

Episode 5: “I’m So Ready to Not Be Brave for Putting on Clothes”: Zoe Whittall and Allison Taylor in Conversation About Fat Femme-inities

- 00:00:01 [Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]
- 00:00:15 **Andi Schwartz:** Hello, I’m Andi Schwartz, and you’re listening to Still Brazen: 20 Years of Queering Femininity, a podcast celebrating the 20th anniversary of the publication of the book *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. This podcast was recorded at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University in Toronto, a place also known as Tkaranto. This place is and has been home to many First Nation peoples including the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendatt. The current treaty holders of this land are the Mississaugas of the Credit. It is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.
- 00:00:56 Welcome back for another episode! This week we have the novelist Zoe Whittall in conversation with Allison Taylor, an emerging scholar in fat studies and femme theory. Zoe Whittall is a bestselling novelist and TV writer. Her latest book is *The Fake*. She has won a LAMBDA literary award and has been shortlisted for The Giller Prize. Allison Taylor is a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow at Re-Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph. She holds a PhD in Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Studies from York University. Allison’s dissertation, titled “Fattening Queer Femininities: The Pitfalls, Politics, and Promises of Queer Fat Femme Embodiment,” explored queer fat femme identities, embodiments, and negotiations of oppressions. Her current postdoctoral research uses arts-based methods to examine how intersecting ableism and anti-fatness constitute barriers to public resources, services, and spaces for people of marginalized genders in Ontario. Her research interests spans the fields of critical femininities, fat studies, critical disability studies, and gender and sexuality studies. In her spare time, Allison can be found curled up with her cat, Evie, and a good book.
- 00:02:12 Zoe contributed two different pieces to *Brazen Femme*: one piece of fiction called “Fevers, Fall-Outs, and Fast Foods” and one co-created comic called “Fat is a Femme-inine Issue.” She has published several novels since then, as well as some recent essays about shifting femme identities, one called “Femme Fatale” which was published in 2021 in *Harper’s Bazaar* and one earlier this year in *Autostraddle* called “Take Me to Low Femme Paradise.”
- 00:02:40 Alli is such a great interviewer; she makes such excellent connections between all these pieces and draws in her own experience as a fat femme and her own research on fat femme subjectivities. The two of them cover fat activism in the 90s, how the fat femme experience and the meaning of femme in general has

changed since then, the complexities of disability and aging as they intersect with femme, as well as fat hatred and performative fat allyship in Leftist circles, plus some hopes for a fat femme future.

00:03:14 This conversation took place in the middle of Zoe’s busy book tour for her latest novel *The Fake*, and it really struck me what a special thing it is for all of these femmes to give time to this podcast. I have been in awe of Zoe Whittall, since I read *Bottle Rocket Hearts* and *Holding Still for As Long As Possible* around the same time that I read *Brazen Femme*, in the early 2010s. It’s been such a wild and wonderful thing to sit in on this conversation and the other conversations on this podcast between the femmes I’ve admired for, like, a decade and some of my really smart and talented friends and peers. The way that femme connects us across generations and time and creates these really rich moments of recognition is really special and just... oh so powerful. So, I just wanted to name that good fortune I’m feeling to be in community with, with these femmes, and to share some of my gratitude to the femmes contributing to this project. So now let’s take it over to Zoe and Alli, and begin where we so often do, with *Brazen Femme*.

00:04:19 [Transition Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:04:26 **Allison Taylor:** So how did you get involved with the *Brazen Femme* book collection?

