And what can you hear?

Deb Singh (00:46:59):

People talking, music, people talking.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:04):

And this is a bit of a strange one, but if somehow you could taste the space, what might its flavour be?

Deb Singh (00:47:13):

Oh my God. Pussy juice, obviously. We are trying to get rid of the man sweat. But I think that energy that comes from people, the endorphins, when it leaves their head and that sexy sweat. Sexiness. It tastes sexy. People are laughing a lot and even their nerves or their trepidations, it's a positive vibe.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:57):

Yeah. And you can let that go. Open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you. That was so wonderful. Thank you for taking you there.

Deb Singh (00:48:07):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:09):

So, I guess I'm curious now, might have to... I don't know if we're jumping back or jumping forward, but you said like you were involved in organizing, to a lesser extent perhaps, the first Sugar Shack. And then at some point, you joined the larger Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. Is there anything you want to say about making that transition? What might've have prompted you to do that aside from Carlyle Jansen asking you to?

Deb Singh (00:48:34):

It was good work. We didn't think that... The last bathhouse, the last Sugar Shack that I had done, there was not many volunteers, especially for the committee work. There were volunteers for the one like that night volunteers, which either would be support or like sexy entertainment stuff, but it was a heavy load to carry, and I couldn't do it alone anymore. And I needed the larger committee, whether it was people power, or I was just like, "Okay, we're not going to do..." At that time, I didn't know. Like, are we going to do more Sugar Shacks? I don't know. But since I did this one kind of almost alone as a committee member, it was only one other committee member, me and Dierdre [Walton]. I don't remember anybody else. Like I said, people helped, but they could not do major work. So, I was like, "Okay, I'll just see what it's like to support planning Pride one or other committee work, the larger bathhouses."

Alisha Stranges (00:49:42):

And so that might've been around 2007-ish?

Deb Singh (00:49:47):

Well, yeah. So, the Sugar Shack, the second one I remember was in 2008. So, it was probably between 2009 and like 2009, 2010, where I was on the main committee.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:12):

And during your tenure as a committee member, do you recall what sort of the central goals y'all were pursuing at the time?

Deb Singh (00:50:23):

No. I don't recall the central goals. I remember conversations because every single meeting... Most of the meetings, the larger committee, were at The 519. But I think we started having meetings at where I work, the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre too. And I know we had some trainings there because I remember walking out of the training. So, the drama. And it's just so sad how the brain always remembers the negative stuff. And those are the things that made you feel the worst.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:57):

What were the trainings for?

Deb Singh (00:50:59):

Anti-racism. So, by the time I go down to the committee, I think Carol Thames was still there, in and out. And I know she was there at some of the meetings. And it was just really apparent that there was becoming a bigger divide between white allies understanding their place in queerness, around queer people of colour and trans people of colour, and how that was looking on the ground in terms of grassroots work in the bathhouse.

Deb Singh (00:51:34):

And so, I think that back then, the exercise of white allyship or white entitlement was looking pretty, not great, in spaces for racialized folks. There's more work and more stuff happening today, but I definitely remember feeling the need for the, quote unquote, larger committee or the main committee to do more anti-racism work at the committee level, as opposed to just be like, "Hey, you're going to fund this one event." Why? Yeah. Absolutely we needed our own event, but it was clearly not sustainable as an all-volunteer committee period, and that there's not much of money here. It's not like we're making money to do separate events, et cetera, et cetera, and to share and all the things. And so, what does it mean to create different structures and processes and procedures for the larger committee, and to do anti-racism work at the bathhouse level, period, on the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee? So, I think that's where I landed in terms of a lot of the work I did.

Deb Singh (00:52:52):

I did less organizing for the bathhouses themselves, even though I volunteered at the bathhouse. I did bathhouse planning. I supported just like any regular member. Less of a main leader organizer in those events like I just did whatever my part was at those events. But then, there was a lot of work that we folks of colour, I heard, and I think a lot of the cultivation of information I got was just in my house at my kitchen table, so

to speak, with my queer people of colour community, being like, “Yeah, this is the racism I experienced, or this is the bull shit I experienced, or this is the gender stuff I experienced in the space.” And people telling you this stuff, so I could, quote unquote, go back to the committee and correct or shape or share or train or figure out how we do our work to make it better for racialized communities in those spaces. And so, we did trainings for all the volunteers on anti-racism.

