

Episode 3: “Rendering the Radical Contemporaneity of Femme: Trish Salah and Leah Horlick in Conversation about the Femme Poetics of Ethnicity and Sexuality, the Fascist Politics of Transmisogyny, and Creating Culture At the Bar, On the Internet, and Beyond”

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

00:00:14 **Andi Schwartz:** Hello, my name is Andi Schwartz you’re listening to Still Brazen: Twenty Years of Queering Femininity, a podcast celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> 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, also known as Tkaranto. This land is currently home to many First Nation, Inuit, and Metis communities, and has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendatt. 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, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.

00:00:57 This week’s episode brings together poets Trish Salah and Leah Horlick. Born in Kijipuktuk, or Halifax, Trish Salah is a transsexual dyke poet of mixed Arab and Irish descent. She is the author of *Wanting in Arabic*, and of *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1*. In 2014, *Wanting in Arabic* was awarded a Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Fiction, and Salah has been shortlisted for the Dayne Ogilvie prize for emerging LGBTQ writers, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize; her manuscript, *High Reason (a Sexology)* was a finalist for the 2021 Nightboat Poetry Prize. Her writing appears in recent and forthcoming issues of *Mizna*, *Room Magazine*, *Teflon*, *Traffic Report Tripwire* and *Vallum* and in the anthologies, *Arab Divas*, *Meanwhile Elsewhere*, *rumi roaming*, and *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*. She edits the *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, and is co-editor of special issues of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* on cultural production, and co-editor of *Arc Poetry Magazine*, showcasing trans, Two-Spirit and non-binary writers. While teaching at the University of Winnipeg she co-organized the conferences, “Writing Trans Genres: Emergent Literatures and Criticism” in 2014 and “Decolonizing and Decriminalizing Trans Genres” in 2015. Salah lives in T’karonto and is associate professor of Gender Studies at Queen’s University, which is situated in the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinabek Nation, governed by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum.

00:02:34 Leah Horlick is a femme poet who grew up as a settler on Treaty Six territory and the homelands of the Métis in Saskatoon. She is the author of *Riot Lung*, which was shortlisted for a Saskatchewan Book Award; *For Your Own Good*, which was

named a Stonewall Honor Title by the American Library Association; and *Moldovan Hotel*, released by Brick Books in 2021. Leah and her dear friend Estlin McPhee spent five years co-organizing REVERB, a queer and anti-oppressive reading series, on unceded Coast Salish territories in Vancouver. A past winner of the Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBTQ2S+ Writers and ARC Magazine's Poem of the Year award, Leah is this year's Canadian Writer-in-Residence with the Distinguished Writers Program at the University of Calgary.

00:03:23 In this episode, they talk about femme communities that span the territories that make up what is now called Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Toronto—communities that are centered around both the bar and the internet. My own experience is more like the experience Leah describes about engaging with femme community on social media. I often have such FOMO hearing Trish and other contributors to the book talk about the IRL femme communities, but as Trish and Leah discuss, both online and offline femme communities are plagued by the same persistent issues, like transphobia and transmisogyny, as well as enable the same kinds of possibilities for creation and connection.

00:04:05 Trish and Leah discuss each other's work in the collections, *Wanting in Arabic*, *For Your Own Good*, and *Moldovan Hotel*, which all pick up on themes of ethnicity, sexuality, and, of course, femme-ness. So, we will join them now, talking about first encounters and lasting impacts of *Brazen Femme*.

00:04:22 [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:04:31 **Trish Salah:** I'm just thrilled that *Brazen Femme* is being celebrated in this way, the work that Chloë Brushwood Rose, and Anna Camilleri did to make that book, I think, was groundbreaking, and I think also experimenting with what femme could be at a particular moment in, uh, in making a way of thinking and writing and community, and, uh, so I'm, I'm delighted to see the book in, uh, re-entering conversations I think it has been broadly influential. But I, I'm also excited to hear how... how it lives for you, Leah, and how it's lived for numerous people. I, I, I feel like, having recently revisited your work, the resonances between femme and, uh, prairie life have become really, uh, pronounced for me, and partly, uh, in as much as femme seems to, for so many people in so many different ways, be a strategy of survival, and of making knowledge out of a place where knowledge isn't, um, isn't a given. So, I, I, I'm excited to be in a making with you, and I'm so grateful to you, Dr. Schwartz, for bringing us together for this conversation as well.

00:05:57 **Leah Horlick:** Truly. Well it, and you know, it's, it's beautiful to hear you say that too Trish, because I think, you know, revisiting the text I, I did a little bit of just kind of the personal archival work to, to make sure I had my own story straight to go like where, where was I? And what was happening for me when I first got this

book like, how did I... How did I get access to it? I remember this as such a, a foundational and formative time in my life. But you, how did I... How did I come across the text? And I found the receipt! I have it up right now. It's, it's the online receipt from Arsenal. I think it might have been the first book—second only to *Subrosa* by Amber Dawn, who is also, you know, a huge part of my life, my development as, as femme person—and, um, I bought it in 2009, so I was 21, still in Saskatoon, and, and so you know what you, what you mentioned about, um, a strategy of survival feels especially relevant because when I look at the date on the receipt, it's two months before the relationship that led to the creation of *For Your Own Good* ended.

