COUNTRY QUEERS SEASON 1 EPISODE 2

DESCRIPTION: Sharon P. Holland is a professor of critical race, queer, and feminist theory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She lives on Catawba, Eno, and Shakori land. In this interview, recorded in June 2017, Sharon talks about her childhood in D.C. and Durham, NC, her journey towards finding an identity that fits, the 8 magical acres she calls "Sweet Negritude" where she makes her home, and the Black intellectual thought that has guided her throughout her life.

This episode, we're asking listeners to donate to My Sistah's House – a grassroots, direct services, and advocacy organization founded in 2016 by two trans women of color to bridge a gap in services for TQPOC in Memphis, TN. They're fundraising to build 20 tiny homes for Black trans women, expanding on their housing security work.

CREDITS: Host/Producer/Lead Editor: Rae Garringer. Assistant Editor/Composer-Performer of Acoustic and Electric Guitar Music: Tommie Anderson. Editorial Advisory Dream Team: Hermelinda Cortés, Sharon P. Holland, and Lewis Raven Wallace. Theme Song Composer/Banjo: Sam Gleaves. Theme Song Pedal Steel: Rebecca Branson Jones. Most importantly, thanks to Sharon P. Holland for sharing her story so generously with us all.

TRANSCRIPT

[Sound of goats]

ADA SMITH [Intro]: Hi, all you rural, raunchy, take-no-shit, calloused-hand, bug-bit, croc-wearing, country queers. This is Ada Smith from Kingdom Come Creek in east Kentucky, and you're listening to the Country Queers podcast.

[Theme Song]

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: Hey, I'm Rae Garringer and this is Country Queers, a podcast featuring oral history interviews with rural and small-town queer and trans folks in the U.S. Each episode features an interview I've recorded since founding this project in 2013. In this episode you'll meet Sharon P. Holland. Sharon lives on Catawba, Eno, and Shakori land in unincorporated Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She is a professor of critical race, queer, and feminist theory at the University of North Carolina.

SHARON P. HOLLAND: Oh, my age. Okay. Well, my name is Sharon P. Holland or Sharon Patricia Holland. I live in Chapel Hill, Old School Road, which used to apparently be called Old Colored Road. *[Dog whines]* That's right, my dog's whining now, this is awesome. She wants to be part of the interview.

RAE: Aw, Winnie.

SHARON: And I was born in 1964 which I guess means I'm 53 years old.

RAE: Great.

SHARON: So, I guess I'm almost an old country queer. *[Laughs]*

RAE [Host]: Sharon drives a big ole truck. She's a horse rider, a gardener, a prolific writer, and one of the editorial advisors for this podcast. We met when I was a graduate student at UNC from 2015-2017. I was working on a Master's degree in Folklore in an attempt to carve out time to fully focus on Country Queers after a couple years of gathering stories in my free time outside of full time work in West Virginia public schools. Where, by the way, I wasn't able to be explicitly out at work—but all the queer kids found me and came out to me.

I interviewed Sharon in June of 2017. That summer, we were six months post Donald Trump's inauguration. The previous fall, up the road in Charlotte, North Carolina, organizers and protesters pressured the city for fundamental change after Keith Lamont Scott was murdered by police. The previous winter, down the road in the other direction in Raleigh, local organizers mobilized at the North Carolina Governor's mansion and inside the State House in opposition to HB2, also known as "The Bathroom Bill." The bill, which was part of a larger national right-wing strategy, targeted and criminalized trans people by requiring by law the use of bathrooms and other public facilities based on sex assigned at birth. The bill was defeated in March 2017. Two months after this interview white supremacists would take over the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia murdering Heather Heyer with a car.

After this year of tumult, Sharon and I sit on the couch in her home study on June 5th, 2017. Sharon is wearing shorts and a t-shirt with a bright yellow plaid button up, that's unbuttoned and casual. It's worth noting here that Sharon is *very* fashionable in her work life on campus. Like super hip. So, her casual outfit and her relaxed comfort at home is noticeable. Her dogs, Winnie and Webster, are in the room with us. Later in the interview, it starts to rain, and then pour, pounding the tin roof overhead. In this interview, Sharon talks about her childhood, her journey towards finding an identity that fits, and the Black intellectual thought that has guided her throughout her life.

RAE: So, if you were going to describe what it's like where you live to somebody who's never been here, has no sense of the place, how would you describe it?

