

## **COUNTRY QUEERS SEASON 1 BONUS EPISODE 1 – EDITORIAL DREAM TEAM**

**DESCRIPTION:** This episode features audio from a webinar hosted by the Women's and Gender-Non-Conforming Center at Berea College in October 2020 as a part of their virtual Pride Series. In it, Rae Garringer is joined by the Editorial Dream Team: Sharon P. Holland, Hermelinda Cortés, and Lewis Raven Wallace. We talk about how we came into storytelling and narrative-shifting work, who we are accountable to in this work, and how we think about and engage with the power dynamics at play in this work.

Season Two will be dropping later in 2021, so in the meantime we'll be bringing you some bonus episodes throughout the winter and into the spring. If this episode is too in the weeds for you, about behind-the-scenes details of how our team thinks about this work, rest assured—more rural queer and trans stories are coming your way soon, including an episode about queer and trans SHEPHERDS!!! Stay warm and queer out there, friends!

**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. Special thanks to M. Shadee Malaklou and Berea College.

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

*[Theme Song]*

LIUXING JOHNSTON [Intro]: I'm Liuxing Johnston in sunny New Jersey and you're listening to Country Queers, the podcast.

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: Hi, friends, how's it going out there? This is Rae. This is the Country Queers podcast. It has been a minute since you've heard anything here on the feed. And that's for a few reasons. The first is that I'm actually a pretty big introvert and a hermit, and Season One wore me out. It was amazing. It was incredible. And it was also a bit intense to have to be that kind of like, on for five months in a public Internet way. So I've been trying to recover from that a little bit.

The other reality is that Country Queers has always been a project that gets like a tiny bit of funding here, a little bit of funding there, and has meant by necessity that I've only ever had small little stretches to work on it at a time. And so I am back in a different paid work land right now, producing a series of radio stories about the carceral state in Eastern Kentucky for some radio stations here.

And I'm a very seasonal creature. I don't love the fall, I don't love the winter, and I've been grieving the passing of three friends in three months, and just in it, in the dark, dark, short days of winter. Speaking of, I'm currently in my bed with socks, jeans, slippers, sweater, my bathrobe and a hat under the blankets because it's 16 degrees in Kentucky. And you Northern country queers probably are scoffing at that, but let me tell you, for Kentucky that's damn cold in this house with uninsulated floors and one gas heater in one room. So anyways, I hope you all are hanging in there, I hope you're taking care of yourselves, I hope you're taking care of your friends. I hope you're warm enough. I hope you're staying healthy.

There is gonna be a Season Two of the podcast. And I'm getting so excited about it. It's not all set in stone, so I'm not going to talk about it much. But the plan as is, is to have a way more collaboratively produced season. And it's going to be months before it's out. And so I've decided in the meantime that I want to bring y'all some bonus episodes along the way, this winter and into the spring. So that's why you're hearing me here today. This is the first bonus episode of several, and it features the editorial dream team for Season One of the podcast. If you listen to Season One, in particular all the way to the end of episodes where I thank them every time, you might have picked up a little bit about them in the outros. And if you listen to Sharon's interview, you learned a bit more about her. But really and truly, this team of really brilliant thinkers helped make Season One what it was. It was really incredible to work with them. They all brought important and critical and interesting questions and edits to the process. I am so grateful to Sharon, to Hermelinda, to Lewis, for all of their support, and I want you all to get to hear a little bit more of their brilliance.

What you'll hear in this episode is a recording of the four of us on a webinar in late October of 2020. We were invited by the Berea College Women and Gender Non-Conforming Center to talk about our work as part of their Pride Series. You'll hear M. Shadee Malaklou, the chair of the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Berea, introducing us. And then you'll hear us talk and nerd out a bit about stories and narratives and power dynamics in this work and accountability. So, I really hope you enjoy it. And alright, here we go.

