

COUNTRY QUEERS SEASON 1 BONUS EPISODE 2 – ODE TO SHEEP, PART 1

DESCRIPTION: In this episode, we'll hear sounds of sheep and some queer and trans humans who love them. Host Rae Garringer shares memories of growing up on a sheep farm on the traditional lands of the Moneton and Calicuas peoples in southern West Virginia, Maja Black shares an audio diary of lambing season in Iowa on traditional lands of the Kiikaapoi, Meskwaki, and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ peoples. Then we'll hear an interview with Grayson Crane, who raises a flock of Icelandic sheep in western Washington on unceded land of the Coast Salish and Nisqually peoples, and finally we'll meet Wesley Godden who grew up in Singapore and now shepherds a flock of Katahdin hair sheep with his partner of 20 years in Ontario Canada on Omàmiwininiwag (Algonquin) and Anishinabewaki traditional lands.

This is Part One of two episodes dedicated to sheep and the queer and trans humans who love them! Find the farmers you heard in this episode on [Instagram](#) and at their websites: Maja and her sister farm at [Local Harvest CSA](#), Grayson farms at [Pink Moon Farm](#), and Wesley Godden farms at [Fairside Farm](#).

This week, in light of the horrific white supremacist attacks on the Asian American community in Atlanta, we're asking folks to donate to Asian Americans Advancing Justice, a nonprofit based in Atlanta that released "A Community-Centered Response to Violence Against Asian American Communities" after the shootings on March 16th that killed eight people in the Atlanta area, including six Asian women. We're encouraging listeners to sign on to their [collective statement](#) decrying systemic violence against Asian American communities, and to donate in support of the victims and their families [here](#).

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 Dan and his sheep on Moneton and Calicuas lands in Jacox, WV for ambient farm sounds he(a)rd throughout this episode. Most importantly, thanks to Maja Black, Grayson Crane, and Wesley Godden for sharing their stories so generously with us all.

TRANSCRIPT

KARESSA [Intro]: I'm Karessa in Greenbrier County, West Virginia and you're listening to Country Queers, the podcast.

[Sounds of sheep]

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: Hey there, I'm Ray Garringer, and this is "An Ode to Sheep," part one of two. When I was seven years old, in 1992, we moved to my stepdad's farm on the border of Greenbrier and Pocahontas counties in southern West Virginia. He lives in a beautiful timber frame house that he built on a 100-acre sheep farm. We first started visiting him when I was six. And one of my earliest memories of the farm is him bringing three newborn lambs into the house—one for my older brother, one for my sister, and one for me. We all laid on sheepskins on the living room floor with old rag towels under the lambs to catch their bright yellow poop. They were so new, their legs were still awkward and wobbly. I thought I had moved to heaven. And in some ways I had, and others not so much. The human dynamics ended up being often challenging, and I spent a lot of time outside with the animals and took great comfort in their company.

I remember a game I would play when my stepdad poured grain into troughs out in the fields once the ewes had been set out to pasture with their lambs. I'd sit down in the middle of the trough, knees up and arms wrapped around my legs, my chin resting on my arms, and wait. The game was to see how close the hungry nursing ewes would come to me to get their sweet feed. Often they came within a foot or so, and I would listen to the sound of them chewing grain and breathing.

I loved feeding bottle babies, though it usually meant an ewe had died or rejected them, which was no cause for celebration. But their wiggling tails while they nursed were so freakin' cute, and their excitement at your arrival, all of which is not normal for most sheep, who tend to keep to themselves. It just thrilled me. We had one bottle baby who grew up to be a very tame ewe that lived on the farm for several years. Her name was Angelina. Once I remember taking a walk down our gravel driveway beside the creek, and our guard donkey followed me. Angelina, the sheep followed her. Our potbellied pig followed Angelina and one of the cats followed the pig.

I loved how my hands would smell like lanolin after handling wool. I didn't love to spin and knit like my mom and sister. I found it boring. But I loved spending time with the sheep. I love how they'll freeze mid step when it starts to rain and stand motionless in the field waiting for the weather to pass.