00:07:03 So really, I was just at this point of coming into consciousness that for me, living in a very, um, you know, what seemed like a huge place to me at the time, after living in very rural Saskatchewan, you have to move to Saskatoon was like the dream, the goal. I felt like I was living somewhere big. And then I think I started to read texts like this coming out of Toronto and bigger cities, and I thought, “oh, there's something happening with me and the turnip truck that I'm not really aware of yet.”

00:07:33 [both laugh]

00:07:34 **Leah Horlick:** “I don't really even know what I'm missing.” Um, but to, to have access to this, um, you know, this really amazing time capsule and document of something that was happening, um, that could give me language to talk about, you know, I'm not just like a lesbian disappointment, or like someone who didn't fully achieve like a queer manifestation of, of gender or I'm not like a girl gone really wrong somehow.

00:08:03 [Trish laughs]

00:08:05 **Leah Horlick:** And, and this could be more for me than just like, “here are these, like, beloved and desirable members of the queer community, and there are the women with long hair.” Um. That that was all, all new to me to have that that language that wasn't um, like, a terrible joke about the length of your fingernails, or those kinds of, those kinds of things. It was, you know, 2009 in Saskatchewan, so that... Um, I had such an emotional response to our, our preparatory conversation for this podcast, and then, going back to the, the receipt in my inbox I was like, “oh, this is this is why, what a what a particular moment!” And I, I mean, this is one of the things that's so amazing about being invited to be part of this conversation is, I feel like I get to speak right to the source! I mean, you were a contributor to the text, the poems have stayed with me for many years. Um, “Red Like a Femme” and “Medusa” and I'm, I'm just so curious to hear from you about what it was like to be a part of the project, and, and at this, like particular moment in time, where you were.

00:09:10 **Trish Salah:** I mean, I think there are lots of parallels in terms of the question of what it means to find resources for femme identity and living, um, from a place where... of, um, where femininity is both over... overly emphasized and, um, emphasized as a problem and misrecognized. So, you know, femme effectively providing a different place from that, um, marking of, uh, fem- femininity as pathology, or as co-optation, or as, as victimhood, um, though obviously you know how does that align with the experiences of violence one has, because what is marked as available for, you know? So, you know, from my vantage I, I think of meeting, uh, the editors, um, in a—I believe this is where I met them—in a workshop run by Mirha-Soleil Ross through the Learning Exchange at the 519 community centre in Toronto, sometime in the very late 90s. And I was just kind of blown away by the two of them in terms of the kind of confidence and care and brazen, uh, interventions they would make, the way in which they came to the question of, uh, transsexual and transgender politics and its possible relationship to queer and femme.

00:10:44 Uh, so I mean I admired them before there was a book, uh, and became delighted to see the project grow. Got to read with, uh, Anna Camilleri at the Red Spot at one point in a series curated by Elizabeth Ruth, who's another contributor to the book, um, and of course there's another anthology, an important anthology, which she put together out of, uh, that series, *Bent On Writing*, um, so, uh, and, you know, I look at the contributors to *Brazen Femme*, and, you know, T. J. Bryant read in that context, uh, Zoe Whittall read in that context, Mariko Tamaki read in that context, I believe. Um, uh, certainly, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha read in that— so there, there's a kind of coalescence of, um, queer femme, uh, and maybe not femme i-, and not, also not femme-identified writers in that milieu. Kathryn Payne certainly read there, and uh, you know, she was a close friend and entry point to the milieu in some ways for me, because I had fairly recently moved from Montreal, and was sort of entering into Toronto's queer community, even as I was sort of discovering a politicized transsexual community which I really hadn't had in the past.

00:12:16 And so, thinking about *Brazen Femme*, I, I think about it as a, a book that, uh, was able to hold a range of... a range of storms, a range of messes, a range of conversations and, and conflicts within a particular milieu, um, uh, that was also enormously generative. I see, um, that book in some ways, um, crystallizing a particular femme take on a particular moment in, uh, queer life, but also really opening the door to what that might mean. And maybe in ways that that door is not open at this moment, um, or is differently open at this moment. So, moving towards the, the book more particularly, uh, being invited to contribute to it was very exciting, partly because I, I had—I didn't know exactly who would be in it, but I knew the kind of conversations and challenges and possibilities that were in the writing world and in the queer world in Toronto at that time. And knowing,

uh, Anna and Chloë, I had a kind of confidence in their ability, uh, to make something sharp, uh, and at the same time generous of, of the moment.

00:13:39 **Leah Horlick:** I, I just have to, like, pause for my goosebumps to, to, you know, to hear you speak about this moment as it's coalescing is, is just tremendous. Um, and to be part of that, um, not just the creation of the book, but the coalescing of the people, and, um, the trust in the editors, which I think can't be underestimated, even just from my perspective as a reader of the book. Um, I was, I was curious how you chose the poems to submit to the anthology, or if they were works that you, that you wrote in response to knowing that you'd be part of, the part of the text?

00:14:15 **Trish Salah:** “Medusa,” uh, I wrote specifically for the text, and it hasn't, um, appeared anywhere else. It maybe it got anthologized in a journal shortly thereafter, something like that, but I, I, I haven't published it in either of my books. But, uh, but it was in some ways, uh, about this question of, you know, as a trans woman, encountering the category “femme” involved a kind of double challenge, because, on the one hand, uh, the history of butch/femme, uh, within a lesbian register seemed to proceed from, uh, the impossibility of trans women as women. In reality, uh, there are lots of places where trans femmes and cis femmes shared space, and, uh, you know, there are intertwined genealogies, but at that particular moment, it seemed as if that was a new problem, and I, I think, you know, we often encounter problems as if they are new problems. Um, so the question of whether femme, as I knew it coming out of a trans genealogy— where femme was, you know, what Saturday night, um, cross-dressers called themselves, being “on femme,” but also what trans women called themselves as they began to live in the world in particular ways, and you know that phrase, “Saturday night cross-dressers,” like that is very much part of the, uh, differential access to trans identity that, um, characterized inter-community tensions at that time, but frequently made its way into... as a language of inclusion. You know, “we are interested in people who, uh, live full time and part time, and...”