M. SHADEE MALAKLOU: Hello everyone, and welcome to the third installment of this year's pride series. My name is M. Shadee Malaklou. I'm the chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Berea College and the founding director of its Women's and Gender-Nonconforming Center. Thank you for joining us today for a virtual conversation with the podcast and Instagram

sensation, *Country Queers*, about how to tell rural queer stories in ways that quote, complicate our collective ideas about rural spaces, not least of all in Appalachia. *Country Queers* is a community-based multimedia oral history project, directed by Rae Garringer and founded by them in 2013. Since then, the project has grown to include a collection of over 70 oral history interviews with country queers in 15 states, a traveling gallery exhibit, a podcast, and ongoing Instagram takeovers by rural queers and trans folks across the US and the world. We are joined today by Rae and by the podcast editorial advisors Sharon Patricia Holland, Lewis Raven Wallace and Hermelinda Cortés. Rae Garringer (they/them) is a writer, oral historian and audio producer who was raised on a sheep farm in southeastern West Virginia and now lives in Knott County, Kentucky with two dogs, two goats, 12 ducks, and a handsome one-eyed cat. Along the way, Rae received an M.A. in Folklore and American Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and gained audio production chops as the Public Affairs Director at Appalshop's WMMT 88.7fm.

Sharon Patricia Holland (she/her) also hails from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she serves as the Townsend Ludington Distinguished Professor in American Studies. Also at Chapel Hill, Holland convenes the Critical Ethnic Studies Collective, is Co-Chair of the Provost LGBTQ Life Committee, and Chair of the Department of American Studies. She graduated from Princeton University in 1986 and holds a PhD in English and African American studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She's the author of multiple manuscripts, including but not limited to *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, which won her the Lora Romero First Book Prize from the American Studies Association in 2002, and *The Erotic Life of Racism*, a personal favorite of mine.

Holland is currently finishing a decade-long project that examines the role that racial blackness plays in the making and maintaining of human-animal distinctions. She calls this project Hum.animal.blackness.

Lewis Raven Wallace (he/they/ze) is an award-winning independent journalist based in Durham, North Carolina. He is also the author and creator of *The View from Somewhere*, a podcast dedicated to telling the stories of marginalized persons who have shaped the arc of journalism in the United States. And, he is a Co-Founder and Co-Editor—I'm sorry, Co-Director of *Press On*, a southern movement journalism collective. Lewis previously worked in public radio and is a longtime activist engaged in prison abolition, racial justice and queer and trans liberation. He is white and transgender and was born and raised in the Midwest with deep roots in the south.

Hermelinda Cortés (she/they) schemes and daydreams about how to use organizing narrative and strategic communications to build power, fortify lasting connections between communities,

dismantle systems of domination, and build the liberated world we and future generations deserve.

The child of Mexicans and West Virginians, country folks, farmers, factory workers, and trailer parks, she has dedicated her life to the work of social movements for the last 15 years. She lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where she writes, cooks, grows flowers and raises her kid in the company of dogs and chickens. She believes in the magic alchemy and revolutionary possibilities of small towns and rural people. And I agree. We are so, so thrilled to welcome Rae, Sharon, Lewis, and Hermelinda to this virtual conversation and to think with them about how those of us who also identify as queer can tell our own stories for our own people. With no further ado, please join me in welcoming Rae, Sharon, Lewis, and Hermelinda.

RAE: Thank you. It's so funny to hear your own bio read aloud. *[Laughs]* But thank you so much for inviting us, and I'm so excited about this. This is actually the first time that the editorial Dream Team—as I call Lewis, Sharon and Hermelinda—and I have all been on the same call at the same time because, this is rural podcasting in the year 2020. We're all scrambling.

Um, I'll just talk a little bit about kind of some history of country queers before, we have more of a conversation about our own approaches to storytelling work. We all work in pretty different mediums in some ways, but I think there's a through line in terms of our approach to working with communities that we're connected to and feel somewhat accountable to. So Country Queers was kind of just an idea. I still feel pretty surprised that it worked every day. *[Laughs]*

I had moved home to West Virginia after about 10 years away, and had sort of bought into this idea for a long time that I couldn't have my queerness and have the mountains, too. I came out in college in western Massachusetts in the early 2000s. And I had only ever met queer people who were either from or were immediately rushing to major cities on the coasts. And I did that too, although not on the coast—I lived in Austin, Texas for about four years. And I finally moved home for a variety of reasons.

And I just very quickly, A) started to see queer people around, right, I could sort of see us differently now that I was out and aware of my queerness. And I also started to get really frustrated that I felt like I'd sort of almost been lied to, or lied to by omission for my entire life until my late 20s, that there are queer people in the country, that there are queer people in rural Appalachia, that there are people who are not only living in secrecy and fear, but there are people who are like, thriving and doing their thing and really happy and healthy. And so I started the project with no idea what I was doing. I didn't have any training. But I was really kind of desperate to meet people.

