

“Speaking of God in Stand Your Ground Times”

By Kelly Brown Douglas

As a five or six year old growing up in Dayton, Ohio, I heard the whispers of the adults around me talking about how awful it was that a church was bombed and four little girls were killed. I can remember hearing someone say, that “the white man” who did it will probably never be caught, and if he were to be caught nothing was likely to happen to him. Around that same time in my childhood, I remember seeing pictures on the news of white policemen with dogs attacking black people—what struck me most were the dogs attacking black children. I didn’t know what I was watching, but those images were seared into my mind—perhaps contributing to my fear of dogs today. I also remember eavesdropping as my parents talked about a man in Mississippi who was killed in his driveway in front of his family, and what a shame it was—and again how nothing would probably happen to whoever did it, if they ever found him.

It was no doubt these whispered conversations and violent images in my mind, along with the growing awareness of what it meant to be black in America, which prompted me, at the age of seven or eight, to ask my father why white people didn’t like us. I don’t remember his answer, but I do remember thinking that if I could figure it out, then maybe we could do something about it and then white people would stop treating us so badly (in my mind I just knew that it was something that we must have done to warrant such treatment). I can’t remember how much time had passed before I figured out the answer, whether it was weeks or months, but what I do remember, as if it was yesterday, that I picked the conversation back up

with my father. One afternoon as we were leaving the house, I stopped on the porch and said, “Daddy, I figured out the answer, to my question” as if he and I were having this continuous conversation. He asked, “the answer to what question?” I said to what we did that made white people not like us, and treat us so badly.” He said, “Oh, what did you figure out?” I said, that we didn’t do anything. They just treat us like this because they want to, it could be the Indians, I said, or the Chinese, it just happens to be us.” (Little did I know at the time that it wasn’t just us).

This question that I asked as a seven or eight year old, I would literally ask again some fifty years later. For there has been no story in the news that has troubled me more than that of Trayvon Martin’s slaying. After hearing what happened to Trayvon as he was walking home from the store wearing a hoodie and carrying skittles and ice tea, I was reminded of how dangerous a world this actually was for our black children. And then there was Jordan, then Renisha, then Jonathan and Eric, Michael, James, Tamir, Freddy, Sandra, and the list can go on. Needless to say, I was unnerved by all of these slayings, especially as a mother of a black son. What was killing our children, I wondered.

And then, there was the July 13, 2013 not guilty verdict of Trayvon’s killer.

Hurt, disbelief, anger, confusion and fear were profound within black congregations across the United States the morning after the Saturday night verdict, including in my own congregation. As the reality of the verdict sank in, Black church people wondered if there would ever be justice for Trayvon. They also wondered if the world would ever be a just place for their children. When the judge read the verdict black America was once again confronted with the harsh reality that black life in America was virtually unprotected, if not dispensable. The decision regarding Trayvon’s killer was the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the 1857 Dred Scott decision, that at

any given moment in time, black people have “no rights that the white man is bound to respect.” But, what about God?

What is the message from God that we are to hear in the midst of such a time as this when young black lives seem indispensable? In the very brief time before me, I will attempt to answer this question and thus discern the meaning of God’s justice in what I consider these stand your ground cultural times. In order to appreciate the significance of God’s justice in this regard, it is important to understand the complex reality of this stand your ground culture that places black lives in danger. What do I mean by stand your ground culture?

The notion of “stand your ground” entered the general public discourse at the time of Trayvon Martin’s slaying. While “stand your ground” law was a backdrop to the Trayvon Martin case, what happened to Trayvon and all the other young black men and women goes beyond this law.

Stand your ground law is an extension of English Common Law that gives a person the right to protect his/her “castle.” “Stand Your Ground” essentially broadens the notion of castle to include one’s body. It permits certain individuals to protect their embodied castle whenever and wherever they feel threatened. In this regard, a person does not have to retreat from the place in which he or she is “castled;” they can stand their ground. Essentially, a person’s body is her/his castle.

“Stand Your Ground” law reflects a social-cultural climate, that is a stand our ground culture, which makes the destruction and death of black bodies inevitable and even permissible. In fact, this culture predates the law itself. Stand your ground culture has produced and sustained slavery, Black Codes, Jim Crow, lynching and other forms of racialized violence on black bodies.

