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NOT FOR MEN ONLY: THE (DE)-CONSTRUCTION OF LESBIAN/QUEER PUBLIC SEXUALITIES

A Dissertation

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By

Corie J. Hammers
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OF LESBIAN/QUEER PUBLIC SEXUALITIES

A Dissertation
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY

_____
Ann Beutel, Chair

_____
Susan Sharp, Member

_____
Craig St. John, Member

_____
Trina Hope, Member

_____
Melissa Homestead, Outside Member

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Abstract

This research study is an exploration of women's sexuality in general and lesbian/queer women's sexuality in particular. There has been little done in terms of examining women's sexuality and sexual practices, especially those sexualities that are considered subversive, taboo and/or immoral for various social, cultural and ethical reasons. That this study examines lesbian/queer sexual practices and sexual cultures at two events, Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, using face-to-face interviews and participant observation techniques, I was able to uncover the various ways in which space, agency and desire foster and facilitate a range of sexual behaviors not typically associated with women's sexuality and expectations society has regarding appropriate standards of femininity. Findings indicate that not only is sexuality highly malleable, but that women's sexuality and sexual desires are much more complicated and diverse than previously imagined.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Any mention of public sex has always been framed around and associated with male space and gay male sex (Hollister, 1999), with truck stops, cruising areas and tearooms as a few examples of exclusive male domains (Humphreys, 1970; Styles, 1979). Sexual desire being defined as male (that is, men as highly sexual and desirous beings) was reinforced and perpetuated with urbanization, which "facilitated the civic culture of desire among men more than any other environment known in Western culture" (Duyves, 1995: 51). Thus, the "urbanization of desire" meant in turn the proliferation of space carved out for and by men for men's sexual pleasure. An entertainment infrastructure for men (bars, clubs, cabarets etc.) was also made possible with the separation of society into public and private realms, where men were relegated to the public sphere of work while women remained confined within the home. The demarcation of the social world into feminine and masculine spheres in turn supported the popular notion that male and female sexuality were "fundamentally opposed: the one [male] aggressive and forceful, the other responsive and maternal [i.e., female]" (Segal, 1994: 76). In sum, that men needed a sexual outlet and release (and had the economic means to do so), both because of their sexual urges and stress from the hostile world of work translated into a society that tacitly endorsed non-monogamy and promiscuity among men.

It has really only been with the Sexual Revolution that society has begun to accept and view women as sexual beings, with their own desires and "sexual urges." That women in the past have been seen as "lacking" in sexual desire is mediated and maintained via social "facts" that have become part of our reality. As we are well aware social "facts" are not always completely value-free; rather, they can contain and reify assumptions and stereotypes. Laws and Schwartz (1981) cogently depict how such "truths" in regard to women's sexuality (or lack thereof) have been institutionalized, routinized, and internalized by women themselves due to the sexual scripts given them, where receptivity and passivity are part of women's sexual repertoire. Although alternative sexual scripts for women where women are hyper-sexual, aggressive and the active one within a relationship are often denigrated and renounced as "unwomanly," women are resisting such notions by in part embracing their sexual desires and becoming sexually agentic beings.

This notion that women are less desirous was also popularized and reinforced among feminists, who claimed that lesbianism—the supposed ideal lifestyle for feminists—was not about sexuality and sex per se; rather, lesbianism was about intimacy, support, autonomy and the nurturing of other women. Rich's "lesbian continuum" for instance, suggested that all women were potentially lesbians on some level if they supported other women, women's rights, and thus, were on some level "woman-identified" (Rich, 1983). This downplaying of sexuality fostered stereotypes that lesbians (and women in general) were not desirous beings, and thus, furthered the

idea that sex and desire were somehow exclusively male territory. Such sentiment is exemplified by Roy (1993) when she asserts that "Down-and-dirty public discussions of sexual practice were skirted in favor of talk of eroticism, friendship, and softer pleasantries. The specificity of lesbian existence—as a *sexual* identity—seemed to get lost" (18).

In addition, some feminists have contended that sexual liberalization is merely an extension of male privilege; that is, being sexual and expressing oneself in overt and explicit ways is really just appropriating male behaviors that are inherently violent, dangerous and oppressive. The irony is that in the 1980s feminists who espoused such ideas surrounding sex found themselves in the same camp as the far right when it came to such issues as pornography. The "sex wars" ensued wherein anti-sex and pro-sex feminists clashed on several fronts, creating a large and irreparable divide within the feminist movement. Rubin (1993) asserts that this is because proponents of the antipornography movement "condemned virtually every variant of sexual expression [e.g., S & M, pornography, role playing, nonmonogamy] as antifeminist. Within this framework, lesbianism that occurred within long-term, intimate [and monogamous] relationships…is at the top of the value hierarchy" (36). The result was that only a certain form of lesbianism was deemed the most appropriate lifestyle for those considered to be "true" and "genuine" feminists. Thus, feminists too were dictating a narrow and limited definition of a proper female

sexuality, further condemning women's desires, fantasies, and any and all behaviors outside this ideal.

This project focuses on various dimensions of female sexuality, particularly those aspects that have either been ignored or considered incomprehensible on political, social, cultural and biological grounds by examining female public sex and sexual practices as they are played out at two particular sites: Pussy Palace, a bathhouse in Toronto specifically for lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered individuals, and the Dinah Shore Weekend event, the largest lesbian event and circuit party in the world. (It is referred to as a "circuit party" due to the plethora of different parties that are held each and every day for four straight days.) I use "lesbian/queer" in recognition of the fact that "lesbian" is problematic in that it is rather exclusive. In contrast, queer encompasses a broad range of sexual/gendered identities, and is therefore more inclusive (what one means by "queer" is explained in the next chapter). In addition, the word "trans" denotes those transgendered individuals who are biologically female but identify as male, and may have gone through/or are going through a transition period from female to male (via surgery, hormones, counseling etc.). A fundamental premise of this research includes the basic feminist argument that gender differences in regard to sex, sexuality and interaction are not due to innate differences between men and women; rather, social-structural factors, cultural values and dominant ideologies are strongly implicated in both creating and maintaining gendered sexualities—in essence, like gender, sexuality is socially constructed.

This study also examines the use of space; that is, how space is carved out by and for women to explore their sexualities at these sites. The concept of "space" is used here to denote a place given a particular meaning due to human activity in a given locale (Leap, 1999; Cosgrove 1984). Not only has "space" been appropriated and used by men to serve men's needs, but has in addition been "heterosexualized" as highlighted by Valentine when he states that: "the ability to appropriate and dominate places and hence influence the use of space by other groups is not just only the product of gender; heterosexuality is also powerfully expressed in space" (1992:395). In essence, the public arena is a heterosexual forum wherein men and women can express their affection, devotion, desire and love for one another (e.g., wedding rituals, funerals, dances, restaurants).

Not only are non-heterosexual spaces tightly circumscribed and often sequestered away from normative society, but such is particularly the case in terms of lesbian spaces which are fewer in number and thus, that much more invisible. These lesbian spaces are largely proscribed by two major forces: homophobia *and* patriarchy (Valentine, 1992). Because heterosexuality is linked to asymmetrical notions of femininity and masculinity, which includes not only physical appearance and dress, but myriad manifestations of power within and outside heterosexual relationships, lesbians and queer women often feel out of place and fearful of discrimination and/or violence. As a result, queer women will often "protect" themselves by remaining invisible; that is, by not engaging in "dykey" behavior

and/or "passing" as straight—in essence, queer women "police" their own behavior. This marginalization, coupled with the fact that women overall have less purchasing power and fewer economic resources, makes creating an infrastructure for and by women that much more difficult.

This project aims to debunk and redefine what female sexualities are and what they look like. By examining these sexual sites specifically for women both through participant observation and face-to-face interviews, I will explore how such space impacts the participants' own desires, feeling, and interactions as it relates to their sexualities. The specific objectives of this project are to:

1) Identify alternative sexual scripts used by women at these sites, which in turn complexifies traditional notions we have concerning women's sexuality.
2) Determine if and how such space impacts participants' feelings regarding their own sexuality, identity, and other aspects of self.
3) Uncover the various emotions/feelings and attitudes women have regarding women's sexuality.

A proliferation of sexual "opportunity" for women will, I argue, propel the undoing of what we have up to now associated with female sexuality. Simply put, women can fuck, want a quickie, and be as desirous as men. Such notions not only are glossed over in most discourses on sexuality, but also, I contend, disrupt and challenge assumptions society has regarding female sexuality. That such

"subversive" sexual behavior does not conform to traditional sexual scripts for women, buttresses the notion that agency and in this case, sexual agency are possible.

The outline of this dissertation is as follows: First, in Chapter Two I present the theoretical framework, that is, the theoretical perspectives used to guide the research, which include the social constructionist, queer and feminist perspectives regarding gender and sexuality, Foucault's concepts such as "biopower" and "docile bodies," as well as Gidden's structuration theory. Chapter Three briefly describes the history of gay and lesbian communities in the US and Canada, state intervention as it relates to queer sexualities and lesbian and gay communities, and the laws, regulations and policies in place regarding the legality of public sex and bathhouses both in the US and Canada. Chapter Four describes the research design and the methods used in the study, while Chapter Five outlines the major themes/patterns found in the research such as the relationships between space, desire and agency, and the common feelings and emotions women experienced while at these venues. Chapter Six briefly discusses the Pussy Palace raid, which provides a contemporary example of state intervention vis-à-vis women's sexuality and lesbian/queer visibility. Finally, Chapter Seven concludes with an overview of the study as well as discusses some of the parallels found between Pussy Palace and the women's health care movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

This study furthers our understanding regarding the social construction of sexuality in that many women expressed strong opinions regarding the injustices

women face when it comes to sexual expression, with some women claiming that "it wasn't fair" that men had so many more sexual opportunities, both in terms of venues available and the social acceptance of male promiscuity. Others discussed the issue of safety and how women simply cannot just go out and have sex, due in part to possible sexual and physical violence as well as the contempt and possible ostracism women will face for engaging in such casual behavior.

Yet, because Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore were women-only events and thus considered "safe spaces" for many, women in turn engaged in casual sex and various acts of sexual expression. That participants felt "free" to do this suggests that space/structure is a significant determinant of women's sexual expression and their degree of sexual agency—a reason structuration theory could prove valuable for future research dealing with sexuality. In addition, for many women such sites were considered to be "training grounds" (this was particularly so for women at Pussy Palace) for re-socialization. That is, many women discussed how their sexuality evolved over time either during the event itself or as in the case for Pussy Palace, every bathhouse event provided another opportunity for women to do things they otherwise would not do—such as initiating a sexual encounter, or as some women stated "to take risks." Thus, future sexuality research needs to taken seriously this relationship between space, agency and desire and how and in what ways gender and sexual preference intersect with these various dimensions to form and shape sexual expression.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

The Social Constructionist and Essentialist Perspectives

From the literature, I have identified several important themes that will provide a framework for my research project. A major debate within the sexuality literature is whether or not sexuality (and gender) is a social construct or some innate, inborn part of self. More specifically, essentialism argues that sexuality is biologically determined, fixed and unchanging, while the social constructionist perspective asserts that sexuality is socially determined—both on a collective (social) and individual level. Yet, while social constructionists contend that things are dictated by social norms, it nonetheless is the case that things can and do change. History buttresses this notion in that ideas regarding sexuality have changed, as well as taboos against various sexual practices. Thus, the social constructionist view also argues that sexuality is also an historical product, such that sexuality can only be truly understood if the social, cultural and historical context is taken into account (Weeks, 1995). For instance, in large part because of feminism and the Sexual Revolution women have much more agency and choice in determining their sexual practices and behaviors compared to the past. Yet, while women are less constrained the "double standard" still exists, such that sex and sexuality continue to be, particularly for women, sites of contestation, guilt, shame and insecurity.

The whole essentialism versus social constructionism debate on sexuality is related to Foucault's ideas of social control and the body. A "strong" social constructionist perspective contends that all behavior is determined by society, its organization and values, while leaving little room for individual autonomy and expression—thus, there is no room for individual agency, which in turn makes social change impossible. Foucault's (1978) concepts such as "docile bodies" and "biopower" reflect this perspective in that power relations comprise society and are part of the modern regulatory apparatus (the state) which includes disciplinary regimes, systems of surveillance and the "normalization of society" (Deveaux, 1999; Butler, 1990). More specifically, "docile bodies" according to Foucault, is the translation of ideology—in this case the "cult of domesticity" and femininity—onto the body or corporeal realm, which in turn dictate's and controls women's bodies (in terms of comportment, disposition, and physical appearance).

"Docile bodies" is particularly useful in relation to female embodiment, where bodily constraint and moderation of sexual pleasure and desire are societal expectations of appropriate feminine behavior. Women's constant vigilance over and against the body and physical appearance is part and parcel of social control as highlighted by Bordo (1989) in the following statement: "Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the days of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification" (24). Thus, the body, which

also operates as a metaphor for culture (Douglas, 1982; Bordo, 1989), becomes then a "sign" or "marker" of a particular historical era with its own regulatory apparatus. In essence, we learn in part what it means to be feminine directly through bodily discourse, the use of "bodily markers" to signify our gender/sex, and our adherence to and obsession with a "beauty ideal." This exaltation of femininity where physical appearance is an all-encompassing and constant preoccupation for some women was a pattern I found among my interviewees. Although discussed at length in my findings chapter, many women spoke of "image issues" such as their weight, breast size and body type, and how an atmosphere such as Dinah Shore aroused feelings of intimidation and insecurity.

On the other hand, "biopower" is used to denote those power mechanisms and the social agents who disseminate and enforce them, wherein heterosexual conventions and male domination are part and parcel of the normative order. In addition, an example of biopower today and of particular relevance for this research study, is the societal discourse which revolves around what is and is not "good" and "healthy" sex and sexuality. Good and healthy sex of course means that sex which is enacted in private, among opposite-sex married couples is healthy and in turn, part and parcel of the "public good" (that is, good for the nation and social order). Lastly, the above example highlights how language and rhetoric, when used by the powerful, is central in the production of "normal" sexualities. As Foucault and Butler argue, our normative order is in large part produced and reconstituted via the discursive

realm (see Foucault's *History of Sexuality: Volume One. An Introduction*, 1978). More specifically (and reminiscent of Marxian ideas of how the powerful dictate material reality), those in power control, shape and organize what is considered "knowledge", which once again becomes our "reality". As a result, discourses shape, order and reify society and social truths in regards to sex and sexuality such that "specific discursive constructions of 'the sexual' create some sexual subject positions and foreclose others" (Harding, 1998: 20).

The Social Construction of Female Sexuality

"Sexual scripts," introduced by Gagnon and Simon (1973) and defined as a "repertoire of acts and statuses that are recognized by a social group, together with the rules, expectations, and sanctions governing these acts and statuses" (Laws and Schwartz, 1981: 1-2), are in essence the "laws," "regulations," and socio-cultural values and beliefs guiding sexual behavior which in turn are part of the socialization processes individuals experience. These "sexual scripts" are infused with traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, wherein women are perceived (and expected) to be virginal, passive and thus, reactive (as opposed to agentic) and not as sexual as men. Even the very act of intercourse itself is described via an androcentric and heterosexist point of view where what counts as "sex" comes down to penetration, so that all other sexual behaviors are considered merely a means to an end—with this definition one has to wonder how lesbians have sex? There is in addition, a long history of women's sexuality being studied, described, and defined by men (take

Freud for instance, where vaginal orgasm meant sexual "maturity"), with women having little say in what came to be seen as the "facts" of women's anatomy and physiological responses to sex and sexual stimuli.

This socialization process regarding sex and sexual behavior starts from a very young age, and governs in turn both one's future sexual behavior and sexual identity. In addition, these social scripts are institutionalized, meaning such behavior is reified and deemed part of the natural order (which is the "essentialist position")—thus making alternative scripts and possibilities seem impossible and/or futile (Laws and Schwartz, 1981). Yet, it is precisely because these sexual scripts are social constructions that they can be undone and do change, thus making any and all ideas regarding a "natural and normal female sexuality" erroneous—it is in part merely an attempt to keep women "in line." That women's sexuality is in reality malleable is reflected by Laws and Schwartz (1981) when they assert that "Because of this process [that sexual scripts can and do change], female sexuality can never be definitively described. We continually learn more about the possibilities in female sexuality, but we will never pin down its 'nature'" (ix). This research project is an attempt to reveal just that: the various aspects of female sexuality that contradict and subvert a natural female sexuality and where, in addition, "emerging" sexualities where sexual agency is prominent are illuminated.

The State and Control of Women's Sexuality

Feminist theory contends that the state and patriarchy go hand-in-hand. That is, the foundation of the state is for one, about men governing over women's labor, sexuality, fertility and movement. The public/private split, long the organizational method for societies, meant that women were for the most part, contained within the home, which aided and abetted male control over women. Going back to Athenian society, one finds the use of private architecture with the creation of separate spheres for men and women. Women were relegated to the more remote rooms, that is, those rooms furthest away from the street (Petchesky, 1990). Petchesky illuminates the extent of this exclusion when she states that "The separation of the sexes was spatially emphasized. While men spent most of their day in public areas…respectable [i.e., upper-class] women remained at home" (79). This relegation of women to the home and the ideology that women *belonged* in the home persisted in varying degrees until the 1960s. Relegation to the private sphere is not just about seclusion within the domicile, but also represents confinement in the psychic and bodily sense as well. Grosz (1995) describes this dilemma facing women in the following statements:

> In a rigid containment or mortification of women's explorations of their own notions of spatiality, men place women in the position of being 'guardian' of their bodies and their spaces, the conditions of both bodies and space without body or space of their own…The containment of women within a dwelling that they did not build, nor was even built for them, can only amount to a homelessness within the very home itself (122).

In addition, the state's concern (and obsession) with reproduction and procreation is also part and parcel of "biopower." For instance, the United States has intervened at various times throughout history on behalf of its own "national security interests" to see to it that the birth rate among American white women of Anglo-Saxon descent did not decline too much vis-à-vis the birth rate among immigrant women and minorities—a situation referred to as "race suicide" (Black, 2003). The health of the state—that is, the ability to retain its hegemonic status—was thus determined in part by the racial purity of the country, with whites maintaining their numerical majority in part by the state's curtailing and restriction on immigration, sterilization campaigns, as well as the use of propaganda to instill in white women that it is their "duty" as wives and mothers of this nation to have children (Krieger and Fee, 1994). That the state has had a hand in wanting to expand, restrict, or rechannel fertility and the sexual practices of ordinary people, particularly women, is also highlighted by Petchesky (1990) when she asserts that:

> states have recurrently invaded the private domain...Their reasons, in most historical periods, have to do with two essential purposes related to the nature of the state: the control of populations [such as the outlawing of abortion and sterilization campaigns]…, and the control of sexuality, especially that of married women and young girls (67).

Ultimately these attempts to control women through policies dealing with fertility and sexual expression are "attempts to contain, not only women's spontaneous practices,

but also the contradictions inherent in these different, but inevitably related, 'public' purposes" (Petchesky, 67).

Thus, biopower and the body are intertwined with sexuality in general, and women's sexuality in particular. Women's sexuality is therefore hindered by society in the following ways: sexual and societal taboos—the magnitude of which takes on new meaning as it relates to queer/lesbian sexualities—inhibit women's sexual expression; an infrastructure around sexual entertainment for women is practically nonexistent and thus opportunity for safe sexual expression is lacking; and lastly, women's continuous negotiation between desire and safety where exploitation and violence against women is pervasive curtails women's sexual opportunities and ways to express themselves.

State regulation as it relates to this idea of "biopower" and safety vis-à-vis women's sexuality is also discussed in this study through the examination of the September 15, 2000 raid of the Toronto women's bathhouse. Male officers had purportedly entered the bathhouse on the grounds that alcohol violations were taking place. Alcohol could not be sold inside the bathhouse without a liquor license. They did have a special permit for the event allowing for the sale and purchase of liquor. These male police officers had entered with many women either naked or in various states of undress. Despite this vulnerability, the police officers stayed for about two hours. Women talked of feeling violated, shamed and exploited during the raid. This raid and its various connections to agents of power as it relates to female sexuality are

explored both in interviews with organizers of Pussy Palace, one of whom was arrested and charged with allegedly violating the Liquor License Act, as well as by analyzing various articles which examined the now infamous raid.

The Gendering of Sex and Desire

It is also important to point out that "sex" and discourse pertaining to sexuality are almost always discussed and analyzed through a heterosexual lens, thus reinforcing heterosexual hegemony (Butler, 1990), or what Rich (1982) refers to as "compulsory heterosexuality." Maintaining this sex/gender system depends upon a binary system of strict demarcation between the sexes, such that males develop along masculine lines, and females adhere to feminine standards of behavior. These stereotypical (and expected) feminine characteristics which include passivity and the need for emotional connectedness in turn shape and organize our views regarding sex, intimacy and sexuality as exemplified by Laws and Schwartz (1981) when they assert that:

> the female and male sex role scripts, to be sure, contain many elements which are not sexual. Female sex role scripts might be thought of as a collection of prescriptions for femininity—including, for example, the expectation that women shall be passive rather than aggressive, reactive rather than agentic. Such prescriptions of course carry over into the realm of sexual behavior…(10).

That gender is inextricably tied to sex and sexuality is an important and pervasive theme in this research study. Comportment, negotiation, and initiation are all gendered such that when women-only spaces are created for in part, sexual

pleasure, the dynamics involved are bound to be qualitatively different from a heterosexual setting. For instance, during my research many women compared themselves or other women to "boys" and "men", sometimes with contempt and sometimes to describe their own "healthy" sex-drive. One woman in particular felt that women coming just to get laid was not okay and was simply "piggish behavior." Likewise, many women described themselves as shy, withdrawn, and "not a player," which indicated both their passivity and unwillingness to be, or be perceived as, the aggressor, and reflected the traditional social and sexual scripts women are socialized to follow. That Pussy Palace, at least when I was there, was not one big "sex fest"—by this I mean that not all women were engaging in casual sex, quite possibly has something to do with all these prescriptions and rules regarding femininity, women and sex (more on this later).

Sexual practices outside these standards of appropriate behavior, such as wanting to simply "fuck" either in a queer or heterosexual context, are considered deviant and repugnant. Thus, women are often ostracized for such shameful behavior. In contrast, men have always been given greater reign in exercising their sexual rights and desires. As previously mentioned, it is merely assumed as "truth" that their insatiable desires and sexual needs have to be quenched for their own well-being and health. Thus, feminists have long asserted that women's ontological and libidinal desire have been "fashioned within the context of male models of power"

(Lorde, 1984)—thus, the maintenance of "regulatory practices" vis-à-vis female sexuality.

Yet, the women's movement as previously mentioned was also culpable in terms of gendering sex and desire, and reinforcing stereotypes regarding appropriate standards of female sexual behavior. For instance, many lesbian feminists during the second wave of the women's movement argued that "women's authentic sexuality is process oriented and egalitarian rather than genitally focused" (Whisman, 55). Women were not really interested in casual sex, and if they were, they were definitely not *true* feminists. If women were promiscuous, they were that way because of "false consciousness," because patriarchy had deluded them into thinking they liked sex, and even liked sex with men. Since heterosexual sex was seen by many feminists (both straight and lesbian feminists) to be inherently violent and a manifestation of the unequal power relations in society between men and women, those women who did enjoy sexual relations with men were merely perpetuating and reinforcing our patriarchical society—therefore, these women were culpable in continuing the system of male hegemony. Such sentiment, that is, that all heterosexual sex is inherently violent and oppressive, is highlighted by Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, a feminist organization in England, whose harsh political manifesto highlighted the need for separatism and outlined for women the "authentic" feminist:

> A political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. All the good work that our heterosexual sisters do for women

> is undermined by the counter-revolutionary activity they engage in with men (Healey, 1996: 65-66).

Of course, such thinking left little room for the possibility of female agency and self-determination as it related to sex and one's own sexual desires. Feminists were therefore in many ways suppressing and oppressing their own.

Due to the increased regulation and laying down of rules for "proper behavior," a bitter division among lesbian feminists ensued in the 1970s and 1980s. The result was the creation of two camps: those who were considered to be "pro-sex" and those labeled as "anti-sex." This divide and animosity within the movement became known as the "lesbian sex wars" (see Healey, 1996 for a thorough discussion of this "war"). These camps had differing philosophies associated with sex and sexuality, with "pro-sex" feminists embracing all sexualities, and accepting all sorts of sex play and sexual entertainment (such as pornography and S/M)—for these women, embracing and engaging in sexual pleasure was first and foremost a feminist act that conveyed the claiming of one's own body and desires. On the other hand, anti-sex feminists were deeply disturbed by any and all sex acts where power and lust were thought to be part and parcel of sexual expression and interaction (e.g., pornography, S/M, casual sex).

In sum, the regime of sexuality is organized around heterosexual hegemony and the sex/gender system. Like Foucault, Butler (1990) agrees that sexual identities are determined by regulatory practices. Yet, Butler (cf., McNay, 1992), in

contradistinction to Foucault, believes that gender and sexuality and the "heterosexualization of desire" can be subverted and contested. That is, individuals are agentic beings able to dismantle the normalizing processes of society. While the regulatory regimes cannot necessarily be subverted all at once, they can nevertheless be transgressed and dismantled little by little with the "performativity of gender" (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993). Butler (1993) goes on to assert that this opening up for the possibility of agency is created because "Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced *and* [my emphasis] destabilized in the course of this reiteration" (10). Such subversion shows the inefficacy and fallacy of "normal" sexuality as it pertains to heterosexuality, femininity/masculinity and the monogamic family (cf., Marcuse, 1955; Butler, 1990).

Structuration Theory: The Interplay Between Agency and Structure

Giddens's structuration theory (1984; 1990) also highlights the ways in which structure and agency are mutually reinforcing. That is, individual behavior and its expression are both limited and made possible by social structures, while also giving meaning to and determining the contours of these institutions. A significant component of any sexual culture and their "social practices" are determined in large part by the institutions and facilities involved (Giddens, 1990). For lesbians and women in general, facilities have not existed for women to engage in casual sex—quite the opposite is the case for men as mentioned above, where facilities and

"sexual sites" are not found wanting. It therefore follows that if such institutions existed, sexual practices once only associated with men and gay men in particular would come to be "de-gendered" in that women would be "doing this" too. More specifically and to the point, sexual practices can only arise when allowed to be "practiced"—thus, space can literally and potentially change behaviors among individuals (in this case, queer/lesbian women) who heretofore have not been given the opportunity to engage in what are typically seen as male sexual practices. Since my project consists in looking at the ways the presence of bathhouses and public sex sites facilitate sexual expression, I believe structuration theory will be useful in illuminating these processes.

How Space Facilitates or Inhibits Agency and Expression

In this project space is analyzed in terms of it being a conduit and vehicle for sexual expression—that is, "spatial praxis" as seen at Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace determines in part the participants' sexual praxis and agency. One of the main findings in this research project is that the creation of sexual space fundamentally impacts, or has the potential to fundamentally impact, lesbian/queer sexual desire, sexual practices and the larger gay and lesbian/queer communities. Supporting this idea, Taormino (2002), in her examination of lesbian public sex, states in an article in *The Village Voice* that "Cyber connections, erotic videos, and women's [sex] parties have created a new public space for lesbian sex. As these venues arise, so does dyke desire" (June 26th). According to social constructionists and feminists alike, women

are not inherently or innately any different sexually compared to men, and not all women long for emotional connection with sex taking place only within long-term, monogamous relationships. Rather, that women are creating and appropriating public spaces for themselves solely for the expression of sexual desire suggests that an embryonic "erotic evolution" (to use Taormino's phrase) is astir. That women, and in this case lesbian/queer women, are having sex for sex sake, engaging in casual sex and creating a lesbian public sexual culture, means in turn a radical undoing of what up to now have been widespread beliefs that women, particularly lesbians, are anti-sex or not sexually "needy" and whose sexual desire ranks quite low vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Hubbard (2001) highlights the ways in which space facilitates and impacts human behavior in the following statements:

> Space…does not simply exist as a 'given' but affects (as is affected by) things which are always *becoming*. Or to put it another way, space is not just a passive backdrop to human behavior and social action, but is constantly produced and remade within relations of culture, power and difference (4:51).

Hubbard then goes on to argue that a critical constructionist notion of space can explain and show how such space can potentially create and stimulate new sexual identities, as well as "challenge the naturalization of heterosexual norms" (51)—and thus, I might add, the formation of sexual identity and the essentialist notions we rigidly adhere to regarding sexual identity.