And since then, as M. Shadee kind of mentioned in the intro, the project has grown. I don't exactly know how many stories...I think it's over 70 and 15 states at this point. There's a gallery exhibit, there's the podcast, there's the Instagram pieces of this, but it all sort of came out of this feeling of pretty intense frustration that I was nearly 30 before I even learned and started to find people in my home community who were queer and trans, and who were having an experience really different from what I could find in mainstream media, which was nothing or stories of really intense violence and murder of rural queer people. And that was about it.

So, the podcast came together this summer, for the most part. Along the almost eight years of this project, it's been kind of me in my free time gathering stories and trying to build a website and like figuring things out, but for this summer with the podcast, I really wanted to bring in people who I really respect and admire and are really great thinkers, and also really connected to rural queer experiences and organizing and queer kind of narratives and thinking and also podcasting. And so I was actually expecting Sharon, Lewis, and Hermelinda all to say no, that they didn't have time to be on the editorial advisory team. And they all said yes, and I still feel like I lucked out so much.

It was really amazing to work with them this summer, on the podcast. And so I wanted to sort of ask each of you to talk a little bit just to start about. We all sort of work in different mediums. Sharon is very much a theorist. I took one class with her and, and was like, sort of following some of the time, but was amazed by her brilliance. Lewis is a journalist, has made a really incredible podcast about sort of the history of objectivity in journalism. Hermelinda is an incredible organizer who really inspired me when I was first starting this project, through her work on a rural and small town report for SONG in 2015, but works in comms. So, we all sort of, in our realm outside of the Country Queers podcast, work in stories, but in sort of different spaces. And so I wanted to start with Hermelinda and I kind of—the question is pretty broad, but sort of, how has your experience with seeing like, communities that you're a part of and connected to, being either absent from mainstream media or represented in ways that were really detrimental, influenced your approach to your kind of work in narrative shift broadly, whether it's in your own personal work or your professional work.

HERMELINDA CORTÉS: So, I'll take it away. And I'm going to set a timer because I always kid with people, I was trained as an organizer in the South, which means time limits are not things *[laughs]* that we readily abide by sometimes. So again, my name is Hermelinda, I use she and they pronouns. I live in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, in a little place called Singer's Glen, very close to where I was born and where I was raised. And for me, growing up in a rural area, you know, like so many folks...in rural areas, you know, we've got the joke, there's more cows than people, all of that sort of thing. And that was very much the case where I grew up. And the other element for me and where I grew up was that I grew up in a family

where my dad was from México, and my mom was from West Virginia, and both sides of my family had been displaced from their home places and then migrated to where they were at. So that was a huge through line in my life.

And growing up, the other piece that I saw, was my dad's entire town moved to where we live. So the entire town of Florencia, Zacatecas nearly over the course of a 10 year period, moved to where we were at a very agricultural-based economy. And simultaneously on my mom's side, all white working class and poor folks, and really found that both sides of my family were in the same places of employment, primarily in poultry factories, and working on the line, and then also working in poultry houses.

And, you know, this was pre-most-people-having-computers-in-their-households, there certainly was no Internet. We had a television and there were two channels on it, right, we got the local PBS with some rabbit ears, and sometimes we could get ABC. And so you know, there was, of course, the radio, but I felt like what I had access to in terms of the world around me, was my people. And that's where I got steeped into story and understanding of who I was and what my identity was. And, you know, the older that I got, the more that I started to realize, as I got more exposure to the world around me, that I was poor, that my family was a family of immigrants. And then as I got older, that I was queer, and being queer was weird, right? So none of those things were things that I actually realized until I started to get more exposure to the things around me. And so that really deeply shaped, I think, the work that I do today, you know, and as I was growing up, one of the things that I would do with my father, as he was learning English, was we would watch World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, at six o'clock every night alongside the local news. And it really was the only sort of outlet I had outside of the people that I saw every day, people who were working in the factories, right, that was everything that I knew.

