

## **Fields of the Future: Unraveling the Loom**

### **A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center**

#### **S2E3: Nikyle Begay—The Sacredness and Science of Raising Sheep**

**Introduction:** This is Fields of the Future, an interview series by Bard Graduate Center. This season highlights the work of scholars, artists, and educators working with Indigenous textiles and textile history of the Southwestern United States and Mexico. Juliana Fagua-Arias speaks with Nikyle Begay about shepherding, the science of breeding for natural colors, and the sacred relationship between the Navajo people and churro sheep.

**Juliana Fagua-Arias:** Hi, I'm Juliana Fagua-Arias. A designer, an art historian, and a curator. And I'm currently a guest in New York City or Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. I'm thrilled to be talking to Nikyle Begay, Diné shepherd and fiber artist. Hi, Nikyle. Thank you for joining us.

**Nikyle Begay:** [Diné Language]. And what I said there was, greetings. My name is Nikyle Begay, and I represent who I am as a Navajo person. I am telling you that I am of the Bitter Water people, born for the Big Water people. And my maternal grandfathers are of the start of the Red Streak people, and my paternal grandfathers are of the Deer Spring people. And in our culture, it is very important to establish kinship. So, whenever I'm talking or meeting somebody new, that's how I'll introduce myself.

**J F-A:** So, I like to begin just by asking you about your practice, because you're a shepherd, and you're also a weaver. So, if you could just tell me a little bit about your relationship with the fiber arts, but also what being a shepherd entails?

**NB:** My relation to shepherding started, I would say, when I was about five years old, as my first memories of going to see grandma, and going to see the lambs and the sheep. And when I turned 13, I took it a lot more serious by starting my own flock. So, I know where my fiber comes from, because I'm raising the animals who grow it. We're taught in Navajo that your livestock, whether it's horses, sheep, or cattle, or even if you have dogs or cats or even a pet goldfish, they eat before you do. So that's kind of one thing that was instilled to me as a child, is you get up at the crack of dawn, and do all of your chores before you sit down and eat. If I'm not out with the sheep, I am sitting at the loom weaving. And the sheep will go out, like I said, when the sun rises, and they'll come back when it's starting to set.

**J F-A:** Another question that I had was, if you could take us through this process of producing wool fiber, from raising the sheep to actually having the wool to start weaving. What is that process?

**NB:** Well, definitely, it starts with the sheep. The elders, it kind of sounds harsh, but they say you can't really call yourself a weaver until you raise sheep 365 days a year. And that just entails of course, being sure that they're fed, and keeping them healthy. Like I mentioned earlier, I

spend a good chunk of the day just making sure they're grazing, if they are not out grazing, then I make sure that I have the finances to support, like buying them hay and supplements that I could easily just feed to them. And I think I mentioned that you have to keep them healthy. So regular vet checkups are necessary. And, of course, providing them clean water, that is kind of like the base of beginning the cycle of them growing their wool. And then you harvest it in the spring. And I do my own shearing. So, I'm very hands-on when I'm raising the sheep. And I'm, just, I guess, in a sense evaluating how their wool growth is going, because I'll look at a sheep and I'll say, "Okay, well, I noticed that this one's a little more coarse, than say, this one over here," I'll say, "Mary is a lot more coarse than Lena or whoever," and I'll keep track of that. So, when it comes time to shear, I'll know to use like I said, Lena as an example, I'll know to use her wool for something that's very next to skim like a traditional, what we call Biił ee' which is a rug dress. And I know to use, like I said, Mary as an example, I'll know to use her coarser wool for say, a saddle blanket, something that's very utilitarian.

