

Episode 6: “‘Femme Persists’: Andi Schwartz in Conversation with Anna Camilleri and Chloë Brushwood Rose about the Evolution of Femme through Time, Place, and Friendship”

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

00:00:16 **Andi Schwartz:** Hi. I’m Andi Schwartz, and this is Still Brazen: 20 Years of Queering Femininity, a podcast celebrating the 20th anniversary of the publication of book *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. This podcast was created at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University in Toronto, a place also known as Tkaranto. The current treaty holders of this land are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and it has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendatt. Place has been really central to the conversations we’ve been having so far on this podcast, and maybe most especially in the episode you’re about to hear; the femme culture we have been revisiting is really specific to Toronto, has been shaped by the particularities of Toronto, and I know everyone who has taken part in these conversations has a lot of gratitude for the land and the place.

00:01:07 This final episode of the podcast brings together the editors of *Brazen Femme*: Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri. Chloë Brushwood Rose is a Professor of Education at York University. Her research and writing take up visual and arts-based research methods, community-engaged media, self-representation and narrative, and feminist and queer cultures. Chloë has published widely in books and journals, including *Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Gender and Education*, and *Visual Studies*, and is co-author and co-editor of several books, including the Lambda finalist *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* with Anna Camilleri. Anna Camilleri is an interdisciplinary artist with a body of work that spans literature, interdisciplinary performance, and visual public artwork and installation. Her book publications, including *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, co-edited with Chloë Brushwood Rose, have been recognized with distinctions from the LAMBDA Literary Foundation, the Association of Independent Publishers, and the American Library of Congress. She is an Intergenerational LGBT Artist Residency alum, a University of Toronto (Scarborough) Department of Arts, Media, and Culture artist residency alum, a Centennial College Theatre Arts and Performance sessional professor, and a Toronto Arts Council/Metropolitan Toronto University Leaders Lab fellow. Anna is founding artistic co-director of ReDefine Arts which was established in 2005 as Red Dress Productions.

00:02:40 So, I have known Chloë for almost 10 years — she was my supervisor as a grad student and introduced me to Anna’s work, and Anna was our keynote speaker at the Critical Femininities conference last year. So it was really wonderful to continue thinking about femme with them through this podcast. This

conversation is really beautiful. Chloë and Anna have been collaborators basically since they met in Toronto in the 90s. They edited *Brazen Femme*, of course, the book we’ve been revisiting and celebrating; but they also worked together on the book *Boys Like Her: Transfictions* which was created by the Taste This collective that Anna co-founded. That book has been referenced many times already in the podcast. They also curated a program for the Inside Out film festival called *Femme Frenzy* and an installment of the *Strange Sisters* cabaret, that was once a fixture at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. They told me about how these collaborations have deepened and nourished their friendship, and their closeness is really evident when you listen to them talk. I always tear up when anyone starts Talking about femmeship, and they had some really touching things to say about it, too.

00:03:50 This conversation went to some really deep places! They told me about femme life in Toronto in the 90s—the fun and wild-sounding parties, of course, but also how it was set against the backdrop of the Montreal massacre and ongoing misogynist violence that made being femme such an act of bravery. They also take us along a femme evolution, how being femme has changed with age, with life, and where they find femme now, connected to land, to heritage, and always, to each other. I don’t want to give it all away! So we’ll get to the conversation now, as they start at the beginning, telling the story—I think for the first time—about how they met.

00:04:28 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:04:37 **Andi Schwartz:** Um, so while we're talking about queer community, I wonder if I can ask you to tell me the story of how you became friends and collaborators?

00:04:46 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** A lover of mine in Vancouver became good friends with Anna, and said, “oh, you, you should meet Anna. You know, she's great. You would get along,” and I was sort of, like—

00:04:57 [Anna laughs]

00:04:58 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Consumed with my jealousy about her becoming friends with Anna. So I was like, “I'm not gonna... I don't need to know this Anna person,” you know. And then uh I moved to Toronto and—to come to grad school—and I was at a party—and actually it was one of the first Dirty Babettes that Christy Cameron curated and put on—and it was in the backyard of a, of a big, you know, shared house in the West End somewhere, and um I ran into Anna at the, at this party, and because we were in Toronto, and in this different context, and, and, you know, I felt really excited to see her there. And I was like, “oh, I know who you are...” I have a very strong visual memory of that night, both the event, the house, and I can remember Anna very clearly. And I remember we

were talking in the hallway, you know. Yeah, and so that was the first time we met. We, we kept seeing each other. And then I did the photos for *Boys Like Her*, I think shortly after that.

00:5:55 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.

00:05:56 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And so, it was really doing those photos, I think where we built our own... really, like, started to build our own intimacy.

00:06:04 **Anna Camilleri:** I remember very well, our photography sessions because they were really intimate.

00:06:10 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:06:10 **Anna Camilleri:** And, you know, we had already built a friendship, and it was a friendship that grew really quickly. I remember that we spent... I mean it was just hours.

00:06:20 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:06:21 **Anna Camilleri:** It was, it was like, it was a day that we spent together, you know, and we were new to one another. Yeah, sharing *Boys Like Her*, I mean, I can't imagine that book without the images.

00:06:31 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Well, that was our first experience of collaboration.

00:06:34 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.

00:06:35 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Because it was such a collaborative process. It's true that the, the photos we did were actually quite intimate in some sort of typical ways, but for me it was that... You know when people share their creative ideas with you? To me that's one of the most intimate things you could do.

