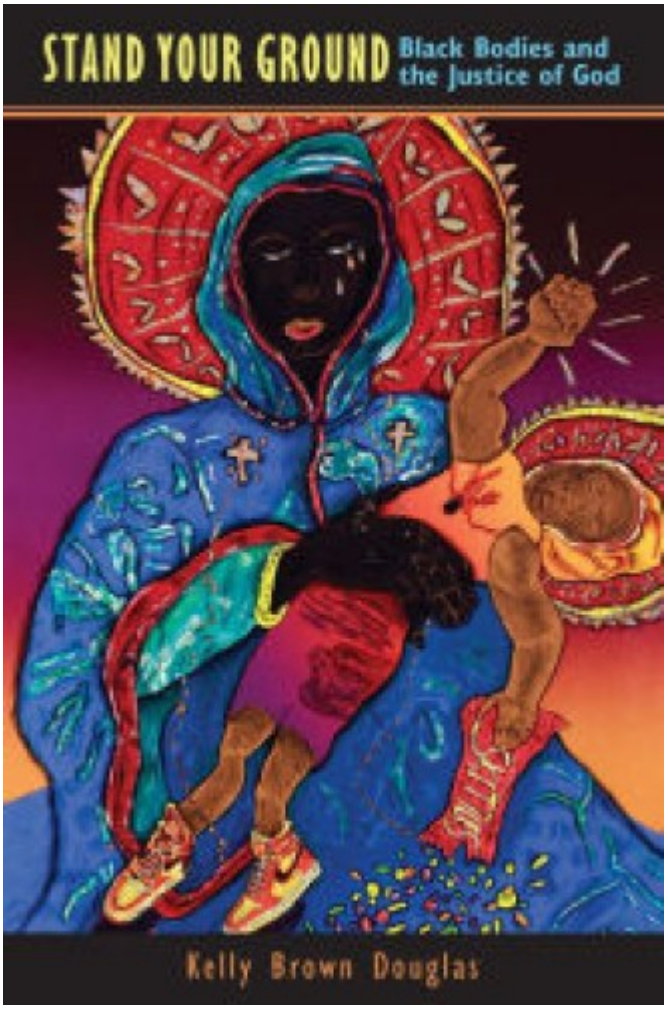
White space, black lives

by M. T. Dávila in the September 30, 2015 issue

In Review



Stand Your Ground

By Kelly Brown Douglas
Orbis

I received the request to review *Stand Your Ground* a few weeks after Freddie Gray was killed while being transported in a Baltimore police van. His death incited protests reminiscent of events in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was killed

by a police officer a few months before. While I was reading the book, a police officer in McKinney, Texas, pulled his gun on teens at a pool party and violently pinned a 14-year-old girl to the ground. I became apprehensive about reading the book as Kelly Brown Douglas's main thesis was displayed in the news again and again. Stand-your-ground culture and the stand-your-guard war represent the perennial cost to black bodies of the persistent myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism.

The final words from Audre Lorde's 1978 poem "Litany for Survival"—"we were never meant to survive"—provide a suitable historical framework for conversations about racial justice in the United States in the year since Ferguson. Douglas echoes the narrative arc in Lorde's poem, beginning her analysis with a study of Tacitus's first-century treatise *Germania*, which promoted Germanic superiority in political, moral, economic, and intellectual spheres. Later, Douglas writes, "the English considered themselves the descendants of the Germanic tribes identified by Tacitus."

The narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism was imported by the Pilgrims, and civic and religious legitimation was woven into the fabric of early U.S. political culture and identity: with divine blessing, a new nation would be built, and the people of the nation would display Christian character. Douglas places the stand-your-ground war within this context of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism.

Douglas's historical documentation is rich and complex. From the founders' indictment of black bodies and of slave intellect and moral will, to sermons contending that the master-slave relationship was divinely ordained; from treatises describing black persons as inherently criminal and violent, to Supreme Court decisions indicating that assimilation was impossible, whites protected their space from blacks. In a nation shaped by Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, white space is understood as the realm of the exceptional and the free, the morally good and the religiously pure. The presence of a free black body is seen as a violation, a crime, an affront to God, and a sin punishable by violence, lynching, and death. White space is wherever a white person happens to be, and attacks on black persons who violate that space are justified. Stand-your-ground laws are created to protect white space from invasion by black bodies.

The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jonathan Ferrell, and Jordan Davis are in constant conversation with Douglas's historical, philosophical, and theological discussion of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. Along with many others, Douglas asks

whether Trayvon and Jordan were as free as their murderers to stand their own ground. According to a national narrative that privileges the construction of whiteness as a divinely sanctioned project, murdered black men and women are guilty of the violence done to them, both before and after their deaths. They are demonized in the media as suspect and criminal simply because they were black and free in the wrong space—that is, space that was not theirs to begin with. The very real suffering of these men and women and Douglas's conversations with her own son ground each chapter in the current lives of black individuals—in their lamentations, their hopes, and the very real threats to their personhood.

Douglas posits that black faith is an antidote to stand-your-ground culture. First developed in the bowels of slave ships and on plantations, black faith is the understanding that freedom is a corollary of the divine life, and that it therefore lies beyond the atrophied and contingent definitions of freedom that protect a spirit of domination and exclusion. More important, God's freedom stands in sharp contrast to the myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and racial superiority. It demands that exceptionalism be dismantled, and it empowers the imprisoned to create a new order of true freedom for all. Black faith develops amid the lamentation of captivity; it is grounded in the belief that all is connected in the sacred. The Christian narratives of the masters' Bibles did not contradict this spiritual grounding, but affirmed it in the witness of a God who liberates in the midst of the vicissitudes of history.

In Jesus' life, crucifixion, and resurrection, black faith finds the ultimate reversal of the crucifixions of black bodies of young men and women at the hands of police officers and of vigilantes who are overeager to protect their white space. Douglas suggests that the character assassination that followed the murders of Trayvon and Jordan can be dismantled by the resurrection of the whole lives of these human beings: the high school graduations, the dreams of military service, the hopes for a college education, the perfect score in a game or on a test, and all the other moments that made up their lives.

The embodied prophetic witness of black faith—the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and many others—promotes a full vision of human freedom and a refashioning of the nation that does not depend on the myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. So do today's #BlackLivesMatter movement and the #IfIDieInPoliceCustody campaign. As Douglas suggests, they signal the kairos that is the current moment, when the destruction of the black body is an indictment of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism in the

churches and in civic life.

This volume is not an easy read, but it is a necessary one. Douglas takes such great pains to detail the historical trajectory of stand-your-ground culture and identity that at times her theological analysis feels rushed and incomplete. No matter. She presents a serious and urgent invitation to reflection, conversation, and action that churches must not ignore. The United States is indeed at a kairos moment, and it bears the names Trayvon, Renisha, Jordan, Jonathan, Michael, Tamir, Sandra, Rekia, Freddie, Eric, Tanesha, Miriam, and too many others.