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Land of the Free, Home of the Racist: Exploring the Narrative of America's Racial Prejudice

Jillian Taylor Fox

Kelly Brown Douglas, a womanist theologian, has a lengthy list of degrees: Bachelor of Science from Denison University, Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from Union Theological Seminary. Douglas, Religion professor at Goucher College and Canon Theologian at the Washington National Cathedral, has authored five books.¹ What distinguishes her theological work from those of many Christian theologians might be that instead of simply acknowledging racism, she explores the history that authorized it—the root causes for why America is a nation dominated by white men. Her exploration of racism was sparked by an incident that occurred at Denison University when she was a student here. My essay explores that altercation and the theories which she would later develop in response to it.

A Journey Begins...

According to Douglas, two main themes in history have shaped the culture by which America is governed today, a culture that celebrates white supremacy. American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny are the two pillars of the American psyche. They have culminated to create a cultural setting which has enabled and encouraged the degradation of Black bodies. Hence, these ideas have created a prevailing ethos in which (white) Americans are immersed and define many modern Americans' consciousness of race. Douglas argues that American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny create a myth of racial superiority of whites that influenced not only America's founding but also its very identity. Therefore, changes in American consciousness of racialized ideologies are imperative to combat the American national identity entangled with racism.

Douglas has a background unlike many Black or feminist theologians. From a young age, she has had the unique ability to relate to both Black and white communities situationally. Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, she attended primarily white schools for gifted students throughout her primary and secondary years. Although not necessarily privileged, she was not subjected to violent or even blatant acts of racism throughout her childhood. It was not until her time at Denison University, which is historically a predominately white college, that she began to realize the

¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Kelly Brown Douglas Resume*, N.d. MS. Denison University, NP.

deep-seated roots of racism that are underlying in the American consciousness. Despite this, however, Dr. Douglas remained “white-friendly,” or at least marginally unbiased, as shown by the dedication to one of her books. She dedicates it to James Cone, the famous Black liberation theologian, and David Woodyard, a white male professor of theology at Denison. Both people had a clear influence in her life, regardless of their race. She remains a radically Black theologian, but refuses to jeopardize her relations with the world’s white community as a whole.

A jarring event occurred during her time at Denison. This is a university that has been historically fraught with racial tensions. In a letter to incoming Black students in 1970, the Black Student Union urged them to “reconsider any decision... about coming [to Denison.]” The letter goes on to explain that Denison “had been taken off the nationally recommended list for schools for Negroes” and that the “atmosphere of Denison was not conducive to the interaction of white and Negro people on the important and educational level of understanding and acceptance.”² Several years before Dr. Douglas attended, the Black Student Union created a list of demands to attempt to communicate the idea that the University was not relevant to Black men and women. As shown by the aforementioned letter, many students felt that change was necessary due to the fact that Denison was not a viable place for their community.

Race relations stayed extremely stormy. “There were many incidents, minor and major, and the basic business of getting an education [had] been an unnecessarily tough and difficult proposition.”³ Eventually, between 1968 and 1972 a list of demands was released. The BSU wanted a Black studies department, a Black student recruiter, at least five Black professors to be hired each year, and one hundred full-time Black students at a minimum enrolled at the school, along with other things.⁴ This aimed to combat the predominantly white environment, and they were successful on a surface level: Denison has become a more diverse campus. On one hand, minorities are changing the institution. That being said, at its core, Denison has remained a school with racial problems, and with a majority of the student body being Caucasian. The history of various minority groups was being ignored. Blatant ethnocentrism fostered racial and sexual tensions.⁵

On May 2, 1978, several altercations occurred between members of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity and young African-Americans *The Denisonian*, Denison’s

2 Letter from The Black Students of Denison to Accepted Black Freshman, 11 February 1970. Folder: Black Student Union Demands 1968-1970. Events 1971-1993. RG14-5 Student Societies- The Black Student Union. Denison University Archives & Special Collections.