And when I moved away from home, much because I was queer and felt like I did not understand how to be who I was in that place, I really got pulled into organizing, because for the first time in my life, I saw people who were trying to put themselves together to contradict the powers that that be. And I really found my way into communications work specifically, because of all of those nights of watching Peter Jennings and only having the violent stories of my people told over and over and over again. And I also really started to see the power and the impact of what it means to actually shift and shape a narrative. And this work really happened for me, after eight years of working as the communications director for Southerners on New Ground. So, Google it, if you can, I'm not going to go into the whole long wind of who SONG is, but my work there was really to help shape and tell the stories of queer and trans people across the South. And we were doing that while many of the fights that the, you know, kind of mainstream gay rights movement was pushing was around gay marriage. And so what that meant around the stories that were told, who was represented, and the issues that affect

us as queer and trans people of color was pretty narrow. And so I just became really motivated to think about the other stories and in real time and in campaign based mode.

You know, I spent a lot of time working on HB2 in North Carolina, also known as the “Bathroom Bill.” And I always quiz people, when I'm talking across the country, I'll say who knows what HB2 was. And many people say they have no idea. But when you say the Bathroom Bill, people know exactly what you're talking about. And that to me, shows the power of narrative and why it's so important to do that work. And so that's the work that I'm steeped in every day, is to really to support and flank people who are in directly-impacted communities who are trying to uplift their stories and to change the powers that be, to change the material conditions of their lives. And that work, I think, is directly connected to the work of Country Queers, I think it is absolutely critical that people are able to tell stories for themselves, and not just to have the avenues to do so, but to feel confident and safe enough to also do so and to feel like they're part of communities where they can do that. And it's why I've been so blessed to participate in Country Queers so I'll leave it there. I'm at my time. And I don't know who's next—Rae? But...

RAE: Lewis, you need a refresher on the question? I don't even know if I remember it. *[Laughs]*

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE: No, I think I got it. *[Laughs]* We'll see. Um, so thank you. I'm really excited to be here with all of you.

And yeah, so I, you know, I worked as a journalist, I have worked as a journalist for about the last 10 years. But, for many years before that, I didn't work as a journalist, I was primarily an activist. And, you know, I had a day job as a barista. And the way that I kind of came into all of that was through being a part of queer youth movement in the 90s. And so I like to say that I came out as queer the same year as Ellen DeGeneres came out as gay, and came out as trans the same year that the movie *Boys Don't Cry* came out. So those were like key kind of cultural moments where being gay and then being transmasculine kind of made their way into a mainstream media outlet for the first time. But particularly for folks who aren't familiar with the film, *Boys Don't Cry*, it's a Hollywood movie that is about a white transmasculine person living in a rural place who is raped and murdered on screen in the movie. And it's based on a true story. But it leaves out the story of another person who was a Black disabled man who was killed in that same incident. And so it's really like, just a case study for sort of terrible representation on many levels. And was the literal only example of a person like me, in a certain way, you know, demographic way, I'm white and transmasculine, that I knew about in any sort of big picture media.

And so the way that I even knew about the idea of being trans—or genderqueer was like a very new word at that time—was word of mouth and zines that we'd send in the mail. And then

at sort of the late stages of that there was like a little bit of internet stuff, like Live Journal, and I don't even remember—So I see the like, Live Journal era folks. *[Laughs]* So for me, that was I mean, I share all that just to say that that's sort of how I came into this whole idea of even telling a story or making media, was that we did it because we had to, in order to make space to be the people that we were in the world, and in order to connect with other people who were fighting for justice in various ways. And I was quite young, when I started kind of working in that framework, and really came up and came out, like into movement, and then later became a journalist.

And when I became a professional journalist through the avenue of public media, it was like opposite day, it was like, suddenly, your proximity to an idea or an issue made you a liability instead of an asset. So the fact that I was close to folks who were working on prison abolition, or that I was close to trans communities, meant that I might have a conflict of interest, and I shouldn't or couldn't report on them or be the one to tell that story. I might be perceived as biased if I was open about those things. And so that was just like a complete, you know, coming from an activist background into that, it was a complete kind of reversal.

And so over the years, I worked in public media for about five years. And then I ended up getting fired right after Donald Trump's inauguration over a blog post that I published that was criticizing objectivity in the face of white supremacy. So pretty basic stuff, we shouldn't be objective about white supremacy. But that was unacceptable in that context, and through a conflict with my employers, I lost my job in public media and so sort of spring boarded from that into a position of advocacy around this idea of the myth of objectivity, and that it's actually a really damaging myth that's continuing to be a kind of tool of gatekeeping to prevent the organizing that we need to change the way that we do journalism in this country and to change whose voices are at the center of journalistic storytelling. So that's been a lot of what I've worked on over the last few years.