Deb Singh (00:53:52):

We instituted a mini sort of talk like a, “Hey, if you’re a white person coming to the space or white identified, here’s the rundown of what it means to be a white ally in the space.” We had like a contract that people had to sign off on at the door. If you’re a person of colour, you could just walk right in, which is really interesting because I don’t think we would do the same thing now. It doesn’t mean that lateral violence isn’t happening. Doesn’t mean that I’m not being racist or anti-Indigenous as a brown woman or whatever.

Deb Singh (00:54:23):

So, it’s just interesting where we’re at with some of the ways in which we were trying to talk about race in those spaces. But people like Chanelle Gallant and like Carlyle [Jansen] were so supportive of that kind of stuff. So many folks that volunteered and committee members alike, that were just like, no, yeah. They were activists too. And so, they had different strategies on how to call out or call in white bodies in those spaces in order for less racism to happen at the event.

Deb Singh (00:55:05):

So, we did trainings for volunteers at The 519. One’s for white allies, one for folks of colour who might be volunteering as support folks or as entertainment folks. We had signs around the space that you had to sort of... These are the rules of engagement, beyond just what the rules were before. Adding stuff in around anti-racism. We had meet-and-greeters to hand out little pieces of paper that had all the rules on them. But I don’t remember some of the specific stuff we would have written down there.

Deb Singh (00:55:53):

I’m sure some of the other the interviews would talk about like, they had how to flirt workshops or meet and greet. Kind of orientation moments where at 9:30 p.m., you all gather here, if you want to just be like a tour of the space or whatever. But in those moments, people would also have to talk about, or work into conversations, like the politics of certain bodies being more, quote unquote, attractive and more people flocking to certain kinds of people than other kinds of people, and what it meant to eroticize certain communities.

Deb Singh (00:56:45):

Circle back to the conversation about white people in the space. A lot of people felt super entitled to be in this space. Well, a bathhouse should be for everybody. And so, it was just basic, simple stuff like, it’s okay for us to have... Just like it was okay for us to have a space just for women, it’s okay to have a space just for racialized people. And at that time, I mean, you can’t say it was all community in Toronto, it wasn’t all humans, but definitely there was a level of queer people of colour who had to work out their stuff about being people of colour, whereas now you have so many more spaces that are specific.

Deb Singh (00:57:26):

Even if you look at the Dyke March for example, 20 years ago, ’til now, a lot of people would have to tuck on to a certain group that you knew that, “Oh, Women’s Health In Women’s Hands is in the Dyke March. Cool,

because we'll just march with them because that's all people of colour." And you know that because it's the community health centre for people of colour who are women identified or, like, gender diverse. But now, you could fully go into like Latin American women's group or this Black women's group or this trans racialized group where that didn't really exist necessarily 15 years ago. So, it was interesting to just even do our work, to work out some of the stuff that we were trying to create, because the goal was to create... I guess you'd also go back to your original question.

Deb Singh (00:58:21):

I think that once I came onto the larger committee, it became a mutual goal to do anti-racism work at the bathhouse level of the committee, because it was very clear what amazing work I had done at Sugar Shack subcommittee and how I felt in this committee being like, "Whoa, these white people think they know everything about everything." And you're like, "Yeah. So, have you thought about this? 'No.' Have you been doing this? 'No.'" And so, to integrate what we were doing and some of the things that came more easily to us, came more naturally to me in Sugar Shack, it became like work that I was now doing as a racialized body for white people in a whiter space. And so, by the end of it, I was like, "And, end scene." Like, I can't deal with this anymore. People are just so freaking out all the time.

Deb Singh (00:59:13):

And I just remember Carol Thames, like amazing person, still know this person in community and her being mad. Her being angry and me being like, "Okay, I'm going to default to angry because I'm not even really angry right now, but I'm going to take the leadership of somebody who's been in this community and was at the raid and who's been doing this work for so long. And maybe I don't resonate with all the analysis right now because I'm still learning and I'm still so young and I'm still figuring out, sort of the racial analysis in this space." But I remember coming to a point where it was like not that I can't work with white people, not at all. It's just that y'all need to do your own work. And maybe you do need to do your own work in your own space in your own way.

