THEN THEY CAME FOR MINE

Healing from the Trauma of Racial Violence

TRACEY MICHAE'L LEWIS-GIGGETTS

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Praise for *Then They Came for Mine*

"If faith is something powerful—finding ways to tether human reality and divine love together—then that faith must be honest about the world but also reach toward healing. In *Then They Came for Mine,* Tracey Michae'l Lewis-Giggetts has not just offered a magnificent, searing, and soul-shaking narrative but has also found a way to do what the best sages, priests, and griots do: she has presented the world with revelation, the breath of the Spirit woven into the very fabric of Black life, literature, survival, art, artifacts, movement, possibility, and humanity. Part memoir, part mediation, part manifesto, this work has the character and skill of poetry, the brilliance of grace, the mystery of Black wisdom, and the illumination that the world we have been given is not all that there is to life. This book is affirmation. It is witness. It is lush. It is liberation. It is fire. It is spirit. It is testimony. It is gospel."

—**Danté Stewart**, author of *Shoutin' in the Fire: An American Epistle*

"Tracey Lewis-Giggetts is a master at weaving autobiographical narrative with cultural commentary, sharing her life experience and wisdom in such a way that it makes readers long to connect more deeply with their own. In *Then They Came for Mine*, she invites us to gaze at the wounds of racial trauma not as a sadomasochistic exercise but as a way to illuminate the way to hope and healing. This is not a book to be approached lightly. This is holy ground."

—**Chanequa Walker-Barnes**, Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Counseling, Columbia Theological Seminary

"So many of us are traumatized by the unbearably persistent and violent racism that is deeply woven into the fabric of our nation. Lewis-Giggetts knows the pain of loved ones murdered in racist attacks and also the pain of wounds that bleed invisibly, assailing our bodies and souls even as we carry on with the endurance of our ancestors. With passion and compassion, Lewis-Giggetts preaches that celebrations of so-called resilience and rushing to premature reconciliation will not heal our hearts, communities, or nation. Only by honestly exposing our wounds and speaking truth with fierce empathy and accountability can we heal the trauma that white supremacy has wrought on God's children of every ethnicity."

—**Jacqui Lewis**, author of *Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-Breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World* and *Ten Essential Strategies for Becoming a Multiracial Congregation*

"Anyone who desires whole mind-body-spirit healing from racial trauma should read this book. Timely, holistic, and insightful, Lewis-Giggetts's *Then They Came for Mine* is a trustworthy guide that I'll keep returning to in my personal healing journey and cite often in my professional work."

—**Christena Cleveland**, author of *God Is a Black Woman* and founder of the Center for Justice + Renewal

"Lewis-Giggetts offers a once-in-a-generation work with *Then They Came for Mine*. She weaves the personal testimonies of those whose loved ones have been killed by white supremacy and the histories of racial violence that undergird those events. Simply surviving the violence and rising to excellence fall short of our desires for a better future. In fact, 'resilience is making us sick,' writes Lewis-Giggetts,

who calls the reader to choose 'healing over reconciliation.' Lewis-Giggetts provides a necessary challenge for anti-racist and trauma-informed healers, teachers, and leaders: center healing and love, for our lives and future generations depend on it."

—**Patrick B. Reyes**, author of *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive*

"*Then They Came for Mine* provides an accessible and frank mind-body-spirit analysis of the kind of Christian faith needed to authentically respond to Black people's trauma caused by white racial violence. It is a timely resource for engaged faith community conversations about this violence."

—**Traci C. West**, author of *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Ending Gender Violence*

"With heart-wrenching narrative, astute analysis of Scripture, and unblinking passion, Lewis-Giggetts offers us a front-row seat to the very real impacts of systemic racism and what happens when it gets personal—and it's *always* personal. This is exactly the type of book that white people who claim to care about racial justice need to read, because it takes us from the comfortable upper echelons of the racialized body politic into the experience of a family living with the results of senseless racial violence. This story will forever change you. If you let it, it will change you for the better."

