

## **Pussy, Pride and police: From bathhouses to Black Lives Matter**

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When I was in my mid-20s I attended my very first women's bathhouse event, The Pussy Palace, which was raided that same night by the Toronto Police in 2000.

I was on a sensory overload and an endorphin high all night enjoying a sex positive, women only, trans inclusive, queer, feminist space. There were women of all shapes, ages, sizes, shades, orientations, gender identities, and states of undress frolicking around. People were fucking, dancing, swimming, hot tubbing, spanking, flirting, watching porn, and having fun. You could explore various kinks and sexual games in different rooms with trained experts and see what turned you on or off. And there were free condoms and lube and latex gloves everywhere! The organizers did everything to ensure we were safe and secure to explore our sexual selves.

At one point in the evening I heard a rumour that lap dances had started, so I ran down in my very short cotton dress with no bottoms on to the front desk clerk and asked her where the lap dances were happening. She then gave me this look that indicated I needed to shut up and I noticed a man standing behind her. I asked him if he was a pool repairman. The front desk clerk then said. "No he's not here to fix the pool. He's a cop." I then tip toed my bare butt backwards out of that room and proceeded to head up the stairs to my room and locked myself in.

The police then inspected our bathhouse event for alleged liquor violations for almost two hours.

I could hear some of the women taunting them and telling them to get lost. At one point a cop pounded on my door. I just huddled into the corner of my bed, stayed quiet, and ignored them until they went away and moved on. I knew my queer history. Images of being dragged out of my room in my underwear, put into the back of a police van, thrown in jail, and having my name and photo in the morning newspaper played in my mind.

I wish I could have been as brave as my activist sisters who called the media the moment the cops showed up and took pictures outside Club Toronto while being interviewed by the press. Or as strong as the Toronto Women's Bathhouse

Committee members whose names were on the event's special occasion permit who took the police to court and won.

But that night I was filled with fear. Our space was violated. We were made to feel ashamed for being queer, for being women, and for being sexual.

I went to the next Pussy Palace and volunteered to be a part of the cleanup crew more as a political act of solidarity, but we never felt as free to bring our "sexy" on after that raid with the same reckless abandon we did before.

Sixteen years later, in June 2016, the media leaked a story that the Toronto Police planned on issuing a public apology for the 1981 gay men's bathhouse raids and the 2000 women's bathhouse raid.

My queer sisters who were there with me all those years ago started talking to each other over social media about the news and the realization hits me what a collective trauma this was for all of us. My queer brothers started asking about reparations. The Pussy Palace didn't experience the same kind of visceral violence that the 1981 bathhouse raids did, but what we did experience was an act of violence.

In the end the "apology" became a non-apology. The police instead expressed regret for the 1981 men's bathhouse raids. They never mentioned the 2000 women's bathhouse raid because Pussy Palace organizers refused to accept their empty apology and photo op saying it was nothing more than tokenism.

And they were right. How can I accept your apology and forgive you if in no concrete way you are willing to change your behaviour?

A few days later I would march with the Toronto Bisexual Network in the Pride Parade in honour of our queer brethren who were massacred at Pulse Nightclub with each step I took.

Before the Parade got started I wandered down the line up of floats looking for a friend. I got near to the end of the floats and ran into one police float after another after another after another after another and started to feel very uncomfortable and wanted to get away.

I found my friend, we took some selfies, and got back together with our different marching groups. We all seemed to be waiting around a lot longer than usual to

get marching and then word got round that this year's honoured group, Black Lives Matter, had staged a sit in. I wouldn't realize until I got home later that night that they also had a list of demands which included the removal of police floats in all Pride Toronto parades and marches.

And I get it Black Lives Matter. I really get it. Police oppression is what started the modern day LGBTQ rights movement. From the 1969 Stonewall Riots, to the 1981 Toronto Bathhouse Raids, to the 2000 Pussy Palace Raid, to the 2004 Bathhouse Raid in my own hometown of Hamilton.

Pride is political. It always has been.

As a queer woman my mere existence is constantly under attack. Rights gained are never static. There are too many forces working away at undoing and subverting the gains the LGBTQ community has made. There are far too many parts of our planet where the state would jail, torture or murder me because of my sexual orientation.

There are not enough rainbow cupcakes or corporate floats anywhere to convince me that capitalism sees the LGBTQ community as nothing more than a group of consumers to exploit.

As a white cisgender queer woman I don't live with the same daily fears of a target being on my back as my queer gender non-conforming friends of colour do.

I have experienced having my body, my queerness, my femaleness, and my sexuality dismissed, attacked, demeaned, and targeted by the police. I have an obligation and a duty to show solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

Black Lives Matter has been predominately led by queer women of colour. Their mandate is queer affirming. They are a part of my community. The Police haven't earned the right to be in our queer space until they stop oppressing every community member who encompasses our Rainbow Flag.

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