More importantly, and central to this research project, is that as already stated, space can not only be used to exclude, but it also has the potential to *de*-naturalize

and subvert the normative order, as well as be a space where agency and liberation reign. For instance, Lefebvre (1991) and hooks (1992) discuss how those on the margins (culturally and socially) can use that marginal position to their advantage for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse, not just with words and ideology, but habits and life practices as well. Lefebvre thus sees "spatial praxis" as being in part about individuals and marginal social groups having an intent, an affect on space—as a result, marginal groups such as those who identify as queer, can within a space which seems at first to be merely constraining and intolerable, foment and stimulate qualitative changes to the regulatory regime or what Foucault refers to as "regulatory apparatuses." Lastly, having spatial praxis is especially important for women given that as already mentioned, space and the public world at large have been considered male territory as illustrated by Grosz (1995) when she states that "space has been historically conceived …to either contain women or to obliterate them" (120).

Space and Praxis: Dimensions of Social Change

Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* is useful in highlighting the ways in which structural arrangements do not automatically exclude agency but rather can facilitate and foster a praxeological element in social action. Habitus is defined as "the practice(s) of everyday life, particularly to be found in the body" (Munt, 1998: 169). In addition, McNay (2000) goes on to explain that the habitus involves the:

> intersection of symbolic and material dimensions of power upon the body…[which] denotes not just the processes through which norms are inculcated upon the body, but also the moment of praxis or living through of these norms by the individual. In other words, habitus is defined, not as a determining principle, but as a generative structure (25).

Therefore this concept, habitus, permits the possibility of agency, which is referred to by Bourdieu as "regulated liberties." Such a perspective is reminiscent of and linked to Butler's notion of "performative agency" and Gidden's structuration theory, which as mentioned previously, argues that structure and agency (or praxis) are inextricably intertwined via social action.

The body, long the foci of feminism, is a significant element within these theories dealing with agency and praxis. The body, both burdened and determined by the material and social norms of society, is also a site where the living through of such norms proceeds. Thus, gender identity and gendered practices become not determinative and automotive processes, but "denotes a conception of gender identity as a lived set of embodied potentialities rather than an externally imposed set of constraining norms" (McNay, 2000:32). Thus, gender and the conforming to gender identity and norms has a temporal dimension as well wherein we are constantly, albeit at the unconscious level, having to constantly "do gender." McNay clearly describes this tension between agency and constraint via the body once again when she states that "Embodiment expresses a moment of indeterminacy whereby the embodied subject is constituted through dominant norms but is not reducible to them" (32).

The Body and "Discursive Determination"

Butler expands on this idea concerning the body when she, like Foucault, argues that language too plays an important role in reinforcing the normative gender/sex order, which therefore limits other gender configurations. The discursive realm negates the "unimaginable" such that "constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender" (Butler, 1990: 9). For instance, "woman" and "man" are social/cultural categories that contain within them innumerable assumptions about femininity/masculinity. These categories in turn merely work to reify the "norm" regarding gender/sex, and perpetuate a binary gendered paradigm whose very stability depends upon oppositional, antithetical and mutually exclusive gendered categories. To give an example that illuminates how language impacts reality and thus, the social structure, one of my interviewees, the "creator" of Pussy Palace, discusses in the interview how one of the most significant impacts of Pussy Palace were the discussions it fueled and how in her words, "it [the bathhouse] started a dialogue that we have never had an opportunity to have." This dialogue and discussion both with one's self (such as asking whether or not you are going and what you will/will not do) and the lesbian/queer community in turn challenged preconceived notions of women's sexuality by merely mentioning "bathhouse" alongside "lesbian/queer desire."

Similarly, Braidotti (1998), in her idea of "embodied materialism" links the body with subjectivity, that is, the body becomes sign and signifier of the cultural, social, symbolic and discursive domains in society such that:

> This is the specifically human capacity for simultaneously incorporating and transcending the very variables—class, race, sex, nationality, culture, etc.—which structure it…This view posits the subject as a term in a process, which is co-extensive with both power and the resistance to it (21).

According to Braidotti, power is in this case (that is, in relation to embodiment and subjectivity) both negative in that it constrains, as well as positive, in that it enables and liberates. Seeing power as both an enabler and constraint breaks from Foucauldian ideas regarding power as an overarching and omnipotent presence, of which individuals cannot break free. In sum, the notion that the subject can "break free" from our heteronomous society is part and parcel of our human condition, and is the reason why social change is even possible.

A good example of this, particularly in a period of time considered regressive and rigid in regards to sex and desire, is Kennedy and Davis's (1993) examination of the lesbian communities in Buffalo and San Francisco during the first half of the twentieth century. They found that contrary to popular opinion, the lesbian communities, from the 1920s up through the highly repressive fifties, were highly pro-active in creating and fostering a sexually charged and liberating environment. Kennedy and Davis state that these lesbians created an atmosphere wherein:

> lesbians openly explored and expressed desire…Butches were firmly committed to making sex good for their fems while fems were enthusiastic about enjoying it and had confidence that their lovers thought they were terrific. This atmosphere fostered a sense of female agency that in turn furthered the establishment of community (377).

In sum and of critical importance is that *sexual agency* has been crucial for the lesbian/queer community, and has been central in their quest for self-determination and affirmation. This "sexual agency" is in direct opposition to the dominant order's rules and norms regarding female sexuality, and is thus a main reason for the degradation, subjugation and regulation of lesbians and lesbian/queer desire.

Queer Theory: Doing Away with Dichotomies

Lastly, queer theory's debunking and outright rejection of any coherent and stable identity category and configuration (Jagose, 1996) includes the very calling into question of any "natural" and normal sexuality. More specifically, according to queer theory concepts such as a "female" or "male" sexuality as well as "homosexuality and "heterosexuality" are all human constructs and categories that are inherently limiting, exclusionary and misguided, in that they are considered to be mutually exclusive and binding. Heterosexuality and the sex/gender system are therefore de-naturalized and deconstructed to make visible these mismatches. Thus, hegemonic dichotomies and binaries, even the apparently unproblematic terms as "man" and "woman" are thrown into question. Making sexuality problematic and

complex is thus what queer theory is about as exemplified by Seidman (1997) when he states that "Queer theory wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality itself, that is, the knowledges and social practices that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of selves" (93).

Such instability of any and all identity categories (e.g., heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality etc.) renders sexuality complex, as opposed to "an identity" which connotes stagnation, permanence and a reification of categorical thought. Such sentiment is highlighted by Weeks (1985) when he states that "the imposition of identity can be seen as a crude tactic of power, designed to obscure the real human diversity with the strict categorizations of uniformity" (187). The "Down Low" (DL) culture within the African American male community is a good example of the ways in which identity categories are unpredictable and rendered mute when investigating how individuals negotiate their own desires and identities. Men on the "DL" frequently engage in homosexual sex, but often refuse to categorize themselves as gay. In fact they often vehemently deny any and all associations with the gay lifestyle, in part because they are often in heterosexual relationships and see this identity, "gay," as meaning white and effeminate—the antithesis of many on the DL who are hyper-masculine in appearance and behavior. According to Wright (2003), "Today's down-low man embraces gay sex but rejects everything about gay identity…He sees his homosexual trysts as just that—sex acts, nothing less, nothing more" (58). Queer identity is necessarily indeterminate, ambiguous and strongly anti-

essentialist. In addition and more to the point of this project, such a perspective where a proliferation of identities and sexualities are encouraged, renders any feminine ideal and "female sexuality" *un*natural and problematic.

Towards a Feminist Epistemology Regarding Sex/uality

That women are taking control of their sexuality and demanding their rights as sexual beings means that new understandings and knowledges about women's sexuality are unfolding. A few examples of this newfound sexual agency include Nancy Friday's books (1992, 1994) dealing with women's sexual fantasies, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1993) (a book that was part of the Women's Health Care movement which deals with, among other things, sexuality), and the increasing number of visible pro-sex "radicals" such as Carole Queen and Annie Sprinkle who discuss and debunk openly and honestly not only their experiences as sex-workers but the various myths society has regarding women and sex—such as the de-linking of the idea that sex for women is always about intimacy and love. For instance, a sex-worker interviewed in Chapkis's (1997) ethnographic study on women performing erotic labor paints a powerful picture of her own experience:

> Men need to think that woman can't have sex without intimacy, and that if they do that it's bad for them. Like a woman only has sex with a man because he and he alone has something she can't live without. In fact, an important part of prostitution for me was realizing that sex didn't have to be about intimacy. There is great power in the realization that you are, in fact, in control (84).

Thus, as many feminists have highlighted and as this quote illustrates, knowledge about sex and sexuality are tied to experience. These experiences in turn often directly contradict the common myths and stereotypes we have regarding women's sexuality, as the quote from the sex worker above indicates—this woman felt empowered and "in control" not only when having sex with her client, but when she realized that sex did not always have to include intimacy (the purported feeling all women need in order to engage in sex or at least in order not to feel guilty and ashamed afterward). That understanding, values and beliefs about sex and sexuality are linked to experience means in turn that there is no universal, objective understanding of sex and sexuality. In essence, women's experiences, which often contradict previous assertions we have regarding women and sex, means in turn that women are creating a new language around women's sexuality as exemplified by Chapkis (1997) when she states that "women are understood to be able to subversively resignify sexual language and practices through using them in unintended ways" (26). In addition, words that have heretofore been used to condemn and demean women such as "slut," "whore" and "dyke" are now being appropriated and re-defined by pro-sex radicals to instead convey power and sexual agency. That society's heterosexist and homophobic discourse regarding sex and sexuality can change is illustrated by Califia (1980) when she states that "lesbians [and all women] can liberate a sexual vocabulary for their own use by seizing words previously used against them" (27).

That this project entails examining women's sexual experiences at Pussy Palace, a lesbian/queer bathhouse in Toronto, Canada, and Dinah Shore, suggests that this study is also in part about expanding and disseminating women's understanding and knowledges vis-à-vis sex and sexuality—in sum, furthering a feminist/queer epistemology regarding sexuality. The study's significance for scholarship on sexuality lies in the fact that as previously asserted, female sexuality has been compartmentalized and restricted in myriad ways. Women are thought to be less desirous, in need of intimacy as opposed to sexual pleasure, and unable or disgusted with the idea of "getting off" for one's own "selfish" pleasure. Yet, many participants at Pussy Palace have spoken of long lines and individuals coming from all over the world to participate in this event, which at present is held several times a year. As one reviewer for Chicklist magazine remarked, "there is no geographical limit on women's desire" (March 1999:1). This carving out of lesbian sexual space suggests new dimensions of female sexuality, its organization, and new opportunities for sexual expression and exploration among women. Broadening the scope of "sexual parameters," behaviors and desires previously only associated with men, turns our current understanding of female sexuality upside down. In addition, women are demanding access to sexual entertainment and exploration. As one woman remarked about a CAKE party, an organization based in New York City which provides sexual entertainment events for women, "it is about having fun exploring

and taking control of one's body, sexuality and pleasure and trying to get rid of sexual taboos" (http://www.cakenyc.com/letter.html, 2/24/2004).

The novelty of it all demands a new discourse, which begins with research projects like this whose ultimate aim is in the deconstruction of a normative female sexuality, ramifications of which have important consequences for *all* women. In addition and of equal significance, sexual equality and a female sexual culture based on pleasure, safety and choice are central to social equality. As Melinda, the organizer of CAKE, succinctly states "sexual equality is the new feminism" (http://www.cakenyc.com/letter.html, 2/24/2004). This project aims to extend and contribute to that sexual equality, where women of all sexual persuasions can feel okay (and safe) to feel uninhibited so as to act on their own desires. This connection between equality and sexual agency is cogently expressed by Alexander (1996) in the following statement: "It seems that to me that as women, we will never be able to assume an equal role in the non-sexual realms of human society unless and until we are able to determine, act on, explore, and name our sexuality in all of its variations" (236).

This research incorporates a number of theoretical perspectives, all of which are important for this particular study. For instance, social constructionist perspectives regarding sexuality and gender as well as the gendering of sex and desire depict processes that ultimately do change and are in states of transition. That I am examining women's sexuality and lesbian/queer sexuality in particular from a social

constructionist and feminist perspective means in turn that I am starting from the premise that women's sexuality has been hindered by patriarchal attitudes and socio-cultural ideals regarding appropriate femininity—where the body, disposition, characteristics of one's personality and repertoire of behaviors such as what was discussed regarding "sexual scripts" are all impacted. As already mentioned, state control—as reflected in Foucault's "biopower"—and our heteronormative order are also culpable in limiting women's ability to act on their sexual desires. In addition, because this study looks at space/structure (that is, Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore) and how space in turn facilitates desire, structuration theory is useful in that it highlights the extent to which individuals can have an impact on structure such that what follows are a range of new and different behaviors (e.g., women having casual sex with other women in a public space is certainly a novel use of space)—this is part and parcel of what is meant by "spatial praxis." Lastly, queer theory proves valuable since this study looks at how subjects' identity formations and behaviors are impacted by the space in which one is located—thus, identity (either in terms of gender and/or sexual persuasion) is seen as shifting, never fixed, and always in a state of flux. That many women walked away and were literally changed by the experience highlights the extent to which aspects of self can and do change.

Chapter 3

Public Sex, Sexual Regulation and Queer Activism in the US and Canada

> *Spaces are not only gendered, and sexed, they are moralized. Spatial boundaries are moral boundaries which expel the abject, due to the perception of difference as defilement* (Munt, 1998:166).

We live in a sex-phobic/sex negative society, where the restriction, regulation and prohibition of sexual expression has been a cornerstone of state policy for maintaining social order, since sex is and has been, for Western cultures anyway, a "dangerous, destructive, negative force" (Rubin, 1989:13). Such social control is exemplified by Foucault (1978) when he states that "Sex was not something one

simply judged; it was a thing to be administered…it called for management procedures; it had to be taken care of by analytical discourses. In the eighteenth century, sex became a 'police' matter…" (24). A society organized around a heteronormative model, where sex is associated with procreation and monogamous, heterosexual relationships, is heralded as part and parcel of a "civilized" society. Anthropological and other scientific "studies" reinforced such notions by associating "savages" with more primitive sexual behavior vis-à-vis civilized peoples (Kinsman, 1996). Thus, a society considered civilized must for one revolve and organize itself around the nuclear/heterosexual family unit. Such a paradigm sets up and upholds a strict binary between "dignified sex" and "deviant sex"—that sex and sexual expression which falls outside this ideal. This cultural ideology wherein "marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid" (Rubin, 1989:14), produces an efficacious sexual hierarchy so that even "small differences in value or behavior are often experienced as cosmic threats" (14).

This heteronormative order does not merely suggest and consist of sexual practices between men and women. Rather, it is about privilege and power, as illuminated by Berlant and Warner (1998) when they assert that this heternormative culture includes:

> a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex…is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of

> narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture…their material conditions feel hardwired into personhood (554-555).

Thus, banning sex outside this framework—such as homosexuality, bisexuality, sodomy, sex for pleasure—is justified on moral and religious grounds, maintaining the health of the population (such as the containment of STDs), national security, as well as limits the ability of sex deviants to "taint" and "influence" others—particularly those most vulnerable to being corrupted, such as children and young, experimenting adults (Rubin, 1993; Warner, 1999).

Part of this regulation of sex has included anti-homosexual crusades, which involve the policing and surveillance of gay/queer communities, such that arrests, harassment and fear come to pervade minority sexual populations. Thus, as Rubin succinctly states "sex is [also] always political" (4). Tactics have included the crackdown and arrests of men found in gay cruising areas, as well as gay and lesbian bars and gay bathhouses being busted off and on now for several decades. Although much policing and surveillance have been targeted at homosexuals, since the seventies, enforcement of prostitution and obscenity laws have also been stepped up, both in the US and Canada (Rubin, 1993).

Treating sex as dirty and shameful—Warner (1999) refers to this as the "politics of shame"—exists alongside our obsession with sex. Sex and sexuality pervade our society, from advertisements, to movies, to our entire consumer culture wherein "sex sells." Yet, there is a distinct and qualitative difference between these

two events. While we can depict some forms of sex, that is, heterosexuality and hetero-eroticism, we do not explicitly talk about sex and sexual desire. Our fear (and shame) regarding sex is evident in the state's policy regarding sexual education, where abstinence and abstinence-only programs are considered "sex ed." Califia (1994), for instance, found that in 1999 one in three schools taught their students that abstinence is the best, and *only* appropriate option, while Clinton signed "legislation creating a $250 million grant…to promote abstinence-only education in public schools (59)—this has only been hastened with the Bush administration's admonishment of all things associated with sex (the administration's AIDS policy for example). We should not be surprised then to find that the US has one of the highest teen birth rates, as well as some of the highest incidences of STDs, particularly among teens and young adults, of all industrialized, wealthy countries (Galliano, 2003). Once again, although this shame and fear of sex pervades all of society and all social groups, nevertheless it is most intense and focused upon queer communities and other sexual deviants—for example, single moms, sadomasochists, transsexuals, prostitutes and the non-monogamous, non-procreative types.

Thus, the sin and stigma associated with "non-reproductive sex" is central to state formation and policy. Kinsman (1996), when examining the emergence of capitalism, state formation and the regulation of sexuality and sexual expression, asserts that "the contemporary oppression of lesbians and gays in Western societies comes from a centuries-long 'tradition' in Western Christian cultures of prohibiting

non-reproductive sexual activity" (49). For instance, sodomy was seen as a sin regardless of gender and sexual orientation, first and foremost because it was a non-procreative sexual act (Kinsman, 49). Throughout European and American history, sodomy was often grounds for execution; until recently, many states still had 20-year prison sentences for those caught engaging in anal or oral sex (Rubin, 1993). Yet, despite applying to both opposite-sex and same-sex couples, sodomy laws have been primarily used against gay men and lesbians, especially during the last half-century (Robson, 1992; Bernstein, 2005). Interestingly, historical records show that early American sodomy laws "seem not to have been enforced against consenting adults acting in private"—either opposite-sex or same-sex couples (Syllabus, Lawrence et al. v. Texas, 2002). Privacy was a domain rarely breached by the State regardless of sexual orientation. Thus, modern America's justification of the condemnation and persecution of sodomy in *all* spaces (as reflected for instance in the *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) decision) due to America's "ancient roots" of persecution are erroneous and exaggerated claims.

Urbanization, Space, and the Creation of Queer Cultures

Paradoxically, the tightening of sexual mores has occurred alongside urbanization, since "urban space facilitates civic culture of desire among men [and women] more than any other environment known in Western culture" (Duyves, 1995:51). This "urbanization of desire" is part and parcel of capitalism, wherein the city became a convenient organization of space for the concentration of goods and

services, as well as people. In addition, the gender-based spatial divisions of labor characteristic of capitalism, "both shape and are shaped by people's sexual lives…[and] create single-sex environments in which homosexuality has the space, potentially to flourish" (Knopp, 1995). In essence, spatial organization was central to the creation of a gay community, its solidarity, and ultimately, its visibility and power (Rothenberg, 1995; Castells, 1983). D'Emilio (1983) makes this connection between capitalism and homosexuality clear when he remarks that the emergence of gays and lesbians is:

> associated with the relations of capitalism; it has been the historical development of capitalism—more specifically, its free labor system—that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity (102).

Urban spaces therefore became localized areas of liberation for gays and lesbians, as well as various subcultures. The creation of bathhouses and bars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were some of the first institutions to give gay Americans and Canadians not only a place to interact, socialize and express their desires, but also a place to organize and create a sense of community, solidarity and pride. Thus, though these places have been first and foremost places to socialize, and in baths, to have sex, they are also sites of political protest and resistance. In essence, lesbian and gay bars and gay bathhouses have been an integral part of gay political

history. According to Bérubé (1996), "gay baths and bars became the first stages of a civil rights movement for gay people in the United States" (188).

Yet, while these bars and baths were often referred to as "safety zones," all sex between same-sex couples were illegal and considered public (since gay men had no right to sexual privacy), such that "gay men [and women] were forced to become sexual outlaws" (Bérube, 189). This of course included finding places to meet and have sex, such as certain streets, parks, public rest rooms and hotel rooms. These semi-public spaces became known as locations to meet potential sexual partners, and consequently were also dangerous both in terms of police surveillance, arrest and/or physical violence. With the gay liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, bathhouses began to open up and became more publicly accessible. Despite their popularity, they were and continue to be subject to frequent police raids, wherein patrons and employees can be arrested.

"Morality Squads" and the Regulation of Queer Desire

Police policy is both toleration and surveillance, wherein surveillance and raids are typically associated with "anti-vice" or "clean-up" campaigns, often associated with a strategy for attaining political popularity or as a diversion from other more serious problems that might impact one's political power. Alongside the state's iron fist regarding procreation and such things as population control, the state has been equally and actively involved in preserving public order, i.e., in marginalizing and sequestering that which is not preferable and that which goes

against the social order—homosexuality and other types of sexual deviance. Raids by the police were common, and the gay and lesbian communities knew that no real reason need exist for the police to barge in and arrest, harass and "publicize" those queer patrons in these places of entertainment, other than to instill fear and intimidate the lesbian/queer communities. Obviously, trepidation was part of the atmosphere, knowing that if such a raid occurred gays and lesbians would be "outed" and thus vulnerable to a host of potential circumstances: the loss of a job, the abandonment of family and friends, as well as their children, and constant harassment.

The infamous 1981 raids in Toronto offers a fairly recent illustration of how the intersection of state power and a conservative ethos can bring about the perfect conditions for increased intimidation, surveillance and containment of sexual minorities. For instance, that year (1981) there was a successful anti-gay campaign in which a pro-gay administration was replaced by an anti-gay mayor. Surveillance of all six bathhouses in the city followed, with four of the six bathhouses eventually being raided six-months later, and a total of 304 men being arrested. The day after the raids there was a huge demonstration at the police station. This raid and the demonstration are today remembered as the turning point in Canadian gay political history. Although reasons for conducting this extensive anti-gay campaign were never given, many believe the raids were due in part to the heightened visibility and political power of the gay and lesbian communities. The justification behind attacks on gay spaces such as bathhouses include the notion that they endanger public health

or threaten the morality of society. Such sentiments intensified with the emergence of HIV/AIDS, where a crackdown on bathhouses was a focal point of many political campaigns (Rudy Giuliani's for instance), despite the fact that bathhouses are and continue to be one of the only places where "safer-sex" practices and safe sex education are taught and encouraged (Colter et al., 1996; Warner, 1999).

Urbanization, Lesbian Cultures, and Safe Spaces

Today, large cities now have a plethora of different organizations and entertainment venues specifically for gays and lesbians, which include, but are not limited to, bars, bathhouses, travel agencies, legal services, bookstores, gay presses, and counseling services (Altman, 1982). Wilson (1991) points out that urban concentration is also potentially liberating and empowering for women, since this spatial intimacy undermines and belies women's isolation in the private sphere. Pussy Palace is one such example supporting Wilson's claim that urbanization can in fact work to liberate women—in this case, in terms of sexual liberation and expression. Likewise, women's entry into the work world has in turn meant both their increasing connection to other women and economic power in society. This has translated into women's ability to appropriate and create "women-only space," such as lesbian/feminist bookstores and bars—though these spaces are few and far between compared to their male counterparts. According to D'Emilio (1983), "gay men have traditionally been more visible than lesbians. This partly stems from the division

between the public male sphere and the private female sphere. Streets, parks, and bars, especially at night, were male spaces" (106).

Lesbian cultures took off in the post-World War II period, when bars, house parties and women's sports teams became established spaces for lesbians to interact, meet other women, and above all, were places of affirmation and identification (Kinsman, 1996; D'Emilio, 1998). Because lesbians defied traditional notions of womanhood, such as domesticity and motherhood, and were in addition often self-supportive economically, they thus broke apart the mythical public-private split by claiming bits and pieces of the social (public) world for themselves. Appropriating public space can not be underestimated, for it allowed for the beginning of an identifiable lesbian community. As D'Emilio (1983) asserts, "they [the bars] alone brought lesbianism into the public sphere…No matter how closeted a woman might be…, in the bars she took a step out and affirmed her erotic preferences" (99).

Kennedy and Davis (1993) describe in detail the extent to which lesbians were able to construct their own communities and carve out their own spaces in the public world as early as the 1920s. Lesbians had to confront two powerful social forces simultaneously, that is, homophobia and patriarchy. Such sentiment is highlighted by Kennedy and Davis (1993) when they claim that, "the concentration of a lesbian social life in bars derives from the danger lesbians faced as women in a patriarchal culture based on the sexual availability of women for men" (65). Despite lesbian/queer women's relative powerlessness, they nonetheless also had power to

resist via the appropriation and creation of "safe spaces." Of significance is the fact that the double nature of lesbian oppression marked the formation of a lesbian community (Kennedy and Davis, 1993). This concentration of lesbians and the creation of bar communities meant a protected space for women to pursue other women in a quasi-public space. This space, where meeting other women was central to finding intimacy, sex and/or potential partners, was/is analogous to what gay men had to go through to meet other men; that is, in public spaces such as parks, piers and bars (Chauncey, 1996). As a result, the lesbian community forged its own sexual culture and opened up possibilities for sexual expression in the 1940s and 1950s which had heretofore been closed off for women—and still was for the majority of heterosexual women. Thus, as Kennedy and Davis succinctly assert, "they [lesbians] were pioneers in women's struggle for sexual autonomy—that is, their ability to decide what they want and their power to obtain it" (195). That women had sexual needs and desires, and that sexual pleasure was important to them were revolutionary notions in and of themselves. In sum, up until around the 1970s the lesbian community was very much a sex-positive culture.

In addition, lesbians faced a different set of social conditions than their gay male counterparts when it comes to sexuality and sexual expression. While male sexual expression was recognized and accepted as part of being a "man," "the heterosexual double standard discouraged women's sexual expression, not to mention its celebration. [Thus] women tended to be less precocious sexually…" (Kennedy

and Davis, 1993:194). The lesbian community was therefore creating its own norms and sexual cultures, because for one, they were much less sexually inhibited than their straight sisters, and in such places in which lesbians congregated, straight men were few and far between, giving women freedom to express themselves free from the fear of sexual violence and harassment. Kennedy and Davis highlight the freedom inherent within the lesbian community and lesbian public spaces due to the fact that "the dangers inherent in sex for heterosexual women in a male supremacist society—loss of reputation, economic dependency, pregnancy, and disease—did not exist" (193).

The Paradoxes of Queer Visibility

Visibility has been a primary goal of the gay liberation movement. For instance, "coming out" was not only promoted as necessary for psychological health and well-being; it was also a form of political resistance that conveyed the message that gays and lesbians were no longer going to live their lives in secrecy any longer (Armstrong, 2002). Thus, coming out was not only an act of self-affirmation, but also was part and parcel of "Gay Pride," which marked a turning point in the gay and lesbian movement. Gay pride meant in essence, the public display of self and community, as well as put sex front and center of its cause—it thus also illuminated for us the extent to which sex and politics were inextricably intertwined.

Yet, the increasing visibility of the gay/queer community is a Catch-22; on the one hand, visibility has meant increasing tolerance and strength, and on the other hand, this "gay space" has translated into increasing containment, demonization and control—in essence, visibility and vulnerability go hand-in-hand (Davis, 1995; Knopp, 1995; Kinsman, 1996). This dualistic nature of visibility is cogently illuminated by Harding (1998) when she states that "Visibility connotes being in the public eye and, as a result, open to scrutiny and judgement, leading to positive and negative evaluations…Visibility, it is argued, is a factor in arguments about both the oppression and the liberation of some cultural groups" (25). Increasing police surveillance alongside the increasing visibility of queer spaces was quite apparent in Canada, when such spaces flourished after World War II. Concerns over queers taking over and infecting society is reflected in the escalation of police arrests, and the raids on bars and clubs by "morality squads" in the US and Canada. Statements made by the Metro Police of Toronto in the 1950s and 60s indicated that "what worried the police…is the fact that they are gathering places for homosexuals and as such offer a chance for homosexuality to spread by introduction" (Kinsman, 228). Such sentiment and concerns about queer communities still abound.

Increasing visibility of gays and lesbians has also meant for some gay and lesbian activists the need for "normalcy." More specifically, many gay rights activists are beginning to argue that an infrastructure created around casual, anonymous and quick sex reinforces notions about homosexual deviancy and

promiscuity (see for instance, Sullivan, 1995). The thinking goes that if gays and lesbians want respect and the same rights, they should act in accordance with "mainstream" society. That is, rather than engaging in public sex and displaying their sexuality *at all*, gays and lesbians should instead de-sex themselves, and adhere to the heterosexual model—i.e., participate in committed, monogamous and long-term relationships where sex itself revolves around intimacy, love and emotion. It seems that at the very moment that lesbians and women in general are fighting for sexual expression and the creation of a vibrant sexual culture, there is now a campaign for sexual deviants to "desex" themselves.