—**Kerry Connelly**, author of *Wait—Is This Racist?* and *Good White Racist?*

"By sharing very personal experiences, Tracey Lewis-Giggetts draws us in to recognize and affirm the blatant and nuanced manifestations of racism and the resultant racial trauma. Having experienced intense racial trauma at a very young age, I very much appreciate her intimate examination of what it's like to be Black in America. In refreshing conversational language, Lewis-Giggetts offers theological, sociological, historical, and legal perspectives on the complexities of racism and misogyny while examining the components lending them columnar support. Best of all, her very frank conversations about trauma are not offered to the exclusion of words about the human potential for faith, hope, and love."

—**Kevin Cosby**, President of Simmons College of Kentucky and author of *Getting to the Promised Land*

To Vickie
I vowed that when you were taken from us, your death would not only not be in vain but be a catalyst for repair and restoration. My prayer is that this book honors you and the glorious legacy of love and care you left behind.

The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish thinker and teacher appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men." Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.

Howard Thurman,
Jesus and the Disinherited

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's always been incredibly important to me to hold the truth sacred. This, for me, has often meant living in the tension of my own lived experiences and the sometimes chaotic and heart-wrenching reality of this world of ours. And yet, there is truth in it all, isn't there? There is truth in every story. In every lineage. Good truth. Ugly truth. Sad truth. Joy-filled truth.

I think that's my intention here with this book. To unveil the truth of what it means to live as a Black person who feels forced to remain vigilant against violence and marginalization. To reveal the truth of how healing in the body, mind, and soul can begin for both survivor and oppressor. I hope I've done that work justice.

First and foremost, thank you to my cousins Mark and Sean, and my sorority sister Kellie, for lending your hearts and voices to this book. To Ena, who also shares their pain. To my White/Lewis family and the Stallard family: I was determined to honor this albatross of grief that we cannot shake and to make sure that the stealing of our precious family members' lives would not be in vain. My hope and prayer has always been that the names of Vickie Lee Jones and Maurice Stallard would live on and that transformation and healing would be the unexpected outcome from our tragedy.

Thank you so much to my parents for enduring my seemingly never-ending, public vulnerability and transparency. I know it's challenging for you, but I also know that you trust both my love for our family and my intent to live on purpose.

Thank you to my husband and sweet baby girl for loving me unconditionally and giving me the room and space to tell my stories. I hope to return that freedom to you in any way I can. You both breathe life into me daily.

Thank you to my agent, Cait Hoyt-Walden, at Creative Artists Agency for believing in me as a writer and a person. You listen to all my out-of-the-box and unwieldy ideas as I pull twenty years of projects out of the "vault."

Thank you so much to my amazing editor, Jessica Miller Kelley. It's been nine years since we first tried to work together, and I'm so grateful that, even now, you see the necessity of my work and the callings on my life.

Thank you to the entire team at Westminster John Knox Press for seeing the vision of this book and running with it. It's an enormous privilege to have a publishing team from my hometown working on such a deeply personal—and hopefully impactful—project.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for that tug in my gut, for that awareness in my mind, for that discerning pull in my heart. I trust you.

INTRODUCTION

The Personal Is Political

Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.
Martin Niemöller[1]

There were other revolutionaries, for sure. Men who threatened the sovereignty of the kingdom. Men with followers into the thousands. But there was one whose threat surpassed the others. He not only threatened the rulers of his day but threatened those who deemed themselves protectors of the sacred. Of the superior. He challenged them. He revealed their flaws and called out their manipulations. And for that he would have to die. Well, for that, and so much more.

Jesus would hang on a cross for no other earthly reason than that he carried himself differently, spoke differently, and lived differently. And he did all this with an authority that should have belied a simple carpenter's boy from Nazareth. That difference would make him a target for all who felt empty and insecure in his presence. Whatever debates one might have about his divinity or the resurrection, one thing is abundantly, historically clear: Violence against his body would be the price Jesus paid for making men who'd thought themselves superior feel insecure.

