

**Becki Ross (WMST, AnSo)**

*Interviewed by: Michele Sharma, 1999*

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MS: Could you give me a brief background of your education?

BR: O.K. Well first of all, I am very pleased to be interviewed, it's very much an honoring experience and I want to thank you for the opportunity. I grew up in Sudbury and lived in Northern Ontario for nineteen years. I always knew that I wanted to go to University and my mother encouraged me. She had a degree, even though she was a full time homemaker with five kids. My father was a middle-class chartered accountant. Although they struggled in the early years, there was always a sense on my mothers' part that her children needed to have an education in order to be financially secure in the world. She wasn't particularly financially secure, she got a very meager allowance from my father and never had enough money and never had any money of her own. I saw that and I decided I had to have a career and that's been the focus for the last forty years of my life. (laughter). So I went off to the University of Western Ontario, where my Mom had gone. My grandparents were there and I did a double major in French and Physical Education. It's quite unusual, given where I have ended up.

MS: Yes.

BR: I think I had desires of becoming a Physical Education teacher. At that time I had no understanding of my sexuality and there are all kinds of funny anecdotes of lesbians in Phys. Ed. which I laugh about now, given that I had no idea about what lesbianism was back then. Here I was doing a double major and I guess it was in my third or second year that I felt inspired by the ideas of one particular professor, about the ideologies of the sociology of sport. I started to get turned on by Marxist critiques of sport and labour. This was mostly for male professional sports, there was no gender analysis going on in 1978 and 79.

MS: 1978, that was the year I was born [laughter].

BR: [Laughter] That puts it all into perspective for you. So now, in the late 1970's, I'm being exposed to a critique of Marxism and class stratification. I had grown up in a town that was deeply divided along class lines, the kind of petty bourgeoisie that my parents were part of and the working class mining constituency. I had a working-class boyfriend for three years and I spent all my time with him, mostly because my own family was disintegrating, my parents were separating and divorcing. So that was very brutal. But I was so much happier with his family and going to minehall dances and functions and just hearing stories about himself and his father, about mine life. So, all of a sudden, I'm at Western and I'm getting a language, I'm devising a kind of analytical framework for making sense of class differences. I had always known that there were inequities in terms of material resources and now I had an ideological political framework to better understand how the world was put together along class lines.

So, I guess more than anything at first, I had a political consciousness around being Marxist and it was quite quickly, by the time I had moved to Queens University to do an MA in Sport Sociology in 1982, that I just knew that gender had to be a primary category. I'm not sure exactly how that happened, but I know that I almost immediately got involved with the women's movement, joined the rape crisis centre, and started doing activism around pornography. "Golden Words" was the engineering newspaper at Queen's at the time and it was publishing the most vile, racist, homophobic, sexist, androgynous crap I had ever come across. So, we had sit-ins in the President's office and stormed porn shops and had demonstrations down on the main mall at Queens. It was a real hotbed of critical activism for me and I got a major education outside of my formal learning, which was happening at university. So this all started to ferment for me and provided me with a context for making sense of a couple of things happening in my life. Always, as an athlete, having to fight for resources, the coaches, the time, the uniforms, feeling that I was in a sexist world, that there were gender inequities that I was facing and those were not fair. There was no justice there.

And then when I was seventeen I had an abortion. I had to leave Sudbury. I had to spend \$450 American dollars to have an abortion in Buffalo. So that was... even though I had no real sense of what that meant, no sense of the struggles historically for centuries for women around reproductive choice and reproductive freedom. By the 80s I came to see that I had needed some strength to make that decision and in fact not to tell anyone that I had an abortion for nine years after I had it. A lot of guilt and a lot of shame, being raised Catholic, so a lot of mixed feelings.