00:04:31 **Zoe Whittall:** I don't remember. [laughs] I just know that I was, you know, in my 20s, and starting out my career as a writer. At the time, I think I probably published some poetry and, I can't remember the year it came out, but my novel would have come out a fe- maybe one or two years later. Um, and I knew Chloë and Anna from the bar scene, and, you know, various community events. I think that we had probably all read together at, um... Elizabeth Ruth used to do a night on Church Street called “Clit Lit,” I think. And I think Chloë and I had overlapped socially. So, we just sort of knew each other from around, and I think our work had been anthologized together before, so, I remember wanting to talk about several things that come up in the fiction piece, um, as being femme issues. And then I had newly, I think, because I can't remember my age then, I can't really quite remember when it happened, but like I had been thin when I came out at 18, and had kind of slowly... my metabolism changed when I started taking anti-depressants, and, like, it was very drastic. It was like six months I became—I look back, and I’m like, “oh, I was very...” I was like a size 14 whatever, but, like, and I’m much bigger now. But, at the time, it felt like a shift in my identity and about... and a shift in the way people interacted with me socially in the queer community and outside the queer community. And so, I wanted to write about the difference in cultural... the sort of different cultural capital involved in being, like, a thin femme in queer community, and being a fat femme in queer community, and how that changed, um, how I was perceived.

- 00:06:15 **Allison Taylor:** Totally. And I think that's so interesting and makes the experience of being a fat femme so clear, that you were able to see it sort of from both sides, like as a normatively sized person and then as somebody who was becoming increasingly fat.
- 00:06:31 **Zoe Whittall:** Mhm.
- 00:06:32 **Allison Taylor:** What was the femme, um, and specifically the fat femme culture or landscape, um, like in the early 2000s, um, in the, like, late 90s, um, you know, when *Brazen Femme* was published and in the works?
- 00:06:46 **Zoe Whittall:** It was, it was around then that, uh, the fat activist group Pretty, Porky and Pissed Off had started, I think, in, like, the late 90s, early aughts, and then I, I was roommates with, um, Mariko Tamaki. And so, she and Allyson, and I think Lisa Ayuso asked me to be involved as, as my body changed, and, um, I can't remember what year it would have been that I was involved. But, they really did make an impact on that art sc- the queer art scene in Toronto. And I would say that... Also, I had moved from Montreal, which had had a really vibrant inter-community art scene, where, like, the poets knew the filmmakers, knew the painters, knew the activists. And in Toronto, when I moved there, it was very segregated, and even within the queer community everything was very segregated. And so, I think the queer committee was no different. Most of it kind of centered around events that happened at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and, like, lesbian cabarets and club nights, and that kind of thing. And I would say that fat femmes were sort of periph- that we were sort of peripheral. Um, I mean I think that there were some fat femmes who were like pretty major cultural producers in that world, like Mariko Tamaki, Allyson Mitchell.
- 00:8:03 I would say that the work that Pretty Porky and Pissed Off did helped that, um, and it really kind of depended where and who you were with and, and like, who happened to be around, you know. [laughs] Like, there's a lot of fatphobia in the bar scene. But then there were... There was also, like, kind of, in moments, like, this unique place for queer bodies and non-normative bodies to, to have, to find like homes and, and safe places. It just sort of depended on the day.
- 00:08:32 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah, absolutely. How have you found that, um, fat femme struggles, what it means, um, what fat femme activism looks like, um, has changed or stayed the same since that time?
- 00:08:46 **Zoe Whittall:** So, I would say that it looks different now, because there are, you know, people like Lizzo and, you know, in the wider culture there's, um, like... The aughts were really bleak.

00:08:59 **Allison Taylor:** Mmm.

00:09:00 **Zoe Whittall:** Like... I even look back at, at photos or videos of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off. I have, like, a... my ex-partner, Suzy, was a photographer, and so she took all these great photos and videos of us. And now I look at them, and I'm like, “We look like thin people,” [laughs] almost, you know, by today's standards. Which is weird! Like, um, I guess it was like, it felt like it was really radical. I think that there's more, um... and I even think, like queer culture has just changed so much, um, in terms of, it's just... Like, in some ways, it's gotten much more radical. And in some ways it's gotten much more—you probably have a better way to say this, because you're scholarly—but, like, just much more, like, liberal and mainstream, I guess, were, would be the words I would use. Now I think about fat femme in relationship with aging, and, like, there's no bar scene for me anymore, [laughs] you know, and it's more like I see people at parties every once in a while that I used to go out with regularly, and that's just kind of what it's like when you age. But I do think that, like, politically things have shifted. But, I'm not really sure how to describe it.