So, it starts not only around shearing, but before that. Because I have to keep their nutrition up and everything. And then I'll shear them. And when all that wool is harvested, I then go to processing it. And the first step in processing is skirting and cleaning. And that just means like you pull out twigs or whatever gets into the wool throughout the year, and you pull out the dirty parts. So, after it's skirted, I either take one of two options. Option one is what we call spinning in the grease, meaning I just take the fleece, if I fluff it up on its own, and I just spin it right into yarn. Or I actually go further, and I'll wash it, which they call scouring. And then I'll fluff it up, so I am preparing it for carding. And when you card it, you just kind of align the fibers, so they'll spin easily and evenly, quote unquote, evenly, you have to be a skilled spinner as well, to get it very even. So that is kind of like an extra process. And that process, I would like to say, is very modern. And I use that term loosely, because, spinning in the grease would have been the option for my ancestors, since they couldn't turn on a faucet to get water, they would have to actually go out to a spring and bring the water back in. So their option back then was just to spin it in the grease, and then wash it after it was all said and done. With modern amenities, I can do all of that. I can wash it, I can card it, and then I can spin it into yarn. And once all that is laid out, I just get right into weaving.

**J F-A:** It's surprising, but it's not really, that you have like the names for each one of your sheep. And I'm wondering if you have like an individual relationship with them?

**NB:** Oh, yes. I certainly do. I use those two names as examples. But I do have names for all of my sheep. For example, I have one named after my favorite Pokemon. Her name is Chikorita. And I'll just hear, because I have friends throughout the world who also speak different languages. So, if I hear just something beautiful in their language, I'll bring that in a name for one of my sheep. So, I have a few friends who speak Arabic, and they're from the Middle East. And her name, that I have now, she's a very gorgeous sheep, her name is Hala, and that is an Arabic name. And her mother is Idris, and that's another Arabic name. And her sister's name was Fayrouz. So now, I kind of stem off from that and I'll have like little themes. So now Hala, who is just the tamest sheep you'll ever meet. She is right in your face. She wants scratches, she wants treats. Her daughter this year who I've named Henna, she's the exact same way. Because I have

this very close bond with them, I just, I appreciate them so much that. And I noticed that they're all individuals in their own right. So, I just named them according to the personality. They kind of become my babies after that.

**J F-A:** I was just curious, because I'm from Colombia so my native language is Spanish, so I'm just curious if you have any sheep named after a Spanish word?

**NB:** Yes, I have. I've had one. Her name was Marisol. She actually lived out her life. So, she's no longer with us. But she was also a great producer of white wool. And she was just so strikingly pretty. So, I'm like, "Okay, this is your name now." Because it was just so her.

**J F-A:** Marisol is a beautiful name.

**NB:** Oh, yeah. One of my friends. Her name is Marisol. And she's a very gorgeous, gorgeous woman, and I'm like, you remind me of my friend. I'll even go as far as that naming them like after a song. I don't know if you've heard that one that goes, Roxanne, that was pretty big. So, I have this one named Roxanne, because I was just so into that song too.

**J F-A:** That's so funny. How many sheep do you have in your flock right now?

**NB:** Well, currently, I think I have about fourteen. And I say, I think, because in our culture, we're not supposed to count our sheep. We have a lot of teachings, and one of them is to not be greedy. So, they say that when you count your sheep, you begin to express your greed. And after that, they all kind of just run away from you because they don't want a greedy owner, or greedy shepherd, I should say. I definitely have less than twenty. Mostly because the drought here is just horrible. Some say it's a twenty-year drought, but I think it's been going on for quite longer than that.

**J F-A:** Wow. This was a whole lesson in just that answer. And when you say about counting, I can see the truth in that, definitely.

**NB:** Oh, yeah. My grandparents, they're very traditional. So, they believe in all of the old teachings. So, they've kind of instilled that in me. And I try to live by it as best as I can.

**J F-A:** I'm also really interested in your weaving. And I wanted to ask you in sort of this relationship between being a shepherd and being a weaver. How do you employ color in your weavings? For example, how do you use natural colored wool, if that's something that you prefer? Or if you combine natural and aniline colors?

