

Episode 3: “Being a Good Erotic Citizen: Kathryn Payne and Sarah York-Bertram in Conversation about Sex Worker-Femme Solidarities and Sex Work Activism in Canada”

00:00:01 [Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:00:16 **Andi Schwartz:** Hello, my name is Andi Schwartz and you’re listening to “Still Brazen: 20 Years of Queering Femininity,” a podcast celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the book *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. This podcast was created at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University in Toronto, which is the colonial name for Tkaranto, an area that has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat and is now home to many First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities. The current treaty holders are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which is an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region. Much of the writing and artwork documented in *Brazen Femme* was really a product of the communities and scenes that were very specific to this place in a specific time, which will be frequently highlighted throughout this podcast, so I am extremely grateful to be here, on these lands, in this place and part of its living history, and especially grateful to its care takers.

00:01:23 This week’s episode puts Kathryn Payne and Sarah York-Bertram in conversation about sex worker-femme solidarities, politics, and activism. Kathryn Payne is a pinko queer femme settler, proud former sex worker, college professor, yoga teacher, aunty, gardener, writer, and year-round cyclist. She lives in Toronto, but dreams of forest, rock, and water. Sarah York-Bertram is a historian, a qualitative researcher, and a PhD candidate at York University in the Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Studies program. She has been studying histories of sex work for 13 years and their doctoral research is an emotions history of narratives and judgements about sexual commerce during Canada’s westward expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

00:02:11 Kathryn’s piece in *Brazen Femme* is called, “Whores and Bitches Who Sleep With Women” and is a really special one to me, because it was the first time that I encountered such a clear analysis of the inherent connection and political solidarity between femmes and sex workers; that highlighted how femmephobia and whorephobia are different sides of the same horrible little box. She puts it like this: “in my opinion, we can’t talk about femme, about femininity, about anything related, without talking about ho. The femme cause is the ho cause—as long as there are hos in jails and danger and shame, femmes will not be free to dress, live or fuck as we please.” She goes on to say that: “The meat of the matter is that femininity + sexual agency = potential social chaos, and therefore

those who combine these qualities must be stigmatized, criminalized, and maligned.” It's good, right?

00:03:09 This is going to be a very fun conversation to listen to, but you'll also learn a lot from my very smart friend Sarah about ongoing sex worker activism in so-called Canada and the centrality of sex workers in the Canada's westward expansion, and, of course, from Kathryn about the some of the queer, kinky, and sex work histories that unfolded in Toronto and how they are connected to femme culture and broader political struggles. I'm going to drop you into the conversation now, as Sarah starts off by quoting directly from Kathryn's very excellent essay, and begins to trace its lineage and legacy.

00:03:44 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:03:53 **Sarah York-Bertram:** “Do you know your lineage? You know, lineage? The people who preceded you in history. Not your bloodline, nor your family tree. Nothing so flimsy as biology or genetics. Lineage, rather, is made up of the people who, in their lifetimes, fought the battles we are fighting now. Struggled towards the same goals. Tried to carve out similar lives against similar backdrops.” I thought we could start with that quote. What informed your decision to talk about lineage? This has been an important area in femme theory especially, and I think Hoskin has written similar kinds of things in theorizing femme, about lineage and about the connections between femme and sex work. Yeah, I'm just... I'm interested to know, Kathryn, what you think about, um, lineage, and why you started with lineage?

00:04:49 **Kathryn Payne:** I think I started talking about lineage, partly because I wasn't feeling like the, the communities that I came out into were informed by the same analysis that I had. And they didn't necessarily fully understand my experience. And, so, I mean initially, I came out in Ottawa, um, in an environment that was super lesbian, feminist, and kind of separatist, and also linguistically divided, right, there was the Francophone lesbians and the, the, um, English lesbians, and there was quite a bit of, um, biphobia at the time, because of this sort of separatist impulse, um, in a lot of the, the lesbian feminism of the moment. Um, but it was also, it was biphobia, but it was also femmephobia. Like, I remember going to one of my first lesbian bars, uh, and my friend and I were like the only people in dresses in the whole bar. Um, and you know it wasn't the 50s or 60s, it wasn't the 70s, right. [laughs] It wasn't really even the 80s. Um, but there was still this kind of, um, hangover of, uh, lesbian separatism, um, that made uh, first of all sort of any close, any intimacies with men super suspect, but, second of all um, made obvious femininity kind of suspect, or at least femininity the way that, that we were doing it, right. Um, and so I had a sort of absence of folks in my real life, when I was in Ottawa, who I felt like I could, sort

of, mentor me, who I could model myself after. Now, when I got to Toronto, that all changed, um, for a bunch of reasons, and I've been thinking a lot about like what were the, the circumstances, um, the context that allowed, um, me to write that article, but also just *Brazen Femme* to happen, um, in that moment. And I think there's a lot going on, and I want to talk about some of that, um, a little bit later, but when I was looking in Ottawa, and even when I first got to Toronto, a lot of where I did find femme mentors was in writing, right, was in um, the, the anthologies I was reading, um, and also just the, the fiction, etc. that I was reading. And so, that's why I quote Joan Nestle there, is because, um, for me, she, along with Dorothy Allison and a couple of other folks were incredibly, uh, big—June Jordan was another one—were huge in my psyche, because they talked about being femme, and they were unapologetic. Um, and uh, then, when I got to Toronto I discovered Carol Queen, who wasn't out of Toronto. She was out of the Bay Area, San Francisco, um but she was overtly bi, um, and femme and involved in sex work, um and, um, had this demeanour that was just so impressive. She just called everybody "dearie" and "sweetie," even when she was condescending the heck out of it. [laughs] Um, so yeah, so there was this, uh, desire in me for models, for people who, uh, I could sort of look at and go, "Yeah, they were after the same thing." It was partly about identifying as femme, but it was also about identifying as sexual, right, and, and trying to not be ashamed because I spent a lot of time struggling, um, with slutphobia, right, with, um, slut-shaming. Uh, and so I have a little poetry book that, uh, I put out in, I think '98 um called *Longing, At Least is Constant*, and a lot of what that book is about is trying to figure out sort of: "Where does a sleazy bi girl fit in the big world, right? Um, and I was also very much involved in left politics, um, and the anti-globalization movement. Um and uh those things were also very big to me. So, Joan Nestle especially really spoke to me and June Jordan, because they're very political. They were very clear on where they stood politically. Um, so all of those things were, were super important, um, and I wanted to kind of flag that that's something you need, right. You need a sense of, of whose footsteps you're following, and whose projects you're the next step in. Or at least it's something I needed. Maybe it's not something everybody needs. [laughs]