This is a common thread in history.

The privileged have always protected their status by enacting violence in a myriad of forms against the poor, marginalized, and othered.

In America, the historical evidence of this is even more stark. David F. Krugler writes, "Between late 1918 and late 1919, the United States recorded ten major race riots, dozens of minor, racially charged clashes, and almost 100 lynchings as white Americans tried to enforce the continued subjugation of black Americans in the postwar era."[2]

So much of this violence boils down to one's perception—belief that one is greater than another because of gender (patriarchy) or sexual orientation (homophobia) or race (racism). And the acceptance of violence because of race is, in my opinion, the most insidious of these contentions because it's based on an incredible and rather blatant falsehood, a manufactured hierarchy, a construct built to protect class.

Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow,* outlines how notions of race supremacy or inferiority were carefully crafted:

> Nathaniel Bacon was a white property owner in Jamestown, Virginia, who managed to unite slaves, indentured servants, and poor whites in a revolutionary effort to overthrow the planter elite. . . . In an effort to protect their superior status and economic position, the planters shifted their strategy for maintaining dominance. . . . Fearful that such measures might not be sufficient to protect their interests, the planter class took an additional precautionary step, a step that would later come to be known as a "racial bribe." Deliberately and strategically, the

> planter class extended special privileges to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves. White settlers were allowed greater access to Native American lands, white servants were allowed to police slaves through slave patrols and militias, and barriers were created so that free labor would not be placed in competition with slave labor. . . . Poor whites suddenly had a direct, personal stake in the existence of a race-based system of slavery.[3]

While it was true that these racial hierarchies had no bearing in reality, many an unscrupulous scientist has tried to create one. For example, in 1851, noted—albeit racist—physician Samuel A. Cartwright reported to the Medical Association of Louisiana, among other things, that "a Negro withstood the rays of the sun better because of an eye feature like one found in apes." He also claimed that "the black man's neck was shorter than a white person's, his 'bile' was a deeper color, his blood blacker, his feet flatter, his skull different."[4] These statements—firmly debunked—obviously weren't meant to humanize. Quite the contrary. They were designed to establish the supremacy of white people and justify the violence of enslavement and other types of subjugations. And yet here we are, forced hundreds of years later to defend the notion of race, of the Black-white binary, because of the violence perpetuated against those who are members of what some call the inferior race. Being Black, as a result of how white supremacy has injected its vile assumptions into every area and institution, is now very much a cultural reality—an identity forged in the midst of great pain and trauma, and one that must be defended as a means to access and maintain equity.

This manufactured distinction–turned–cultural reality has never been more pervasive than in these yet-to-be United States of America. Embedded in our DNA as a country, written into our Constitution, is the evidence of white supremacy. Article I, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution blatantly states that, regarding representation in Congress, the enslaved African would be counted at three-fifths the value of white people—of lesser value politically.

And in the summer of 2020, during an unprecedented global pandemic, these heinous ideals reared their ugly heads, full and strong and fierce like a demented phoenix rising from the ashes of our pseudo-equality efforts. Overt violence returned to the forefront. Racial violence, while an ever-present reality in Black and Brown communities, is now a trending topic worthy of hashtags and *New York Times* think pieces. So much so that it's easy to become desensitized to what some have described as "trauma porn." I, too, grew numb to the headlines.

As someone who writes about race and faith and other "hot" topics, I'd grown accustomed to shutting down when the stories became too much. It was necessary for my mental and emotional health. There was always going to be another man like Philando Castile or woman like Breonna Taylor or boy like Tamir Rice or girl like Aiyana Stanley-Jones. People. Humans. All killed by someone who refused to see them.

Yes, shutting down was easy. Until it wasn't. Until the hashtags changed.

#Krogershooting

#JusticeforVickieLeeJones

On October 24, 2018, everything changed. My family was transformed forever by a level of hatred that I'd only

really seen demonstrated on graphic internet clips and in the stories of my elders.