00:16:09 So, femme in a particular trajectory that was trans seemed almost distinct from femme as it, uh, seemed inherited in a particular lesbian or cis lesbian genealogy. And so, uh, you know, as a trans woman, do you identify as a femme? Well, if you're transsexual and you pass, you pass through femininity in a way that, um, might be glamorous, but is also in some ways a making of oneself to not be read as trans. If one doesn't pass, one is punished for it, and one's visibility, one's femininity is hyper-visible in a register that might be objecting. Um, so between, you know, the dual trajectory on the one hand, and what it means to be feminine as a trans woman, whether queer identified or not, femme felt like a category that I was eager to see opened up and problematized, and “Medusa” in some ways bears the traces, as a poem, of the kind of contradictory, uh, positioning of, uh, trans femininity and relationship to a cis gaze, perhaps a cis lesbian gaze,

perhaps a transnormative gaze. Uh, you know, we didn't say “cis” at the time, it wasn't in general use and transnormativity hadn't really happened yet. Um, but [laughs] at the same time we end up anticipating the, the way in which our ideals may become punishing ideals, I think, in in various ways, so.

00:17:50 **Leah Horlick:** Well and, you know, I'm so moved to hear you speak about the ways that in, in some ways it sounds like there have been tremendous changes in these multiple and overlapping communities. And then in many ways, perhaps, there haven't been. And I was thinking about what you spoke about where the, the door was in some ways perhaps closed because of the historicized, or what we think of as like the general historicized relationships between butch and femme in a cis context, and I, I was thinking about, um, you know, my trajectory of engaging with femme as a term after finding the anthology, and how I was a part of—I don't know if you were part of these, but there was this moment when Facebook was still somewhat fresh, and none of us were burnt out on it yet, there were these very large, femme solidarity Facebook groups. I don't know if you were a part of them. But it was probably...

00:18:37 **Trish Salah:** Mhm.

00:18:38 **Leah Horlick:** You know, five to seven years after I, you know, achieved access to the text. And what, what was the ultimate demise of the Facebook groups—or not necessarily demise, but the reason why I left and many people left—is because of the recurrent transmisogyny issues in these specifically, um, so-called spaces of femme solidarity, and, you know, whether it was related to an issue with moderation or an issue with the size, or like the inevitable forms of conflict that arise in very, very large groups of queer people. It, it seemed insurmountable to find a way to talk about femme—I guess, you know, we're talking 2013 to 2017, somewhere in there—um, without, like the complete erasure of, of trans women's experiences, and, and that, like, deep lived knowing that the access to femme in a trans context is in many ways completely different historically, um, but also comes with its own set of risks that aren't part of the cis experience.

00:19:41 Um, yeah, I was struck thinking about that as you were mentioning, and we're experiencing problems as they're new, [laughs] even though they in many cases are not, are not new. Um, so, and, you know, I, I don't think I... I'm conscious that I probably still don't have an accurate sense of the ways that the, um, the urban versus rural or the geographical demographic might have influenced these conversations, because by the time I was a part of those online communities I was in Vancouver, and I think the, the Vancouver/Toronto schism [laughs] is also, is also quite deep. Um. So, I, I wondered, you know, how, how did you see, um, response to the book land or change in Toronto after publication, or how might you have experienced it?

- 00:20:26 **Trish Salah:** I mean, there was a lot of celebration of the book. I think that it probably did do some of the work of creating a context for conversations. Um, and or... how, you know, how does art, how does literature hit? In some ways it hits us below the conscious level. Um, and so I think that, uh, you know various works in the book, um, provide a kind of psychic leverage for rethinking, you know, any kind of essentialist conception of femme. And sometimes the language, you know, feels very antique now. I, you know, I as, as my own language a few minutes ago, when I said, “Saturday night cross dresser,” you know, and, and one could say offensive, for that matter, but it, but it's of a time. And so then the question becomes like, “what does one do with language of a time?” Do you hold it? Um, how can you hold it in ways that do not reproduce harm, but also do not erase what happened, you know?
- 00:21:28 Um, uh. So, in the early 2000s in Toronto there was, you know, ongoing conversation, that I think culminated in a commitment towards trans inclusivity at the Toronto Women's Bathhouse, for instance, uh, about relationships between cis queers and trans folks, and, you know, the question of transmisogyny within uh queer women's communities, I think you know there was the kind of work that Mirha-Soleil was doing with—Mirha-Soleil Ross—but also Xanthra Phillippa [MacKay] and Mark Karbusicky, um, uh, with the, uh, Counting Past 2 festival to raise the visibility of transsexual and transgender arts. And I think, along with a book like *Brazen Femme*, uh, a certain kind of cultural pressure was brought to bear upon the naturalness and the givenness of transphobic positions within cis lesbian and gay and straight, uh, arts communities. So, I, I see it as part of that movement, um, and, you know, I, I think I started by pointing to the moment where I met the editors by to suggest that people were doing their homework and thinking about these problems before the book came around, you know, and people had stakes, various types of skin, you know, conversations I remember having: do we think of femme as a trans identity? What would that mean? How does the denaturalization of femininity, um, and the claiming of femme pleasure, um, and power look differently on different bodies, whether you're thinking about race or, or, or cis-ness, um, or class.
- 00:23:18 So I, I think the book contributed to a cultural shift, and made it less given, because when, when I was invited to participate it was at a moment where, you know, I wasn't worried about TERFs on the Internet; um, it was a question of whether my presence would be questioned at any given lesbian gathering. And usually it wasn't. But the question always was there. So, so how trans-ness and femme interacted at that—like, I think this helped change that as a norm, um, and that's just one piece. But I think it also part of a re... renewal of femme in terms of, uh, an aesthetic that had to a certain degree been constructed within an academic imaginary as belonging to the 50s and 60s, you know. So, I think it