By the time I got to Queen's and I was doing my MA. thesis, I figured I had to do research that was going to make a difference somehow, that was going to be reflective of the kind of debates around gender and class that I was most familiar with. Race analysis and racism, and racialization, came later and sexuality was not even on the map at that point, it was not even theorized by me. I was "successfully heterosexual" at that point, I had good boyfriends, both short and long-term relationships, although by 1982 I think I said good-bye to my last man (laughter). I realized one day looking around me at the Kingston rape crisis centre that I was the only straight women in the room and that all of the lesbian and bisexual women around me were warriors, they were fierce, they were survivors, they were powerful, exuberant, articulate, you know really inspiring figures, mentors in lots of ways, and they really didn't match up with any of the stereotypes that I had always had of lesbians and that was discombobulating as well. So I was getting a major emotional political education in the movement at that time in Kingston, at the same time that I was doing this degree. I decided to focus on the work of mothers with young children and their leisure patterns.

MS: Wow!

BR: That was my focus. I was mostly interested because of the impact of sport and leisure on my life: the ways in which working-class and middle-class women were able to find time for recreation and leisure in their lives, and what did that look like. I had met a geographer, Suzanne Mackenzie, (who just died actually in October 1998). May she rest in peace, she was brilliant: a socialist, feminist geographer, and she was my MA supervisor. She mentored me, she opened me up to new literature on gender analysis of

the environment, and particular notions of space. What kind of obstacles and barriers are in women's way as they try and make meaning and relevance in their lives. So many obstacles for them, particularly for working class women, many who were on Mother's allowance. So through very good fortune, I was able to get into the schools [laughter] to get lists of women who had young children.

There were two different areas: a working-class neighborhood and a middle-class neighborhood in Kingston. I think I did about forty interviews in the end. Twenty interviews each of working-class women and middle-class women. I got an immediate education in their lives, the place, their work place; the ways in which for the most part they had very little money to go travelling or to go movies or to spend in any kind of discretionary, leisurely way. In fact, that was what I was really uncovering, the stories of women's work. All the various shapes and forms and multi-faceted dimensions that it took and how it was so tough for them, whether they were in their roles as mothers and wives or welfare recipients. I really felt that I was learning an enormous amount. It was really homage to my own mother, I realized that much later. I tried to figure out why I was doing this, I'm not a mother, and I'm not going to be a mother. By that point I wasn't even straight, I had started to come out to myself, I guess it was about 83-84. Yet I was totally compelled by the richness, texture, and strengths in these women's lives. Some of them were not that much older than me and they were real beacons. They really told me something about how women struggled in the subordination and oppression they faced and how in the face of so much negative shit in their lives they were able to come out, or overcome, or at least make a lot of sacrifices for their children.

I remember one very pointed story of a woman saying, "I go to Bingo and I make arrangements for daycare for my child because I can actually have a coke and drink it all by myself". This is something very small but something very meaningful for her, she didn't want to have to share it, she wanted to be able to go to Bingo and have the chance of winning some money that she might secretly be able to keep to herself and not have to declare against her Mother's allowance cheque and so on. That really told me a lot about what was meaningful to her and the kinds of limits and possibilities in her life.

From there I went on to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I went there because of Dorothy Smith. I had been reading her work for years and she had been there since the mid 1970s. She had escaped from UBC and ended up in Toronto and she was big, I mean she was a guru. She had followers, people referred to them as Smythites and I had always felt very odd about that, I didn't really feel like I fit in any particularly easy way into her mold, but I was really compelled by her analysis and the way she understood the world. She was a Marxist, she was a working-class, British woman who had gone to the United States to study. She had been a single mother herself. A woman who had come to higher education much later in life. When I met her she was in her sixties.

I started late '84 at O.I.S.E., and I was just out to myself by that point. I started having relationships with women, got involved in all kind of political action with "Other Words" which was a feminist newspaper at the University of Toronto and with the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics. I was realizing that I had to be part of that reproductive rights struggle, based on my own experience and what I knew of other women's lives. That was really rocking by the mid to late 80's. I got involved with "in rites" which was a lesbian and gay liberation magazine and I was on the editorial board

there for about four years starting from 1986. I got involved in a lot of anti-racist organizing. Started to meet and befriend women of colour in the Asian Canadian community and the African Canadian Community, First Nations women, I had some women of colour who were my lovers. That always felt like a little mini-coalition, the relationship with the women of colour. That somehow those issues around race, gender, sexuality, class were urgent and pressing not only outside our lives and around us but in our intimate relationships of trying to love one another against so many obstacles.