In addition, this desexing of self has qualitatively different ramifications for women as compared to men. Women have never been allowed to display their sexual selves, at least not to the extent that men have been given (either in terms of space or societal expectations), and it has only been in the last few years that women are demanding their right to sexual entertainment and expression. It is also the case that any discussion of women and public sex has to also address the important issue of safety. Such sentiment is highlighted by Jocelyn Taylor, an activist within the lesbian community in New York City, when she states in *Policing Public Sex* (1996) that "whereas men have permission to go about their sexuality in a public way, outside or out of doors, this is not something that is as easily available or permissible for women" (Thomas, 1996: 63-64). Thus, the culture of public sex itself is gendered since "efforts to create a public sexual space for women must be qualitatively

different" (Thomas, 64). The beginnings of such an environment can be found at both Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, where women are often quoted as saying how "liberating," "safe" and "empowering" these events make them feel. Because both events are public and accessible (as opposed to being underground), they are in addition *visible*, an important element in terms of achieving and creating a sexual culture. One subject in this study asserted that "the guys are a couple of steps ahead of us"—a statement which might indicate that the creation of such an infrastructure for and by women is the first step towards achieving sexual liberation.

Today, the dominant culture and right-wing organizations continue to perceive gay entertainment areas and gay ghettoes as too visible and thus, too dangerous—in essence, these "gay" neighborhoods are threatening to "family values" (Knopp, 1995). Thus, a strict demarcation and boundary often exists between the hegemonic-heterosexual order and homosexual communities, particularly those gay communities that are highly visible, such as San Francisco's Castro District. Visibility is also related to notions of public and private, where gays and lesbians have been admonished to stay quiet in "public"—as exemplified in Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for military personnel—since sexual orientation is a "private" affair that does not belong in the public sphere. Of course, this forces gays and lesbians to stay "in the closet" and in reality, is society's way of silencing sexual minorities and thus, maintaining and reinforcing their invisibility.

More specifically, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which was created as a "sign" of tolerance and a step towards eventual acceptance into the military (and society in general) instead tacitly punishes homosexuality and has interestingly enough, resulted in *more*, not fewer, discharges for homosexuality in the military (Warner, 1999). The fear of making homosexuality more visible, that is public, plays itself out in other ways as well. For example, Von Beitel (1976), in examining reasons as to why Texas legislators in the 1970s refused to decriminalize sodomy, found that committee members were particularly concerned that decriminalization would lead to the gay subculture, and their displays of conduct, becoming increasingly more visible. No longer would the heterosexual majority be able to "deny the existence of the massive and pervasive gay segment of society" (44-45).

The Myopia of Privacy Claims and Sexual Liberation

Because this research is about public sex and the issues and legal ramifications surrounding homosexuality and sex, past and present rulings and regulations dealing with such issues are important to outline and discuss. "Right to privacy" claims, which have been used to win certain rights and freedoms, such as the right to get an abortion and use contraceptives (Califia, 2000; Backer, 1993), are currently being used among gay and lesbians to garner full social equality. Sodomy laws, for instance, were recently overturned using this argument (i.e., *Lawrence vs.*

Texas, 2003) so long as these previously forbidden sexual activities are conducted behind closed doors. Justice Kennedy for instance, in ruling in favor of *Lawrence* and thus, the unconstitutionality of sodomy laws, argued that the "State is not omnipresent in the home", since "Liberty presumes an autonomy of self that includes freedom of thought, belief, expression and certain intimate conduct" (Syllabus, 2003:1). Yet, as previously argued, "right to privacy" claims work to merely privatize the political, and more importantly, impedes and ignores the larger issue—changing society's ideology regarding homosexuality in particular, and sex in general. Such sentiment is expressed by Kinsman (1996) when he states that "right to privacy" claims are "no basis for queer claims to full social equality with heterosexuality and for dismantling the heterosexual hegemony at the heart of social and family policies" (344).

"Right to privacy" arguments are part and parcel of modernity and liberation theology, which stem from the likes of John Stuart Mill who argued that individuals should have freedom of choice and action in matters pertaining to "private morality." Sexual liberation and a sexual liberation ideology manifested themselves in both the Wolfenden Report (1957) and the Model Penal Code (1952)—essentially, both called for the decriminalization of sex between men (and women) so long as this sex takes place in private (see for instance, Kinsman, 1996; Warner, 1999; Califia, 2000). The Wolfenden Committee was formed following a span of moral outrage and "moral panic" in Britain over sexual vice, such as prostitution and homosexuality. Again,

this seeming shift towards tolerance and liberation is in reality a more benign form of contempt and regulation. Such sentiment is cogently expressed by Backer (1993) when he asserts that the:

> Wolfenden Report and the Model Penal Code are themselves instruments of perversion. They provide an excellent example of the manner in which heterosexual liberal discourse can, by invoking such high concepts as toleration, conceal multiple forms of subjugation of sexual nonconformists…As long as sexual nonconformists continue to act as if they are engaging in criminal acts—furtively, secretly, always in fear of detection—their conduct will not be subject to criminal penalty (758).

Toleration is therefore fundamentally intolerant in that sexual nonconformists have to remain hidden from view. Heterosexuals and our dominant culture in turn, can continue to remain oblivious and ignorant of other sexualities and more importantly, the dominant culture can "politely" continue to control and own the public sphere. According to Backer, "Toleration arises from a political inability to continue suppressing conduct, not from any sense that the conduct tolerated is worthy of respect" (760). Weeks (1981) backs this critical analysis about "toleration" as seen in the Wolfenden Report when he argues that "the key point is that privatization did not necessarily involve a diminution of [state] control (244). Because modern society knew and admitted as much, that control and regulation of sexual nonconformity is impossible, a policy of concealment and marginalization became the new method of sexual regulation. In sum, the state has not removed itself from sexual regulation; rather, it (the state), "continues to use its power, overtly and covertly, to enforce the

notion that the conduct protected (in private) is wrong, awful, disgusting, and not indulged in by normal people" (Backer, 1993:796).

For example, policies such as "lewdness" and "public indecency" have remained central to state control and sexual conformity as reflected in the Model Penal Code. "Obscenity" and "lewdness" are based on interpretation, and in this case, are measured using the hegemonic point of view, where acts and behaviors that fall outside the confines of heterosexual marriage are vulnerable to being described as "degrading" and thus, obscene. These very concepts are imbued with morality, and merely work to enforce and reinforce the public/private boundaries dealing with sexual regulation. "Indecency" in Canada is so loosely defined that it includes "what the contemporary Canadian community is not prepared to tolerate" (Kinsman, 1996:339)—that is, all sexual nonconformity, especially, but not limited to, homosexual acts and behaviors.

Public Sex and Sexual Regulation

Public/private distinctions emerged with capitalism, which not only regulated and organized the laws and regulations of capitalism, but these very concepts, that is, public and private, were used to oppress and marginalize certain groups—women's association and relegation to the home being just one example to maintain in this instance, male hegemony. In addition, "public" or "private" are socially constructed, political concepts as reflected in Smith's (1993) statement regarding the contradiction and instability inherent in this private/public split: "Privacy is something that is

socially constructed in this society…Indeed, in the middle of the night, when it is absolutely pitch black, a park might in fact be a very private place" (58). To reiterate, the private-public divide is part of the state's regulatory apparatus used in part for sexual policing. The Wolfenden Report reinforced these private-public distinctions by defining a private space as a place of residence (that is, private property) not visible to public view, while public space encompassed everything else—so that a "public" bathroom was indeed a public place (Kinsman, 1996).

According to the British Sexual Offenses Act of 1967, a law emanating from the Wolfenden Report, "public" meant a public restroom as well as anywhere a third person might be present. This demarcation between public and private sex is also exemplified in Canadian law, where the presence of a third individual during a sexual act is considered "indecent" even inside one's own home—that is, no longer is it considered a protected affair via right to privacy claims. According to Califia (2000), the state "always wishes the zone of privacy to be as narrow as possible" (18), so as to eliminate the potential visibility of any and all sexually deviant acts. Not surprisingly, gay communities have continuously asserted that gay institutions are part of the private sphere, and thus, an area off-limits to police harassment and surveillance (Kinsman, 1996). More importantly, the gay community shifts the debate over what is or is not "private" from "the language of the State discourse and places it in the social practices of everyday life… [which] builds upon the idea of privacy as a realm of individual choice, consent, and morality" (Kinsman, 1996:343).

Thus, rather than privacy being merely about territory, privacy comes to include the social interactions and practices taking place within that realm of intimacy.

Gays and lesbians began occupying and claiming their own social space in the early twentieth century, but it was not until World War II, and particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, that one could claim a "lesbian/gay community." I define a community here as one in which gays and lesbians occupy public space that they can claim as theirs, and are to an extent organized and self-contained, and thus, visible to the outside world. The emergence of bars and clubs were "central social institutions in the gay community" (Newton, 1979:59), and were places to congregate, socialize, and meet others. Such establishments created the "first urban zone of privacy [in terms of engaging in sex], as well as safety, for homosexual men" (Bérubé, 1996: 191). Kennedy and Davis (1993), in their historical analysis of the lesbian community, found that bars were just as important for lesbians, particularly working-class lesbians, not just in terms of being the center of sociability and relaxation, but "were also a crucible for politics" (29), *and* sexual expression—the specifics of the lesbian community and sexual expression are explored further in the next section. As previously mentioned, bathhouses were also a significant part of this sexual landscape (for men). Bathhouses evolved into "gay" institutions slowly over time, and emerged as sexual spaces alongside urbanization and the growth of cities in the 1920s and 1930s. Bathhouses were significant in that they came to be "refuges from society's prejudice against homosexuality, and as oases of freedom and homosexual

camaraderie" (Bérubé, 191). These sites were therefore inherently political, and became the fulcrum for a gay and lesbian civil rights movement.

The Laws and Regulations Regarding Public/Private Sex in the US and Canada

Such spaces overlap with concerns and the contradictions inherent in the public-private debate. For instance, being that such spaces are some of the only places in which to meet and socialize with others like yourself, is engaging in sex in bathrooms inside these venues "public" or "private" sex? The fuzziness of private and public distinctions, which are still problematic and vague, means in turn that in reality, there are "many zones in between—a motel room, a bathhouse, a bar, an adult bookstore, a car, a public toilet, a dark and deserted alley—that are contested territory where police battle with perverts for control" (Califia, 2000:18).

The law has said that sex in bars, inside a bathroom stall for instance, does indeed qualify as public sex, and is thus, punishable by law. "Bawdy-house laws" in Canada, devised initially to deal with houses of prostitution in the early twentieth-century, have in recent years been used by the police (and the State) as justification to raid baths and bars and arrest gay men for "indecent" behavior (Kinsman, 1996). A bawdy-house is defined by Canadian law as a "place that is kept or occupied or resorted to by one or more persons for the purposes of prostitution or the practices of acts of indecency" (Kinsman, 339). Thus, in Canada gay baths are indeed labeled as "common bawdy-houses"; yet, the police must have some direct evidence of indecency (that is, gay sex) via surveillance (such as the use of undercover cops)

before they can actually raid one of these places. The infamous 1981 raids in Canada of four major gay baths in Toronto, wherein over 300 men were arrested, was preceded by weeks of police surveillance. Such a large-scale assault on the gay community was justified on the grounds of moral decline and State degeneracy, as well as the outstanding claim that these gay baths were connected to organized crime—the evidence: monies that were going back and forth between the US and Canada from some of these places (Kinsman, 1996).

The difficulty and debate regarding laws against public sex lies in the fact that freedom of expression is hindered, as well as ignores the context surrounding sex in purportedly "public areas." As Califia makes clear, public sex is almost always conducted in private, that is, behind doors, in cars, amidst the bushes, and away from any and all people. For others to see what is going on, they will have to invade personal, that is, private, space. Califia thus argues that the nature of such interaction, when barriers are erected or used for privacy sake, means that this behavior should instead be referred to as "quasi-public sex." Because police assume that they have the right to intrude and make private acts public events so as to "protect the public," they have used a number of techniques to disrupt such space: cutting down bushes or trees in parks, making bookstores remove doors entirely, and setting up hidden cameras in and around "gay spaces" so as to publicize semi-private areas—in essence, the areas behind the blinds are exposed for all to see (Califia, 2000).

In the United States, public sex places, such as baths, have been especially prone to raids and police/state surveillance since the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s. The thought was that "sex clubs meant unsafe sex meant AIDS" (Blotcher, 1996:26), since, the thinking goes, most transmissions occur in public places. The automatic assumptions are that public sex places were and are merely sites of hedonistic desire, free of their own regulations and norms, and in essence, one big orgy and "free-for-all." Such thinking is shortsighted and simply wrong. In terms of what I found at Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, instead of being places where anarchy and lawlessness prevailed, the events were highly regulated—both had a security staff, and at Pussy Palace there were rules regarding what is/is not appropriate behavior taped on doors and walls throughout the bathhouse (with an anti-discrimination policy to boot).

Not only do subcultures and the spaces in which they inhabit have their own norms, regulations and unspoken rules of behavior, but gay spaces such as baths, tearooms and other clubs where sex takes place have been important sites for the dissemination of safer-sex materials and information. Particularly with the onset of HIV/AIDS many of these places became pivotal places for STD/HIV prevention, safer sex information and demonstrations, and free condoms (Warner, 1999; Blotcher, 1996). More importantly, in many locations, these were the only places where people were actively talking about and discussing, openly and honestly, issues pertaining to safe-sex and sexually transmitted diseases.

Such activism was overlooked and dismissed by the State, police and other social conservatives, who merely saw these sites as harbors of disease, contagion, debauchery, and sin. Agents of the state used various tactics to eradicate these sexual sites via rezoning laws, the "gentrification" of neighborhoods, "redevelopment" and inflating property values. These processes occurred (and are occurring) in New York, where former New York City mayor Rudy Guiliani's main concern was cleaning up New York City. This "cleaning up" was in large part about endorsing "a re-made vision of New York City as a homogenous hive of family-centered leisure and entertainment institutions—a New York City, in short, that has never existed" (Serlin, 1996:47). Thus, "cleaning up" was in reality a clever euphemism to weaken, isolate and remove a vibrant queer sexual culture—a culture that was viewed as too visible and too overgrown, and thus, a threat to the dominant order's feelings of comfort and security. As Bell and Binnie (2004), citing O'Conner (2001) make clear, gentrification projects mean in essence the purification of space, such that "these long-term gentrification effects work to chase out 'unwanted' activities, with profound implications for the sustainability of sexual spaces and cultures…" (1815).

The New Sex Wars: Assimilationists versus the "Queers"

As previously mentioned, there has occurred a split within the gay movement between those wanting to "assimilate" and those who want to maintain their queer

identity. In short, assimilationists agree in part with policies akin to Guiliani's "cleaning up" campaign, since genuine acceptance of gays and lesbians will only come about with their normalization—this includes keeping their sexuality and sexual expression discreet i.e., "behind closed doors," and refraining from casual/public sex and promiscuous behavior. Of course, others (anti-assimilationists) contend that by doing so we will lose our visibility, our own sense of self as queers, and are in the end merely conforming to a status quo that will never completely accept us anyway. Conforming and assimilating for many gays and lesbians is the antithesis of gay liberation, since this will lead once again to our becoming invisible. In addition, the ultimate goal for anti-assimilationists is in keeping sex political and "queer," which is part and parcel of changing and challenging society's own ideologies regarding sex and sexual expression, where sex is seen as dirty, deviant and shameful. Keeping sex queer and maintaining a "queer identity" means in part having agency, autonomy, and the ability to engage in sexual behaviors without feelings of guilt and shame. Keeping sex queer also means acknowledging and acting on our desires by for one, maintaining public sexual cultures and thus, public spaces so as to resist a heteronormative and prescribed model that measures and standardizes what is or is not considered to be "healthy/normal" sexual relations.

Chapter 4

Research design and methodology

The central objective of this project is to examine lesbian/queer sexuality as it pertains to "sexual sites" created to foster types of sexual expression previously associated with masculinity and male sexual desire—that is, sex which is anonymous, quick and physically bound as opposed to emotion based. Thus, this research is a significant departure away from previous work on gay public sex, which is almost exclusively about gay *male* sex. Concentrating on lesbian/queer public sex will

therefore add to our understanding of sexuality in general, and lesbian sexual expression in particular.

The research design uses a multi-method approach, wherein data are gathered using a combination of intensive interviews and participant observation techniques at two sites: The Dinah Shore Weekend Event and the Pussy Palace bathhouse event. The Dinah Shore event lasted four days and three nights, while the Pussy Palace bathhouse event lasted one night (one extended night) from 6:00 P.M. till 4:00 A.M. that morning. Interviews and observations for the Dinah Shore event therefore took place during these four days except for one interview I conducted the day before the event began—at a local café near where the event was to take place. As for Pussy Palace, I spent a total of three days in Toronto, wherein most of my time was spent at the bathhouse (I was there the entire evening) or traveling to meetings I had either set up before coming to Toronto or while I was there. Given the sensitive nature of this study, subjects were given the option of providing a fake name during the interview process, and of course, only pseudonyms are used throughout this dissertation so as to provide confidentiality.

My interview subjects were obtained using both snowball and purposive sampling techniques. That is, I obtained my interview subjects by approaching those who were at these events, and in three cases interviewees came to me volunteering their time to be interviewed because either their friend or girlfriend had just gone

through the interview process with me—those who "volunteered" their time were all Dinah Shore participants.

As previously mentioned, I interviewed not only participants found at each site, but some of the organizers of Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace as well. More specifically, I interviewed two organizers for Dinah Shore during the pool party in the bar area on the last day of the event (Sunday). As for Pussy Palace, I interviewed two members of the Pussy Palace committee and a volunteer/participant of the bathhouse event who had been volunteering the night of the infamous Pussy Palace bathhouse raid (she had also participated at several bathhouse events as well). In terms of the interviews with Pussy Palace committee members, one interview took place in Toronto at her place of business the day after the bathhouse event, while the other interview was conducted via the phone in September, 2004. The phone interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted during her lunch break at her place of work in Toronto. Interviewing organizers and the promoters provided valuable information in that it gave me an insider's perspective as to the etiology, objective and philosophy behind both Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace. The volunteer/participant provided personal testimony as it related to the night of the bathhouse raid, and the ways in which it impacted both the lesbian/queer participants who were there that night as well as the lesbian/queer community at large. All told, out of the 15 interviewees at Dinah Shore two were organizers, while two of the nine

interviewees at Pussy Palace were organizers with one interviewee being a past volunteer.

I used two different Interview Schedules in my research project, one for the participants and another set of questions for the committee members/organizers and volunteer. The following are a few examples of interview questions used during the interview process with Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace participants: How, and in what ways, does this space impact your behavior?; What is your agenda/objective coming to this event?; Have you hooked up/had sex while you have been here?; Do you feel different in this space in any way?; Why do you think other women attend this event? Interview questions used for the organizers and volunteer included such things as: How did this event get started and what is the philosophy behind it?; Has it evolved over the years? If so, how?; Have you seen any changes in women's behavior, dress, etc. since this event started?; Do you think women's sexuality has changed over time and if so, in what ways?; How do you think this event impacts lesbian/queer women as well as the lesbian/queer community? The complete Interview Schedule for both participants and the organizers are included in the back of this report as an appendix—Appendix A is the Interview Schedule for the participants while Appendix B refers to that Interview Schedule used when interviewing the organizers and volunteer.

A tape recording device was used during each interview so as to record all of what was said between me, the researcher, and my subject during the interview process. On occasion I took notes to highlight the main points addressed by the interviewee, particularly if she discussed something that had not been thought about or brought up before this discussion. Interview data were later transcribed from the tape recorder using a transcribing machine, with the transcription process being one wherein I typed the interviews out into Microsoft Word while listening to the interview tape—on both occasions I began the transcription process upon my arrival back home. Finally, interviews in Word were then transferred into and analyzed using NVivo, a computer software program which specializes in qualitative data analysis. This program allowed me to more easily explore and interpret the patterns/themes found within the data that were obtained. That is, the creation of nodes—a central feature of the NVivo program—and the coding of interview text enabled me to more easily make connections both among the interviews and observations made. Because the nodes are in essence a way to bring together ideas, thoughts and linkages with the other interviews, these in turn allowed me to create my analytical categories. Some examples of the nodes created for this project included "expectations of event," "atmosphere of event," and "impact of event on behavior," each of which was further broken down in terms of having a designation indicating whether this was in reference to Dinah Shore or Pussy Palace.

This research uses a feminist-queer methodology which means feminist methods are used, wherein reflexivity, connection, and engagement between myself, as researcher, and my subjects exist. I refrain from using totalizing and essentializing concepts and categories when describing my subjects and their experiences, since this research study is for one about complexifying female sexuality, and lesbian/queer sexuality in particular. In other words, not all people adhere to nor fit in with society's binary paradigm as made clear by Epstein (2005), citing Warner (1991), when he asserts that queer "offers a comprehensive way of characterizing all those whose sexuality places them in opposition to the current 'normalizing regime'" (Epstein, 70). Rather, individuals have multiple identities, which include, but are not limited to, sexual identities. More importantly, because this study was in part about examining how sexualities "emerged/changed" in space and over time, a queer stance was I believe necessary. For instance, several women I came to know over a period of a few days at Dinah Shore expressed to me how their behavior had in fact changed if only for a brief moment in time. One subject I had interviewed in the early stages of the Dinah Shore event who had during the interview process stated that she "was not in to all of this," came up to me the night of the White Party and stated matter-of-factly that "we are just like me aren't we." This subject's statement was in direct response to both her and the other participants' reactions and behaviors toward the dancers, which included merely staring and taking pictures, to actually going over and giving them money while slapping, touching, and/or groping them in various ways.

Thus, I use the word "queer" in part to describe how women in this study and at these sites are actively deconstructing and challenging traditional ideas we have of a female sexuality.

In addition, embodied accounts of reality are central to this project where personal experiences are part and parcel of a subject's epistemology and understanding of the world. By making the subjectivities and "situated knowledges" of my subjects central to the examination of sexuality I hope to further our understanding of sexuality as it relates to expression, negotiation, agency and social control. Not only do I focus on individual accounts of experiences as it relates to the subject's sexuality, but I also seek to uncover the various ways in which actors at these sites mutually shape each other's conduct. That is, sexual conduct and expression is in part a joint product of multiple actors (Gagnon, 1977); thus, once again space, how is it created and maintained, as well as how such sites facilitate interaction is also an important part of this research. In sum, my research project adheres to a grounded theory approach, where theoretical ideas are developed from observations of the data themselves (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). By immersing myself in the locales as specified above, I let the data "speak for themselves."

Interviews lasted anywhere from between thirty minutes to two hours, and were typically conducted on site (that is, at the event itself). Those interviews conducted on site were on average typically of much shorter duration (about thirty minutes), while interviews with organizers and volunteers ranged from between one

and two hours. When I interviewed participants at the event itself I often tried to find a place that was much quieter and thus, away from the center of commotion. This was particularly the case at Dinah Shore where music was extremely loud, even outside during the pool parties. I conducted all of my Dinah Shore interviews at two locations: at a local café that was quite popular with the Dinah Shore participants and during the pool parties at an outside bar—this bar was a bit removed from the pool area (although still quite loud, which made hearing what my subjects had to say somewhat difficult at times). Except for those Pussy Palace committee members and volunteer, all Pussy Palace interviews took place at the bathhouse in the pool area, where it was a bit quieter (although once again, it was not always easy to hear what interviewees had to say).

As already mentioned, interviews were semi-structured in the sense that though I had a set of questions to ask my subjects, I nonetheless tried not to direct and control the flow and content of our conversation. At the same time, unless otherwise irrelevant to my subject (for instance, there were a few questions pertaining to casual sex so if they had never experienced casual sex these were not asked), I almost always asked all the questions on the interview schedule. In addition, if other issues or topics came up that were not planned although potentially related, I asked them questions about this as well—for instance, a few had mentioned breaking up with their girlfriend due to their girlfriend's infidelities so I would ask questions about this situation. Questions that I asked my subjects during this study include, but are not

limited to, the following: How do you feel women's sexuality has changed? Do you think female sexuality differs from male sexuality—If so, how? What are your experiences with casual sex? Do you think women come here just to hook up/have sex? How do these events affect the lesbian/queer communities? How does the atmosphere at these events impact your own feelings/emotions? Do you feel like you change in any way once you walk into this space (i.e., Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore)?

I believe, due to the nature of the study, that a brief description of Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace are necessary, particularly given the fact that interviews, observations and thus, the findings were impacted by the space in which these events took place. Thus, describing the setting/context of each event will allow one to gain a better understanding of the methodological issues that are addressed later on in this section.

The Dinah Shore Weekend Event

The Dinah Shore Weekend Event is an annual event that grew out of what is now one of the biggest golf tournaments for women. The golf tournament, no longer called the Dinah Shore tournament (since 1999), is now referred to as the Kraft Nabisco Championship and is still held in Palm Springs at the same time as the Dinah Shore Weekend event. The golf tournament began in 1972, when Dinah Shore agreed to lend her name to it—the thinking being that such a high profile woman would draw a great amount of attention to the sport. This association proved

successful and in 1976, the Colgate-Dinah Shore Winner's Circle Ladies Professional Golf Association Tournament (the original name), actually received a higher TV rating than the US Men's Open golf tournament (Kort, 2005). At its very inception, much of the fan base included lesbians who were traveling to Palm Springs every year to support and watch the golfers.

The actual Dinah Shore Weekend Event has been going on now every year since the early 1980s. The first organized party took place in 1981, where a bar was turned into a lesbian bar and dance club for one night. By 1983, Lilyan Browne, began booking hotel rooms and doing some advertising not only to celebrate the golf tournament but to organize a fairly substantial lesbian party. By 1987 she was reserving entire hotels for the weekend during which the golf tournament was taking place (Kort, 1995). With every year Dinah Shore (the party, not golf tournament) got bigger and "better," and by the mid-80s two women club promoters from Los Angeles began organizing parties with big-name acts, including comedians and music bands. It eventually evolved into what is today the single largest lesbian-only event in the world, which brings in between three to five thousand women from all over the world every year. According to one source, it is second only to the Palm Springs International Film Festival as the most lucrative city event (Kort, 2005). One resident of Palm Springs as cited by Kort (2005), described the transformation of the event strictly in terms of sexual expression:

> The first time I ever heard that gay women—or gay men, for that matter—would pretty much take over a hotel with pool parties and hugging and kissing. But the demeanor [in the beginning] was far from what it would be today—not one going topless, screaming, or fucking her brains out (67).

It is so successful that hotels in the area compete to sign contracts with the organizers/promoters. Last year for instance, two hotels, the Wyndham Hotel and the Doral Resort, were reserved specifically for Dinah Shore participants. The Dinah Shore Weekend Event is currently organized and run by three women out of Los Angeles, Mariah Hansen, Robin Gans and Sandy Sachs—Gans and Sachs, the two interviewed for this project, also own Girl Bar, a very well known lesbian club in LA.

Unfortunately, the close association between the Dinah Shore event and the women's golf tournament has made both the golf players and sponsors uncomfortable, with the result that over the last couple of years the Kraft Nabisco Championship has lost financial support and media coverage. This homophobia is revealed by one individual who asserted that "the Dinah Shore tournament is a real sensitive subject in the LPGA because the straight players sort of hold the gay players responsible for the tour's lack of sponsorship" (14). To make matters worse, a few professional female golf players have "come out" in recent years, making many within the LPGA quite nervous and anxious over how to rid the league of any and all lesbian affiliations. For instance, one LPGA commissioner told players in his "Five Points of Celebrity" speech that by "keeping up appearances," they could keep the league (and thus, the players) financially solvent and successful (Kort, 1995). This of

course was an indirect reproach to all things lesbian, and plays into the continuous and pervasive theme that the ideals of femininity—even in sport—are to be expected.

As mentioned above, because the venues are reserved only for those participating in Dinah Shore, the pool parties, which are held at these hotels every day for four consecutive days (Thursday through Sunday), are entirely lesbian/queer, except for hotel staff. In addition to the daytime pool parties, they have themed parties every night, with the two biggest parties (on Friday and Saturday nights) held indoors at one of the two reserved hotels. As stated by one women, this is a "lesbian world" (Kort, 2005:79), which was the intention and goal of Hansen, one of the current organizers, so that women would feel more secure and safe, experience less homophobia, and be able to express themselves in whatever ways they wanted (79). This "lesbian-only feeling" was expressed several times not just by those I interviewed, but those I happened to carry on conversations with throughout my stay in Palm Springs.