00:10:05 **Allison Taylor:** Hmm.

00:10:06 **Zoe Whittall:** I guess it's, like, accessibility has gotten better. There's more fat representation. There's, there's so many more places to buy clothes. There's less reliance on, like, clothing, swaps, etc. There's more discussion about fatness in general...

00:10:20 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah, yeah. I think that when I was doing my research, um, and in sort of my own experience, the thing that I was most excited to see was how much fat femmes are, like, picking each other up or, like, are supporting each other, or, like, um... in my sort of, like, experience as a fat femme, um, for me personally, it's tied to butch because, like, I'm attracted to, like, butches and, like, masculine-of-centre folks, but hearing, like, my participants in my research talking about like dating fat femmes, like, sleeping with fat femmes, or even just, like, friendships, um, that, you know, you might classify as platonic or romantic, or that kind of, like, exist beyond all of these boundaries. I found that so exciting. Um, so many people talked about like their best fat femme, um, and about existing in community. And I just... I love that there are relationships between fat femmes of all different types that are coming around, and the ways that, like, those are giving us new ways to think about fatness and femme, um, and like desiring, um, fat femmes or, like, you know, the ways that we're sort of making spaces for ourselves when the world is so fat-hating. Um, so, in my experience, in my research, that would be one of, I think, the main shifts that I noticed. And I think it's always been there, but I think maybe now there's a more sort of pronounced, explicit emphasis on, um, like femmes, fat femmes supporting fat femmes.

00:12:04 **Zoe Whittall:** That's great.

00:12:05 **Allison Taylor:** Like, went to revisit that chapter, like, for our conversation today, and, like, when I've written about it previously, I think, like, one of the things that stood out, um, was the idea of there being a “high femme Rolodex,” and how it's full of, you wrote, “people who are tall, skinny, with some tattoos and a snap-to-her strut,” and I think that idea of not feeling like a true femme, or like a real femme, um, or like I could even could be high femme because I was fat really resonated with me. Um, but yeah, when I read your chapter, and I think that it's really interesting that, you know, 20 years later, that still feels so true in so many ways.

00:12:51 **Zoe Whittall:** Oh, does it? That's too bad. I thought I had this, like... I think that sometimes when you get older, and you look at youth culture, and like younger queers doing things and you're like, “Wow! This... things are so much better,” you know? So, I'd hoped it'd have become a little better. Um, but yeah. I think that there's still a—I mean on the masc side, too—there's still an, a thin ideal, and that that's too bad. And I also think, I also think that that back then femme was a lot about, like, working-class jobs, including like sex worker jobs and like, and, um, and that, that had a lot to do with, like, who was seen as a real femme and who wasn't. Yeah, so I think that there was a sense of like “real femmes have a certain kind of background. And this kind of interaction with cis men, and a certain kind of power, alternately like, power, leverage, identities, and also, like much more disempowered positions that they came from. So, it was like, yeah, it was different. And fatness was kind of like, you know, I think, especially in the 90s, Leftists were really big on, like, fat as a symbol of capitalism and...”

00:14:00 **Allison Taylor:** Hmm.

00:14:01 **Zoe Whittall:** Excess, and, and like to be... I think, because back then, like, we really didn't have—like my community and my friends in general at that age—didn't have uh, a lot of connection to our families, and so we had our own family structures, and it was more, like, to be an outsider was just more normal, I guess. So, like, I'm, I'm trying to, to reconcile that with, like, you know, the queers that came 10, 15, 20 years after us, who, like, watched *Glee* with their parents, or whatever, you know.