00:06:50 **Anna Camilleri:** Absolutely. Yup.

00:06:51 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** It's so vulnerable to say like, “this is what I think might work,” or, you know, like.... Through that whole process, we, we were also developing this kind of...

00:07:01 **Anna Camilleri:** You know, I, I think that the, the photo shoot or photo shoots with you, Chloë, for *Boys Like Her*, they were deeply collaborative, and that was part of the, the intimacy that was, that was really built between us. And it, it took us—and me—so far away from the subject/object dynamics and relationships.

- 00:07:20 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:07:21 **Anna Camilleri:** I hated being photographed. Uh, I still don't like being photographed, and, and... Um, but you know the great exception for me has been... was being photographed by you and it, and it was because I didn't feel like a subject.
- 00:07:38 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Hmm. Mhm.
- 00:07:39 **Anna Camilleri:** And, and that wasn't really the nature of the relationship. So yeah, they were very intimate events that I, I feel like really formed a basis of trust in our relationship. And I, and I don't think that I would have invited you to do it if there already wasn't some trust, but...
- 00:07:55 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** We spent a lot of time working on these different projects, and also just spending time together. I mean, you know, there was no texting or like, there was no... Like you, just to spend time, you, like, went to someone's house.
- 00:08:06 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:08:06 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like, you just go over in the morning, and then you just stay there all day. You just spend time around each other.
- 00:08:11 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:08:12 **Andi Schwartz:** I love hearing this kind of stuff about um how your friendships and your community developed and unfolded and engaged because it's so different than the context that I'm in, right, so. So, I'm just really curious to hear a little bit about, a little bit more about, yeah, what was the femme community in, in Toronto like at that time?
- 00:08:32 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** I, you know I moved to Toronto in '96, and it immediately felt different to me. I felt like I arrived to a place where many of the most exciting cultural spaces were led by femmes. I, I wouldn't even say that femmes were necessarily identifying each other yet. I mean, that's partly, I think, why we made *Brazen Femme*, is that we wanted to...
- 00:08:57 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:08:57 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Take what we saw, and actually name it as something. And you know, yes, people identified as femme, but there wasn't a sense that, the way there is now, of femme as like a political, a site of political solidarity; that I, that was not my experience at the time. So, so for me, it just... it wasn't the

femme community, there wasn't a community per se, but... Um, and the book was an attempt, I think, to build community actually.

00:09:22 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm, mhm.

00:09:23 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** But there was this reality where, like, if you looked around at like, Desh Pardesh festival, at most literary events, queer literary events, Buddies in Bad Times, uh, the leather community, the kink community, um, you know, like on and on... books, the women's bookstore, like all of these spaces, had femmes at the head, at the.... leading, you know, like were leading these spaces.

00:09:47 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah, yup.

00:09:49 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** So it was just like... for coming to Toronto and being like, what is this place I'm in? And it was the same, like, that night at Dirty Babette: Christy Cameron was putting on these cabarets and it was really the start of the cabaret scene in Toronto, and femmes were leading those events or producing those events. So I was like...

00:10:08 [Anna laughs]

00:10:09 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** I mean, I remember arriving in Toronto and I was sleeping on the floor of someone's apartment, people I barely knew. I remember they were like, “we're going to Buddies to the dun— there's, there's a dungeon night, like, you should come.” And I remember being like, “okay!” Like having no...

00:10:23 [Anna laughs]

00:10:24 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And I went, and I remember walking in—it was the main space, like this is how popular this event was back then.

00:10:28 [Anna laughs]

00:10:30 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** The *main* space was this party. It was...

00:10:33 **Anna Camilleri:** Oh my, it was packed.

00:10:34 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** But, like, you were so many femmes, like high femmes, leather femmes. I was like, “oh, my God!” Like, I was coming from a place where I felt like I couldn't even go to the bar in a dress. Like it was just shockingly different.

00:10:49 **Anna Camilleri:** Yes. Yes.

- 00:10:51 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And yet it still felt, like, tenuous. Like it... We didn't feel, I don't know, Anna, of this is true for you, but it didn't feel like we had the power, really. I mean femme still felt like a dangerous position to occupy.
- 00:11:03 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:11:04 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Even in, even in queer spaces. Even in queer spaces.
- 00:11:06 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah absolutely. There were lots of femmes around, identifying as femme, identifying as Diesel femme, low femme, high femme, like lots of different terms, and there, there was a sense of precarity like. You know, my experience at the time, even though I had a kind of um, you know, I had some agency and voice and a kind of power in our communities, but there was, there was still very much the subject/object relation around femme.
- 00:11:36 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:11:37 **Anna Camilleri:** That femme, you know, it was assumed that femmes were attached to, you know, some masculine—
- 00:11:42 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:11:43 **Anna Camilleri:** That, that we, that we were, um, that we weren't people who were moving through communities, like, uh with our own agency and our own ideas. And so how femme was located—and I would say, not by me or by Chloë—but in the culture that we were moving through was, was deeply disturbing, I think, to both of us, and disempowering. And so that was... That was part of the place that *Brazen Femme* came from was like, you know, “you got this wrong, like, that's not who we are.”
- 00:12:11 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah. And Anna, I feel like, you know, for us also in our personal experiences, like there was this also work of educating the people in our lives.
- 00:12:21 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:12:22 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And, and I feel like, even in our relationships with friends and lovers who—especially butch-identified or masculine-of-centre friends and lovers—like there was this work of saying, “No, like, femme is not this, like... we're not your accessory. We're not your, you know, we're not your...”
- 00:12:40 **Anna Camilleri:** Foil, trope, appendage, you know, add-on...

