

In-Sacred-Spaces-3

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sacred spaces, ballroom community, queer liberation, black churches, spiritual experience, civil rights, social justice, personal journeys, Hudson River, vogue performance, ballroom elders, spiritual connection, black motherhood, trans experience, church accountability

SPEAKERS

Milan Terlunen, Aya Labanieh, Ciara Lyons, Iman Hill, Colby King, Kalik B, Shai Pratt

Colby King 00:08

[Music begins.] Welcome to In Sacred Spaces, a three-episode podcast series in which we visit spaces around New York City that are sacred specific communities. These include historic Black churches in Harlem as well as the Chelsea Piers a gathering place for members of the ballroom scene. There are many kinds of Black churches in the United States, with hundreds of years of history. Ballroom is a community of mostly queer and trans performers from Black and Latinx backgrounds, originating in Harlem.

Aya Labanieh 00:37

Join us as we walk around these sacred spaces with the people who love them. We discuss their personal journeys with spirituality and how the spaces they've chosen to inhabit connect to longer histories of civil rights, women's equality and queer liberation.

Milan Terlunen 00:54

We hope these conversations will connect with your own experiences, whether you identify as LGBTQ+, as a Christian, or as part of any other religious or spiritual community - or none at all. If you can, we encourage you to listen to this podcast while walking around a place that is sacred to you.

Colby King 01:18

Our podcast team includes people with diverse religious backgrounds in a range of racial, sexual and gender identities. You can find out more about the team and the project at our website insacredspacespodcast.com

M Milan Terlunen 01:34

We hope these episodes will inspire you to reflect on your own unique relationship to spiritual experience. Throughout each episode, we've included musical interludes composed by Stone Butler that give you some private moments to meditate on what you've heard.

M Milan Terlunen 01:56

For this episode, we're gathered at the Chelsea Piers with members of the ballroom house of Louboutin, Iman, Ciara, Kalik and Shai, as well as Colby, who's been part of the In Sacred Spaces team since the beginning. All five of them are LGBT individuals who grew up in Baptist churches. Some are now leaders in the ballroom community, and others are advocates for social justice. You can learn more about each of them on our website. They share their reflections on our first two episodes, as well as how they personally relate to grace, love, motherhood and community.

M Milan Terlunen 02:38

We begin by talking about where we are, the Chelsea Piers. We're sitting at a table overlooking the Hudson River. It's late in the day on a warm summer evening. All around us, there are people strolling about enjoying the weather. [Music ends.]

K Kalik B 03:02

We on sacred grounds.

C Colby King 03:05

Yes, yeah.

K Kalik B 03:06

I mean, this is, this is like a sanctuary. This is a safe space. It's been a part of our history, ballroom history, for as long as we can remember. Like the pier was, everybody will come to congregate, speak, dance, celebrate, mourn, cry, literally... what, not too long ago we just had a memorial here. And this is not the first memorial we had here or, and unfortunately to say, gonna be the last you know. This is our space for safety. This is where people learn how to vogue or like perform. They speak with the elders of the community right here and learn, like, get free knowledge, honestly. Yeah, just the sacred grounds. The pier is sacred.

I Iman Hill 03:52

I remember talking to the icon, Luna Khan. Well, I don't know if he's still a Khan anymore, but he walked Butch Queen Face. He is responsible for the GMHC latex ball that we do every year.

And I know you all can't see because this is a podcast, but if you look out here, there are these little... so we're on a pier, for those who don't know. So picture that there is a pier and that there is these little wooden stakes that are, that are coming up from the water as you look over into the Hudson River, which, if you look even further, it would be Jersey City. And he told me that the old piers used to extend all the way to where these wooden stakes are. And from here, it's about maybe 100 I would say maybe about 300 feet. I would say 400 feet. But he... the way he described it to me last year, he said, I look at these wooden stakes and I think of tombstones because of all the people that we've lost and all the people that we've buried and all the people that we've celebrated and mourned and revered, on this space, on, in, on this pier. And when he said that, that just kind of like, it brought me to this place of, like, I don't want to say pensiveness, but just, it just put me in a place of, like, deep thought, and I'm like, wow. And when you think of like, even the headline of saying, oh, Marsha P. Johnson's body was found in the Hudson River. We're right on the Hudson River. So essentially, her ashes and her remains are here, and these are icons and figures in our, in our community that to loop it back around, were essentially pastors of our movement, which is liberation.

S

Shai Pratt 05:32

[Laughter.] I was like, she really got me in my feelings.

K

Kalik B 05:37

Like, you know, I really...

S

Shai Pratt 05:41

Sorry I was just absorbing that, I'll you can go...