SHARON: Magical. Magical. When I first bought the land, I was really excited because, you know, I was like, "I want to live in a place…I want to have an acreage. And I want to live in a place with a driveway, with an old shed on it, you know, that looks kind of country and kind of scary." At the same time, um, I wanted to live at the end of a dirt road. And this is like the end of the dirt road for Blackness, in that it's 10 minutes from

town just in case anything breaks off. Right? Um, let me see, and it's not Alamance County. All right, hold on for a sec.

RAE: Okay.

SHARON: Dogs off. Go, go, go on, both of you, go on, go on. She's not going to be good. I apologize, I hope she's not ruining your audio.

RAE: It's okay. It was just dog sounds.

SHARON: Dog sounds, okay.

RAE: But we know what it is.

SHARON: Country queers and their animals…Um, and so, I wanted to kind of give a name to the property, and I thought of it as very sweet. A lot of people think it's kind of like a sanctuary. But, it was my brother Eton, my non-bio brother who was visiting once, and he said, "Why don't you call it Sweet Negritude?" And I'm like, "Yeah, because Blackness is bittersweet." You know? And also because it seemed to resonate with the intellectual thought that pretty much brought me to all the things in my life that I think are good.

RAE: Hm. What, um...Do you want to follow that train? *[Laughs]*

SHARON: The Negritude movement, you know? Pan-Africanism? Um, you know, I always tell people I'm African American culturally, I'm a person of African descent as a human, but then we all are, so...Um, and I am Black politically, in that I believe in Black freedom, struggles for global Blackness. And I wouldn't know anything about those struggles if I hadn't read Fanon or Emile Cesair, just a whole range of authors who've helped…Du Bois, Tubman, or about Tubman at least. Um, you know, Harriet Jacobs. Just all those struggles for Black freedom, and very complicated struggles among complicated people. I guess that's what I like about the word, term Negritude. It talks about Black freedom, Black genius, but it also talks about that we're more than just our suffering. And I think that's important. So, this place is more than just about Black suffering. It's about the gift of Blackness. *[A small thing falls in the background]* Emphasized by an acorn falling from the trees. Clearly an ancestor throwing a funny rock at the window or something crazy like that. And my dog's decided to clean herself. That's awesome.

RAE: Yeah, that's good background noise, Winnie.

SHARON: I know. Thanks a lot.

RAE: You think you could pause it, Winnie?

SHARON: Yeah, I know. Winnie, would you like to go to the other room? I would really like that to happen. Go on, go on, go on, go on. Bye-bye, bye-bye. Out, out!

RAE: Um, so when you were saying you wanted to be in the country at the end of a dirt road, but not in Alamance County...*[Laughs]*

SHARON: Like, historically, what's up with Alamance County? Oh, you know, Klan activity, like huge Klan activity. Like, if you go past White Cross Road, when Orange begins to become kind of Alamance? Before the whole November, 2016 election, you'd see, you know, there would be Hillary posters and then they'd fade out to like, nothing but Trump for miles, right?

So um, you know this is…You gotta, you know, you can be country queer all you want, but you also need to be safe. Or find spaces of safety. But I feel like my people have been from this area. I'm like probably sixth generation North Carolina. I take it seriously. And I never really had a home.

Like my mom—we had a place to live, but we moved around a lot. So, kind of somewhere between military brat and something else. And if I was going to put down roots, I wanted to put down roots where I could actually stay and not be afraid of like, "Oh God, what's going on down the road?" So. There's a vibe here. There's like, these families, Black families have been here for generations. And so it's a mostly African-American road, which is very unusual for Orange County. So...

RAE: Um...Sooo...I guess since you just talked about your mom and growing up a little bit, do you want to talk about like... where you were born, your childhood, where you grew up?

SHARON: Yeah, I spent, in a nutshell, I spent my time in D.C. That's where I was born and raised, but I spent my summers in Durham, North Carolina with my grandmother, because I guess my family was old time Southern. And so all the cousins came to stay for a little bit of time. But since my mother had become a single parent when I was seven, I stayed with my grandmother the longest. I was also the baby of the baby.

My mother's people—my grandfather's office was on Parrish Street. They were heavily involved in the creation of Black Wall Street, Mutual Life Insurance. And so I grew up kind of a Mason-Dixon Line kid. Where, you know, I had this kind of international community in D.C., where I went to private school, almost all of my education, until my graduate years, really. So I grew up there and then I moved, let me see. When I moved off to college, I began this kind of odyssey of like, moving every year for two decades. It was kind of crazy—not every year but moving...I've seen a lot. I've crossed the country, twice.