Deb Singh (01:00:01):

And I don't have to witness watching you do that shit because it's painful for racialized folks and it's okay to have a separate space for white allies to go talk about your racist shit and to work it out in ways that you need to with each other and not have to expect that and the racialized folk at the table take that up, especially when our identities, our bodies are sexualized bodies because of our melanin has been looked at a certain way and treated a certain way. It's very clear to us now that Black women's bodies have been oversexualized and over-treated with violence compared to other bodies. Same with Indigenous bodies. And so, when you move into sex from that angle of things, of course the needs are different. And there was a lot of having to break that down to people and argue with people about what the needs were and stuff.

Deb Singh (01:00:59):

And so, it was interesting. But all of it was a learning space. But I remember leaving the committee time, not with a bad taste in my mouth per se, being like, "I just don't want to do this work this way anymore. It's not sexy anymore." And I also had full-time jobs at that point and stuff. And I've worked with all these kinds of queer women. I work in a critical mass, people of colour, queer organization. So, I got a lot of support from them to do the bathhouse work. At those last years, we were using the TRCC [Toronto Rape Crisis Centre] for the committee meetings, but at least a couple. But it was more like the bathhouse culture was changing, race was changing, and I needed to take care of myself as a person of colour and not hear white women gripe anymore. But that's a simplified way of putting it.

Alisha Stranges (01:02:00):

Well, I want to leave some space here if you want to talk more specifically about what tensions arose over what sorts of issues. We don't have to, but I wanted to leave space for it if you wanted to.

Deb Singh (01:02:15):

Yeah. I just don't even remember. I just remember that at one point, the committee was like, "Yeah, we need to do anti-racism training." And then we did it. And I just remember being like, "Yeah, I don't need this training." Not to say that like, "Oh, as a person of colour, I know everything." But what they needed to know is different than what I needed to know. And it was not nuanced. It was not a thing. I think our community would have been super open to Indigenous folk or two-spirit folk, but it wasn't any sort of cache to talk about it that way from yourself. You definitely just hid a lot of your identity stuffs. It wasn't as open. There was Latin American people. There were Asian people. But again, there was a few brown people, but still there was a lot more Black people, I remember, and more Latin American folks.

Deb Singh (01:03:14):

But again, if you have culturally a lot of internalized shit going on, coming to a bathhouse is like, "Whoa." So, it's in ways we were speaking to the most radical people all the time. The people who had already done enough work to be able to know about this space, be part of this space, whatever. So, when you got to the white space and they didn't get that, it was like, I don't know. I found it more boring because I was like, "Wow, all these people care about is *the* bathhouse." And I was like, "Oh yeah, I guess that makes sense for them in terms of event planning.

Deb Singh (01:03:48):

Now that I'm an event planner, I get it. The minutia, the details. They make an event. Absolutely. If you think I have fervour in my activism now, you should have seen me when I didn't have a seven-year-old and I haven't slept, and it's been a pandemic. I had energy. And so, I had energy to politicize and rock and revolutionize and use that as a pivotal space for survivors, for racialized folks, for two-spirit folks. And they were already there. Those people were teaching me and telling me what to say when I went there. You know what I mean? So, it wasn't like it was just all me. It was just like my friends. So, I think some of the tensions were of that nature, that white women had great ideas. They had the money, they had the power, but things were shifting.

Deb Singh (01:04:44):

It's so interesting because even just to pinpoint that when The ArQuives back in September [2020] did a panel discussion, I was sick, and I was supposed to be on the panel. I couldn't be in it. Had to call and cancel on that day. And I was in isolation on top of it because I thought, first time I was being sick, it was a sinus infection, not COVID, but I didn't know. So, I put myself in isolation from my family and all that stuff. And so, couldn't be on the panel that day. But again, it was a conversation about the raid, the raid, the raid. Of course, it's by virtue of these 40 amazing, I'm sure there are amazing people who have contributed so much knowledge to the tree of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. So, it's much more than the raid, but the raid is this central place around the literal policing of our bodies and the literalness of being queer outlaws or lesbian outlaws.