One of the things I think most closely connected to Country Queers within that work that Press On, the organization I work at, has done is a couple of intensives, about podcasting for the movement. And so really like developing both the skills and tools to make podcasts, but also the sort of framework for like, what is my relationship to this story? What is my relationship to power in this story? Who am I to tell this story? You know, those kinds of questions are the things that we're helping folks think about as they think about being the one to make a podcast about X, as well as like skilling up on the making a podcast. So we got to work with Rae, who probably didn't need most of that training, *[laughs]* but got to work with Rae in that training. And it was great. And I will stop talking now and pass it to Sharon.

SHARON PATRICIA HOLLAND: Thanks so much, Lewis. Well, it's so funny like, being the one that's a little longer in the tooth than other folks. I feel like that little redaction about my life

could go on for a little bit. *[Laughs]* So I'm going to focus on what brought me to North Carolina, because I think that's most important. And what brings me to this rural space.

I'm so thrilled and honored to have been asked by Rae to really participate in this podcast, and so great to meet Hermelinda and Lewis here in this moment. This is my second pandemic. And that first one, HIV/AIDS was terrifying. And I wanted to mark that, because so many of us are living in this space right now, thinking about this as this new occasion in the history of humanity. And it's interesting that I survived the first one away from home, and I'm surviving the second one surrounded by my ancestors and surrounded by people I love in a chosen community. And last night, I spoke at the memorial for Randall Keenan, who passed very quickly and suddenly, and I—you know, may he rest in peace and power—but his story of his novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, and his character Horus, really moved me back in the 90s when I first came across that novel. And so when people have asked me about why I came back to North Carolina, I have two reasons. One, Randall. I read that novel, and I thought it might actually be possible to live this revolutionary, I think, queer, African-descended, multiracial life in the way that I want, that I would like to.

The second thing that brought me back to North Carolina is just my family and that legacy. I am the only girl-child of a girl-child in my mother's family. My grandfather was Davis Buchanan Martin. He was the chair of the Committee, which was known as the Committee for Negro Affairs back in the day, and my mother was a plaintiff on the Blue et al. v. Carolina Public School Systems. And she helped to integrate the public schools. I helped to desegregate them as the next generation. And that's a whole 'nother conversation. And that case, along with others, were bundled together and they became the cases that were *Brown v Board*. My mother also matriculated into Carolina in 1959. So my Tar Hill legacy is pretty long. And I pretty much come from about five generations of North Carolinians.

And so story got me here, fulfilling a family legacy keeps me here. And thinking about, you know, my grandmother, in particular was very formative in my life, was a country girl, always considered herself a country girl who married a banker, who would have thought it? And, you know, I think about her every day, and I came back, because I want to hear that language that I heard in my bringing up in my ear, I wanted to have it nurture me. And so the last thing I'll say is that, you know, stories are amazing, and I have a story and it's mine to tell. And I'm going to tell it, and I think that's why I work on this podcast.

RAE: I'm so glad I get to record some of that story *[laughter]*. So something I think a lot about with Country Queers—actually, Suzanne Farr, who was a founder of SONG, who Hermelinda knows well—early on, I don't know maybe I'd done a few interviews and I kind of had like gone to one SONG event and somebody was like, Suzanne, you got talk to Rae, you know, rural stuff. And she's, for those who don't know her, she's like, incredible, brilliant, old dyke Southern

organizer, and she can be super intimidating, I would also say *[laughs]*. But she asked me probably in 2014...right? The project started in 2013. Like, who are you accountable to with this work? And I think that I have feelings about who that is, mainly being the people who share their stories with me, right? Like, that's my top priority is that I do everything I possibly can to make sure that people feel A) safe in the interview itself with me, but also, that they know that at any point, if they don't want the story to go public, that they can tell me that and I will respect that, because I think growing up in Appalachia—which I'm assuming there's a lot of folks on this call from different communities and places but Berea being based in Appalachia—I think folks know, pretty immediately, it doesn't take long to think about examples of the way that storytelling can cause harm, right, to communities. And so that's something I think about a lot in the work.