- 00:12:46 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, or like, sex toy. Like... It's not just like, your, [laughs] you know. I think, like, that, that, that, that was in a way... You see that in in the introduction to *Brazen Femme* that we were, like, in a way, some of the ideas, like you were saying, Andi, seem really contemporary now, because in a way, now that's how femmes talk about femme. But at the time, I, I really feel like we were saying those things for the first time in many ways, for ourselves.
- 00:13:14 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:13:15 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like it's not that other people hadn't done that, I mean people like Joan Nestle and Amber Hollibaugh also had said things like this, but it felt really, like, new. And, like, you know, it was so... femme was so tied to butch. And that's why, you know, the book is so... Like in our intro, we sort of are insistent about this idea of femme on its own terms, and it's... Now that sort of sounds like, “well, obviously,” but at the time it wasn't obvious.
- 00:13:38 **Anna Camilleri:** It wasn't obvious.
- 00:13:39 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** It wasn't obvious to anybody. Like no one had had really... Yeah, it felt radical at the time. I mean, it's the thing I'm proudest of about the book, is that we were trying to establish that self-determination for femmes. Like, and for ourselves.
- 00:13:54 **Andi Schwartz:** Yeah. I think that's like another one of the biggest, um, for sure, one of the biggest impacts of that book. I was talking earlier about bringing together like art and prose as like one of the major legacies of it, but I think it's that intentional shift that it activated towards thinking about femme on its own, or on, “on our own terms.” Um, and I think making it an anthology was also really important, because you did... It was not just, “this is just what Chloë and Anna think” it was like, “Look.” I guess I didn't really know that, that it was actually more of a, the capturing. It was capturing a moment and a feeling of the time, right?
- 00:14:34 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah, I mean, we had to be brazen to establish, to claim our self-determination, I think. Like, you can't do that softly.
- 00:14:41 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:14:42 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** There wasn't the same political discourse around femme. So, in fact, if anything, like, I think being femme still felt quite vulnerable, and felt kind of dangerous, and felt kind of marginalized, which is again part of the reason we called it *Brazen Femme*, is that we were, I think, responding to a context. You know, Andi, as you know, like in your work, like your generation of

femmes, I think there's been a real turn back to like, you know, softness and vulnerability.

00:15:12 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.

00:15:13 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And all these kinds of things, and I, and I think that's probably in response to your zeitgeist. For us, like our zeitgeist, we were already like... softness was not what we needed. We needed like something else, you know, to respond to the zeitgeist we were in. So, and yeah we weren't the only people I mean, there are other, I'm thinking of the Harris and Crocker anthology that came out around that time, like there were other.... other people were having these same thoughts, like femme needed to be thought about in, in new ways and, and I think it was also a civil rights movement, I mean, we were responding to an experience that they didn't have the same rights and like powers and, you know, safety, that other people in the queer community had, right, so.

00:15:54 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah, yeah. And it's important—

00:15:55 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah.

00:15:56 **Anna Camilleri:** To name that Chloë, because I, I think, um, you know, I have so much appreciation for femmes today who are talking about and creating work and embracing softness. But when I cast my memory back to 20 years ago, and the place that *Brazen Femme* came from in my own life, it's important to acknowledge that I—what? How? In 2002 I was 32 years old, and, and I had the experienced a lot of gender-based violence in different forms of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence—

00:16:29 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:16:30 **Anna Camilleri:** In queer community, as a queer person, as a femme, queer person.

00:16:34 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:16:35 **Anna Camilleri:** So, the need to, to really establish the frame and use that phrase “on our own terms...”

00:16:44 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:16:45 **Anna Camilleri:** Femmes on our, on our own terms, was really unhinging from a whole bunch of different things. One of them, like, in that unspoken

community narratives, like, there was also violence, like the, the presence of violence.

00:16:59 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:17:00 **Anna Camilleri:** And, and so that toughness for me was very important. That was a very important political stance. It was, it was necessary, and, you know, even considering softness, um, really didn't appear on my radar until, in a real way, until many, many, many years later, because there was so much risk, actually, um.

00:17:23 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:17:24 **Anna Camilleri:** Connected with softness, like acknowledging vulnerability or need, um, that came, coming from that place or from that experience, right?

00:17:33 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah, it's very. It's actually very moving for me to think about, because we, Anna and I, are both people who experienced gender-based silence from early childhood, you know, because we were girls because and, and, because we were a particular kind of girl, too, like. So, we're both survivors of violence, like lifetimes of that, and we still are ourselves. Like we were still like, “No, I'm still gonna wear whatever the fuck I want to wear, and I'm still gonna be the femme I am, and the girl I am, and the...” you know? And, uh, it was risky, and it continues to be, and it's riskier now for some women and some femmes than others.

00:18:13 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.

00:18:14 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like, for sure. And um, like it, it just really reminds you when, you know, and Anna says that, like, it was so... uh, such a sign of, like, life and vitality, that we just continued to, you know, be that, be ourselves in that way, and that we, we were like, “No, we're just gonna make more spaces for this” like, “you, you don't get to, to tell us that we don't get to have this pleasure in ourselves, pleasure in our bodies...”