00:09:25 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah, I, um, find that when I'm looking back on my experience reading, um, your chapter, it was a moment for me, um, finding my own kind of lineage and that of my friends. Um, and it was... uh, the way that you, um, write about things that you know you don't necessarily say, like, how, um, the, uh, Christians that you hung out with in your early teens thought that your brain fell out of your head. Um, [laughs] that resonated a lot, uh, for me as well, and, um, the kind of, um, like you mentioned, slutphobia, um, as a young person growing up in a conservative, rural community coming to your work I found a lot of connection, and, um, I found that the work that you were doing in

drawing all of these different, uh, links like Joan Nestle, and, um... like I, I hadn't read Joan Nestle. You were the one who, um, introduced me to Joan Nestle's work, and, um, the way that you pointed to Joan Nestle's writing as a place where complexity, complex, sexual agency could exist or, or did exist, that was a big moment for me because that sort of complexity was not allowed where I was coming from. We were either victims or sluts, those were the options. And, um, so I know, um, that by the time I came to your piece, which was not until actually 2010. So, it had been out in the world for eight years. But it was a, a moment for me of finding place that I didn't know, um, was out there. And, uh, so I think that's interesting to think about, yeah, just the legacy of this piece, and the way that, um, I and likely others found [laughs] just a lineage that we maybe weren't aware of. Um so, I'm wondering: what was Toronto like at this time? Um, and how would you say it compared to maybe other places?

00:12:20

**Kathryn Payne:** So I think one of the really interesting... I've been thinking a lot about that moment, right? And it's sort of... I think previously I sort of thought about it as late, late '90s, right, but then, when I sort of looked into some things it was actually really early 2000s. Um, but I think it was fed by a bunch of stuff that was going on in the '90s, and I think there was this moment in, sort of, queer culture, um—and maybe it was more sort of chick queer culture— um, but it wasn't uh, it wasn't just in Toronto. I had lovers in Seattle, um, and, uh, friends in Vancouver, and there were a bunch of things that we all had in common, a bunch of things we were all reading or listening to or thinking about, um, or participating in, um, that, uh, I think, really helped make that moment. And so, I want to sort of tip my hat to Pat Califia um and Macho Sluts, and the work that was going on there. Um, and, uh, Carol Queen was kind of part of that for me. Um, there was also Scarlett Harlot, right, um in the US. Um, Carol Leigh, unfortunately just passed. Um, and uh then in Canada, um one of the folks who's work I was really interested in was Becki Ross, um, and, uh, it wasn't just her work. She was one of those folks, that I was like, "ooh, there's a possible mentor. There's someone I can model myself on," right, and that was super important. But there were a bunch of other things happening that kind of, I think, came together in that moment. So, um, there was a lot of connection, not just around queer community, but around resistance, right? So, there was, um, I was involved in anti-corporate globalization protests. Um, and, uh, and so, you know, I went to Washington to protest the IMF and the World Bank. Um, I went to Quebec City uh to protest the free trade area of the Americas. That was a ginormous moment in my life, because I think up until that moment I didn't fully understand the, the fist of the state. Um, and, uh, and also, the amount that other people don't understand that, right? Like we protested for like three days and I watched what was on TV and I was like, "That's bullshit! That has nothing to do with what actually happened!" Right? Um, and so I think that sort of helped inform our culture.

- 00:14:38 Um, there was also this really big sort of sex-positive um queer women's culture happening in Toronto specifically, right. So, um, there was the women's bathhouses, uh, and, you know, eventually the raid, annoyingly. Uh, but there was also the Feminist Porn Awards, and uh—Chanelle Gallant and, uh, Carlyle Jansen, big tip of the hat, because that was sort of their babies—um, and uh, Feminist Porn Awards, Clit Lit, so Elizabeth Ruth, who's also in *Brazen Femme*, um, she organized this reading series, um, and, uh and it was, it was often a really good forum for, for sort of sex-positive work. Um, I remember reading at the, the Hussies for Humanities themed night, um, which I think was November in 2001, um, and then I belong to a writing group called the Stern Writing Mistresses. We were queer, sex was often something we were writing and talking about, and lots of us in that group also had some kind of SM practice or SM cultural connections—um, thus the "Stern Writing Mistresses."
- 00:15:42 [both laugh]
- 00:15:43 So I think there was like there was a lot going on that was feeding into these ideas, and, and particularly, sort of me, like trying to figure out who I was and where I fit right. So I had a place. I belonged. Um, I was contributing to something, um, that felt really important. You know, we used to talk about, you know, “you might be tired, but you still went to the bathhouse because you were going to be a good erotic citizen.”
- 00:16:11 [both laugh]
- 00:16:14 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]
- 00:16:23 **Kathryn Payne:** I had lovers in Seattle for a period um in the early 2000s, and I would go out West and do things in Seattle and and Vancouver, and then I had my life in Toronto. Um, and in particular in the SM scene, which I was part of in both places, um, I noticed a really interesting difference. And I've talked with a couple of other people about this, Chloë being one of them, um and they, they sort of backed me up. So, when I was here in SM space and sort of the queer community that kind of flowed out from it, um, there was just kind of an understanding that the femmes were the Doms, um, and that the boys, the butches, were butch bottoms. That was just kind of... that was the default mode, um the sort of taken-for-granted. But then, when I was out West, um, I noticed that it was a really different scene, that there was a lot of butch Daddies, um, and a lot of little girl bottoms. Um, and so I, in that moment, I sort of understood that in Toronto we had a special thing going on.
- 00:17:30 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah.