00:14:29 **Allison Taylor:** Mhm, yeah. And I'm really interested with your involvement in *Pretty, Porky and Pissed Off*. Um, yeah, how did *Pretty Porky and Pissed Off* and your activism there, um, relate to fat femme for you, or did it? I'm assuming.
[laughs]

- 00:14:46 **Zoe Whittall:** Yeah, it really did it. It just helped me have like friendships and connections, and feel better about myself, because I think, like, simultaneously as when I joined that troupe, I was, like... having the first experiences I’d ever had of, like, going out to a bar and, and hitting on people and them not reacting well. Like it, because it had been like, you know, that didn't happen constantly, but, like, there was... I used to joke about it in my stand-up act that, like, gaining weight made me, forced me to learn how to be interesting, like I, that I had thought that I was interesting, but it was just that I was conventionally attractive. [laughs] And so, people react to you so differently, and they're so nice. It's like, it was similar to the experience I had of, like, I dated butches for 18 years, and then I dated a trans man who passed, and we—and he had two kids—and we passed as heterosexual and cis in the world, and I thought everyone was on drugs because they were so nice to us all the time, and it was so weird.
- 00:15:41 And I had that same kind of dissonance when I gained weight, and people started to ignore me, or saying things about me that were negative, or not be interested in flirting with me, etc., and it was like because my body changed so quickly, I didn't really quite... Like, my friends used to joke that it was like, “the year Zoe’s tits fell out of her bra all the time,” because she didn't realize [laughs] that her tits were changing, you know, like. Uh, so yeah, yeah Pretty Porky and Pissed Off was great. It was like having, like, a really cathartic social group to meet with occasionally and talk about fatness. I also just, like, learned a lot from everyone in the group, because I had been political, but, like, I was a very typical kind of normatively sized person who like, thought, you know, I thought like, “Of course I'm a fat ally. Of course I'm not an asshole about it.” But I really was, like, just in subtle ways that I excluded my fat friends in certain ways, and I didn't think about them in certain contexts, or like, just kind of really subtle ways that, like, after becoming fat, I realized, “Oh, my God, I participated in that kind of oppression all the time in these small, everyday ways.” And so, yeah, being part of PPPO was really helpful, just in having a community that was, like, a little bit more specialized than my queer community.
- 00:16:55 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah. And I was just reading your, um, piece that you just wrote for *Autostraddle*, um, “Send me to Low Femme Paradise.” Same.
- 00:17:05 **Zoe Whittall:** [laughs]
- 00:17:05 **Allison Taylor:** It's so good, and you talked in it kind of about some of your shifting experiences as a fat femme since, like, the start of the pandemic in 2020, and specifically how that affected, um, the way you experienced your book tour this year. Um, can you tell me a bit about what prompted you to revisit the topic of femme to you for that article?

00:17:28 **Zoe Whittall:** Yes, okay. So, I just had this really interesting experience of... I lived alone during the most locked down times in the pandemic, and, so and then, of course, I was like, “who do I dress for? Myself and my dog?” [laughs] You know. And uh, so, I wore a lot of sweatpants for the first time, and this... So, like when I, I had a book, come out in 2021, and it was when I did everything online, so I would just like, put on a, some lipstick and a shirt that looked cute and, and do Zoom Events. But when it came to like going out in the world I was, like, overwhelmed from, for myriad reasons, but one of them was that I had outgrown a lot of my, like, clothes that I used to wear to do events. And also just styles that shifted in the interim, and also, like, just, like, my last book came out when I was, like—Oh, my God! No!—Besides the one that came out in 2021, it had been five years. And so, like the years between 39 and 40 and 46, 47 are like kind of sig- you change a lot. You, like... every friend I see who's my age, when I see them now I'm like, “oh, we have... we're really middle aged now,” [laughs] whereas when you're like 38, 39, you can kind of, like, fake it because we have queer faces.