One woman I met during the "Kick off Party" (the first party of the event) expressed in a very emotive and enthusiastic way how the Dinah Shore event was really a "fantasy world, where you can feel for four days what it is like to live in a lesbian world." She had never experienced anything like it, and had been coming every year for six years specifically to experience this "fantasy world" once more. Likewise, one woman from Rhode Island and a participant at Dinah Shore, who I ran in to at the airport to catch my flight home, said matter-of-factly "it is so weird to be

seeing men again," illuminating again how Dinah Shore was very much a women-only event. During my research there, I myself saw a total of about six men, excluding those men who were part of the hotel staff.

The Dinah Shore Weekend event markets itself as "one big party," with some sort of party going on at all times coupled with the widespread availability of alcohol. If anything, Dinah Shore is first and foremost a party, yet at the same time it is sexually charged. Part of its marketing includes a pamphlet with scantily clad women found both inside and on the cover, some of whom are posing in a seductive and sexualized manner. In addition, go-go dancers are a fixture at all the Dinah Shore events/parties and are part of the marketing campaign. These go-go dancers are a huge hit, and are by any measure a favorite among the Dinah Shore participants. From what I observed, the majority of those there would literally stop whatever they were doing once the go-go dancers came on stage, which typically included platforms or cages just high enough to reach them with outstretched hands.

These dancers wore barely any clothing and often danced together in highly sexualized movements—for example, they pretended to engage in oral sex and, at times, grabbed one another's body parts, the most common body part being breasts. On numerous occasions, at least once every party, an individual climbed into the dancers' space to try and touch and/or dance with them. Once, during the pool party on the second day, one woman threw a shirt to one dancer, "Sam," the unanimous favorite; Sam grabbed the shirt, placed it in her bikini bottom, kept it there for a few

moments and then proceeded to throw it back to the woman, whereupon the crowd went wild, and started clapping as if trying to get her to do more.

Because the days were spent pool-side many women were wearing only their bathing suits, so the atmosphere was palpably sexual. During every pool party women would begin, at least by the afternoon, taking off their tops, so there were many topless women both in and outside the pool area. The Wyndham Hotel, one of the reserved hotels where I was the majority of the time (I was there for at least 6 to 8 hours every day for four days), was structured in such a way that the pool was in the middle of two sides of hotel rooms, with balconies facing the pool area. The spatial arrangements were such that twice I observed, on two different days, women on the balconies on both sides of the hotel flaunting and flashing their breasts. Within this atmosphere, I observed on eight occasions women grabbing, slapping, and/or pinching other women's body parts. I experienced this myself on several occasions: a woman grabbed my breasts to "see if they were real," while two women approached me and grabbed my arm, with one proceeding to kiss my tattoo, and on another occasion, I had my buttock pinched while walking around the perimeter of the pool. One of my subjects, while we were finding a quieter place in which to conduct an interview, had her buttock slapped by one woman with another woman cheering her on. Right after this happened she stated to me in so many words that she had gotten used to this, that is, women outright touching her in some way.

Lastly, at the pool parties there were also booths with individuals selling different items, such as clothing, and books. One woman was displaying and marketing her own lesbian pornography. A TV screen had been set up at her booth to promote it, with graphic and close-up images of women having sex. Not surprisingly, there was always a gaggle of women standing and watching the TV screen throughout the day. When I approached her booth and looked at the porn video, she got up, came over to me, and asked if I had ever seen a "cum shot" like that (that is, a woman ejaculating). She then expressed her excitement about being able to get that "on camera." She was quite enthusiastic about her work and gave me her business card before I departed to see what was going on at the other booths.

Pussy Palace

The Pussy Palace Committee of Toronto is an all volunteer committee that was set up specifically to bring lesbian "safer sex" bathhouse events to fruition. The organization was spearheaded by Janet Rowe, who at that time worked at the AIDS Committee of Toronto, dealing with women and children living with HIV/AIDS. The Pussy Palace Committee began meeting in 1998, and held its first bathhouse event that same year by taking over, for one night, a gay male bathhouse called Club Toronto. Before finding a bathhouse that would agree to do this, the Committee was rejected by other "more elite" gay male bathhouses for various reasons. Some were merely financial in that they were afraid they would lose money, if only for a night, but others were very stereotypical and discriminatory. For instance, some of the

owners (all men) stated that there would be blood and tampons all over which would cause too big of a mess, while others simply could not fathom any women showing up to "fuck." Others contended that male patrons would not come back knowing that women had used their space to engage in sex.

Contrary to these assertions and their assumptions, Pussy Palace has been very successful, and actually brings in more money for Club Toronto during the lesbian bathhouse nights than it otherwise would on any given "regular" day. It has since been regularly organizing and conducting bathhouse events three to four times a year, with smaller events taking place in between at Club Toronto, such as "Strip Night" events. Currently, Hamilton, a town about an hour away from Toronto, has for the past year been putting on lesbian and trans-only bathhouse events as well. These Pussy Palace events, by taking place in bathhouses, are explicitly sexual and highly charged. Thus, that sex is more "outspoken" at Pussy Palace suggests that participants are going to be more at ease and less hesitant in terms of fulfilling their sexual desires—that women were actually having sex out in public was a difference immediately observed and felt compared to the Dinah Shore event.

During each Pussy Palace event they provide various types of entertainment to get "women in the mood." These include the S & M room, where a large crowd was always present while watching S & M take place among couples inside the room; a G-spot room, where there was constantly a long line of women waiting their turn to get their g-spot touched with the explicit intent of reaching orgasm (every time I

walked down this hall there were loud noises such as screams and moans); lap-dancing nooks where women could either go to watch or get lap dances, by at times, topless and very "fem" women; the Temple Priestess room where women would simply tell the Priestess what she wanted done to her or what she wanted to do (again, there was always a long line to see her); massage rooms; a dance room; and finally, a porn room where footage of women having sex with other women on a big TV screen was constantly on display.

Many of the Pussy Palace attendees and volunteers disliked all of these various "activities"/themes, believing them to be superfluous and unnecessary since a bathhouse was meant to be a sex fest; that is, they felt that the rooms to put "women in the mood" took away from what women were supposed to be doing in the first place—having casual sex with one another. Thus, Pussy Palace put on an event referred to as "Bathhouse Lite" similar in style to the men's, which as one of the my subjects put it "is a fuck fest without all the rides." Cusitar of *Xtra!* Magazine described "Bathhouse Lite" as something "with all of the flavour of the former bathhouses with none of the additives…[that] provides an opportunity for the gals who've attended previous parties to show off what they've learned" (September, 2004:1, Issue #518). The first "no frills" Bathhouse Lite was held in September 2004, after the bathhouse event I attended in June. From what others told me, it was fairly successful, but did not draw the same large crowds as previous Pussy Palace events had done. One interviewee, an organizer and former committee member of Pussy

Palace, asserted that the small turnout was due to the fact it was not well advertised—"it wasn't that women didn't necessarily want that, it was really how do you promote that? A lot of women just didn't know about it."

The bathhouse was designed to make movement tight and bodies close. It was dark and dim, with red lights glowing in the hallways to give off a "sensual" feel. The hallways in turn were long and narrow, with private rooms on either side—the first 100 people who came in to the bathhouse automatically got keys to a private room. (I was one of those to get a room). The rooms were tiny with mirrors on all sides, a small bed and chest of drawers with just enough space to hold sex toys and other paraphernalia. In addition, there were nooks and crannies all over the bathhouse, where people were found either chatting or having sex. Staircases were narrow and steep, with people often just waiting for others to come or go before using the stairs themselves. There were so many different hallways and rooms, it felt almost labyrinth in style, which made it easy to get discombobulated and confused—I managed to get disoriented and turned around on several occasions. There was also an outdoor area with a small pool, and a patio area with chairs. This space was always filled with women and transgendered individuals swimming, talking and/or of course, having sex (more about this later).

Characteristics of Subjects

The majority of interviewees at Pussy Palace were between the ages of 28 and 40, with two subjects I interviewed being younger than 25. Again, according to

organizers I interviewed, Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore seem to mostly attract those in their upper-20s to mid-thirties—from what I observed, this certainly seemed to be the case. This study is limited in the sense that I did not have a broad range of ages, particularly those younger than 25 and older than 40. Simply put, Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace could mean different things to different people depending upon their age and experiences in life. At the same time, as is indicated above it seemed to be the case that my interviewees were fairly "representative" (in terms of age) of all attendees at Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace. In addition, out of the 15 interviews I conducted at Dinah Shore, five were women of color (two African-Americans, a Pacific Islander, an Hispanic woman, and another woman who identified as half-Caucasian, half-Thai). In contrast, all of my Pussy Palace interviewees were white, which again limits my study in that women of color could have different experiences at Pussy Palace. One Pussy Palace organizer, Jessica, when asked about the first Pussy Palace event, stated that in trying to create a diverse environment there were still very few women of color present. Jessica admits that one of the reasons so few women of color come to the bathhouse events could be because lesbian/queer women of color "might feel more isolated and awkward" in such a space—a feeling Jessica and others who are part of Pussy Palace lament and thus, are actively trying to correct.

In terms of where participants were from, I found that for the Pussy Palace sample, all were from Toronto (including the organizers), except for two, one of

whom was a graduate student at a university in Toronto, while the other subject had come all the way from Newfoundland just for this event. As for the Dinah Shore sample, all were from California (either born and raised, or had relocated and were currently living there), except for two individuals who had come from Atlanta and Seattle specifically for this event. As for those living in California, three were "locals" (in that they lived in Palm Springs), four were from San Diego, four others were currently residing in and around Los Angeles, and two were from San Francisco. Finally, in terms of educational level, of those in the Dinah Shore sample seven interviewees had at least a bachelor's degree, while five were either currently in college or had taken some college course work. As for the Pussy Palace sample, all but three had a college degree.

In terms of those interviewees at Dinah Shore who were "out", three subjects were completely out, while the rest were "out" but to varying degrees. More specifically, some women were out at work, but not to their families, while others might be out to their friends and family, while not being out at work. Overall, the majority of those that were out "but to varying degrees" had the most difficult time being out among family and at work. Interestingly, all the subjects I interviewed at Pussy Palace were out in all aspects of life.

Methodological Issues/Dilemmas

As a participant observer at these sites, numerous methodological, ethical and moral issues are raised which include the following: the ways in which I participated

and how that affected my findings as well as the particular subjects I sought out to interview; how such facilities, particularly Pussy Palace, revolve around legally proscribed behavior (i.e., public sex); the boundaries I negotiated both with myself and my subjects in terms of trying to maintain simultaneously both a professional, yet personal and comfortable, atmosphere so as to facilitate conversation appropriate to my research objectives; and my own discomfort, insecurities and "degree of approachability" at various times throughout the research process.

In regards to this last methodological dilemma, my "insider" status as a self-identified lesbian/queer feminist was not always enough in terms of being able to "fit" in with the crowd. I found myself at times feeling quite the stranger, the "outsider" if you will, since I was after all trying to distance myself from the events taking place right in front of me. For example, at Dinah Shore I did not directly engage in the pool parties, nor did I ever wear a swimsuit, and because pool parties obviously revolved around the pool, I was on the periphery (literally) the majority of the time. My dress (which always consisted of shorts and a t-shirt) potentially could have been a drawback for some, in that my being fully dressed (in comparison to those in swimming suits) could have been construed as being "uptight" and thus, "unapproachable."

In addition, at Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore I did not engage in sexual encounters of any kind and tried not to make myself seem "available." On two occasions, once at Pussy Palace and once at Dinah Shore, I was propositioned by a

woman I had been talking with for a while, someone who I was also interested in interviewing. Once she propositioned me, I felt uncomfortable and awkward, not sure as to how to "reject" her in a kind way, that is, in such a way as to not hurt her feelings and still be able to ask her for an interview. Ironically, that it was difficult and uncomfortable for me to tell her "no" plays in to the difficulties many women have in terms of being forthright and direct—Tannen (1990) and Lakoff (1975) have done extensive studies on communication and language between men and women, both showing how women are indeed more passive, less direct and more polite compared to men.

At the same time, needing to put on a professional/serious façade and remain a "nonparticipating insider" so as be somewhat disengaged with the social scene and thus more objective, was potentially problematic in that people did not see me as someone they could, or wanted to, associate with. The result was that I potentially cut myself off from valuable and insightful information. This is analogous to what Styles (1979) stated regarding the problems he encountered due to his "nonparticipatory insider status." For example, Styles, who conducted research on gay male bathhouses, found that it was only when he became a true "insider," that is, engaged himself in the sexual life of the baths, did he come to more thoroughly understand the sexual language and negotiation process pertaining to sexual encounters. That I did not engage in casual sex means I also missed out on

experiencing first-hand the intricacies and subtleties involved when it comes to sexual transactions and the negotiation process.

Thus, the "insider/outsider" dilemma is not only multi-faceted and layered, but has its own rules of engagement, with its own advantages and disadvantages. For example, if I had chosen to fully engage in any and all activities, I also think I would have lost the respect of those I had interviewed. More specifically, I feared that my subjects, who had just divulged personal information and taken time out to talk with me, would perceive this to be a sleight against this personal disclosure. I also believe that had I myself participated, my subjects would have taken this to mean that the project itself is not altogether that serious or significant—a sentiment I wanted to avoid at all costs.

As briefly mentioned above, I had some difficulty approaching potential subjects, particularly at Dinah Shore. I looked for those I thought would be most approachable, which means of course that those who did eventually consent to being interviewed could potentially have had some things in common, thus limiting the diversity of my interviewees. Those who were younger, in their early to mid-twenties, seemed most difficult to approach, and only two of those I did ask who looked to be around this age at Dinah Shore agreed to be interviewed. The result was that almost all of my subjects at Dinah Shore ranged in age from around 22 to early forties, with the majority being in their upper twenties to lower and mid-30s (the average age of my respondents was 31). It could be that a particular age group, in this case those in

their early to mid-twenties come to Dinah Shore with different expectations and different anticipations compared to their older counterparts. Maybe for many among the younger crowd, this was their first time at Dinah Shore, which because of the "novelty" of it all, could have had an impact on their behaviors, attitudes about sexuality, and expectations.

At Pussy Palace I felt it was easier to approach individuals compared to Dinah Shore. I think this was in part due to the very explicit and exposed nature of the event. In other words, because the atmosphere was so direct and everything was "out there," individuals felt more at ease to talk with me and express themselves. In addition, like Dinah Shore, there were spaces at this event that were more or less places to converse, relax, and meet people—such as the pool area which was outside. I was able to approach and interview many of my subjects in this space, where talking about the event and what individuals had experienced that night were central to many conversations.

Methodological Limitations

Because I chose events that are episodic in nature—Dinah Shore is held once a year, while the Pussy Palace committee organizes bathhouses about three times a year (they have had only three other bathhouse events since I was there in July)—my research findings are automatically constrained and limited to the time period in which I was there. Not only was time a limitation, but I did not stay at either of the hotels that were hosting the parties and reserved specifically for Dinah Shore

participants (this was primarily a financial issue). Looking back I regret this decision knowing that had I been on site at all times I would not only have had more access to participants in which to interview them, but I would have been able to capture more fully what was going on on the "inside" during this time (for instance, many spoke of hotel parties and a few even mentioned hearing about orgies).

In addition, distance from these sites as well as the gay and lesbian communities that are most affected by these events (such as those in Toronto, and in and around Palm Springs) suggests that there is great potential to "miss out" on the ways in which Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore have impacted the lesbian/queer communities and the individuals involved. For instance, to what extent has Pussy Palace transformed the lesbian/queer community's perspective regarding female sexuality and sexual practices over time cannot be thoroughly and exhaustively addressed without being embedded within the community itself for an extended period of time. Despite this limitation, I was able to uncover and glean from the interviews (particularly the organizers) and articles discussing Pussy Palace some of the ways in which these bathhouse events have affected the queer community.

Due to the temporal constraints as well as the infrequency of such events, coupled with the fact that my subjects were found using snowball and purposive sampling, means of course that my findings are not generalizable. Lastly, one has to question how "representative" of all queers/lesbians the women at these events were to the gay and lesbian population/communities in general. Obviously, people go to

Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace events because they are in some way attracted to them in that these events could potentially provide something that they are looking for (be it casual sex, validation for being a lesbian/queer, networking and meeting others, etc.). Thus, individuals who are drawn to Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore could very well be different in myriad ways compared to those who see no point in going. Lastly, Dinah Shore was fairly expensive with each party costing anywhere from between $25 and $50 to enter—pool parties were $25, while the night parties were typically two times this amount. These fees, together with hotel room, food and transportation expenses alone would exclude many from being able to come.

Methodological Strengths

Although many might translate this study's "ungeneralizability" into being less scientific and thus, less relevant, I argue that the techniques used were appropriate and if anything, allowed for a richer, fuller and thus, more complete interpretation of what was taking place at these sites. Due to the methods used (participant observation and semi-structured face-to-face interviews) I was able to describe the setting, how the setting/space/structure impacted the participants' behavior, and subjects' own interpretations and perspectives regarding the event itself. These "insights" and the interviewees' own subjectivities would not have been uncovered had I used quantitative methods. For example, I was able to witness and uncover via the interview process one woman's frustration while at Pussy Palace because she felt "awkward" and "shy." She was frustrated in part because at the same

time as feeling shy she also explained to me how she wanted to be more engaged with others and sexually confident, knowing that she felt this way because of "social conditioning." That I was able to "catch" this subject's emotions while they were being felt by her, in turn provided in that one episode/interaction alone much complexity and nuance that otherwise would not have been revealed. Thus, immersing myself in these environments and conducting interviews allowed me as researcher to highlight the ways in which people make sense of their lives and the world around them. Such sentiment is exemplified by Berg (1998) when he states that "qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in their understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (7)."

Chapter 5

Findings/Patterns

The Queering of Space: How Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace Transfigure Women's Sexuality

In this chapter I examine the ways Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace have impacted, complicated, and changed not only ideas regarding women's sexuality but women's sexuality itself, and lesbian sexuality in particular. More specifically, the intent of this section is to reveal the patterns/themes that emerged via the interview data and observations. Interpreting the interview data means that the most salient and relevant features, including concepts, issues and dilemmas came forth, wherein connections were made with the patterns found. Findings were then weaved together into a cohesive and coherent format so that ultimately, a "picture" of a lesbian/queer sex culture and lesbian/queer sexuality(ies) was illuminated. Lastly, I strive to provide the "major messages" that were uncovered using my own interpretation of the events and interview data. While this is ultimately my interpretation, nonetheless my subjects' own depiction of the ways in which these events impacted them, the lesbian/queer community and queer/lesbian female sexuality are at the foreground of any and all analyses.

Women's Reasons for Coming to these Events

This section describes the atmosphere at both Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore using both observations and interview data. Participants at both sites illustrate to varying degrees a sexually charged environment. For instance, according to one Pussy Palace participant, who attended the very first bathhouse event held in 1998, it

involved pure indulgence and hedonistic desire as illuminated in the following statements:

> Four hundred women stood in the rain for two hours or more to get in. The first Pussy Palace was a dream. I ran around from 4 pm to 7am the next morning…I watched four hundred women cruise each other. I listened to women fucking each other through the paper-thin walls. Women walked around naked, lingered in the hot tub, hung off the fire escape…Pussy Palace is the epitome of female decadence… (Gallant & Gillis, 2001: 154).

Those volunteers/organizers I spoke with about the Pussy Palace bathhouse characterized the environment as being "highly charged," using various words to describe the energy emanating from the event. Here is what one of the organizers/volunteers, Erin, said about the first couple of Pussy Palace events:

> Everybody was filled with electricity. The thing sold out in 10 minutes! All the tickets gone. It was packed to the gills. I mean that's a pretty confusing house and it was, it was filled, and the energy was just un, unbelievable.

Asked to elaborate on some of the things that were going on such as what she saw during this time Erin had this to say:

> I mean there was so much sex everywhere, publicly, privately, it was damn freakin unbelievable. I had never seen anything like it in my life…This friend of mine and I were involved in this group thing in a room that doesn't exist anymore [the owner always modifies the space]. There's a room that's got floor to ceiling mirrors…it was fantastic and so there was this very public thing going on and the room was packed full of so many women that the body heat set off the fire alarm…There was also, there was like, there was one woman that was the focus and seven women around her and there must have been 60 or 70 people packed into that room, and with the mirrors you could see all these reflections…

She then goes on to describe it as "paradise." When I ask her to comment on some of the things she herself participated in while not on duty as a volunteer she states that:

> Like it was just, like there were some group activities, some one-on-one stuff…I sat with a friend of mine and watched and you know, just different porn rooms and you walk into a steam room and there would be people going at it right. I mean people just like fucking there and you are like okay…You would just sit and watch for a while, whack off, do whatever and then like go off to your next thing. So that was pretty hot, like the first one was just like 'wow'! I felt like I was in rooms doing shit all night and it was like a kid in a candy store. My three hour shift was definitely like you know an interruption in that time period.

Another participant I spoke with, Christie, when asked to use a few words to describe Pussy Palace, characterized it as "a queer women and trans safe fuck fest with lots of rides." Christie, who was in charge of the G-spot room the night I was there (that is, the one responsible for stimulating G-spots), always had a long line of women waiting their turn—I observed on three occasions at least 10 to 15 women in line. At one point, Christie, who had not had a break in hours and had a "date" that night, said to those still waiting: "Okay, whose in line, okay, 'one, two, three, nobody else can go in line because you are not going to get it. I got a date!"

Another Pussy Palace participant, "Heather," when asked how many people she thought were actually here to hook up and have sex, answered "probably around 50 to 60 percent." Based on what I observed, coupled with my interviews, I would argue that 50 to 60 percent is an accurate estimate. It seems that those not there specifically for sex were there due to mere curiosity, to get oneself "ready" for the next bathhouse event, and/or for the social and psychological aspects (such as

validation, self-esteem) the event provides. I asked Heather to describe what she had participated in and what she herself had observed at this event:

> I just had really hot sex with a woman who came up and asked me if I would be willing. I am really sore [laughs]. I have also participated by watching. The events that are open to people are like S & M, the G-spot room, there are rooms here where women set up shop basically. There are line-ups for these women because they offer themselves for the utter pleasure, I mean my God!...But yeah I have observed, I have not gone into any other those rooms, I just have encountered, tried to and attempted to make connections with people, to meet some people…

Patrice, who I interviewed while she was standing in line for the Temple Priestess [a woman who provides sexual services by either giving and/or receiving] and who had previously admitted feeling as though she could take "more risks here" (more about this later), when asked whether or not she had participated in any sexual activities, replied by saying:

> Well I did, I did experience the G-spot room and I did have a very nice orgasm there. And I did go to the message thing and I had some erotic experiences there, like not you know actual sex but very erotic. And I have had some very sexy dancing, and I had a lap dance and then someone asked me if I was giving lap dances. So, I gave a lap dance [laughs]. It was a great opportunity.

Patrice had not only received, but had given pleasure in a way she had never experienced before, which according to her was a "great opportunity." This is certainly an example of how space can influence behavior and in this case, sexual exploration and agency.

Likewise, when I ask Jessica, a Pussy Palace committee member, to describe the atmosphere of the first bathhouse, she states that she along with all the other committee members, "bumped into our own assumptions about our sexuality." She goes on to state that for the first bathhouse night they greatly underestimated what women would do:

> There was a huge, huge line-up [to get in], something we didn't even anticipate…And there was plenty of sex happening…The bathhouse challenged everybody, we were blown out of the water. Our assumptions that we needed to have all these things in place to get it going for women were wrong. We just went wow! It happened, we did need to do this…

During my time as a participant-observer at the Pussy Palace event I tried to spend equal amounts of time in the different parts and levels of the bathhouse (the first floor consisted of the outdoor area with the swimming pool, sauna, showers, porn room and dance floor, while the two other floors contained the various rooms with sexual rides, the dancers and the small private rooms for rent). I observed, as other interviewees had with the previous Pussy Palace bathhouse events, long lines to get in. I was one of the first in line, and by the time doors opened at 6:00 pm there was a queue wrapped around the corner and extending for about a block. About an hour into the event, the place was indeed packed, although not as crowded as I had imagined it would be. That is, moving around from room to room was fairly easy to do. One committee member whom I had interviewed said there had been around 200 to 250 women that night, which, compared to previous bathhouse events was about 100 fewer individuals than in the past. At any given point in time there were always

women hanging around in groups talking, laughing, swimming, observing others, and just having a good time.

Despite the "social" feel of the event, there was also quite a lot of sex and sensuality going on. In addition to the long lines to the Temple Priestess and G-spot rooms which I have already commented upon, there were couples having public sex, that is, sex in the open. At one point during my time in the outdoor area I was sitting down talking with a group of women who I had met while waiting in line. A couple walked by, sat down on a bench just a couple of yards away from us, got undressed and started having sex for what seemed to be about twenty minutes. Once they started having sex, two other couples who had already been in the area began making out as well. Women would come over to just watch and observe and either stay a while or walk off to go somewhere else. Besides the women I was with, I counted at least ten individuals who had actually come over to witness these couples having sex. I also observed on three different occasions during the night three different couples having sex up against a wall or staircase.

In addition, any time I walked by not only the Temple Priestess and G-spot room but the private rooms as well, I heard screams and noises emanating from the walls. There was one S & M scene going on that night, which created a lot of buzz throughout the bathhouse. For instance, one woman grabbed me without saying a word and took me to the room where this scene was being played out. There was a fairly substantial crowd watching as two couples were role playing. One woman was

moaning and "getting off" while her partner was hitting her (not in a violent way) with a whip. Many women were topless, wearing S & M attire and paraphernalia, and some were completely nude—those completely nude were typically in the sauna or swimming pool. I witnessed on many occasions (I counted 7 times) women touching and grabbing one another's breasts. For instance, while interviewing two women standing in line for the Temple Priestess (Patrice and Tami), another woman they seemed to know and who was topless came by to chat with them. Both interviewees began rubbing her breasts and nipples, with Patrice saying, in the midst of answering a question I had asked her, "That tit is getting a little bit um. I have to pinch that nipple and make sure it stays hard because her breasts are innies and she likes them better that way when they are hard" (this interaction did in fact make me somewhat uncomfortable).

Although as indicated, I witnessed (and heard) a substantial amount of sex and sexual activity going on, I would say as previously mentioned, that about half of all the bathhouse participants were not there specifically to have sex per se—rather from what I observed many were there to socialize and meet new people, possibly find a partner, to watch (be a voyeur), and of course to experience what a lesbian/queer bathhouse looks and feels like. I surmise given my experience and observations that in terms of why so many women, in a environment that exists specifically for sexual pleasure, were not engaging in sex and sexual activity has to do with several factors: they were partnered and maybe in a monogamous relationship, they were intimidated

and thus afraid to engage in sex, they did not see anyone that sparked their interest, and of course, they were just not interested in the sex but rather socializing or watching sex taking place.

The first two possibilities are related to both women's socialization regarding sex and sexuality, and the fact that as a whole the lesbian/queer community adheres to a monogamous model when it comes to relationships and intimacy—this is quite different compared to their gay male counterparts where open relationships are in many ways "normalized" and accepted. Of the eight interviews I conducted at Pussy Palace, six had been actual participants the night I was there—the other two were volunteers/organizers who had participated before but not this night. Out of these six participants, four had had sex and/or engaged in sexual activity that night—all were at that time (at least this is what they told me) single.

It was not as though sex was ubiquitous nor public sex a constant feature of the atmosphere. Rather, it was here and there, at times feeling as though it was everywhere and all over, but at other moments the atmosphere felt more social than sexual. It was constantly noisy and lively with music, the steady commotion and movement of people, and a lot of individuals just hanging out and talking to one another. I suspect from what participants and organizers told me in their interviews that this bathhouse event was somewhat different compared to the first couple of Pussy Palace events, that is, a bit more on the mellow side in terms of sexual activity and public sex. My feelings regarding why this was the case could be that the novelty

of it all has run its course (though I am not sold on this idea, seeing that there are now other bathhouses around Toronto opening up to lesbian/queer women), the raid in 2001 could still be a factor (particularly for those who are closeted and/or professional women), and maybe many lesbian/queer women simply do not feel as though they need to come to every bathhouse event that is offered.

