

COUNTRY QUEERS in collaboration with OUT IN THE OPEN

SEASON 2 EPISODE 5 : Sharonna Golden

DESCRIPTION: Sharonna Henderson is a mother, an activist and a burlesque performer. She is a fat, Black, queer, woman who believes in liberation through rest and art. Her life is full of love and beauty and it's her mission to share it with as many souls as possible during this lifetime. In this episode Toviah DeGroot draws from Bhanu Kapil's "The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers" for a dream-like conversation about bodies, fatness, disability, race, ancestral memory, parenting, white violence, silence, and more.

Toviah Degroot (they/them) is the interviewer and creator of this episode. Tovi grew up living on occupied Abenaki land in central Vermont. They are now a college student, writer, artist, advocate, and a pain in the ass. Building community and bringing people together are their favorite things in the world, and they intend to do it for the rest of their life.

For this episode, Sharonna is asking you to **PAY BLACK FEMMES, QUIETLY.**

CREDITS: Created and produced by Toviah DeGroot, with support from HB Lozito from Out in the Open, and Rae Garringer of Country Queers. Sound Designer: Hideo Higashibaba. Audio editor: Rae Garringer Editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland. Featured song: "Headspace" by Nayeema. Nayeema is a young musician from Knoxville, TN - checkout their music here! Additional music by Ketsa and Tommy Anderson.

[sounds of a gurgling stream and faint songbirds]

Intro

Hey! This is Tanya. I'm high on a mountaintop in eastern Kentucky and I'm listening to Country Queers the podcast, and I'm so glad you're listening too. [kiss sound] Love you!"

[fade in music - "Headspace" by Nayeema]

TOVIAH DEGROOT [Host]

Hello everyone, and welcome back to another episode of Country Queers. This interview takes place on Abenaki land in central Vermont. The land in which, at the time of this interview, is one of greens and yellows and sunshine and rain. And when this interview comes out, it will be a land of red and orange and yellow and the crunch of leaves on the ground. And not that much farther on in the year, of snow and white and sparkling. My memories of this land are varied. I grew up on a dirt road on 30 acres of land with only five of it cleared and the rest of it forest that turned into state forest.

My name is Toviah DeGroot. I use they/them pronouns and I grew up here on Abenaki land. Today I interviewed Sharonna Golden, who I met through the Samara fund, a small nonprofit fund that funds LGBT organizations or organizations that have LGBT programs, that we're both on the board of.

I asked Sharonna several questions from Bhanu Kapil's "The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers", a book of poetry, where she went around the world to England, India, and parts of the occupied United States, interviewing women from those places using a series of 12 questions. I didn't touch on all of those questions during this interview, but just the ones that I thought were the most pertinent.

Now - I am a Jewish person. And there's this idea in Judaism called B'tzelem elohim that I think is relevant to this interview and to our community as a whole. B'tzelem elohim means we're all created in the image of God, we all carry a piece of God inside of us. Now, I'm not necessarily one of those people that believes in an omniscient God. But I think when we come together as a community, and we make connections, as people we create God. When we connect to those pieces of God inside of us, we manifest a larger God.

So what I think is that when we come together as a community, as an LGBT community, we manifest God. And I think what Sharonna and I did in this interview was manifesting our own little piece of God. So, I hope you enjoy the intimacy we cultivated in this interview.

[Music "Headspace" by Nayeema]

Tovi

So the first question is: who are you and whom do you love?

Sharonna

I am Sharona Golden, a unique individual that's full of love that gives love constantly to anyone who wants it. So, I love so many people. I love my partner, my child, my family, most of them. I love my community. But, I love anyone who wants the love that I have.

Tovi

That's lovely. Yeah, I feel like when you, I think especially in the community that we're part of, coming into it is a place where like, there's a lot of like, fraught conversations in a community that should be about love. And so I think you have to come into it with a, like, heart that's open.

Sharonna

Yeah, definitely.

Tovi

This second question is... I like it very much - and it's where did you come from, and how did you arrive?

Sharonna

I think I came from the stars. And I came from my mother who is a beautiful, resilient, funny, charismatic Black woman. And I arrived very abruptly. But with lots of celebration. My father was - it was Labor Day weekend - it was actually on Labor Day I was born. And he was away with his friends. And then my mom said that she was in labor, and they stole a crib from the hotel that they were in, because I guess I didn't have one and bought a bunch of alcohol and food. And my arrival was met with like a bunch of grown Black folk, singing, dancing and drinking. That's how I arrived.

Tovi

I love that, birth should be met with celebrations like that.

Sharonna

Yeah, I feel like, I wish my son's birth was met like that. It was mostly met with like me being fatigued and being like, "Actually, I want everyone out of my face." But my celebration, my birth, was met with like, just a bunch of loud ass rowdy people that are, you know, close to my parents. So,

Tovi

Yeah. In a more logistical way. Where did you grow up?