00:18:37 Anyway, so I started to be like, “what... what should I wear?” It started as a fashion crisis, and then it kind of became a little bit of an identity crisis where I mean... I remembered that... like there are certain ways that, like, queer women can dress in straight literary establishment settings with just like, you know, button-down shirts and, um, kind of... Blundstones, or just sort of plain, plainer, I guess, and a little bit more on the masculine side. And so, I ordered all these shirts, and I started to be like, “what if I just dressed kind of like an academic lesbian from my generation?” And like, which is something I... had never appealed to me before. But I started to think about it in a utilitarian way where I was like, “This can be kind of like a uniform” to sort of cover up the issues I felt like I was having with aging and with my size and, uh, perception and, and the, the, the spectre of, like, having to see myself in video, on television shows, or whatever. Like, if, if I was lucky enough to get that kind of coverage from my book, so.

00:19:35 Because I had the experience of... in 2016, I, uh, was nominated for a really big award, and every, you know, I had the experience of, like, everybody, all the other authors on the short list, all the other women, were given stylists, and they were able to, like, get dresses lent to them by designers, etc. And, but there are no, like... No one would do that for me, right? And they tried to be like, “oh, here's your, here's your stylist. We're going to go to this one, this exciting store.” I'm like, “that's the store I shop at all the time. It's the only one,” you know. So... and that was when I was smaller than I am now. So, it was just sort of like, “Well, I don't want to think about it,” and so, so I started experimenting with more like masculine clothing, and it I didn't end up working out, and I ended up like kind of, you know, buying a, a little black blazer and trying to, you know, just do the all black jeans, black Blazer situation and, and run with it that way. So, then I wrote

the piece about, like, embracing low femme and embracing, like, kind of a more casual presentation of femme, and how that feels a little bit better in middle age.

00:20:38 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah! And I think also interesting to hear about how your experiences have shifted as you've aged as a femme, um, but also like pre- and then, during, like, the, you know, the ongoing pandemic. Um, we thought that it was really interesting that in this piece, the one you just wrote for *Autostraddle*, you talk about low femme, and then how, um, the like, the anthology, the 2002 anthology is *Brazen Femme*. And... have you always identified as low femme, or where might low femme fit in relationship to *Brazen Femme*?

00:21:14 **Zoe Whittall:** I think that, like, when I was younger, I was always high femme when I went out.

00:21:18 **Allison Taylor:** Mmm.

00:21:19 **Zoe Whittall:** But then in my everyday life—like my friend Joey in California, like she never leaves the house unless she has her lashes on and her lipstick and, you know, a certain kind of presentation, and I was never, I never did that. Or periodically would kind of be in a phase like that. But I think I always kind of, like, and I think it's partially like an ADHD thing, where, like, when I was young, and also, I used to be, like, really broke, so I felt like the cost of being that dressed up all the time was a harder, a higher bar to meet. But I think that, like, you know, when I say in the piece in *Autostraddle* that I used to wear heels, and then it's somewhere around 30 I just got a couple of pairs of boots, and that's all I wear, unless it's Pride. But, also, like, I think that, like, when I feel more high femme, when I want to dress up more high femme, it's when my life is more social, and it's when I think it's a little more... I go through, have more high femme phases if I'm dating butches, or if I'm dating someone where that, like, kind of interaction is more playful and interesting. Whereas, like, if I'm not in a butch/femme dynamic, then I just kind of feel like a little more, like... um, and I'm more, I have a more, of an introverted life, that's where I feel like a little more, low femme.

00:22:32 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah, for sure. I loved how in the *Autostraddle* piece you talked about low femme in relationship to fatness, um...

00:22:41 **Zoe Whittall:** Mhm.

00:22:41 **Allison Taylor:** And talking about like the pressure as a fat person to be, you know, hyperfeminine, um, and look, you know, like at least you can say that you're put together, and that's like one way to sort of mitigate, you know, the fat hatred that's coming at you from all angles, um...

00:22:58 **Zoe Whittall:** Mhm.