Like the women at Pussy Palace, many of those interviewed at Dinah Shore, when asked why women come to this event, mentioned motives that were both social and sexual. For instance, one interviewee, "Susan," when asked why she thinks women attend Dinah Shore states "Definitely, it's definitely an opportunity to do things." When I ask her to clarify what "to do things" means, she explains "To get laid, have sex. Yeah, yeah, that's my impression." When I then ask her why she herself came to Dinah Shore and what she is looking forward to most responds by saying "To meet people, to observe, make connections, and have a good time." Another interviewee, Brenda, when asked what she thinks the objective is for many of these women coming to Dinah Shore, sees it as a generational thing—that is, women are coming for different reasons depending on their age. As she explains it:

> Um, the older crowd, I think what I just said camaraderie, the fact that we are out there. The younger crowd, get drunk and get laid, absolutely. The lesbians, they are out on a mission. Good for them cause it has taken a long time for them to be able to do that, and say you know what I don't want to be in a committed relationship when I am 22. They are out there and they are having a good time. I hope they just remember their elders.

Brenda, who is 35 (which is about the average—most Dinah Shore participants were between 25-35 years of age) and in what she describes as a committed relationship, when asked what she herself is looking forward to most about Dinah Shore, states:

> Tan stomachs. No, just the fact that there are women coming from all over the country and you have all that mishmash together. And to have that many women in one place, I mean you walk in to a haven full of women. It's phenomenal.

Robin, another Dinah Shore participant, when asked what her expectations were and what she anticipated most about the event, responded by saying:

> Just to have fun and be around women who are also gay, and be able to relax, not worrying about men you know being around and hitting on you, just to have fun. I am not here to hook up with somebody, I mean if I kiss someone fine, no big deal as far as sex and stuff.

When asked to comment on how many women are here specifically to have sex, says

> I could see like maybe 50, like 50 percent of them. That's why women come to these events I think.

At another point in our conversation Robin mentions once again how she is not here to hook up and that that was not important to her. Likewise, another participant, "Lilly," when asked what she anticipated most, says outright:

> You know it's not like I'm out here looking for somebody, I'm really not. You know I did, I came to the pool party and it's great but I'm not the type of person to just go look at women and be like [makes a gesture of sexual desire]. I'm not like a man…

I then asked her to comment on what she thinks other women's objectives are in terms of coming to Dinah Shore. This is what she has to say about the agendas of other participants:

> I think these women here are thinking they can be like boys, how boys are when they come to parties…I think women just kind of let their manly side come through and they just are like c'est la vie. You know I think they just kind of go for it, and it's unfortunate, but that's just, that's just my opinion…

Both Lilly and Robin seem to want to make clear from the get-go how they themselves were not there with the intention of hooking up. Lilly compares women who do (and are) engaging in casual sex/hooking up as "acting like men," which for Lilly is unfortunate. Another Dinah Shore participant, when asked why she had come to this event, abruptly stated the reason as to why she was *not* here: "I am not trying to get laid or anything." She then goes on to explain what it is that brought her here:

> Seeing girls basically, hanging out, meeting new people. I love meeting new people, like and they are from all over…and seeing old friends…

Interestingly, excluding the two organizers I interviewed, half of the participants (7) I interviewed described Dinah Shore as an event where women come for among other things, to "hook up" and have casual sex. Of those, four indicated that having sex/hooking up was a "primary" reason as to why women came to Dinah Shore. Yet, not one of the women claimed it as "the" reason why they themselves had come, though many did indicate kissing, flirting and getting "some attention" would be nice. In addition, two participants, when asked whether or not they were looking to have sex or hook up, stated that they definitely would be looking for that "if they were single." Five interviewees, when asked to depict their objectives/goals

while here, went on to describe themselves within this explanation as being "shy" or "withdrawn," with one subject saying outright that she is "not a player."

This pattern, wherein my subjects viewed other women (the majority according to most of the participants I asked) as there specifically for sex, while denying this for oneself fits in nicely with what other studies regarding women and sex have shown. For instance, according to Laws and Schwartz (1981), traditional sexual scripts prohibit women from admitting that sexual encounters are for *their own pleasure* as reflected in the following statements:

> Another complexity is that traditional scripts prohibit some actors—especially women—from acknowledging one aim of the transaction as sex. In the traditional scripts for women, sex is always for the sake of something, or someone else, not for oneself…If sexual self-interest is not a permitted motive for women, does this cause them to bargain less hard than their partner? (130).

That women are ill at ease to admit to wanting pleasure could very likely be another factor as to why not only so many women were not engaging in sex at the Pussy Palace bathhouse, but also why some participants (like those above) frowned upon women who choose to act and claim pleasure as their right. The forthright, direct and ultimately selfish act of approaching someone for sex can be so alien for women and thus so disturbing as to be an easy target for contempt and disgust. As Laws and Schwartz make clear in their study of women's sexuality in myriad situations (such as when coupled, single, married etc.), one of the major patterns they find throughout is that "in their sexual transactions, women act out a female script of

receptivity and reactivity, not of sexual agency (131)." Cruising—which involves looking and gazing at, in this case, other women and moving around the premises in search of an individual to hook up with—is seen as a masculine activity where the initiator of sexual encounters is coded as male. In addition, cruising, because it involves behavior that is planned out beforehand could be seen as, particularly for women, predatory and objectifying behavior—behavior that no "real" women would admit to engaging in or wanting to engage in.

In terms of ascertaining why it is that women rarely admit to their own desires nor take the role of sexual aggressor is partly a manifestation of women's socialization. For instance, studies examining sexual practices among couples in America find that initiation of sex is largely a male responsibility among heterosexual couples (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). Those women who for whatever reason have been immune to such rules regarding female sexuality, will often learn over time that assertiveness is not welcomed. Not only do men often feel uncomfortable about a woman "taking charge" but she herself might feel awkward about taking the initiative as well. Studies do indicate that most women express reservation in taking on this role (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Brown and Auerback, 1981). Magnify this by two women and we find that many lesbian couples find the process of initiating sex problematic in that they "are not comfortable in the role as sexual aggressor" (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983: 214). That women are hesitant to be seen as the "aggressor" and act in the initiator role could also be related to my earlier

findings, wherein only a few participants admitted outright that *the* reason for coming to Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore was indeed to have sex.

Interestingly enough and an important point in terms of this study, is that not only do women feel uncomfortable being the initiator, but they have problems with others seeing them as such. For instance, in one study looking at sexual practices among couples, upon examining lesbian couples and asking them which one typically initiates sex, a pattern emerged wherein partners within the same relationship would attribute the role of initiator to the other partner (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998). The reluctance to admit the "initiator role" is once again part of women's traditional sexual script, where being the "aggressor" and approaching another individual is seen as too masculine. In addition, it could be that lesbians' heightened sensitivity to being seen as a "dyke," i.e., masculine, might inhibit lesbians even more compared to their heterosexual female counterparts when it comes to the initiation of sex.

Overall, most of the women interviewed had come to experience a combination of the sexual and the social: that is, experiencing an all-female space which certainly has a "party" atmosphere and thus, is very social, while simultaneously being a "sexually charged" environment. For instance, Amy's reply to what she anticipated most about coming to this event depicts rather well the dualistic nature of Dinah Shore (i.e., the social and sexual components):

> I anticipated from what people told me a lot of women in bikinis, a lot of cruising, a lot of drinking, and I came, see I just recently kind of broke up with somebody so I guess I came anticipating at least meeting people,

> possibly hooking up, just having fun. But then on the other hand I was just like 'well you know I'm just going to go and have fun with my friends'. If that happens, cool, I meet some other girls cool, but if not you know whatever.

Amy had met someone the night before during the White Party, the "big" party on Saturday night where as the name implies both the décor and dress of the participants are white, and later on that night went to her room to, as she put it, "hook up." When asked whether or not she felt the atmosphere at the Dinah Shore "White Party" changed her behavior in any way asserted that:

> Not really, I mean it was definitely just playing it cool, checking out the scene, looking at girls. But I'm generally just a shy person and I don't really approach people very easily…like it takes a lot for me to go up to a girl. I am not like that…

Later on during our interview, when asked to respond to a similar question: how and in what way this environment might affect her personality and/or behaviors, makes this comment:

> Well like compared to when I am out at the bar I think I am a little friendlier, because I think this is what this weekend is about, everybody is just making friends. You know like and you guys, like you and that ____ and I forget all their names, and it wasn't even like a flirty thing it was just like 'hey where are you from', you know. Totally, you just meet people and it's just cool so I feel friendlier in that respect.

When I then ask her whether or not she feels this environment allows women to be more exploratory and carefree asserts matter-of-factly: "I was [laughs]. Yes. Yeah, it's [Dinah Shore] an avenue for that to happen."

Like Amy, many women had different responses to questions which pertained to how the atmosphere impacted their own and other's behavior. While Amy admitted feeling more friendly here compared to "your typical bar scene," and thus, open to meeting new people (she had come up to me and a group of women I was with at a restaurant, sat down and introduced herself), since according to her, "this is what this weekend is about," she nonetheless does not feel as though the parties (in this case, the White Party) had an effect on her personality—that is, she still felt shy and thus, unwilling and unable to approach others. Amy highlights the sociality, connections, and networking that goes on at Dinah Shore (which for many is why Dinah Shore is so important in the first place), but when it comes to encounters that are potentially sexual in nature (like those at the White Party), she remains somewhat withdrawn and unapproachable. As she puts it, her intentions did not include having to hook up (although she did end up hooking up later that night):

> it's not like I walked in [to the White Party] and was like 'well I'm going to get drunk and get my freak on.'

Whether or not women circumscribe their feeling regarding sex and sexual desire or really feel indifferent about possibilities for sexual encounters that are indeed opened up to them and made available at Dinah Shore is unclear. What seems to be the case is that overall, the women I interviewed want first and foremost and from the get-go to depict themselves as not concerned about sex and certainly as not the ones who

"initiate it." Yet, when asked why other women had come, sex and "getting laid" were clearly at the top of their agenda.

One subject I interviewed at Dinah Shore, "Mary," broke from this pattern in terms of making explicit and direct references to sex, how Dinah Shore facilitates sex, and how she herself changed once in this space. For instance, when asked what her expectations were coming here replied:

> I didn't come last year and two years ago I was in a relationship. This year I am single. This is not a place to come with a girlfriend. I mean if you come with a girlfriend you are out of your mind!

When asked what she means by this has this to say:

> This is a meat market. It's not a place to meet someone, so therefore I am not here to meet someone. It's really just to be around a whole bunch of lesbians, most of whom want to hook over or whatever. And really if anything happens here in, you know here in Palm Springs or what have you, it happens and you just leave it here…I don't know, this is just a meat market.

Such sentiment is analogous to what Lilly, in her depiction of women "acting like men" at Dinah Shore, stated when she claimed that "there's going to be a lot of hearts broken this weekend," in reference to women hooking up with other women and cheating on their partners. In fact, three interviewees had mentioned knowing some couples who were *not* coming precisely because of this fear that something might happen. For instance, Robin, when asked if she knew others who were coming stated that:

> I have a bunch of friends who were supposed to come out here, but you know they all have girlfriends and they saw fights coming up so they didn't…

Continuing on with what Mary said in describing Dinah Shore as a "meat market," when asked why she thought women came here, replied:

> Most people come here to hook up, to just have a really, somewhat of a sexual experience. Everyone talks about Dinah Shore being you know very sexual, orgies, you know what have you…You don't come here to meet anybody, it's just such a meat market.

That she describes Dinah Shore as merely a "meat market" for women to hook up with one another could indicate the similarities of men and women share when it comes to sex and sexuality. That women are, at least in terms of how Mary describes it, constantly "on the prowl," looking, touching and gallivanting around are descriptions typically reserved for men and male behavior, particularly when it comes to sex. Mary's exhortation not to come to "meet someone" insinuates once again that those at Dinah Shore are only looking for one thing, i.e., sex, and thus are superficial individuals who cannot be trusted.

When asked to comment upon her own experiences while here, Mary has this to say:

> So far today or this weekend, total meat market. You know it's funny cause I meet a lot of people however it just goes to that 'hi, how are you, where are you from, and then they try to go like and take it to the next step. You know the majority of women here, they just seem like they are out to find a fuck and that's it. Personally I don't want to do that you know…

I then ask her if she herself has "hooked up" or had sexual encounters while at Dinah Shore. Mary admits to one sexual encounter but as she puts it "no sex":

> I made out with one person on Friday morning or whatever it was and it was cool. We made out, but and then I was like 'I don't know where this person came from…So, I really just kissed one person and that was about it…

Mary then goes on to explain her experiences at Dinah Shore two years ago, where according to her, she had just broken up with her girlfriend because she had cheated on her, so all bets were on:

> I really just became a slut [laughs] that weekend. I made out with every girl that came across my way, and I didn't care whether that girl had a girlfriend or what…People do change absolutely. This is like meat at your worst. You have like prime rib, you have filet mignon, you have everything around you so you have a choice…So I did hook up, I had sex that weekend, yes. I made out with like three different girls…

When asked how Dinah Shore impacts the lesbian/queer community, Mary continues on with this idea of it being a "meat market" by saying that:

> Like I said if you are single you come here, if you have a girlfriend you are asking for trouble. This is really just like a big show-off party you know. You either show off your body, your muscles, your six-pack, and hook up, that's it, that is really what it is.

At another point during our interview, her friend had walked up and said something to her indicating how she had just hooked up with "that girl" who apparently she had been interested in all weekend. When she departs, Mary talks about how she comes out here every year to hook up with someone. According to Mary, her friend

> on average hooks up with about three different girls. That's just her whole purpose of coming here is to hook up with someone…That's just who she is and she was here last year and the year before…

Her friend was very excited about hooking up with this girl, and was also visibly

intoxicated. At another point during our interview, which was being conducted at Sunday's pool party outside the pool area when things were winding down and people were leaving, her friend comes back to tell Mary how she had "just kissed five women," and that another one of their friends has been "missing" for awhile. After our interview, I see Mary once more in the hotel foyer and ask her if she found her friend. She makes a face as though annoyed and tells me that "she was in a hotel room hooking up."

Unlike other Dinah Shore participants I interviewed, Mary makes it clear that she is not looking to meet people nor make connections since all anyone wants is really just to hook up. She makes references to being unable to trust others and thinks it is all, in her words, a "really big fashion show" and "meat market." According to her, this is a superficial environment where looks and sex reign supreme, as opposed to being a space wherein one can cultivate genuine and possibly long-term friendships and connections—and certainly not intimate partnerships. This of course also goes along with what other participants said in terms of how this environment emphasizes physical appearance, which in turn perpetuates insecurities and "image issues" within the lesbian/queer community—these issues are discussed later.

In sum, both events in their own way facilitated sex and sexual possibility, while also providing an atmosphere that was social, wherein making connections and meeting new people were equally important. Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace highlight and exhibit what a lesbian/queer culture and public sex culture looks and feels like,

where however ephemeral, women come to play, fuck, dance, socialize and express themselves—this, when a majority of women are in their mid to late twenties and up into their early forties. In addition, these events break away from the totalizing feminisms of the past where objectification of women *by* women was reprehensible, forbidden, and where "sexual self-policing" was part and parcel of both the women's movement and a lesbian feminist ideology.

Safe Space and the Self: How Feelings of Empowerment are Cultivated

Individuals have always used and manipulated space for specific purposes and functions, which in turn can elicit a gamut of feelings from despair and anguish (e.g., the prison cell) to hope and inspiration—in essence, space can be modified to suit an individual or group's objectives. Since the feminist and gay liberation movement, there has been a proliferation of "alternative" spaces, places created for minority groups wherein they can "express themselves" free from homophobia, discrimination and violence. For instance, woman-only spaces such as "community centers, theater groups, music festivals, and collectives of all kinds emerged" (Armstrong, 2002: 141) in the wake of these civil rights movements. Both Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace have in turn created their own version of a "safe space." That is, women can dress, behave and act on their desire without having to worry about violence and harassment, so that in this context "safe space" encompasses not only physical and sexual safety but being in an environment free of homophobia as well. Although women-only spaces have existed before for women to express themselves sexually, the overwhelming

majority of such places are not open to the public. Rather, these have more or less been underground, secret, exclusive and hidden from public view—these include for instance, private sex parties, clubs and organizations. On the other hand, Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace (especially Pussy Palace) are very public, inclusive, explicit about sex and relatively safe, as made clear by one of the Pussy Palace interviewees in the following statement:

> I mean it just, I don't find it existing any where outside these you know boundaries. Yes, you have night clubs, and yes people can go home with someone for one night, but it's not outspoken and that's the difference. Here everything is outspoken and I think to be able to have it outspoken and in a yeah, it's probably very liberating I would say.

In addition, Jessica, a Pussy Palace Committee member, remarks how Pussy Palace is different than other events because:

> this was so explicitly sexual. It didn't have any, it is not about undertones, it wasn't just about a sex positive event, or it wasn't just about a reading, you know it was actual sex happening!

That both events, particularly Pussy Palace, are so explicitly sexual and safe are major reasons why for many of these women they are in turn so empowering.

When I asked the organizers of Dinah Shore, Shannon and Michelle, about how and in ways Dinah Shore is important for women, Shannon stated the following:

> Well, women are a lot freer there's no doubt about it. They're much more open…They can be themselves and that they can feel very comfortable and have a sense of self-esteem, what else can I tell you.

The other organizer, Michelle, has a very similar response when she asserts that:

> And being in a space and being in an environment where they can be themselves, and be free to be themselves without any sort of backlash, any sort of discrimination.

At another point in the conversation, when I ask how this space might impact behavior, Shannon relates to her earlier comment about women feeling more comfortable in this environment since women do not have to contend with homophobia. She goes on to argue that:

> Well they can't really express themselves that well in a mainstream heterosexual environment because they are worried obviously of any sort of heterosexism, homophobia, any kind of backlash.

The other organizer, Michelle, interjects and says:

> Especially a lot of girls that come from the Midwest and places where you know it's a little tough. So here you mean, I mean you saw, I mean you can see what the weekend has been like. I mean I would say people here have been pretty expressive.

When asked to comment on how participants are being expressive Shannon states that these women are being "just really sort of extremely free, very uninhibited." Michelle continues this thought by saying that:

> I think if you are not used to being able to express yourself on a regular basis, you have to edit your behavior, if you have a place where you don't have to edit, you have a tendency to go over the top because its, I think its just human nature. If you get you know restrained for too long you know, then when you finally get to come out you will really fly out of there so.

The Dinah Shore organizers are thus describing the ways in which this women-only space, free of homophobia and discrimination—thus being physically safe, enables and facilitates women to express themselves in ways that they simply

are unable to do in most settings and in their day to day lives. In addition, Shannon argues that this safe space affects how women feel about themselves. Both organizers also point out how "empowering" this event is for women, and how all women should experience this in their lifetime "to really get an understanding of the power of being around so many women at one event" (Kort, 2005: 95). Shannon is quoted by Kort as saying "It's a shame we don't have more things like that…Some of the girls describe it as having died and gone to heaven…I've seen girls just getting so depressed thinking about what it's like to go back to reality" (95).

Women feel more at ease, have higher self-esteem and are more comfortable in their bodies—all of which has an impact on their behavior and interactions with other women. Michelle insinuates that one of the reasons women at Dinah Shore are so uninhibited is simply because this is the only time in their lives that they have the license to do these things in an atmosphere where heterosexism, patriarchal attitudes, and sexual violence do not exist. As she puts it, women "don't have to edit" their behavior and they can simply "let go" here at Dinah Shore.

Likewise, when I asked Jessica, the Pussy Palace committee member, what the explicit purpose/objective of Pussy Palace was, she states that it is about opportunity and providing a safe space for women to express themselves. The following are her words describing the Mission Statement of Pussy Palace:

> I think the original purpose, which was to give women choices and provide a space that women had, and could make real choices about what kind of, how they express their sexuality, um, whether they had sex or not, all of those are,

> we don't often get to make those, well I shouldn't say that, but we, we certainly have had, many of us, have had many situations where we really didn't have a choice…or we didn't know how to make it happen for ourselves, so um, its instructive in that right, just that alone.

The Pussy Palace Committee, quoted in a journal article examining the bathhouse raid [which I discuss later], goes on to state that "Whether or not women attended [Pussy Palace]…it existed as an option, a possibility, as a problem for how women think of themselves as sexual beings" (Gallant and Gillis, 2001: 153). This feeling of entitlement, particularly in terms of satiating one's sexual desire and sexual indulgence, is the epitome of women's resistance to traditional notions of female sexuality and sexual scripts. Such conditions in turn elicit feelings of empowerment, which translates into (or at least has the potential to) women being more apt to engage in casual sex and sexual expression.

Many participants I interviewed at both events had very similar things to say about how these events impact one's emotions, feelings about their body, appearance, and attitude towards self *because* of the safety, lack of discrimination and hostility, and feelings of liberation that such an atmosphere elicits. A participant at Dinah Shore, Teresa, when asked how Dinah Shore impacts the lesbian/queer community, commented that:

> I know it's a great place to meet people. I mean my friends that have come here they have just made friends all over…It's like a networking kind of thing and I mean this is just like a safe place I think…so you know just a safe space where women can go, because typically most, I feel like most events are

> always, the majority of events, are both men and women and its nice to have such a huge event I think geared towards women specifically.

Later on when asked how important Dinah Shore is for women she comments again on this idea of safe space, her own personal experience, and echoes an earlier response made by one of the organizers in terms of Dinah Shore being maybe even more important for those coming from more repressive areas of the United States:

> I think it's very important. Lets women know there are other women like them. Especially you know, if people that come from out-of-town or smaller cities, its good probably for them to go to a safe place. I mean just after living in the South for a little while I mean there was nothing and I couldn't be out, I couldn't be myself and it was really hard to be in a relationship and not be able to express that. So um, I think being able to come here and be safe, you know whether they are in their community or not, it's good.

Thus, women can act, feel, move and "be" in an environment in which they themselves are for once the majority, the "norm." This notion of how Dinah Shore "Lets women know there are other women like them" conveys that in part, Dinah Shore is also about affirmation and validation of one's sexual preference and identity. Because lesbians/queers are frequently invisible to one another and/or are "closeted" in the "real world," Dinah Shore acts as a respite from this constant surveillance and monitoring of self. "Passing"—the facade used to enable gays and lesbians to live without fear and interference, which is for many gays and lesbians their modus operandi within the public sphere, can be put to rest for a brief period of time at Dinah Shore. Related to this, Dinah Shore makes lesbians/queers and homosexuality

in general visible to mainstream, that is, heterosexual, society, as one interviewee/participant, "Abby," makes clear when she states that:

> Well I think when you throw a big event like this it makes other people aware of what's going on, especially when it's really big like this. I mean before, before Dinah Shore I don't know if the community of Palm Springs ever knew that there was such a large lesbian community. Now they know. So throwing events like this let's other people know that we are out there and we do have a strong community, and we do have events you know.

Visibility functions not only to bring strength, affirmation and solidarity to the gay and lesbian communities—and thus feelings of empowerment, but as Abby asserts, it also sends a message to straight society that gays and lesbians are alive and well, and happy to be who they are. This theme is very much in line with "Pride Parades" that are put on in public to demonstrate the queer community's strength and the pride they have due to their "difference"—as well as throw into relief our rigid gender ideals and rules regarding gender conformity. One Pussy Palace participant, Julie, claims that the key to gaining strength for the lesbian community is in making ourselves more visible and having more women/lesbian-only spaces. For instance, when asked why Pussy Palace might be important for the lesbian/queer community, Julie points out that:

> Like there's all this stuff especially the gay guys you know what I mean, a lot of stuff. I mean even look at all the bars for them compared to how many are chick bars you know what I mean. So, therefore we've gotta like come together and just get stronger as a little community…but like make our presence more known so we have more equal things, like more clubs that are for women you know, bathhouses for women, whatever, you know what I mean. It just seems like they have a lot more of a fucking like, media and just

> overall, with their clubs and everything, how things are run mostly by males anyways so you know. So it's important for like all of us to come out here [Pussy Palace] and support each other so that we can get stronger…

Though Julie does not really explain what she herself means by "stronger" she nonetheless sees a direct correlation between the strength of the lesbian community and its visibility via the proliferation of lesbian-only places. Visibility is thus a dimension of this feeling of empowerment in that women come in to contact with others who also identify as lesbian/queer. As a result, women can "be themselves" and do not have to hide at least for the duration of the event.

In addition, gays and lesbians who are visible, meaning "out" about being gay, have often gone through a coming out process where one literally goes from being isolated, trapped and *invisible* to a place wherein they are no longer hidden from the world. The coming out process thus includes the hope that this person leaves behind extreme self-consciousness, and instead brings forth self-acceptance, confidence, and in the end, self-esteem. Events such as Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace thus seem to be ideal places and vehicles through which to address, recognize and explore one's own same-sex desires, precisely because they provide a safe and accepting environment. Participants describing these events as "fantasy worlds" and in utopian ways conveys just how important such sites are for many of these women.

Out of the 24 participants/organizers I interviewed all but two mentioned something to the effect of "feeling comfortable" at these events, either in response to

questions which asked what their expectations were, what the event provided, how it made them feel, and how their feelings/behaviors changed in this space. This pattern is significant in that feeling comfortable in one's skin and surroundings—that is, being in a safe space free of hostility and discrimination—is inextricably tied to feeling empowered, liberated, and is directly linked to self-esteem. In essence, these women are comfortable precisely because they feel safe and at ease both physically and psychologically. That the psychological variables that induce a sense of calm and well-being are present in turn creates a setting wherein one can feel okay to pursue their sexual desires and push their boundaries vis-à-vis sex and sexuality. For instance, when I asked Abby what her expectations were coming in to Dinah Shore she stated "to have a good time, to feel comfortable, to be able to be whatever I want to, do whatever I want." When I asked her why she can feel these things here she quickly replied "because when I kiss my girlfriend I'm going to see other girls kissing their girlfriend."

This of course is again in reference to the fact that she and all the other Dinah Shore participants will not have to worry about facing homophobia and heterosexist comments, glares, stares and harassment. Another Dinah Shore participant, who I will refer to as "Karen," when asked to describe what the Dinah Shore atmosphere is like, asserts that:

> It's just like open and so free…I am fine with who I am, you know, they can look at me and know I am a female and not have a double take. You know I am in a comfortable atmosphere…

When asked to compare these feelings at Dinah Shore to a regular night out in Seattle (where she has been living now for close to four years) she has this to say:

> Even though for instance I want to go to a gay club there's also straight people that linger [at the gay club] and I found that those are the ones I have the most problems with cause they don't, they see me as being more masculine, which you know, just cause I dress in men's clothes, people are just like once you get to know me, there's just like 'I don't see it' you know…But coming here its just like I know no matter what I am going to have fun, there's not going to be any problems, any drama. I feel really comfortable.

Later on in the interview, Karen, when asked if Dinah Shore was important for the lesbian/queer community, adds to this idea of feeling comfortable when she explains that:

> It's hard to find just like a good surrounding like for all females. For instance, Seattle…it was like number two on a scale of like gay populations so when I got there I was like yeah, its going to be a lot of fun and then it's just like this one little bar for women…And all the other places are like mixed crowds but it's all mostly male dominant. That's the same way in San Francisco, Seattle, Arizona and Portland and everywhere that I've been. So this is a place where you know you can come and you know just be. I mean last time I was here I think I saw one guy the whole time, just one, some crazyness like that you know…It's a place where I can go and know that people relate to me in some way.

Relating to earlier comments about how Dinah Shore might be especially important for those living in the Midwest or the South, Karen is in a way adding to and somewhat contradicting this notion by arguing that even in the more "progressive" places the majority of space, that is, the entertainment infrastructure geared towards gays and lesbians (bars, clubs etc.) is overwhelmingly male, and at least in Seattle, includes a large percentage of patrons who are straight. Karen, who admits to having

a very butch appearance [that is, looking and dressing like a man], feels uncomfortable at these public venues and often experiences what she refers to as "problems" with these people, who seem to automatically have numerous assumptions about her simply because of her appearance. Karen feels that at Dinah Shore people "get her" and she does not have to explain or justify who she is or why she looks the way that she does.

Another Dinah Shore participant, Amy, when asked how she thought Dinah Shore might impact the lesbian/queer community gives a quick reply: "It's empowering." When asked to elaborate she states:

> It's an automatic. I mean we've had this weekend where we can like do whatever, let go and do whatever you want…But on the other hand I mean the fact that we don't have more weekends like this, where we have all of this pent up like 'oh, I've got to meet girls', and then we release it all in one weekend once a year cause there's no where else to do that in the world.