I remember summer nights that my sister and I would set up a tent in the yard and we tried to imitate the voices of the sheep. Some of them have these deep bass voices. And some have these really high-pitched voices. Sometimes they crack like they're going through puberty. Some of them sound like they've been smoking for 50 years. I haven't lived with sheep in like 20 years. But there's still almost nothing as calming to me as the sight of a grazing flock out the window and their soft voices coming across the pasture. The flip side is it every time I hear coyotes. I still sit bolt upright in bed and feel panicked about where the sheep are before remembering that I don't have any. So this December, in the midst of my annual seasonal depression, which was made more stark this year by the intensity of spending an entire winter holiday season alone in my dark little house in a dark little holler in eastern Kentucky, I came across a video on Twitter of a three or four year old British kid showing a sheep. For those who aren't familiar with livestock life, there are shows for sheep for pigs, for goats for cows, etc. where both the animals and the humans are judged on various elements of their presentation, and the animals are judged on their physical build and characteristics and health. You see this a lot at like state fairs, county fairs and such. But of course, like so many things due to the COVID pandemic, most of

these types of events have been canceled. And so this video was part of a virtual sheep show. The kid was adorable. The sheep stood taller than her. She walked it around on a short rope, told it to stand back. And when her mom asked her what kind it was, she said, white, and then corrected herself and said, Dorset, which is a breed of sheep that originated in Britain. I watched the video probably five times in a row because it was delightful and brought me great joy and who the hell didn't need some joy in December of 2020. And I thought that despite being a lifelong radio listener, I can't remember any sheep stories that I've heard in audio form. Which is weird to me, because they have really incredible voices and sounds and they're really cool animals. And so in the weirdness that is my life these days, I put a call out on country queer social media to see if any queer trans shepherds wanted to talk to me on the phone about sheep and gender and stuff. I thought maybe a couple people would reply. I often don't think things are going to work with this project and I'm surprised that they do. But instead, I heard back from over a dozen sheep lovers across the US and Canada. And so over the past three months, I've recorded a handful of phone calls, navigating bad internet or cell service on one or both ends with people in Colorado, in Iowa, in Washington State, and in Manitoba, and Ontario, Canada. I knew this was gonna be a fun episode to make, but I had no idea how much these calls would end up supporting me through a particularly isolating winter. And it was ridiculously fun to nerd out with people about sheep and queerness and gender, which I realized is a real niche nerd territory that is not everyone's cup of tea. I almost wanted to put a disclaimer in here about like, why sheep are under appreciated and why you should listen to this episode, because here's all these reasons why they're wonderful, but instead, I'm just gonna say, this episode might not be for everyone. But sheep queers, this one's for y'all.

Depending on where you're located, it might be starting to feel like spring, and like winter is behind us. Here in West Virginia, the coltsfoot has started to bloom. And I've been hearing spring peepers the past few days—two sure tell signs that spring is coming. But winter feels like it's still looking over my shoulder. And before we're all fully moved on into the warmth of spring, let's go back into the winter for a minute and get cozy with some sheep and some humans who love them. In this episode, part one of two, we'll hear an audio diary of lambing season in Iowa, recorded in February by Maja Black. And then, we'll meet Grayson Crane, a queer and trans shepherd in western Washington who raises a flock of Icelandic sheep. And then we'll meet Wesley Godden, who's originally from Singapore but now shepherds a flock of Katahdin hair sheep with his partner of over 20 years in Ontario, Canada.

[Sounds of sheep farm in background]

MAJA BLACK: Hi, everybody, my name is Maja Black, and I am a queer farmer and shepherd living in southeastern Iowa. And I am recording to you from our lambing barn, where we have been lambing for the past two weeks, and the first day that was even near 32 degrees above zero was yesterday. The past two weeks have been really cold, minus 10. Lows for 10 days. And we just reached our 40 lambs mark. So we're expecting I think like, 60 to 70 lambs from our ewes that are due this February, so we're cruising on through and now and then it's like, not so, so cold, I'm just sitting out here. It's almost just after 6am and I'm just hanging out, watching a bunch of newborns we got last night.