00:18:42 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.

00:18:43 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Pleasure in our, our sexuality and our, our, our gender experience. And that does take a brazenness, I think, and it takes bravery. The fact that we keep existing, and that we kept existing as femme, despite the gender-based violence we experienced, or the femmephobia we experience, like it is radical. It is it is like amazingly powerful.

00:19:06 **Andi Schwartz:** I was gonna say, too, that I think it's actually taken a really long time to shake that femmephobia. So, I probably started identifying as femme

probably, like, not quite 10 years after, but, you know, close to 10 years after, like, the book was published, and it's still, at that time, femmephobia, was still very much the flavor...

00:19:26 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.

00:19:26 **Andi Schwartz:** that we are experiencing. And I, so, I started my Masters in 2013, so, 10 years ago. I had a grad student—like when, you know, we had to do that introductory, “this is what my masters is about”— a grad student say to me, “uh, isn't it more important to be butch?” Like, truly perplexed by my topic—

00:19:44 **Anna Camilleri:** Hmm. Yes.

00:19:45 **Andi Schwartz:** And why on earth I'd want to, you know, study femininity and femme. And I think between that point and now, I think it's like almost like a 180. Obviously, I think, like, you're right, femmephobia is still insidious and shifting, and it has shifted. But like the way that I think that there's been a lot of effort to appreciate femmes publicly.

00:20:05 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:20:06 **Andi Schwartz:** And to like, really mobilize this appreciation for all of the work that femmes do culturally...

00:20:10 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm, mhm.

00:20:12 **Andi Schwartz:** In the community and all that kind of thing, but...

00:20:15 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm, mhm. Yeah, I mean, I, I worry a bit. I, I... it must... It's probably just my... because of my own... partly because of my own history, and like the ways that that produces a particular kind of hypervigilance in me, but I—

00:20:29 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.

00:20:29 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** I do worry about the quote femme appreciation. [laughs] I think that it's very easy to perform that—and as many other folks can attest to—in a kind of tokenistic way, but not in a way that actually forces cultures to examine their, like, and people to examine their assumptions and beliefs. And then when you have like H&M with like “femme” T-shirts, and you have, you know, “Harry Styles is a femme.”

00:20:58 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.

- 00:20:59 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And like you, have this white, mainstream co-optation or appropriation of femme, you actually just endanger further the queerest femmes, the, the femmes who are most vulnerable. The femmes who are, you know, because of who... because of transness, because of race, because of class, like, for whatever reason.
- 00:21:24 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:21:24 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like what other, other, other vectors of vulnerability like. Like, I see I, I do think there's been a shift, and I am glad, but I also worry that it's um... You know, we like to feel better, so we're very quick to be like, “oh, it's good now,” you know? “It's good now.”
- 00:21:41 **Anna Camilleri:** Mm, mhm.
- 00:21:42 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** But I actually think we live in a deeply, deeply misogynist and femmephobic culture.
- 00:21:46 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:21:47 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** So I just don't think that has changed, really.
- 00:21:50 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah, it's real because the, the world hasn't completely transformed, Chloë, in the last 20 years. [laughs]
- 00:21:55 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Well, no!
- 00:21:56 **Anna Camilleri:** Like there is still.... Um, yeah, there, there are conversations that we were having 20 and 30 years ago that, that, that we're having now. And there are, there are civil rights that have, have actually disappeared in the intervening years, right, like to acknowledge that, and I, I don't want to stay here too long, but I just want to acknowledge something that floated into my memory, that in 1989 there was, you know, this terrible event that's been now regarded as the Montreal massacre. And I was at the time taking a couple of courses at York University. I was working full time, but I remember being up on the campus right after all of these women were murdered in Montreal. And, uh, I have this memory of these tunnels...
- 00:21:50 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:21:50 **Anna Camilleri:** On campus, and is spray painted slogans, spray painted in red saying, “Down on your bitch knees.” Multiple slogans like that painted all over the campus. And I remember the feeling in my body. Uh, I was working at the time at Sistering drop-in centre for women, and there were some really great

women who I met there. Um, and one of the women is a woman named Jackie, who, uh, gave me the word “femme”—

00:23:21 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Hmm.

00:23:21 **Anna Camilleri:** For myself. She was like, “You're a femme, girl!” And Jackie...

00:23:24 [Chloë laughs]

00:23:26 **Anna Camilleri:** Was about 10 years older than me and, um, a trans woman and sex worker, and you know, so I'm just thinking because we've been spending this time talking about these histories, and it was just such a strong memory that came back to me of, you know, this seminal moment in my life of like... There was something about being on campus and being... and, and seeing these slogans that, that externalized something that I knew in my body, that I experienced in my life. And, and that really was, for me, um, a precursor of...

00:24:00 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:24:01 **Anna Camilleri:** You know, identifying as femme and the beginning of, like, producing work from this place of, like, “I am choosing this identity that, that puts me at risk.” And it's not being femme, inherently, that puts me at risk, but it's the, you know, opting not to, you know, wear a paper bag and hide, but to actually choose this site, um, for me, that was a really, like... that was a really important and terrifying time in my life.

00:24:28 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:24:29 **Anna Camilleri:** That really.... what is the word that I'm looking for? That...