K

Kalik B 05:47

I mean, honestly, personally, for me with ballroom, this is where I had my first grand prize. Like, my first win, my first introduction, like I remember sneaking out at 13 years old, like coming to pride and like, you know, like, you know, at the daytime, and it's not really at the night time. That's when the girls are out. I just felt so amazed by, like, what the pier has brought me so, like, it's so interesting now, like, you know... When I was growing up in ballroom, like, you know, certain people would... after they do, after school, and then would come to the pier and celebrate. But when we got older, we disrespected the pier, almost similar to how we like disrespected church, like, you know, we'll go, but then after, like, we get older, we like, "You going to church? Like, I don't got time for that." Like, I pray, like, you know, but in the pier, we did that as well. Like, we's like, "Why y'all going on the pier to vogue? What, y'all look crazy like, you know?" And it's good to see that this generation has a very strong appreciation for the pier. And I appreciate, like, their openness to just coming back to where it started, in a sense, you know, because it's important, like, these spaces are so important, and you have to sometimes go back to the beginning to get forward and move forward.

C Colby King 07:06

Yeah, something that Ciara said right before we started, and you Kalik just also said, was: during the daytime, the pier is not the pier. It's not until it's like, the darkness kind of falls over it, that it becomes that. Which... there's layers to that. And I can get into it, but I'm not gonna do so. But lot of times when we're here and people are voguing, and then they're playing beats, and everyone's just kind of having fun, and, you know, congregating, people start talking about whenever somebody like "carries", which means like they, for people that don't know, to "carry" means to...

K Kalik B 07:43

Be amazing, like...

C Colby King 07:44

Be amazing, exceptional. Do something beyond what is expected, so...

K Kalik B 07:50

Overdo it.

C Colby King 07:51

Overdo it. Yeah. So, like, whenever someone's carrying while they're voguing, people might say, "Oh, the trancesors are speaking to me or running through me. So like this place as a place you know, of mourning, yes, but also of connecting to those that came before us, and being able to feel that while being in this space.

C Ciara Lyons 08:15

It's kind of funny. This is not like a funny comparison, but for anybody who's like, watched like the Avatar movies, right? And like, y'all know when, like, they go to the tree and like, connect their like tail to like the tree to like, kind of, like? Yes... The pier is like, our like, LGBT, like, Eywa, because, like, it's... And it's hard to explain to people who aren't familiar, like, who don't make up the community, because it's such a spiritual experience to be here. And I think, I really want to make sure that's very clear is that this is extremely sacred to us as a community, and even, like, individually coming here without anybody else, just like to clear your mind, or just to even just like be one with, like, your LGBTQ-ness, like this place is really, really, really, really important and really, like our, our, our grounding center. I think.

K Kalik B 09:08

No, honestly, because to your point, I remember I was so lost in life, in general, and I don't even know what I was doing. I didn't know where I was going. I had no direction. And this just is the

know what I was doing. I didn't know where I was going. I had no direction. And I'm just in the city, and I was like, "You know what? Let me just get a bike." I didn't know where I was going, but every single time I was lost, I ended up literally in this spot looking at me like it was just that groundedness that I needed, and I could never explain it until you literally just said it like that. It was always this spot that I come back to, but it's so much memories of like... It's something special to happen at this place, even when you're here with your friend, just walking around, where they just start spilling their secrets, or just saying how they really feel, or just confessions, or just going back in the past, I felt like this, like it's just something about this place when it comes to us, where we just get into our bag, we just really get emotional or like, really want to communicate or... [Sound of howling.] See? [Laughter.] I don't know, like something, I don't know. It's an interesting I don't know. It's hard to explain. It's really like a spiritual connection, if anything.

M

Milan Terlunen 10:43

[Music begins.] Everyone puts on headphones and wanders away while listening to our first episode on grace with Derrick McQueen. After a half hour, we gather again at the end of the meeting. There are kids playing and yelling nearby as the group shares their initial reactions. [Music ends.]

C

Ciara Lyons 11:05

When he mentioned liberation and the Black church just being based on liberation and just like freedom from oppression, I think that that resonates with all of us, because we participate in ballroom, and ballroom is literally black queer liberation, like in its highest capacity. And I think that's beautiful to see that connection, because a lot of times when it comes to, like, religious settings, they try to shy away from anything that connects them to us when it's literally not a "them and us", it's just like a collective. That's something that stood out to me immediately.

I

Iman Hill 11:39

I am so glad CeCe went ahead and started it off, because that's exactly what I wrote. So I was jotting down notes as the pastor was speaking, and immediately, like I just concur wholeheartedly with what she said. So to quote, he said that the origin of this church is an abolition. And in the word abolition or the origin of church, excuse me, I replaced the word "church" with "ballroom". So the origin of ballroom is abolition. Then the immediate sentence after that, he says, abolition is about liberation. And then, if you subtract or supersede abolition with ballroom you have: ballroom is about liberation. When he goes and he talks about the origins of the church, he mentioned Samuel Cornish, and Samuel Cornish, to me, could be replaced with Crystal LaBeija. Crystal LaBeija, obviously, for us, is the Black matriarch and the Black founder of the ballroom scene. Prior to that, it was the Harlem drag balls that was like in the 1920s, moved into the 60s, and then she, as we all know, in her participation was shunned and was looked at as less than, or othered. And what she decided: to take her talents over to ballroom.