RAE [Host]: So, this is the sound of a brand-new lamb. It's just been born. And its mom is licking it, cleaning it off, warming it up.

[Sound of newborn lamb]

MAJA: So today is what, the 20—February 22nd. And our lamb count, I believe is like, up to 30 or more. And we've had a quiet night, but there's several suspicious sheep so I came out to do chores a little early. And I'm just chilling in the barn. I kind of tried to sneak in because the *[bleating]* moms, you can hear them, know that it's almost time for hay, so they start screaming at me, but it's a *[bleating]* nice sound. *[Bleating]* I'm approaching them. What do you want to say? *[Pauses]* When I ask, they have nothing to say.

I'm gonna try to articulate what, how I experience lambing season as a farmer. We schedule our lambing season in February, in Iowa, which, if you have ever experienced winter in Iowa, can be wildly unpredictable. However, we have a really cozy barn, and we schedule it for this time of year because we are also CSA vegetable farmers. And this is, oddly, the month when we have the most time to tend to the animals. And so, it works out from the CSA schedule-wise, but I also really like it from personal experience perspective. February is the month where the sun starts to come back, or the day starts to get longer and helping usher in new life at this time just honestly feels like waking up from a long dark night. This year, most especially. And this year we started lambing, the first two weeks were about staying warm and making sure the newborn lambs didn't freeze. We're experiencing, as many listeners will know, the polar vortex and so we're ushering lambs into the world at minus 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Which meant we just had to catch every labor when it was happening so we could help dry the lambs off. We were fighting frostbite on the ears and making sure everyone got under the heat lamp as fast as possible. But now, we're almost done. And I'm out in the barn at 8am and it's 32 degrees out, I'm only wearing a couple sweatshirts—feels amazing. The lambs are laying in the patch of sunshine in the doorway of the barn. And it just feels good. Feels like waking up. So, I guess...I guess what I'm trying to say is that witnessing livestock give birth is to get to know the relationship between life and death. We get to see everything that the body can do and everything that is encouraging life, and we also bear witness to when it doesn't work and try to care for the animals either way. And it feels like a great responsibility and also such a privilege to get to understand the natural world on a deeper relationship level. It helps me understand my place in the world and it helps me appreciate our more-than-human kin.

MAJA: Mixing some feed. *[Sound of feed pouring]* Today is February 23rd, I think and when I got up for my 4pm, or no, 4am—4am check I learned from my sister who's doing the night shift that we've had births in the last eight hours with eight new lambs and we'll just listen a little bit. Oh, *[laughs]* some of them just hopped a bunch which is so cute to me because they were like, just born. *[Sheep bleating]*

That louder *baa* was like, "Where's my baby?" from one of the moms that lambbed before. And the little sounds—*[bleating]* not that one—are from the newborn lambs.

MAJA: Filling water. *[Sound of water pouring]* So, surprisingly, we're already almost at the end of our February lambing season. We had 10 ewes lamb in the same day the other day and that was about it. So, we just have four left. We have over 40 lambs on the ground. We have three goats left to kid, also, so that'll be exciting, but feels like we finally left the polar vortex time warp mind bubble, and the highs

have been in the 30s and the snow, while it's still like, a foot of it on the ground, it's been melting every day. You can hear the birds chirping on this recording, hopefully. It's about 6:30am and the sun's just starting to come up and the full moon is setting. And I didn't do as many recordings in the barn as I wanted to. I hope this offered a small portrait of sheep sounds and adult lambing season shepherd talk.
[Bleating]

RAE [Host]: Now, on to western Washington, where we'll meet Grayson Crane. A quick note: you'll hear me ask them about their Icelandic sheep, and we're gonna dive more into the history and messiness of sheep breeds in part two of "Ode to Sheep," but, Icelandics, unsurprisingly, are a breed that were developed in Iceland. And when I was growing up in West Virginia, we raised some of this breed. And so you'll hear me excitedly asking Grayson about his flock. You'll also hear me laughing and interrupting a lot because the casualness of phone calls, really kind of threw off my formal interview game. And I really enjoyed that about the process actually. But anyways, here we go.