3 Ibid.

4 Black Student Union Demands. Folder: Black Student Union Demands 1968-1970. Events 1971-1993. RG14-5 Student Societies- The Black Student Union. Denison University Archives & Special Collections.

5 Ibid.

school newspaper, includes one article detailing these incidents. It began with the Beta House's traditional "War Declaration," an event in which the freshman pledges don costumes and 'fight' each other on Denison's East Quad. The theme in 1978 was "Mutiny on the Bounty." Most of the fraternity members were dressed as pirates, and two were dressed as women. One of these women was painted in Blackface, and dressed to represent a Black woman.⁶ Dr. Douglas, who was in her third year at Denison at the time, was quoted in this article. "I was personally offended by the figure of the 'Black woman,' and by the spectators' reaction to the figure. I heard several of the spectators shouting racial slurs at the figure including, 'Black baboon,' and 'African baboon.'" Allegedly, another student, Dorris Harris, was asked, "If you don't like it here, why don't you leave?"⁷ The clearly racist undertones of this event had an extreme effect on Dr. Douglas, which eventually influenced the course of her life.

Later in the same evening, twelve Black men, members and leaders of the Black Student Union, approached and entered the Beta House, carrying a variety of weapons including baseball bats, chains, and a golf club. The Beta President, as well as the two Deans of Students, Gamble and Gibbons, were having a discussion about the previous incident. A heated argument and fight ensued. The two Deans were perplexed as to how to diffuse the angry situation. This incident was a result of escalated racial tension, and both parties were clearly at fault.⁸

The administration's reaction to the incident also seemed biased. At the time, Denison's management was largely white, and was watching over a predominately white setting. An interesting picture was painted, with President Robert Good claiming that the students in Blackface were simply "naïve." The Beta Theta Pi fraternity was placed on probation for one year, but the members of the Black Student Union, who initiated a retaliative attack, were placed on probation for the remainder of their time at Denison. James Bell, one of the BSU members, was a first-year student at the time of the altercation, and thus received three and a half years of probation.⁹ He was extremely aggravated by this, and turned his anger into motivation to create better race relations on campus. He felt he had been unjustly treated by the administration, and helped start *The Vanguard*, a publication featuring works by Black students.¹⁰ The variation in punishments also resounded

6 Burnell, Gregory. "Protestors Demand Administrative Action." *The Denisonian* [Granville], May 10, 1978.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Letter from President Robert Good to the Denison Community Re: Actions Pursuant to Events on the East Quad and at The Beta House, 4 May 1978, Folder: Blackface Incident May 1978. Box 2A: Events 1971-1993. RG01 The University- History, Denison University Archives & Special Collections.

10 James Bell, "Why The Vanguard." Folder: The Vanguard 1980. Events 1971-1993. RG14-5 Student Societies- The Black Student Union. Denison University Archives & Special Collections. Denison University Archives and Special Collections.

with many current Denison students. Many thought it was an uneven distribution of justice.

In the Beta Fraternity's response to the incident, they painted a grossly prejudiced picture of the incident. They emphasized the violent and brutal nature of the Black men who led the retaliative attacks, attempting to further reinforce stereotypes about African-American men. Many in the Denison community accepted this scene and description, which unfortunately had a highly negative impact. When a mockingly stereotypical image of a Black woman is displayed for all to see, and then quickly brushed under the rug, the impact on minorities can be extreme.¹¹

In her book, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Dr. Douglas addressed this event¹².

It happened one early spring evening when my Black female roommate and I were returning from selecting our dorm room for the next school year. As we entered one of the residential quadrangles, we noticed a crowd of excited white students being entertained by something in the center. We both walked over to see what was causing such uproarious behavior. When we looked into the center of the circle, we were shocked and horrified by what we saw. One of the fraternities was conducting one of its rites of spring by enacting a drama. Central to this drama was a white male in Blackface, costumed as an African woman (with a grass skirt and spear in hand), prancing around the circle in a stereotypical, tribal-like fashion. As I stood in pained shock, I heard shouted words, "Hey, get down, you African wench." The words deepened the pain, while also making crystal clear to me that I as a Black woman was nothing more than a "wench," a Jezebel to many on that campus. The wider significance of that incident became clear to me only after I left Denison. I later understand that there was a white patriarchal hegemony in America, fervently protected by White culture.