Deb Singh (01:05:43):

But of course, when we see the community as like this 40 year thing of time and identity and labels and language and sexualities and spectrum, so many things being on a spectrum, as opposed to Butch/Femme and gay/lesbian, where it landed in those spaces and places a little bit more between the 80s and 2000s, for

sure. I was lucky enough to be part of a time in the bathhouse's history that was really opening up from the dichotomy of thinking around the raid. And that was the biggest piece of oppression to lesbians being the people who were oppressing other lesbians, trans and gender diverse and no-binary, and of course, Black, Indigenous and people of colour. And so, it became a branch of a tree of the spectrum. And my body was in that and part of that in an interesting way. So certainly not to say that at the time the raid had its huge impacts on queer community and what that felt like and what that meant, but also those people were being harassed in bars way before the raid.

Deb Singh (01:07:08):

And Black and Indigenous people were nowhere to be seen in those spaces because of so many reasons, but the easiest one being racism and not just by the police or the system, but by their very own counterparts, queer counterparts. So it's really, now that I'm sitting here and saying all this stuff out loud, it's really a huge privilege and honour to have had the capacity and ability to be injected into that space through loving white allies who knew that they had their work to do, but of course still we all perpetrate our own experiences of anti-Black racism or transphobia, for example, as a non-Black and cisgender person, for example. And so really building my capacity to be an ally at the same time as being the bodies that I needed to create more spaces for and with. That makes sense?

Alisha Stranges (01:08:08):

Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you for sharing all of that. It sounds like a very difficult position to have to have occupied.

Deb Singh (01:08:18):

Yeah. The thing is, if it sucked, I wouldn't have done it for so many years. I did it for so many years. Like, 2006 to around 2010, I think. And so that's like a good five years of doing volunteer work that I was never paid for. I remember having all the Excel sheets and sitting there partying by myself and drinking wine, doing the volunteer like, "Okay, who's going to go in this room?" "Oh yeah, no. This person said that this..." Correlating the volunteer emails. We didn't have Google docs. Oh my God, back then. You know what I mean? So literally, everyone had to send an email and be like, "I want to do this." And they'd be like, "I want to do this." "Who sent the email first?" And like, "Who's better at it?" And who has more experience in community? And who's going to be the better like this? People came up with like, "Hey, I want to be the femme priestess. And I want to do this and do that." Or "I want to have tarot card readings."

Deb Singh (01:09:18):

People just came with their shit, their skills, their joy, what they want to do. And we were like, "Okay, that corner, you go there. And that corner you go there. Somebody go to the Dollarama and get the plastic." All the plastic tablecloths for all the needs. So, it was fun and it was sexy and it was an amazing contrast to the work I was doing with survivors where our sexuality, our sex, our bodies are used against us, consent was taken away. Power was taken away. It was a great contrast to working in this sex shop for a year. Because, of course, opening up people's minds, especially like hetero, straight-acting folks who are freaked out about their own bodies and masturbation is a new, exciting, scary, weird, shameful, harmful... You know? And so, all of those spaces and places that I occupied in my 20s and early 30s were spaces where people got to feel more empowered and people got to love their bodies more and be in their bodies more.

Deb Singh (01:10:18):

So, yeah, man. Whatever tensions, I don't even remember leaving because of the tensions. I remember being like, "Okay, I've done my work. Bye, bye. I want to go do over this. I can't do anything more if I keep doing

this, and I want to engage in the [Toronto Rape Crisis] Centre more,” where I was working. And I’d done my work, and it was time for other people to enjoy that space and to get what I got from it. And mentors for life and friends for life and community for life.

Deb Singh (01:10:48):

And especially now in this time where community is weirder and to have the skills to maintain and build community, it’s like its own skill when we’ve been inside for 15 months. Yeah. There’s something to be said for volunteer work doing that for so long. It must’ve been awesome. I know it was awesome. And it was a place to be. And what was also great about it is that people would think... I would say I did this work and people would be like, “Oh my God, you must have the best sex.” And I’m like, “Meh, I don’t know.” I mean, like, people are people. I still am a survivor. I still have my own shame. You get to be more comfortable with talking about sex. You get to be more comfortable with helping other people talk about sex, but it doesn’t mean you have the best sex. Yes, I did get the best room at the Pride bathhouse.