also did the work of rendering obvious the radical contemporaneity of femme, but also, also allowing for a genealogical relationship.

00:24:29 **Leah Horlick:** Hearing you mentioned the radical contemporaneity of, of butch/femme, and not just this artifact from the, the 50s and 60s, that was part of what was so powerful to me with, with the text, because of where I was, um, in my own academic journey at the moment. I was like very close to the end of my undergraduate degree, and I, I was minoring in Women's and Gender Studies, and I... Like, once I started to get a sense that that femme was more than just like this thing people would say to identify, like, who I was in the gay bar. Um, then I, I had this new like layer to interact with, which was people going, “Wow, you're writing this paper about this, like, vintage gender subculture.” [laughs]

00:25:12 [Both laugh]

00:25:13 **Leah Horlick:** I was like, “Oh no, what has happened?” I've clearly stepped, you know, into, into something that I don't... I don't fully understand what I'm doing yet, but it's also clear to me that other people don't, don't understand it either, you know, in the in the broader academic community, certainly in, in what we might think of as the straight community. Um, and yeah, trying to, to pull that into the present in theory and in academia, in the way that we were living it, or that I would—not to, like, create a false ‘we’—but yeah, that was... I remember that as being so challenging in a way that I hadn't anticipated. Yeah!

00:25:49 I, I wondered, too, just as you were speaking about the, the Toronto's Women's Bathhouse. There's some, some sites that, you know, I, I come across regularly in texts from this time, and in the anthology, and then some, some other, you know, places that I feel as if I have a familiarity with from literature but I, I've never actually been, I was never a part of. Um, and one of those other places is the Pussy Palace. Um, and when I was flipping through the book, um, thinking about, you know, things that seemed, um, seem antique now but were maybe new at the time, or, or were different for me at the time. I remember reading Sandy Rapini's comic, which is, “Adventures with Zenith and Ariel” and I, like, I remember when I flipped through the book like when I was reading it, I was like “well, and I don't know what happened in those four pages. [laughs] I have no way of making what has happened in this comic legible to me; I guess I'll come back to it later.” And now I'm like, “ah,” it's kind of like a wholesome retrospective moment.

00:26:46 [Trish laughs]

00:26:47 **Leah Horlick:** But I, I wonder you know if, if you don't mind me asking was, was that a space you were a part of? How did that interact with conversations at the



time? Or... and but it, it comes up so regularly in work from this time that I was curious about...

00:27:02 **Trish Salah:** Um, well, what I would say is that, uh, you know, the Pussy Palace, also known as the Toronto Women's Bath House and later known as the Pleasure Palace, those are one in the same, and the Pleasure Palace was a sort of reiteration, revising of that, that I think, came out of a recognition that even the initial initiatives towards trans inclusion, um, may have reiterated, you know, bio essentialist, uh, language. I mean, I, I love the name “Pussy Palace,” I was sad to see it go, but I, I see the logic. Uh, yeah, I think that if memory serves me, there are actually some photos in the, uh... in *Brazen Femme* that were produced for *Brazen Femme*, but were also produced, um, uh, as postcards, uh, advertising the Pussy Palace and doing so in a way that I think was about inscribing trans women's bodies, racialized women's bodies, or racialized person's bodies, within the visual, um, possibilities of the, uh, Pussy Palace, so that, that may give a sense of how closely intertwined some of this organizing and art-making was. You know, activism is, is aesthetic, and femme is a kind of aesthetic, activist epistemology in some ways, right?

00:28:37 [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:28:45 **Trish Salah:** I miss the bar. Um, I miss the bar so much, and I don't even miss the pre-Covid Bar. I miss the bar that I felt uncertain I was welcome in, because there was a kind of very vibrant, intense, sexual, queer women's and queer people's space, and kink was part of that, cruising was part of that. So, I think, on the one hand we, um, are sort of suffering, the isolation of the pandemic, and the sort of compensatory expansion of, um, virtual space and relationship to that, and that builds on the resources of, like, Strap On and Facebook, and, you know, various types of online communities that we've had for a long time. You know, Instagram, is a form of writing, and I think that you know one of the questions is the question of femme as poetics, or as aesthetics, as, as creative aesthetic, and, and, and as poetic form. So, I wonder about, you know, the spatiality of the Internet as a place where femme writing and femme expression is a cultural making and a place of connection and relation. I- and I think that's exciting and tremendous. But I also, without wanting to make femme or queerness just about sexuality, I miss the public or semi-public, um, communal space of sexuality as being a place where gender was very much, uh, part of what we did. And I know the bars still exist, and I know that, you know, I often felt those bars as deeply problematic, um, for various reasons or difficult to be in—but I miss the promise of desire that bar culture had, and I guess I, I wonder about how we can reshape spaces that, um, that can give that possibility life again in, in new ways.