00:17:31 **Kathryn Payne:** We had a particularly femme-Dom culture, um, that I was living in, that I am still eternally grateful for.

00:17:39 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah, I'm internally grateful as well, [laughs] because I think that, um, having not even been maybe like aware of the fact that that was, um, uh, informing, um, the sort of cultural production that came from Toronto, um, it really helped, uh, kind of shape, uh, my own, um, uh, I guess, perspective and behavior, and, and, um, my own, um, femme-ness. [laughs]

00:18:14 That gives such a good sense of what the context was. You know, it's, like, now, the uh Pussy Palace raids have been kind of at the forefront of, um, some of the, uh, queer organizing, um, because it's come more to the forefront as a result of the, um, appointment of, of a terrible person as the chief of police. [laughs] And, I'm thinking, too, about, um kind of the ways that the sex work histories demonstrate how, like ecologies are really specific, histories are really specific to place and to community. But, uh, I'm also interested, too, to know what, uh, kind of works, um, were coming around that time, and how kind of... um, the approach that you took as well, where you're working together with, um, the authors of *Brazen Femme*, the editors of *Brazen Femme*. Um, one of the pieces that, um, you quote, um, right off the bat is Joan Nestle, like we've talked about, but you also have this really beautiful, um, kind of juxtaposition of different writing in, um, the piece. And so, I'm curious about what informed that, um, decision to have those two pieces together, um, in your chapter.

00:19:55 **Kathryn Payne:** So that decision was made with Chloë and Anna. So, one of the great things about the, the women in my world is the recognition of the power in numbers, right, that when we are collective, we get so much stronger, um, and Chloë and Anna together are like an unstoppable force. They're such a powerhouse, um, and they bring really different complementary, um, skills, but also visions, um, to what they work on, right. So, Anna had come out of um the Taste This Collective—and before I met Anna um I knew about the, the work that Taste This had done, and I had a battered copy of *Boys Like Her* um that I'd read multiple times, like some of the pieces in there I almost knew by heart. Um, and they're really innovative around structure, right? So, they performed, um, but then they also had this book and written pieces. Um, and Chloë, of course, has all sorts of influences from the academy, um, and I have to say part of why I loved the idea of doing it that way was that, you know, when I went to grad school I was really interested in Cixious and Irigaray and l'écriture féminine, and thinking about theory and praxis, theory and and life together, I think, is one of the projects of that. And, um, so, having the text run alongside each other, worked really well. Um, and, also, I'm a poet. And, uh, so yeah, for me, I'm not wedded to, to prose forms, and I actually really preferred when they, when they sort of

said, "Why don't we do columns?" and I—we had to play around with the layout a bunch, you know, old versions of Word, Whee! [laughs] Um, but when I looked at it on the page I was like, "Yes, okay, yes, like this is what works."

00:21:47 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah, it works so well, and I think, um, you know, just as a as a young reader, I felt really inspired by it. I had been in the process of learning, um, different types of, um, queer and trans feminist methods. And this sort of way of, um, centring, like, life experience along with the kind of more theoretical explorations. Um, really, I was like, "oh, this is how you do it!" I'm also wondering if we want to talk a little bit about maybe this, this method, but also, um, the ways that, um, we can kind of explore potential solidarities between, um, you know, femme and sex workers, um, and sex work. Um, so one of the things that... about, about me and my learning is, like, I learned sex work-feminism at the same time I learned about femme, um, so they've never been separate to me, ever. Um, so, you know, the knowledge of sex working femmes, and, and in some of my group, and some of my peers um also identify as "Femme for Pay." I don't know if you've ever heard that before, Kathryn! [laughs]

00:23:19 **Kathryn Payne:** That's brilliant! I love that! That's so good. [laughs]

00:26:25 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Those who are, you know, gender fluid, or, you know...

00:26:28 **Kathryn Payne:** Yep, yep.

00:26:30 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Like "I'm femme for pay" is, is a practice. And, you know, as well as being femme, that all kind of frames my approach to sex work histories. Um, and so on, uh, page 49 of, uh, um, *Brazen Femme* of your um chapter, um there's a little description of femme, um. It says: "femme is the position that deliberate feminine sexual agency often occupies in queer girl subcultures." And, um, I'm wondering, you know, there's a lot of different ways that people talk about femme, and yeah, for me it's always in this kind of like, um, like I said, there is no separation, really, between sex work-feminism and, and femme, and femme experience for me. But I'm wondering if you're interested in exploring a little bit about these potential solidarities, and also about how you were conceptualizing femme at this time while you were writing, and maybe what you think now?

00:24:38 **Kathryn Payne:** Well, I think it was super interesting picking up *Brazen Femme* again, right? And 'cause one of the things that happens is real life. And I hadn't thought for a couple of years, really, about what it means to be femme, right, because you're living, um, and, uh, one of the quotes that really stuck out to me from the intro is that they say, "Here, we blow the whistle on the confines of

femininity." Right? And that was so much what was going on in that moment, right, is we... So, the way I used to talk about it, and can talk about again now, is that when I hit, I don't know, some 20-ish age, I was a super tomboyish straightish, and then bi girl, right, and, um, when I hit that age and I wanted... I, I, I thirsted for elements of femininity. And the way I thought about it was that I kind of, I broke it down. I left femininity, and, uh, and then I got to rebuild it the way I wanted it, right, and the way that actually suited me and my world. And I just have to say a huge piece of what enabled that, and a lot of the people who helped me sort of figure out um a version of femininity that worked for me, that kicked ass, was trans gals. Um, so, Vivian Namaste, her work was pivotal, but also her person. Um, Vivi is one of the, like, snappiest, smartest, no-bullshit, um unapologetic kind of femmes I have ever met, and she also taught me how to hail a cab with considerable flair.