But yeah, growing up was pretty amazing, but it was hard. It was the 70s. And there is a generation, we have the history of the folks who were civil rights activists, but everyone skipped our generation. The civil rights activists were the ones who, in solidarity busted

open down the door, but we were the ones who walked through it quietly and had to be examples to everybody else for our race, for our people. And I would say that that's work that's really been hard, was hard for us to do, but nobody, since no one talks about it as work, or no one even thinks about it's that kind of like, silent thing that happened to us, that now people who are 50 something, my dearest friends, we talk about it. Cause desegregation's no joke. *[Laughs]* And in many ways, it's a lonely endeavor because they only let a couple of us through the door. Even though there are a mass of people on the other side breaking it down. They only let us trickle in. So, all of us were the only Black students, the only Black and female students, the only Black and poor students, the only, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I, however, you know, my mother's people were pretty bourgeois, like I said. My grandmother didn't work outside the home, ever, which was unusual for black women in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. My mother was one of the plaintiffs in the Blue v. et al. case, which was one of the founding cases for Brown v. Board. They sued the Durham public school system. So you know, I got to see a lot, I grew up with a lot of privilege and access, considering. My mother grew up with a lot of privilege and access. When I was born it wasn't whether or not I was going to college, it was where. Would I go to a historically black college or would I go someplace else. Anyway, that's a long-winded answer, but—

RAE: No, it's great. It's my favorite kind of answer.

SHARON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, you know, yeah growing up was, I got to see a lot. But also, you know, I guess I'm trying to take care of the little girl in me who had to desegregate. I'm finally returning in my fifties to go, "Whoa. That was some heavy stuff." No wonder why I'm triggered by almost everything, you know, when I think about institutional spaces. But now I also know why I can't keep my mouth shut in institutional spaces. If I see something I have to go, like, "We shouldn't be doing that like that." Because I'm not afraid. I've been the only one for a long time, and the sadness is, I still am. Everywhere I've been, I've been a first. It's 2017, yo, drop mic on that. That's all I've got to say. That's ridiculous. It makes my blood boil that they're still trickling us in. Getting rid of us twice as fast. Calling that progress? I'm not going to float in the expletives here, so we'll just put the ellipsis on that section. *[Laughs]*

RAE: Well, so one question I ask people is how do you identify? Which can be—

SHARON: Oh wow.

RAE: —as much or as little as you want.

SHARON: Oh boy. How do I identify? Papa Bear. You know? Um, I guess the closest thing to my own self-identification would be Two-Spirit, um, without kind of utilizing a term that I know has been churned around in LGBTQAI spaces, to some good effect and not. And so, but in terms of—I really feel like I'm both male and female, of yin and yang. And I'm proud of both those qualities. And so I don't try to, you know, like—I will

walk down the street in a tie and see a nice piece of mid-century modern in the window and go, "Oh my God, that's a fabulous dresser." I mean, like, my wife probably would say I'm a gay man trapped inside a lesbian's body. But I don't think of him as trapped. *[Laughs]* I think of him as very at home, you know?

I love feeding other people. I love all manner of queer creativity. And I like radical thought. So how do I identify? As...I try to be ethical. When I'm not, it weighs on me for, like, ever until finally I'm like, "Will all the people in my head please take a seat." Right? But yeah, I guess if I could identify I'd say, I am gendered and genderless at the same time. I don't really stick to its codes, and I love the aesthetic.

I love art. I think that beauty is underrated and over-articulated, definitionally. I feel like my children should grow up, and the people I love should grow up, surrounded by beauty. I guess there's a lot about how I live and who I am, that I find a lot of folks don't understand. But, if I could give a small window to that understanding is that, most people's encounter of Blackness is through narratives of Blackness that are historical registers. But they're not necessarily experientially, culturally, marked. And so, I remember watching *Hidden Figures*, a movie which, unfortunately I'm going to put this on tape, I really did not like. And part of it is like, you know, I'm really tired of seeing like…uh, the bathroom running across is important. But I'm sick of seeing that crap. I'm sick of seeing us pull white attention to Blackness through Black suffering. There've got to be some other avenues, right? And so, one of the things I loved about the film, though, is that if you were born into Black bourgeois middle-class culture, the landscape, the aesthetic landscape of that culture was all mid-century modern, because one of the things we forget is you could buy Dansk. It was a little less expensive, and it was edgy. It was furniture that a lot of white folks weren't looking at going, "Oh, I want that bureau." They were, like, worried about that bureau. You know what I mean? The edges of the 30s and the 40s were taken off, you know, were smoothed out. And, you know, McCobb and all the rest of them made pieces that people could live in. Really live in. You know, that were both aesthetically plain in many ways, clean line, so that you could put other things with them, like your grandmother's bowl. And you wouldn't see the table, you'd just see the bowl. You know? And then this work became art in and of itself, but that's what I grew up with. That's my aesthetic life, right?