At the time of the incident, Dr. Douglas was clearly very sensitive to the issue in a heartfelt sense: this was her *aha* moment, when racism became realized in a very concrete way.¹³ Members of the university she attended were blatantly ridiculing and stereotyping her, the Black woman. She became trapped in the tension due to the nature of the situation. It was not until later in her life, however, that she began to view this overarching issue in a more profound sense, and began

11 Letter from Beta Theta Pi Fraternity to the Denison Community, 5 May 1978. Folder: Blackface Incident May 1978. Box 2A: Events 1971-1993. RG01 The University- History. Denison University Archives & Special Collections.

12 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 54.

13 *Ibid.*, 55.

to be able to conceptually cast a judgment. This passage enables the audience to clearly understand the context through which Dr. Douglas is coming to theology from. It is a context in which American institutions enable and encourage racist behavior. It is a culture that accepts that racism and sexism are unavoidable, things to joke about. Racism is inherently prevalent in America's institutions and consciousness.¹⁴

American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny

In *Stand Your Ground*, Dr. Douglas' most recent book, she describes two strains of history that have shaped the culture by which America is governed today, a culture that celebrates white supremacy. American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, two pillars of the American psyche, have culminated to create a cultural setting that has enabled and encouraged the degradation of Black bodies. These ideas have created a prevailing ethos in which people are immersed, and thus it defines the consciousness of many modern Americans. These seeds of history culminate to create a myth of racial superiority that influenced not only America's founding, but also its identity.¹⁵ The difference between the sentencing of Brock Turner and Brian Banks is a result of America's narrative of exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. In order for one to understand this idea of racial superiority, one must understand the historical aspects of American identity that influence its legislature and laws. It is through this understanding that the significance of America's racially biased culture truly comes to light.

The concept of American Exceptionalism has its roots in 98 CE, in Germany, when Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus published *Germania*. Heralded since then as "one of the most dangerous books ever written," Tacitus' words are easily construed in a way that legitimizes various racial purity movements, most notably the National Socialists' holocaust movement and genocide of the Jewish population. Tacitus described a "perfect race, free from all taint of intermarriages."¹⁶ This perfect race had a strict moral code that was "more effective than any law system." It was upon this idea, and image of white purity, that Thomas Jefferson and America's other founding fathers built America's foundation. Anglo-Saxon supremacy has come to rule in our institutions and culture.¹⁷

Although the exact ethnic origins of Tacitus' "perfect race" are unknown, many believe that they are the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons. It is therefore

14 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 10.

15 *Ibid.*, 15.

16 Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 16.

17 *Ibid.*, 25.

argued that “strong moral qualities and a drive for freedom” run through Anglo-Saxon veins. In due course, the unique superiority of Anglo-Saxon “pure blood” transformed into the concept of American Exceptionalism, beginning in England. The English believed that they were the descendants of those in *Germania*, and that their ancestors were Anglo-Saxons. Various radical reformation groups brought the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority to America. This “imported the cornerstone” to the culture and identity that has prevailed and become dominant in the US today.

The depth of American Exceptionalism is often overlooked in academic circles. In Advanced Placement US History, a course taken by many high school students, the curriculum includes a description of the idea, but focuses on the celebration of freedom and democracy. The racial undertones and divine character of this concept are nearly completely overlooked.¹⁸ American Exceptionalism has made the white male normative, and perpetuates an identity based on the idea of white superiority. Disregarding these implications in an academic setting creates a generative culture. Every racist and oppressive law, theology and political strategy were spawned by the idea that American white men are exceptional, and that Anglo-Saxon history and culture must be protected at all costs. This mindset, which emerged with the dawning of America, has determined the histories of numerous groups of minorities, most notable African-Americans. It created a consciousness that dominates American society. This consciousness is underlying in every move and decision made, whether the population realizes it or not. In order to truly create a radical change, we need a prophet to create a shift in consciousness within the American populace. This idea is discussed in later sections.