00:30:56 **Leah Horlick:** I think that maybe the extent of the grief around this has yet to be fully seen. Um, like just speaking from my own experience, like I, I left Vancouver

kind of halfway through 2020, and then I moved to Calgary, um, where I was essentially in in my house for, for two years, and then moved to Saskatoon, because I thought, “I, I can't be my house [laughs] for two more years in this city where I don't know other people! I have to have to know, um, like a couple more warm connections, and be in a familiar place to be able to manage,” and when, when I think about my life in Vancouver, I, like, I could have gone weeks without a, a significant or meaningful interaction with a straight person, and that, that may never happen again in, in my life. And Calgary was not the same, and I think in in many ways I, I had that like very adolescent experience of, of being like “if I am not around other people who understand that I am queer and see me that way I am going to scream. Like this is, this is an extreme, like it's a damaging experience in a way that I haven't anticipated.” And now, being back in Saskatoon, and, and you know everywhere you go, you're seeing the impacts of the pandemic as well. So I, I, I, I so felt what you said about missing the bar. I live very close to the bar. It's the same, it's the bar in which I came of age. Have I gone back in there? No! [laughs] Because I would, I would really prefer not to get Covid. But I, I feel that, that absence of the way that desire moved through spaces, um, the, the tension that you expressed, Trish, of able being like, “Well, this isn't all that it's about, but it sure doesn't hurt.” And then, you know, there, there have to be...

00:32:34 Um, I, I was just talking to my therapist about this, actually, where I was like, “you know, in, in the past there were many more rewards for the, like, profound violence of this lived experience,” and, and that was social connection, and like, like physical and sexual intimacy, and like a sense of feeling appreciated or being in community, and those, those things are so hard to achieve. And well, many, many people are so good at doing that online, and I, I aspire to that, I don't think it has the same material impact on me, just as a person quite yet, even though it certainly helps. It's, it's certainly helping. Um, but I, I don't know what it will look like for us, and I'm sure we could talk about it for ages. I mean I, I haven't even fully explored, you know, like what it means for me to be like talking about a, a place in like a, a settler context. And, and those kinds of... you know, the, the facility with which I described my ability to move between cities is like a profound privilege, and that, that sense of like following where the community is, many people can't, can't do that. And indeed, I couldn't do that at one point in my life. So, I'm, I'm conscious of that when I, when I kind of retell that tale.

00:33:37 [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:33:46 **Trish Salah:** I wanted to, if it's okay, just turn to your own work a little bit. You know, I went back and, um, revisited, um, *For Your Own Good*, um, recently, because I hadn't had a, had a chance to read it in quite a long time. And I, and I wanted it clearer in my mind when we talked. And one of the things, you know, I have questions about specific poems, but one of the questions I had at the, in

terms of femme as an aesthetic, is to do with the way in which certain signifiers—nails, hair—um, function as a kind of baroque ornamentation at, at the level of the poetic line, and, and I wondered about that as a kind of femme aesthetic. You know, it's, it's descriptive, obviously, it's a figure, obviously, but it, but I wondered about the accumulation of signs as part of the way in which one contends with, uh, um, femme invisibility, um, but also, um, a kind of maybe a reclaim—reclaiming of, uh, you know, you described the, or you referred to, you know, the joke about long nails. Um, so, as a way of, um, taking, taking aspects of self-presentation, um, but also just the objectified elements of femme identity and mobilizing them in a way that feels creative. So, could you talk a little bit about this?

00:35:24 **Leah Horlick:** You know, I, I know it's, it's gotta still be in my apparatus somewhere, but now, um, I'm in many ways farther from the text, and farther from the experience. I, I also find it very difficult to revisit the work. Um, so, sometimes I, I worry about, you know, my, my previous self, and I hope I'm doing her justice in the way that I talk about the work now. But it's, it's hard even to capture the, the level of anxiety I felt about not having the ways in which my gender was relevant to my experience or my, my identity as a femme woman come through in the text, and I think part of it to do, was to do with my, like, growing understanding of the way that at the time we still talked about, um, like softness and vulnerability and fragility in—even in the femme community—as things that were, um, signifiers of weakness, and, uh, therefore requisitely a bad thing like a negative thing, um, and I felt in some ways like, “I had to really forefront this stuff, so people know it's on purpose,” um, which, which I think is a very, you know, key part of, of many like, I don't want to say “baby femmes,” but people who are coming to this part of themselves, um, like that, that need to convey that this is an intentional choice.

00:36:42 Um, and then in some ways, I wonder what that, that is doing, or how that might be interacting with like, for me, what was certainly internalized misogyny at the time and, and going, you know, “do I really have to be hard femme or, or would it, would also be okay to be soft femme?” Like is my, my insistence on these signifiers, like, a way of going, “not like the other girls,” um, in a way that is derogatory and not in a way that speaks to the, um, you know, the, the singularity of a femme experience, insofar as it's, it's differentiated from like a coercive experience of femininity in a, in a like specifically heteronormative context. And because so much of... I, I had this sense that part of why what was happening had something to do with my femininity, and I couldn't quite articulate it at the time. And so in some ways I think I was using shorthand, um, where now I might have different ways of indicating that, um, if I were to attempt the text again. But, but I think you know, because I didn't it's the way that it is, and that's, that's what was right for me at the time.