00:24:32 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like a catalyst or a....

00:24:34 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah, it was a, a catalyst.

00:24:35 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah.

00:24:36 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.

00:24:37 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah, it's.. It makes me think about the ways that femme has emerged across contexts, um, in terms of, like, the ballroom scene and the sex worker communities, and... Because when you said that, Anna, I thought, “oh, yeah, like that was, of course,” I mean, we were both in our late teens at that time, like when that that event happened.

- 00:24:56 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:24:57 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** There's something about choosing to be yourself that, despite those events, that I think is very profound, right.
- 00:25:03 **Anna Camilleri:** Absolutely.
- 00:25:04 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And also being seen by another like in that story you're seen by this other femme, it sounds like, yeah.
- 00:25:11 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah, yeah. And then taking myself to the Toronto Women's Bookstore and spending all of this time looking for, like, “what work do you have that's been created by femmes?” And I'd spend hours in the bookstore, and encountered Dorothy Allison and Jewelle Gomez. Both that, like that terrible event in our history, and then this connecting, like recognition of who I was, like, giving me a word and the name that I really needed to understand myself. And then connecting, like making these broader cultural connections and like, “wow, we do exist. There's not just me. There's a whole bunch of us.”
- 00:25:48 [Chloë laughs]
- 00:25:48 **Anna Camilleri:** “In, in different places and communities across generations, across times, across decades, across...” like the sense of lineage.
- 00:25:55 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:25:26 **Anna Camilleri:** It was the sense of lineage, you know, and, and also understanding that there is, the sense of risk was not something uniquely felt by me, but, but felt by many. And, and despite the risk and the risks that, that, you know, we've chosen this brazenness.
- 00:26:13 **Andi Schwartz:** I'm just curious what you think about how, by observing and engaging with young people, how you've seen, like, femme identity and queer identities change, and maybe is there something that, something hopeful in that that you see?
- 00:26:28 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** You know, I don't know that I feel hopeful like “oh, everything's gonna get better” like that's... I don't, I think that I don't know, that have that sense of linear, progressive time. I think that's a really, like, colonial and patriarchal kind of concept. But I do have... I do feel inspired by what I imagine will be the new creative ways that people become themselves and insist on their self-determination. Like, continue to do that, and... Um, you see, I think, you know, there are lots of ways of being femme now that I couldn't have imagined, you know, when I was in my 20s and, yeah, and I celebrate that, like. I think that

there, there's growing pains, and like moments of tension between, between generations in that way. But I think for me, like, I've really come out on the other side of that feeling very excited about what younger queers are saying and expressing about femme. And I don't have to understand it. That's the awesome part, because I don't have to understand it all. I can just be like, “ooh, this is fun. I can just watch this.”

00:27:29 [Both laugh]

00:27:30 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** “Watch this unfold.” You know? I don't really understand non-binary femme, but I love that it exists, and that I get to just like [laughs] you know, watch it kind of be in the world, and see what it does. And you know, and I also celebrate so deeply, you know, every femme's right to, you know, name themselves, and you know, be themselves.

00:27:55 **Anna Camilleri:** And, you know, when I think about some of the, the Gen Z femmes who I know and work with, it is one of the things that I most deeply appreciate is, is how models of care are really talked about and externalized. And, you know, and of course, Chloë, we care for one another in these really deep ways. But it, it's taken me such a long time to be able to identify, you know, care as like a, a legitimate thing that I need to give to myself.

00:28:26 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:28:27 **Anna Camilleri:** And, and so one of the things that I really appreciate about Gen Z femmes, many of whom do identify as queer, uh, non-binary femmes, is these models of mutual aid and mutual care that are, you know, directly linked to access intimacy, and, and that are really smart, intelligent, um, you know, deeply thought-out kind of systems. That's you know, that include like femmes across many different spaces and, and, and states of being, and wellness and unwellness, and an expectation of, uh, care...

00:29:05 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:29:06 **Anna Camilleri:** Both given and received within community models. And, and that was something that we did with and for one another, Chloë, and that we've done through our friendship.

00:29:14 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:29:15 **Anna Camilleri:** But, but I feel like that wasn't something that was really present in our communities.

00:29:20 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** No.

- 00:29:21 **Anna Camilleri:** That, you know, care is a word that just was not really on the map.
- 00:29:26 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** No, and there, there was a wariness, too, between femme, like... because we were...
- 00:29:32 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:29:33 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Um, as there often is among people, like, who are marginalized within the dom- more dominant culture, which it felt, still felt like in queer spaces. You know... It's like, “Can I trust you? Are we gonna compete for the same resources?” Like, there was this wariness. And, and of course that's amplified, because patriarchy does that to girls and women, anyway, like it's kind of amazing how much care we did offer each other, given that we were also fighting those, um, kinds of dynamics. Yeah, and I think what's interesting is that... I mean, I, I agree, I think, that's such a wonderful, like, turn in our, in queer culture and in, in, in queer femme culture now. You know, if I, if you asked me like, “what are the moments when you felt most femme?” Like they, they wouldn't be the moments I, like, walked into a bar fully made up. Like, the moments when I felt most femme were probably moments I was in, like, closest intimacy with other femmes. And usually, that was in sites of care, like...
- 00:30:30 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:30:31 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Which I, I agree, we weren't as explicit about, or we didn't really know how to talk about—but, you know, when Anna broke up with a lover and I went and slept in her bed with her, and, you know, and she cried, and I was there, or when I, you know, got sick, and someone came over and painted my nails or massaged my back, or like when Kathryn broke her knee, and I was, like, over there.
- 00:30:53 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:30:54 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And I, she, like, she's like, “I just need to be moisturized,” so I moisturized her [laughs] you know, like her body. Like, you know, these things which are like...
- 00:31:00 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.
- 00:31:01 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Things that femmes do for each other. And then, like... Those are the moments when I feel most femme, really.
- 00:31:06 **Andi Schwartz:** So beautiful.