It bears repeating that America was originally intended to be a divine nation, and the colonizers viewed their journey as one authorized by God. Puritan leader John Winthrop gave a famous speech that echoed the words of Tacitus, and consequently gave birth to the pillars of American identity. “For we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world”.¹⁹ This speech clearly mirrors the scripture in Matthew 5:14, which states, “You are the light of the world. A city upon a hill cannot be hidden.”²⁰ When Winthrop drew comparisons to the Bible, it instilled in the early

18 Stanley Kurtz, «American Exceptionalism in APUSH,» *National Review*, Web address (Accessed on June 18, 2016). <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/421952/sorry-still-no-american-exceptionalism-apush-stanley-kurtz>

19 “John Winthrop’s City upon a Hill, 1630,” *Mount Holyoke Educators*, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm> (Accessed on July 18, 2016).

20 Matthew 5:14 (New International Version).

American people an air of superiority: they became the city upon a hill, a city that cannot be stopped. Perhaps this was too much power to give to a budding nation.

Winthrop's words created the two legitimating canopies that fall over America, one civil and one Christian. The Anglo-Saxon's exodus to America was, at its core, a religious mission. This caused a dichotomy in their task: on the one hand, they aimed to build a nation aligned with their Anglo-Saxon political heritage, with Anglo-Saxon institutions and ideals, and on the other, to build a religious nation. These were virtually synonymous, which gave the Anglo-Saxon myth divine legitimation.

Thomas Jefferson, one of America's most famous founding fathers, believed whole-heartedly in the words of John Winthrop. He saw the United States as a city upon a hill, a divine nation sent by God to implement Anglo-Saxon ideals of governance. Jefferson also held the ideas from *Germania* in high regard, as a thoroughly unashamed Anglo-Saxonist. He saw the exodus to the New America as the exodus of the New Israelites documented in the Bible. This clearly reflects the religious narrative that governed America's founding institutions and ideology.²¹

Many would argue that the Anglo-Saxon myth evolved to become more about blood than institutions. Whiteness became cherished and privileged above all else, and enabled Black bodies to become little more than property and chattel. The narrative of Exceptionalism, which has now a part of America's ideological heritage, shelters whiteness, and shelters people like Brock Turner. In turn, it legitimates the desecration of non-white races. America's sense of Manifest Destiny led directly to the governing mindset of white superiority. In Protestant clergyman Josiah Strong's 1886 publication *Our Country's Possible Future and Current Crisis*, the main thoughts behind manifest destiny, civil liberty and a pure spiritual Christianity, are explained. Strong claims that Americans are divinely commissioned to be "our brother's keeper."²² North America was the greatest home of Anglo-Saxons, the principle seat of power, and the center of life and influence, according to him. Strong continued along this path, by claiming "nothing can save the inferior race but a pliant and ready assimilation." This ideology laid the foundation for present opinions on immigration and diversity, which is dominated by the concept of assimilation over integration.²³

Another 'sacred canopy of legitimation,' an idea credited to Peter Berger, a sociologist who specifically focuses on religion, was created to create an identity for

21 Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 11..

22 Josiah Strong, "Our Country's Possible Future and Current Crisis," *Our Country* https://www.learner.org/courses/amerhistory/resource_archive/resource.php?unitChoice=16&ThemeNum=1&resourceType=2&resourceID=10138 (Accessed on July 18, 2016).