00:37:48 And I, I was thinking about it, too, because that, I guess, was one of the things that spoke to me so early on about, about *Brazen Femme* is the way that those signifiers appear as, as like kind of talismans of power in, in the text, and for me to get the sense that these... so interesting, because I think at the time, if I had been functioning in a, in a heterosexual context, I would not have approached these things with the same anxiety. I would have had kind of like a, like a 90s girl power sense of like, “I can still be a self-actualized subject and like, look like this.” But then, because I was all of a sudden out of context, and I, I didn't really know what was happening with my sexuality or my gender, um, it was new to me to think in these like, in this context, these can also be, like, powerful ways of communicating with other people, um, like ways of signifying to people who know what to look for, that I'm, you know, on a wavelength, um, and also they give me so much trouble with, uh, like, you know, a, a key character in, in *For Your Own Good* is like the archetype of the doctor, and what the doctor thinks when they look at you, um, and to see *Brazen Femme* not only like explode those signifiers as they were reductive, but also really celebrate them was so meaningful to me, and I think it was really my first experience, um, with, with work that celebrated sex workers and the ways that they used those signifiers as forms of, of power in not only the profession, but in their way of moving through the world every day.

00:39:20 And because a, a part of *For Your Own Good* was a like coercive, like recruitment experience into sexualized work, it was very new for me, um, you know—like in in the spirit of antiquity, I was 21-year-old in Saskatchewan. I was like coming to a consciousness about having been sexually abused, and I thought, like “the next trajectory of my life, logically will be that I will probably develop a substance addiction to cope, and I will necessarily become someone who engages in sex work.” And it was *Brazen Femme* for me that was like, “and that's not a bad thing. That's not the worst thing that can happen.” You know, this, this, like, in my context, was, like, quite weaponized, but didn't necessarily have to be, um, and I could continue to celebrate those parts of myself that that were, um, you know, recognized as like vulnerable potential, but also didn't need to be... Yeah, didn't, didn't need to necessarily be denigrated, um, or that it wasn't something derogatory. Um. And this is all before I had like a consciousness of how race and ethnicity might be functioning in that vulnerability. For, like, in in the ways... I don't think I fully understood like language around exotification yet, or like the way in which, like being perceived as racialized, whether I knew it was happening or not, was a contributor to that kind of like hyper feminizing or hyper sexualization.

00:40:48 Um, so, yeah, it, it was all kind of coming together [laughs] in, in a way that at the time I was like, “what I what I can say about this is nails and hair and jewelry,” [laughs] and, and now you know, I, I feel lucky that in many ways those symbols have, have endured as things that many of us are fond of, and, and still hold a lot

of power. Um, yeah. And, you know what, one of the reasons I was so moved to be in this conversation with you, too, is when I, when I think about the ways that my consciousness changed, and I was able to articulate the role of, of racialization in my experience with, with my newer book, *Moldovan Hotel*, it was really, it was *Wanting in Arabic* that made it seem possible to me that, um, like, an exploration of mixed identity and ethnicity, um, could necessarily involve, like, a discussion of the erotic and, uh, like, a gendered body, and... Previously, I had found it so challenging to, to talk about race and ethnicity in ways where... it felt very inappropriate for some reason, and maybe that some of my own cultural stuff, or maybe it's environmental, but to talk about, um, like race and sexuality and gender at the same time felt very like, um... especially because I, I'm... You know, the book is focused primarily on the Holocaust, and I really had to work through, um, the sense that that would be inappropriate somehow to, to integrate that, when, really, it's a core part of the experience for, for many people. And, yeah, it was, it was really your text that I think dealt with my failure of the imagination in that that department for which I'm very grateful.

00:42:27 **Trish Salah:** I'm moved to hear you say that. I'm so moved by all you're saying, and you know part of my brain is back thinking about sex work and *Brazen Femme*, and some, and some of it is about, is, is hovering around this question of, uh, you know, the signifiers, as, you know, what you suggested, potentially, uh, a kind of response to internalized misogyny in, in, in relationship to soft femme being equated with some kind of victimhood. So... So my mind is running in several directions at once is what I will say.

00:43:03 [Leah laughs]

00:43:04 **Trish Salah:** But I so appreciate the different types of connections you've just made, so I'll, I'll go back to, um, *Brazen Femme* just for a moment, and say that one of the pieces that, uh, when I think femme science, I, I think of Kathryn Payne's articulation of “slut, femme, ho,” and, and the way in which that model is an intersectional understanding of how racialization and class play out in terms—and skinniness and, uh, blondness—play out in relationship to certain registers of, um, femme possibility and or disadvantage within the industry. Um, but the sort of articulation that harm can happen, that exploitation does happen, and that people can make choices, although the choices people can make are differently allocated. So yeah, and I, I, you know, your discussion of your own experience—and I, I see that in those moments in, um, *For Your Own Good*, uh, where that, um, pressure, you know, “you can pay for college...”

00:44:08 **Leah Horlick:** Mhm.