- 00:31:07 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:31:08 **Andi Schwartz:** [laughs] I'm, like, tearing up. I love femmeship so much.
- 00:31:12 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah, yeah.
- 00:31:13 **Andi Schwartz:** And I... it's interesting, I think, like in the work I've done, like, around softness, like, friendship is, like, a really strong feature of that, and I think it's just probably like you were saying earlier, it's, like, that's always been part of femme culture, you know, but it's just not...it's something that we can, you know, talk about...
- 00:31:30 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhmm.
- 00:31:31 **Andi Schwartz:** And politicize now, because some of the most urgent things, you know...
- 00:31:36 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm. Mhm.
- 00:31:37 **Andi Schwartz:** It's just another layer we can add on now.
- 00:31:39 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah. And I think that comes out of, like, disability justice, it comes out of...
- 00:31:44 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:31:46 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like, Black feminisms, like... I actually think those other discourses have allowed us to articulate femme in new, in new ways, like, that we're... we owe those, you know, those tradition, like those traditions have fed into new, new ways of thinking about femme and femme community. And...
- 00:32:01 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:32:02 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** The way that we think about gender and femme in particular has really benefitted from those other conversations.
- 00:32:08 **Andi Schwartz:** Yeah. So, I'm interested in thinking, in hearing from your perspective the work that femme can do, politically, still. Like, how does femme stay relevant now? How is femme relevant now? And what are your femme politics now? How does femme inform your politics?
- 00:32:26 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** I mean the first thing that pops into my head is sort of, and I, I haven't really ever articulated this before, but one of the things about *Brazen* that we didn't have a language for the way we might now, but that was

very much at the core of how we thought about the book was that femme was this very non-essentialist, intersectional kind of space.

00:32:49 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.

00:32:50 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And, like... I, I don't know if we say it in the introduction, but like... I identified as femme rather than female like, rather than being a woman. Like femme felt like—

00:33:00 **Anna Camilleri:** Yup.

00:33:01 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** In, in the, in the language of the, the time, the way we used this word—like, it felt like a transgender position. And that comes partly out of the learning we did with Mirha-Soleil Ross at the time, and, to me, that remains really relevant. I mean it's... it, you know, when I look at what's happening in the US around trans rights, like... Femme lineage is very closely tied to, you know, through Nestle's work to like the Civil Rights struggle of Black Americans, through the work, you know, through ballroom through the struggles of like trans women and trans women of colour, and, like, through the work of Amber Hollibaugh to sex workers—and of course all of those circles overlap, like it's a, it's a multi, multi circle Venn diagram, right? [laughs]

00:33:50 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.

00:33:52 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** From the earliest writings on queer femme, it was always articulated in what we now call an intersectional way. And it, it actually, for me, was like, I feel like, saying I was femme was the first way I was able to say, “I am a combination of things.” Like, I'm not just one thing, you know. And, and so, I think that continues to be more relevant than ever, that we have to see our struggles as connected.

00:34:24 **Anna Camilleri:** When I think about what was at the heart of *Brazen Femme*, when we conceived the anthology—and it's not an accident that it's an anthology, you know, all of these works...

00:34:34 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:34:34 **Anna Camilleri:** *Femme Frenzy*, *Brazen Femme*, *The Strange Sisters* cabaret, you know, *Boys Like Her*, are all multi-voiced works. So, you know, really centered in these cultural productions is, you know... It's a relational ways of knowing and building knowledge that are tied to civil rights movement and the, and the need for, the ongoing need for civil rights. So, when I think about, you know, how femme figures now, and, and how femme will figure in the future... I mean, that central thesis of *Brazen Femme*, to me, still feels very current. Like, if, if we were

to build the text now, what was at the core of *Brazen Femme*, then, would be at the core of *Brazen Femme* today.

00:35:17 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:35:18 **Anna Camilleri:** Because, you know, what we recognize is that *Brazen Femme* isn't, you know, and a, it isn't a performative identity, but that it's about something that is essential. And I'm not talking about an essential identity, but that is, that there is something, there's a heart that's driving, you know, femme culture and femme identities, and it is about, like, very linked to civil rights, to equity, to, coalition-building movements. And the recognition that we are all more than one thing simultaneously, we're many things simultaneously. We're a part of many communities simultaneously and, you know, and, and, and as the water rises, like, so do all of the creatures in the, in the waters, all of the boats on the water, and, and, and I feel like that is, you know, that need for, you know, intersectional work, I feel is still where we are and where we need to be. And I feel like this conversation could be grafted onto the conversations we were having 20 years ago, and, and, you know, our, our world is really in need for a deep, systemic change. And, and that was true then, and that, I hope, you know, I mean, I believe that probably will be true 20, 20 years from now. But really, I have been thinking about, you know, *Brazen Femme*. It's like, okay, so the, the place that, that text came from and what's at the heart of it, and what is at the heart of, we'll say femme identities now, femininities now... I feel like those things are not so different, like some of the, the words have changed, or you know, or political understandings and conversations continue to evolve and grow. But, you know, that that bonfire, the heart or the, the, the rhizomes, the...