This culture has its origins with the grand narrative and legitimating religious canopies that define this nation. In this short space of time I cannot begin to cover fully the complex and interlocking web of systems this narrative has spawned along with the caricatures and stereotypes grafted onto black bodies that it has also generated. I will therefore just discuss it in broad strokes so to again provide the social-historical context for understanding the meaning of God's justice.

The roots of stand your ground culture were sown with the arrival of the first Americans to this soil, Pilgrims and Puritans alike. In 98 C.E. the Roman historian Tacitus published what has been called "one of the most dangerous books ever written," *Germania*. In a brief space of thirty pages he offered an ethnological perspective that would have tragic consequences for centuries to come. It is the racial specter behind stand your ground culture. *Germania* provides a meticulous portrait of an "aboriginal" people "free from all taint of intermarriages," with "fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames," who possessed good moral habits, a peculiar respect for individual rights and an almost "instinctive love for freedom."

Tacitus' ethnological description spawned the construction of the Anglo-Saxon myth. This myth has been a ubiquitous, even if unspoken and unacknowledged, ideology in the modern world. Initially, this myth highlighted Anglo-Saxon forms of governing, and stressed the unique superiority of Anglo-Saxon religious and political institutions. Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, the myth shifted its focus to Anglo-Saxon blood. In so doing it suggested that the superiority of the institutions was a result of Anglo-Saxon blood. It argued that strong moral qualities and high regard for freedom flowed uniquely through Anglo-Saxon veins. This myth, replete with reverence for Tacitus, arrived in America by way of England's post-Reformation

struggles with the Pilgrims and Puritans as they fled from the Church of England to build a nation more befitting Anglo-Saxon virtue and freedom. They considered themselves the Anglo-Saxon remnant that was continuing a divine mission, tracing their mission beyond the woods of Tacitus' Germans to the Israelites in the Bible. From its earliest beginning, therefore, America's social-political identity, with a legitimating religious canopy, was an Anglo-Saxon identity. Its sense of democracy and freedom was inextricably linked to the Anglo-Saxon myth and Tacitus' Germans. This was a myth that greatly influenced the Father of America's Democracy, Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson was a thoroughgoing and unabashed Anglo-Saxonist, to the point of studying Anglo-Saxon language and grammar and insisting that it should be taught in the University. In short, through political architects such as Jefferson, America's Democracy was conceived as an expression of Anglo-Saxon character. From its earliest beginning, therefore, America's social-political identity, with a legitimating religious canopy, was an Anglo-Saxon identity. Its sense of democracy and freedom was inextricably linked to the Anglo-Saxon myth. The "city on the hill" that the early Americans were building was nothing less than a testament to Anglo-Saxon chauvinism. Hence, the grand narrative that defines America is that of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism—and this narrative demands a stand your ground culture.

In order to sustain itself, America's defining narrative produced the ideology of white supremacy, what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as the "wages of whiteness" and legal scholar Cheryl Harris terms "cherished white property." Subsequently, in an effort to validate the notion of white supremacy, and hence the reality of cherished white property—which expresses itself as

subjugating power endowed with rights that only white bodies can enjoy—stand your ground culture was inexorably born.

Stand your ground culture is inextricably connected to the ideology of white supremacy as it is meant to protect one of the most significant “wages of whiteness”— free space. As slavery established, free space is white space. Moreover, white space is wherever the white body is castled. In sum, from its Puritan and Pilgrim beginnings, Anglo-Saxon power has formed an intricate cultural web of interactive narratives and discourse to sustain itself, or at least to maintain the illusion of America’s Anglo-Saxon identity. This web began with the grand narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. In the end, the black body has become entrapped in this web as it ultimately constructs it as a criminal body always guilty of something, and thus making clear that the black body does not belong in the free space. This construct of the criminal black body was likewise established in slavery.

The black body as chattel is the specter from slavery that has the greatest impact upon black people’s current social-cultural realities. Again, it was firmly established within America’s collective consciousness during slavery and it remains a pervasive part of that consciousness today. It has just taken a different form, perhaps more appropriate to the social historical context. The twenty-first century version of the chattel construct is the criminal black body. The black body that was once marked as chattel; is now marked as criminal. This construct serves the same purpose as the construct of chattel. It relegates the black body to an “un-free” space.