**NB:** Well, you have asked me a very, very good question. Because I have dedicated, I would say about the last fifteen years into breeding for colors, natural colors. There is a whole science behind it. Rather than just bringing in a ram during breeding season, just any run of the mill white ram or black ram, chances are, you're going to get only black or white. So, after linking up with all of the right sheep breeders, I found out that you can extract different alleles out of their

genetics to create different wool colors. And, I've never really taken to dyeing, mostly because who wants to stand around and wait for pots to boil. And not only that, but I was never good at it. I was always burning. I mean, I use that loosely, quote unquote, burning the yarn. And it would just come out very crunchy whenever I tried to dye my own yarn. So, I'm like okay, well, instead of just having a full flock of white sheep that I can dye into many colors, why don't I raise a flock of those colors that I normally use, and that's what I did. So, like I said, I linked up with the right sheep breeders within the United States and New Zealand and Australia. And I just spoke to them and bought a few books. And realized that, if I pair this ram with this ewe, and use a Punnett Square, I have four chances of getting a certain color of sheep. And lately, my predictions have been fairly accurate. So, I know what I'm getting when I pair my sheep together for breeding. So right now, well, not even just right now, but throughout my sheep raising career, we Navajo fancy brown, natural brown. And natural brown in color genetics, is very recessive. So, I have actually spent so many years to get strong brown genetics in my flock. So, if I know that I'm going to pair it with, say, a solid black ram or a white ram, I know that, if they have a twin, I'll at least get one brown one and I'll get another color. So, I've introduced science into raising the sheep. And it's been fun. It really has. So right now, we're starting to focus on quality of wool. I mean, not saying that the wool before was lacking quality, but we're just trying to improve it to where it could be next to skin soft, for example.

**J F-A:** Have you, in this technique of if you have two colors, and you say, well, there's a chance one in fourth that I'll get this or that, have you gotten like a crazy color or like something unexpected? Or has it always been something that you expected?

**NB:** Well, actually, this past season, I bred a brown ram to a white ewe, ram being male and ewe being female, and in learning about color pattern genetics, white should be very, very dominant to every color pattern, because I guess I could set the record straight to say that a white sheep, beneath it is either genetically brown or black, we call that the base. And white is what we call an agouti pattern. And after that, you'll have spotting. And after that, you have what we call extension, meaning that they're always going to be a solid sheep if those genes pair up, or those alleles pair up. And all of these we call locations, and they actually have locations on a little strand's DNA. And that's how we know that if we make so and so to this color to that color, we'll more than likely get this.

So, this year, it was actually last year when I put the ram in, put on a brown ram on a white ewe, and white is the most dominant pattern in the scheme of agouti color patterns. So, I expected to get white, right? No, I got two very recessives. And they all have names. And one of her lambs is what we call blue. So, it's born black base, because, just to set it straight again, every sheep is either genetically black or brown. And then you just have the color pattern over that, and color patterns they express white or tan on the body. So, one of her lambs came out black, solid black with two teardrops. And in my experience, I know that the ones that have teardrops, they will fade, their fleeces will fade to a just a very gorgeous two tone, the outer coat almost being very like silvery, and the inner coat being dark. And it's just like this cool blue-looking fleece. So that was one of her lambs.

The other lamb was brown base. So, the brown lined up, and since it's so recessive, I'm like whoa, what happened? So, she had another brown lamb that has a very recessive color pattern, because she has tan on her cheeks. And I haven't personally seen this color pattern in a brown. So now that I'm watching her grow up, she has white around her neck now. Her fleece coat is brown. And at the base of it, it's starting to lighten out to almost like a stainless-steel color. It's amazing. So, I'm looking at her like I can't wait to get my hands on that wool when I shear, because I'm so curious to see what it spins up to.

**J F-A:** I think you mentioned that brown was particularly like a desirable color, but it was also very recessive. Why is that? What is the meaning behind this color?

