

## Sacred and Profane Season 2, Episode 6: “Black Women on #BlackLivesMatter”

[00:00:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer:** I’m Kurtis Schaeffer.

[00:00:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor:** And I’m Martien Halvorson-Taylor, and this is Sacred and Profane. On our last episode, we heard from Jessie Marroquin, who brought the story of Santa Muerte and one of her devotees.

[00:00:23] **Kurtis Schaeffer:** Today, we’re bringing you another documentary by a University of Virginia student as part of our ongoing series, Field Notes. Like Jessie’s reporting, this piece relies on first-person interviews. Jason Evans went to Philadelphia to report on how Black Lives Matter members both draw on their faith and reject traditions of the Black Church. We’ll let Jason take it from here.

[00:00:51] [SOUNDS OF PROTEST AND POLICE SIRENS]

[00:00:59] **Shakira King:** My cousin died. We’re actually coming up on his seven-year anniversary, August 23rd. Um...I’m sorry; it’s still a little emotional, 2012...

[00:01:12] **Jason Evans:** This is Shakira King.

[00:01:14] **Shakira King:** ...and he was killed by the Philadelphia Police Department.

[00:01:18] **Jason Evans:** Shakira King is a Philadelphia-based activist and educator.

[00:01:21] **Shakira King:** ...And I was really angry and didn't know what to do with all the anger I had. I was just kind of going through the motions of grief and Mike Brown was killed. And that was my tipping point. So, I was in a group chat with some folks that I had met via the Internet.

[00:01:44] **Jason Evans:** People in the group chat told Shakira about plans for protesting the killing of Michael Brown.

[00:01:48] **Shakira King:** And they were going to Ferguson and I wanted to go so bad, but I was still fairly young and my mother was like, “No you're not going.”

[00:01:56] **Jason Evans:** This was in 2014?

[00:01:57] **Shakira King:** Yes! I really wanted to go. They were organizing bus trips and caravans. There was actually a bus that left here from Philadelphia with some folks that I now have gotten really close with. And I was like “I'm going.” She was like, “No! Stay still.” And it hurt me to sit still.

[00:02:17] **Jason Evans:** Shakira King didn’t go to Ferguson, but she didn’t sit still. She joined a Philadelphia-based group of activists who were committed to making a change in their local community.

[00:02:27] **Shakira King:** I began to organize with folks on the ground on how to make sure these folks were lifted up who were there on the ground doing the work. And then when they came back, they formed the chapter and I still wasn't fully ready to be fully engaged in the work partly because... I’m not gonna lie, some folks who maybe listening or who may have been

wanting to get into activism may also share this right now, but it's intimidating to get into this kind of work when you feel like you're not fully informed. So, I took some more time to get really fully informed and I joined another group called Sankofa Community Empowerment that was led by a friend of mine and our focus was really on educating people so every meeting every week we took a different subject and we met and we broke it down and we talked about it. And then I met the two folks who were running Black Lives Matter at the time.

[00:03:17] **Jason Evans:** Black Lives Matter is a movement founded by three Black women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. It began in response to the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, among many others. While political activism is central, so is spiritual wellness for the community.

[00:03:40] **Shakira King:** I met them and they were like come to this healing circle we have because we had had Joyce Quaweay at that point who was killed by her boyfriend who was the Temple [University] police officer and then we had Alton Sterling who also was killed at the time. And they had a letter writing campaign and they hosted a healing space for us to kind of come together and they had mental health professionals that we could talk about the grief...

[00:04:03] **Jason Evans:** But unlike the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, which had strong ties to the Black Church, the Black Lives Matter movement is not affiliated with any organized religion.

[00:04:14] **Shakira King:** They had spiritual practitioners who were there who were willing to pray and cleanse and there were all these different elements of how the liberation movement is moving forward.

[00:04:26] **Jason Evans:** Many members of BLM grew up deeply religious. But a lot of millennials no longer identify with the Black Church.

[00:04:33] **Jalane Schmidt:** The founding of the organization was not connected to the Black Church.

[00:04:38] **Jason Evans:** That's religious historian and Black Lives Matter activist, Jalane Schmidt.

[00:04:43] **Jalane Schmidt:** Millennial African-Americans as with other, you know, their millennial peers... there's a higher portion of "nones" [N-O-N-E-S]. That is, folks who don't claim any religious affiliation. So that's a new kind of demographic fact that also plays in here, I think. And then there's been this tension, actually, between some black church leaders, some people who are more vocal about it, and Black Lives Matter...

[00:05:12] **Jason Evans:** Another source of tension is that the Black Lives Matter leadership model is vastly different than the centralized, predominantly male and Protestant models of the Civil Rights Era.

[00:05:21] **Jalane Schmidt:** Black Lives Matter is trying to be, quote unquote leader-full, kind of more lateral in its arrangement of initiatives and organizational activities.

[00:05:30] **Jason Evans:** In short, BLM has many leaders, including Black cis women, queer-identified, and trans people.

[00:05:39] **Jason Evans:** Many BLM leaders are inspired by the Black women freedom fighters who went largely unrecognized by their male counterparts, including Fannie Lou Hamer, Barbara Jordan, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, and Ella Baker.