Amy in some ways echoes one of the organizer's earlier comments with this idea of pent up energy that needs to be released, wherein Dinah Shore becomes the perfect outlet. Yet, Amy is also frustrated in that she feels that there needs to more of these "outlets" for women than merely once a year. When I ask Amy if she can pinpoint some of the positive things that Dinah Shore brings, she makes several illuminating references to some of the patterns/themes that have been discussed thus far—such as safety, feelings of empowerment—by using a personal anecdote highlighting the struggles gays and lesbians face within the public sphere:

> You can walk around and be a dyke and it's cool you know. I mean like we don't have to worry [about homophobia and hostility] cause if we're out in the world, at the beach or whatever, at least for me personally I constantly have my eye, my eye looking over my shoulder, who's looking at me, who's going to make a comment…There's no straight guys here as far as I know, there's no people here picketing. You know I am very relaxed and I'm very just like 'we're all just having fun'. We don't have to worry about that other aspect that we have to worry about in our lives. You know I went on a date with a girl like last weekend and like trying to think about where we should go and I'm like 'oh this place', but 'oh, it's not a gay place'. So I am going to have to worry about that also on top of having to try and like hang out with this girl. You don't have to worry about that [here at Dinah Shore], just have fun to your own like element.

Continuing on with this theme of comfort and affirmation, another Dinah Shore participant/interviewee, Robin, when asked whether and in what ways Dinah Shore is important to the lesbian/queer community she responded by saying that:

> I think it's probably very important to a lot of people, to the whole lesbian/gay community, very important cause it's just another event that allows them to be who they are and you know, where they can come and not care you know, enjoy themselves.

Another Dinah Shore participant, Brenda, described feeling "dumbfounded" the first time she went to Dinah Shore. When I ask her to explain why she felt "dumbfounded" she goes on to state that:

> The feeling that you get when you walk in to the pool party and you have this many woman in one place and it is just women, you are just like 'oh my God'! It is just that dynamic, it makes you feel really good, confident, empowered I guess.

She, like several other participants I interviewed, comments later on in the conversation about this "energy" at Dinah Shore she feels every time she has gone,

which elicits feelings of freedom and being "liberated." During one pool party at Dinah Shore, when I, along with the majority of those in attendance, were watching the go-go dancers, I asked a woman beside me who had commented a moment earlier how one dancer "doesn't dance, she fucks," what she liked most about this event said nonchalantly and tersely: "This is a safe place. I don't have to worry about rape and you are validated for being you." She goes on to say as though this were an added bonus "plus you get to see so many beautiful women." Although one can argue that these emotions are only temporary and thus, ephemeral since such settings are in a sense "artificial" and short-lived, I nonetheless believe that the mere ability to feel such things is the beginning of possibility; that is, it allows these women to envision a different world and see what the world could *and should* be without fear and with genuine social and sexual equality.

Pussy Palace interviewees/organizers had very similar responses to questions which pertained to the emotions and feelings surrounding the bathhouse event. Jessica, the organizer who spearheaded Pussy Palace, when asked to describe what she wanted the atmosphere of Pussy Palace to be like (at least for the first bathhouse event), she mentioned wanting an environment that was simultaneously both "sexually charged" and "safe." Knowing this to be an important challenge and part of what would make Pussy Palace successful she asks herself this question:

> How do we let women discover that [sexual opportunity, their desire] for themselves, but also provide a space that is safe enough, and can we do that…It was very exciting that wow, we are doing an event and we bumped

> up, into, bumped into our own assumptions about our sexuality and what women will do.

As mentioned previously, the Pussy Palace Committee did several pro-active things to make the event as safe and as sexual as possible. These included such things as "Bathhouse Etiquette" sheets describing all the rules and what is/is not appropriate behavior (e.g., how to respectfully reject someone), having counselors on hand the first night, and at the same time having all the different sex rooms and other activities (porn rooms, lap dancers) to get women "in the mood." When asked to describe some of the feelings the event conjured up, Jessica, a Pussy Palace Committee member, has this to say:

> There were moments when I certainly looked around and went this is historic! This is an historic event, this isn't just 'oh, we are just getting our jollies off you know'. You know this is something that really hasn't happened…It was an historic event and you felt it when you were there because everybody was quite in touch with their own sexuality and desire. Just walking in to the door was a moment of empowerment…

This "moment of empowerment" as Jessica describes it is at the same time a space where women can feel comfortable about their bodies as noted by another Pussy Palace participant, Julie, who when asked to describe what she likes most about this event had this to say:

> Just the fact that everyone is just chillin, and they are cool with their bodies and they don't care. They are just lounging and that like you know it's an event where girls can come out and get it on and they don't have to feel embarrassed like it's bad or whatever…You know they do their own thing and that's important you know.

Another Pussy Palace participant, "Tami," who had herself done some "servicing" that night (sexually pleasing another in whatever way he/she wants), when asked if Pussy Palace is important to the lesbian/queer community answered by saying:

> I think it's very important. I wish there was more…More women-friendly spaces where it's okay to express your sensuality and sexuality…It's amazing how women change, like we had a stripper night and like they were all over.

When asked to explain how women change in this space she asserts through personal experience how for instance, women become "more confident, empowered." These feelings are due in part to the safety, comfort and feelings of validation many individuals experience at Pussy Palace. She goes on describe her feelings in relation to when she is servicing another female and states that:

> basically I am here to please and serve my top. Make sure they're satisfied, they're happy…you know basically I cater to them, but on the other hand it makes me feel a lot better, like it makes my self-confidence go right up because it's not all about low-esteem or whatever. It's equal in a funny way…But you know what it is, you know what you are going for and that's what I like. Maybe being over 30 does it.

Another Pussy Palace participant/interviewee, Megan, when asked how this atmosphere might impact women's sense of self, explains that:

> The women are well, taking over there…taking control over their own bodies more. It seems to be more you know 'I am in charge of me, myself and my body and what I want and what I don't want'. It seems to me more an awareness of like this is what I like…Like more that kind of attitude I think among these women to um, to see themselves as owning their own bodies and not a possession of anyone else.

Likewise, during my first interview at Dinah Shore, the interviewee—Debbie, a local and owner of a restaurant in Palm Springs, when asked if Dinah Shore affects the lesbian/queer community in any way, responded by stating that:

> I think it's good for the lesbian community. I think that you know we hide our sexuality a lot…but here you can, you know [pauses and gives a smile]…and the parties! You know there is nothing wrong with sex and I think that Dinah Shore promotes it and you know that is what the weekend's about. That's what those parties are about [meaning, sex and sexual expression].

Throughout the interview Debbie was a bit reserved and at times embarrassed, often either never referring to sex and sexuality directly, or resorting to euphemisms. Yet, she was at the same time adamant about how women need to feel okay about sex and be able to act on their desires. In essence, Dinah Shore enables women to come out in more ways than one—not only in terms of their sexual persuasion and lesbian/queer identity, but also in terms of "letting go" sexually.

This idea of "owing their own bodies" was certainly a common component in many of these women's descriptions of how these events impact personal attitudes towards the self. Owning and manipulating one's own body for one's pleasure is of course the epitome of empowerment, agency and self-esteem. That women have a safe space in which to do such things and exercise this "ownership," negotiating desire and sex on their own terms is indeed, as Jessica described it, truly historic and certainly a departure from our heteronormative and homophobic society. The fact that such places even exist reveals the extent to which social change and sexual

equality are possible, which thus supports the arguments made by those who argue against too strong a social constructionist perspective (see for instance Butler, Giddens, Bourdieu).

It should be noted that this concept of "safe space" seems to have somewhat of a different connotation and meaning depending upon which event we are referring to. More specifically, Dinah Shore participants and interviewees, when describing the environment of Dinah Shore, described it first and foremost as one that is free of any and all homophobia—the freedom and safety to act and be precisely because the majority of women there were lesbian, questioning their own sexual identity, curious, or at the very least gay-friendly. On the other hand, when discussing Pussy Palace "safe space" meant for these women a space free of potential sexual violence, harassment, and patriarchal attitudes. Thus, "safe space" in this context (Pussy Palace) is more explicitly first, about sexual safety, although of course it too includes an anti-homophobic element. I believe that this difference in what people see as a "safe space" is due to the context in which the events take place: that Pussy Palace is explicitly sexual and for sexual pleasure means that participants are going to expect to be able to pursue their desires without sexual violence, while those at Dinah Shore see it primarily as an extended party and a "getaway" from our homophobic society which demands censorship and invisibility for gays and lesbians.

Even in a Safe Space it is Less than Perfect

Interestingly enough, while many participants felt a sense of empowerment at Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, many at the same time also discussed feelings of "intimidation" and insecurity. There was in essence, this dualism between self-affirmation and a "heightened sense of self," which led in turn to some individuals feeling a degree of inadequacy. For instance, Julie, who by all indication was extremely excited and "worked up" in anticipation of the bathhouse event (this was her first one), when asked if there was anyone else she knew there or that she knew was coming to the bathhouse event, stated that:

> I was happy when I heard a friend of mine was coming, just a familiar face cause I will admit to feeling quite intimidated and fretting a little bit, whatever, about my own self and all that kind of crap.

Another Pussy Palace participant, Megan, when asked if anything at this event made her uncomfortable, mentioned how it felt a bit awkward because women were unsure as to how to move in this space and how to use their bodies. When I asked her if this is how she felt as well she responded by saying:

> I feel that way and when you look at people, not all of them, you can see that a little bit like what do I do with myself. I don't have a drink because I don't drink. I have this space and there's women all over the place, like what do to, what to do…I don't know how to behave and that leads to some kind of shyness, which is frustrating.

During the interview Megan seemed on many occasions frustrated that she too was struggling in this space. It was almost as though she was treating the bathhouse event as a test, a challenge to see if she could overcome and fight back against this so-

called “social conditioning” as she puts it. Part and parcel of this social conditioning regarding sex, which is related to this participant’s shyness and insecurity, is the shame surrounding sex itself. When people are merely “fucking” for the pure pleasure of it we often denigrate and shame the act and of course, the individuals doing it (particularly women no matter what their sexual persuasion). Warner (1999) describes our society’s displeasure with sex when he states that “If others are having sex—or too much sex or sex that is too deviant—then those people have every reason to be ashamed” (31). Add to the mix sex that is being performed in “public” and we have a mess on our hands—getting people comfortable enough to actually do it (particularly women) is in itself a revolutionary and subversive act.

The Dinah Shore event, which as already mentioned, is in sum a large and ongoing four-day party broken up into several different parties each day. Every day during Dinah Shore there are two pool parties, one at each hotel. I observed during these pool parties very scantily clad women, some at times going topless, and others wearing very skimpy bikinis. Many women I interviewed commented on this in terms of excitement, but at the same time it also acted as an added pressure to look good, which thus fed on some of their own insecurities. For instance, one participant I spoke with, when asked if anything here made her uncomfortable, stated that:

> Well I’m not in my, I don’t feel good in my skin here. It’s just not, obviously there’s a lot of T & A here and it’s not me. Obviously I am wearing a tank top, I don’t feel too secure in my skin.

Another interviewee, Teresa, when asked if she thought the Dinah Shore event would impact her behavior in any way, stated she might be "a little bit more withdrawn because it's more intimidating." When I asked her to describe why it is that she feels intimidated she explained that:

> Because there are so many more people here and you know there are girls with you know hot little bodies and I'm not quite feeling comfortable as they might you know or whatever…that's the difference for me, is that you know everybody is going to be in their little bathing suits and I'm going to be like 'oh, I haven't exercised in six months.

Besides Teresa, three other Dinah Shore interviewees used the word "intimidating" either to describe their feelings when in this space or to describe the atmosphere itself. When I asked one of them to describe why "intimidating" she remarked, "I guess because I've gained a few pounds and all these women are in their little bikinis and all." When I asked the same question to another interviewee as to why she felt intimidated she stated "there are a lot, a lot of women. People without their tops and yeah. Mind you this was my first time and at that time I was not necessarily out." For someone experiencing Dinah Shore or Pussy Palace for the first time, it can definitely be overwhelming, particularly for those who are just newly out or have yet to act on their same-sex desires. When faced with three thousand women at Dinah Shore, or walking in to Pussy Palace where "it is packed to the gills" as one interviewee/participant put it, you are likely to feel both excitement and be unnerved at the novelty of it all.

Likewise, Amy, when asked how Dinah Shore impacts the lesbian/queer community, she begins by saying outright "It's empowering." When asked in what way, she describes how women are able to let go and just be themselves. A few sentences later though, she begins to address the ways in which Dinah Shore perpetuates and reinforces all of this "image stuff." Amy explains it this way:

> You know we still have image stuff in the queer community just like in any other community. I mean you have to look good, you know, everybody's like 'oh, I gotta, even I was like 'I got to get tan, I got to do sit-ups two weeks before. You know that 'I need to look good, oh my boobs are too small' you know. So the image thing, especially here cause it's all like bikinis and so that was, I mean a little bit alienating for those who don't fit that image.

That lesbian communities are not immune to and insulated from "image" issues that Amy speaks of is something typically glossed over by those examining lesbian/queer women. That is, the standard of beauty that women, i.e., heterosexual women, are supposed to adhere to (thin, toned, tan and large-breasted) are also ideals perpetuated—though I would argue not to the same extent—by the lesbian/queer communities. For instance, the organizers (and sponsors no doubt) of Dinah Shore sell and promote their event using what would be considered "femme" lesbians—that is, women who are "feminine" in dress and appearance and who would just by appearance alone be assumed to be straight. Body image issues are nothing new to the gay male community where according to Magnan (2004), "acceptance within the community is still too often determined by a person's appearance" (*Xtra!*, Sept. 2:13). For instance, some studies indicate that of those 10% of men with eating disorders,

close to half are gay (Magnan, 2004). Although body image issues might not be as prevalent within the lesbian community compared with their gay male counterparts, it seems to be, as Dinah Shore indicates, a concern.

From what participants at both sites have said, given the context of Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, which are qualitatively different events with somewhat different agendas, the insecurities that arise are also a bit unique to each event. While my subjects at Pussy Palace indicate feelings of hesitancy, shyness and an unease in not knowing "what to do in this space," the major anxieties found at Dinah Shore seem to be more in line with what one subject simply referred to as "image issues." Yet, both atmospheres are, as expressed previously, intimidating, particularly for those who have never been there previously.

I myself felt relatively comfortable at both sites, with feelings of amazement, awe and to be honest, at times revolutionary zeal. Observations as to what women were wearing, what they were doing, such as their ability to have sex within view of others, and the touching, grabbing and invading of not only the dancers' personal space but other participants as well, really did fly in the face of my own assumptions in terms of women's boundaries and what they would and would not do. Although seeing this was exciting in terms of subversive appeal—seeing female sexual agency in action—it also was at times uncomfortable in that it was so "taboo" and "out there." This was particularly so at Pussy Palace where sex was literally "in your face," which was something I for one had never experienced. My movements at both

sites could be characterized as circumscribed, careful and highly self-monitored. This was so not just because I was there doing research, but because I too have my own issues, judgments, insecurities and assumptions surrounding sex and sexuality. Unfortunately, I believe my discomfort stems in large part from the fact that what I saw challenges to the core what we consider to be a "natural" female sexuality.

That there is now a "lesbian gaze"—meaning that women are no longer just the recipient of the stare but the initiator of a look that can express anything from attraction to lust and in some cases, can be used to objectify others (in this case, women objectifying/sexualizing other women), and a lesbian/queer sexual culture is now emerging and a reality, says a lot about how much women's sexuality has changed and what it might look like in the future. Events such as these support notions that view sexuality as indeed a social construction that is malleable and unpredictable—at least in regards to women's sexuality and sexual expression. At the same time, even in an environment as safe and "free" as Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, women are still concerned with their appearance, have body image issues and still feel inhibited and constrained when it comes to acting on their sexual desire and having sexual agency. Lastly, some women are still describing those women who do admit and act on what they want as "men," which merely perpetuates traditional notions we have regarding sex and gender as well as works to stigmatize them.

Agency and Space: The Facilitation and Fostering of Desire

Even though some women struggle with feelings of intimidation, insecurity and discomfort with their bodies, as already indicated, this was not the case for many women. That is, women were able to move past these insecurities and express their sexual desire in forthright, direct and uninhibited ways. Because lesbian/queer women are fighting against two exclusionary and inhibiting social forces at once—that is, the heterosexual and male appropriation of public space—lesbian/queer women are in a unique and qualitatively different *space*. In essence, they are using their "marginal status" to reconfigure not just space, but undo cultural assumptions and stereotypes society has regarding female sexuality, and lesbian/queer sexualities in particular. For instance, as one Dinah Shore interviewee put it when asked what the objective was for those coming to this event stated quite frankly: "Getting drunk and getting laid. Lesbians, they are out on a mission." When I asked her what this "mission" is she matter of factly said "sex," which is not what we would expect given our ideas regarding women's sexuality. In essence, the significance of lesbian/queer women's outsider status, that is, on the margins of society, is that this "third" space allows women to recreate and redefine women's so-called "sexual scripts." That some women come to just have sex, hook up and have fun is contrary to not only what society says regarding women's sexuality, but to scientific studies that have been done showing women to be less sexually driven compared to men (Laumann et al., 1994). That prominent myths about certain social groups still persist is highlighted by Laumann et al. (1994) when they assert that "theories that look toward

a biologically based sex drive as an explanatory framework at the individual level are still quite prominent, especially among the general public" (86).

In my interviews with several of the organizers of Pussy Palace, a common theme was found which illuminates the interplay between agency, structure/space and the acting on (or not) of one's desire. More specifically, space, such as the bathhouse and Dinah Shore event, allowed for and simultaneously facilitated agency and sexual opportunity, thus making the negotiating of sex and the questioning of one's own sexuality part and parcel of the milieu. For instance, one of the Pussy Palace organizers, of which I refer to here as "Jessica," spoke of how the creation of Pussy Palace bathhouse events forced individuals to ask themselves questions, new questions, involving their own sexualities, desires and inhibitions or lack thereof. Such sentiment is reflected by Jessica in the following statements:

> It was quite evident that women had no sense of how to be…You create an event that actually allows women to make decisions to say yes or no in a way that we haven't really ever had that opportunity right. So um, we also, we did…a lot of reassuring that you wear whatever you want, take your clothes off if you want, don't take your clothes off if you want, you can wear whatever…It is for you to define how you express yourself right. You can be a voyeur, you can come and participate, you can really just do whatever. In some ways that was reassuring [to be able to do whatever] but it also created a little more unease right, cause then it *really was your choice* [my emphasis].

This unease really stems, as Jessica puts it in *eye Magazine*, from the fact that "A lot of women have not had the freedom to explore their sexuality…After all, young girls are *not* taught that their sexuality is theirs, for their own pleasure" (Silversides, 2001:4). Interestingly enough, the fact that there were no rules and no expectations of

what participants should do, meaning they could do whatever or nothing at all, made the bathhouse event in a paradoxical way more about self-examination, and thus, *more* anxiety producing. According to Jessica, women had to really consider what they wanted from this event, which was also about questioning one's own sexual identity, sexual practices and boundaries—something that might or might not change once you walked in to this space.

Finding the Slut in All of Us

Related to the process of self-examination and introspection vis-à-vis one's sexuality and desire, a common theme/pattern I found was that many participants (and all the organizers) at both sites agreed that not only did these sites enable and facilitate sex, but gave one an opportunity to "take risks"—that is, explore their desire. One Pussy Palace participant I interviewed, a self-identified bisexual currently married to a man, when asked what this bathhouse event provides for the lesbian/queer community stated that:

> it gives people an opportunity to connect with a lot of different women where there are no men around and I think that is really good cause I think that women are different when there are no men around. I think it gives women an opportunity to just kind of express themselves differently and just take more risks.

One participant/interviewee at Dinah Shore stated, when asked whether she felt as though the event might impact people's behavior said:

> I think that once they, you know, see all the women surrounding them I think they start, you know, looking a little more and changing their perspectives a little bit as far as like their, their values and stuff like that…

When asked to elaborate a bit more on this she stated that:

> You say like 'oh no I wouldn't do that' but once you get here and you see if the opportunity is there in your face I think some of the people will take it and go against what they believe.

That individuals will go against their "values" suggests that some people, once exposed to this sexually charged atmosphere, might do things that they never thought they would do. During my time at Dinah Shore I saw this happening firsthand to a subject that I had interviewed in the early stages of the event. For instance, during the interview, the subject, "Robin," when asked if she thought her behavior would change in any way while at Dinah Shore, responds by saying: "No, not at all…I am here just to have fun and be around women who are also gay…I'm not one of those people like, I'm not here to hook up with people…". When I saw her two days later at the White Party, what is considered to be the biggest and most popular party at Dinah Shore, she came up to me and started talking about "being transfixed" by the go-go dancers, and how she "does feel different here" in that she was feeling more open and gregarious. I observed her that night, where indeed she had been fixated on one dancer in particular, and had given her money on several occasions by placing it in her bikini bottom. At one point she once again approached me and stated matter-of-factly "we are just like men aren't we," referring to everyone's obsession with the dancers.

In a similar vein, when I asked what the motivations were behind Pussy Palace, "Christie," an organizer and member of the Pussy Palace Committee, addressed the issue of taking more risks and exploration when she states that:

> Its about exploring, expanding queer sexuality…There's some people who are totally fine with casual sex who go to sex parties. There are others who come who have never had sex with a woman, who might be bisexual, they are a lesbian and haven't had a relationship or they have had one relationship, they are not sure…

She continues with this theme at another point in the interview when explaining the philosophy/purpose behind Pussy Palace:

> So its partly about knowing who we can be…I know that my sexuality, my identity has really evolved, and so it gives women an opportunity to look around, 'she's doing this, this is what I see myself looking like", whatever right. So you can discover who you are…I went to a bathhouse in Seattle and saw some tender S & M and it blew me away…I found it's not about whips and chains and beating the shit out of somebody right. So I saw that as an opportunity…It's like "oh, I want to try this. What do I want to do at the next bathhouse right? So I wanted to see what the G-spot room would be like [which was a big hit], and I figured that one out. We are going to have two G-spot rooms because we need two! And we are going to have a Butt Plug Room [for anal stimulation] and we'll see. Maybe we need two Butt Playrooms, I don't know, I am not sure how popular it is going to be. This is going to be you know a test…And the men have changed their opinions about women too right, like the gay men.

In sum, Christie sees Pussy Palace as fostering the "ability to find your own sexual self." She adds to this by describing Pussy Palace also as an arena for exploration, particularly for those women who are questioning their own sexuality, or who maybe identify as lesbian but who have yet to act on this attraction to other women. During the interview, when asked whether she herself had gone to Pussy Palace to just have

sex, besides her role as what I refer to as "G-spot queen" where as she puts it "I just went to the G-spot room and make women cum," Christie disclosed how during the first event she was with someone but that they had had sex in one of the private rooms. At the third Pussy Palace event, during which she was also working as a volunteer, she had this to say:

> I was single, I was non-monogamous and I went to have sex, and went on [to work] at 7:00 and I was on shift again at 2:00 and my shrink had told me to ask at least 10 women to have sex. So I started at 7:30 and I found one person, we had sex. I found her again later [when she was done with her shift], and said 'I am going to have a swim in the pool, I am going to have a shower and I want you to meet me in the sling room [for S & M] in twenty minutes'…So, I didn't quite get to the sling room by the time she came upstairs, and she just came up to me and just started kissing me in the shower and I just said 'okay what do you want'…

Christie and the woman she had sex with that night ended up having a two-year relationship. As Christie explains, "that was not was I was looking for, I was not looking for a relationship, but we just clicked."

Another Pussy Palace participant and co-author of an article examining the Pussy Palace raid, Gallant, commented on her first bathhouse experience. Gallant engaged in things she otherwise would not have, which in turn changed how she perceived herself. In describing her experiences and the personal transformation that followed, she states that:

> I had thrilling experiences, I took risks being bolder than I would otherwise ever be, experimented with pleasure and desire…I lap danced at my first bathhouse and got an addictive first taste of the pleasure of power. I walked

> away exhilarated, well-fucked, and newly aware of my femme power (Gallant & Gillis, 2001: 156).

Although not completely related to the above, it is well worth mentioning what Gallant says at another point in the interview when she states that:

> Shamefully, there aren't many safe places in the world to be a slut…Pussy Palace validates sexualities that do not conform to the middle-class norms of 'private', marital/sanctified (hetero)sexuality, and are not dependent on men to 'civilize' and legitimize women's bodies (156).

Likewise, another Pussy Palace participant, "Julie," whom I interviewed and conversed with on a number of occasions that night, when asked whether she thought Pussy Palace allowed women to be more creative/exploratory in their behavior, claimed that:

> Yeah, for sure cause this is like a sexual place you know what I mean. Like a bar is more of a social place, I mean this is like a social place too but there's a lot of other stuff going on…People are already curious, they're looking, they know what goes on here you know what I mean, so people are more open you know. They are walking around with no shirts on, no clothes on, you don't see that anywhere else, so yeah, it's a way more sexual place so…

When I asked another Dinah Shore participant, "Amy," how she would describe Dinah Shore to someone who has yet to come, she responded by stating that:

> I would say lots of bikinis and debauchery, and drinking, and lots of partying…Like I feel that what happens at Dinah Shore stays at Dinah Shore you know like, let go and do whatever you want and sexual freedom…Yeah, Dinah Shore is just kind of generally understood that it's for the ones that are more of the casual sex inclinations. Yeah, so it's an avenue for that to happen.

Another DS interviewee/participant, "Brenda," when asked whether the Dinah Shore event impacts individual behavior stated that:

> Well, given the fact that you are there and you are feeling that kind of energy and it's one wave of energy and especially, you know night-time parties and you have alcohol involved, absolutely. People are going to try things, people are going to be less inhibited. Yeah, definitely.

This "energy" arises because as she sees it Dinah Shore fosters a "heightened sensitivity" everything around you, particularly because of "how many women there are in one place." Her gestures and comments when discussing Dinah Shore are a mixture of excitement, disbelief and liberation. She continued throughout our conversation to comment on how unbelievable it is, especially in terms of the sheer number of women present, and claims that the first time she went (this is her fourth) she was "completely dumbfounded."

"Erin," a Pussy Palace volunteer and participant, when asked how these bathhouse events impact individuals and sexual expression, begins by discussing the atmosphere of the first Pussy Palace event and using words such as "incredible" and "empowering" to describe the atmosphere. Erin then goes on to state that:

> people were just having sex with each other in all kinds of different ways…I mean there was a lot of public sex that happened at that bathhouse right, so there's like people fucking on the stairs, there's like…like that idea of like in your face right…It's almost beyond comprehension right because you can't imagine it…

She goes on to state how such an environment allows people to "take risks, people do things that they wouldn't otherwise do. Yeah, and sort of push their boundaries a little bit." Another interviewee, who had just gotten back from having

what she described as "hot sex" with a woman she had just met, gave a very similar response when asked how Pussy Palace is important to the lesbian/queer community:

> I think the environment that they offer you here…is one of complete openness whereby you, you leave the crap at the door kind of thing and just come in and be open to meeting people…to be open and go explore. I believe in exploration…I believe in pushing your boundaries…so this is a very good environment I think for those kinds of things.

Thus, some of my subjects came in knowing that they might be tested, that is, in terms of exploring their own sexual parameters and boundaries. This sentiment supports what Pussy Palace organizer and committee member, Jessica, said during our interview when she explains how such a milieu forces individuals to interrogate their own selves, their own desires, own comfort zones, and induces some to engage in risk-taking behaviors. Many, it turns out, took advantage of the situation, experienced new things, and thus came out of it with different attitudes towards sex and women's sexuality—all of which influence their own sexual identity(ies).

Female Sexuality versus Male Sexuality and the Re-fashioning of Female Desire

> *"Sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them"* (Warner, 1999: 7).

The words "whore" and "slut" have been used and appropriated by pro-sex feminists to mean something positive, wherein one's sexual agency is claimed, sexual fulfillment is celebrated and seen as necessary, and where ideas surrounding "proper womanhood" and femininity are deconstructed and subverted. These words are as

Chapkis (1997) puts it "a symbol of women's sexual autonomy, and as such, are a potential threat to patriarchal control over women's sexuality" (30). Chapkis, citing Kaplan (1994), concurs and states that:

> Men who yell at women will often call them a 'whore' and a 'dyke' in the same breath…This should make us realize that both of these terms condemn women's sexual autonomy. Whores and dykes are a threat to heteropatriarchy because both set their own rules for sex (22).

Whereas the image of male sexuality and male sex is depicted as an "unbridled almost uncontrollable force" (Weeks, 81), women acting on their own desires are seen as antithetical to appropriate femininity, and thus, highly threatening to the status quo. While men have devised words to condemn, shame and ostracize an active female sexuality, they are now being appropriated by women and used as symbols of "empowerment," strength and subversion.