I

Iman Hill 13:11

So I guess, like, without spewing my notes at you, she is kind of like the direct representation of the, I guess you could even say, the different denominations of even Christianity. How there is Baptist, Baptist Christian, there's Presbyterian, there's all these different denominations. And even when we talk about queer liberation as it pertains to white queerness or Black queerness, we do have people who can similarly be parallel to our experience, but because they do not occupy the same intersections, we believe different things. So Crystal LaBeija could be Presbyterian, whereas the white drag balls could be Baptist, if that makes any sense. And so, you know, they're saying that Samuel Cornish, so obviously, I'm using Crystal LaBeija in the place of Samuel Cornish, founded the church, and he spoke about freeing slaves, queer individuals, and I'm... "slaves" I'm also superseding as queer, Black queer, queer individuals to not only be a church ballroom, being a church, but a home for runaway slaves or runaway queers. And if they wanted to settle, which was something that they also mentioned, if they wanted to settle in ballroom, if they wanted to settle in our church, it would not be just a place for like that they could come in and out of, but it would be a place that they could settle within community of people that look like them.

I Iman Hill 14:29

So I think that for me, because I did grow up Baptist Christian for the majority of my life, I... And to be honest, even in these different denominations, like how I was speaking about how we can believe we can we all be reading the same book, but interpret it differently. It is like, in the Baptist way, it's almost as if you did feel like you have to hide. And I, what I loved in one of the other things that I wrote in my notes was, and I'm trying not to look directly at them as to read off the paper, but he mentioned something about grace. Grace was like a overarching theme toward being graceful or Grace-filled. And I think that that's something that's so powerful. Because when you say graceful or gracious, let's change the word around, it is almost as if it's coming from a place of pity, like, or I'm gonna have or I'm gonna have mercy on you. And I think for me to kind of pivot from just talking about ballroom, for me, one of the things that didn't resonate to me in the church is I always felt like I wasn't good enough. Like I always felt like I have to be... I have to lay my sins down on the line, I have to almost crucify myself in order to be welcomed here. And it's like it's always this thing of like we're not worthy of God's grace. We're not worthy of, of, of the goodness of God. And it's like I... If God is is omnipresent, and if God is sovereignty, and if God is divinity, at what point in my human experience am I ever going to get to a place where I am, quote-unquote "worthy", because we are imperfect by virtue of us being human.

S Shai Pratt 16:12

Come on.

I Iman Hill 16:12

So it's like, how is it? How, what is this like? It's like, it's almost like a rat race, if that makes sense. Like I'm not going nowhere if I show up to this church forever not worthy. Whether I sin or I don't sin or sin, sin correctly, let's say that, because I think that Baptist churches and Baptist Christians, a lot of denominations of religion period, have this like, this is an okay sin and this is a not okay sin. This don't make sense to me. But what I love about the word grace-

filled is that when you realize that God is all around us, and when you come to this place, and we can use ballroom now, we can bring ballroom into it, when you come to this place where you've experienced liberation at its purest form, you want everybody to experience what you felt. So I think that is the grace-filled experience that we get when we come to ballroom and we hear the chanting, we hear the music, we hear the drums, we see the dancing that is similar to praise dancing. And it's almost as if: if I experience this, come one come all who are like us, to experience the liberation that I feel.

K

Kalik B 17:18

I think it's like the same thing with me, how I joined ballroom. It was because, like, Baptists was like, you know, like celebration, going to church, you know, every Sunday, it was a traditional thing. It was like habitual. And in those spaces, it's kind of like special to me, because I always look at like the Black experience. And like, Black experience, we always find a way to find resilience and peace in our struggle, in our like, in the worst of times, right? And it was similar to ballroom in the sense of, like, it correlated with the church. Because, you know, this is something that... We know our history: this is something that wasn't originally ours, and it was given to us or forced on us, I should say, and yet, and still, we found a way to make it ours and find, like, some peace within it. And it's the same thing with ballroom, how it came about, and just like the navigation and how we navigated with it, and that's why it was so special. And I just think that's just like a Black experience. I think that's a marginalized experience. I think that's like an experience of like just suffering, like all of us continuously suffer, but had to find a way of liberation, of that peace. And I just love that. You know, sometimes the church of any kind, or religion of any kind, bring that faith to people. The opposite and the bad side is, like, when you're trying to be too good, you end up doing bad. Like, you know, it's kind of similar. I know I'm getting way off topic, but like with Batman, where was it "dark knight", where he was just like Two-Face, he was like, you live long enough to see yourself turn to the villain. I think that's what happened with churches. Or, like, even, I've seen it in ballroom with certain public or like powerful figures, where you're there for a long time and you want to... You, your intentions are good, you know you want good, and you want that liberation on everybody, but sooner or later, switch around and you weaponize in some way. So it's very interesting. It's very interesting of how it all connects and intersects.