On a seemingly ordinary Wednesday, my elder cousin Vickie Lee Jones drove to her neighborhood Kroger grocery store and was shot dead in the parking lot by Gregory Alan Bush, who, according to witnesses, ended her life because she was Black. This was shortly after he'd shot and killed a grandfather, Maurice Stallard, who'd come to the store with his grandson to shop for school supplies.

I grew up in Jeffersontown, the suburb of Louisville where this horrific crime occurred. *That* Kroger is across the street from my parents' home. Bush had tried to enter my parents' church prior to shooting my cousin and Mr. Stallard when both Mom and Dad had just been there for Bible study an hour earlier. All of this means I've had to reckon with the fact that if something doesn't change soon, hate-crime shootings like the one that took these two precious lives, and all the innocent lives that came before and after, will be as commonplace as a daily social-media scroll through a millennial's life.

Hope is practically nonexistent when I think about the racist, xenophobic, patriarchal, oppressive dog-whistling that seems to come regularly now from those who call themselves our leaders. The oft-quoted poem by Martin Niemöller ends with "Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."[5] James Baldwin, in an open letter he wrote to activist and writer Angela Davis, co-signs this with, "If they come for me in the morning, they will come for you in the night."[6] It's a feeling that hides in my body. That one day it will be me. That one day it will be my child. That one day there will be no one left who

will create my hashtag or say her name. That last line of Niemöller's poem resonates so much for me that it inspired the title of this book.

I know what will happen if we don't replace our reconciliation efforts with actual spiritual healing. More hate crimes will come. More of us will be desensitized to the pain. More hate will surely materialize if we don't actively stand against the oppression and suppression of Black and Brown people, women, LGBTQIA individuals, immigrants, and other marginalized groups. More hate is coming if we don't heal.

I wasn't the only one rocked by this proverbial storm. I'm part of a community of people, of family and friends, who were forever changed by the actions of one racist, white man. Just so the impact of racial violence is clear, I'd like to share a few words straight from the hearts of those closest to the victims.

> I was actually heading to work [that day]. Had been calling my mom for hours. When I got to work, I received a call from family members asking if I talked to my mom. After about 30 minutes of working, I got another call from my cousin saying I need to get over there. I informed my team leader and ran out to my car. I was about halfway to the Kroger from my job when my aunt called and told me my mom had been killed. I lost it in the car. Still not sure how I made it to the Kroger.
>
> I was very angry and confused. I punched a couple parking signs, crying until my eyes started hurting. If it wasn't for family members being there . . .
>
> Marcus Jones, youngest son of
> Vickie Jones and my cousin

That day was a regular, busy, and chaotic workday for me. In addition to the regular meetings, I also had a workforce recruitment event. That meant that the day before, I worked late and picked up my son from my parents' home later than normal. I was also attempting to get my son ready for a sleepover at his friend's home for the weekend and was trying to locate our sleeping bag. Throughout the day I was texting with my dad (as we normally did) about the sleeping bag situation, because of course he wanted my son to have what he needed and to help me by trying to do some things for me because my work schedule was so full.

In the afternoon, I was stressed and running late from a lunch meeting and trying to get to my office for another meeting. I was in my meeting, and my cell phone rang with a number I did not recognize, so I stopped the call and did not answer. Right after that it rang again, same number. . . .

"Excuse me, I need to take this call because someone is trying to reach me."

I answered and it was my son. My heart started beating really fast and I looked at my watch, because I thought that he should be with my dad. My dad picked him up from school for me. . . . His voice was different. He was crying, and anxious and scared. He said that Granddad had been shot. I remember saying, "Slow down, and repeat yourself." I heard him. I was just like, no, he is wrong. He said it again and said that he was shot in the back at Kroger. I remember jumping up and asking the person I was with to get the communications staff to see if something had happened at the Kroger.