- 00:23:00 **Allison Taylor:** How do you... How do you negotiate that, being low femme and sort of the... yeah, the ways that like fat hatred, you know, trickles in from all ways there?
- 00:23:09 **Zoe Whittall:** Yeah, I, I think that, like, as, as I get older, the less I care, I think, in so many ways. And I think that pre-pandemic, and during periods of time when I've been single or, like, going out more I felt more pressure—I certainly feel more pressure in a professional context, like, I also work in television, and so I feel that pressure acutely when I have to go do network industry events, or I have to interview in-person, or I have to work in a writing room in-person with mostly straight people. I feel like there, you know... That if you are a thin, cis, straight woman, you can show up to work in, you know, like, a nondescript kind of pillow sack, and people will be like, “that's the height of fashion,” and if I were to wear the same thing, I would look like I rolled out of bed and, like, you know, wasn't trying. And I think people, if people really think that it reflects, your clothing in that context really reflects on your character and your ability to do a job well and, um, yeah, and I feel like I used to really try to keep up in those scenarios, and that I think it's one of those weird, positive gifts of the pandemic that, like, and getting, becoming the age that I am, that I am less and less stressed about it.
- 00:24:26 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah, for sure.
- 00:24:28 **Zoe Whittall:** Though, I really appreciate it as a, like, a person looking at somebody else, like, I really appreciate fashion and, and, like, really int- like, great makeup, and when people are really put together, I find it very, like, admirable and, and amazing. And it's just... it's more like I always feel like I can... No matter, no matter what I do [laughs] I can't quite ever get to that level. And so, part of low femme, embracing low femme is more about, like, just, like, accepting who I am, you know... [laughs]
- 00:24:54 **Allison Taylor:** Yes! For sure, for sure. Um, no, I've had a sort of, I think, an experience of really embracing low femme, um, as sort of, like I've become, like, increasingly, like, disabled throughout the pandemic, and just like not having the spoons to, like, you know, make sure that my eyeliner flicks are perfect, or like, have that, you know, bright lipstick, like sometimes, like, my hand is trembling and I can't do it.
- 00:25:21 **Zoe Whittall:** Mhm.
- 00:25:22 **Allison Taylor:** Or, like, I can't, like, stand at my bathroom mirror for, you know, the, the 20 minutes it takes to put on a, a face like I used to. So, I, I deeply relate to that, and I think that's so interesting looking at it from your angle of aging as

well. What are some of the main ways that you think aging has affected your relationship to femme?

00:25:42 **Zoe Whittall:** It's so interesting. It's hard to parse, like, what is, like, being a woman, aging, femme-ness, like, all kind of a mess. But I do feel like my femme identity connects me to my lesbian identity and queer identity. Like I, I, I use “lesbian” and “dyke” and “queer” kind of interchangeably, even though I'm technically bisexual. I just think the word “bisexual” is so corny and awful, um, you know. [laughs] So um, I... the word femme I feel like connects me to a type of queerness that feels like generational to me, or feels like my community of the people that I love, my chosen family, like, I feel like, um, no matter who I'm, who I happen to be dating—and I mostly have been dating queer men for the last little while—using the word connects me to, like, who I think my core community is.

00:26:32 And also because, like I, I mentioned the generationally and the aging stuff, because, like when I hear, or I read, a 20-year-old talking about femme identity online, I just don't really even understand what they're talking about. And I don't, um, relate at all. And I think that's okay. I feel like that happened when I was 21 and I was trying to talk to people in their 40s. Like, we just have different contexts. So yeah, I feel like there's a sense that, like, when younger people talk about femme identity, I feel like they're talking about everything. It's the same way I feel like a lot of people talk about queer as though it means everything [laughs] and I feel like, for me, the specificity and queerness and dyke culture, specifically, is important to me. Like I, I wrote another piece for *Harper's Bazaar* about, like, femme being a queer word and the importance for me of the, like, that, that, uh, that context, and I feel like um... I think that's why I still cling to it. Like, I still find it an important word, even though it is, it grows increasingly meaningless. Not meaningless. It's growing increasingly, like, big, as a word.

00:27:31 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah.

00:27:32 **Zoe Whittall:** Which is like... I'm fine with that, I'm not trying to tell anyone what anything means. But, um, for me, it kind of is a part of my history that, I think is important, still.