I

Iman Hill 19:33

Ballroom, to me, the origin of it, going back to the conversation in the first episode of this podcast, was a place, or is a place, for runaway slaves and, and the slaves in which we're talking about, slaves of our own minds, slaves of our, slaves of our conditioning, slaves of everything that we've been taught to hate about ourselves. And in that, though, however, in trying to give grace, and then in the theme of grace, I realized, and it's something that I wrote in my notes, is that we're all wounded people, even Crystal LaBeija, when she founded ballroom, this is a, this... we're imperfect people. You know, as we talk about humans and the concept of being sinners. So now you have all of these wounded people coming together in community, and a lot of us are operating from unhealed traumas and almost like survival-based thinking, and it's not love, it's not informed by love. And so I do give grace to where ballroom has changed and how ballroom has changed. It doesn't make it right, but I think that there

needs to be a greater conversation about how to shift the focus now that we are in this home base of community. How can we love, and how can we not bring our outside experiences of hatred and bigotry to a place where we love?

M

Milan Terlunen 21:42

[Music begins.] The sun is starting to set. It glows orange across the Hudson River as the group discusses their struggles with perfectionism. [Music ends.]

S

Shai Pratt 21:54

It's like in ballroom and in church you deem to be like perfect. You try to be perfect in the church, and you try to be perfect in ballroom. And it's like, it's...

C

Ciara Lyons 22:04

And I like the topic of like, perfection, because it's so crazy how, in Christianity, in the ballroom, we feel like we have to be perfect, so bad, but we have no examples of perfection. So it's like, where does this unattainable desire to be something that we obviously can't be come from? And I think the same way in ballroom you have critics, you have critics in church too, who just try to just belittle you or make you feel like you're not enough. And I think it's like a cycle where we as a community and as a people are so used to being put down for hundreds of years just as a whole, that we tend to do that to each other and to ourselves. And so then when we come into spaces where we feel a sense of community or sense of togetherness, we, we, we begin to honestly dismantle it ourselves, because we are so used to not having anything as a collective. And I hate that for ballroom and for church, because these are two spaces that are very influential in so many Black queer lives. Most Black people that I know grew up in the church, and most people, most Black people that I know up here that are LGBT, are also a part of ballroom. So to know that those two things are so important to this community, but also are so detrimental to our mental health and just how we perceive ourselves is kind of like, it's weird. It's weird.

C

Colby King 23:45

I mean, like you said there, we don't have any examples of perfection. And I think what was always so confusing for me growing up in church and even now in ballroom, is like the idea that God makes no mistakes, right? So the one thing that's supposed to be perfect is God. And so I think for me, when I realized that I wasn't straight, it made me feel crazy, because I was like, then I must, something must be wrong with me, because God can't be, this can't be possible if this is not supposed to be something that He created. And I, sitting, I'm sitting here, and this is who I am. And then you come to ballroom, and there's expectations that are held for all people. But you know, like Iman said, we are a microcosm of the world, and like the category where I walk is Face, so I'm expected to look a certain way that I do not. There are standards that people are expected to have about what beauty is, what love is, all these things that even

though ballroom really was meant to be the antithesis of a lot of things that have harmed Black trans and Black queer people, we find ourselves replicating those same systems within it and holding people to standards that we can't achieve.

I Iman Hill 25:16

If ballroom is a microcosm of the world, and the world we live in right now is very patriarchal and whitewashed, then Christianity to me is also a product of that as well. Christianity to me is whiteness. I mean, honestly, because I'm thinking about and none of this have we talked about the root of African American religions, and not even African American, African religions. And this idea of imperfection, just, I mean, this idea of like, God makes no mistakes, and all these things. It's like, this is very white. This is very white. And I know we're talking about Christianity in specifically, but when you study Ifá, which is a Orisha-based faith, we learn that Olodumare is God, and the Orishas are emanations of God, and who've had human experiences, but um, there's a, there's a, there's a Patakí, which in, in, in Christianity you would call a "proverb" or "tale" where Obatala, who is the king of the white cloth, is drunk and he is responsible with the mind. So when you talk about Orisha, the root word of Orisha is Ori, which means your head. So if Obatala was drunk, and he is responsible for, for cognitive thinking, the responsibility or... the Patakí says that people with mental disabilities are a product of his drunkenness. Because he was not able to properly, you know, configure the the minds of these people. So we have mental illness because of Obatala. But that was, if you would think of, in God, that would be a mistake, you know. But we are, in my lived experience, I find that people, sometimes people who are quote-unquote "mentally disabled", are some of the most beautiful and intelligent people that I've ever spoken to, but not in the norm of the way we think about it, you know?

M Milan Terlunen 27:32

[Music begins.] The group splits up again to listen to the second episode on love with Nigel and Lisa Pearce. By the time they're done listening, it's fully dark. The table we were at before has been taken over by other people, so we go sit on some grass in a big circle. [Music ends.]