I also think it can be really confusing, like how do you do that beyond the individual person whose story you've recorded? Like how are you accountable to a community more broadly? And it's something that I think about with this work with Country Queens and the podcast this summer, sort of how, how to navigate making the person who shared their story feel comfortable with the way it's presented, but also trying to pull in and think about, kind of other experiences and layers of history and things happening, to put a story in context. That's a ramble. *[Laughs]* Um, but I kind of wanted to ask each of you about how you think about, like, who you're accountable to in your work, and how you approach that.

And I actually want to start with Sharon, because your work is just so different in some ways. *[Laughs]* From at least me and Lewis, who, you know, are both in sort of podcast-y land and Hermelinda, in like, comms strategy land, but like—I didn't know I was gonna ask you that question, I just, now that I have you on this call, I'm really curious how you would answer that. *[Laughs]*

SHARON: I feel like one of my students now. Could you repeat the question, please? Rae. *[Laughs]* What's the question one more time? Rae?

RAE: Well, it wasn't a very clear question. It was a ramble. But sort of like how do you think about who, like when you're writing or when you're—

SHARON: —Oh, who I'm responsible to? That's right. Okay. All right.

RAE: Yeah, in your work? Mhm-hm.

SHARON: Well, I do mostly critical work. But I think of my work also as my teaching. And I'm really committed, I consider myself a committed teacher and a committed scholar, and I don't see those two things as separate from one another. I learn from my students, I learn with my

students. And my students have been so informative and challenging me to rethink. But in terms of, as a theorist, I feel like, you know, that Malcolm X quote, you know, I am for truth, you know, no matter who says it. I am for justice, no matter who it's for or against. And I love that quote because it allows me to challenge my community. Some of the work I do—I didn't talk about this earlier—but some of the work I do, some of the narratives I'm deeply invested in, are Indigenous and Native narratives. And I have done a lot of work in Afro-Native Studies, and particularly thinking about intersections, between and among communities. And so the work that I do is always already thinking about Indigeneity. And thinking about how this story that I'm telling might be contested by another story or might be invisibilized, you know, might be invisibilizing a story that is literally laying next to it. And so I love the approach of thinking of something like the spokes on a wheel, you know. I might start in the central place, but it's not the center. It's just something that brings everything together. And so I don't, what's the word for it? I don't, um, valorize it.

And also as a theorist, I allow myself...you know, I love myself some philosophy every once in a while. I allow myself to just not care about my audience. I care about what needs to be said. And I know that so much of what I have to say, both in life and on paper, might not be what people want to hear right then, but it's necessary. So in that way, I care for my audience. But I don't care for them in terms of direction, I care for them in terms of...like, my grandmother would say, you know, you need to sit down, because this is something you need to hear, whether you're ready or not. So...I hope that helps them. *[Laughs]*

RAE: Yeah, yeah. No, I was excited to hear your thoughts on that. Lewis, what about you, thinking about sort of accountability in your work?

LEWIS: Yeah, I think that, in a lot of ways, even when I worked in public media, where structures of accountability are really complex, and not at all representative and don't...In public media, those structures don't include the people that are reported on. But they also don't include the public, in any kind of meaningful or comprehensive way. Those structures are geared toward the known audience of mostly white, and mostly middle and upper middle-class listeners. And so, I'm saying all that to say, like, even when I worked in public media, I feel like it was sort of this dual life of like, there's that institutional accountability—that now I'm very openly critical of—and then there's my accountability, right. And in that instance, in many ways, it was to my sort of political community. And people, the people who had taught and mentored me in the practice of organizing and then the practice of storytelling and the people who kind of call me out and hold me accountable through deep relationship. And so that structure really in certain ways showed itself when I got fired, because the people who fired me thought that they were dealing with just me, but they were dealing with me and all the movement organizers and all the people to whom I've been accountable, with whom I have deep, accountable relationships, who were ready to go, on just, like you know, “You can't do this to one of our

people.” And so and I think that's where it's so important for journalists and storytellers to organize and to be a part of organizing in ways where not only can we be held accountable, like when we go off the rails in the way that we tell a story, or what story we choose to tell, but also that we can hold institutions accountable collectively. So that's like a two-way street.

And then now, you know, I work as an independent. And so it's a whole sort of variety of things. But I think mostly, for me, it's like, kind of deeply relationship-based on the people that I work with, and have learned from over a lot of years. And just like being in movement, community is the primary source of accountability.