I asked my son where he was and told him that I was coming. He was scared, crying, and the person who let him use the phone took the phone. She said that my son had run and was screaming and crying for help and had run to the Starbucks across the parking lot from the Kroger, and that she and her son had him. She asked where could they take him and I said I was downtown and on my way. I put her on hold and called my mother. I asked her if she had spoken with Dad, and she said no, he was picking up my son. I then told her what my son had told me. She was in disbelief just as I was. I combined the calls, gave the woman directions to my parents' home, and told them to stay on the line together until they got there. I then received a call on my work phone number from my supervisor, telling me that there was a shooting at that Kroger.

I then called my son's father [to meet us], and then my brother, who began checking hospitals. When I arrived at my parents' home, I hugged my son and tried to calm him. I then decided to go to the Kroger. My mother said she was coming with me. When we got there, people that I work with were there, waiting for me with some police officers I knew. Officers asked my mother what my dad was wearing when he left, and then the police chaplain walked up. I knew then. . . .

One of my good friends grabbed me as my legs went weak and hugged me. I was crying and screaming "NO!" over and over again. My other friend held my mother.

Later, my friend took my mother home, and I met my son and his dad at the police station. We sat

there for hours, waiting on a detective that specialized with children to interview my son. My coworkers, my friends, were there with us, and no one left as we waited.

Initially I was very confused and in protective mode. I wanted to protect my child. I had never heard him sound that way. His voice and that phone call replay in my head all the time. I knew that I was going to have to be rational and calm because I was going to have to make decisions and I needed to find out what happened. [Nevertheless], I physically felt sick to my stomach and began to have a headache.

Kellie Stallard Watson, daughter of
Maurice Stallard and my sorority sister

On October 24, I was sitting at the bar, when the bartender makes a vague statement saying that they are getting wild in the area. I asked him what he meant by that and he said, "They are shooting up at the Kroger's." Knowing that my mother shopped there all the time, I proceeded to call her but continually got her voicemail. My sister-in-law and I were supposed to be heading to lunch, so when she called to tell me she was ready, I asked her to swing through that parking lot since she lived right by there. She drives through and calls me back.

"Does your mom's car have a Louisville Cardinals license plate on the front of it?"

I tell her yes and she says she sees the car, but not Mom. I tell her that I am on my way. Five minutes later, I pull up in the Kroger gas station lot. My sister-in-law said an officer told her that there had been a shooting, and there were still people inside

> the store giving interviews. Believing that Mom was one of the people being interviewed, we waited. Two hours later, my family pulls up. We all continue to wait and see when Mom is going to come out. More than an hour later, we see a group of people walking toward us. The coroner asks what we were there for and we inform him that we were waiting for my mother to come out from being interviewed in the store. He asked us her name and we tell him: Vickie Jones. He tells us she was one of the victims of the shooting. Needless to say, it took us by surprise and we were all upset. He proceeded to tell us that there were two victims. A gentleman inside the store, and my mother outside the store—fifty feet from where we were standing. They had covered her body, so we were unaware that she was even there. At this point, we are all upset and crying, but we notice all the news crews there with their cameras all pointing towards us.
>
> Sean Jones, eldest son of Vickie Jones and my cousin

I share, and will continue to share, these additional accounts beyond my own with you, in their own words, not just because the brunt of this kind of violence manifests differently in people, but also because it's important to demonstrate how the impact of racial violence is felt not just by the victims but whole families and communities. The heart-wrenching sound of one unarmed Black man crying out for his mother as a white police officer kneels on his neck reverberates well beyond those present or his family. That vibration reinforces the collective trauma that Black people have experienced for hundreds of years in

this country. It challenges white people's understanding of their own capacity for empathy. It changes us all.

There were tears, of course. Plenty of those. And in moments where memories were shared, there were smiles and laughter. But there were stony faces also. Strong faces. Faces that stood resolute in the face of a horrific reality. As we laid my beloved cousin Vickie to rest, I was acutely aware of all the ways in which Black folks grieve, the ways in which we feel we have to hold our pain and move through the heartache that can come with constant dehumanization—the regular and consistent consciousness of how our bodies are not always safe in this world.