00:44:09 **Trish Salah:** Is, is being applied in ways that are forceful, right? Um, uh, and I, I think, about, uh, the way in which racialization plays out in, uh, “Yellow Scarf” as

one of the places where you are grappling with that. And you know the register of, uh, the gaze as a racializing and sexualizing, uh, both eroticizing and objecting, technology, um, experience. So, I mean I'm interested in thinking about that with you, but I, I also appreciate your, you know, very generous comment about *Wanting in Arabic* vis-a-vis *Moldovan Hotel* which, uh, when I read it, uh, struck me as so powerfully, uh, entering into... You know, we think of phenomenology and we think of the archive as two different things. But this is a phenomenology of, like, the past in the present, and, uh, negotiating its meaning for, you know, a poetic subject who bears some relationship to the writer, whatever that may be, but, uh, I, I felt that, um, the way in which the book worked to animate the Holocaust as experienced by a diasporic writer returning to sites of violence, and then making some kind of meaning and relationship, like, I, I think that it does very careful, delicate work to not be anything like an appropriation, but to, to be an inhabitation.

00:45:52 And I'm grateful for that. I think, you know, so much of *Wanting an Arabic*, in retrospect, feels like bumbling around at the intersections and fumbling for possible language, and not having it, um, and so trying to make something. Um, but often, you know, trafficking in stereotype and self-orientalization in that question of exotification and misidentification with cultural tropes, um, as they apply to myself and my own cohort of queer of colour people at that time, you know. Um, it feels like a complicated and problematic work in some ways, just because, uh, there weren't... They were not available to me for various reasons, that may have to do with me being light-skinned, and growing up mixed race and not in Lebanese community after my father's passing, not going—and, you know, because of light-skinned privilege only politicizing around my own racialization, you know, in my 20s. After, you know, a decade and a half of knowing that I was Lebanese, but walking in the world as if I were white, until it was called to my attention that I was Lebanese. You know, like... [laughs] So, um, what you do in *Moldovan Hotel* seems so much more subtle than that, honestly. Um, and, and, uh, and, you know, from my perspective, self-assured, um, whereas it, it, it always felt like a gambit, and felt like a gambit frequently went wrong with *Wanting in Arabic*, which, you know is... you know how it is. [laughs]

00:47:30 **Leah Horlick:** I—thank you. I'm so flattered, and you know, really in like, in the spirit of full transparency, and not to, not to create a false equivalency, but that's the, the way that it sounds like you feel about *Wanting In Arabic* is oftentimes how I feel about *Riot Lung* where oftentimes I'm like, “Oh, that's, that's where I could not do what I was trying to do because I did not have the language,” and I think in the process, I very, very clumsily like threw light onto issues that I was like not within my rights to do, or, or really like walked into other people's stories as if I owned the place. It's... I, I don't know how you find this at this point in your career, but it, it's so challenging to, to look back on that work and feel like that: “Well, that's a reflection of where I was at the time,” and it's challenging to be in

a different place now, and, and look at it, and, and be like, “well, I, I also, you know I created an object, and so now I'm responsible for the object, and so far as it lives.” And *Riot Lung* is out of print, um, but I, I do think, you know, if it were in print or if it comes back, there will need to be some conversations about the ways that I like, attempted what I attempted, and did not stick the landing.

00:48:37 [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:48:45 **Trish Salah:** So, I, I just wanted to come back to the work of femme science, and I wondered if you... your sense of how femme differently positioned you, or you feel differently positioned in femme vis-à-vis really the work of feminine gender in reproducing cisheteropatriarchy. Like, where, where is femme in relationship to that now? We, we know in some ways where, um, the terrain that, um, uh, *Brazen Femme* is staking out in terms of making claims to a kind of queerness that denaturalizes, but also refuses, that speaks from places like sex work, speaks from racialized and devalued femininities, um, and, and celebrates, you know, excess and power, um, and, you know, I'm being a bit reductive, but those are some of the things. So, where, where would you say femme sits vis-a-vis patriarchal gender these days? [laughs]

00:49:52 **Leah Horlick:** [laughs] It's, it's such a, a beautiful and, and troubling question that I could spend so much time with. I, I mean, I think just speaking very personally for me, um, so many things that I felt so angry, or so obligated, or so coerced into doing when they were understood to be, for, like, “the male gaze”—I'm making air quotations—you know, those, those things to me now feel quite, quite beautiful and, and powerful, because I'm... I have the opportunity to enact them in the context in which I choose to enact them for the people and the parts of myself that I'm choosing to, to celebrate. And I also think, you know, we've, we've come an amazing way in recognizing and, I hope, I don't know about making space for, but certainly acknowledging that the aesthetic signifiers of femme are not the, the only ones in that many I mean, certainly I have many, many people in my life who I love so much now, who we experience themselves profoundly as femme, and also struggle to have that recognized because of their gender presentation, or the way that the aesthetic that they're choosing to enact, um, is, is devalued because it doesn't look like what we think of as, um, like, cisheteropatriarchal femininity.

00:51:12 And so, I think in, in many ways we've still a great deal of work to do. What I would love to see in the future of—in, in expressing a hopefulness for the future of the femme science—I think it still astonishes me the extent to which the femmeness is only read, um, as like a necessary compliment to queer masculinity. Um, I was just, you know, not to get too personal on the podcast, but I was just thinking about this: I was in a coffee shop where I've gone, like many, many times, for years. I know it's queer-owned, and then I go in there with an ex-

partner, and all of a sudden I have the nicest conversation with the owner. [laughs] I was like, “I've been here so many times. But there's a reason this is only happening now,” and so I think that, uh, you know, that, that hypothesis remains to be exploded, or that is not as integrated into queer life as I would like it to be—even for those of us who think we know, or for people who I, I'm sure, would be quite conscious that this is an occasion in many parts of our lives, it's still... it still happens so, so regularly in a way that concerns me about our ability to like, integrate the, the, the abstract into the lived experience. I don't know. Does that answer your question? I hope so.