I also now have some practices of accountability, like to the people that I tell stories about, mostly, most of my journalism in the last few years has been about other journalists. And so in some ways, the power dynamics there are like, more even than a lot of the power dynamics of a lot of the other stories that I've done, where I'm talking to someone else, who also knows the process of what I do, and, but even there, I didn't used to do this, when I worked in public media. I show people the work, give them a chance to give feedback on it, ask them what they thought of it after and have a pretty engaged process around, "I'm talking about you, and this is your story and I might be the one shaping it, but it's still your story." So yeah.

RAE: Awesome, thank you. Hermelinda?

HERMELINDA: Oh, man, this is like a can of worms for me. I'm a little jealous of Sharon, *[laughs]* where I'm like, I wish I didn't care about my audience as much as I have to.

So, you know, I mean, I think just to give a really simple definition of strategic communications, in terms of the world that I sit in, strategic communications is helping to get people to say the right thing to the right people at the right time, in a power building context. So, you know, just to kind of lay out the kind of world that I'm in, because I think people hear strategic communications and can think all kinds of different things, but that's kind of the gist of it.

And I think that the question of accountability has really changed for me, going from being a communications director inside of a power building organization that was focused on queer and trans people of color in the South, and uplifting and sharing the stories and doing all of the work there, to now working in a multitude of organizations, where I'm actually working at the level above story, where I am looking at narrative ideology, values and beliefs, and how all those pieces of story connect to paint a broader narrative that then informs people's human behavior, and then the systems around us. So you know, when I was a communications director, my accountability, I would always tell myself, was first to my people, second to my organizing lineage, and third to my integrity. And those were the things that were like my North Star in doing the day-to-day work.

And I had to really carry that with me, because I was interacting with editors and producers all the time, who wanted to take our people's stories, but it was extractive, they never had time to do the full context. They always messed up people's identities in all kinds of ways. And they exploited them and often put them in physical danger.

You know, there was this one particular time, I was working with a young Black trans person in Mississippi, and another national LGBTQ organization had pitched their story to a very well-known international media outlet. Their story got covered and within the span—and then the comms director from that organization, which was white-led, did not follow up with the person. And as soon as the story ran, that person got ran out of their town in Mississippi. And I spent weeks trying to make sure that person was safe, right. And that was not in my job description, right? But I had my integrity to my people, right?

So I thought about accountability very much in that way, in relationship to threading stories together to paint a broader picture of what our demands were and the world that we wish to see. And now, a lot of the people that I'm moving stories, who we're talking to, are actually not my people, at all. They're not people who I share values with, they are not people who I share a vision with. And so my accountability has to not just be to my integrity, to my people, and to my organizing lineage. But it also has to be to right-sizing power, and to the vision of the world that I want to see. And I have to hold that North Star in a much different way, when I'm trying to create messaging or memes for 45-year-old Latinx men who the Proud Boys are trying to recruit. The message that I moved to them is much different than the young queer person in the country that I'm also trying to talk to, and I'm trying to move them all in the same direction. So you know, accountability, I think, is quite complicated. And all of us are having to make quick calls every day often. And sometimes you actually don't have that much time to think about accountability. So I think another thing that's just important for me is to like build in a praxis. And I think Lewis was talking about this a bit just in terms of like, you have a praxis of following up with people who you share stories with. And for me, I have to make sure I carve out an hour every week to be like, what did I do this week? What did I move forward? Did I fuck up? *[Laughs]* Right? And then having a sort of sounding board of my strategic comms peers, who I'm like, this is a multiracial group of people, a multigendered, a multiclass group of people who can also catch me where I fall and assume that I will fall and push me. I think what Sharon was saying around like, we have to push our own communities, because often the stories that we are telling also reinforce beliefs that aren't helpful to us. Right? And I think, you know, we've seen this so much in coming out stories, right? For years and years and years, where there was the forced narrative of, "You have to come out to be a true gay person." *[Laughs]* Right? And I think that there's just work that we all have to do to really interrogate the underlying beliefs and values that are in the stories that we're moving along as well.

RAE: And that's why this is the Dream Team. *[Laughs]* What a what a range of answers to that question. I love that.

So let's see, I'm trying to check on time. I think if folks have questions, we had planned the last 15 minutes to be kind of a Q & A. So, don't know if any of those have come in.

M. SHADEE: So, one of the audience members asks, "How do you think the history of queerness, mainly the discrimination and feelings of shame that queer folk experience, affect the availability of authentic self-disclosure?"