00:37:08 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.

00:37:09 **Anna Camilleri:** What's happening at that level of, you know, the, the micro-organisms that work, like, kind of rooting through and aerating the soil. Those things are, are the same.

00:37:20 **Andi Schwartz:** I would definitely agree. You know, we talked a little bit—like, lots—about where femme maybe started for you. But say, where is yeah, femme for you now? And how do you connect to femme now? And what does it mean to be femme outside of, you know, youth culture and outside of public culture, outside of these things.

00:37:39 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah, I feel like femme is going to be... There must be like a mathematical word for this shape—but like that, there is a... there was a trough in the middle of my life where I wasn't sure if femme... how femme was important to me. Like, I wasn't sure how to think about my femme-ness.

- 00:37:57 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:37:59 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** But I feel like as I get older femme is becoming really important to me again in my life.
- 00:38:06 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:38:07 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** And it's partly because my most important relationships are with femmes. And they are so sustaining, and I have such a deeper sense of my own vulnerability, my own mortality, my aging body, my like... my...
- 00:38:24 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:38:26 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** yeah, like, and so I just have such deep gratitude for those relationships in a way that I don't think I was capable of in my 20s and 30s, [laughs] like really having, like knowing the depth of that, like what that care actually meant. Like, now, at this age...
- 00:38:42 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:38:44 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Like, the care I receive from Anna, the care receive from my other close femme friends feels like, literally, like a matter of life and death. It feels like it is...
- 00:38:52 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.
- 00:38:52 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** What will keep me alive, and what will allow me to... Yeah, be myself until I don't get to live, you know, until my life ends like. And, and those relationships, I, I have no doubt, are actually extending the length of my life. You know. I mean, we know that right? We know relationships, and, like, being in relationship, being connected, being loved, like, these are life-sustaining things. And I, I really, like, feel that very deeply in a way that I, I didn't before. So, yeah, I feel very appreciative of my exist—like, my femme community now, which is in a way smaller and more intimate, less public, but is...
- 00:39:30 **Anna Camilleri:** Hmm. Mhm.
- 00:39:32 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** I don't know, like, I was up in Anna's cabin with her, and it was the morning. I got up. I sat, I was sitting down, and I was looking at her in the kitchen, and she's, you know, always cooking, chopping some vegetable. [laughs] And she's in her boots because she's been outside. She has her hair braided, she's wearing... and I was like, “oh, my God she's so beautiful!” Like, when it's, you know she's so...

- 00:39:54 **Anna Camilleri:** Wow!
- 00:39:56 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** To me that, like there's this like aura of femme that I'm, like, this is so much more femme to me than any time we were, like, in fishnets and, you know, high heel boots, like. It just... there's this, again, this like depth or earthiness, or rootedness about it, and it's like and so for me, that, that sort of gets to how I feel about femme now. It's not like... It is this sort of like, you know, force in us, not...
- 00:40:22 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:40:23 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** It's not like a box we, we sit inside.
- 00:40:25 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:40:26 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** But like a force that we channel.
- 00:40:28 **Anna Camilleri:** Chloë, I'm blushing. Thank you. That was really beautiful, thank you.
- 00:40:31 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** [laughs] I should have told you that morning.
- 00:40:34 **Anna Camilleri:** Aw.
- 00:40:35 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** But I kinda didn't want to ruin the moment. I was like, “Oh, I should tell, Anna she looks really beautiful.” And then I was like, “No, I just wanna appreciate it.”
- 00:40:40 [both laugh]
- 00:40:42 **Anna Camilleri:** Thanks Chloë.
- 00:40:43 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah. Yeah.
- 00:40:44 **Anna Camilleri:** So I think for my myself. You know, in this continuum of, of what we call time, that, that these, these phases of life are not separate, you know. Like being, being young, being middle-aged, being old, it's like, “Well, we're just kind of on this wave or this circle,” and they're, they're not distinct. These parts of our lives overlap and, and blend together. But it it's been important for me to really think about, like as I have aged and my, how I live my life, and where I, where I spend my time, and how I spend my time looks so different, because the, the truth is in my 20s, the... every weekend actually was...

- 00:41:24 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:41:26 **Anna Camilleri:** You know, there were events, there were parties. There were these kinds of, like... that, that was real.
- 00:41:30 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:41:31 **Anna Camilleri:** And, and that's not what my life looks like now. So, I, I've been connecting my queer communities, my, my femme communities, my femme identity with other cultural and identity markers. So, my Italian Maltese heritage. So, I've been doing more learning and research and understanding that I come from a line of Stregas, Stregarias, witches, you know. These women in my family who were the folk healers collecting medicines, who had a way with animals, who had away with plants. It's like, that's part of my ancestry, that's part of a future...
- 00:42:08 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:42:08 **Anna Camilleri:** That I can imagine for myself, of being this old woman, you know.
- 00:42:12 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:42:14 **Anna Camilleri:** Surrounded as I am now, with animals and plants, and connected with the earth, like grounded in something that is maybe less tenuous than what I was grounded in as a younger person. It's like I feel grounded now in something very different. And it's not about, you know, anybody agreeing with me or about hearing my words validated externally or external accolades. But about, “I'm, I'm here. I'm here, and I'm connected to something really deep.” That's some, you know...
- 00:42:49 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:42:49 **Anna Camilleri:** I don't have all of the words for, but I feel it in my body. I feel it in connection with, you know, in deep, intimate connections with Chloë with other deep intimate connections that the... It's relational. It's not just like, “I'm here and I'm alone,” but it's relational.
- 00:43:05 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:43:06 **Anna Camilleri:** And it's deep and it's, you know, and it's both, you know, through time traveling backward and forward. And then also it's landed. Soil. My body. The, you know, the truth of this body that it changes, and, and that is part of...

