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Sapphire as Praxis: Toward a Methodology of Anger

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In the final pages of this article, I will use this methodology of anger to trace the fatal incident between Sandra Bland and officer Brian Encinia using poetry as a creative mechanism to re-render the transcript of that incident and, most importantly, to highlight the otherwise knowledge that it is not Sandra Bland who caused her own incarceration and subsequent death, as the angry Black woman trope would confirm, but white supremacy and sexist hatred.

CODA: “IS ANYTHING WRONG, MA’AM?”

BRIAN ENCINIA’S HATRED AND SANDRA BLAND

“In a landscape drawn from an ocean bed, you can’t drive yourself sane—so angry you are crying. You can’t drive yourself sane.”⁴⁵

43. Lorde, “Eye to Eye,” 152.

44. *Ibid.*, 146.

45. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf, 2014), 105.

On or about July 10, 2015

You are plowing through heartbreak, a cigarette between your fingers, the radio's bass beating into your sternum, a song in your throat.

You feel watched, you pull over to avert and the eyes pull over with you.

You know that this happens. You know how this happens and why. You know that it has no name, cannot be named without a price, to call the officer out, to call the officer the po-lease, to say a thing like *my rights*, you will be naming that which will invite your death. It will be you.

It is not funny how he asked a question to which he knew the answer and yet didn't understand his own damned question.

It is an old question.

Discount your memory (and they will) but his answer to his question was: *It feels like you will die very soon.*

On or about July 10, 2015, you lived.

Heartbreak, whether you like it or not makes you woefully aware that you have a heart. That it is beating, that it beats in a chorus and it is yours. You can live for the heart even if, perhaps because, it is breaking. But you cannot live for him. So . . . On or about July 10, 2015, you chose to live.

Which invited a very certain and undeniable death. So very certain, that three days later they called it suicide, called you crazy, invoked a trope to make it fall into sense:

Arrogant, uncooperative, belligerent, angry black woman.

And we knew, Sandra, that whatever your choices were, whatever hand wrapped a thing around your neck (we know that thing) whomever witnessed your last breath (we know them as well) however you moved about your sadness (who would we be without sadness?) we knew that you did not merely, so happen to, in this

particular instance, even though you may have any number of reasons to implode.

That is never how it works.

On or about July 10 to July 13, 2015, at various points in time you lived as electronic reverb, yourself surrounded by your fading self in the vacuum of silence that is Black womanhood.⁴⁶



*she watched the sea*⁴⁷

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight-year-old woman from Chicago is pulled over by a state trooper, Brian Encinia, in Waller, Texas. During the stop, she smokes a cigarette inside of her car. According to the dashcam video, Encinia asks her to put out her cigarette. She refuses, noting her right to smoke inside of her car.⁴⁸ Encinia orders

46. A version of this poem was previously published in *The Offing*. See Bettina Judd, “On or about July 10, 2015,” *The Offing*, March 24, 2016, <https://theoffingmag.com/here-you-are/on-or-about-july-10-2015>. The title of the poem is a reference to the text of the lawsuit filed by Sandra Bland’s family against Waller County.

47. Use a mobile device to scan this code and hear the audio/visual version of the poem. You may find the video version at <http://dr.bettinajudd.com/on-or-about-july-10-2015>.

48. Scholars of law and rhetoric as well as commentators have also analyzed this encounter for the ways that Encinia used coded language to enact powers beyond his authority. For example, Belén Lowrey-Kinberg and Grace Sullivan Buker discuss how Bland’s lawful asking of questions was deemed inappropriate behavior by a police officer who wished to assert power. I examine a small excerpt of their conversation here as instructive for the writing prompt of the poem that begins this section. For more on this topic, see Belén V. Lowrey-Kinberg and Grace Sullivan Buker, “‘I’m Giving You a Lawful Order’: Dialogic Legitimacy in Sandra Bland’s Traffic Stop,” *Law and Society Review* 51, no. 2 (June 1, 2017); and K. K. Rebecca Lai, et al., “Assessing the Legality of Sandra Bland’s Arrest,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/20/us/sandra-bland-arrest-death-videos-maps.html>. Panama Jackson also offers

Bland out of her car and threatens her with a Taser. Then, Encinia forces her out of the car and beats and arrests her. The Waller county police detain her for three days. During this time, Bland attempts to post bail. On the third day, she is found dead, hanging in her cell and her death is attributed to suicide. I am moving quickly through these events as they have been reported because it is difficult to write.⁴⁹ I am doing so because I want to get to the point, which is not about reproducing this event as social media has done ad nauseum, and because I am more interested in a brief moment between Bland and the officer and its devastating effects. This moment appears to be benign, yet it encapsulates the threat of racism and sexism to Black women's speech. It is a moment about tone — its misreading, or perhaps its perfect reading. It is the moment in which Bland's annoyance and frustration articulated through speech and silence are read as a threat and when Brian Encinia exerts force in order to put *an angry Black woman* in her place. The dialogue in open redaction:

E: "You okay?"

B: "I'm waiting on you. You — this is your job. I'm waiting on you. What do you want me to say?"

E: "I don't know — you seem very irritated."