So ten years I spent in Toronto, doing that degree and teaching sessionally for a couple of years. For almost fifteen years, I stacked a pretty big student loan, which I am still encumbered by at the moment and I am almost 40, still owing the government but grateful. Well aware of my privilege of having been able to study and work hard. I always took a contract in the summer with the Health Directorate for the provincial government writing a newsletter on women and addictions. I learned a lot about addiction and went around to detox and recovery homes all over the province and talked to both clients or recipients of the service and women in that business, so that was a really good match for me even though my very own research would take a very different turn. I learned a lot about women's anger and struggles, which often manifested themselves in alcohol and tranquilizer addictions.

MS: So what direction did your research take?

BR: I think it was probably quite early that I decided that I had to do research on lesbian feminism. As a highschool student in the seventies, I wasn't an out lesbian, I wasn't active in any movement at all. Through my political organizing in Kingston and Toronto I met lesbian women and loved these women and thought their stories were amazing. I felt I had to try and recover and capture their stories. One particular organization was called the Lesbian Organization of Toronto, which opened in 1976 and closed in 1980. That became the central focus of my Ph.D. research at O.I.S.E. I did around 40 interviews, trying to map out all the various players and the ideological currents, which overlapped and often conflicted with one another in the context of radical feminism and social feminisms. Some of the women were much more identified with gay men's struggles around sexuality, the police for example and the courts, censorship, than with issues like violence against women, which radical feminists had put on their agendas in the early seventies. I spent five years on that project, it took me a long time to do it, and the degree took seven years. It was an excruciating project, I remember waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat fearing that my subjects, my narrators, would trash me, that they would say that I misrepresented, distorted their experiences. I just didn't think I could live with that, at the same time I didn't want to bargain away my own ability and capacity to produce an analysis and an interpretation. It was not simply descriptive or journalistic, it actually had a political, critical bite to it. It was the first lesbian book that the University of Toronto Press, the biggest and most prestigious academic press in the country, had published. So I worked closely with the senior editor of the press. He was a big fan of mine from the start and I'm still really close to him and really respect him a lot for the limb he went out on for me.

So it was really important to publish that and to have that out there and circulating. It was published in about 1995, it feels like a century ago since it came out.

And subsequently there have been other books that have been published by the Press and by other Presses in Canada on themes broadly described as sexual politics and I'm really proud to be part of that process. Certainly my book wasn't the first, but it was the first for University of Toronto, and now there is an emerging body of critical literature.

MS: Yes, even from class, we always talk about histories and it's as if you wrote lesbianism into history. It would not have been there if you had not gone through all that to write the book and get it out there, because I think that it is a very valuable piece of information.

BR: I think of it as an invitation, I've always thought about it that way. A third of the book is bibliography.

MS: Yes, I noticed!

BR: That, to me, is the invitation to push further, to go deeper and in other directions. It's just a tiny little droplet in a pond at this point, and I don't think it is rippling out right now but there is increasingly a context. Students like yourself are interested in intersectional analysis and sexuality is a part of that. It is not good enough anymore to just collapse notions of sexuality, sexual desire, sexual identity, and sexual community under this broader rubric of gender. That's not sufficient and Gale Rubin even told us that and it is now sinking into people. I think that's really exciting. It's thrilling to see this development. But I have also discovered for myself that I keep wanting to back up a decade (Laughter). Now I'm going to the forties and fifties and that feels really good to me. That's the way I need to be going right now. As a Sociologist I'm an interdisciplinary scholar, I mean I trained as a sport sociologist, I had a feminist geographer as a supervisor. My passion is history, I'm interested in literary theory and analysis of language, discourse analysis and also analysis of texts. I am a sociologist in the Dorothy Smithian sense of my understanding of social relations and power relations. I'm totally smitten some days by Foucault's philosophical understanding of normativity and hetero-normativity and discourses of power.