[00:05:55] **[ELLA BAKER SPEECH]** - Friends, brothers, and sisters in the struggle for human dignity and freedom: I have had about forty or fifty years of struggle ever since a little boy on the streets of Norfolk called me a nigger. I struck him back! And then I had to learn... [RAUCOUS APPLAUSE]

[00:06:18] **Jason Evans:** Some of these women, like Ella herself, had direct ties with the Black Church while others had no formal religious affiliation.

[00:06:25] **[ELLA SPEECH CONTINUED]:** I had to learn that hitting back with my fist one individual was not enough. It takes organization. It takes dedication. It takes the willingness to stand by and do what has to be done when it has to be done.

[00:06:48] **Jason Evans:** But no matter your affiliation, the movement as a whole was influenced by tactics that came out of the Black Church – tactics like respectability politics.

[00:06:58] **Jalane Schmidt:** So, Harvard historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined this phrase “the politics of respectability” to speak about the Black Women’s Club movement of the early 20th century. You know “Lifting as we climb” was kind of the mantra.

[00:07:12] **Jason Evans:** Civil Rights leaders saw respectability as a powerful political and moral strategy in their struggle for racial equality.

[00:07:18] **Jalane Schmidt:** You know, let's wear coats and ties when we go out to protest, wearing our Sunday best, perfect diction, elocution, and all these kinds of markers of middle-class status and proper manners and... I mean these were the wives of doctors and dentists and lawyers and funeral home directors and what there was in terms of middle-class status in the Black community at that time. And making the case tacitly and explicitly for civic inclusion by having these sorts of markers.

[00:07:56] **Jason Evans:** Many Black Lives Matter activists find the respectability strategy not only outdated, but also stifling and exclusionary. Respectability means conformity – conformity in dress, conformity in behavior, and especially conformity in sexuality. Many Black women like Shakira grew up in the Church listening to messages that denounced their sexuality.

[00:08:19] **Shakira King:** I attended a very conservative Baptist Church here in Philadelphia and it was my family’s church. And you know, folks had very strict beliefs on what folks’ roles were, what women’s roles were. I’m a Black queer woman proudly and I struggled with my queer identity and all of my life because I knew that what I had been taught was that I was going to go to hell and that God no longer loved me because of how I because of how and who I loved. As I grew older, I stepped away from the church because of that, because it didn’t feel right.

[00:09:01] **Jason Evans:** Shakira never thought she would return to the Black Church. But in the summer of 2017, Shakira was hired by St. Paul’s Baptist Church to become a teacher in the Church’s Freedom School, a literacy program designed to uplift Black and Brown children. St. Paul’s is a rarity in the Black Church. Despite the fact that most Black Churches are comprised of Black women, very few are led by women. St. Paul’s Baptist Church was founded in 1890 by

two Black women – Frances Fields and Mary Henryhand. And currently, most of the leaders of the Church are women, including the assistant pastor, Charisse Tucker.

[00:09:42] **Charisse Tucker:** Black women have been a part of movements. That's not new.

[00:09:46] **Jason Evans:** From the pulpit, Charisse can see that Black women are leading the fight for Black freedom.

[00:09:50] **Charisse Tucker:** I think what is unique in this moment is that we're saying, we don't want to work and we're taking the mic. No, we will not write the script and pass it on to you to read in front of the cameras. We got it! We got the mic. That's all right. We good! And it's not to exclude the participation of men or to exclude participation of others who are also working toward justice also working toward the thriving of Black people in Black communities or other communities that have been marginalized for a host of reasons. What I think what we're seeing is women saying, "No more will I bear the load and pass the reward for you to get it." And I think that's why it looks so different.

[00:10:43] **Jason Evans:** In the struggle for Black freedom, Black women are leading the way and determining for themselves what Black Lives Matter means.

MUSIC [DETERMINATION].

[00:10:51] **Shakira King:** Black Lives Matter means...

[00:10:53] **Jalane Schmidt:** So Black Lives Matter means...

[00:10:56] **Charisse Tucker:** It means that our lives matter.

[00:10:59] **Jalane Schmidt:** ...highlighting Black lives and the way that we've been subjected to dehumanization.

[00:11:06] **Charisse Tucker:** ...that our wellness matters, that our hopes matter, that our thriving matters that our health matters.

[00:11:13] **Jalane Schmidt:** Treasuring and promoting the full humanity of Black people.

[00:11:17] **Charisse Tucker:** ...that our survival matters, that our futures matter, that our children matter, that our concerns matter. And that its mattering means it gets to be taken seriously, it gets to be paid attention to, it gets to be the center of the conversation, and it is worthy of resources and strategies and support and room.

[00:11:43] **Shakira King:** Black Lives Matter means... liberation in community. And healing in community. That's our goal.

[00:11:55] **Charisse Tucker:** That's it. No more explanation.

[00:12:09] **Jason Evans:** Special thanks to Shakira King, Revered Charisse Tucker, Professor Jalane Schmidt, and Professor Paul Jones.

[00:12:16] **Kurtis Schaeffer:** This project was funded by the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. It was created by Jason Evans.

[00:12:26] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor:** Ashley Duffalo is our communications manager. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. Kelly Jones is the Lab's editor. Special thanks to the Joy Bells for the use of their song, "Determination." Next week, we'll be returning with a full-length episode of Sacred & Profane. Stay tuned.