23 Ibid.

America that tied together race and Christianity. This is the American civil religion, a narrative that heralds Anglo-Saxonism as divine. Dr. Douglas identifies this as the Protestant evangelical canopy. This canopy legitimated the Anglo-Saxon myth, and connected the institutions to God. This ‘valorized America’s sense of Manifest Destiny,” according to Strong.²⁴

In addition, Manifest Destiny was driven by a sense of urgency that spurred its popularity and widespread reception. It became a requirement for American expansion, because ‘the eyes of the world’ were upon the new countrymen.²⁵ As a budding Christian, protestant nation, they needed to prove their worth. Thus a movement meant to ‘civilize’ and morally restore rural America was born. This authorized the mass genocide of Native Americans. The founding fathers aimed to create a nation following one system of religious and political principles, speaking one language, and understanding one culture. Each of these ideas stemmed out of Anglo-Saxon ideals, and this is how early America developed and thrived. This race of people believed they were chosen by God, which ingrained in them an evident sense of superiority.

It is these ideas of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny that have come together to form the foundation for modern American culture. A white spatial imagery is created in which whiteness is synonymous with privilege and power. They have created a norm in which the white male is dominant, and all others are inferior.²⁶ The underlying mindset of many was constructed to be racist, and although it is often not at the forefront of people’s opinions, it is certainly basic and pervasive within our understanding of American values and institutions. George Lipsitz, an American Studies scholar, often discusses various case studies and examples that were created as a result of institutional racism. Things like widespread incarceration, hostile environments, demonization of black bodies, and multiple public policies are considered when looking at the implications of America’s racist past.

In Lipsitz’s book *How Racism Takes Place*, he attempts to answer the question, “Why does race still matter so much?” A valid question, many would say, due to the fact that the civil rights movement was over thirty years ago, and comprehensive civil rights laws have been established in the United States. Racial identification still remains the key factor when determining opportunities and life chances for various demographics. Dr. Douglas would most likely condone Lipsitz’s wonderings. Every day, we hear of black bodies being murdered, being arrested, being

24 Ibid.

25 Douglas, *Stand your Ground*, 12.

26 George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 3.

oppressed. Racial inequality is persistent, and in order to become a fully functioning nation, free of inequality and injustice, a solution must be found.²⁷

Some may argue that the reason that race is still a determining issue is because that African Americans have proven themselves ‘unfit’ for freedom. Politicians claim that black people do not take advantage of the opportunities available to them. They claim that equal rights, legislatively, exist, so the fact that inequality is still a problem is due to a deficiency in the black race. By focusing on the disadvantages that exist, we are in fact ignoring the inherent privilege and advantages available to white people, and disregard the fact that white is normative and superior in American society. “The patterns of the past continue to impeded progress in the present.”²⁸ Problems with education, housing, and poverty still wrack the black population of today, and this is due to the inherent racism that exists in America’s institutions.

In order to move forward as a society, we need to acknowledge the idea that our society is structured by a white spatial imagery, and when we compare that to a black consciousness, extreme problems arrive. There is a vast skewing of resources, primarily houses and land, towards white families, which excludes black people. This redistribution occurred through Jim Crow laws, housing discrimination, and now mass incarceration to leave black families in the inner city. Here, they don’t own property, cannot accumulate wealth through inheritance, and do not have the means to organize into a strong political community. Lipsitz asserts the idea that white spatial imagery created a black spatial imagery, where space is not private but communal. He encourages us to cut ties between space race, and power. Dr. Douglas specifically uses similar ideas to discuss the assault on two different groups of people: African American criminals and the LGBT community.