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today. This construct is a valuable part of America's exceptionalist identity, thus it is not easily disposed of. As Michelle Alexander has aptly pointed out, "racism is highly adaptable."<sup>1</sup> So too are the constructs that have fostered it. They just take different forms, those that appear more appropriate to the social historical context as they mask the racialized nature of the construct itself. This is the case with chattel. The twenty-first century version of this construct is the criminal black body. The black body that was once marked as chattel is now marked as criminal. This construct serves the same purpose as the construct of chattel. It relegates the black body to an "un-free" space. It preserves the free space as a white space. This transformation began shortly after emancipation.

### **The Criminal Black Body**

During this period black people began to enjoy some of the rights that were considered "wages" of whiteness. However, the image of the black person as chattel still lurked in the imagination of American society. The fear of black people that consumed white people after Emancipation was driven by the belief that black people no longer acted as chattel. There was an urgency to re-inscribe black people with the identity as chattel, hence to return them to the space for which they had been allegedly created. It is of course, not by chance that the stand your ground culture which was fostered to protect the white space, began to assert itself in a more aggressive manner after Emancipation, because this was the first time that "white America," had to deal with a population of free black bodies. The assertion of stand your ground culture effectively removed the black body from the white space by criminalizing it.

The various assertions of Reconstruction/post-Reconstruction stand your ground culture, such as Black Codes, Jim Crow laws and lynching, served to transform the construction of

chattel into criminal. The various Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws in particular served to plant the image of the black body as a criminal body deep within America's collective consciousness. Essentially, these legal productions were, as Du Bois said, "designed to fit the Negro's condition and to be enforced particularly with regard to Negroes."<sup>2</sup>

This construct of the criminal black body has been sustained in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the way it was sustained in post-Emancipation America: through the racially biased laws of stand your ground culture, such as the drug laws, stop and frisk, and the stand your ground law itself.

Michelle Alexander has called the Prison Industrial Complex the new Jim Crow. She is right in the sense that it does, as she says, function as a "well-designed system of racialized social control . . . in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow."<sup>3</sup> The laws that have been generated to ensure a majority black imprisoned population certainly are updated versions of Jim Crow laws. Nevertheless, the Prison Industrial Complex is about more than the Jim Crow laws that make it work. This "Complex" attempts to re-install, in a more acceptable twenty-first system manner, the same system that Jim Crow was developed to reinstate. The Prison Industrial Complex harkens back to slavery. It maintains the narrative of slavery that the black body is not meant to be free. It virtually re-enslaves the black body by putting it behind bars. If the black criminal is the new chattel, the Industrial Prison Complex is the new slavocracy. The Industrial Prison Complex is the institutional manifestation of stand your ground culture. And to reiterate, this culture does its job when it removes the black body from the white space (a free space) and returns it to the black space (an un-free space) in a way that seems reasonable and unbiased.

What makes the transformation from chattel to criminal complete is the insinuation of the image of the black body as criminal into the American collective consciousness. When this is done, the black body and the criminal body become virtually synonymous. Thus, to see a black male body, is to see a criminal body. There was no greater example of this than what happened to 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio. It was impossible for the white police officer to see Tamir Rice as the child that he was. He allegedly saw a threatening criminal man, as he claimed he perceived Tamir to be twenty-one. It is interesting to note that Ohio has an open carry law—meaning it is legal to carry a gun in public. So even if the officer thought Tamir was twenty-one, Tamir had a right to carry a gun. What is clear however, that the right to carry a gun, concealed or not, is a right accorded only to white bodies, and certainly not criminal black bodies—it is a wage of whiteness.

It should also be noted that the black female body has been criminalized as well, perhaps in a more gender specific way. She is often portrayed as criminally immoral and most times mean and angry. And hence, a Sandra Bland appears threatening, regardless.

The cultural production of America's narrative of exceptionalism, has done its job as it protects white space by violating the freedom, and sometimes ending the lives, of young black men and women with impunity. Essentially, the white space, wherever the white body is castled, stands its ground against all non-white intrusion. And so what are we to say about the justice of God in such a time as this?

In answering this question we must first understand something about the nature of stand your ground culture in relationship to God; we must recognize that stand your ground culture is nothing less than a culture of sin. Sin, as that which alienates humans from the very ways and

will of God, reflects a breach with God and what God stands for. Stand your ground culture reflects such a breach in many ways. I will just suggest a couple.