So people will come into the house and they're like...You know, they think I'm invested in the bastions of whiteness. You see what I'm saying? But I'm like, well, actually, this is part of the culture I grew up with. Like, where someone would say, "Girl, you better get that. You better use a coaster with my coffee table." Or like, the plastic on the furniture right down South or whatever. There was plastic on it because, guess what? Those women knew it was art! And I think that's a beautiful thing! We thought of that plastic as like, "Oh Lord." Right? And it came off when other people were there. My grandmother was like *[Gasps]*. My grandmother didn't put any plastic on. Oh my God *[In Whisper]*. My grandmother was just edgy that way, right. I feel like I guess what I'm trying to say is I wish radical folks had a real sense of that beauty's okay. And also a real sense of how each of us lives. At the same time, when I moved to the South, one of my Black friends

was like, "Oh God, are you going to be okay down there?" I'm like, "They have running toilets. I think I'll be okay. And my people are from here. I got this." Right?

But then when I broke up from my 12-year relationship and decided that I'm finally going to live, well how I've always wanted to live, really. And I bought the house at the end of the road on eight acres, that you couldn't see from the end of the road, let alone to the head of the road through the private drive. I had people messaging me on Facebook and leaving me texts, "Girl, are you going to be okay? You're a Black woman." They, "Mm, Sharon done moved out in the woods, girl. All *by* herself. Ain't nan person around. Okay?" And so I remember my friend, Laura Bells. Bless her heart. Um, worked over at Watts Grocery. You know, when I left that relationship and moved out here, she goes, "I'm coming out there to see you. You know I can't drive at night." She's a very high femme, hilarious, good, good, good friend. And she was like, "I can't drive at night, but I'm gonna to come see you." And sure if she did drive her little Mustang up here. She goes, "Lord, girl, you got gravel in my heels." *[Laughs]* she came up, and we did some porch sitting, cause she's from, um, Randleman, I guess, in North Carolina. So, you know, she like the country too. Um, and it was just really sweet. Like, she was a little, she just wanted to know...She goes, "I ain't worried about the country, I just want to know you okay." But you know, people were a little worried.

Like, so the combination is a little bit weird. It's like, you could be living in a Chicago loft in the inside, but on the outside you're like, "I been clearing that land for like a half a month now, and I can't get that stump out. You gotta guy with a haul?" You know what I mean? The conversations I have with people seem so bifurcated, but not so much cause...I grew up in that mid-century modern world, that aesthetic world of the beautiful black dress, you know, and the cocktail party, and the Ames Furniture. And then there was my grandmother's farm with her family, that had been in her family for generations that we were in the process of losing when I was a kid that I would go out to every once in a while. Anyway, long-winded answer, but—

RAE: That's great.

SHARON: Identity.

RAE: Yes. *[Laughs]*

SHARON: You know what I mean? My identity's weird. So I feel like people, if they knew more about Black culture, they wouldn't find so much of my practices anomalous.

[BREAK]

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Hey friends. Because we know the impact of colonization on land and resources in the U.S., we're encouraging our white listeners to engage in an ongoing process of land-based reparations. So, during each episode break we're asking our

white listeners who have extra funds, to donate to land projects led and founded by queer & trans Black and Indigenous folks and people of color. Today, we're asking you to donate to My Sistah's House, a grassroots, direct services, and advocacy organization, that was founded in 2016 by two trans women of color who sought to bridge a gap in services for trans and queer people of color in Memphis, TN, with a focus on transgender women of color.

In 2016, Executive Director, Kayla Gore, converted a six-bedroom house she owns, into an emergency housing facility with eight beds available for trans and queer people in need of shelter. My Sistah's House primarily serves trans and gender non-conforming people of color, many of whom have been recently released from incarceration, are experiencing intimate partner violence, and/or are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. Now, they're fundraising to build 20 tiny homes for Black trans women. Please donate right now to support Black trans housing access in the South. The link to the gofundme is in the episode notes and also over on our website at www.countryqueers.com.

Now, back to my 2017 interview with Sharon P. Holland.

[END OF BREAK]

RAE: When did you—you sort of talked about this—but when did you first, like, know you were queer?

