Wool: A Place-Based Product
The Australian wool industry is illustrative of the nation’s paradoxes: ecological stewardship is coupled with degradation, on-farm traditions are blended with an ability to adapt to changing markets, and sheep are subject to ethically-questionable procedures while simultaneously being held as a symbol of pride, resilience, and national identity. Wool has a spatially and temporally extensive commodity chain, with production, processing, and marketing literally spanning the globe from Australia to China to the United States and other countries.

Methods
I spent two months traveling and working on wool farms across Australia. I used participant observation and interviews to examine member meanings amongst woolgrowers, shearers, and people otherwise involved in the industry. I performed content and narrative analyses to pinpoint major themes and concepts about what was important to the people I was working with. I then used this ethnographic data within a framework of political ecology to look at the effectiveness of one animal rights campaign on creating change within the industry.

Focus Question
What are the processes and forces shaping wool as a commodity and where does power to impact the industry lie?

The Mulesing Debate
The PETA Save the Sheep campaign led to major changes within the wool industry. However, change did not occur in a direct, linear fashion. There were several factors that led to the relative success of the campaign:

- Portrayal of suffering of a “charismatic” animal that people can empathize with
- Economic conditions that drew growers away from Merino wool and towards lower quality wool or other agricultural practices
- A pre-existing desire amongst woolgrowers to find alternatives to mulesing

Although it may appear that the success of this campaign was due solely to consumer pressure, it is evident that there were a variety of other factors that contributed to its “success.”

Results
The wool system is a complex web of relations with direct impact between two actors being difficult and unpredictable. The effectiveness of the mulesing campaign is one example of how a combination of several unique instances (economically, politically, and socially) can align to allow consumer-driven change to be effective. Yet this campaign only led to improvements in the industry, it did not provide ultimate solutions.

Implications
- Activist campaigns provide industry transparency and challenge marketed narratives of production. However, they are in no way perfect venues for creating change within an industry.
- Understanding the variety of forces shaping a product and the complexities surrounding that product is necessary for consumers to understand how to impact change and why certain measures may be effective in specific instances.

Selected References:
-<Order of references to be added as needed>