



**FAITH
UNLEAVENED**

*THE WILDERNESS BETWEEN
TRAYVON MARTIN & GEORGE FLOYD*

TAMICE SPENCER-HELMS

Praise for Tamice Spencer-Helms and *Faith Unleavened*

“Much has been written about the young white exodus from evangelical religion. Rarely have we been invited to journey alongside young evangelicals of color. Tamice Spencer-Helms takes readers by the hand and walks them through her exodus and liberation. We witness the scales falling from her eyes and see with her, for the first time, that the white evangelical waters she once found respite within are actually filled with the rotting bodies of theology and discipleship stunted and killed by White Jesus. Walk with Tamice through each stage of her healing and transformation, and encounter unleavened faith. This is a worthy read, indeed.”

—Lisa Sharon Harper, President and Founder of Freedom Road, LLC and author of several books, including *The Very Good Gospel* and *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family And The World—And How To Repair It All*

“Tamice is an incredibly important voice as someone who lives faith at the intersection of practitioner and theologian. Her reflections on historical events that have shaped this emerging generation is a gift to anyone who mentors young people of any racial background, since these events have shaped our ecosystem.”

—Rev. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, Founder of Chasing Justice

“We all contend with a wilderness and on that journey, it’s necessary to choose what we consume. In *Faith Unleavened*, Tamice showed me a path I hadn’t seen and gave me nuggets of a better way to do community and life with one another. I’ve still so much to learn. Join me in the wilderness.”

—Seth Price, host of the *Can I Say This at Church?* podcast

“I learn so much from listening to stories unlike my own. In this memoir of evolving faith, Tamice bravely invites us into a journey that is tender but unflinching, heavy with grief and suffused with hope. I am challenged by the ways we disagree with one another, and even more challenged by the ways we agree.”

—Gregory Coles, author of *Single, Gay, Christian* and *No Longer Strangers*

“In *Faith Unleavened*, Tamice Spencer-Helms vulnerably provides us with her exile experience in white evangelicalism and her courageous exodus out of it. Doing so, she offers a gift for the rest of us, inviting everyone to let go of White Jesus so we can encounter the living, liberating, and unleavened Bread of God. Read this book!”

—Drew G. I. Hart, Associate Professor of Theology at Messiah University, author of *Who Will Be A Witness?*, and co-host of the *InVerse* Podcast

“We all need fellow sojourners on our path to a more beautiful, just world. Tamice Spencer-Helms is an ideal guide for those seeking to leave behind faith narratives of exclusion, violence, greed, sexism, exploitation, and racism rooted in white supremacy for narratives of reconciliation, inclusion, nonviolence, generosity, equality, and sustainability. Spencer-Helms displays a powerful, honest, and clarion voice in *Faith Unleavened*. This book is a must-read for all who care about the role of faith in a world seeking justice.”

—Doug Pagitt, pastor, author, activist,
Executive Director of Vote Common Good

“Tamice Spencer-Helms guides us through the wilderness of a Black woman contorting herself to a white Jesus and into freedom as a Black woman fully seen and loved by herself and Jesus. Spencer-Helms shares her doubts and the obstacles to decolonizing faith with a vulnerability and honesty that made me flinch. She powerfully names how white supremacy gaslights all of us and she gives hope to those still on the journey.”

—Kathy Khang, author of *Raise Your Voice*

“A faith cannot feed you until you have first wrestled with it and sat with the story it has yielded in your life. In *Faith Unleavened*, Tamice Spencer-Helms shares the story of her wrestling in the wilderness and the sustenance she found therein. May we all be courageous enough to trust God with our stories.”

—Pastor Trey Ferguson, Founding President of Rebellion for Christ Ministries, co-host of the *Three Black Men* podcast

“Everyone should read Tamice’s story. She describes how white supremacist beliefs in Christian organizations deepen pain and self-hatred for people of color, especially when they are trying to minister from those frameworks. She illustrates how both over-rationalism and over-emotionalism in white evangelical theology(ies) hinder trauma processing instead of helping. She shows how shallow understandings of God, people, and society cause more problems than they solve. But Tamice helps us glimpse the glory of Christ in the Black Church!”