Sharonna

I grew up in Jamaica, Queens.

Tovi

Oh!

Sharonna

Yeah, and I've been, I was there my whole life until college. I moved to Baltimore, and realized Baltimore was not fun. I moved back after that, but I went to University of Baltimore, and I was like, "Actually, I'm not a college person."

Tovi

How did you end up in Vermont?

Sharonna

So I've been here for eight years now. I got pregnant by someone who lives here. I moved up here, so that we could try to co-parent. And we don't co-parent, I, I do it all. I also wanted to be away from my family so that I could have more of a controlled influence over my son and raise him in a way that I felt more comfortable. You know, I love my family. And we just have a lot of different views on what raising a child is. And they respect that too, you know. It was hard for a bit, but they see like the person that I've raised so far, and they've also had a lot to do with that, because he's so connected to them.

But it's also great that they actually are not raising him, and I did. So the distance kind of helps even though my son's dad is not really a part of his life, like he sees him. You know, once in a while. Like once every four months, or whatever, he'll see him for like an overnight. He's local. But we're not very, we're just, he's just, he's not good at adulting I'll say that.

[fade in music, soft electric guitar by Tommy Anderson]

Tovi

I love all these questions, but um, this one is, how will you begin?

Sharonna

How will I begin? Oh, that's a tough one. I feel like I'm done beginning.

Tovi

Well, the next question is how will you live now?

Sharonna

Mmmmmm. Okay, so... I feel like I have begun, especially in the last month. And the way I did begin is accepting, accepting that I'm not for everyone and accepting that my path does not look like everyone else's path and that is definitely not linear. That my goals are not financial, my goals are not to be the best at everything.

Sharonna

And once I accepted that then it was, and I'm still doing it - nothing nothing about this is linear. So I feel like I'm, maybe I am just constantly beginning because I have to keep reminding myself that nothing is linear because of trauma and because of you know, white supremacy and violence, that I will have to recharge my soul and my brain to remind myself that I am enough. So.

Tovi

I think living on axes of marginalization, you are constantly in that space of, "Is who I am enough?" And "Is the path I'm taking enough?" Even when it looks so different from the path that, quote unquote, everyone else is taking?

Sharonna

Yes. Yeah, it's really, it's difficult.

Tovi

I've been in the process of applying for disability these - the past month or so. And it - to do that and to like accept in myself that I, this isn't a path a lot of people take and it is made hard on purpose for me to do so.

Sharonna

It's supposed to be inaccessible.

Tovi

Yeah. And I think that's an experience that, I think, resounds in a lot of different marginalized communities. And I think I mean, you can speak to this, especially for people of color, where the road is made difficult on purpose.

Sharonna

Yeah, I mean, I will, more than likely, I'm not sure. I may have to apply for disability at some point in my life, which is a struggle because I want to like, be married and be a partner, and I won't be able to apply for disability.

Tovi

I always tell people that marriage equality doesn't exist yet.

Sharonna

It's not. It really frustrates me when people think that, but that's also something I newly learned. As someone who was struggling with chronic pain. I have degenerative scoliosis. So hopefully I can like slow it down.

Tovi

I also have scoliosis. Solidarity.

Sharonna

Wooh! So much, I was actually - last night I got down on the floor to do exercises for the first time in a while. And I realized that I had been like, especially last week, I just completely disassociated from my body.

[fade in rhythmic electric guitar by Tommy Anderson]

Tovi

Yeah, this is kind of related. But this next question is, what is the shape of your body?

Sharonna

The shape of my body?

Tovi

Yeah.

Sharonna

Yeah. I am round. I'm lanky. I'm massive. Very curvy, I have lots of lumps, I'm curved. I'm uneven. Which I say all the time, I'm like, "I'm not even." I used to struggle and call myself deformed and because of how my back looks and how my shoulders look and how my hips - one is higher than the other and one pops out more than the other. But, I - my body has so many layers to it

Tovi

I really wanted to talk about this with you because, I see how much - and body positivity is such a, I think-

Sharonna

I hate it.

Tovi

Yeah.

Sharonna

Body positivity. I think we should be okay with body neutrality. We have, we can, we just need to accept the bodies that we have. Or other people - People have bodies and other people need to mind their fucking business about other people's bodies.

I have to love my body before I get on stage. But I often struggle doing day to day things with the body that I have. So it's hard for me to feel like this all around love and care for it. I have to get better at, honestly, is not beating myself up for it and being so hard on myself, because it's out of my control.

Tovi

Yeah. I mean, I over the pandemic, like, I'm not gonna use the word plus size because I hate it. But, became fat over the pandemic and I started using a cane recently, and it's so interesting to get more stares, for being fat and for using a cane, around Montpelier, than I ever really got for being gender nonconforming.