MS: How is it being cross-appointed?

BR: I mostly think of myself as being in more places than two and that's the struggle, trying to actually be 100% in both places. Officially my joint position is in Women's Studies and Sociology and that's been extremely tough. I feel like I have not done the absolute best that I could have and yet I'm not going to flog myself either. I never have worked as hard as I have in the last four years at UBC. There is that informal, covert set of expectations that I will be able to be everything that everyone needs me to be in each place. I have since discovered all kinds of women across this campus that are supportive of me. Dawn Currie, Gillian Creese, Gerry Pratt, Susan Boyd: they are in Law, Geography, Social Work, Women's Studies, they are everywhere across the campus and they have smoothed a path for me. They have taken me under their wings, sometimes formally sometimes informally.

Valerie Raoul is part of that mix, and I feel really cherished, I feel like they

remember what it's like to be a young scholar faced with such intense conservatism and racist and homophobic backlash. Stalwartly they have continued to make a place for feminism and anti-racist scholarship and for research that matters to women's lives. So I have felt carried along by them and mothered by them and I'm just so pleased. I'm probably going to get tenure in May, which will be a huge relief. I don't expect my work load to diminish that much, but definitely in terms of what I feel I can do, the risks I can take, the students I can work with, the places that I can go with my own research, it all feels like it's coming together. It's an exciting time and I think that I will be able to take a few risks. For example, in my sexuality course that I'm teaching in Sociology, I have 70 students this year and that course will likely continue to grow in numbers. We did some really amazing work in that class this year, issues around masturbation, prostitution, pornography, abortion, homosexuality, and these are among the most pressing, vexing, controversial issues of our day. There are national referendums going on all the time, whether it be porn law or homelessness (we know that forty percent of homeless youth are queer) or spousal benefits, the right to marry, or right to inheritance law, or bereavement, or immigration status and so on. How do we make sense of municipalities who are earmarking money for the rehabilitation of johns and taking the money out of the hands of sex trade workers? These are not easy issues. Students usually come into the class with already pretty much solid, pre-formed...

MS: Ideologies

BR: Concretized ideologies and standpoints about many of these issues, and I think the majority would say that by the end the ground had shifted beneath their feet.

MS: Really.

BR: And I have talked to enough of them- however small those shifts, for some more seismic than others, but shifts nonetheless in consciousness and standpoint, and that's very rewarding.

MS: That must be, especially after all the hard work you do, I think that would be a pretty rewarding thing.

BR: Definitely, and students are hungry for this, they are already very skilled and literate in popular culture, which is one of my passions, they know more about popular culture than I do (laugh) I'm struggling, racing to keep up with them, but for the most part though, as much as they have knowledge and they are conversant and literate and visual in the medium, they don't always have critical deconstructive skills, so I do a couple of classes on Walt Disney for example. Walt Disney, as far as I am concerned, runs a cultural monopoly worldwide, sets the terms of cultural debate, and operates as if it were cultural legislation. Disney products are heteronormative, and very racist and sexist tropes play out again and again, whether it be Aladdin or Pocahontas, deeply sexist.

Romance narratives that are all about sixteen-year-old girls marrying princes they don't know, leaving the home of one man (their father) to move in with another (their

teenage husband). I mean it's just staggering to me. I've been on numerous radio shows giving my analysis of Disney and callers will just scream at me, particularly in Calgary, (laughter). Something about Calgary, where I am just pilloried, openly attacked, viciously rebuked for my analysis because people feel that this is breezy entertainment. Parents have investments in certain kinds of narratives and stories about young people and what they should be expecting for their futures in terms of marriage and reproduction. Students have not been given the opportunity to think critically about issues of gender and sexual politics. I provide them with a small queer space in which to do that, where straightness is not accepted as the norm, where it is continuously problematised.

MS: O.K., do you see yourself more as a feminist or Sociologist? Would you label yourself as Becki Ross feminist sociologist or Becki Ross sociologist, feminist?