**NB:** Well, this is actually very interesting because in my culture, brown sheep are revered as being very, very sacred. I mean, sheep to us are sacred. They're a gift from the deities. But this was a time where my people believed that every being on earth spoke the same language. And they kind of had like a persona. And they wanted to be involved. So, the rainbow beings, they created the most sought-after beautiful sheep, which was brown. And they told the humans before they were gifted to them that, "Hey, we're not going to just give browns that easily." In that traditional story, they say that "we'll bless you with browns every now and then." So, in a sense, that was my ancestor's way of explaining that brown is very recessive, that it's a blessing to have a brown sheep. So that's kind of what brought me into it, being a weaver, and brown being very, very, very gorgeous. But that's kind of what drove me to breed these different colors within my flock. On the other spectrum, like the western view, even scientifically, there's different proteins that make up how the color will influence the fibers. Black has just always been more dominant than brown. So, the proteins that create the eumelanin is what it's called, within a strand of fiber, or even the pigment I should say, the black is more dominant. So, to extract the brown, you would have to breed and breed for years every black sheep that is carrying that gene for brown.

**J F-A:** It's just so interesting to see the complexity behind this beautiful color, not just scientifically, but philosophically. I also wanted to ask you, because you mentioned you learned from your paternal grandmother when you were a child. So, I was just wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about that relationship?

**NB:** Sure. So, my grandmother, in Navajo I would call her Shinalí asdzáá which says that she's my paternal grandmother, she has always been a shepherd. She's always been raising sheep since as far as she can remember. And she's also been weaving since she was a teenager, I believe. So, I was just always intrigued by that. I was just always so into it. And I'm just like, "Wow, I want to do this." And I remember always begging my dad, "Please, I don't want to go to school anymore. Just let me live with grandma. Let me do what she does. Let me learn. That's what my interest was." I think I had expressed interest when I was about ten. And my grandma, she is fluent in Navajo, and she speaks very little English. So, I am the opposite. I speak a lot of English, but I can fluently understand Navajo. And she told me, she said, "I'm not going to give you any formal direction, you're not going to learn this out of a book. The only way you're going to learn this is if you sit right next to me and watch me." So, I did that. For so many years, I've just watched her,

go out with the sheep and how she cares for them and provides that nurture for them, and kind of just grew to actually being there while she was setting up her loom. So, I've just sat very quietly and just very attentive next to her just watching and observing, just learning, and taking in as much as I could. And of course, she would explain things. And I would have to keep rehearsing it in my mind. So, when I see my father, I'm like, "Dad, grandma just said this. Translate it."

I eventually became better at understanding on my own, but that's how far I would go, as to just keep rehearsing something she said in my mind, and until I could repeat it to either my dad or my mom, and they would clearly translate it for me. So that's how I learned, I learned to raise sheep from her. And I learned to shear sheep from her, I learned the whole process of using that harvested wool and setting up your warp so you could weave. She also is very, very accomplished in twill weaving. And you don't see a lot of twill weavers nowadays. So, I felt fortunate to actually learn so much of what we call counts, to create different tool patterns, like a diamond or a broken diamond or the two-face that traders call them, because that is something that's not really taught nowadays. I believe the traders and the collectors have really undervalued that type of weaving. So, weavers would rather weave something that sells for big money, rather than this utilitarian, twill weaving. So that's something that I always look back. And, I just felt very, very fortunate that my grandmother was able to teach me about that style of weaving.

**J F-A:** It sounds like a very special relationship, but also that way of learning just by observation, it seems like you develop a whole different set of skills that you don't develop, if you're like reading. Seems like you have to be completely, completely connected with that moment, or you might miss something really important.