GRAYSON CRANE: Yeah, so my name is Grayson, I use they/them or he/him pronouns. I'm in western Washington, I run a small farm out here called Pink Moon Farm. We grow 'bout an acre and a half to two acres of vegetables and then raise a couple of flocks of laying hens and also have a flock of sheep, who are mostly Icelandic sheep and there are, let's see, there's about 22 of them like that are just like, always here and then with lambs we get up to like, mid 30s/40s number of sheeps around, which is pretty exciting. And it's a little chaotic, but mostly exciting.

RAE: I'm so excited that you have Icelandics, and I'd love to hear you talk more about them, like what you know about the breed, what you love about the breed, like, describe them for people who've never heard of them...

GRAYSON: Yeah, so now they're sort of coming back into fleece, but they have kind of this like, sort of like a cattail look to them, almost like a cattail that's burst...like they have a very like, puff ball on two little tiny little toothpick legs. Fall before they've gotten sheared they just are fucking majestic. Yeah, they come in all sorts of different colors and spotting and have cute little color combinations like badgerface and moorit. Because they have this, that double coated fleece they get these like, crazy fleece colors. Like, they get these bronzes and oranges and like, sunset colors in some of them and these super deep blacks that have like, bluish gray and...

RAE: Even like silver, like they look like they're like metallic or something sometimes. They have this glow...

GRAYSON: [overlapping] Yeah, we just got—yeah they're so fucking pretty.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we have this one moorit gray ram who is like, blue almost. But yeah, and then behavior wise, I think it's like—again, because I've only really known these sheep, it's been talking with, getting to know other sheep people, you know, interacting with a couple of sins? that I had here for a little while as well, where I was just like more and more realizing how weird Icelandics are. There's two ewes that we have that just seem to like they just like their alone time. It just seems like, like I think it's funny because like as a shepherd or someone that keeps animals I think you get really in tune to their

behaviors and their patterns right, because it's like, you know, anything's really deviating from that—you don't want to like jump in there with a microscope, but you know, it's like, if you're standing all alone when normally that's not your vibe, like that's usually a sign something not so good is happening. But yeah, there's these two ewes that just really seem to like to have their alone time, and there's this like one specific tree that one of them would go stand behind and kind of like hide from the other sheep *[laughs]*. And we called it her office, because she would like to eat her hay in the morning and then go hide behind the tree *[laughter]* because she just like needed a bit of herself *[laughter]*. Then she would come back and hang out with the rest of them. *[laughter]* But like yeah, they just...and I don't know if all sheep are like this. I think this is like, you know, a special kind of love you develop for animals where you're like, these sheep are so unique and they're so charming *[laughter]* and like, "Ah, I just love them," but they just have some behaviors that are really like, just funny. They'll like, meet often—they have this cattle scratcher that they all like, sit around. It's like, it's in like a maypole, ceremonial situation almost *[laughter]* they'll like gather around it and sit together near it. I don't know *[laughter]* what that's about. But that's really funny to me because like, I think I really learned that you know, some of them are cool with being touched, but they don't really want you to touch them. And I think like, probably the biggest sign of like, "I like you, you're cool" is like sitting near each other, you know, like laying down near someone and digesting and doing your thing. And they sit down near that cattle scratcher at least once today, like in a little circle and just vibe. *[Laughter]* Yeah.

RAE: And so, I have multiple things I want to ask you about at once, which is always what happens to me when I'm coming in with less of a list and more just like following *[laughter]* threads, fibers, if you will.

GRAYSON: Ha ha.