—Mako Nagasawa, Founder & Executive Director of the Anástasis Center, author of *Abortion Policy and Christian Social Ethics in the United States*

“Tamice Spencer-Helms writes with honesty and courage about her confounding journey through white Evangelical Christianity. For the sake of future and current generations we need to listen and learn from her story. If you’ve ever felt betrayed by your faith or bamboozled by life, this book will inspire you to keep going. You matter, healing is possible, and together we can seek the love and justice of the kingdom of God.”

—Mark Scandrette, teacher and author of
The Ninefold Path of Jesus: Hidden Wisdom of the Beatitudes

“Tamice beautifully takes us along her journey in and out of whiteness. By weaving in her personal story, world and church history, and current events she leads us into our own personal exploration of what our experiences with whiteness, White Jesus, anti-blackness, and the Church have been like. This book bears witness to the death-dealing ways of a system that refuses to see people but insists on the superiority of its ways, politics, songs, ideology, and theology. Tamice’s journey out of the system gives me hope that redemption is possible—revolution is possible. So come on.... let’s get us some unleavened bread and have ourselves a revolution!”

—Carol Ng’ang’a, Founder & Executive Director of Msingi Trust

“In this critical book, Tamice eloquently and painfully takes us on a journey through racial trauma and faith deconstruction, all while allowing the grace to sit with discomfort. She brings forth her own story in a way that is undeniably brilliant. Take your time with each section of this poignant writing.”

—Robert Monson, Co-Director of Enfleshed,
co-host of the *Three Black Men* podcast

“To the image-bearers who have been told they were naked before and above being told they are Loved, let Tamice take your hand as a fellow sojourner of the wilderness in *Faith Unleavened*. Tamice sews history and scripture into a tapestry through the stitchwork of storytelling; inviting us into her painful, particular, and common experience as a Black woman in the white evangelical expression of Christianity. In this wilderness—I mean, right in the middle—Tamice sets an abundant table both for the collective and just for you. Here laughter and tears, sorrow and song beckon each of us to eat until we are full of the unleavened bread Jesus has provided.”

—Nya Abernathy, Founder of The Dignity Effect, writer at *Of Earth & Of Stars*

“This is the story of leaving behind a controlling, small religion, and going on the hunt for a faith that is big enough to hold everyone and everything. Within these pages is a memoir of liberation...not just for Tamice but for all of us.”

—Scott Hall, host of the *White People Work* podcast



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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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This book includes personal stories. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences and information gathered over time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

For Leah and Ellsworth,

Thank you for helping me make sense of it all.

For Harlym and Ellison,

You are the first fruits of my resurrection.

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Prologue

When they flipped his body over, the bright canary yellow blanket fell on the grass. His hoodie was damp because he'd been laying there a while, and it had been raining that night. He was wearing jeans and fresh Fusion Force 20s. The red, black, and white ones with the red strap and patterned flap. I recognized those Jordans because my brother has a pair. His fade was cut the same and his skin was a darkened caramel color too. It could have been my brother under that sheet. His 7-Eleven lighter along with the Skittles he'd bought his little brother were strewn on the lawn, and they found the AriZona iced tea a little bit later.¹

I didn't sleep that night. I kept thinking about the shoes.

That Sunday when I went to church, we sang happy songs about God's goodness and glorious reign. No one talked about Trayvon, not even the pastor. We learned about joy and gladness the week the 911 recordings came out, and we prayed for revival in America during the rallies in Sanford, Florida.

In November of the same year Trayvon died, Jordan Davis was shot to death because a white man thought his music was

¹ Orlando Sentinel, ed., "Pictures: Evidence Photos Released in the Shooting Death of Trayvon Martin," *Orlando Sentinel*, May 17, 2012, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/trayvon-martin-george-zimmerman/os-pictures-evidence-photos-released-in-the-shooting-death-of-trayvon-martin-20120517-photogallery.html>.

too loud,² and Rekia Boyd was shot in the head while standing with some friends. The off-duty officer carelessly fired shots over his shoulder into the group because he thought her friend's cell phone was a gun.³ At church the day after the jury acquitted Trayvon's killer, they talked about how sad it was that the guy from *Glee* died. They didn't know anything about Trayvon. They didn't even know his name.