00:27:41 **Allison Taylor:** Mhm, absolutely, yeah. Are there moments that you could point to where, like you've heard, um, you know, like the next generation, talk about femme where you've been like, yeah, “that, that is not my that is not my experience of it. Like, Wow! This is different.”

00:27:55 **Zoe Whittall:** I think that straight people started using the word femme, and like it was on T-shirts in H&M, for example, and, like, it just sort of... People say “femme” when they mean, they meant “feminine.”

- 00:28:05 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah.
- 00:28:06 **Zoe Whittall:** And to me, that's not what it means. But I feel like it increasingly is what the word means, um, and I also think there's this other thing that, like super academic Leftists will also say, “Well, femme only means this from this history,” and it's, like, not even really true that that's the history, or that's, that's like one part of the history. But, like, I just feel, like, all around there's like a real argument about, like, what femme means. And, I don't know. I think it's okay that it shifts. I feel like, you know, the word, the word “butch” has shifted so much that people don't even really use it anymore. So, it makes sense that femme would as well, but for me, that, the terms are connected. And I think that that's really funny to me, thinking about this book, because I remember how radical it was at the time that it was a whole book about femmes, and, and there was such a, an effort involved to, like, disconnect the word “femme” from “butch” because of how butch-centered the conversation had been until then, and then I feel like the, the connection, the disconnection from butch has almost created something different, like a different problem in the intervening years, um, for me, anyway.
- 00:29:11 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah. I... it was so, like... I went into a Chapters-Indigo one time, and, like, it was so disorienting to see “femme” on, like, a pencil case. I was like, “what is...”
- 00:29:22 **Zoe Whittall:** Yeah!
- 00:29:23 **Allison Taylor:** “What is happening here? This is... bizarre.”
- 00:29:25 **Zoe Whittall:** Yup.
- 00:29:26 **Allison Taylor:** “I don't think this is what you mean to say here.” So, I yeah, I can 100% relate to that. And yeah, I think it, it, it does, it does... I feel that as well, like, this tension around who gets to define femme, what does it mean, who gets to fit within it? Do we broaden it out to be inclusive? Um, yeah, what do we do here with it? Um, so, I think that's so interesting. And I'm really curious to watch the ways that femme continues to evolve, um, and the different meanings that people make of it, and the ways that it gets taken up.
- 00:30:02 **Zoe Whittall:** Yeah, like words just change. And, like, I remember when we as a community started using the word “transgender” instead of “transsexual,” or when some people resisted using the word “dyke.” I think... it's funny as you get older, like, trying to keep up with the ways that words shift and the meanings change, and then, like, how that makes you feel about the words you still use. But yeah, to me, femme-ness is still very queer, and, and a fat femme body is kind of a queer body, no matter if you mean literally gay. But a femme body, if

you don't mean queer, [laughs] what does that, you know, like there are all sorts of questions I have about that.

00:30:40 [Transition music: Brazen Femme Theme Song]

00:30:48 **Alli Taylor:** What are some of your hopes for future generations of fat femmes?

00:30:54 **Zoe Whittall:** Um. I feel like it would be great if like... If there was, you know, like, how young people, like, children specifically, or, like, young teenagers, they just don't even give a fuck about queerness or, like, different identity categories. They're so like... I mean not everywhere, but some, in some places. Like, my friend, who is a trans guy went back to talk to his high school just like 5, 10 years ago, and they, and they were like, “he's so normative.” [laughs] “He's so binary,” and they're like, “my gender changes, like, before lunch,” you know. Like, there's just, like...