Sharonna

Damn. Mmmmm. Yeah. I... I'm surprised but not surprised. You know, it's always one of those like, because I expect a little from society. Whenever someone tells me their experience, I'm like, "Yeah, no, I can see that." Our thoughts are even just trained to make everything inaccessible. The way we project onto other people is just really ableist. And there's something about fatness and disabilities that makes people so much more uncomfortable than any type of queerness.

Tovi

Yeah, I think especially around here, and where I live in particular, Montpelier is such a center of LGBT people. And so I've become accustomed to like people staring at me for being gender non conforming in a way that is uncomfortable to people. And so I wonder if it's just that I've normalized that in my head, and I am just now noticing the way people stare at me for being fat and for being disabled.

Sharonna

Yeah....I'm sorry.

[fade in music - dreamy sounding song by Ketsa]

[EPISODE BREAK]

HB LOZITO [Host] Hey, friends, I'm HB Lozito with Out in the Open. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land, and resources, we're encouraging our white listeners with access to wealth to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So, during each episode break, we're asking our white listeners who have extra funds to donate to projects founded and led by, queer & trans, Black and Indigenous folks, and people of color.

Today, Sharonna is asking you to "pay Black femmes, quietly."

The encouragement to do so is in the episode notes, and over on our websites at www.countryqueers.com and www.weareoutintheopen.org.

Now, back to Tovi's interview with Sharonna.

[END BREAK]

[fade down music]

Tovi

This question - I feel a lot, I think living here — What do you remember about the earth?

Sharonna

Mmmmm... . I remember a lot about the earth and I think as Black and Indigenous folks as well - and I always struggle with people when they're like, "Oh, you're not Indigenous, you're Black." And I'm like, "Black people are Indigeneous," by nature. And generationally. What has gone, you know, through my great grandmother, through my mother, through every member of my family and the ones that are also not with us anymore from each generation, sits with me. Like the way, the way I feel accustomed to, to the earth, to my surroundings, my fears of it, the things I love in it, they're all generational. They're all from my past. And I don't know exactly what I remember entirely, but I know that this is like, I don't know, it's weird to just have these like memories that are there, but you know, they're not yours.

We talk a lot about generational trauma as marginalized people. But we don't talk about the wonderful generational things. I know, the smell of certain herbs and vegetables, and the smell of certain things before I see them. Things that I have not really been accustomed to being around. So like a lot of my family's from the South. But I grew up in the city. And yes, I've been in Vermont for a while. But growing up in a city, it was not the memory of earthiness that I have growing up in my life now, right? But moving to Vermont, yes, there's grass and green everywhere and everywhere and it was familiar to me when I moved here in a way that I really couldn't explain. So I think I remember a lot because of my ancestors. And because of what they - when they come to me and what they give me and things that just get passed down. You know, it's like déjà vu or, like, when you smell something that smells familiar, like, it smells like a place that sometimes you've never been, but you know what that's like you, you're familiar with it.

Tovi

Yeah. I hadn't thought about it like that before....I'm Jewish. And so there's the generational trauma piece, and I think about that a lot. But there's, there's also the diasporic piece in that, in me is the memory of so many different places.

Sharonna

Yeah, and same, like, in me - and in all of us, really, right? And this is why white violence is probably - it probably won't end until something drastic happens, because white people have only known violence. It started in the medieval times with the way they were tortured. Or at least in my mind, as far back as I know, that's when it started. But white people only know violence. So they only know how to inflict that on each other, and onto other people. And when you're connected and not like, settling with the violence that you're, you have caused that your ancestors have caused, then you can't move forward to feel the diasporic anything, you know, you can't actually - when that's blocking everything else. You're not connected to anything good.

Tovi

Yeah.

Sharonna

Black people, for instance, like we're always seen as resilient and x y and z and I think we have, not accepted things, but we have learned to find space that's our own to get us away from the violence that has been inflicted on us over the years. And from that has come, you know, these memories that are passed down through each of us generationally. That is not just the the trauma but also the, the love, the culture, the food, the smells, the you know, all of these wonderful things that are overlooked and

really not talked about, unless we're all around each other, like other people don't know about them,

Tovi

Thank you for sharing that I had not thought about the fact that like, my, my memories of the earth are not just my own. They're the memories of all of those who came before me. And there's the element of like, those memories have been disrupted by tragedy. But at the same time they have been centered in joy, as well.

[fade in music "Headspace" by Nayeema]

This is a very important question. What are the consequences of silence?