00:26:13 **Sarah York-Bertram:** [laughs]

00:26:15 **Kathryn Payne:** And I think... So, uh, when I was writing the piece I actually took some pains to avoid doing much defining of femme, um, because I think there's a danger of making a new box, right? Um, and I don't want to do that, and I don't want to police who gets to be called femme, who gets to, you know, uh etc., etc. But for me, the femmes I know are ridiculously competent, right? And I think sometimes in our, in the big world, masculinity is supposed to be competent and, kind of, things get called "masculine" if they're competent, right? Um, and, uh, so, you know... But we can all change tires. You know, we can all work on cars. We know how to build things, um, but also sort of the competence that, uh, women end up in charge of all across the world, right, like food, taking care of people, [laughs] etc., right? And, so, femme for me is about being kick-ass. It's about embracing things that have been, um, included in the category of femininity, but getting to cherry pick right, and being like, "okay, so I'm gonna sew patches on things, um, or I'm gonna quilt, um but that doesn't mean that you can diminish me." Right? Like, it's not... so, to try and take things that have been diminished because they're feminine, um, and say, "no, that's the... I'm not accepting the diminishing of this." Right? Um, and so those are some of the things that factor in. Um, and, as I age, too, I'm sort of seeing that, actually, the... You know, Beyoncé is not wrong: girls run the world! [laughs] We keep everything moving, right, and not just... You know, I knew this about the UN and the amount of unpaid work women do, etc., etc., I teach this stuff, right, but also just what I see in the real world is like... I have four brothers. [laughs] They'd all be lost without the women in their lives, right? Like there's the women's work, and women's competence keeps everything going, um, and I think, for me, femme is a name for that, in a way. And sex work is part of that, right?

00:28:27 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Mmm, yes!



- 00:28:28 **Kathryn Payne:** Like, sex work is a part of how women all over the world continue to take care of stuff, right? Continue to keep their families afloat, but also keep economic engines turning. You know, there's been some really interesting work in the past little while about, um, sex workers in the Wild West, right? And how sex work was a really important economic engine in the settler project.
- 00:28:54 **Sarah York-Bertram:** It's true that, um, there is this type of, um, labour in, um, histories of Canada's westward expansion, for example, where people... uh, where the, the economy was highly gendered and a lot of men traveled West for work. And so did, um, many sex workers. It's so important, um, to recognize, in part because the way that the economy was structured was to really treat women—I'm talking about the Western Canadian experience—but to treat them, um, as, uh, wealth builders for future husbands or for husbands. That was really the social role and, and building, um, a, uh, now we know, deeply white supremacist, um, uh, society and culture that privileged the ascendance of whiteness. Sex workers disrupted that so much in the histories, um, that I've studied. But I'm also thinking about just even the influence that sex workers have had on just, like, general aesthetics. Like, over time I've noticed that sex workers have influenced all sorts of, um, cultural production and, uh, expression, um, aesthetics, and queer community. I think one of the things that, uh, I was most struck by when I was doing some of my research, um, more recently on histories of sex work in what is currently, uh, called the province of Alberta in, uh, I think it must be, Calgary, um, so Treaty 4 territory, one of the people, uh, in charge of policing in that area mentioned that there was a necessity for sex work. This is something they said, but that they were bothered by how often the sex workers in the community advertised their services via, uh, lace curtains in the window.
- 00:31:19 **Kathryn Payne:** [laughs]
- 00:31:20 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Um, apparently, this wasn't something that was a wide practice, but in this early twentieth century—so in the early 1900s—if you saw lace curtains in the window of a hotel, one knew that there would be a sex worker potentially working there. And, over time, lace curtains just were normal in the countryside. So, is there... are there kind of like aesthetic things, like in Toronto or elsewhere, that you've noticed, you know, over time sex workers' influences, um, on, uh, the queer community, or just even the way that, you know, buildings look, or, uh, spaces in buildings where maybe, um, sex work happens.
- 00:32:11 **Kathryn Payne:** I think there was a lot of cross-pollination in the early 2000s, um, between sort of queer women's community and um sex worker community. Like

Mirha-Soleil Ross, uh, and her work with Counting Past 2—and just her work generally, like she was so out there and overt and shameless and beautiful—um, it was really inspiring, um, and I think, I think for sure in some ways her work and Counting Past 2 kind of created an aesthetic of their own. There's this, also this overlap between a sort of SM communities and sex work right, and I think a bunch of our, kind of, queer, punk aesthetic, uh, was heavily marked by SM aesthetics, right? Um, and I think... That wasn't random. That was because all sorts of us were Dommies. [laughs]

00:32:59 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Right.

00:33:02 **Kathryn Payne:** And I think if you're gonna pay \$300 for those darn platform boots, [laughs] you're gonna wear them to the parties, too.

00:33:09 [Both laugh]

00:33:11 **Kathryn Payne:** So yeah, I think, you know, like Mistress Patricia Marsh is sort of the, the doyen of the Toronto scene when I got there, and she just recently retired, um, but there were lots of other folks, too, who were working as Dommies, um, and going to grad school or, and working as a barista at Starbucks, [laughs] and working on their performance art work, um etc. Right? So, I think that was the most obvious, um, sort of, form there. I've actually... When I read the piece over, I noticed that at one point I say that "sex workers are unassimilable," um, partly because of that disruptive factor that you talked about. Yeah, and I've been thinking a lot about that, right? Because, I mean, for sure now—you know, I'm 52, I haven't done sex for quite a while, and you could argue that I'm pretty assimilated.

00:34:04 [both laugh]

00:34:06 **Kathryn Payne:** But I think that, that's different from sex work itself, right? I think, in a in a way, there's this respectability impulse, um, that I, uh, think almost every social movement kind of gets sucked into, you know. You can see conflicts in, like, Black, Black community and Black culture around, like the respectable sort of Black folks, and the less respectable Black folks, and you can hear it, uh, in our communities now, too, right, like you've got uh sort of backlash against things like BLM and, uh, younger queer, BIPOC queers' work, right? And I think there is something about the ways that sex work, um, is about autonomous women and autonomous femininity, and, uh, about economic power that can't get folded into patriarchy easily. You know, in New Zealand they've had decriminalization since 2005; I would be super interested to sort of see if that means that there's a possibility of sort of a respectable ho. Do you know what I'm saying?