Several women I interviewed highlighted how women are training themselves to have sexual agency and engage in what would be described by society as "slutty" behavior. That is, women are as mentioned above, taking risks and putting themselves out there to have casual sex, one-night stands, and make sexual fulfillment an important part of their lives. Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore are two spaces wherein women can come and "practice" acting out this sexual potential. For instance, one Pussy Palace volunteer and active bathhouse participant, Erin, describes this process of sexual agency via the enactment of desire—which is reminiscent of Butler's notion of performative agency and embodiment—by claiming that:

> When you have these like transient spaces [Pussy Palace bathhouse] like you are forced to recreate a set of signs every time for what it is you want, that you are looking for, what you are also open to and open to experiencing and also like, open to using right.

She continues with this theme of the body and desire as being reconfigured within this space when she claims that:

> we are sort of training each other explicitly…and using a bathhouse space is both this like discipline, this sense of like you're going to do it, this is the way you do it, this is the way to use it, which draws on these traditions that come from the gay community right, the men's community, and also trying to co-opt them and use them for a different thing.

Likewise, another Pussy Palace participant and interviewee from Sweden, "Megan," a graduate student currently studying in Canada, when asked how and in what ways female sexuality differs from male sexuality, goes on to explain that women and men are not that different sexually, but rather, men have had the opportunity and freedom to express their desires. In relating this to Pussy Palace, she remarks that:

> I don't think it's natural different…I just think we are socialized to act differently…like women are put in a space like this [Pussy Palace], we are not used to it. I guess it takes some time to find that, that different behavior that we are not used to express it.

When asked if Pussy Palace is an attempt to change this she states that:

> I think it can change and I mean, just looking here you find women that know how to express themselves and how to take that space and use it, and their own sexuality. So of course it's changeable, but I think we need to have more…even on a social level like this to be able to change it.

Thus, both participants are indicating that the bathhouse is important in teaching women how to use and navigate this space in their quest for sexual agency.

In addition, these women and trans are "doing it" differently than the men. That is, these lesbian/queer women are creating their own public sex culture that is qualitatively different through the combining of both feminist principles, social activities and their newfound sexual agency as highlighted by Erin when she asserts that: "the bathhouse continues to do this intersection between like, keeping political at the same time as it is trying to keep the fun stuff." Additionally, previous research on gay male bathhouses and public sex sites show that communication between men at these venues is typically nonverbal and discreet in character (Humphreys, 1970; Styles, 1979). Casual sex seems to be much more the focus and more public at male bathhouses compared to what I observed going on at Pussy Palace. That this nonverbal communication among men is quite different from typical encounters and interactions between women is indicated by Christie, a Pussy Palace Committee member, when she describes women as being "a lot louder than men" not only in terms of actual sexual intercourse, but overall—talking, socializing and meeting others are part and parcel of the lesbian/queer public sex culture (at least at Pussy Palace). Christie goes on to highlight how lesbian/queer women are simultaneously both appropriating male space and using it in another way when she states that "we are going to develop our own culture [out of public sex]." She explains how one trans was telling her that he did not want a bathhouse similar to the men's where "it's like you know, no talking, very quiet and discreet. He's like I want to party, I want to

have a good time, I want to be loud about having sex." My interviewee goes on to explain that:

> Women are a lot louder than men right. I want to celebrate this so we are sort of doing a bit of a different culture, I think…Women are a bit different, we need a bit more warm-up, we need some time to get going.

Jessica concurs when she is quoted as saying in *eye Magazine* that "that is not how we move into each other" (Silversides, 2001: 4), in response to how gay men typically operate and negotiate sexual encounters inside a bathhouse (that is, by being discrete, quiet and waiting inside rooms for potential sex partners). Another member of the Pussy Palace organizing committee, Loralee Gillis, continues by arguing that in contradistinction to the men's bathhouses

> Pussy Palace facilitates sexual encounters in more social ways, like dancing, cupid games and body painting…At the bathhouse there is a lot of intimacy and hanging out together, so you're not alone forced to go and get what you want (Silversides, 2001: 4).

It could be that this "loudness" stems in part from the fact that Pussy Palace is a celebration of not only female sexual agency, but a lesbian/queer female sexuality, and thus, is in and of itself not just sexual and social, but political as well. It could also be related to traditional sexual scripts and socialization processes we have wherein men are supposed to be more stoic and reserved, while women can, and are expected to, show their emotions (if so, this would be a powerful example of just how entrenched such gendered notions really are).

This mixture of the political, social and sexual as is found at Pussy Palace, where there are actual social events and activities to "get women in the mood" suggests that Pussy Palace is less strictly about casual sex as a typical male bathhouse seems to be, and more about a site where camaraderie and validation are equally important. I would argue that these ingredients (camaraderie and validation) are also "necessary" to Pussy Palace's smooth functioning and viability as a queer/lesbian space as illuminated by Jessica when she states in reference to women's fears about coming to Pussy Palace, that:

> And there was a lot of anxiety about 'oh, is it going to be, I just hear my gay male friends talk, and they just walk around and people stare at you. I don't think I am going to do that'. And we knew that the way we navigate our sexuality with other women is very different than gay men. Whatever we set up we need to have some, there has to be a variety of ways that women can find ease and comfort being there and exploring and expressing in whatever way they want to, every way they choose to.

In addition, at the first bathhouse event there were counselors on hand for those who, for whatever reason, were experiencing trauma—for instance, something at the bathhouse could potentially trigger a personal experience/memory involving sexual violence. Having counselors on hand certainly plays into Pussy Palace's feminist framework as well as highlights the various issues and social injustices women are particularly vulnerable to such as sexual violence—this of course can in turn have a powerful impact on one's own ability to engage in sex since trust is the fulcrum for any and all willing and mutual sexual encounters.

That women move differently in space and in particular, in a sexualized space suggests in turn that a space *for women* is necessary to make female sexual agency possible and visible. This issue is addressed by Gallant and Gillis (2001) when they assert that "One of the reasons that we began the Pussy Palace was to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality…we knew we were discouraged from doing it in the same explicit public ways that gay boys could" (153). It was also, as one women asserted, started because "we [the Pussy Palace Committee] believed in women's right to fuck" (Gallant & Gillis, 154). Likewise, when I asked two of the Dinah Shore organizers why women come to this event every year "Shannon" commented that women come "to meet women," while the other organizer stated that "I think women come over here to get laid, that's for sure." Shannon goes on to state that:

> Yeah, to meet women, to get laid. But to meet women, I mean there is no where else you can go to meet this many women from all over the country and even some women in Europe.

Thus, although women can "fuck" like the boys they often do so in ways different from a typical male-male or male-female encounter.

Megan, who had previously mentioned her "awkwardness" at Pussy Palace because she "did not know how to move in this space," when asked what her beliefs were regarding whether or not she felt women's sexuality was different from male sexuality had this to say:

> I don't think stereotypes of female, male sexuality are true, but I think, I think men and women are socialized to express and you know their sexuality in different way and sexuality is constructed by society…So I don't think it's natural different, I don't think its biological, essential different, I just think we are socialized to act differently…

Later on in the interview she relates her (and others) shyness to "social conditioning," and how women, when put in a space like this "are not used to it." Megan is both aware of her own insecurities in terms of being unable to navigate through this sexually charged atmosphere, while at the same time is expressing her awareness that this is not "natural" but rather a feeling due primarily to socialization—that is, women being taught *not* to act on their own desires, and certainly not to initiate sexual encounters. Thus, such anxiety supports and highlights the ways in which traditional sexual scripts and ideas regarding femininity can work to suppress women's acting on their sexual desire.

Likewise, Debbie, a participant at Dinah Shore, was asked if she felt female sexuality was different from male sexuality, responded by arguing that it is only different due to socio-cultural norms (as opposed to some biological cause) and the added pressures women face in not being able to have a sexuality. She goes on to argue that:

> Well, its okay for guys…it is not okay for girls. It's okay for guys to sleep around, it's okay for guys to have one-night stands and there's some kind of stigma for girls [if they have one-night stands]…Women are taught not to express it.

Women are encouraged not to express their sexuality even though according to Debbie, women are as sexual as men. Likewise, Jessica, a Pussy Palace Committee member, when asked how and in what ways sexuality is different between men and women, points to social and cultural beliefs as opposed to any biological determinism. Here is what Jessica had to say about the issue:

> Well, I don't even know right, I mean I think it is socio-cultural for sure. I don't think it is biological per se, but I guess I don't really know cause how do you…there has been you know thousands of years of social conditioning around our [women's] sexuality…

Hinting at both the biological and societal components of sexuality, Jessica goes on to describe how the act of sex itself is different and more complex for women compared to men when she explains that:

> You know sexuality and sex is a dangerous business for women. You know whether it's because we are avoiding, you are always dodging unwanted sex, or we have experienced unwanted sex, or um, we are trying to prevent pregnancy or you know, whatever it is, it is not an easy business. It's mixed with lots of stuff, so and sex is work for many women so, so, it just by that nature alone changes everything.

That "sex is work for many women" speaks volumes to the myriad issues surrounding women and sex. Add to this the ways in which traditional sexual scripts inhibit women's ability to pursue their desires, and it is no wonder that many women choose to remain celibate or indifferent to sex and their own sexuality. That sexual abstinence or celibacy is an active and deliberate option when it comes to sexual behavior for some women is expressed by Laws and Schwartz (1981) when they

assert that "The costs of sexual activity may sometimes outweigh the benefits. There are some good reasons why women who have functioned well as sexual beings prefer to remain inactive for a period of time" (161). Yet, despite the added burdens sex has for some women (or maybe because of them), Jessica nonetheless feels that bathhouses for women will only continue to expand, particularly as she puts it the "no-frills" kind of bathhouses (bathhouses without all the social functions). The "no-frills" bathhouse is in addition more akin to typical gay male bathhouses, wherein men come to bathhouses not so much to socialize but to have sex—trips to the baths often include more than one sexual encounter.

Tami, another Pussy Palace participant, when asked to comment on how or if women's and men's sexuality differs, explains that it is not about gender per se but rather that the difference lies within the individual, not particular social groups or classes of people. Such sentiment is reflected in the following statement:

> No I don't think female sexuality and male sexuality differs. I think its, to me because I think it's all the same you know, it's the individuals that express it differently. Like there's very sexual women, like you know "Sex in the City" Kim, you know what I mean. And then there's of course you know you've got "Queer as Folk" [a show about gay men], the guys are always doing each other. But you know I think it's all the same…

One participant at Dinah Shore, Mary, who had earlier described the event as a "meat market," when asked what her opinion was regarding the differences between men and women when it comes to sex and sexuality, had this to say:

> Actually I think when women, because I mean from the time I was 15 to 19 I dated guys…So I dated guys until all my high school and junior high and you know I really think women are worse. Like I think its worse when you go to a lesbian bar rather than to a straight place. Lesbians are just so much more aggressive sometimes you know…

When I ask Mary to elaborate and describe the ways in which lesbians are more aggressive she asserts that:

> You know alcohol and all these things take their toll, but really yes, women are more aggressive. I really think women are so much more aggressive than men. And especially in such a place like where we are today, yeah. They don't care, I mean they'll slap your ass, touch your breast. You just really can't say 'hey you bitch, don't touch my fucking boob.'

That Mary believes lesbian women to be more aggressive sexually than men is surprising but could prove insightful. It might be the case that some women, particularly in an environment such as Dinah Shore where alcohol is ever present, think because they are women that they can more easily and justifiably invade personal body space (such as groping another without permission). In other words, such actions are not seen to be as threatening and/or dangerous compared to when men engage in such behavior. As a result, when it does happen to an unsuspecting woman she might not feel okay to complain or lash out at the woman intruding on her space (and body). From what I observed and as I have already mentioned, I did see (and experience) dimensions of this behavior, where slapping, pinching and groping were certainly a part of the repertoire.

Another Dinah Shore participant, Amy, attributes differences between male and female sexuality to the nurture side of the equation (as opposed to any essence—i.e., genetic/biological component). When asked to explain why it is that women and men seem to differ in terms of sexual expression, she remarked:

> I don't think there's the whole nature versus nurture shit. I'm very much of the opinion that we sort of are taught by the world whether we're straight or gay, and that men have raging hormones, and they just can't help themselves. They could have sex for sex sake and not care about the other person or get emotionally involved. I think those attitudes are very present but I think it's just what we are taught…

Another Dinah Shore participant, Teresa, when asked the same question regarding male and female sexuality, answers by stating matter-of-factly "I don't, I don't think it does really. I think there are all levels on both sides."

When asked to elaborate on why it is that she thinks men's and women's sexuality are more similar than not, she tersely asserts "I think so cause I think I could be a boy. I have always said I could make a good straight boy." When asked why it is that she would make a good boy explains that "in the relationships I've been in I am way more sexual…" That Teresa uses "boy" to describe herself simply because she is an admittedly very sexual person says a lot about how entrenched our stereotypes and traditional notions are of women and men when it comes to sex and sexual desire.

Brenda, another participant at Dinah Shore, when asked whether or not she feels women's and men's sexuality differ states rather amusingly:

> You are talking to the wrong person. For me, no, I can be a pig with the best of them you know. I just, I don't think that um, women need to be uptight as they are about sex.

Brenda sees the younger women as supporting her argument that women can be just as sexual as men by stating that:

> And I think that has changed with the younger crowd…They don't want to settle down. They want to break that stereotype and they are starting to go 'okay, I don't need to settle down with the first person I hook up with.'

While many interviewees saw men's and women's sexuality as being more similar than different, with any differences being attributed to society's rules and regulations concerning women's sexuality and sexual exploration, there were just as many interviewees who asserted that indeed, due to some "hardwiring" women and men were indeed dissimilar when it comes to sex. For instance, Karen, a participant at Dinah Shore, when asked this question regarding whether men and women were poles apart or more alike in terms of sex and sexuality asserted matter-of-factly that "women and men are just like completely different species, so it's [sexuality] just kinda different." She goes on to add that:

> just from my experience alone it just, I know that women are completely emotional, well not all of them, not all of them. But, you know, the majority of them are completely emotional and, men are just more of um, on that physical aspect you know…

Likewise, Lilly, another Dinah Shore participant, who earlier had made comments suggesting that women in this space are "allowing their manly side to come through,"

when asked this same question gets rather passionate and uses personal experience to justify her reasoning:

> Three words, men are pigs! That's it. Women, at least in my opinion, it's more emotional you know. Like I said, I just can't do it [have casual sex]…I'm not just going to have sex for the sake of having sex. You know I would rather be emotionally tied to somebody, emotionally involved…

Throughout our conversation not only does she describe men as pigs when it comes to sex, but equates women engaging in casual sex at Dinah Shore as men. This rigid and hard stereotype regarding men's sexuality suggests that she seems not to think that men regard emotional bonding as important when it comes to sex, with some men cherishing the emotional and intimate aspects of a relationship more so than there female counterparts.

This idea of men and women being "wired differently" in terms of sex and sexuality is also expressed by Heather, a Pussy Palace participant. When I asked her whether or not she felt that men and women's sexuality differed had this to say:

> Oh, yes I do, yes I fucking, geez, I don't understand. I don't understand but men and women are wired different that way. They just are, I mean economically just think of it. Economically this business, this place, this is a business, exists 365 days a year and it caters to a male clientele and so that's that. And then you have Pussy Palace which is once a year, maybe twice a year, I don't know…That's very different, that's very different sexually…

Heather points to the dearth of venues for women to justify her belief that women and men are by nature equipped differently. The fact that men can fill up Club Toronto [the bathhouse that Pussy Palace uses for its events] every day of every week proves

that such a drastic difference in sexual behavior between men and women has got to be explained by our genes. Ironically, when I asked Heather later on in the interview why she had come to Pussy Palace states "I came to get laid and I came to fuck." Another Pussy Palace participant, Patrice, who I interviewed while standing in line for the Temple Priestess room, felt that women and men differed sexually but had a unique perspective regarding why this was the case:

> You know there's a direct correlation between how much testosterone you have and how aggressive you are. Like I am a fairly aggressive woman and I think I am a high testosterone woman. You know a man has much more testosterone, they tend to be, I mean of course there are exceptions…The thing about men too is that because their dick, their genitals are on the outside, they can't avoid them whereas women, you know some women have never masturbated whereas I don't think there's any men who have never masturbated. So, I think men are just more aware of their genitals, you know rubbing up against their pants and all this kind of stuff. I mean I was aware of it but not all girls are. So I feel like um, you know there's more women that are out there who are out of touch with their sexuality than there are men you know.

Patrice sees the location of genitals and testosterone as being some of the biggest reasons as to why so many more women are "out of touch" with their sexuality. Studies examining self-stimulation (i.e., masturbation) bear Patrice out. For instance, according to studies examining sexual practices, one study found that in terms of masturbation about half of all women have tried masturbation versus over 90 percent of all men (Laumann et al., 1994). Likewise, Schwartz and Rutter (1998) note that boys learn to masturbate at an early age due to among other things "friction of bed sheets" and erections (43). In addition, Laumann et al. (1994) found that 58

percent of women versus 37 percent of men never touch themselves. That women touch themselves less and engage less frequently (if at all) in self-stimulation is also partly a manifestation of the powerful social norms which advice us that "nice girls don't touch themselves." Studies indicate for instance, that parents are more upset if they find their daughters masturbating compared to sons. Thus, parents in turn are more likely to discourage girls from touching themselves (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998). This feeling of shame, coupled with the fact that women are less inclined to "touch themselves" and "indulge" in sexual pleasure, could once again be one of the reasons why women at both Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore felt awkward, uncomfortable and at times, judgmental towards those women who did just that (i.e., seek sexual fulfillment).

In sum, it seems that as indicated with these interviews about half of the participants see sexual differences between men and women as primarily a social phenomenon and thus something that will and can change, whereas the other half sees it as more or less a biological issue. Yet, those who contend that it is innate do not dismiss that women are sexual—many who claimed this side of the equation (essentialism) were themselves engaging in casual sex and from what I observed very uninhibited sexually (that is, acting in ways we as a society associate only with men). Such findings indicate that maybe this is not so much a mutually exclusive, either/or issue; rather, the social and biological realms could be equally determining factors as to why women and men act on their sexual desires in different ways (See for instance

Schwartz and Rutter, [1998] for a more exhaustive look at the interplay between biology and society as it relates to sexual expression.).

Conclusion

Both Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace have several things in common: these sites allow for and foster an atmosphere where "spatial praxis," visibility, empowerment and sexual self-determination are part and parcel of the milieu. Because these are places where women can exercise and express their sexuality, it is thus a space wherein women can actually practice how to negotiate sexual encounters, initiate sexual desire, and simply, to say "yes" or "no"—decisions which on the face of it seem simple and trivial, but in reality, have been difficult decisions for women to address and address honestly and forthrightly. Because women have been socialized to be demure, nice, and indirect, women have often not been able to assert their own desires and concerns vis-à-vis men (and women). One of the things that Jessica, the Pussy Palace organizer, expressed over and over again was how incredible it was, in this day and age, that these women, who were purportedly already "empowered women," had difficulty saying yes and no *to other women*. For instance, she states that:

> Everybody was calling us going "well, if I come in, if I come, like what if I don't want to have sex? And I found that very interesting because just because you come to a bathhouse, why would you lose the right to say yes or no?...Women don't really know that they can say no. By coming in they [think they] are going to have to say yes.

To make coming to this event easier and more comfortable, the organizers wrote up a non-discriminatory policy which included a list of bathhouse rules—this was referred to as "Bathhouse Etiquette," and included the right to say no, as well as respect of one another's boundaries and "comfort zones." In addition, at the first event there were counselors on hand in case the bathhouse, for whatever reason, triggered personal traumas—thus, highlighting the feminist philosophy and framework guiding the bathhouse event.

Lastly, these interviewees and participants are highlighting how women are not only being allowed to navigate sexual desire, but are also simultaneously practicing how to negotiate their own sexual boundaries. More specifically, women are being given an opportunity to carve out their own comfort zone and to practice saying not only "yes" but "no" as well. The concept of "agency" is typically thought of as merely involving action as highlighted by Andersen's (2003) definition which is as follows: "Agency refers to the active and creative way that human beings give meaning to their experience and act on their own behalf" (399). Yet, "agency" in this study is extended to include not only the ability to act on desire, that is to be active, but, and equally important, the ability to deny, reject, and decline sexual advances from another as well as the power to *not* act on one's desire, that is, to remain inactive. Broadening this concept to include inaction and the power to say "no" adds a significant dimension to women's sexual agency. That is, women have had, as one of the interviewees made clear, difficulty not only in being sexual, but in addition, in

being clear and direct about what they do *not* want as well. Providing a forum wherein women can exercise this right to say "no," as Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace does, is an equally important step towards the attainment of sexual equality in society.

Chapter 6

The Pussy Palace Raid: Social Agents and State Intervention into Lesbian/Queer Female Sexuality

Although I have already discussed how space can potentially provide "spatial praxis" and sexual agency: that is, an arena in which to explore, transfigure and navigate one's own sexuality and thus sustain and foster social change, space can also be used to contain and inhibit societal transformation. In essence, spaces can be carved out for dissent or created to quell any and all subversion. Wilson (2001) exemplifies this paradox of space within the city specifically in relation to women when she states that:

> urban space is so fundamentally constructed by gender difference that women are not simply disadvantaged but representationally excluded…On the other are those who see the city as a contradictory and shifting space which can be appropriated by women (83).

Pussy Palace is just such a place: an urban space appropriated by women (albeit temporarily), which is in addition, the taking over and extending of public space for the lesbian/queer community. Although such an appropriation of public space by minorities, and in this case sexual minorities, can be a positive and transformative step, it nonetheless can potentially bring forth a climate of hostility, possible violence,

and *increased* regulation. In an age of increasing visibility of gays and lesbians, particularly when it comes to the media, we are also simultaneously witnessing as Hoffman (1996) puts it, "a tangible sexual devolution," which includes a "narrowing of sexual freedoms, a clamping down on sexual expression, a withering of sexual worlds" (340).

The raid on Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000, which was their fourth bathhouse event, is indicative of the ways in which this increasing visibility of sexual minorities—and thus their greater strength and self-affirmation—often works in tandem with hegemonic and heternormative forces to oppress, denigrate and "contain." This paradoxical situation is clearly illustrated by Gallant and Gillis (2001) when they assert that:

> The Pussy Palace has given queer women's pleasure and sexual cultures a higher profile in Toronto. With increased visibility we have also become an object for increased legal and moral regulation. The police raid on the Pussy Palace adds another layer to how we think about ourselves as sexual beings—our public expressions of sexual desire have been witnessed, monitored and documented by the state (153-154).

Previous raids on gay male bathhouses throughout Canada in March and April of 2000 had already fostered a climate of fear and insecurity among the gay and lesbian communities there. At the same time, Pussy Palace was getting a lot of media attention within this hostile atmosphere as highlighted by Erin when she stated that:

> we had known that, like we knew the event was getting big and like a lot of press and so we started putting together a list of what is okay, what is not okay [in terms of drinking, nudity etc.] because, cause what was happening in

> Toronto at that time was that a bunch of the men's bars had gotten busted, two actually had recently been busted by the same guys who eventually busted us.

Ironically, they were raided precisely when the Pussy Palace Committee was being extra careful and more vigilant about the rules and regulations of the bathhouse. For instance, during this particular bathhouse event, the committee members had decided to get a special-occasion permit (what is referred to as SOP) so that they could sell alcohol. An SOP is allowed if you are having a one-night event and you are raising money for charity. All the money they raised from alcohol sales that night went to the Bill 7 award, which according to Erin is a "scholarship fund for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth to pursue post-secondary education." Knowing that this might make them more vulnerable to increased police surveillance, they handed out sheets to each and every patron telling them the rules regarding alcohol consumption—for instance, no drinking was allowed in the outdoor swimming pool area. In addition, there were two "persons in charge," each taking different shifts, to make sure that all persons were following the bathhouse rules. (Erin was one of those "persons in charge.")

On the night of the raid five male police officers entered Pussy Palace and stayed for about two hours, on the premise that this was a "liquor license inspection." Previous to the actual raid, two undercover female police officers went in to investigate and then reported back to the male police officers who had been waiting somewhere outside the bathhouse—all told there were at least seven police officers

on the scene. Six weeks later the police decided to lay three provincial charges against Pussy Palace, which are akin to misdemeanors in the US. These charges included liquor license violations due to serving alcohol in prohibited areas and outside prescribed areas (the two volunteers with their names of the SOP, one of whom was Erin, were responsible for this particular violation), failing to provide adequate security, and three counts of disorderly conduct. According to one source, liquor violations are almost always handled by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, almost always involve a warning, and have never been prosecuted in court. In addition, as one criminology professor from the University of Toronto described it, not only are warnings usually involved but the charges actually laid are comparable to traffic violations—that this took six weeks to decide, coupled with the fact that the male police officers lingered in and around the bathhouse for close to two hours, seems a bit suspicious (Silversides, 2001: 13).

Because the three previous Pussy Palace bathhouse events had all made the daily papers, and the female officers had checked it out beforehand, these male officers knew that this was a woman-only event, and that women were in what can only be described as "various states of undress." Despite this vulnerability, the organizers were not allowed to warn other women that male police officers were coming in. As Giese of the *Toronto Star*, who followed the entire Pussy Palace raid and its subsequent outcome, put it "sex, of course, and not the liquor license, is at the crux of this issue" (*Toronto Star,* October 12th, 2000). Gillis (2001), a bathhouse

participant and eye-witness to the police presence and their intrusive behavior, observed "a palpable change in women's bodies and their demeanor…I watched these men knock on women's doors, search their rooms, take their names and addresses, and visually inspect their bodies with an aggressive and penetrating gaze" (Gallant & Gillis, 159).

Erin gave a similar statement regarding this change in women's bodies and movement and how she herself "felt trapped in this space while being ogled by eight [it was actually five] male officers." According to Smith (2000), writing for *eye Magazine*, one woman interviewed described the police officers acting inappropriately, for at one point she comments on how "One woman had to ask an officer if she could help him when he was stuck in a gaze at her naked breasts…" (12). Erin, in a moment of frustration and visible anger, discusses during our interview how it was her job, given that she was on security duty, to "keep them [the participants] all safe, right" and how these police officers had just "fucked with my job" since according to Erin:

> You know for me the sole point of the issue is that we have a lot of women that are survivors in there right, and we got a lot of people with sensitive jobs and we have a lot of people who just don't want to have contact with police officers…

Because Erin was the "person in charge" (part of a security team of four other women) at the time of the raid, the police sergeant, Dave Wilson, spoke with her and asked her to provide proof of the liquor license (the SOP). At one point during the

interrogation and inspection of Pussy Palace, Erin asked Dave Wilson and another officer whether they were part of the liquor license squad. Their reply to her was "no, we are part of the morality squad!," which was a unit within the police department that was promptly disbanded after the infamous 1980 bathhouse raids. Such a comment highlights the homophobia and contempt for gays and lesbians, as well as the ease with which these police officers can exert their authority over those with much less leverage and power. Even more unnerving is the fact that, according to Erin and other sources, the head officer, Dave Wilson, was acting on his own accord and volition: he had not told his superior officers that they planned on invading Pussy Palace that night.

At another point that night, Sergeant Wilson asked Erin how much money they are making tonight working the bathhouse, and who the person in charge of the entire event was. Erin responds by saying to Wilson that this is all volunteer and that "nobody makes money, this thing doesn't even break even, we are just covering costs," and there is no "one person" in charge since "this is a collectively run event, it's a feminist event." According to Erin, her reply causes Wilson to get "confused" and agitated. At one point she brings in Christie to talk with Wilson and explain how things are run at this bathhouse. After explaining it to him, he then proceeds to ask Christie whether she is in charge. When she too replies no one he again gets visibly upset and leaves the room.

Soon after the charges were laid against Pussy Palace and the two organizers, the Pussy Palace organizing committee filed a human rights complaint against Toronto Police Chief Julian Fantino, the five male police officers who entered, and the Toronto Police Services Board (Silversides, 2001:12). In addition, the committee organized several fundraising events to help pay for legal expenses, and immediately began preparing for their next bathhouse event, which was titled "Pussies Bite Back."

During the court proceedings members of the committee, in reference to the alleged breaches of the Liquor License Act, argued that the police conduct was in violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guarantees all Canadians, regardless of sex and sexual orientation the same basic human rights. In this case, the Committee members argued that the entry of male police offices was analogous to a strip search and that a reasonable expectation of privacy was thus violated. Justice P. Hryn's ruling, who presided over the case, argues in favor of Pussy Palace when he states that:

> None of the above is to suggest that the police had no right to entry. On the contrary, they had the right to enter under the Liquor License Act. But in these circumstances of a search analogous to a strip search, it was not appropriate for male officers to enter. Of significance is that female officers could have been used, but no check was made to determine if female officers were available(Court testimony, January 31, 2002: 30).