Sharonna

Uh...Before my morning coffee! So. [laughter] The consequences of silence? I am coming from this from a perspective of being a fat, Black, queer, woman, right? A cisgendered, fat, Black, queer, woman - is that - when people are silent than they lose access to me. When they are silent at the wrong times. When they are silent at the times that they should be silent, I know that they are actively listening. Sometimes you need to be silent to listen. So silence isn't always a bad thing that we treat it in society. I feel like especially in the BIPOC community, there's like this, "We want white people to speak up and speak up" and I'm like "sometimes white people actually just, most of the times, they need to be quiet and they need to listen because they don't know anything to speak up yet."

Tovi

Yeah.

Sharonna

Like we're putting a lot of onus on people who have not had any education or lived experience in the way that we have, when it comes to our existence and what that means and how it's treated. You know, how it's mishandled our existence, often, right? So sometimes their silence is what is needed, so that they can actively listen and understand and find compassion. Because they have to work through their own trauma as well.

But then there's times where it's like something so blatant, and I'm like, "Why are you being quiet?" So the consequence of like, being quiet when I need you to not be - and I'm a very direct person - so, when I need someone to speak and I have to ask you more than once to speak then you, you lose access to me

Tovi

Yeah, that's a very good way to put it.

Sharonna

So that's the consequence in my personal opinion.

And everyone has different ideas of what silence means to them. I'm someone who enjoys quiet. I don't enjoy hearing myself speak and I don't often enjoy hearing others speak for long periods of time. That's probably why I don't like college. But I really enjoy like quiet. I love engaging conversation, like back and forth. But I enjoy silence. So I think consequence for me in that context is different. Because yes, silence during those wrong times, no access to me or the things that I love. And lesson learned from that, right? But sometimes silence is something that's very much needed, and silence is under fucking rated. Sorry, can I say fucking?

Tovi

You're allowed to say fucking.

Sharonna

Ok [laughter] It's under fucking rated. I wish more people - especially in this generation where everyone wants to be heard and followed and seen as somebody, "somebody" right, air quotes. There's not enough silence. So.

Tovi

Yeah, we need to shut up before we can speak up.

Sharonna

Yeah, yeah, I've definitely hit a point.

Tovi

This is the last question I'm going to ask before I have to go - It's what would you say if you could?

Sharonna

I don't think there's anything I can't say. So I say everything.

Tovi

Hell yeah.

Sharonna

I used to be someone who felt like I couldn't speak my mind and my truth. But I'm very vocal, and I'm very loud. And I scream things from the corners of every room I'm in. I don't feel limited by could and could not because I just know that I can. So I do. I'm not someone who holds her tongue. So I say all the things.

Tovi

And you should, you should say all the things. That's a good note to end on.

Sharonna

Yeah. This was great. Thank you!

Tovi

Thank you!

[fade up music - "Headspace" by Nayeema - with lyrics]

[OUTRO / CREDITS]

RAE GARRINGER [Host]

Hey there, I'm Rae Garringer. Next time on Country Queers you'll hear Kū'i'olani Cotchay's interview with Miguel Mendías. Miguel is an interdisciplinary artist living in Marfa, Texas, on occupied Jumano and Apache lands. Miguel is Chicanx, Mexican-American, or Latinx (a term he dislikes). He is *mestizo*; of Czech, Basque, and Rarámuri (Tarahumara) descent. His father's family has lived in Marfa, Texas for five generations. Here's a clip from their conversation:

MIGUEL MENDÍAS: When you live in the place where your ancestors live, you might learn things that you never understood before, that you never could understand. If you're native, you already understand that the land shapes the people. That's why, in native origin stories... or I was going to say cosmologies, but that's the word that Anglo culture uses to look at it. In stories of how people came to be, it's always like: where did the people come from? They came from *this place*. And, so when you live in a place you really can understand how that place shaped your ancestors and all people, really. You start to really see that and understand that.

This episode was created and produced by Tovi DeGroot with support from HB Lozito from Out in the Open, and myself. Our fabulous sound designer for all of Season 2 is Hideo Higashibaba. Audio editing on this episode by myself.

Endless thanks to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland. Sharon was the editorial advisor for this episode, thank you so much Sharon. And thanks most of all to Sharonna, for sharing your story so generously with all of us, and to Tov for all the time, energy, and care you put into this episode.

Our featured song in this episode is “Headspace” by Nayeema. A link to their bandcamp is in our episode notes! Additional music in this episode is by Ketsa and Tommy Anderson.

If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review the Country Queers podcast, it helps other listeners find us. You can find all of our episodes and more about the project at www.countryqueers.com. While you’re there, you can also sign up for our mailing list and please consider signing up to be a sustaining supporter of Country Queers on our Patreon page. This project would not exist without the contributions of our listeners and supporters. We are a small team, with a small budget, so really anything helps.

You can also find this episode over on the website of our co-facilitators of this collaborative Season 2 adventure at www.weareoutintheopen.org. While you’re there, check out their rad work with rural LGBTQ+ folks in the northeast and support their work too!

Until next time...stay queer out there, friends!

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