I felt a deep and nauseous sadness that grew more and more unbearable. I told my friends, but they didn't understand why I would be so upset about some "thug" in Florida being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or why I was concerned about how many white people were on the jury of that other trial I'd been telling them about—the one where the boy stole the Snickers and died.

"His name was Trayvon, and he didn't steal," I told them. I didn't tell them about my brother, and I didn't tell them about his shoes. They didn't deserve to know.

Four months later, in the middle of the night, Renisha McBride was shot in the face with a 12-gauge pistol-grip Mossberg shotgun through a screen door on her neighbor's porch because she was knocking too loudly.⁴ Eight months after that, in New York, Eric Garner was choked to death in broad daylight for selling individual Newport Kings that weren't in

² News Service of Florida, "Man Who Shot, Killed Jacksonville Teen Jordan Davis in 2012 Appeals to Florida Supreme Court," *Action News Jax*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.actionnewsjax.com/news/local/man-who-shot-killed-jacksonville-teen-jordan-davis-2012-appeals-florida-supreme-court/AFERBGLA4NFZTCBK3ESWMOBIA/>.

³ Taylor Lewis, "Police Officer Found Not Guilty in Death of Rekia Boyd," *Essence*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.essence.com/news/police-officer-found-not-guilty-death-rekia-boyd/>.

⁴ Monica Davey, "Fatal Shooting of Black Woman Outside Detroit Stirs Racial Tensions," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/us/fatal-shooting-of-black-woman-outside-detroit-stirs-racial-tensions.html>.

their original packaging⁵—the kind Rigby, my auntie, used to smoke. She called them “loosies.” Eric told the officer he could not breathe, but it didn’t matter.

In Ohio one month later, John Crawford was shot inside a Walmart for picking up a gun they sold in the store while his girlfriend gathered ingredients to make s’mores.⁶ Michael Brown was shot six times and left lying face down in Ferguson, Mo., in August in the middle of the road. The officer let his body fry on the asphalt of his neighborhood for four hours in front of his mother’s house.⁷ Two days after that, Ezell Ford was shot in the back at close range. The officers who killed Ezell said they stopped him for “walking on the sidewalk at 65th Street.”⁸ Two months after that, Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times in 13 seconds. The officer said he was afraid for his life because of the folded pocketknife in Laquan’s pocket.⁹ The next month, a 12-year-old boy was shot in the torso for

⁵ History.com Editors, ed., “Eric Garner Dies in NYPD Chokehold,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, July 15, 2020), <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/eric-garner-dies-nypd-chokehold>.

⁶ John Swaine, “Video Shows John Crawford’s Girlfriend Aggressively Questioned after Ohio Police Shot Him Dead in Walmart,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, December 14, 2014), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/14/john-crawford-girlfriend-questioned-walmart-police-shot-dead?CMP=share_btn_tw.

⁷ Julie Bosman and Joseph Goldstein, “Timeline for a Body: 4 Hours in the Middle of a Ferguson Street,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/us/michael-brown-a-bodys-timeline-4-hours-on-a-ferguson-street.html#:~:text=For%20at%20least%20four%20hours,for%20two%20weeks%20of%20unrest>.

⁸ Kate Mather, Richard Winton, Ruben Vives, *LA Times*, “Ezell Earl Ford, 25,” The Homicide Report, *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2014, <https://homicide.latimes.com/post/ezell-ford/>.