American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny are two historical themes have specifically contributed to the degradation of criminal Black bodies, and this is extremely prevalent in today’s society. In her book *Stand Your Ground*, Dr. Douglas describes the partisanship and unfairness that is inherent in the “stand your ground” culture that exists in America today. Modern stand Your Ground laws are an extension upon English Common Law that gives a person the right to protect his or her “castle.” In America, this has been broadened to include one’s body in this “castle.” This removes the duty to retreat before using force in cases of self-defense, and, in doing so, provokes violence and gives people the right to protect their bodies at all costs. This signifies socio-cultural climate that enables the assault and killing of Black bodies, and even makes it permissible. She specifi-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

cally references a famous case, of Trayvon Martin, who was murdered by a white male who felt his "castle" was being threatened. Martin was shot and killed for doing nothing other than being a young Black man.²⁹

Many would attempt to make the case that we are living in a post-racial society. Critics claim that blatant racist policies, such as segregation or the Jim Crow laws, no longer exist. A quick glance at the news, however, can demonstrate how relevant arguments like Kelly's are. Brock Turner is a name now known to many in America. The subject of heated debate, and now infamous, the all-star Stanford varsity swimmer was convicted of raping an unconscious woman behind a dumpster in January 2015 at age twenty. Although sexual assault cases can often be complicated, this one was not hidden in a dorm room, or clouded by the convoluted emotions that come with the territory of college romance. Turner and his victim had met only minutes before the assault occurred, and two students witnessed the assault, confirming Turner's identity. It happened in full view, and there was no question about the legality of the matter: Brock Turner raped a woman. However, Turner received only a six-month sentence, and this convicted rapist will likely serve just three months in prison.³⁰

Another star athlete, high school football player Brian Banks, had expectations of joining the National Football League. When he was only sixteen years old, he was accused of rape, tried as an adult, and received a sentence of more than five years in prison, with an additional five years parole as a sex offender. He spent his time in prison, before his accuser eventually admitted to fabricating the evidence, and all charges were dropped. His aspirations of college or the NFL were destroyed. The main difference between these two cases? Turner is white, and Banks is Black. The judge believed that prison would "have a severe impact on Turner." The same was not believed for Banks³¹.

This is only the most recent in a long list of cases in which sentencing reflects the deeply entrenched racism that exists within America's justice system. Corey Batey, a former Vanderbilt University student and Black athlete, was convicted in April of raping an unconscious classmate, similarly to Turner. He received a mandatory prison sentence of 15-25 years. He'll spend much of his life in jail, while Turner will be out by Christmas. The media's handling of the case also showed extreme racial bias. America has a history of white supremacy, which devalues the Black experience. The assault on Black bodies has a cultural setting, which is

29 Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 3.

30 Natasha Noman, "Brock Turner Gets Months in Jail - A Black Student Got 5 Years for a Rape He Didn't Commit" *MIC*, <https://mic.com/articles/145788/brock-turner-gets-months-in-jail-a-black-student-got-5-years-for-a-rape-he-didn-t-commit> (Accessed on June 15, 2016).

31 *Ibid*.

mainly defined by the ideas of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism. These two historical themes have created a culture in which white becomes normative, which fosters the degradation of Black bodies and perpetuates institutional racism.³²

Changing the Dominant Culture

So the question remains: what can we do? Is there hope that these permeative themes can be combatted? Dr. Douglas makes it clear that when she references whiteness, she is referencing the 'treasured property' that has resulted from the nation ruled by the ideas of American Exceptionalism and white supremacy. This is the dominant culture in America. Many would state that Americans do not recognize or appreciate criticism, yet this is necessary if change is truly to be brought. Bringing hurt to public attention, as Dr. Douglas is attempting to do, is necessary in order to empower. Of course, those in power do not respond well to criticism, but it is necessary if one wishes to grow and move forward. Without criticism, women would still be unable to work, homosexuals would still be placed in mental institutions, and African-Americans would still be enslaved. Although America has come a long way since its founding, Dr. Douglas has clearly brought the fundamental problem to light: America's dominant consciousness has been historically pervaded with racism. Now, more than ever, Americans need to be critical of governing institutions and call for a radical change.³³

This radical change is powered by an energetic hope. When a community begins to have hope for something better, an atmosphere of amazement begins to emerge. If before they had given up, this provides them energy to move forward and fight against the dominant consciousness. This is why the 'royal' agenda is against hope: it provides people an energy of amazement to fight for positive change. The very idea of hope implies that there is more to life than simply the present, and that 'now' is not forever. Hope energizes people to imagine a future that is unlike the present, to believe that that they can be free from oppression. Hopelessness emerges in regimes where everything is considered "forever," because there is "little or no prospect for change on the horizon."³⁴

The establishment of the royal consciousness, however, wishes for people to believe that everything is permanent. They aim to keep hope at bay in order to prevent people from uprising, and therefore losing power. The king has everything aligned, and does not wish to give an option of change to the people. The popu-

32 Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 88.