C Ciara Lyons 27:58

I think in both the ballroom community and in church, love is, is supposed to be the guiding light to everything that that we do and participate in. But I think that kind of gets lost in the action of those two things a lot of times. But also I feel like in this episode, the people speaking were really accountable for Christianity as a whole. And Lisa was like, she understands how, like, churches really hurt people, and she really didn't want to be a part of that. And I think that's beautiful, because a lot of times churches don't take accountability. And I don't think that is necessarily that they don't know that a lot of things are wrong in that institution, but I think that it's like we're, we're too good to do anything wrong. But when she took accountability for just Christianity as a whole, being like an aiding factor in the detriment of Black people, I think that was beautiful, and it... a big healing thing for a lot of us. I think, as people who come from a Baptist background, hearing somebody say that, yeah, you went to church and they fucked you up because they did, but to also be like, but we love you still, and we want you to come

here because we can offer you something that maybe you haven't received that could maybe change your perspective on church. And that's beautiful to me, because that's what I was looking for when I came to ballroom.

I Iman Hill 29:41

First and foremost, let me just say this. Lisa being a Black woman. I'm assuming Lisa is a Black woman.

I Iman Hill 29:48

It's no surprise to me that she said all of these things. Why? Because women and people who are often the most marginalized are always, and I would say 100% of the time, the most self-reflective and most self-aware. It is not lost on me, or it does not surprise me that the person who is the most oppressed in the room is able to think about, how can we include everybody else? So from a ballroom perspective, when Colby talks about trans women not being centered anymore, trans women are the most self-aware and self-reflective people in the space. Trans women are also the most marginalized people. Black trans women, excuse me, are the most marginalized and oppressed people in the world. So it is also not lost on me that in our reflection, we are oftentimes met with backlash when we say, "Hey, this is not right, and we need to change this." You know, she talked about expansion and inclusivity and making ways for other people to experience, I guess, the love that she had felt when she first came to the church. But we all know with expansion, sometimes we lose... the mission statement kind of gets lost a little bit with expansion. And we've seen that with ballroom. How New York City was the Mecca. You could only go to a ball in New York City. As we've expanded, things have changed, and it's not the same ballroom that... when we talk about venue. So she mentioned the old church that had the holes in the top of it, right? And to me, I think of the Elks Lodge. I think of Tracks. I think of the Roseland Ballroom. I think of these places where the balls were held and how dilapidated these places were. I think of the pier that we're on right now. This turf was not here 30 years ago. It was actually potholes and concrete and, you know, to the naked eye garbage, but with loving eyes, like she said, we were able to see the beauty, we're able to see the spirituality, we're able to see the divinity that is that is housed here. So to tie that into womanhood, and it's just, it's not lost on me, or it doesn't surprise me that a woman is bringing this up, you know, and I think later on in this conversation, maybe we could pivot to motherhood and how that, and how, you know, people treat Black mothers, and how that is actually reflective of how men treat women who aren't their mothers. And yeah, I have a lot to say about that, but we're just gonna keep the conversation flowing.

S Shai Pratt 29:48

Yeah she is.

C Colby King 32:43

Something else, you know, thinking about all these things too, is like that I think the episode did really well is in Christianity, like a lot of times, love might also be just like little kids running across like racing across the pier right now. Love as charity, right and they talk about their

across like facing across the pier right now. Love as charity, right and they talk about their church providing housing for people and providing safe spaces for people to actually be able to live. And I think there was a point in time I think that was a big part of ballroom was providing safe spaces in community for people to be able to survive. I don't know if everyone still has those same missions. Huh?

M

Milan Terlunen 33:37

Talk a little louder.

C

Colby King 33:38

Talk a little louder. I don't know if everyone still has that same mission of loving and supporting one another, beyond walking the ball. Surface-level things. But it's like love can be so much and love is also about making sure that people you care about aren't hungry if you can, and are housed if you can, and finding community support in those ways. And I think that is, you know, in a lot of ways, what the foundation of ballroom was and was supposed to be. And I'm not saying it's not. Like there definitely are still people that that is their mission. But as like all things, and as Iman was getting to, when things become more commercialized, once capitalism takes its hold on things, once things become more mainstream. I love my good girlfriend Beyoncé down. [Laughter.] I love... You know, but I feel like I... What has happened, in a lot of ways, is that people don't recognize this space is something that actually means something, not taking the time to actually learn about a culture that they want to participate in. And I'm kind of rambling here because I'm just thinking about a lot of, thinking about a lot of different things, but it's like listening to this episode. I thought a lot about just how things have been taken in a lot of ways. And some people don't even necessarily see ballroom not only as LGBTQ, but I want to be very explicit to say, like, ballroom, yes, it's LGBTQ, and specifically it's trans. It was started by trans women. But it's Black. And I think that... And Brown. Black and Brown. But Black. And lot of the people that get to represent ballroom often are not Black, and often a lot of them these days are not even trans or even LGBTQ at all, and get to vogue on very large stages and claim to represent a community without pouring any support into it. And so it's always about love is the message, but losing the charity and the support that's supposed to come with that, because love is about more than just seeing people. It's about making sure that you are supporting them.