**NB:** Oh, yeah. So, when I finally started my own flock of sheep, she told me, she's like, "Okay, you have sheep. Now you got to do something with them." And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" Because we also eat our sheep. And I'm like, "I don't want to do that. They're my babies. No. I can't imagine ever doing that." But she's like, "No." She's like, "You don't just raise them to eat them." She's like, "Hello, they have wool." So, she said, "If you want to continue as a shepherd, you got to learn how to weave or at least how to shear the wool so you could market it." But one time, I had asked her, I said, "Grandma," I said, "Why am I just so into all this? Why do I love being a shepherd, and why do I love weaving?" And she told me, she said, "When you were a newborn baby, and the part of the umbilical cord that's still stuck on a newborn baby dries and falls off," she said, "I took this to the sheep corral to the center, the heart of it." And she said, "I placed it there and scooped some dirt and sheep poop over it." And she said, "I said a prayer, praying that one of my grandchildren would someday pick up this life way that she's been living all of her life, and that her mother and her grandmothers have lived.

So, when she told me that, I just felt so honored. And it just made sense. Because, in our culture, we still do that practice when a newborn, the umbilical cord dries and falls off. It's just most of the time it's kept at home. So, when the child grows up, and develops into their own, their mind will always be at home, their heart and soul will always be at home. Well, in my case,

my grandmother, she placed it in the heart of her sheep corral. So, my mind, my soul, everything that I want to do in life, would be there. And it's an honor. It's just, I guess, the greatest gift that I was ever given in life.

**J F-A:** It seems like you're connected to the act and the world of shepherding since you were born. So beautiful.

**NB:** Oh, yeah. I always tease my grandmother, like, "Thanks to what you did, I go anywhere in the world, and I can't have fun because my mind and my heart just thinking about the sheep at home." Joking, of course, joking. But she gets a kick out of that one whenever I say that.

**J F-A:** Thank you so much for sharing that.

**NB:** Sorry, I kind of got a little emotional.

**J F-A:** No. Oh my God, please. Well, actually, this is a good transition to this question that I had, which is, if you could tell me a little bit more about this historic and also kind of spiritual relationship that in general, the Diné people have with the Navajo churro sheep in particular.

**NB:** Okay. Well, we as Diné, we believe that we had always had sheep since the beginning. But along the way, the ancestors encountered a time where they weren't being reverent. They were becoming greedy. So, the deities that we believe in, took them away, and said, "You lost your way. And you'll get them back when you're on that right path again." And it's kind of funny, because there are a lot of these little things that go on, but they've actually found sheep bones in pre-contact Navajo dwellings. They could be bighorn sheep or whatever, whatnot, that we followed. There's also been talk that the Icelandic Vikings, as they call them, have made contact in the US before Columbus or the Spanish. So, it's a memory that our ancestors had. And that could be possibly why. They say that we had sheep and that we lost them. And when the Spanish came in, they say it was a reintroduction to the animals that we've already known. But within that time that we didn't have them, we sang the sacred songs that mentioned them, we said our prayers that mentioned them. There are different wild tobaccos that grow on the mountains, and some of them are associated to sheep, and we offered to the deities wherever they are that smoke from the tobacco. So, we've always had that yearning for them, during that period that they weren't with us. So, when the Spanish came in, it was like a reintroduction, because you'll read in some of the journals that Apache or Hopi, or Zuni, or other Pueblo tribes really didn't take to being pastoral, but the Navajo did.

So, the sheep, we call them the old type sheep. The Spanish, they call them churra and they are, I guess at that time period in Spain, were kind of just like these scrubby sheep that were just disposable. The Spanish crown had actually made it illegal to export Merinos, which grow very, very fine fiber. So the churra like I said, to them, was just, send it. Go for it. They came at dime a dozen basically. But when they came to the southwest, it was wow, this reintroduction of an animal that we remember from so long ago that we've been wanting, just the best animal ever, because they acclimated to the southwest very well, as opposed to different breeds that were

introduced later on. So, with the churro, and we, Navajo, we actually have different names for them. The most common is Dibé dits'ozí, which means the sheep with long, shaggy fiber, because if you look at a sheep, or a churro sheep, they have long wool. Another name that we call them is Dee' djí'í, which means the four horns, because Navajo sheep are known to grow multiple horns. They're like one and a handful of breeds of sheep throughout the world that are able to grow more than two horns.