- 00:35:16 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yup, yeah.
- 00:35:17 **Kathryn Payne:** Like in fiction there is, occasionally, right? There's... So, Firefly, the TV show—
- 00:35:25 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Oh, I love Firefly!
- 00:35:28 **Kathryn Payne:** Inara, one of the crew members, Inara—well, she's not really a crew member she's sort of... but she's a ho! But she belongs to this sort of guild of hos, but in this imaginary, in this fiction, she's more respectable than the rest of the crew!
- 00:35:41 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah.
- 00:35:42 **Kathryn Payne:** She is THE respectability on this ship of folks, right. And, and I love the idea of a future world, a fiction, in which, you know, sex workers are super respectable folks and are organized, and are kind of like nobility or royalty, right? [laughs]
- 00:35:59 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Mhm! Yeah. I love that. And I hope that happens on Earth as well as in space.
- 00:36:05 [both laugh]
- 00:36:08 **Sarah York-Bertram:** So, what do you think gets us to that place that you're talking about, where sex work is valued? And, you know, I'm thinking about the Amy Kaiser and Ray's book on Spread magazine. They note the, uh, rising kind of right wing in feminism in the early 2000s. You mention it as well. On page 48 you write: "Let's face it in the eyes of the rising white—right wing, we are all Jezebel." You know, I, um, almost mispronounced that to "white wing," which um also works! [laughs] But, um, you know, I'm thinking about the ways that, um, historically, sex workers have fought so hard against fascism on a global scale. And, um, I'm also thinking of the ways that whorephobia is so dangerous, and how it impacts sex workers, um, on a global scale as well. You know, if we're thinking about where we've been, so you know, if we're thinking about, for example, some of the experiences from the 2000s, what that mobilized, how it was specific to Canada, where you know... This period was a time when there was a lot of organizing occurring in sex work communities in Canada and internationally. Um, so, in 2008, Terri-Jean Bedford, Amy Lebovitch, and Valerie Scott launched their challenge, um, against, uh, Canada's sex work laws and succeeded in, um, their challenge. In 2010, uh, Justice Susan Himmel issued a decision that struck down sections 2.10 and 2.12, uh, of the Criminal Code, um,

and this was in the context of, um, Ontario. And in, um, I think it was 2013 there was an appeal process that occurred. So, following Justice Himmel’s decision the, uh, federal government, which at that time was a conservative party of Canada which was led by prime minister Harper. Boo! [laughs] Uh, they, um, appealed the decision as did the province, um which, at the time I believe was Liberal under Kathleen Wynne. And the Ontario government, or the Ontario courts, rather, um, granted a stay on the decision. So, um, uh, essentially things were paused for a period of a year. They extended a stay to, uh, continue hearing arguments about, uh, the decision to decriminalize parts of sex work or parts of Canada’s prostitution laws during that period, which had been passed in, um, the late 1800s. That’s how old those laws were that Terri-Jean Bedford, and Amy Lebovitch, and Valerie Scott were challenging.

00:39:40 So, in 2012, um the court of appeal ruled, um, that parts of the criminal code, um, that, uh, criminalized sex work violated sex workers’ Charter rights. And in 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down sections 2.10, 2.12, and 2.13 of the Criminal Code and that was an incredible moment, um, uh, in 2013. There was just a lot of like hope and, um... But that hope was quickly squashed [laughs] by the law that the Conservative party ended up passing. Um, so, they, um, passed the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, which was a very low point in, um, recent, uh, Canadian sex work organizing communities. It was very traumatizing, in part because a lot of sex workers had given, um, statements and showed up for the process of trying to inform what laws would come from, um, the government, and were met with just a lot of patronizing and whorephobia. Uh, but there are ongoing challenging so the law’s days are numbered! The Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, along with five sex worker applicants and one former escort agency owner, presented arguments, um, in Ontario’s Superior Court in Toronto late last year and that’s 2022.

00:41:32 So, what do you think was important to you in thinking about, you know, organizing in that period and also where we are now and how we’re organizing now? I know there are people who are, for example, shout out to Chanelle Gallant doing the important work of, of resourcing people to understand that fascism can thrive in feminism and that it has historically.

00:42:01 **Kathryn Payne:** Yeah. Yeah, Well, and I think one of the answers to sort of the fascist feminist stuff is working in BIPOC communities, right, like, I think Elene Lam's work with Butterfly around migrant sex workers, like I think that's... You can't address those issues within a right-wing frame, like it's just not possible, right? You have to challenge borders. You have to think about, uh, citizenship in a different way. Uh, you have to think about, um, migration and diversity and actual equity, not just diversity, right? Um, so I think that's, that's one of the answers. Um, I also think... So, when I wrote the piece it was before we really—

like, there were TERFs, but we didn't have a word for them, and there wasn't a lot of them, like they didn't have the kind of traction they seem to have now. There was REAL women, you know, but they... their brand of quote unquote feminism wasn't fooling anyone. You know what I'm saying? Um, and uh, when I read the piece now, one of the things that I sort of think to myself is that, um, there was a certain naivete to my goals and writing it, right. I was trying to address, um, some of the misinformation and the stereotypes, um, that I heard out in the big world, and also I'd also started teaching by then, and so I also heard these, these things in the classroom. I've learned to come out as a sex worker really early whenever we talk about any sex worker pro- topics in my classes, so I don't have to hear all the foolishness. I say that. I come out, and I say, you know, "so don't say anything rude!" [laughs]