C

Ciara Lyons 36:43

I want to piggyback off that. Because I think when Lisa was talking and she was discussing her nephew who transitioned from female to male, I think that was important, because a lot of times we have family members who probably wouldn't even mention that at all, and as someone who has an aunt who probably would rather die before admitting on a public forum that she has a transgender niece, I think that's beautiful to even see her, to see Lisa mention that to her husband as like, "You're good with this, right? Because I am. Like, so, are you good?" Because a lot of times people don't even, like, consider that. People don't consider the fact that people have queer, trans, lesbian, gay, whatever, family members who could be impacted by these hateful beliefs that people have, I think that's really beautiful, because she didn't have to do that, and she didn't have to mention that, and she didn't have to make it a point to make sure that her husband understood where she was coming from. Yeah.

M

Milan Terlunen 38:25

[Music begins.] A group of drag queens have shown up on the pier and are having their own conversation nearby. Inspired by Lisa's story about Dr Katie Cannon's ancestor, our discussion moves to the topic of mothers and motherhood. [Music ends.]

S

Shai Pratt 38:59

So I wanna talk about mother. So me and my mother were very close. So honestly, I came out when I was 15 years old, and I'll never forget I came to the village, I think I was by the pizza shop that was up the block, and I ran into, right, and I ran into this, this lesbian. I ran into this lesbian up the block, and she she grabbed me by my neck. I will never forget this. She grabbed me by my neck, and she said to me, she was just like, I'm gonna tell everybody that you out here. So in my hood, if you came to the pier, West 4th, you were, you were deemed gay. At that time I didn't know what I liked, so I came here. She dragged me all the way to the train, I literally was crying from West 4th all the way to Coney Island. When I got home, I woke my mother up, and I was like, "I have something to tell you." So my mother was like, "Oh, my God, did you kill somebody?" I'm like, "No". She's: "somebody's pregnant?" I was like, "No". She's like, "What the hell you got to tell me?" So I was like, I was like, "I'm gay". So she was just, "Go to sleep". So the next day, when she woke up, she, she was flat-ironing, hot-combing her hair. And she was just like, "I'ma ask you a question". She was like, "Do you want to be a girl?" I was like, "What do you, what do you mean?" She was like, "Do you want to be a girl?" I was just like, you know... She said, "Because if you wanted to be a girl, we got to get you on hormones now. I'm not raising an ugly daughter"

K

Kalik B 40:21

Wow...

S

Shai Pratt 40:21

So to me, I didn't understand that at that time. I didn't understand it because I'm just like, "What? Like, why did you ask me that?" Because it was... one time I said, she asked me who I want to be following. I said, Pocahontas. [Laughter.] I guess I love Pocahontas. So I guess to her, she was accepting of it then. I'll never forget. When I got older, I asked her, I said, "You, I'll never forget when you said that to me, because to me, it was like, you accept me for who I, who I am." And she told me she was just like, "It's so crazy, but you don't know it, but your uncle, your uncle, your uncle, your aunt. I'm sorry. Your aunt was trans, and she raised me. So she was like a beautiful woman who raised me. So if that's what you wanted to do, I was gonna stand by you a hundred and ten percent. So if you, if y'all look on Facebook, y'all see my mother voguing and everything, my mother's been in the scene for years. So to me, what I when I look at my mother, I just like, damn, I got a good mother. Like, but like, I think I had to come to realize that a lot of people didn't have that, a lot of people didn't have that. So me seeing that... [Someone passes by playing loud music.] Oh I'm sorry... [Laughter.]

C

Ciara Lyons 41:29

I grew up with a single mother as well, and I don't have any siblings, so it was me and my mom up until I was 15, 16. And I think I came out to my mom when I was 13. And when I came out to my mom when I was 13, my mom actually came out to me as well. When I was younger, my mom had a girlfriend that I thought was just her best friend that lived with us for a while, and she was a very integral part of my childhood, my mom's girlfriend, and so when I came out to her, and my mom told me that, and also, my mom asked me if I wanted to be a girl, and I said, "No, no" because that wasn't a possibility. I didn't know what that was. I didn't know that was an option to me, that was so outside of my realm of, just outside of my space, that I just couldn't even fathom the possibility of even doing... That whole thing was just a myth to me. But it was weird because she came out to me, but then she also kind of made me feel horrible about my sexuality, which was weird for me, because I'm like, we've kind of had the same journey to an extent. So I would expect you to understand where I'm coming from, but you don't. Then she comes out to me further to tell me that she broke it off with her girlfriend then because she don't want me to get bullied in school for having two moms. And so it seemed like a bit of that resentment that she held because she couldn't suffer through the consequences of her own relationship, were put onto me as a burden. So it was okay for a while, and then I was like, "Wait, but I do want to be a girl". And it went to hell, because at that point it was: "So you lied to me, because I asked you, and you told me no." And so, my mom is my best friend. She was then, when she told me that, she is now, and she will be whatever the fuck happens with me and my mom. However, it's weird, because motherhood, especially Black, single motherhood, is such a journey that is so, so, so, so, so, so traumatizing, but so beautiful, because the way that my mother loves me is beyond this world. And I think that us all that have been raised by single mothers, we understand that, because as, as horrible as some of the things that my mother has done to me have been, I know that there's nobody else ever at all who will ever love me as hard as my mother does. And I think that's such a valuable feeling. And I hate that it comes with, I hate that it comes with, I hate this kind of like, a backhanded compliment. Because while my mother has made mistakes, again there, there's no one who could replace what she has done for me and what she will continue to do for me in her position in my life. And in terms of Black motherhood, as even going back to slavery, we weren't allowed to raise our children, and we had to raise the children of the people who were causing us the most harm, and I don't think that people realize to this day how horribly slavery impacts the Black woman. I recently read, I'm kind of on a topic, I recently read *Beloved* by the. Iconic. Toni. Morrison. [Laughter.] But reading that book...