And right now, with the history that the sheep have had, not only with the Navajo, or with the Spanish or with Mexicans, or even other native tribes, began with the US government. And when they started pushing West, they were trying to, I guess you could say tame native tribes. And the Navajo were one that you just couldn't defeat them. It wasn't until the long walk when they were trying to herd the Navajo out from the southwest and to Fort Sumner. Their first attempt was a scorched earth policy, where they just burned fields and orchards. And sheep, they were just slaughtered, to make Navajo surrender. And at that point, they wanted to march them down into southeastern New Mexico to relocate them. So not only did they do that, but later on in history, they tried to improve the sheep with different breeds to improve the wool to help the market. But that also didn't work because these bigger breeds, they weren't doing so well on the range in the southwest. So, it was clear that the Churro were just the best fit. And it wasn't until the Hoover Dam was completed, they were afraid that whenever the monsoons rolled in, be afraid that it would just fill with silt from anything that rained into the rivers. So, in order to control again, because at that time Navajo were very prosperous with the sheep industry, there were stories of families going to town with five thousand sheep, easily selling fifteen hundred to two thousand lambs, and getting paid and leaving, that was kind of affecting, what they were trying to establish say in like Wyoming or wherever they raise a sheep.

So anyway, so that was the government's excuse to again, come in and exterminate millions of Navajo sheep. And that was called the livestock reduction. When I was growing up and understanding and listening to elders, they said that the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) agents would just come in, and they would tell the head of household, and usually it was a woman, and the US government with other influences, didn't like to work with women. So, they would point the father or even the oldest son, as head of household and say, "Okay. Well, you get your sheep in the corral, and let's do a tally count, to see how much you have." But most of the time, they were tricked. So, they would bring in the sheep, and they were just shot on spot, or either burned in front of their shepherds. So, I think just being able to survive and being resilient is why we also appreciate this breed of sheep, not only because they've adjusted to our area very well, and that we have, some kind of ancestral memory of them, but also because we've been through it, and they've been right there with us. That's just the important connection that we have grown to have with them.

**J F-A:** I think it was in one of your Instagram posts, maybe that I read, you know, "you take care of them, but they also take care of you."

**NB:** That's another teaching that I grew up with. And there was one time that I really didn't understand it, so I spoke to my paternal grandfather. And he said, "They'll take care of you in



more ways than you ever could imagine." And I'm like, "Okay. For example?" And I thought he was going to throw that teaching at me. But he's like, "I remember as a kid, that my parents, they would have us run with the sheep up into the mesas," whenever BIA agents were coming around to collect children to send them to residential schools. And he said that, "We would just follow the sheep because they would know where to go." They knew how to evade natural predators. So, they were pretty sure that if they saw someone unfamiliar, they would be slinking away. And he was telling me, "They took care of us." You know, "We follow them. And we evaded BIA agents for as long as they did." So, they were never sent to school. And with everything that's being uncovered now, I think, within mainstream, whether it's Canada or America, we, as Indigenous persons, have always known what went on during that era, when children were being taken and going through horrific things to basically colonize them. So, he said, "that's one way they took care of me." And, speaking to other elders, I know there's this one man who served in World War Two. And he had said that he came back with what he didn't know was PTSD but was describing it as such. And he said, "The sheep kept me sane, basically, just being able to work with them and being around them."

There are other more lighthearted stories where my dad when he was growing up, he said that they would milk the sheep, and they would cut off a piece of, just a little clip of its wool, they'll wash it, and then they'll dip it in the milk. And the lock was long enough to where his sister could hold it, who was a toddler, and she'd suck milk off of it. And there were other times where he said that they would take lambs to market. And before he went off to school, those lambs paid for his shoes or his clothing or a new jacket. So, there are various instances that are very sweet where the sheep have provided. And I think before we wore jeans or shoes or whatever, whatnot, that they would weave blankets and other attire to cover themselves, or even use for bedding. And you hear a lot of elderly women shepherdesses who will say, "When my parents passed, the sheep became my parents. They took care of me." And it's just so sweet to hear those things.