BR: I guess I would have to say that I am going to refuse to pack my identity in any neat categorized way. That might be too post-modern, but I feel that when I'm in the world as a teacher, an activist, or analyst, I inhabit a multiplicity of identity categories. My training as a sociologist is deeply infused with and informed by my feminism and my anti-racism and my commitment to critiques of heterosexuality, and my abiding commitment to anti-poverty and to understanding class inequalities: of how this world is structured to supply some people with wealth and profits and not others. So I can't really tease all those things apart, I feel that I do sociology but I do it in an interdisciplinary way. I'm not totally versed in all the classics but I certainly know and have read Marx, and Weber, because you have, you won't be employed as a Sociologist if you are not familiar with the writings of the great white men. But the women that I have been turned on to in Sociology are like me—they struggle in the context of feminist organizing to try to bridge activism in the community outside of the academy and activism as educators within it. That's not an easy struggle. It literally sucks me dry, seventy-five hours a week, it's been going on for five years.

It was Kamloops, at the University College of the Cariboo, where I took my first teaching job in 1995 in the Sociology department I had never been to the West, and here I was in Kamloops with its reputation for "red-neckery". My friends were all worried that I would have skinned rabbits and dead rats at my door, crosses burning and everything else, and it wasn't like that at all. I really miss it; I loved Kamloops. I thought the students were amazing, mostly working-class kids who had parents who had never been to University. They were there to try and improve their own lives and I did absolutely everything I could to enable that and I miss that, because it is not the same kind of diversity here...I think there is more of a cultural and racial diversity at UBC which I am thrilled about. But last week Fay Blaney, the absolute fireball that she is, took one glance around the room, "No First Nations students in here": how do we account for this? What is wrong with this picture? How do we understand this? She is talking and thinking sociologically and historically, of course, in terms of histories of genocide and oppression and colonization in the nation called Canada. Whatever small contribution I can make in the classroom I do. I make sure that I am there in as much complexity as possible in terms of my own self, my own learning, and of my own consciousness.

MS: Yes, I am trying to think about the interdisciplinarity of Women's Studies, I mean, I think it's really good, because professors like you who have such a rich background can pull from so many things and can offer students so much, I see that as a very positive thing. But would it be better if we had professors stay in just one field, so you would be just in Women's Studies or just Sociology, so there isn't a split.

BR: Right, because we have none at UBC and other universities like the University of Victoria have full-time Women's Studies' professors

MS: Exactly.

BR: Well, I believe that none of those professors did Women's Studies degrees. They trained typically in a classical discipline and because they were feminists and anti-racists they moved into Women's Studies as a new emerging sub-discipline, or department, or focus. There is only one program in this country York University that awards PhD.'s in Women's Studies. And there are so few jobs, there may be one or two jobs in Women's Studies across the country in any given year. So the supply will exceed the demand, and people need more than one discipline or more than one job. The sessionals are exploited workers teaching one or two courses here or there. In 1993 I had four offices in Toronto. One office at York, Ryerson, University of Toronto and O.I.E.S., and I was teaching in each of those places and doing research in a couple, and I was stretched to the max.

MS: Even more than here?

BR: Well, differently, stretched in not knowing which office to be in, whether I was doing the right lecture in the right place, and that made me crazy. So I loved going up to Kamloops and having one office, three courses, students who could find me and I could find students, timetables that I could actually adhere to without much anxiety. I mean there is the anxiety of actually preparing and teaching a class, but that was much more satisfying even though the hours were long. I am not sure about full time Women's Studies, there still needs to be so much work done in the classical disciplines. Feminist and anti-racist theory have not made epistemological breaks in any of the disciplines, so people like Dawn Currie, myself, Gillian Creese, have been half-appointed as Chairs of Women's Studies and part-time in Sociology. Sneja Gunew is both in English and Women's Studies, or Sharalyn Orbaugh is in both Asian Studies and Women's Studies, Nikki Strong-Boag is in Education and Women's Studies. We all feel that we have to wage battles in our other home departments, the discipline in which we were trained because none of us were trained, in Women's Studies. So, in some ways I feel a commitment to continue to make change in Sociology, because there are so few feminists who are pushing the envelope around race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Yet, obviously, the deep commitment that I have to the political and intellectual project of feminist scholarship and the teaching of feminist research and anti-racist research on this campus, takes expression in Women's Studies. I think an MA in Women's Studies will open doors in this province around doing research for radio programs, and television and film documentaries, or with the Ministry of Women's Equality, or any