SHARON: Oh man, Maude, I was eight. I mean, I didn't—let's put it this way, that was the first I was unafraid to be queer, which is a nice way to be queer. Like, there's nothing wrong with this, right? I mean, there's nothing like those early girl friendships. When I was—I went to the pool. And I used to, I love to swim. And the deeper the better. Like, I probably would've been a really good diver. Not afraid of depth. But, so you know that moment where you're coming around the corner and you see, in the distance, you see all the girls looking at you and whispering, and you just know, here's your moment? And you're like, "Oh God, I'm going to get nailed." And I remember the ringleader came up to me, and of course I could tell she was, like, you know, the appointed one, came up to me. And this is the reason why people thought I was weird. She came to me, she said, "You know Sharon, if you were a boy, you'd be really cute."

And so for a second I was like, "I don't really understand the comment." I was like, "Well, that wasn't so bad." And that was—then, I realized years later, "Oh, *that's* what made me weird." Right? Because instead of like running off crying, I was like—and I stuck my chest out and I had like, a really good swimming suit on because I always wore like, really nice swimsuits, and I remember sticking my chest out and putting my hands on my hips and I was just like, "Cool!" You know? And, or, and I also gave her a cheeky, kinda like, "Yeah, you're cute too." You know, just that kind of cocky, kind of...And they were all like, "That did not go down the way we expected." Right, and I remember—but then later I understood what they were trying to say, and I was like, "Oh, they see me and they know me. They know that I'm a boy-girl." Right? I think that was like a moment

where I realized my queerness, but my queerness was not the kind of queerness that was decided. You know, like I didn't feel like I was a lesbian. I didn't feel like I was a straight woman either. And you know, I finally came out when I was in love with a woman in college. We were in love with each other for like, a year. We both had boyfriends. Um, but I also loved my boyfriend. You know, bisexuality never really appealed to me as like, an identity. And so, I didn't know what I was, but I knew I wasn't entirely butch, nor was I entirely femme. Nor did I think of sex as an identity. I thought of sex as something you had, and it didn't really matter with whom and how. So I was kind of omnivore-ish in that regard.

And so it wasn't until I started working Akwesasne Nation, I started reading around, I started doing a lot of thinking…you know, I read Audre Lorde. A mentor in college named Lila Karp handed it to me one weekend and I was like, “Oh my God, that's what the part I've been missing.” You know? I was like, “Ohhhh!” You know, I’m like, “How many people did not, my age, did not read, like, *Zami* and masturbate all weekend long?” *[Laughs]* You know what I mean? Like, “Yay, this is our book, man,” right? And go like, “Oh finally, I get it now.” Right? So I guess... uh, I liked men, I liked having sex with men. But I didn't have that deep *love* of men that was required to be with them in partnership. And so when I finally came out to myself and my boyfriend, and told him, "I can't be with you, and not because I don't love you, it was just because I can't be that way. And I don't want you to accommodate that for my happiness because I want you to be fully happy." It was not only one of the most mature decisions I've ever made about my sexuality, but most mature decisions I've ever made about a friendship. He was just like, “You wouldn't let me be half a person or you don't believe that a partnership is one person sacrificing what they love for the other person's pleasure.” That's not how it works. We seek that pleasure out together and get all up in the loam, as Toni Morrison would say, or forget about it. But my friend Marjorie Levinson once told me, "People see you, Sharon. And some love that certain quality in you and are attracted toward it and want to be with that. And other people are totally afraid of that quality." She goes, "Unfortunately, that’s most of the people are on the other end of the spectrum. But there are a few who really kind of dig that and will treasure it and want to be around it. And there are other people who try to kill it."

And I was just like, "Oh yeah, I experience the kind of deep loathing. Yes, I do." So I guess I've had three kind of coming outs in a way. And then I started actively being a lesbian-identified, or a woman-identified woman. Um, at the same time feeling kind of genderqueer. And I remember it was Cherríe Moraga. I told Cherríe Moraga, "You know, I go to the club and you know, I try to talk to women—"

RAE: I'm going to do the thing I'm never supposed do, but you know her?

SHARON: I know. It's really funny.

RAE: I just can’t do it.

SHARON: I know, right? People say that all the time. Even my wife is just like, "You're friends with Jewelle Gomez on Facebook?" And I'm like, "Yeah."