RAE: But yeah, sorry. I'm curious if you could talk more about like, where you grew up and your own sort of, like journey towards, through, with gender and queerness.

GRAYSON: Yeah, totally. Um, I grew up in mostly in Massachusetts, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is the other side of the river from Boston. And yeah, I have a lot of memories. I think something that occurred to me maybe four or five years ago, was I have a lot of memories of being outside as a kid. We didn't like live in a—we lived in a pretty urban place, but we lived across the street from a reservoir that was made into like a park kind of area, and there was like a path around it and stuff. And I think a lot of that—like a lot of me figuring out who I was involved being in the woods, and like getting up to whatever kid stuff I was getting up to. Like building little, you know, "This is my spot that I'm gonna be in for, like, forever," but really, it's like the next few days until it falls over or whatever. *[Laughter]* Or like collecting different plants or making different potions or climbing trees, and I think that always felt really comfortable to me. And it felt like a lot of growing up...Cambridge is a pretty like, liberal place, but it's also pretty like Yankee Doodle egghead, kind of, if that's not too coded of a way of putting it like...

RAE: Can you explain that, actually? I don't know if I know what that means *[laughs]*.

GRAYSON: Yeah, like, it's like a very Northeastern, like very Boston in flavor, but because of all the universities and colleges there. You know, there's a lot of ideas and different people coming and going,

but it's also like, a little self-important, I guess, like a little like, bookish, you know, which is hard growing up, because I think like that particular brand of Northeastern-ness, and that brand of Northeastern whiteness, for lack of a better way of putting it, is, you're being judged, but no one's really telling you. And as a kid, you're picking up on that, and I think, particularly growing up queer and trans. And not always having a language yet for that.

I think a lot of my experience was being very hyper aware of what was going on around me, but not always being able to verbalize why that was, like, unsettling or feeling like you're being watched a lot, cause my gender presentation from the jump was very like, yeah, I was like, oh, not always, but very much like a gender non-conforming kid, and also like, loved leopard print tights *[laughter]* and hats. But also was like, I want to be wearing sweatpants. And once you know, like, as you get older, like gendered fashion hits more, I was like, I like these boys' clothes way more. But also, I like that leopard skin shit too. So like, can I not play with both?

So yeah, I think as a young person I didn't see--I had definitely had some supportive adults in my life, but I also did not see a lot of like, combinations of gender and sexuality that were similar to mine and then also kind of felt a lot of restriction that most folks would say wasn't really happening, you know. Because like, you know, you're in a more liberal place, people think of themselves as liberal, but like, also, you're getting a lot of shit all the time. Yeah, I think that was really difficult, but I think difficult in a way that just felt as a young person like, "I need to, I need to get away from this." And yeah, I also just, you know, growing up in a family where there is some difficulties with like addiction and trauma going on. I think by the time I hit high school, I was like, "I gotta go." So that is what I did. *[Laughter]* Yeah, so came out as being queer in college and university and, you know, started farming then. And then lived in Toronto for a little bit after university and had been playing with gender a lot, I think throughout my life. But being in Toronto, I think for a couple of years kind of opened things up for me around, like just seeing a lot of different types of gender, like seeing a lot of different types of trans people, and people who were presenting their genders in different ways and not like claiming any label around it. And some people like really claiming a label around it, and some people accessing gender affirming care and other people not, and just all sorts of different fabrics, like combinations of that. For me, it was just like, "Okay, now I can start to see a little bit more of what I look like, here." And yeah, moving out here to western Washington, I think that became the moment where I was just like, you know, I'm definitely trans. Like, that's who I am. That's like part of me. Yeah, just figuring out like, what combination of things helps me feel more aligned, and more, right. I really love being trans and I love being queer, I think.

[Music faintly starts]

But what I've said many times is, and especially reflecting now that I've had more time to reflect on different parts of my life, you know, being in my mid 30s now. I think being trans and queer, like, absolutely saved my life. Like I think I would have been miserable and unable to move forward with so many of my dreams and so much. Like so much more community, so much more richness, so much more truth and possibility by being queer and trans than if I, you know, kicked the can down the road, and lived my life, you know.