M

Milan Terlunen 45:50

[Music begins.] At this point, we've been recording for over two hours. And guess what? The batteries in our recorder run out. Once we put some spare batteries in, Ciara picks up with a discussion of a book by Toni Morrison. [Music ends.]

C

Ciara Lyons 46:38

In the book *Beloved*, she began to discuss how, as Black people being slaves, she felt like she didn't control her heartbeat, like she felt like her heartbeat was someone else's, like her hands were someone else's. The white children stole her milk from her breast when her children were hungry. And so I think that totally lends itself to Black motherhood now with that sense of

control. And if you're not who I want you to be, or if you're not living up to what my expectations are of you, then you're not good enough for me or for the world. And I think it's beautiful now to see that transformation for my mom, because at a time, I didn't see a point where we would have a good relationship, and I didn't see a point where my mother would be in my life, but now we're in a totally different space. Because I think she understands that that sense of control that she felt like she needed to have over me was just something that was forced upon her by something that she had no control over. And so when she relinquished that control, I felt like that, that totally changed our relationship. And that pertains to ballroom, because, again, that sense of control. We are all our own people. We all do what we have to do for us. We all feel differently, think differently, look differently. And I think once we step back from trying to make someone who we want them to be, and let them be who they are, we'll blossom, because it'll be true and total self reflection and not some constructed bullshit that we are seeing now, in ballroom and in the church.

S Shai Pratt 48:48

So I was, I was basically going into the, like, starting from the beginning, like a gay Black man is more accepted than a trans woman in the Black household.

K Kalik B 48:58

Well, I think that's...

S Shai Pratt 48:59

But that was, that was the topic.

K Kalik B 49:01

I think that has a lot to do, of like the system and society we live in, and what's...

S Shai Pratt 49:07

And like, why is a gay Black man more accepted in society than a trans woman?

K Kalik B 49:12

Because he's still a man.

S Shai Pratt 49:13

Because he's still a man, yeah.

K

Kalik B 49:15

And men, you know, we run the world...

I

Iman Hill 49:18

Definitely.

K

Kalik B 49:18

... in a sense.

I

Iman Hill 49:19

Definitely. You could still be, I mean, no shade though. You could still be your mother's protector as a gay Black man. You could still be your mother's provider as a gay Black man. You could still be, you know, everything that you I mean, you could still, there's a lot of things you can still do, and you have the privilege of being a man. One thing that I realized that when I transitioned, and I say this to every trans woman that I, who asks me about transitioning, who is questioning transitioning, I always say like you must understand that you are... as a gay Black man, you have things taken away from you, or you have marginalizations and oppressions, but you are giving up the last bit of privilege that you have, deciding to transition, because you are now choosing to be a woman, to be... and I'm not saying "choosing", as in like, trans is a choice. I'm not saying that. But what I'm saying is that you are forfeiting the last bit of privilege that you have in this world, which is the fact that you are presenting masculine. So think long and hard about that, and I didn't realize just how, just how serious that was, until about maybe six or seven months into my transition. Eight months into my transition. I realized that like, "Hey, I'm, I'm, I'm speaking in spaces, and nobody's listening to me. Like I am, I am... I don't feel as though... I feel like people are hearing me. They're not listening to me. I feel as though people are not considering me." And, and what I was, what I was witnessing was the shift in perception. I am now being perceived as woman, so therefore this is, these are... You on a whole new set of rules, baby, and beyond you being a Black woman, now you a Black trans woman. So even the little bit of decorum and cordiality and respect that we give a Black woman, you not getting it. So I gagged in real time, like I was, like, "Hold on. Like, this is crazy!" Because I was so used to... I transitioned when I was 20, almost 21, 21, so I'm used to these past, you know, X amount of years, feeling like I was on top of the world, like feeling like I could speak and everybody would shut up, I could speak and everybody would listen. And feeling so silenced, almost like, like it was like night and day. So we like, we're gonna repeat these cycles until we going back to the root of finding, finding God. Going back to the podcast - finding God in you, finding God in, in you, so that you don't need a church to tell you how to love God. You don't need the ballroom to tell you how to love yourself, or how to do, to do these things. Finding that within yourself is gonna take work, and it's gonna take effort, but that is the only way to be able to come back to the space healed. You ever seen somebody come back after having a sabbatical and you be like, "Damn, that bitch is glowing. What you doing?" She loving

on herself. Mika, prime example. Mika, Mika Prodigy. She, she's one of those people that I could say, if you don't see them, if you don't see her for 6, 7, 10 years, she'll come back to the ballroom and she'll she'll light up the whole room.