RAE: Oh my God. Okay. I'm not supposed to interrupt you, I'm sorry.
SHARON: I'm like, "Yeah." Cherríe is like...totally awesome and helped mentor me. Because Cherríe told me, "Sharon, you're a soft butch. Women really like that. You need to like, work on that." I had um, my dear friend Sylvia Villarreal was like—we were inseparable when I was like, in graduate school—and she was definitely like, a butch's butch. And you know, I'm just a giggling butch. Right? And so Sly and I would hang out, and Sly would just laugh at me. She's like, "Sharon, you're so funny." You know, she goes "First off, you brought a book to the bar. Maybe that'd be your first clue. Maybe there'd be a reason why people don't want to talk to you." You know, but it was Cherríe Moraga who taught me when I was at Stanford, actually, after graduate school. And it was my first assistant professorship, and we were talking in the parking lot. And I was kind of crying. I was just like, "I really would like to find someone, but I just feel like I don't fit in."

And she's just like, "Because you're an Ann Arbor dyke. Stop being an Ann Arbor Dyke." And she goes, "And start being a San Francisco dyke. You know, go your own way." You know? And so that's when I started like, more actively wearing ties. You know, but then I realized, "Oh, I'm like such a Southerner. I'm a dandy. I'm like the epitome." Because what does the southern dandy do? It goes to the house party and looks at the men and the women. *[Laughs]* You know what I mean, like? [*Laughs]* And so I'm like, "Oh!" You know?

And so I feel like, you know, I guess I have to understand that, it could be threatening to be in a room with someone and you're not really sure if they want to like, bend you over or start dating your wife, *[Laughs]* if you're a heterosexual man, you know. *[Laughs]* And you're like…But then you realize, I'm kind of attracted to the idea that this woman might want to bend me over a little bit. *[Laughs]* Like, what's going on with me, you know? And then sometimes I'm like, is this woman actually flirting with me in a boy way? You know, like, so there's ways, you know.

And I do sexuality studies. You know, sexuality studies isn't about something in a book. It's about how you move through the world. And I realized my entire life I've been moving through the world where guys are attracted to me, but they're attracted to the male part of me. You know, and women are attracted to me. And they're attracted to that deep woman in me, but they like, the kind of like, you know the semblance of butch. And, you know, my friend Sly would always laugh. Like, you know, "You always start off as a Butch, but then you trip." So it was Cherríe who taught me like, "Girl, you just need to learn how to work that." And I was like, "Okay!" You know, and I was like, "I'll try." You know, and I did start getting more dates, right, you know. But it was—I mean, I went through the age of identity politics, you know, but I think I've known since I was 12. Lke, I made the decision at 12 like, "Oh, I'll never fit in. So stop trying." And I think to me, and I know that sounds crazy, to me, that's the epitome of country queer. Those of us who've realized we'll never fit in. We'll never be the queers who are counted.

And so, long story short, I guess um, yeah, I do know these people and they helped raise me. I mean Toni Morrison used to always call me the coffee girl, because she came to Princeton, when I was—we had actually helped to bring her. I mean I was taught in a class at Princeton by Gloria Naylor. I took a class from her; she was a visiting professor. And as part of Gloria Naylor's class, we launched a campaign to bring Toni Morrison to campus to read from *The Bluest Eye*. I mean from *Beloved*, which had just dropped.

And so right before the lecture I was like, oh, you know, "Ms. Morrison, can I get you anything?" She goes, "I would love some coffee, black." And so, I'm like, "Do, do, do, do, do." *[Laughs]* Like Chariots of Fire playing. I'm running, "Get out of my way." *[Laughs]* I go to the International Center which is now the big ole student center, but back then it was this little coffee shop. And I'm like, "Toni Morrison is here, get out of the way. I'm going to the front of the line, I want some coffee." And there was some people like, "Toni Morrison is—you're getting her—" And I'm like, "Yes!!"

So, I got her coffee and I was trying to figure out, the podium was slanted. So I'm like, I can't put it on top because I don't want it to fall on her. So I put it, tucked it right under, and I told someone, "Tell Ms. Morrison that her coffee's right there! All she has to do is just reach down!" Right? Well, she didn't know it was under there. She's like, "What happened with the kid with the coffee?" And so afterwards I'm like, "You didn't drink your coffee?" She was like, "Where was my coffee?" I'm like, “Aahh!” I'm in tears, right?

Then, I meet her years later in graduate school, and we all go out to lunch with her. I'll never forget, right when there was a book signing or whatever, we were like, we showed up to take her to lunch. She goes, "Want me to sign your books?" "That's okay. We're just here to walk you to lunch." She goes, "Okay." And what's your name? And my friend was like “Yoshi Campbell,” “and I’m Sharon Holland.” And then Yoshi’s like, "Sharon named her dog Sula May Peace Beloved." And I'm like, "Thanks." And then Morrison looked at me like…"You're, the coffee girl." I said, "I totally can explain that. You see I tried…” And she’s like, "Don't worry about it."