In addition, Hryn ruled that the search was unreasonable because the police knew prior to entering that women would be in "various states of undress." The Judge then

goes on to assert that this case actually brought the entire system of justice "into disrepute."

In the end, ties between the gay and lesbian communities (as well as some segments of the heterosexual community) were strengthened, with gay men donating generous amounts for the Committee's legal defense fund. That this raid, and what the raid represents—regulation of the queer community—helped bring gays and lesbians together is highlighted by Erin:

> Yeah, the boys really stepped up and throughout, not just the beginning but like throughout actually kept coming out to like events and supporting us and giving lots of money, which was very important. So it was really a bridging moment between communities and I hope that that has a longer impact.

Not only did the gay and lesbian communities work together with fundraising and several demonstrations that were put on to protest the Toronto Police Department, but the lesbian/queer community came out in full force, as described by Erin when she states:

> They [the police department] didn't know what they had touched when they touched us, because we are an organized group of women and we are well connected and like in terms of activism and getting, like we knew how to write a press release [which caught everyone's attention]. We are not like shrinking violets…It was like 'oh, see now we are pissed.

According to Erin, the day after the raid the two city counselors got involved, one of whom is an openly gay man. Both assisted in the fundraising process, and Kyle Rae, the openly gay city counselor, immediately held a press conference, which quickly

led to an outpouring of media outlets wanting to talk with him and the Pussy Palace organizers. This media frenzy was described by Erin when she claims that:

> So, it was in the *Globe* [a major daily newspaper in Canada], it was in *The Star*, *The Sun*, the protest rallies, oh God, it hit all the media outlets here. It was national…

In addition to the charges being dismissed, the Pussy Palace Committee also won their suit against the police officers and the Toronto Police Board, where they ended up getting around $250,000 in damages. This was a huge victory and might possibly represent a turning point in relations between the queer community and the police. That the raid caused such a buzz, and that the Toronto community as a whole sided with Pussy Palace is also an historic moment for the gay and lesbian community.

Although victorious, the fear that the state and state agents can exact such power and fear over sexual minorities in this day and age makes celebrating such a win a cautious and tepid affair. Focusing on the court case, planning legal strategies, and having to constantly organize fundraising events certainly tamped down the excitement in ultimately winning (as well as taxed untold numbers of women who could have used their energies and talents for other things—like planning other bathhouse events!). Lastly, that male police officers could enter this woman-only space so freely and without reservation, makes imagining the ability to cultivate and foster a society where a queer female sexual agency can flourish without intervention difficult. One organizer even admitted that although they were quickly planning the

next bathhouse event, since the raid it felt a bit weightier and less carefree (the next one was held summer 2001). As she describes it:

> To provide the police with fewer excuses…we decided not to obtain a liquor license and to completely prohibit alcohol from the event. We tried to strike a balance between protecting ourselves from police investigation and not over-regulating the bathhouse to the point where we were cowed by police powers…(Gallant and Gillis, 2001: 164).

In the end, the Pussy Palace Committee strategically decided to hold their post-raid bathhouse event, "Pussies Bite Back," during Toronto's Pride parade, knowing that if something did happen, there would be a queer army in full force ready to fight back. Many of the organizers/committee members thus recognized the link between the state and female sexuality, and the balancing act that is necessary to both protect oneself while creating an atmosphere that facilitates agency and autonomy. When I asked Erin what her opinion is as to why the raid ultimately happened, she states that:

> This raid, like the raid was around state intervention and female sexuality yet again right…It's about you know that my big objection to it was using the police as agents of the state to come in and actually attack something that was you know undermining what are basically the core principles that you know North American and European States are founded on. This idea of like women as property exchange.

In conclusion, the raid on Pussy Palace was a good example of just how precarious women are in terms of asserting this kind of sexual abandon and liberation. That these lesbian/queer women have to be vigilant of and resistant to state intervention like this is merely another obstacle (albeit a very powerful and

ubiquitous one) to sexual/spatial praxis and autonomy. The other barriers that places like Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore face include, but are not limited to: sexual violence, a heterosexist society, body image issues and ideal standards of beauty, traditional notions of femininity, traditional sexual scripts we have for women (and men), and lastly, the lesbian feminist community's own aversions to and derision of casual sex. Given all the forces against what I refer to as a "lesbian queer sexuality," it is both amazing that such venues as Pussy Palace and the Dinah Shore event even exist and yet, not a surprise to find some women at these sites uncomfortable, upset and contemptuous in seeing other lesbians/queers acting out their own sexual agency. Such forces no doubt play a significant role in the dearth of spaces available for women to engage in casual sex, and thus, the insufficient visibility of a lesbian/queer sex culture (although as evident by Pussy Palace this is beginning to change).

Chapter 7

Discussion/Conclusion

This study undertook to explore women's sexuality and lesbian/queer sexualities in particular. More specifically, I investigated how the creation of woman-only and sexually charged spaces—these so-called "safe spaces" (that is, Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace), potentially impacted not only sexual behaviors, but aspects of self. My findings indicate that many women took advantage of these events to explore their sexuality and try things that they had never before experienced. That women came into this space to, as one organizer put it, "discover their sexuality and desire" suggests that the active construction of space can in turn impact behaviors, experiences and knowledges about one's self and the world. One Pussy Palace organizer, when asked in an interview for *Xtra!* magazine why lesbians find it hard to have sex for sex sake, responded by stating that:

> You need people who are sexually articulate and assertive about their desires. You need people who can pursue their desires and feel comfortable having non-romantic desire…It means that even if in the moments of your interaction you care for each other, it is primarily the pursuit of lust (November 11, 2003).

At the same time that many women at Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore expressed feeling liberated and empowered, a few women stated feeling "intimidated," "insecure," and "uncomfortable." The discomfort and insecurities women experienced were typically associated with aspects of physical appearance such as breast size, weight, and looking "in shape." These feelings were most apparent at Dinah Shore. Some participants also expressed frustration and discomfort when women invaded personal body space and/or touched them without permission, which was a common occurrence at Dinah Shore but was neither something I observed nor experienced at Pussy Palace. As noted before, one interviewee described the women at Dinah Shore as "pigs" because their behavior was, according to her, too aggressive and outwardly sexual. While feelings of liberation and empowerment worked to facilitate sexual encounters and enabled women to act on their sexual desire, feelings of apprehensive and self-doubt would seem to have had the opposite effect in that women would likely close themselves off from any and all sexual opportunities.

In addition, these "gender markers" vis-à-vis femininity (e.g., breast size and weight), coupled with the fact that some participants found overly sexual women distasteful, is reminiscent of Foucault's concept of "docile bodies" where "the body operates as a metaphor for culture" (Bordo, 1989: 21). That women might have felt more inhibited due to these insecurities—made possible by society's expectations regarding women's physical appearance and sexuality is highlighted by both

Bourdieu (1977) and Foucault (1978) in their assertion that the body is a direct locus of social control, where even the very trivial and mundane practices of everyday life (such as applying makeup) become habitual and necessary activities. Women feeling uncomfortable at these events is of course an unintended and unwanted effect that directly conflicts with the organizers' objectives, where sexual exploration and affirmation of self and sexuality are supposed to be core aspects of the Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace experience.

Although attitudes and behaviors are patterned by sexual scripts dictated to us by society and various social actors (e.g., parents, teachers, peers), my findings indicate that individuals are able to resist traditional notions concerning sexuality by developing via practice and *re*-socialization alternative and thus, opposing scripts. That scripts are flexible and idiosyncratic suggests in turn that ideas regarding sexuality and gender are in part artificial, malleable and potentially volatile constructs. Butler (1990) illustrates the artificiality of gender and sexuality when she states that "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (2). More specifically, that women can "put on" a masculine persona (and vice versa) which includes corporeal, psychological and behavioral components suggests that gender as we know it does not have to exist—this "putting on" of the other sex/gender is part of what Butler refers to as "performative agency." In this study, agency was crucial in

allowing and enabling women to reshape their sexual repertoire. In addition, sexual agency was possible for these women because of the space/structure carved out for these participants: that is, it was made up only of lesbian/queer, trans or at least gay-friendly women—thus, making it free of homophobia and sexual and/or physical violence, and explicitly sexual giving women in turn permission to act on their desire.

As mentioned throughout this study, I used the social constructionist perspectives when it came to examining sexuality and gender. That sexuality is constructed is also made visible when we consider the "sexual scripts" played out between and among women and men when it comes to initiation, negotiation and the acting out of their desires—these behaviors in turn intersect with and are infused by appropriate forms of femininity and masculinity. Many women came to Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore to in part "explore their sexuality." That they came to explore their sexuality insinuates that they came wanting to engage in behaviors and act out fantasies and desires they had not had the opportunity to do before (or as may be the case, the environment was not conducive for this "exploration"). The goal of sexual exploration is related to what other participants said regarding how such sites are places wherein women can train and teach themselves "how to be" in this sexualized space—all of which is part of what I refer to as a re-socialization process, wherein women are literally revamping their sexual scripts.

That women were (and are) modifying their sexuality does not translate into women simply trying to attain a male standard of behavior when it comes to sex. For

one, as was indicated by several of the Pussy Palace organizers, these events were and continue to be inspired by feminism, which is in part about claiming one's own sexuality and doing with one's body as one pleases. Women engaging in casual sex, initiating desire and claiming sexual pleasure as their right should be thought of as sexual *possibilities* and *options* that all people are entitled to regardless of gender. I take a pro-sex feminist stance when I state that true sexual autonomy and agency exists only when an individual has the ability to make choices, and can feel safe doing so—of course, one can only make decisions if one has options and opportunities at their disposal.

Yet, at the same time, these non-traditional sexual scripts have difficulty being heard and made visible. That marginalized sexual scripts and thus, alternative understandings of sex and sexuality are hardly noticeable means that such knowledge is contained and suppressed. Laws and Schwartz (1981) cogently depict this process when they assert that:

> The sexual identity that deviates from the dominant script suffers from an absence of validation as well as from invalidation, or negative sanctions imposed by those who assume roles in the dominant script. There is no standard language to describe or express experiences and identities which are not socially recognized. Consequently, it is difficult for individuals to communicate about such phenomena…(11)

In essence, something that remains unrecognizable remains unthinkable—if something remains unthinkable it remains an impossibility, which keeps the status quo firmly in place.

Coupled with this invisibility and invalidation are the ways in which female sexuality has been either ignored, dismissed as minimal, and/or defined via a male lens. Such sentiment is exemplified by Weeks (1985) when he states "contemporary feminists have noted the absence of a language for female sexuality except in terms of the male model (9)." Similarly, Laws and Schwartz (1981) reveal the ways in which women's sexuality has been predicated on and compared to men and male sexuality when they state that:

> Living in contemporary America we are heirs to a number of different social constructions of female sexuality, which have been dominant in different periods. Virtually all of these have been promulgated by men rather than women, and it is only in our own time that women have begun to define their own sexuality (13).

That language functions to make something visible and "real" once again suggests that female sexuality, particularly that sexuality which goes against normative ideals concerning women and sex (i.e., women are less desirous, monogamous, passive, etc.), is incomprehensible.

This project is in part about resurrecting such knowledges and thus, being part of a new language, a new discourse regarding what female sexuality, and lesbian/queer sexuality in particular, is, what it looks like, and what is has the potential to be. That female sexualities are still emerging or "becoming" as some would say is illuminated by Laws and Schwartz (1981) when they state that "As sexual self-identity is strengthened by a range of experience and practice, we may

expect changes in the character of female sexual behavior (62)." That Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore challenge dominant and traditional ideas regarding women's sexuality means in turn that female sexual scripts too are challenged, expanded and reinvented. For example, Pussy Palace has broadened the discourse on female sexuality as illustrated by Jessica, a Pussy Palace Committee member, when she states:

> It [the first bathhouse event] created a dialogue so whatever happened at the bathhouse, before the bathhouse even happened there were ripple effects in the community around 'are you going, are you not going, do you think about bathhouses'. You know so everybody had to make a decision about whether or not they were going…It created a dialogue that we have never have never had an opportunity to have…

Jessica continues on with this theme later on in the interview by discussing how this "new dialogue" is in addition, related to the creation of novel opportunities for women in terms of sex and sexual desire. Jessica has this to say regarding the interaction between a new discourse and the opening up of sexual opportunity for women:

> I think it has created a whole dialogue around what our sexual choices are that didn't exist before. I think it has created a whole dialogue around, not just a dialogue, but a different sense of empowerment around our sexuality now. The prevailing myth that lesbians don't have sex, has been, has been deconstructed right…So there is a different permission across the board [in terms of sex]...Um, and so, I think it changed our relationship to that [sex], and um, I don't, I think the ripple effects are that you know you have a community that is an hour away that is having another, you know started their own bathhouse. That speaks volumes to me about how, how the community

> accepts this as part of our sexuality now or part of our expression of our sexuality right…

Thus, I believe that one of the strengths and contributions of this research is the mere fact that this study focused on not only women's sexuality, but sexualities and sexual practices that are considered transgressive, subversive, taboo and in some cases, immoral. I also believe, as already stated, that society cannot begin to change traditional ideas regarding gender, sex, sexuality and desire until we start forging a new language, a new vocabulary in which individuals can "speak" and express their experiences. That many interviewees referred to Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore as "fuck fests," "sex fests" and "meat markets" seems odd, considering that these are woman-only spaces. That many women admitted coming to these events "to get laid" or that they had already engaged in casual sex at these events is once again contrary to how we think typical, that is, "normal," women behave. Lastly and related to the above, due to my use of face-to-face interviews I was able to gather a more "authentic" understanding of people's experiences, which as Silverman (1994) claims in the following statement is ultimately the main objective in qualitative research: "Authenticity rather than reliability is often the issue…"(10).

Looking to the Past, Predicting the Future: The State and Feminist Organizing

Before discussing some of the issues future research should address regarding female sexual agency and lesbian/queer women's sexualities, I want to discuss some

of the striking similarities I found between the Pussy Palace Committee and its all-volunteer, non-profit organization wherein feminist policies are part and parcel of its ideology, and the women's health care movement during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. I broach this topic in part because both strived for similar things, and both were/are attempting to create options and alternatives to the status quo. While Pussy Palace is ultimately about lesbian/queer sexual agency and claiming the right to "fuck" and satiate sexual desire, the women's health movement was about disseminating information and learning the "facts" regarding women's health and well-being.

While in the past women's health care and their bodies were defined, controlled and treated solely by medical men, so has sexuality and sexual agency not only been claimed by men, but men in turn have defined what female sexuality is and what it should be. The women's health care movement was not singular in any sense of the imagination, but involved multitudes of different groups, organizations, activists and scholars, or as Morgen (2002) states "it depended on multiple points of emergence" (12) for its survival and effectiveness. That this movement was multi-pronged is illustrated by the myriad issues it was consumed with such as women's freedom from sexual violence, access to safe abortions, and knowledge of their own bodies. The multifaceted issues the movement addressed is illustrated by Morgen (2002) when she states that "in the late 1960s they [women] demanded knowledge about their bodies, sought greater control over their own health care, and forced their

way into medical schools and the rooms where health policy decisions were made" (1).

What transpired was a proliferation of women-controlled health clinics in the US in the 1970s, which were in turn politically feminist and often volunteer, non-profit clinics—if services were not free they were more often than not very inexpensive. According to Morgen (2002) these clinics were feminist in that they: were controlled and organized by women; women's own experiences were central to understanding women's bodies and thus, validated; women were taught not to be afraid of their bodies such that they were taught breast self-exams, cervical self-examinations and masturbation techniques, which in turn led to feelings of empowerment, ownership, and familiarity over one's body; gave women permission to refrain from "overmedicalization" by for instance, using midwives during pregnancy and abstaining from certain forms of birth control (such as the pill) that were thought to be unsafe; and finally, upheld an egalitarian relationship between the health care consumer and provider. One outcome of this movement was the creation of an organization referred to as "Jane" that was set up in 1969, whose members, all "Jane," helped women gain access to secure, safe and cheap abortions. That these clinics were relatively safe and effective is highlighted by the fact that during its four year span (from 1969 until *Roe v. Wade*) there was not a single fatality (Morgen, 6).

Although many of these clinics such as Jane were underground organizations and thus, outside the law, they nonetheless seemed to enjoy tacit protection from the

state and law enforcement agencies (as is the case for Pussy Palace). Yet, like Pussy Palace, one of these clinics, the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center, was raided in 1972 due to the fact that it was practicing medicine without a license. In an eerily reminiscent fashion (i.e., in terms of what happened during the Pussy Palace raid), an undercover policewoman had infiltrated one of the organization's self-help groups (Morgen, 2002). After five weeks of undercover surveillance, police raided the Health Clinic charging two women with "crimes against the state," one of whom pleaded guilty to a reduced charge, while the other was acquitted of all charges. Once the raid became public it not only incited and solidified the women's health care movement even more, but the LAPD became, according to Morgen, "the butt of jokes and rage" (23).

Both the women's health care movement and Pussy Palace had been in existence for about three years when they were raided. In addition, both were raided at a time of increasing media attention and visibility. That the state saw both Pussy Palace and the LA Health Center as threatening enough to require undercover surveillance and police involvement suggests in part that women taking control of their own bodies is the epitome of subversion and thus, potential social *dis*order. In addition, both organizations/movements started at the grassroots level, and both involved/involves substantial sacrifice, mobilization of resources, networking and organization on the part of all women involved in the struggle. That women are expending so much energy to bring about social change and foster an environment

allowing female agency suggests in turn that such changes are needed and necessary. As one Pussy Palace participant remarked, when addressing why she thinks Pussy Palace has been a success, stated that: "I think that the [bathhouse] was just something the community was ready for."

Limitations of the Research Study

As I have already discussed in the Methods section, there were several drawbacks and limitations to my study in terms of methods used and time spent at these sites. For one, because I conducted a qualitative study the "representativeness" of my sample is certainly in question. That my sample size included 15 individuals at Dinah Shore and 9 interviewees at Pussy Palace cannot exhaustively and accurately depict all participants at these events, nor the lesbian/queer community in general. Yet, my observations and talks with participants in passing strengthens the extent to which my study describes in an accurate and "authentic" way lesbian/queer women, their desires and their views on sex and sexuality.

Several questions come to mind regarding my interview sample: Were the interviewees at Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace somehow different from those women who either chose not to participate in this study or were never approached? Did younger or older participants not included in this sample have a different agenda/expectations coming in to the event? Did the costs associated with Dinah Shore (average expenses including travel, food, hotel and entrance to parties would be at the very least $300 dollars) exclude many lesbians/queers from coming and if so,

might they be different than those that did come and could afford it? It could be that those that did decide to come were more "permissive" in their attitudes towards sex and sexuality to begin with. If so, then they might be a select few, thus, distorting how the majority of women "out there" view their own and other women's sexuality.

Future Research

As mentioned previously, a major limitation of my research had to do with the fact that I am not, nor was I then, embedded within the communities in and area where Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore took place. In addition, my research only includes the interviews and observations gathered during one visit at each site. Gaining an insider's perspective on what is going on both with participants who come to these events and how the lesbian/queer communities are impacted by them will increase with repeated visits to these sites, which I expect to do in the future.

In addition, there are a number of issues that were not addressed within my research that I think are important issues to consider. One such issue deals with identity and identity processes. More specifically, I am interested in how identity is played out differently the moment someone walks into a space such as Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace, and how in turn this identity might shift once one leaves. For instance, are these invented, ephemeral identities or are they continuous in that aspects of self as felt and played out at Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore become core parts of self in everyday life? If such events cause "temporal" identities than does the transition back to the "real" world and one's real life cause cognitive dissonance? Can

it then be for some ultimately disempowering since such events are few and far between? That some lesbian/queer women got a taste of what one Dinah Shore participant referred to as a "fantasy world," or that some women walked out of Pussy Palace with a sense of sexual agency for the first time could in the end prove disheartening and ultimately, illusory once they step outside this "artificial" space. Many women did indeed make comments during our interview expressing frustration that lesbian/queer women do not have enough woman-only spaces to go to.

In addition to the above issue regarding whether the effects of Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore are temporal or more permanent is the idea that women, and in this case, lesbian/queer women, have to go somewhere in search of freedom. In other words, Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore are set up in part to give women opportunities they otherwise would not have and to be as one of the Dinah Shore organizers put it "extremely free and very uninhibited." Yet, that women are having to go to a place, a particular space to feel this reflects in part that female empowerment and agency are not part of the normative order. That women are going somewhere, often at great lengths, to find respite from discrimination, violence and homophobia highlights how much we have to overcome to achieve sexual equality (this of course includes all people, not just lesbian/queer women).

Lastly, the fact that Hamilton, a town outside of Toronto, is now putting on bathhouse events for lesbian/queer women suggests that there might be a movement towards an increase of lesbian/queer spaces for women to engage in casual sex. In

addition, if CAKE, the organization in New York City catering to heterosexual women, is any indication, sexual spaces for all women seem to be on the rise. If this is the case (and I think it is) then future research will have to examine and address the ways in which venues catering to a heterosexual clientele as compared to lesbian/queer women are both similar and different. For instance, do the ways in which CAKE fosters and elicits sexual desire, that is, gets women "in the mood" share qualities with what was found at Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore? Do men who participate at CAKE events have an effect on women's behavior? In addition, do women at CAKE and heterosexual women at comparable venues, experience similar feelings of uncertainty, intimidation, as well as feelings of empowerment, agency and inclinations toward taking more risks as found among the subjects interviewed for this study? All of these issues and questions are important, and each will provide other dimensions to female sexuality that this study did not address. I believe this research is fertile ground for a lively, provocative and insightful debate that will in the end change how we see, think, and feel about female sexuality.

In conclusion, that Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore are giving women opportunities to practice working out their desires and enacting an agentic sexual self also means redefining and re-constructing how we think about female sexuality. Despite many women feeling empowered, other women stated feeling uncomfortable and hesitant in such a milieu—both in terms of either their own or other women's

assertiveness regarding sex and sexuality, and because of body image issues. Such issues demonstrate the ways in which society continues to inhibit women's sexuality.

Finally, that the formation of identity(ies) and constructions of gender and sexuality are processes (that is, formed and shaped over time via various life experiences and the social actors involved), are important insights have not been lost on sociologists—in fact, sociology has been at the epicenter of such "radical" ideas. Knowing this, sociologists have at the same time failed to move away from dichotomous, binary thinking when it comes sexuality and sexual categories, which has in turn worked to perpetuate the hetero-homosexual binary and gendered sexuality (i.e., "female" and "male" sexuality as polar opposites). In addition, sociology has often ignored sex and sexuality altogether, even though no social institution can be fully understood without taking these "taboo" subjects into account (think for instance about social stratification systems, the family, economic sphere, etc). Such sentiment is exemplified by Epstein (1996) when he states that "no facet of social life is fully comprehensible without an examination of how sexual meanings intersect with it" (156).

I believe that by conducting face-to-face interviews and making observations in this study so as to uncover the *active* construction of sexualities and identities as they were acted out in space contributes to our understanding of sexuality (and gender) in a number of ways: it highlights the malleability and volatility of sexuality, it complexifies ideas society has regarding "female sexuality," and it reveals the

relationships between space, agency and desire—that is, "spatial praxis" and sexual agency/desire were able to emerge due to the creation of a "safe space" carved out for and by women. One woman, who while being interviewed in *Xtra!* magazine describes what is necessary for casual sex among women to take place (a quote which at the same time reflects why an entertainment infrastructure for women around casual sex is still in its infancy):

> In order to have good casual sex, you need people who are sexually articulate and assertive about their desires. You need people who can pursue their desires and feel comfortable having non-romantic desire—not having sex with someone you care about. It means that even if in the moments of your interaction you care for each other, it is primarily the pursuit of lust (November 11, 2002).

Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore are attempting to do just that—that is, create a space wherein women are free to engage (or not) in casual sex and sexual pleasure.

More importantly, it could be that Pussy Palace and Dinah Shore are attempting to create and foster for the first time, a society wherein women have true agency when it comes to their own sexuality and desire. The crux of the issue is not whether women can or "should" engage in casual sex. Rather, the issue is really about women being able to appreciate and know their bodies, their desires, their limitations or lack thereof, and in addition, for all women to have the ability to be direct and assertive when it comes to sex, sexuality, agency and desire. That events like Dinah Shore and Pussy Palace are first and foremost celebrations of women's sexuality and that they in turn have the potential to cause, as one Pussy Palace

organizer put it, “ripple effects,” in essence permeating and impacting all women “out there,” suggests that a society where all variations of female sexuality are valued is indeed possible. Thus, I believe this research shows that we are in the midst of a new phase regarding women’s sexuality, albeit an embryonic one, but one where women are being given greater reign in terms of their sexual repertoire, and where increasing sexual opportunities for women exist—all of which will in the end force society to rethink and redefine the parameters and expectations we have when it comes to understanding what exactly women *really* do want.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. How many years of schooling have you completed? (Some or all of high school,
   some college etc.)

2. Where do you reside now? Where are you from originally?

3. Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer? What does that identification mean to you?

4. Are you single or partnered? If so, how long have you been with this person? Do you "play" (participate in activities at the site) together at this site or go off on your own)? Do you have a monogamous relationship or is it an "open" one?
   Do you see this relationship being a committed, long-term relationship?

5. Have you been here before? If so, tell me about the first time you went to _____? How did you feel? What were your expectations? Did anything bother you or make you uncomfortable? If you have been here before, how have your attitudes or behaviors changed?

6. What do you anticipate most before coming? Do you have an "objective", goal or an "agenda"? If it is sexual, do you desire a one-night stand/casual sex? Do you look for a "fuck"?

7. In what ways, if any, do you think these "sexual sites" affect the lesbian/queer community? Has it made the community stronger or caused any friction within the community?

8. Does this site impact your sexual expression/behavior in any way? In other words, does your behavior differ here compared to other lesbian spaces such as the bar etc.?

9. If you have sexual encounters here are you more exploratory about it? Are you more creative/carefree?

10. Do you look for particular people to "hook up" with?

11. Do your feelings, attitudes differ once you walk into this space? Are you more communicative, distant or aloof? Do you feel vulnerable in any way? If so, please explain.

12. How do you negotiate sexual acts/encounters with another individual? For instance, how do you start the process, what are your patterns etc? Does the other person make the first move?

13. Is your approach or interaction similar to other sites where you interact with members of the lesbian/queer community?

14. What are some of the cues or signs which indicate you and another person are mutually interested in one another? What kind of cues or signs do you, yourself give off?

15. Are alcohol and/or drugs involved when you "hook up" with someone?

16. If you "hook up" for a night, do you maintain contact with that person while you are here or when you leave this event?

17. Before having sex, what is your level of intimacy? Do you exhange names, talk at length etc. before engaging in sex?

18. Does your dress/demeanor/attitude change in any way once you enter this sexual space?

19. If you had to guess, what percentage of those who attend these events do you think are out? What about the percentage of racial/ethnic minorities? How about social class position (i.e., lower, middle or upper class)?

20. In your opinion, are many of those who attend active within the lesbian/queer community?

21. How important are these events/venues to you?

22. Do you have friends that come here?

23. Do you discuss with your friends the fact that you attend these events? How do they react?

24. If someone were to ask you what it was like to come to _____, what would you tell them? Would you recommend it to them? Why or why not?

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

1) How many years of schooling have you completed? (Some or all of high school, some college etc.)

2) Where do you reside now? Where are you from originally?

3) Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer? What does that identification mean to you?

4) What is your current occupation?

5) When did you get involved with Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore?

6) What are some of the objectives/goals behind this event?

7) Can you give me a Mission Statement for Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore?

8) What are your ideas regarding women's sexuality?

9) Do you feel women's sexuality/behavior has changed over the years? If so, in what ways?

10) Since this event has been going on, have you seen changes in women's behavior, sexuality, dress?

11) In what ways do you think Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore is important for women?

12) In what ways do you think Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore is important for the lesbian/queer community?

13) How many women typically attend this event?

14) Why do you think women come here? What is their agenda/objective?

15) How many women do you think come here just to have sex?

16) Has the crowd changed in any way since you began putting this event on?

17) Can you describe Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore for me in just a few words?

18) What is the future like for Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore? That is, what would you like to see happen?

19) What have been some of your own experiences at Pussy Palace/Dinah Shore?