⁹ Kori Rumore and Chad Yoder, “Minute by Minute: How Jason Van Dyke Shot Laquan McDonald,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/laquan-mcdonald/ct-jason-vandyke-laquan-mcdonald-timeline-htmlstory.html>.

playing with a toy gun in the park.¹⁰ He died the next day. His name was Tamir Rice. In April of the next year, Freddie Gray's spinal cord was snapped in half while he was being transported by police for possessing what they referred to as an illegal switchblade; they didn't buckle him in when they drove him away.¹¹ In November, Jamar Clark was shot in the head while handcuffed,¹² and Akai Gurley was shot to death while walking down the stairs.¹³ Walter Scott was shot dead in the back by an officer who lied in his report.¹⁴ Just across the border of that town, only two months later, nine Black men and women were massacred in their own church during Bible study.¹⁵

Alton Sterling was selling CDs out of his trunk at a corner store in Baton Rouge when he was pinned to the ground and shot five times in the chest at close range.¹⁶ And the very next day, the entire world watched live as Philando Castile bled to

¹⁰ Jamiel Lynch and Christina Carrega, "Justice Department Won't Pursue Charges against Officers in Tamir Rice Shooting," CNN, December 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/29/us/tamir-rice-shooting-no-federal-charges/index.html>.

¹¹ Amelia McDonnell-Parry, "Death of Freddie Gray: 5 Things You Didn't Know," *Rolling Stone*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/death-of-fred-die-gray-5-things-you-didnt-know-129327/>.

¹² Sara Sidner, Steve Almasy, and Joshua Berlinger, "Jamar Clark Shooting: Witness Says He Was in Handcuffs," CNN, November 22, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/21/us/minneapolis-jamar-clark-police-shooting>.

¹³ Sarah Maslin Nir, "Officer Peter Liang Convicted in Fatal Shooting of Akai Gurley in Brooklyn," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/nyregion/officer-peter-liang-convicted-in-fatal-shooting-of-akai-gurley-in-brooklyn.html>.

¹⁴ Hannah Grabenstein, "Walter Scott," PBS, December 17, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/walter-scott>.

¹⁵ Associated Press, "Supreme Court Rejects Appeal from Dylann Roof, Who Killed 9 People in a Black Church," PBS, October 11, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/supreme-court-rejects-appeal-from-dylann-roof-who-killed-9-people-in-a-black-church>.

¹⁶ Catherine E. Shoichet, Joshua Berlinger, and Steve Almasy, "Alton Sterling Shooting: Second Video of Deadly Encounter Emerges," CNN, July 7, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/06/us/baton-rouge-shooting-alton-sterling/index.html>.

death in front of his 4-year-old daughter and his girlfriend. He was shot seven times while sitting in the passenger seat. He was wearing his seatbelt.¹⁷

But still the pastor didn't say anything.

"Numb" is not the right word because it was sharper than that. "Angry" won't suffice either because it was deeper. It was as if the world was spinning, and I could not find my balance. With every hashtag, the crack in the toxic foundations of my faith grew wider. Where do you run when the only person you can turn to is White Jesus? I could not breathe. I could not sing another damn song about joy. I didn't know it then, but I was fellowshipping with the 81% of white evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump, and there was leaven in the bread.¹⁸ How could they be so oblivious to the issue at hand? How could they not see it? Why did they argue with me so much about it? Why did *I* have to calm down?

They were convinced all those who had been killed had done something wrong, something to deserve being gunned down like beasts with no family, no future, and no dignity. Why were all the pictures of the slain so dark and thuggish? Why were all the murderers in uniforms and family photos?

The anguish was unbearable. It was the culmination of so many things I'd ignored for so many years. How many Black bodies had to drop before they cared? Didn't Jesus care? Why didn't they know any of their names? And why did all the

¹⁷ Ralph Ellis and Bill Kirkos, "Officer Who Shot Philando Castile Found Not Guilty on All Counts," CNN, June 17, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/16/us/philando-castile-trial-verdict>.

¹⁸ Martínez, Jessica, and Gregory A. Smith. "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis." Pew Research Center, August 27, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

GoFundMe money go toward George Zimmerman's bail instead of Trayvon's burial? Deep inside I knew something was happening to me, and I knew it was the beginning of the end. Of what? I didn't know. I hoped it wasn't my faith, but I didn't have the energy to fight it. I couldn't see Jesus through the pile of dead Black bodies anyway. I spent the three years after Trayvon died in perpetual despair.

It felt like there was trauma in my bones. Like I was carrying the pain and the weight of the entire struggle for freedom and dignity, and I couldn't decide if I wanted to be free. At the same time, this pain gave me a sort of strength, and it began to lift me. Right as it did, Donald J. Trump was coming down an escalator to announce his run for the presidency.