Deb Singh (01:11:50):

One year, I don’t remember what year. It had to be 2007 or 2008, because that was one of my first bathhouses with my girlfriend that I’m still with today. We got the room with the TV. So, there was porn constantly playing. And I was like, “This is the perk of the bathhouse. This is what being VIP means in the old Club Toronto, boy.” That was the best. But also, I think the [Toronto Women’s] Bathhouse Committee, I’ve thought about it many times since the practical work of organizing and doing it, because of course, Club Toronto closed for a long period of time and then opened up as Oasis Aqua[lounge]. And they have like a Sapphire night.

Deb Singh (01:12:32):

And so, I’ve been to that and I’ve been to hetero nights, and I’ve been to free times where you can go in with a bunch of cis-gender men or whatever. And I’ve personally chosen to not go to the Pride bathhouses. Usually, I was working for many years late on that night, and I couldn’t go. I’d be exhausted. I’m like, “I’m not trying to put on my makeup at dah, dah, dah.” I’m like, “I’m partnered now, but I’m still poly. I know everybody. So, this is not fucking sexy.” Like, I just really want it to be anonymous. So not... I didn’t feel that for many years as well, years after being away from the committee work, but still super in community in Toronto. And so, yeah, it’s funny to think about anonymity. I didn’t have much of it. So, I was like, “Oh, the space is also not even for me anymore.” So I’ve evolved in terms of, if I really want to fuck anonymously, going there to the Pride bathhouse, like a Toronto Women’s Bathhouse Committee event, wasn’t for me, and then upon the inception and the years have gone by with Oasis Aqualounge, it feels like the [Toronto Women’s] Bathhouse Committee was less needed.

Deb Singh (01:13:49):

That space wasn’t a space that needed to be created by volunteers anymore because there was like, say, Sapphic happening once a month, for example. So, I don’t really know, even at all, what the status of the Toronto Women’s Bathhouse Committee is right now, but I think I would be a lifer on their mailing list. I don’t know. I haven’t seen an event in a long term, but maybe I deleted myself, who knows? Maybe I had one of those drunken moments. I was like, “Fuck this. I’m not doing it anymore.”

Deb Singh (01:14:18):

So, I don’t know. It seems like it’s had such an interesting evolution, but needless to say, I’m on the mailing list for Oasis Aqualounge, and I still follow spaces that would occupy people like me. Queer, bisexual, omnisexual, love all the genders. Love cis men’s bodies, trans bodies, cis women’s bodies, masculine women’s

bodies, feminine men's bodies. Love it all. And I still long to be in anonymous sexy spaces. And so, I don't know if that's a good way to end or what? You have more questions. I don't know.

Alisha Stranges (01:15:05):

I just have sort of one addendum question. It is a great way to end. Maybe this is anticlimactic, but I'm sort of been dying to find out. We know that the name of the series, the Pussy Palace changed at some point to the Pleasure Palace. But do you happen to know when it happened and what might've prompted it?

Deb Singh (01:15:25):

See, like, I smoke a lot of weed. So, this kind of memory is not great for me, but I do remember a time where we went from this, and we went to that. Was I part of that conversation? I feel like I fucking was. But maybe I wasn't. So, I wish I could go back to Carlyle [Jansen] and be like, "Girl, what?" But absolutely at the time, I just remember being like, "Yeah, for sure." The body part wasn't as important. The reason why the body part was there was because, obviously, it was about a woman-occupied space, as opposed to the men-occupied, like, all the gay men bathhouses that existed in Toronto. So, it never was about exclusive women-ness. I never felt that from any of the committee because there was always gender nonconforming, gender diverse, trans, non-binary, butchy-type people up in every single space all the time.

Deb Singh (01:16:22):

Every time somebody walked to me, every time I was introduced to someone new at a volunteer level, it was amazing to see so many skin tones, body types, community... Words people used to identify themselves, if they even said them. It was just like, "Yo, hot people. Yay. This was great." So, I don't remember it... I remember obviously queer and trans people or specific trans people in my life being like, "Fuck, this body part means a lot to us. Call it something else, dude. We want to feel included slash there's the political aspect of labels and words."