C

Colby King 52:24

The concept of humanity was constructed around being white, being wealthy, being cis, being a man, and so if you are not those things... Being Christian in a lot of places. So when you are not those things, when you start to take away those identities, you become literally less human. And I think we have to shift from... And going back to the idea of church as this place, and Christianity when it comes to the concept United States and the Caribbean and even lots of lots of Africa, but not all of Africa, something that was forced onto many Black people. I mean, even the concept of Blackness itself was forced onto Black people. We were not Black when we were in Africa. We were people. I think what has to happen is not just seeing people as human is... To completely abolish something is to completely get rid of all limitations and concepts and things that were created to define what some people were and what other people were not. And ultimately, the reason why white people are human is because Black people are not, and I think it's the reason why cis people are human is because trans people are not. The reason why men get to obtain more humanity than women is, is because they are men and women are not men, right? So much of people's identity is based on who they are not, so much of oppression is based on who you are not. Even the Black church, as opposed to being the white. To this day, the most segregated place in the United States is churches on Sundays. Churches on Sundays are still the most segregated space in the United States, because the Black church is not a white one, right? And therefore it's not, to many people, a church. And I think in order to truly change and transform the world, we have to ultimately abolish so many of these systems that we want to hold on to. Even the idea of being a human in general has to be changed in order for us all to be seen as... not necessarily human but as persons. And worthy of... all equally worthy of love and equally worthy of security and equally worthy of being able to live and thrive. I mean, not even necessarily thrive - live! Like I mean...

K

Kalik B 55:39

"Thrive" can be so many different things to, you know, so many people. And I think, to your point, like, I think it's so hard to abolish a system because it affects everybody so differently. So they want to keep the parts that's holding them in a certain space, you know. So I think that's the tricky part, because then, like, how do we go and tell... It's just a lot, like, it's layered. It's so layered that, like, we have people that will willfully know that wrongdoing is being done to someone. Or this... They wouldn't want things done to them but still allow and accept it, or turn the cheek, because they know that "this doesn't affect me and my privilege and my understanding of what religion may look for me compared to them, or what this may look..." So it's a very layered, interesting thing, and I just think that, like, as a whole, in, in communities of church and in ballroom, it's the fear of like, what does this future look like without these systems? You know, what does it look like starting from the ground up, when we never had to start at ground up? And even that within itself is a privilege to certain people of not having to start from the ground up and build and create, like, a specific reality for themselves, you know. And again, that aligns with going back to what you say as far as accountability. Accountability in church, accountability in ballroom, accountability in this world of like: what part do we play? Where's the blood on our hands, or what have we done? And can we absorb that? And can we

be honest with like, those points that actually are the things that connect us, like our wrongdoings, our mistakes are the things that connect each and every one of us, None of us, make every perfect decision, you know?

M Milan Terlunen 58:01

[Music begins.] The pier has started to empty. As our conversation has gotten more personal, we find ourselves speaking quieter and moving into a tighter circle. After many stories about the past, Colby leaves us with thoughts for the future. [Music ends.]

C Colby King 58:35

I think part of the reason why so... church and ballroom are so alike is because so many people in ballroom are people that ran away from church. And ran away from church, still wanting it. And created something and participating in something that they... participate in something that they do love, but they also carried and brought in the traumas of those same places. So there's that. But what do I think the future looks like? I'll say I'm an Afrofuturist, very Beyoncé Renaissance, very alien superstar. And I mean, I think the future of the world, or the world that I want to see is one that is Black trans and Black queer and Black ballroom. All over. And in a lot of ways, this community has influenced the world over, whether people will give credit to it or not. So it already is. I just imagine a world where people actually know that. Yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 58:37

[Music begins.] We're almost at the end of the episode, but it's not the end of the conversation. We'll now leave you with a little more music to reflect on everything you've heard.

M Milan Terlunen 59:15

We'd love to hear your response to this episode. If you have thoughts or stories to share, please send an email or, even better, a voice note, to team@insacredspacespodcast.com. In Sacred Spaces was produced by Olivia Branscum, Colby King, Aya Labanieh and by me Milan Terlunen.

C Colby King 1:01:25

With musical compositions by Stone Butler and technical support from Evan Li and Ana Maria Rodriguez.

A Aya Labanieh 1:01:31

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Milan Terlunen 1:01:47

And most of all, thank you for listening. [Music ends.]