00:52:30 **Trish Salah:** Yeah, I know that's, that's wonderful. I mean, I guess I've been thinking about it, because when I think about, you know, the, um, rise of fascism, the alignment of that with transmisogyny and homophobia like, you know, this sort of inter- interaction of those three things. I... I wonder how those of us who are femme, uh, in our presentation, in our sense of self, who fall outside of conservative elaborations of gender can navigate a retrenchment around certain types of gender normativity.

00:53:09 **Leah Horlick:** Yes.

00:53:10 **Trish Salah:** Which, which also can be predicated upon our exclusion. So, so, you know, does that look like staking a claim to femininity that refuses the priority of the cis heteropatriarchal in a way that is politically efficacious in some way? Does that look like, uh, you know, you mentioned riot girl; like, the kind of gender-forward demos that we had a particular moment. I mean, I, I think that, that's certainly happening around reproductive freedom, but what does that mean in terms of queer life? And what does that mean in terms of... Does that... Does that auger a kind of, um, risk of a retrenchment of butch and/or androgenous queer womanhood as a, as the measure of, um, a politically efficacious subjectivity? Like I will, you know, are those pressures, like, growing in ways that we haven't really tracked because, because they're sort of ripples, um, to the, to the big incursions that are happening, but ones that we may end up feeling as we, um, try to organize or try to go to parties, or notice the absence of, um, cultural space, viable cultural space, or...

00:54:30 **Leah Horlick:** I'm so glad that you brought it up. And, and I really appreciate you. You know, introducing the, the, the current moment, the horrific moment in a way that's so, so eloquent and, and, like, expansive, um, because I, I'm struggling, I think... Now, now that you're mentioning I'm, I'm so curious to see what will happen in, in like a quite horrified way. I mean, I know certainly for myself, I definitely—um, and maybe this is also Covid related—but in, in the last year I've been like I'm, I'm not sure—um, and this is like a like a real “cis-sue,” [laughs] if you will where I'm like, “Now, is, is now the time to be talking about femme insofar as it manifests for me as, as a cis person?” It really doesn't feel like it's



important, and I'm concerned about how that may impact, um, like younger femmes or people down the road, but I also feel very hopeless about what to do about the, the weaponization of, like, um, lesbian and gay people against trans people, and to have the way that I, you know, um, present in the world, um, be, like, hailed as like an exception- acceptable form of, of queerness. It's very, very disturbing to, you know, have... at least the way it's, it's happening here it's like—speaking, like, inhabiting the voice of the people who believe these terrible things is like—“you're alright, because you look like the gender you were assigned at birth in the way that I think you should, and so I don't perceive you as a threat to children, um, and I perceive you as like an assimilated, non-troubling, like, quiet experience of sexuality that I don't really have to think about.” Um.

00:56:09 And it feels like such a departure from where we were 15 years ago, at least, as far as I was conscious of it, um, and I don't... It, it remains to be seen, like you were saying, what we're going to be able to effectively do about that. Um, yeah, like the, a lot of the early, like, femme kind of axioms that I haven't had to say in a long time really come to mind, like, like “femme on purpose,” or like “femme privilege does not exist” like I, I'm really having to dust those off... [laughs]

00:56:38 [Trish laughs]

00:56:39 **Leah Horlick:** In a way that I thought I, I wouldn't have to, and perhaps that's, you know, it's, it's likely that that's a reflection of my own experience at this particular moment. But, um, yeah, like horrifying. And, and, and in some ways, also horrifyingly logical, given the trajectory of many of the cultural conversations and political maneuvers. I don't want to sound naïve, like.

00:57:00 **Trish Salah:** So, So that's, that's kind. I, I appreciate you saying that, and that actually clarifies what I was trying to think about in ways that I really find helpful. Um, in terms of personal trajectories. I... for a while my biggest worry was the insecure precarity of being a contract instructor, you know. I'd had at least, um, some normalization of my transition within my own life and my own family. Uh, I felt like I had political community that could challenge the implications of that normalization being a kind of limit. But I, I don't think I worried about transphobes coming for me in the way that I might worry today. Um, you know, I'm not talking about walking down the street, I'm talking about sort of a more intentional trajectory—though walking down the street is its own milieu and, and space of risk, obviously. But anyway, I, I didn't want to take us too far in that direction. But it was something I was thinking about in terms of... I, I guess, when I started thinking about what *Brazen Femme* could open up in the early 2000s. Um, it, it did sort of cause a kind of uncomfortable echo with where we are now.

00:58:20 [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

- 00:58:29     **Leah Horlick:** This is, you know, this is the only like significant conversation, not just with femmes, but about femme-ness, that I think I've had since the onset of the pandemic, where there have been more than more than two people, people who I admire and respect so much but haven't had a chance to get to know very well, and that used to be such a regular part of my life. I really didn't know what I had! And so, to, to be able to re-enter that space with both of you is quite, quite meaningful, and I expect there's more where that came from for me once we get off this call.
- 00:58:59     **Trish Salah:** Yeah, I feel honoured and grateful to be in conversation with the both of you, and like I am revived by, by the conversation. I, I thank you for making that happen, and, and, and for inviting me into that.
- 00:59:17     [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]
- 00:59:33     **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.