- 00:43:23 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm, mhm.
- 00:43:23 **Anna Camilleri:** The groundedness of recognizing that this body that I'm in is, is uh, you know, it's a, it's a changing, it's a changing vehicle. It's a fragile embodiment of something that is much deeper and more profound. It's a spirit, right? It is something that gives me a lot of solace, that there's just a groundedness that I feel...
- 00:43:41 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Hmm.
- 00:43:43 **Anna Camilleri:** Is part of, you know, my you know, my lineage. But it's also been worked for. It's also been earned. It's also, you know, something that's continuously unfolding.
- 00:43:51 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:43:52 **Anna Camilleri:** And it is really nice to be embraced to, to, you know...Those glints of recognition of like, “Hi, femme, I see you!” Like, that's really wonderful, and I celebrate those moments. And...
- 00:44:02 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:44:03 **Anna Camilleri:** And, and I also... it's been really important for me to be able to recognize myself and that myself is something bigger than... I think about Elizabeth Ruth and “Quantum Femme.”
- 00:44:13 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm.
- 00:44:13 **Anna Camilleri:** It is bigger than just this body. And just this time, and just this moment.
- 00:44:18 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Yeah, I totally feel that. I feel like I'm a medium, and I just channel this spirit. This is just the spirit I was meant to channel, you know. And, and I do really relate to what Anna was saying about the relational nature. I mean, I, I do feel like gender is really a relational thing. It makes me think of Ulrika Dahl's work...
- 00:44:36 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.
- 00:44:37 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** A little bit, and, and, and other European femmes who have theorized femme quite differently and gender quite differently than the North American femmes. It was actually about like, yeah, like what it... Like gender is this living, relational thing that moves. It circulates, it's, it's, it's lived, it's channeled, it's whatever. And I think that's why when Anna talks about the

relational as including the more than human, that's so important for me. That's been so important for me and my understanding of femme. Um, and that's...

00:45:07 **Anna Camilleri:** Yeah.

00:45:07 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Something I didn't have access to in my 20s. I, I couldn't um... In my 20s, you know, femme was such an urban identity for me. It was such an, it was an identity that revolved so much around the scene and the events and the... and I, I think what I just have come to appreciate so much in, at this stage in my life, is that what I'm in relation to has changed a lot, and that that's allowed me to just experience femme as something that is... not... As... It's much more resilient than, like, the bar scene. Or...

00:45:40 **Anna Camilleri:** Mhm.

00:45:40 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** The fashion of the day, or the, you know, or a relationship with my butch lover, or any of the number of other things that will fade away to dust. And, you know, like [laughs] whether we want them to or not. And so, like, femme persists, right? It's like it's just waiting for you to recognize it. It's not gone anywhere, because I don't actually think it's something we control, you know. It's not like something we invented. I think it actually is just a word we use to describe something that's very ancient and very, um, like, real like. Very, you know.

00:46:13 **Anna Camilleri:** Hmm.

00:46:14 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** It's like um, it's one of the many strands of the universe, right? Is this femmeness is something we, we get to ride it. We get to surf it while, while we're here, and then it's... But it will get, like, it'll last after we're gone, too, you know. It's here after we're gone.

00:46:30 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:46:37 **Andi Schwartz:** [laughs] It's been really great spending this time with you both as well, and you know, I love hearing all of the stories from *Brazen Femme*, pre-*Brazen Femme* times. [laughs] So thank you so much for being part of this project with me. And yeah, sharing your stories.

00:46:58 **Anna Camilleri:** And, and I just want to say, Andi, I, I, I want to just thank you for your honouring of this work of *Brazen Femme*. Yeah, it's, it's been deeply meaningful, you know, our, our points of connection through the conference and through this podcast, because I, I think for me, like, it's given me a perspective that maybe I lacked in my own life about the importance of the work, you know, and, and the communities and movements that it's a part of, because there was

something very like... I remember Chloë and I were talking, you know, two years ago about like, “God, the 20th anniversary is coming up,” and, and we talked about, you know, doing something. But there was the question of what, what would that be? And then, and then, of course, we got to the year, and there was just a bit of sadness for me about like this text that I feel is, like, you know, not single, not a singular text, but a seminal text connected with, you know, a larger movement, and, and to just see the anniversary kind of come and go, just, was sad. So, I feel like that hasn't happened, actually, because we've been having these conversations, and, um, and that you've been doing this work. So I just want to thank you, like, really. Thank you.

00:48:13 **Chloë Brushwood Rose:** Mhm. I hope you'll include that in the podcast.

00:48:15 **Andi Schwartz:** I will. [laughs]

00:48:18 [Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:48:34 **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.