33 Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 162.

34 *Ibid.*, 71.

lation is numb, not able to feel anything or imagine a greater future, and this is exactly how those in power wish to keep it. The Solomonic regime had to cling desperately to the present: if it were to slip away, they would have nothing. The “royal consciousness aims to overcome history, and the future therefore loses its vitality and authority.” A lack of hope means that the people will continue to follow the king blindly, and continue allowing their history to be formed by someone else. Thus the royal consciousness has an opposition to hope because it would allow people to form their own history.³⁵

In order to carry out this radical change, in a racial context, a modern prophet is necessary. A “radical break with social reality” is the true goal. The prophetic task is to “nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”³⁶ The dominant culture is permeated with odes to racism and white supremacy, and in order for this to change, a prophet needs to come and lead the movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. acted as the prophet of the civil rights movement, tying together biblical concepts with modern calls for change. He argued that God’s significance is determined by his liberating actions. God is at work in our world, He is not afraid to choose sides, or standing on the outside looking in. Instead, King argues for a God who takes the side of the oppressed every time, and this is the God that the next prophet needs to create hope for. We need a new prophet who will bring a change of consciousness and free America from the slavocracy’s reign of terror.³⁷

This change of consciousness is an attempt to transform our imagination, rather than simply change a law or catalyze an event. A change of consciousness is greater than a change in circumstances, hence its significance. The dominant consciousness is what needs to be addressed, instead of simply addressing specific public crises. If one could change the way a population thinks, that is more radical than a social change. One law being changed does not change the way that a population functions and a culture thrives, but a change of consciousness will rectify the way in which a culture has been established and aim to move forward in all ways. For example, it is one thing to simply change the law on gay marriage. It is another to genuinely cause a population to understand that this is not about one issue, but rather that everyone should be treated with equality, regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation. This is important because by transforming our consciousness, we attain the capacity to see a future of change. We begin to have a history, and we begin to have energetic hope for something better.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 37.

Especially in times like these, where everyone is focused on their own lives and what they want ‘now,’ a lesson like this is important. We need to look, as Dr. Douglas suggests, at the historical themes that have been ingrained in our culture, and target the root cause. We need to combat the culture that enables the killing of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis. As Davis’ mother described, “racial profiling and stereotypes serve as the basis for illegitimate fear and the shooting and killing of young teenagers.” This is a culture that does not permit Black males teenagers to act like teenagers. It is a culture that tolerates the taking of a promising Black male life over a matter as trivial as “loud music.” This is the culture that needs to be changed.³⁸

I believe that we can tie this back to Denison. Although the events of this university’s past are worth criticizing, Denison can be the place where change starts. Dr. Douglas advocates for a change of mindset, and looks for young people to change the way the world sees differences. This can be done on a local level, and is already beginning on this campus. The problem that permeates the very soil that America was built upon is that white males have written our history, and this history not only disregards but also depreciates Black people and minorities, especially women. The assault on Black bodies is not something that can simply be changed by changing a law or policy, because it is ingrained in the dominant consciousness of America. The concepts of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny are just two examples of ideas that have created our culture of white supremacy. Maintaining a white status quo has always been the goal, and this is the issue at the core of today’s problems. This is what Dr. Douglas is attempting to dissect, and what needs to be changed if we can move forth as a Christian nation with true, genuine equality.

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38 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 232.

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