Deb Singh (01:17:07):

And there's an absolutely exclusionary aspect to the idea of just pussy, but I don't think queer folks or lesbian-type folks, or any other word that you might've used back then to identify yourself, necessarily saw it as an exclusive space. But maybe there were people that would say something very different to you about, they saw it as a politically women's space. But me as a queer person of colour, who's always been attracted to all kinds of bodies. And I'll say that trans community members, like so many Black and racialized community members, 20 years, 10 years, five years older than me, I feel like they've accepted me into their worlds as a femme of colour.

Deb Singh (01:18:00):

Not me giving permission or accepting them into my woman's world. I don't feel that, I don't need that. I've always felt like it's interesting that men didn't share their space with women, that we have to create our own spaces. Of course, we're very different than the experience of misogyny and patriarchy that women have experienced or all genders who are not cisgender men have experienced. But I feel like trans communities, non-binary communities have been my biggest teachers around activism, around parenting, around sex activism, around sex work.

Deb Singh (01:18:42):

So, I'm just like, "Yeah, no, thanks for accepting me, wanting to talk to me and helping build the quilt of love and community and support and healing and joy and pleasure with me." As opposed to me ever freaking gate

keeping for them. So, I don't know. You're asking the politics of that space at that time, but I can't remember it because I'm sure it was diverse. I'm sure there were people who were like, "Women only," and were like, "Oh, but pussy has to be like this."

Deb Singh (01:19:16):

And I just remember feeling relief when they called it Pleasure Palace. And I was like, "Yeah, it makes sense. Great." I'd never had resistance towards it, personally. And again, because those folks who were at my kitchen table, in my house, in my backyard, after-after parties, hanging out because those are my people, my community, even my elders, my mentors.

Deb Singh (01:19:46):

So, I was lucky to have them in my world and them be like, "Yeah, Deb, you have a big mouth. Come over here. Let's do this." The dialogue didn't have as much weight around trans or gender diverse inclusion, even though we really needed to do our work as a committee, as it did around race. There was more weight or more heaviness, I remember about race, because again, it was like, "Well, wait, we're all lesbians." And you're like, "No, I'm a Black lesbian, man." Your mom is celebrating you and taking pictures of you and your girlfriend at graduation.

Deb Singh (01:20:31):

And like me, I'm like not telling my mom. My mom doesn't know. So those differing things. It's not that it separated us, but it definitely brought more of those emotions to the table. But again, I can't speak for other folks around that time. Because the name change was one thing, just like my history with the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre. They added Multicultural Women Against Rape because of course, it was like a bunch of white lesbians that started it. Amazing humans, huge amazing legacy of organizing, just like with the Pussy Palace. Amazing legacy of organizing, white folks who definitely did a lot of their work along the way to become better allies.

Deb Singh (01:21:19):

But of course, we know racialized, queer folks are really the bread and butter of our communities and the ones who, by virtue of their bodies and their identities and how they're seen in bathrooms, are the ones who are bringing liberation to this community. So, it is a true honour when those communities have enough capacity and strength to augment that work. So that's how I saw it back then. And the name change was just one way we were trying to do that work of inclusivity and centralizing of different bodies, sexual identities, different skin tones, different abilities. Because we could never have a freaking bathhouse that was accessible to people who used wheelchairs or people who use mobility devices because the fucking places, every single one has a set of stairs.

Deb Singh (01:22:18):

And so just thinking about activism in those ways, I have to say it was definitely one of my best learnings of how to be a better activist to all kinds of work that I do in community is working on the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. There were so many amazing folks, and there were so many amazing political conversations and intersections. And the best thing about it was that if it was an event, we were doing an event, everything was about, eventually, end game was the event, the bathhouse, it was going to end in orgasm. So, no matter where your activism landed, orgasm was the freaking end game. So that's a good place to be, is pleasure in our communities. We deserve it. Our bodies are deserving of it. So that's some of the greatness around the inclusivity work that we did.

Alisha Stranges (01:23:22):

Well, do you want to leave it there, Deb?

Deb Singh (01:23:24):

Yeah. Makes sense. Hopefully.

[crosstalk]

Alisha Stranges (01:23:27):

Pardon me.

Deb Singh (01:23:29):

Hopefully it's just soundbites in some of the larger stuff.

Alisha Stranges (01:23:32):

No, it was brilliant. Thank you so much for taking so much time to reflect on these things.

Deb Singh (01:23:39):

I'm a long talker, so it's so...