[Long Pause]

SHARON: I'll take a stab at that. *[Laughs]* Everyone seems like everyone's like, "Okay, well." I guess I'm paused at the word of authentic, although I think authentic, you're meaning like authentic and true to self, right? How do you think the history of queerness... Well, so many aspects of the history of queerness... the exclusive whiteness? Um, you know, how does my story fit into that story? It's binarisms, you know, rural versus city, you know, POC against a white majority, which is, you know, flattens the diversity of, you know, ancestrally African, Indigenous and Latinx and other folks of color.

So, I feel that it's not so much finding a way to fit into that history for me, as it is trying to figure out all the ways in which whatever has gone before, that collecting of our identity as a group is just, you know, not very efficient. And also not the whole story. I mean, Country Queers is so... I mean, of course I said yes to being part of this. Because I read those stories, and I'm like, well, there goes, another thing that I thought about that is now blowing my mind. You know, I love to read stories about queerness that challenge my own beliefs. And so I feel like to tell the authentic story of the self is really to keep telling stories, that challenge what story is, until there is no central story, there's just your story alongside other stories. And we can tune into anyone we want and feel like, energized and nurtured. And also think with that person. Kind of long winded.

RAE: I love that.

I don't really... nothing is coming to mind for me in this question. *[Laughs]* Lewis and Hermelinda, do you have thoughts on it?

HERMELINDA: I mean, I think the only thing it's making me think about, you know, I mean, any of the number of crises that I dealt with at SONG from a communications perspective, nearly all of it involved dealing with the media in some way, shape, or form and having to train queer and trans folks of color about how to be spokespeople. And one of the things that I would see,

right—and we would always pull from our membership, we would never pull from people we weren't already in relationship with. And one of the things that would happen often is that even if people were leaders in their community, the second they heard the word reporter, they were running for the hills, right? There was no sense of agency that they would feel because they understood the imbalance of power, I think it's one of the things, and when we talk about shame, we aren't talking about power enough. There is a sense of shame, because there is a power dynamic. And so part of my work was to negotiate that power dynamic, and to try to flatten it as much as possible. So that that internalized sense of shame wasn't going to go away necessarily, right? But we could facilitate a space where we could just crack it open, just enough for somebody to step a toe in. And then one of the things that I would find is after somebody would step a toe in, they would get their own sense of power to tell their own story, again and again and again. And so the next time I would call that person, right, they'd be like, actually, those reporters are fools. Here's my story. Right? And I think there is such a profound sense of stewardship we all have to our peers and our community to help support that if this is our line of work. So I think that's the other thing with the shame piece that I was really thinking about.

*[Music]*

RAE [Host]: Thank you, thank you, thank you to Sharon, to Hermelinda, to Lewis. I've learned so much from each of you. I'm so grateful for your support of this work. And I'll be calling you soon to talk about Season Two P.S. *[laughs]*. Thank you also to Berea College and to M. Shadee Malaklou for inviting us to talk with you and your students.

I also want to say here that there are a few other folks without whom Season One would not have happened. Tommie Anderson, who is a dear friend and incredible country queer, who also lived in her camper in my yard during the full production of the season, and because of that had a front row seat to all of my anxieties and questions and moments of excitement and moments of despair on the emotional roller coaster that was putting these stories out into the world. She also was helping me edit the audio and wrote some original songs for the podcast. I'm hoping that in another episode sometime in the next year, y'all get to meet Tommie, 'cause she is one of my favorite humans. And truly, I couldn't have done Season One of this podcast without her friendship, and her musical magic. And I want to also thank Sam Gleaves, a dear friend and fabulous country queer who wrote the theme song for Season One, and Rebecca Branson Jones, who recorded pedal steel versions of Sam's original song, including what you're hearing in this episode.

And for all the country queers out there, stay tuned for another bonus episode! They'll look a little bit different every time. I'm working on one right now that I'm very excited about, interviewing queer and trans sheep farmers, sheep shearers, shepherds in the U.S. and

Canada. And I'll probably pull out some more interviews from the collection of Country Queers stories that I've recorded since 2013. So, keep an ear out. We'll be here every once in a while and very, very, very exciting news of a variety of sorts for Country Queers coming in the new year.

Stay warm y'all. And, as always, stay queer out there, friends.

[END]