First, this is a culture that thrives on antagonistic relationships between individuals as signaled by the very idea of “standing one’s ground.” In this regard, stand your ground culture does not value the sacred humanity and life of another. Indeed, as a sinful construct, stand your ground culture is sustained by a notion of “not belonging.” Certain human beings are assumed to not belong in certain spaces, and in fact, not to belong to God. Moreover, stand your ground culture disengages persons not only from their humanity, but most significantly from their very lives. In fact, the person on the other side of the stand your ground gun is not seen as a human being, much less as a sacred child of God with a life that is to be honored. Behind the myth of “self-protection” which stand your ground law hides behind is a disdain for certain bodies—most notably, the bodies of “black and brown people.” In effect, stand your ground culture empowers people to betray the sanctity of another’s life. It is in this very way that stand your ground culture stands in opposition to a God who creates life and who resurrected Jesus from the dead.

Furthermore, stand your ground culture nurtures systemic and structural sin. Laws such as stand your ground, stop and frisk, conceal and carry, speak for themselves. They objectify and devalue life. They are meant to oppress and humiliate. Other aspects of stand your ground culture, such as the Industrial Prison Complex, are structures and systems of sin as they thrive on denying life and freedom to others.

Stand your ground culture is in fact, the sin that sin produced. For America’s founding narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism is the nation’s original sin. This means that the unspoken but palpable identity of this nation is a sinful identity. Essentially, the way in which the

early Americans— that is, the Pilgrims and Puritans— as well as the Founding Fathers constructed the identity of the nation is consequential. It has virtually meant that the nation has been held captive to sin. And this brings us to the justice of God. For the manifestation of salvation from the sin of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism signals nothing less than the reality of God's justice.

Daniel Day Williams says, “God’s justice is manifest in [God] working to put down the unrighteous, expose idols, show mercy, and achieve reconciliation in a new order which expresses [human beings’] dignity as the bearer of the divine image.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, God’s justice means a restoration of the sacred dignity of all people. It means healing the breach of sin that is injustice. As Gustavo Gutierrez points out, "All injustice is a breach with God." And so, healing this breach means nothing other than freedom from sin; that is, freedom from the sin of injustice itself. The sin that is stand your ground culture. And so, first and foremost, God's justice means freedom, freedom not in some other world but in the world in which the sin of injustice functions. Put simply, if sin is not simply an otherworldly construct, but rather is that which impacts the quality and condition of one's historical life, then the salvation which is God's justice must not simply refer to an otherworldly or spiritual state. The freedom from sin that is God's justice, must be an earthly freedom. Additionally, the meaning of that freedom must be understood from the vantage point of the victims of injustice, this means the victims of stand your ground culture. Why? Because it matters that Jesus died on the cross, just as it matters that God freed the Israelites from bondage. For through both of these divine revelations God revealed a preferential option for a freedom that was defined through God’s solidarity with the oppressed—the enslaved, the crucified classes of people in the world. That Jesus was crucified affirms his absolute identification with the crucified innocents of the stand your ground culture war. For it

was on the cross that Jesus emptied himself of all that would have prevented him from identifying with the crucified class of his times, a crucifying kenosis if you will. And so it is, that we must see Jesus in the faces of the Trayvons, Renishas, Tamirs and the Sandras' of our time.

The point of the matter is that it is only when the least of these, in this instance those victims of stand your ground culture, are free to achieve the fullness of life that is theirs, that God's justice will be realized. It is only when the lives of the least of these are honored, respected and esteemed in the world systematically, structurally and individually that we will know the justice that is God. Their freedom will signal a freedom from sin. Their freedom will signal that America is no longer held captive to its original sin. In this instance, the justice of God means nothing less than an end to the complex systemic, structural and discursive sins of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and the stand your ground culture it has spawned which put young black lives in peril.

In her letter to Michael Brown's parents, Trayvon's mother, Sybrina Fulton, said, "We will bond (as parents of slain children); we will continue our fight for justice and make them remember our children in an appropriate light."<sup>5</sup> If God's justice holds any meaning for us as we sit here, then we must all bond with these black mothers and refuse to be content until this world is safe for our black children, all of our children, and God's justice is done, and stand your ground culture has not transformed itself, but has been defeated. To speak of God in stand your ground times is to make God's justice real.

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 21.

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Day Williams, Chapter 12, "Love and Social Justice," *The Spirit and Forms of Love*, *np*.

<sup>5</sup> Sybrina Fulton, "If They Refuse to Hear Us," 29.