**J F-A:** There's so many sad stories and horrible things that happened in the past, but then finding these beautiful connections, this relationship not only between humans, but also humans and animals that were essential for survival and for resilience, as you say, that's really beautiful. I wanted to ask you about the Rainbow Fiber Co-Op, of which you're a founder. And just tell me what it is, tell me how it came to be, and what it means to you.

**NB:** Sure. So, I just told you about the brown sheep, and how they were a gift from the rainbow deities. So just in general, rainbows being beautiful, and sheep being beautiful, and during the start of the pandemic last year, it was just so grim, and it just seemed like there was the light at the end of the tunnel. My friend Kelli Dunaj, and I, we were just well, rainbows correlate with the brown sheep traditionally. And rainbows are beautiful, and we want to exude just that positivity and that beauty. So that's how we incorporated rainbow into the name of the coop. And the idea began last year, when COVID had hit the Navajo Nation, especially hard. Because shepherds didn't know what to do, the stores were closed, stores that purchase the wool on a large scale. And the companies that come onto the reservation, and buy wool, they weren't coming in, because there were so many restrictions. And when things kind of relaxed a bit, we

really found out how Navajo Churro wool was just not appreciated. If you take it to any of those buys or to a buyer, they'll just tell you that it's worth nothing. When in reality, this fiber has been literally the backbone of my people for hundreds of years. So, we just felt that something needed to be done to help sustain the shepherds, and just something to encourage them to continue raising this wonderful breed of sheep. So, we decided to cater to other weavers throughout the US. And we have actually little incentives that we're working on to have Navajo weavers use the yarn once it's processed and milled.

So, in a nutshell, that's kind of how we came together. We would love, love, love, love to buy all of the Navajo-grown Navajo Churro wool, but that's just not in the cards right now. So, we have decided to work with a few shepherds who have large flocks of Navajo sheep, who are very dedicated at preserving Navajo sheep. So, we hope to expand maybe whenever we become financially able to, maybe bring in more shepherds to work with, but right now we have three of them. And we're excited.

**J F-A:** You actually touched on what my last question was going to be. Which was just, if you could tell me a little bit more about the state of the wool market currently, because I have read also in your posts, that it was really affected by the pandemic, but also by the last presidency.

**NB:** When the former president, the last sitting president, went into that trade war with China, and China was the big importer of wool from Australia, New Zealand, and the US, and other parts of the world, but they were big importers of a lot of different types of wool. And coarse wool being one of them, because they have the ability to make that coarse wool into carpets there. So, when the last presidency started placing all the tariffs on goods coming out of China, that made them unable to buy wool on the scale that they used to. So not only were American breeders of sheep affected, but also people in New Zealand and people in Australia were also affected by that.

**J F-A:** I'm curious about that relationship with China. Is that something that has existed for a long time?

**NB:** My friend, Kelli, the co-founder of Rainbow Fiber, she actually sent me a really interesting article about Navajo sheep and the Navajo wool market. It seems like since I think it was like the late 1930s, China had always been a major player in importing Navajo grown wool because they had that successful carpet-making business there. In that paper, it had said that, not only was China becoming this big powerhouse, but also Navajo, I think they specified women, but, obviously, Navajo weavers, too, had started creating their own economy I believe, in there they stated, I don't know, if it was a hundred or a thousand weavers, were bringing in a million dollars a year in their weavings alone. And of course, Navajo didn't see that money, because it was going through the traders. But that, at that time period, was a lot of money. And not only that, but they had also gone through more regulations with the government. In that paper, it had stated that it was kind of illegal, if not illegal to form a co-op that would get them better market prices.

**J F-A:** Thank you so much, Nikyle, for joining us today for the second season of the Fields Of The Future podcast. It's been a joy and a privilege to speak with you and to learn more about your work and your practice.

**NB:** Thank you for having me.