RAE: Mm-hmm. That's really sweet. *[laughs]*. Just teared up, I'm having a little emotional moment, sorry. *[Laughs]*

GRAYSON: Aw. Yeah, like, I would not have the quality of relationships that I have in my life, which I'm so, so grateful for, like the depth of friendship. And yeah, it is. It is the gift that keeps on giving even though, you know, it can be hard sometimes.

[Music grows louder]

[BREAK]

RAE: Hey friends, because we know the impact of colonization on people land and resources in the U.S., we like to use these episode breaks to encourage our white listeners who have extra funds to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. And we ask folks to do that by encouraging them to donate to Black, Indigenous, and people of color, queer and trans led land and wellness projects. But this week, in light of the horrific attacks on the Asian American community in Atlanta, we're asking folks to donate to Asian Americans Advancing Justice. It's a nonprofit based in Atlanta that released a community-centered response to violence against Asian American communities after the shootings on March 16, that left eight people killed in the Atlanta area. I'm going to take a minute here to read an excerpt from the statement that they released, because I think it's important: "Working class communities of color are disproportionately suffering from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Trump administration's relentless scapegoating of Asians for the pandemic has only exacerbated the impact on Asian business owners and frontline workers and inflamed existing racism. The hyper sexualization of Asian American women and the broad normalization of violence against women of color, immigrant women, and poor women make Asian American women particularly vulnerable. Hate incidents against Asian Americans rose by nearly 150% in 2020, with Asian American women twice as likely to be targeted." Again, that's an excerpt from a statement released by the Atlanta-based Asian Americans Advancing Justice. Please take a minute to sign on to their collective statement, decrying systematic violence against Asian American communities, and demanding a community-centered response to ending this long history and responding to this tragedy. And to support the victims and their families, as well as crisis intervention across the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, Asian Americans Advancing Justice in Atlanta has set up a fund to accept donations. Both of these links, to sign the statement and to donate to that fund, can be found in the Episode Notes. They're also listed over on our website at www.countryqueers.com.

[Music ends]

[END BREAK]

[Sheep sounds]

WESLEY GODDEN: Hi, this is Wesley, and welcome to the sounds of my farm. Hi, girls. How's it going today? *[Whistles]*

[Sheep sounds end]

My name is Wesley Godden. I live in Ontario in the highlands of the Ottawa Valley. We moved from Toronto to the Ottawa Valley to raise sheep and to actually be closer to nature. So, in 2016, we bought a farm up here and started a sheep farm.

Originally, I came from Singapore and in Singapore, such a developed country that you don't really have the space and the nature that you find up here in the north. After meeting my partner in 2000, we have always loved camping and loved nature, and so that's why we moved up here.

RAE: I'm curious when you were growing up in Singapore, like did you did you grew up in a city? Have you ever lived in the country before this move to this farm?

WESLEY: I lived at a time where Singapore was changing. So we were changing from having more rural pockets in the country to being completely urbanized. And so I had the luxury of actually seeing what all Singapore was all about. Being closer to the jungles, having my grandmother live with chickens and having just lots of nature around us. Although there's not a lot of farms in Singapore because of how small the country is, my experience with being close to my grandmother and experiencing her life and kind of like a more rural area spurred me on to actually like nature more.

Before that before coming here. I'd never touched the sheep. I'd never—I'd seen a sheep in the zoo, I guess, but never had any real experience with sheep farming or farming in a large scale in any particular way. And so after me and my partner, and having lived in a city for basically all my life, we took the plunge and wanted to actually experience what living close to nature was all about. And it's an experience that I would never change. It's something that is so special to me.