00:31:22 [Allison laughs]

00:31:23 **Zoe Whittall:** For fat, fatness and femme-ness, like, it would be so great if, like, for example, there was like a cabaret or a queer night of performance, and, like, there was a fat burlesque performer, or a fat dancer, fat writer who was on stage and the first reaction of the crowd wasn't like, “wow, she's brave,” or “this is new,” or, “I'm, I'm going to perform, like, being cool with this,” or, or the assumption that, that, that she's more radical or, like, I... If there was just, like, an, an assumption that bodies come in all sizes—and not to, like, paint over the, like, the very real oppressions, or to not talk about them—but I just feel like my hope would be that there wouldn't be like this fat hatred lens, you know, like, that things would change enough that—I don't like the word fatphobia because I feel like it's really fat, fat hatred—but, um, like, I love when, when I'm in, like, a kind of Lefty room, and people are talking about fatness, and, but there's still like a level of like, “aren't they brave,” or, “aren't they interesting, aren't they unique,” and I feel like it'd be cool if we got past that, and it was just like bodies come in every size, you know? I don't know. I maybe sound utopic, but it would just like, it would just be, I think, pretty great.

00:32:37 **Allison Taylor:** Ugh, I'm so ready to not be brave for just, like...

00:32:40 **Zoe Whittall:** Right? [laughs]

00:32:41 **Allison Taylor:** Putting on clothes and, like, existing in the world because I have to?

00:32:45 **Zoe Whittall:** Yeah, exactly, or to feel like people want to date you, like, the, the feeling of, like, oh, people want to be friends with you or date you, not because

of like any kind of performance of allyship, or whatever. Like, that's uncomfortable, too, you know, in a Lefty world.

00:32:58 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah, can you tell me a bit more about that? Has that been something you've experienced?

00:33:03 **Zoe Whittall:** Well, I feel like, I'm not really in this world anymore, but I feel like there was a time when I did, was around a lot of like Leftist, scholarly, academic spaces, and I feel like there's such an insincere performance of, um, of not being fatphobic on the part of like, normal, normative-sized people that feels, like, kind of great at first, and then, like, just as weird [laughs] as other kinds of, like... Cause I feel like when you're... if, let's say, you're trying to date in that world, like, there's a, there are people who are like fetishists; there are people who are genuinely attracted, but like kind of fumbly about it; and then there are people who like perceive you as having a kind of weakness...

00:33:40 **Allison Taylor:** Mmm.

00:33:41 **Zoe Whittall:** That they can exploit, um, you know, like, people who don't want a, someone else to leave them, for example, sometimes go for fat women or fat femmes, because they feel like—I mean, this is, can be all unconscious—that they would have some sort of like upper hand, um, because of the ways different bodies are valued. And so, I feel like, in, in a lot of like, like far Left spaces, there's a lot of, like, denial of, um, those kind of uncomfortable realities, and the way that, like, you know, the “I’m-more-oppressed-than-you” kind of dance that people go through in that world plays out in, like, real feelings and people, if that makes sense.

00:34:17 **Allison Taylor:** Yeah, that 100% makes sense.

00:34:20 [Transition music: Brazen Femme Theme Song]

00:34:28 **Allison Taylor:** I just want to say that, like, I first read *Brazen Femme*, um, in, it would have been like 2013, when I was, um, in university, and I had, like, just come out as queer. A friend had said, like, “I think that you might be femme.” Um, and I think femininity has, had always felt just sort of, like, weird or wrong, or, like, it didn't fit me, um, because I was a little fatty, and then reading *Brazen Femme*, and seeing, like, “Fat is a Femme-inine Issue,” and reading that, and like seeing my experiences, like, mirrored back to me, was so meaningful, so, like, I think, that your chapter and your work in that book, um, really did something in terms of making femme expansive and making fat femme feel like it was a possibility, um, and like a way for me to see myself and exist, um. Yeah. So, I, like... I think that *Brazen Femme*, the book, and your chapter did so much.

00:35:24 **Zoe Whittall:** Cool. That's so awesome. It was a really big deal at the time for me to be published in that book, because I did feel like it was like a significant contribution to, like, queer culture at the time, and also like to be a part of it, it was really exciting to me.

00:35:39 [Outro music: Brazen Femme Theme Song]

00:35:55 **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, Dr. Andi Schwartz, 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 Studies 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.