And then the last time I had lunch with her, we were at Northwestern. I was an associate professor, and we had lunch. And we talked a little bit and we were both talking about how we like mysteries, because as writers, the mystery novel was the one genre you can read without being offended by people's writing better than you, *[Laughs]* to a certain degree. And also not be offended by like... it won't get in the way of your own creative process. You can totally enjoy it. So we talked about that. We went outside and I said, "It's been a real pleasure to have all these moments with you over time." And she said “Yeah.” She goes, "I know you." And she goes, "Good work, by the way." And I said, "Thank you.” I said, "I wanted to make you proud." And then she goes, "Keep it up."

RAE: Oh my God. *[Laughs]* I’m gonna start crying during your interview!

SHARON: And I went home. I know and I went up and I was like, “Toni Morrison read my work.” Because, I wrote this piece on *Beloved,* which was called “Bakulu Discourse,” about death and about Blackness, and she just winked at me. And there was a sense of acknowledging, we are Black girls, now women, on this planet trying to be who we are in a space. And that's what I mean. Like I'm in this, space where who we fuck isn't the end all and be all of who we are, and we are decidedly queer. We like the burnt bottom of bread and we like to write sentences like, you know, “Sula watched her mother burn, not because she was vengeful because she was interested.” And we're not afraid of saying those things that would be horrific.

And so there was that moment where we just kind of looked across at one another and we saw one another. And so... sometimes I forget that me. But sometimes I'm really happy for that me... And I think that that’s where... it's that queerness in us, as creative Black people, that we enjoy. You know that, we're the ones who don't look away, who aren't afraid of saying the upsetting thing. That white supremist propriety and privilege would not only denounce.

I was telling a group the other day, most people encounter Blackness through tales of our suffering, and they don't know anything about Black culture. And so, when they come upon us, they don't have anything to connect with us. Truly. Culturally. I can look at another Black person my age and go, "Mmm, that was a Petey Green moment." And then go, *[Laughs]* "Girl, I know what you're talking about," and just laugh!

There's a way in which—the one thing I remember about my childhood is we never stopped laughing. Like my mother and I literally would have to pull over on the side of the road and be like, “No, seriously stop.” She's like, “I've stopped.” I'm like, “No, you're not. Like, I'm going to, no, I can't breathe. Stop laughing.” At everything. Like, at *everything.*

And there was always a way to turn a situation where you could get killed into, like… “Well, either we're gonna to get killed, or that man's butt crack is actually going to stop being the focal point of this moment where we could both be killed,” you know what I mean, like? My mother found, we all found some way to go like, “This is a really terrible moment, but the one thing I'm interested in, that's a really shiny thing right there in the middle of it...What is it?!” You know what I mean? Like there's a way in which...that's the Blackness I have inside. So when someone comes through the whole civil rights register, I'm like, “I didn't really watch all of *Eyes on the Prize*, and I really don't know what you're talking about historically, but I can't tell you something really funny about watching the Jetsons and eating a bowl of fruit loops when I was seven.” You know what I mean? And so it’s those moments.

And I was saying that, I feel like, one of the things that we do is we talk about Black suffering a lot, but we don't talk about Black…freedom. Like how many people, non-Black people and Black people have actually contemplated what Black freedom is, what it looks like? And I feel like our writers like Cesaire and Fanon and Morrison and Naylor and Gomez have all written about that. Not explicitly, although sometimes yes, but it's

implicit in the work. And that's why I read it. Not because it tells me how to deal with my suffering. I mean, that's a learned thing. But it tells me how to be free in a world that can't abide by such a thing.

And so there's that. And the other thing I said is, we think slavery is this kind of thing, like you know, about, not just what white people did to Black people. Got that. Although in some cases not so much. But we think about is this, the signal task of slavery and understanding it historically is for us to understand that relationship. I said, but to me the center of slavery, which we need to kind of come on board with, is what to do when the overseer hands you the whip? To me, that's the core ethical question of slavery. That remains unresolved. And I feel like people like Toni Morrison knew that.
Because that's why she wrote *Beloved.* She's like, "Now let's just talk about what could be so bad, what'll make you take your own child's life? And then contemplate having done that thing. And now let's contemplate living after. What does living after that look like?"