RAE: I want to ask you about the sheep here in a minute because I actually am really curious about hair sheep. I know a little bit about some meat and wool breeds, but I don't know a lot about hair sheep. But I wonder if you could talk more about like...I'm curious when and why and how you ended up in Canada? And I'm also curious about, like, you know, discovering that you were gay is that the word that you use for yourself or is queer, okay, or...?

WESLEY: It doesn't matter to me, gay or queer. It's fine with me. I came to Canada when I was a teenager to further my studies, and at that time I was quite open already with my sexuality with my friends and stuff. But it was in Canada whereby I truly became more accepting of myself and realizing that I am who I am, and it doesn't matter who I am. And I'm still human, and I'm still, you know, I can still be loved.

I came to Canada also partly because of how accepting Canadians were, when I was trying to research and trying to actually see where I would like to further my studies. Canada, at that time, was really in the forefront of human rights. For example, the Declaration of Human Rights in the UN, it's partly written by Canadians. And so that really brought me to wanting to come here. After coming here, in the late 90s, I could see how accepting people were, although there was still a stigma, at that time, people were crowding around, there was a gay village, it was so vibrant. I wasn't, I was never discriminated against. I could walk down the street with makeup and heels. And no one said anything to me. I didn't

feel afraid to actually walk down the street. Even in school, I felt really accepted by the students, by the faculty. Yeah, so that made me, made a really huge impression on me, in regards to being able to accept myself and being able to be who I am in society.

RAE [Host]: This is an awkward interruption, but there's about to be a noticeable change in audio quality. Basically, what happened is that the call kept dropping. And so we switched from a phone call that I was recording with the TapeACall app to me calling Wesley via WhatsApp, and then setting my phone on speakerphone on the table and recording, with my Zoom H6, the speakerphone call. So that's what's happening here.

RAE: Well, I want to talk about sheep, which is the original reason we were talking and now we're 45 minutes in and I haven't asked you about your sheep. *[Laughs]* This is always my problem. I could talk, I could ask people questions all day. But um, so you all raise a hair sheep, right, a hair breed?

WESLEY: Yeah. We chose hair sheep after quite an extensive research, because we wanted to raise sheep for food consumption. And so being new to sheep and all, we didn't want to have the hassle of having to shear them, having to find additional space, or an infrastructure set up to make sure that the wool's clean. But hair sheep, this breed Katahdin sheep, it's actually created in the U.S.A. from two different breeds of hair sheep, I think in the 50s. So, it's still a relatively new breed of sheep. It's quite used in the U.S. But it's getting more recognized now, even in Canada, because of how utilitarian this breed is. Hair shaving, in general has—it's more parasite-resistant than wool sheep. So that also caught my attention because we didn't want to have to, well, we didn't know much about how to keep sheep, so we didn't want to have parasites and all that stuff. In the winter, right now, they live in a hoop barn and they're exposed to all of the elements. They can come in and out as they please, but they always choose to stay in the barn. But they develop an undercoat that's really thick, and they molt it all off in the spring. I've trained the sheep so that they come with the call of my whistle.

RAE: Oh!

WESLEY: Yeah, it's quite interesting. I'll whistle, I'll hit the green bucket, and you'll see them just charging at you *[laughs]*.

RAE: Yeah, for that grain *[laughs]*.

WESLEY: Yeah, that's why we don't have any—we don't have any herding dogs. Because of how we trained them.

RAE: Will they come when you whistle, even if you don't have grain?

WESLEY: Yeah.

RAE: That's incredible.

WESLEY: Yeah, because we have a few leaders in the pack, in the flock. And it's those leaders that we trained. So once those leaders actually start making their way, everyone else will start making their way towards us too. They're very accepting of us going handling their lambs. Some of them will bring their lambs to us.

RAE: Oh, that's so sweet *[laughs]*.

WESLEY: Yeah, to introduce us to them.

RAE: Oh!

WESLEY: Especially a few of my favorite ewes, they will come with their lambs, and we'll pet them, and I'll pet the ewes. And it's quite, it's quite interesting, we build a kind of friendship, you know, between species.