number of non-profit organisations, I think there are possibilities, and I have witnessed feminist graduates go on to decent paying jobs in the big bad world out there. So it's a complicated thing. I think of Women's Studies is itself interdisciplinary and has to be, just because if you think of any one question there are going to be different ways of coming at it. That is so rich, if you think of daycare, violence against women, pay equity, employment, the media, I mean you can come at it psychoanalytically, you can come at it from a Marxist materialist standpoint, you could come at it from political economy, or philosophy, or geography. Each of the disciplines has something to bring to bear on any one given issue or topic. The kind of territoriality around disciplines is beginning to crumble.

MS: Traditional, but changing.

BR: Yes, the ways in which disciplines have been structured, packaged, and bordered off, and territorialized is an artificial construct. That is all about legitimacy and credibility and defensive territory and turf, and that's an old patriarchal, colonialist model that is under siege at the moment, and that is a positive thing.

I had a Hampton grant with eight others last year who were from English, Education Women's Studies, Geography, Sociology, and History, we all came together with this idea to figure out what interdisciplinarity means. Can you actually do interdisciplinary research without your own disciplinary grounding? We decided that you couldn't- you did need to have some sort of disciplinary grounding, some familiarity in the kind of debates and concepts and traditions of a discipline. We felt we could be invigorated by the kind of cross conversation and fertilization of ideas that could happen in a place where people did not need to defend their own standpoint. We learned we could debate ideas without feeling defensive about our own discipline. The challenge is to resist the tendency to shore up truths, mask truths at the border, or protect against assaults from the outside.

MS: Yes.

BR: I mean, I don't think it clears it up for Women's Studies students because you're not really getting a foundation in a discipline,

MS: Yes, but, I find that with all the different Women's Studies professors they have so many different areas of study, I think that is really stimulating.

BR: Excellent.

MS: To be able to have all those different kinds of issues interplaying in one person, instead of taking two courses, you get the same in one course.

BR: Yes, you know I think that there is a big commitment from all of us, even though we have so few resources, to try and have guest speakers, and I know that seems on the surface to be a small thing, I don't consider it to be a small thing. The guest speakers that I have are women that I've known or am getting to know, that I'm building some sort of

trust and solidarity with. You just can't invite anybody; they won't come. I mean, why would they come, particularly activists like Fay Blaney's, so it was a complete honour and privilege for me to make a connection with her first and then to invite her to the class and to have her open herself, her own personal history of residential or her struggle with her own children, and their schooling, and histories of racism, both in her own community and in the broader white community. I am grateful to Fay and she really is an interdisciplinary scholar. She has been informed by Sociology, and she is a Historian, a cultural critic. In the class, she analysed statistics and used them to support her arguments, she's a very deft traveler across disciplinary traditions, and I felt totally inspired by her. So that is the kind of moment whereby someone like myself can try and make connections with people beyond the University gate and bring them into the classroom.

I do that in my 312 class, I had two sex-trade workers, Simone has been an erotic dancer for twenty years, and Andrew who is a hustler, who has his own escort service. Both of them are part of a political action group called SWAV, (Sex Workers Alliance of Vancouver). So they are on the ground running, in relation to the police, courts, media, it's just become a full time vocation for both of them to stay abreast of developments, vis-a-vis the state and the sex trade. And then I had two male-to-female transgenders and a female-to-male transgender. That was a big time privilege for the class. None of them had ever met a transgendered person at all, ever.. Because I know them, I can provide a space wherein they offer different kinds of knowledge that I would never be able to communicate myself. Through film or video, I also introduce different perspectives and different approaches, different voices.