00:43:35 Um, but I think, you know, I thought that if I could just explain how banal, uh, it was to do sex work in some ways, if I could just sort of talk about some of the, the joys of the experience, if I could just make it... If I could demystify sex work a little that, that, like that would go miles and miles to facilitating decriminalization, to removing, um, some of the, the stigma and dangers, um, that we faced in doing the work, right. Um, but I sort of I think I underestimated, and I wasn't... I wasn't fully aware of—partly because I lived in this glorious little bubble that I've kind of described, right [laughs]—Um, I don't think I was fully aware of how necessary whorephobia is in the maintenance of homonormativity, right? Or, sorry, heteronormativity—sometimes homonormativity, too, I'm afraid, but [laughs] but mostly heteronormativity. Like, a few years ago I, uh, I stayed with a, uh, a lover's sister in another country. And, uh, she's Christian, um, she's a mom, um, she didn't have a full-time job because her full-time job was taking care of the house and the kids, um, and she was very, uh, very frank with us. Actually, she went on a big, long rant [laughs]: and she was upset at the time because a dear friend of hers from her childhood had visited, who was not married, um, and had gone out with her husband to a nightclub. Um, and she was super angry at this woman, um, but it was really obvious to me—she called her "ho," which is why, you, know my ears pricked up and I was like, "ooh, what's this about?" kind of thing. But it was really obvious to me that what was going on there was that this woman who I had met, um, was pretty miserable in her life, right? [laughs] That, that her husband didn't really take any responsibility for the household, didn't really know how to put his kids to bed, um, probably wasn't really seeing her, um, and, uh, she really needed to hate this "ho"—who wasn't even a ho, right? [laughs]—um, because they didn't have to live her life right? And they had autonomy and opportunities, and could go out to the nightclub, and were more attractive to her husband because they weren't, you know, doing all the household stuff and taking care of their children. Um, and I... So, in that moment I sort of had a little bit of a, like, light bulb going over my head, and I was like, "oh." [laughs] Like, you can't just

wipe out whorephobia, um, with education and decriminalization. [laughs] You actually do kind of have to, and this is sort of goes back to the unassimilable right? You actually do kind of have to dismantle heteronormativity. [laughs] Because the sex worker is a foil, right, she isn't a real human being no matter how much we write, [laughs] no matter how much we are real human beings, and no matter how much we put that out there into the world, right, we are way more valuable as a figure um in this logic of the patriarchy, and now, sort of neoliberal, white supremacist patriarchy.

00:46:42 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah, and that's making me think of the context of the pandemic. And how many, um, people were like, women in particular, were ushered into domestic space and economic dependence on men increased significantly. I have not even recovered financially from, you know, there was a major budget cut to one of my jobs that happened at the beginning of the pandemic, and, um, I know I'm not the only person who has had that experience as well. We're in a time when, you know, I'm also thinking about something I've heard Chanelle Gallant say about, um, sex work being crisis work.

00:47:32 **Kathryn Payne:** Yep.

00:47:33 **Sarah York-Bertram:** You know, cost of living is going up. So, we're going to see more and more people doing sex work, and there's also going to be this, this whorephobia and this tension, as people are, like women in particular, are more and more economically dependent on men. I think it's important to, um, note that and to, um you know, you mentioned coming out in, you know, your teaching, uh, to make sure that, or to at least try to reduce the amount of comments that you may hear. And this is actually an intervention that I've made as well in classrooms to say to professors, "actually, there are sex workers in your class. They are there." And when, you know, I've heard of some so-called feminist course directors often treating the topic of sex work as something to debate, that is completely inappropriate in this context. It's always been appropriate, inappropriate, rather, but, you know, in this context, where more and more people are turning to sex work to survive for various reasons... I imagine, Kathryn, you have students who just feel tremendous relief [laughs] when you explain your experience, because I think it, it really resonates with a lot of other, um... a lot of young people right now, especially.

00:49:10 **Kathryn Payne:** Yeah. Well, and that's one of the, the things about when I come out in class. I mean, it's partly to, [laughs] slow down the whorephobic comments, but also I've had all sorts of queer students—both queer and trans to be very clear. Uh, and I think... so what I found since that article, um, since *Brazen Femme* was published, is a sort of more fulsome histories of, um, Toronto's uh queer scene, right? So, um I teach Elise Chenier's really, I think,

incredible article "Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture," um, which looks at, um, the Continental, and, um, the Tenderloin in the 1950s and the 1960s in Toronto, and what, um, what Chenier has found is that the early working-class, um, dyke bars were, uh, sex worker bars. It was sex workers who were there first, partly because of, um, a, I don't know if it's an idiosyncrasy in the liquor license laws—I don't know about other jurisdictions, so I don't know if this was a, a thing that happened in other places. But the liquor licensing laws in the '40s and '50s were set up to separate the so-called sexes. Right, so there would be a ladies and escorts room, and then a gentlemen's room, um partly to protect the ladies and escorts—and they didn't mean escorts like hos—

00:50:27 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah! Important clarification. [laughs]

00:50:29 **Kathryn Payne:** but the ladies were to be protected from the so-called gentlemen who were, you know, um spitting on the floor and um you know swearing and doing other things that, of course, delicate feminine sensibilities couldn't deal with, right. Um but what those women only kind of rooms or women and escort rooms, what they enabled was a place where sex workers could work indoors, right, in the relative safety of their own community with their friends around them, um and where uh Johns—clients—could find them, right? And these were, these women who were sex workers, were also lesbians, right. And sometimes, the butches turned tricks, right, uh, which is, you know, not something that people tend to think of when they think of the history of sex work. It's not just my students now...

00:51:21 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah.

00:51:21 **Kathryn Payne:** ...who are, are often coming out of queer and trans places who are doing sex work, there's been connection between those two communities throughout the history of Toronto, right, and I imagine lots of other places. I just don't know much about the other places, I only know my place, right. So, I think the queer movement actually needs to kind of acknowledge, um, the deeper sex worker history. It's just one of the reasons why I love Chauncey's history of New York, right, "Gay New York." It's, like, rife with stuff about sex work, right? And I think being sexual outlaws has united us for a very long time, and I don't think that's done yet, right. I don't think we're past that. Which, you know, is good, right, because I think there's a lot of support and strength to be had in queer community for hos. But I do also wonder sometimes if... if we had been more overt and honest about sex work in queer communities, if we might have picked slightly different political directions in our queer political projects.