I've said it many times, but Black folks have to be the most resilient people on the planet. We certainly know how to "stand therefore" in the face of devastation as Scripture instructs (see Eph. 6:13–14). At least on the surface, where people can see, we see Black people reinventing ourselves so that we can navigate the sometimes painful experiences of this country and world. We unfortunately can be *too* good at this. We learn to bypass our pain. We allow the dominant culture to teach us that grinding away and being twice as good for half as much is a good thing. It isn't. It is a lie.

Resilience is certainly not a bad thing. It's kept generations of our people alive when slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, brutality, and daily dehumanization should have long killed us. I have a tremendous amount of grace for the way my ancestors chose to stay alive. But resilience comes at a cost. Resilience is making us sick.

As I've spent the last three years battling my own trauma-related health challenges, I've finally become resolute in one thing: I don't want to be sick anymore. Feeling

grief and pain out loud is challenging. Some people don't understand it. They make assumptions about you when you are open about the things that hurt you and yours. But gratefully, I'm no longer invested or interested in the gaze of white folks, church folks, or any other kind of folks. I will cry sometimes because I know that my tears are cleansing. I will rage sometimes because I know anger that grows too big in a soul will burn it from the inside out. I will scream sometimes because somebody needs to hear my voice. This is also why I wrote this book. That's why I choose healing over reconciliation any day.

In John 5, Jesus asked a man laying at the side of the healing pool of Bethzatha, laying right *beside* the place that could heal his pain, "Do you want to be well?"

I ask the same of both white and Black readers. Are you ready to be well? What if wellness lives on the other side of pain and grief? What if wellness looks like sitting in the discomfort of what privilege and violence have wrought your fellow man? What if resilience isn't about pushing aside your trauma or the trauma you and your ancestors have caused but is more about sitting still enough to observe it—not maneuvering around it but moving through it? What would happen if Black folks released the need to show white folks that they can't hurt us, that they can't beat us? What if white folks released the need to pander and placate when plain old reckoning would do?

The remedy offered to those grieving, or anyone who has dealt with any kind of trauma, is to ground ourselves in the current moment. Being present means we aren't mired in the past, in the event that changed our lives, but it also means that we aren't required to think about a future so violently at odds with the one we'd imagined for ourselves. That latter piece is what's really important, because the

truth is that we all have a vision for our lives. We all think about what we want and how things are supposed to go. And even if we come from the worst backgrounds or we've had the most traumatic childhood experiences, many of us still hold on to a little bit of hope that things will pan out the way they're supposed to. And so when we are faced with such overwhelming evidence to the contrary, violence that numbs us, it leaves us discombobulated. It becomes easy to focus on all the things we feel like we lost, all the things that are no longer possible. I'm never going to see my cousin Vickie, who I called Aunt Vickie because that's one way Black folks are taught to respect our elders, at the next family reunion or get-together. I will forever regret all the times I could have visited and didn't. I will no longer hear my mother talk about running into her at the Kroger across the street, the Kroger where she needlessly died. It's really easy for me to be deeply frustrated by what can't be, so choosing to focus on the present moment gives me an opportunity to not have to wrestle with what can never be anymore.

Which brings me to why I've written this book. I'm not an authority on grief. I just live with it daily. Part of being grounded in the present for me now means accepting it as a part of my journey on this plane. I used to think the work of my life was being a storyteller who centered and amplified the lived experiences of Black people. And while that's certainly a huge part of who I am and what I do, I now know that the work of my life is much more profound: finding ways not only to heal from the traumas this life and these systems have presented to me but also to maybe, hopefully, help someone else heal too. This book is honestly a chance to use all that I have learned, every emotion I've felt in these last few years, to speak out for those who may not know that their day is coming also.