Well, one of the things I love about that novel is that that's her question. It's like, you got to go home. That's why I don't teach *Beloved*. I taught it once and it almost destroyed me because I had my whole class, I said, "Go home this weekend and think about what could happen tomorrow to make you take the life of a child you loved. And if you can't find out, couldn't think of anything? That's what Morrison was trying to say. You have no idea what it was like to live through that."

So, when I think about trauma and people, I think about the thing that I've learned from them. And the reason why, I guess, I love women...is that trauma is not the thing that happens to you, it's what everybody does in response to it around you. That's what hurts. Because you can get over the thing. But you can't get over other people's silence around it. And that's, to me, the formation that creates Black freedom. Because David Walker isn't speaking about slavery, so much as he's speaking about the occasion of Black freedom. Because he's taking us out of that trauma. He's saying, "Forget about this. Forget about the trauma, we know that. Let's not talk about how to end that, because guess what? That's not going to end." [Laughs] That's a condition of human life because human being, and I think he's right about this, has no idea what it is or who it is.

You know, maybe that's what we're all country queers because we kind of know, we've had enough of human being. And its failure to recognize itself. You know?

But anyway, yeah. That's how I know Toni Morrison. And how we had that moment of connection. And how it was really important for her to tell me as a young Black scholar…not so young probably, but still young enough. You know, "Good work. I like what you're doing." So you know that all that stuff you're busting open is not for naught. Which it feels like sometimes. All right, so that's all maudlin. *[Rae laughs]* Death, destruction, freedom. Right?

RAE: That's great. *[Laughs]*

SHARON: Are we okay on battery?

RAE: Battery’s good, yep.

RAE [Host]: During the interview, the rain began to pick up slowly, first tapping, and then pounding on the tin roof of Sharon’s study. We talked about her journey through decades of teaching in universities across the country to this magical 8 acres in the piedmont of North Carolina.

SHARON: And so I got this place because I wanted peace. I wanted to be able to look out there and know that anyone coming in my driveway, I could tell them to go home, all the way back up the road. I didn't want to see anyone going past so I didn't know my neighbor knew. Sometimes for days, I don't see cars. I just wanted peace. I wanted to be as far away from the world as possible, while still being able to get 10 minutes within good foodie culture and a hippie market like Weaver Street.

It’s sad, like you forget to care. You find yourself driving down the road and going, "This was not acceptable. *[Laughs]* This is not acceptable. I need to go back home and put on undergarments." *[Laughs*] Or you're walking on the land, you put your high boots on because you see something. The high boots are always by the back door. So you can slip into them. Or you think, "Oh, it's raining really hard. Let's go to the creek and see how high." You know? Those kinds of things that you don't think about.

So, it's just a state of mind. And it's peace. And I just want to tell people it doesn't belong to the rednecks, whoever the fuck they are. I don't believe in that term. It doesn't belong to whiteness. It doesn't belong to anyone. I don't consider myself integrating. Maybe that's why I'm out here because I don't have to desegregate it. I feel my humanity in ways that I have to be mindful about. How much land am I clearing? What am I getting rid of to put this up? Am I truly the caretaker of this place?

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Since the time of our interview in 2017, Sharon has continued pushing for change in institutions, finding comfort in the woods where she lives, teaching classes, and writing with her dogs by her side.

Next time on Country Queers, we’ll hear an excerpt from my 2018 interview with Tessa. Tessa is a trans woman who was a chemical engineering college student in her hometown of Cookeville, TN at the time of our interview. She was also working with the Cumberland Gender Advocacy Group, which works to support trans folks in multiple counties in rural middle Tennessee.

TESSA: So, my mom initially said that she never wanted to see me in a dress and stuff like that and probably about 8 months ago, she actually bought me a dress. We went to the store and she bought me a dress and it was such a big deal.

RAE: [Says something quietly.]

TESSA: It was awesome.

RAE: What's the dress?

TESSA: So it's this white dress with blue stripes and it's very floral.

RAE: Do you like it? Do you wear it?

TESSA: Yeah I do, it actually fits—it's one of the nicest dresses I have, and it fits really well, so I love it.

RAE [Host]: This episode was created and produced by me, Rae Garringer. Audio editing support comes from Tommie Anderson. Our theme song was written and performed on banjo by Sam Gleaves. Additional music on electric and acoustic guitar written and performed by Tommie Anderson.

Endless thanks to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland, who you met in this episode. Thanks most of all to Sharon for sharing her story so generously with all of us.

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Until next time, stay queer out there, friends!

[END]