MS: Speaking of different voices and opinions, I couldn't help but to notice the picture of you in *The House That Jill Built*. From what I remember you had long hair and had a guitar, not the Becki Ross of today. What was that all about?

BR: That was a wig, thank you very much . (Laugh) That was just terrible. I should have not even put my name on that, I should have just put Emily Ruth, and people would not have even recognized me.

MS: I would not have if the name was not under it.

BR: That was such a rich opportunity, I mean, it was only because of Audrey Butler, who is a dear friend, an amazing playwright from Cape Breton, an outspoken lesbian. She was in Toronto and she said "I know you're doing this research on lesbian feminism and I want you to turn it into a monologue and give it at "The strange sisters Cabaret" at Buddies in Bad Times theatre. And I said "No way Audrey, I'm not a performer, I'm a fuckin' historian, I like to be in my little turf, with all the dry stocky material (laughter) with all my transcripts that I have done from all my interviews. "I don't want to be in the spotlight" This was in 1988. She insisted that I do it, so I wrote this monologue.

It was a half hour and I got up totally dressed in my little outfit, this 1970's garb, plaid-shirt, 501 jeans, big honkin' cowboy boots, this big bandana and wig, a thousand buttons with every slogan that every feminist and lesbian had ever come up with and I sat up their on the stage just full of piss and vinegar, and terrified, just shaking in my boots,

and yet I had a ball. The people in the audience, there were probably 250 people there, were screaming with laughter. I did not even think it was funny. I pulled all the stories and knit them all together just like with a crochet hook, mixing all the stories that lesbian activists had ever told me, and it was extremely sad in places, very poignant and moving and touching and yet deeply, deeply humorous and funny. I really felt like I was a storyteller, there was something about the audience that in fact told me that what I was doing was not just working with dusty archival material and oral transcripts, but I had indeed a responsibility to tell stories from and for my community.

MS: Tell me about Street Haven, what was it like?

BR: Street Haven was an unexpected development. I was at the Lesbian Gay Archives in Toronto and it is just chockfull of memorabilia and files and buttons, and posters and banners. It is a real testament to the work of the archivists to make a place for that material which would otherwise disappear. They preserve it, catalogue it, and honour it. I was there because I had done some research on bar culture and was fascinated by bars. I love going to bars, always have, always will, and so I was doing another project about bar cultures in the 1960s and 70s and literally stumbled on this newspaper clipping, from the *Globe and Mail*, that said "Street hostel open for prostitutes, lesbians and addicts," and I thought Wow! So this was five years before the Stonewall rebellion in York and I was saying to myself that Lesbian is in the title of this headline alongside (laugh) prostitutes and addicts and it's in the context of a drop-in shelter for women who were ex-cons and street-involved. I thought, I know nothing about this, this has nothing to do with bar culture, and this is something else.

It turns out that within two weeks, my close friend Cynthia had phoned me to say that Peggy Ann who in 1965 had been the Executive Director was featured that week in the *Toronto Star*, so I found the article. Sure enough she was still there, in the early nineties. I met her and she liked me and she opened her archive to me. It was on the third floor and it was a historian's dream. I just about fainted, she opened the door and there were hundreds of files.

MS: Wow!

BR: Right there before me was the history of Street Haven, the butches and femmes who frequented it, and the middle-class, white, Christian volunteers who tried to better the women's lives. I found this work very satisfying because it seemed like I was recovering a lost generation of queer women, most of whom either overdosed (on heroin) or were murdered.

In my most recent research I turn my attention to Vancouver's world of "erotic entertainment" or striptease, from 1945 to the present. Issues of how "the business" has been constructed as a "public morality problem" are central. Mostly, I'd like to challenge assumptions about who female erotic dancers are, and why they do what they do.

MS: Could you summarize your research passions to me?

BR: Over the past ten years, I would point to ongoing curiosity about intersections of

gender, race, class, and sexuality, and in particular, the policing and the disruption of common-sense notions of sexual normativity vs. abnormality. I seem to have no difficulty sustaining my 'obsession' with all matters of sex!