- 00:52:25 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Something you said made me think of, of the, the kind of like... Like, I think the, the what you said about sexual outlaws, and about how, you know, we've been here [laughs] and will be. And one of the parts that really struck me when I was reading this, um, your piece, for the first time was that pleasure piece, that joy piece. I mean, really we are in a time when I think joy can feel very far away. [laughs] I'm wondering if you want to talk a little bit about that, about what you were thinking, you know, when you were writing this, and, you know, even now. Just like... "The Joy of Hoing" is the title of the, this section in your piece. What... what's the joy of hoing?
- 00:53:24 **Kathryn Payne:** [laughs] So the thing about sex work is it's really dramatic in some ways, right, like you can have really intense, sort of awful moments, and then really intense, good moments. Um, I'm also gonna take this opportunity to correct the one typo in the published piece. I've been dying forever to.
- 00:53:43: [both laugh]
- 00:53:46 **Kathryn Payne:** So a lot of women talk about sex work as empowering right, um, and, um, I think there's particular conditions that allow that to happen. Um uh and, but I think one of the main things is sort of you get to step into being a slut and celebrate it. So finally, the fact that my body loves touch gets to be a good thing instead of, like, slightly dangerous, right? [laughs]
- 00:53:10 **Sarah York Bertram:** Yeah.
- 00:54:12 **Kathryn Payne:** But the typo part is: "The tabloids don't"— this is also 55, um and it should say: "The tabloids don't tell how we find good friends and homes in the homosocial world of working women." Some of the women that I met doing sex work are just incredible women. If you look at the, the folks who have worked at Maggie's in Toronto, the folks who have been on the board, uh you find a list of, like, really impressive people. [laughs] Kara Gillies, um, who is kind of the, the, the matriarch of Maggie's, when I started working on the board at Maggie's, um, is one of the most impressive, um, and competent and lovely human beings on earth. Um, but there's other parts to the joy. So, there's the community, um and hos talk to each other, like no one else I have ever encountered. Um, there's a short form and uh, a cheekiness, um and a snappiness that, uh, I think is, is very particular. I think it's culturally specific. Um, but there's also... there's the joy of some of the interactions with the clients, right? So I, in in my time working I had some really memorable calls, right? I've worked with seriously disabled fellas who were so sweet and so kind and so just needed touch, right? Uh, I had a client once who came when I had a dungeon job, um, and he wanted to be tied to the St. Andrews Cross, and tickled.



- 00:55:42 **Sarah York-Bertram:** [laughs] I love that!
- 00:55:44 **Kathryn Payne:** And I will forever remember him because when we took him down after a very intense tickle session—I got most of that one because my nails are short because of my sexual proclivities.
- 00:55:53 [Both laugh]
- 00:55:54 **Kathryn Payne:** Most of the folks that I worked with all that big, long nails, so I mostly did the tickling. But when we took him down at the end of the session he, he sort of patted me on the shoulder in this way that was like respectful and camaraderie. It was just... It was very, um, acknowledging and thanking, right, in gratitude. I'll never forget that. I had another client; it took, like, half the call for me to ferret out what it was that he wanted, um and what he wanted was, um, to be put in a pseudo diaper and held and bounced like a baby. And that that was what he paid, like, quite a bit of money [laughs] to have someone do. And he had so much trouble saying it. Like, it really, it's a, it's a testament to our skills as sex workers sometimes that we can give people what they want, because our culture does not train people how to talk about what they want at all.
- 00:56:46 **Sarah York-Bertram:** No!
- 00:56:47 **Kathryn Payne:** And often they come to us full of shame about whatever it is, right? And so that, that call I will always remember, partly because he was a heavy guy and so bouncing him up and down was not easy, [laughs] but also because it took so much work to get to what he wanted, and he was so... like the relief, the joy, the, the... I can't even explain his, his expression at the end of the call, like I think he also maybe felt seen in a way he hadn't been? And, so, there's, there's moments like that right that are really precious. And when I say in the book that one of the things we do is social work, I'm not kidding. [laughs]
- 00:57:27 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yes!
- 00:57:28 **Kathryn Payne:** There's also, honestly, the joy of being bawdy and disrespectful, not respectable, irreverent, and not having an institutional structure “tsk tsk” or frown at you. Right? Um, so I really... that's I think, part that I miss a lot. I don't... I love my job, I love teaching, and I'm very grateful for the wage, but the institution is onerous, right?
- 00:57:52 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yeah.
- 00:57:53 **Kathryn Payne:** The institution is relentlessly heteronormative right, even when it's trying not to be.

00:57:57 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Yes!

00:57:58 **Kathryn Payne:** There was an afternoon when I went out for lunch with a group of my colleagues. Um, uh we're close to the St. Lawrence Market where I work, so we toddled down to the St. Lawrence Market and, um, one of the more senior of them, um, was talking about how he paid for university by working as a longshoreman, um, uh and how he managed to save up lots of money because it doesn't pay that badly and on the weekends, when all the other fellas on the boat would go into town for parties and whores, uh, he would just stay put and study and etc. Um, and so, after that comment I just couldn't stay quiet. [laughs] So, um, I talked about, um, what it was like to work in a dungeon. [laughs] And I partly you know got through parts of grad school working as a ho. Um, and, uh, you know the silence after my little anecdote [laughs] was resounding, right? [laughs] So, he's allowed to talk about being a longshoreman, and it doesn't kind of take away from his patina of professionalism, right? But I'm not allowed to talk about having been a ho, right? So, there's this: there's this ongoing, um, set of gendered and, and hetero narratives about who were allowed to be, or who are allowed to be and maintain authority, etc.