And I began seeing red.

Trayvon Martin, his shoes, and the trial of George Zimmerman were responsible for the beginning of my exodus from toxic, white Christianity. Before that, my peers in the white churches I attended routed their racist attitudes through religious beliefs and backed them with biblical authority, which made them harder for me to detect or resist. But when Trayvon died, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Religion was no longer an adequate obfuscation. George Zimmerman's story just didn't add up.

Initially, Zimmerman saw Trayvon walking through a gated community and began following because he thought Trayvon seemed suspicious. Zimmerman followed in his car, and then on foot when Trayvon turned off the sidewalk to go through a backyard. Zimmerman even ignored police who told him to

leave the teenager alone and let them handle it.¹⁹ Acting as self-appointed gatekeeper that night, he saw a young Black boy and thought, “*Intruder*.” Trayvon was 17, unarmed, and minding his own business.

My friends didn’t budge when I tried to talk to them about it. It was sad, they told me, but I needed to trust that Jesus was on the throne and remind myself what Paul said in Romans 13 about respecting authority. But what was dangerous about a boy in a hoodie? What is threatening about a bag of candy? What authority did Zimmerman carry? Even still, they were positive they were not racists. How could they be, when they were friends with me? They were just being objective, radical for the truth, swayed only by facts.

I reeled as the list of hashtags grew and the people around me did not. Jesus couldn’t be this cold and unfeeling. There had to be a way to love both God and my neighbor with a clear conscience and common sense. It had to be possible to love and follow Jesus in a way that would let me sleep at night. There had to be an answer for the carnage and something stronger than the rage. There had to be a way to love the Lord and breathe. I could not breathe. I didn’t need Jesus to be on the throne, I needed Jesus to come down here. I could no longer worship a god whose love couldn’t break through yellow caution tape. I could not negotiate any longer with a god who could not meet me on blood-soaked asphalt next to shell casings, evidence markers, and white chalk. But I did not know where to find that God. At the same time, I had the gross realization that

¹⁹ Adam Weinstein and Mark Follman, “The Trayvon Martin Killing, Explained,” *Mother Jones*, March 18, 2012, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/03/what-happened-trayvon-martin-explained/>.

my only purpose in the lives of some of my colleagues in ministry was to sanction their racist attitudes with my silence born of self-preservation. I held my tongue in the name of unity among believers, but they never held theirs. They made ignorant and infuriating comments without any hesitation or care for the ways their opinions did violence to my soul. I fell into a deep depression and began to let tequila do the work that the Spirit once did.

The murders of Trayvon Martin and George Floyd took place at either end of a number of messy, painful, glorious, beautiful, and liberative things that happened in my life and theology, which are the focus of this book. Trayvon's death caused the upheaval of everything I knew and believed. As everything came crashing down around me, I was left with mere fragments of the faith that had motivated every major decision I'd made up to that point.

The devastation defined me for a time and led me into a dark and lonely place until the silence from God broke one day in 2015. That word from God gave me the courage and permission I needed to begin extracting the poison from the Christianity I had adopted. If Jesus was the bread of life, then there was something else making me sick and I needed to figure out what it was. I learned it wasn't the bread; it was the leaven of whiteness.

May 25, 2020, the day a police officer murdered George Floyd, was a wake-up call for a lot of white people, but I couldn't at that point call any of them friends. I'd lost so many of them along the wayside of the acquittals and non-indictments in the years that followed Trayvon's death. By that point, I'd given up bickering over confederate flags and monuments and trying

to help them recognize how atrocious their justifications for brown children in cages were. Too much had transpired, and it was too late for their apologies to have any bearing on my well-being or my tolerance for White Jesus.

I broke when George Floyd was killed, but I did not break the same. The systems hadn't changed, but I was different, and that changed the nature of the sting. As the world witnessed the horrors and toxicity of the yeast of whiteness, I loved myself, my Blackness, and the truth enough to find refuge and solidarity in Jesus, the author and perfecter of a new, *unleavened* faith.