RAE: Are you sad, then? Because it sounds like, you know what, you know, I think sheep farmers have such different styles. And often sheep are less, you know, they can be much more shy than goats, especially if you have a large herd, but it sounds like you all have like, pretty—you interact with them a lot. And so did it take you a while to sort of get used to taking the lambs to market. Knowing that they'll be for meat, or is that a sad process for you?

WESLEY: Before we, before we bought the farm, this was our main, I guess, our main hurdle that we had to cross. Because we had, we had to really think hard, do we actually want to be producers, producers of meat animals, and do we have an issue with sending them off to slaughter for food. It was a very hard decision for us to make, because knowing how each animal has a personality, but in the end, we kind of got over that because we understood that producing food also helps society. And anything that we eat, anything that we do, there is a life taken for the food that we eat, even if it's a vegetable, even if it's a plant, we have killed something to eat that food, or someone has killed something for you to eat that food. It doesn't have to be an animal. For example, if you were, if you were to eat romaine lettuce, for example, and having to till the ground or having to kill some bugs, just so that you get that romaine lettuce on your table, someone has killed something so that you survive. And that's basically part and parcel of the whole circle of life.

RAE: I've never actually heard somebody say that, that like even if you're a vegetarian, even if you're a vegan, there's a loss of life that's happening, right? Because plants are alive, because worms are alive, because insects are alive. That's interesting, I've never—

WESLEY: Yeah, or even birds are alive, or wildlife, there has to be, or their own habitat has to be destroyed for the vegetables that you eat. We a lot of times we just see animals and we feel for them because they are so closely related to us. And then we don't have as much love for plants and the forest or other vegetables that we eat, because they're so different from us. But in the end, they're all living things. They might not be walking, they might not all have legs, but we are all still living things. A lot of vegans, sometimes they say, vegetables are not same beings. They don't have, they don't have emotions like us. But in some ways we are using our own way of thinking, our own way of

communicating to the world, and we're trying to replicate that with plants, but it's different. So we don't look at it in *their* way of life. Because plants do communicate, plants do try and help each other, plants do fight one another. It's just that we don't see it. And these are what I've learned through the three years that I've been farming, that we have completely disassociated ourselves with nature in that sense. That's why we have so much issue with deforestation, we have so much issue with our environment and all that stuff.

RAE: Okay, I think that the last thing I want to ask you is just like, are there any particular moments you've had with sheep that you'd want to talk about, like just moments that you've had that you'd want to describe, with them that felt special?

WESLEY: Well, I think every single moment I spend with sheep is kind of special to me, because every day they show me something that I have never seen or is new. It's just like a pet for example. You know, they come to you for lovings. You go to them and then give them a little scratch. It's just the daily communication with them.

[Sound of wind and sheep]

RAE: Let's see if I can find a little wind break. Look at your ears *[bleating]*.

Oh, hello, you gonna check out the microphone?

[Music]

That's it, for part one of two of an "Ode to Sheep." Stay tuned for part two, coming soon, in which we're going to dig into some sheep history, including, of course, the impacts of European colonization on breed variations. And, we'll also hear from Pony Jacobson, a trans sheep shearer about training a herding dog and shearing sheep on a commercial crew in Iowa. We'll also hear from Penelope Logue of the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch in southern Colorado, which is the queer and trans haven that also has hundreds of alpacas and sheep. And more. Thank you so much to Maja, to Grayson, and Wesley for participating in this episode, and for their sweet interviews and recordings. You can find some images of each of them, as well as links to their farms over on our Instagram account. I've been your host and producer for this episode, Rae Garringer. Music on this episode, in order of appearance, featured our theme song written by Sam Gleaves, performed on pedal steel by Rebecca Branson Jones. Additional music featured original tracks written and recorded by Tommie Anderson for the Country Queers podcast. Thanks also to my stepdad, Dan, and his sheep, for letting me record ambient farm sounds that you heard along the way.

Until next time, stay queer out there, friends.

[END]