00:59:27 **Sarah York-Bertram:** That's... that's a really interesting anecdote about yeah, just the silence after sharing. Um, yeah I'm also thinking, too, um, about just in Spread, in the early 2000s history that Spread, um, mentions, there's this kind of, um, dominating narrative of empowerment that they flag. That says, that they write, "contributed into a growing stigma against sex workers whose experience isn't strictly empowering." And I find that when I'm talking about histories of sex work, or even just, um, thinking of different kinds of projects. Uh, for example, some friends of mine we were going to try to, uh, kind of make like a comic of like historical, um, sex work histories. And what we found was that a lot of people, even the people we are trying to work with who are not anti-sex work, were, like, uncertain about how to feel when engaging with the subject matter and the sources because, I think, that narrative of empowerment, which is, you know it holds truth, but is not reflective of everyone's experience. Um, it, it makes it so people don't know how to talk about sex work, or how to talk about like diverse experiences, without, you know, naming something as like naming sex work as like all bad or, you know, all good, um and part of what struck me about your piece when I read it for the first time, is that it was like you were turning on a light, and being like, "it's actually all of it." There are a range of experiences, and sex workers, um, have to navigate, due to criminalization and whorephobia and stigma, um, horrible working conditions. And so yeah, I'm just thinking about like, yeah, the anecdote that you just shared and the silence, and the silence that often comes up for me when I'm presenting to people and they're like, "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel, or how I'm supposed to

interact with this information," and sometimes they might even say, "Wow, your area of expertise, or your area of, of research sounds really sad."

01:02:04 **Kathryn Payne:** Interesting! I think one of the... I've been so lucky, right? Because I already knew about sex worker organizing when I started to do sex work, and so, um, I knew where to plug in, um, partly because of the, the sort of cultural connections in my communities. Um, and so in 2005 I went to Montreal, um, for a conference that Stella, the sex worker organization of Montreal, had organized. Um, I think it was, yeah, Forum XXX. And I actually think Stella is an amazing organization that way, because I think they deal with those complexities all the time quite well. Um and, but one of the things that really struck me at Forum XXX—there was like a lot going on. It was an international forum. We had a, a speaker from New Zealand who basically explained how the sex workers there had organized around decrim to get, to actually get decriminalization. Um, there were folks from, from, uh, India who are talking about their specific issues. There was a performance troop from Australia called Debbie Doesn't Do It For Free that I just loved. But the, the thing that really blew me away about that conference was not necessarily the international, or the, or the people who were sort of the, the presenters. But was the, the conversations among us as we move through the, the time and the agenda, right? Because in sex worker space, there can be these really honest conversations. Um, and one of the things that I've noticed among the folks, the women, that I've worked with is that, um, there needs to be sometimes—and I'm sure this is true of just about any service industry job—where you're just really rude about the clients, right? You're just, like, really rude and crass and nasty. [laughs] And that's one part of it right? And then, there's sort of talk about working conditions, and working conditions, you know, range from, "how much time you have to put in for free on the phones for this boss?" to, you know, "Where can you get cheap stockings?" Right?

01:04:09 Um, and, uh, and then I think there's also the, the places of empowerment, the things that, that are joyous and, um, you know, the sharing of stories about, sort of, moments of empowerment and joy. Um, but yeah, and I really, I think, in the piece I was trying really hard to make it clear that my experience of sex work is a particularly privileged experience, right? Um, and, uh, it still really, really is, right. In as much as, you know, I was also able to leave, um, uh, when I wanted to. Um, and, um, yeah, and so I think it's not the same experience for anyone. Every single person is gonna have a really different experience. And unfortunately, we live in a really messed up, unequal world. Um, and so, for the folks who are coming out of poverty, for the folks who are coming out of isolated communities, for the folks who, um, are BIPOC, for folks who are Indigenous especially, um, there's like a lot of extra, horrifying baggage. Um I, you know, I think, about the Cindy Gladue case, um, and I think it's really important to acknowledge that it's all, this is all, these are all parts. And sometimes sex

workers are really, pivotally and historically important— Stormy Daniels. Um, so I think you know, it is a really mixed bag, and frankly, most jobs are like that, right? Like, you know, teaching has its high end, and its very low end, right, like.

01:05:48 **Sarah York-Bertram:** No, it's so true. And um yeah, I think the fact that we can, um, hold, uh, this space around complexity, around the complexity of you know, like, the, the sexual agency piece that you, um, uh wrote about at the beginning of the piece, um, and you know, using Joan Nestle's work, um, to, uh, flesh that out. Um, yeah, just holding all of the complexity, uh, is so important. And I think, like we've, we've talked about, just the direction that things are heading where probably more young people are going to be doing sex work, and there is just going to be more and more, um, you know, complex experiences, um, it's important to keep that space, um, because it's... I think when we hold space for, uh, these complex conversations—and also for sex work-centered space that sex workers can talk to each other—it is anti-fascism, really.

01:07:07 **Kathryn Payne:** Yes, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And I mean the other thing about sex work going forward is that sex workers are really smart and innovative, right? Like cam girls?

01:07:13 **Sarah York-Bertram:** Oh my god!

01:07:14 **Kathryn Payne:** Like there's all these innovative, new ways of doing sex work that, um, are... many of them are ways that workers can control their working conditions more, right. Um, and so, I think technology is being used really well, um, by sex workers to enhance the empowerment side and decrease the risk and stigma side. Now, unfortunately, law makers are trying to stomp out any sort of... I think they're, we're playing this, you know, usual game of whack-a-mole: as fast as we come up with new ways to do things, the fascist law maker sorts, they find ways to shut that stuff down, right.

01:07:55 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

01:08:04 **Kathryn Payne:** [laughs] That was super fun!

01:08:07 **Sarah York-Bertram:** It's all been so good and I don't want to stop but also... [laughs]

01:08:11 **Kathryn Payne:** Thank you so much, you guys, this was really fun, and I'm really I When I picked this up and looked it through again. I was like this is really important. I'm super glad you guys are commemorating it and, and shining a spotlight on it. Because, yeah, I think it's, it's awesome.

01:08:26 [Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

01:08:42 **Andi Schwartz:** This podcast was created at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University, in collaboration with the Media Creation Lab at the Scott Library. It has been produced and recorded by me and edited by Rafia Naz and Maykel Shehata. The podcast is sponsored by a number of departments at York University — the Digital Scholarship Centre at the Scott Library, the Institute for Research in Digital Literacy, the Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Graduate Program, the Sexuality Studies Program, the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, and the Communication and Cultural Studies Joint Program with Toronto Metropolitan University. Thank you for listening.