B: "I am. I really am. [Unclear] what I am getting a ticket for. I was getting out of your way. You were speeding up, tailing me, so I move over, and you stop me. So, yeah, I am a little irritated. But that doesn't stop you from giving me a ticket, so . . . [unclear]."

an insightful and beautifully written close reading of the interaction between Encinia and Bland. See <https://verysmartbrothas.theroot.com/the-moment-that-ended-sandra-blands-life-1822521368>.

49. For a transcript of the arrest, see Ryan Grim, "The Transcript of Sandra Bland's Arrest Is as Revealing as the Video," *Huff Post*, July 23, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sandra-bland-arrest-transcript_us_55b03a88e4b0a9b94853b1fi. Documents related to the lawsuit *Geneva Reed-Veal, mother of Sandra Bland, deceased, v. Brian Encinia, Texas Department of Public Safety, Elsa Magnus, Oscar Prudente, Waller County Sheriff's Office*; Complaint at law (Case No. 4:15-cv-02232; wrongful death lawsuit) can be found on the website of the Legislative Reference Library of Texas at <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/currentissues/clips/casePage.cfm?pageID=8&reportID=28329>.

E: "Are you done?"

B: "You asked me what was wrong, then I told you. So now I'm done, yeah."

E: "~~Okay. Do you mind putting out your cigarette please?~~"

B: "I'm in my car. Why do I have to put out my cigarette?"

E: "~~Well you can step on out now.~~"

B: "I don't have to step out of my car."

E: "~~Step out of the car.~~"

The encounter escalates, and he opens the door. He threatens to remove her physically and punches her or attempts to punch her. She gets out of the car and lets him know that she plans to sue. She tries to document the incident with her phone. He orders her to put the phone down. I can stop here because the moment that I want to highlight has already passed. The moment in question is when he returns to the car and asks what seems to be a benign question, marked here in italics:

"You okay?"

Encinia likely wanted her to reply, "Yes, I am fine," an answer that would acknowledge his power — her obeisance to his power. His ability to control her is *fine*. If Bland had responded in such a manner, he would not have to hear her testimony. Bland was a problem to his/the official narrative of benign policing, and force was the solution. When she does not give him his desired response, *he* becomes irritated. Encinia wants to remind Bland of his ability to do what he wants with her body:

"Do you mind putting out your cigarette, please?"

Let's not be distracted by the pleasantry of "please." He is not asking; he is telling. Bland knows this and asks, "I'm in my car. Why do I have to put out my cigarette?" Note she doesn't answer his question, "Yes, I mind" or, "No, I will not put out my cigarette." She asks about what is beneath his question. She is asking why he's engaging her with

aggression. This doesn't solve the issue at hand: Encinia needs to make Bland aware of his ability to use force:

"Well you can step on out now."

Another attempt to control what Bland does with her body, despite the fact that he has no reason to assume that she is a physical threat to him. And here, for the third time, Bland invokes her rights and speaks directly to the conversation of power and violence that Encinia is attempting to mask: "I don't have to step out of the car." It is at this moment when Encinia starts to threaten brute force. The threat is communicated by a question devoid of earnest:

You okay?

A familiar question marked by terrible politeness and implications of power and subjection.

You okay? (I dare you to say what is wrong about this interaction.)

This exchange is not unlike other insincere exchanges and their transparent meanings:

Has anyone here done anything to offend you? (I dare you to say that you are offended.)

Is there a problem? (You are the problem.)

All of these seemingly benign questions are not questions but dares — tests to see whether the one asked knows her place. To go off script is to be out of place — to be "arrogant" as one media pundit described Bland.⁵⁰ All of these questions are, perhaps, another more menacing version of the question W. E. B. Du Bois recounts in *Souls of Black Folk*:

50. Harry Houck, a CNN contributor and former NYPD detective stated that Bland was "arrogant" and "uncooperative," and her behavior was the cause of her arrest. See Blue Telusma, "Ex-Cop on CNN Says Sandra Bland Died Because She Was 'Arrogant from the Beginning,'" *The Griot*, July 22, 2015, <http://thegriot.com/2015/07/22/ex-cop-on-cnn-says-sandra-bland-died-because-she-was-arrogant-from-the-beginning>.

How does it feel to be a problem?

You won't be a problem now, will you?

Don't be

*a problem.*⁵¹

It would be easy to surmise that Bland's speech is what put her in danger, but that doesn't explain why she was followed in the first place or what transpired in the days after her arrest. Bland insisted on drawing attention to the script being handed to her. She cited the pattern, saw the fractal of hatred where Encinia insisted that *she* was violent chaos. She insisted on letting Encinia know she had an awareness of her rights. In public discussions of this series of events, she was cast as angry and arrogant and thusly responsible for her own death. I want to acknowledge this kind of reading of Black women's anger because it highlights the function of the trope, which is to justify oppression and, in this case, murder. Bland may have been angry but it was not *her feeling* that put her in danger. It was Encinia's hatred, his desire to exert power over her.⁵²

Sandra Bland's death is the result of law enforcement and the carceral logics that have structured Black life in the Americas.⁵³ The destructive force, or at least the specter of it here, is embedded in the speculation of her death as suicide. Her death, whether ultimately by her hand or not, was orchestrated and facilitated by the state embodied in Encinia's hatred, and it is the invisible hand of white supremacist ideology that created a narrative by which her death would seem to be a natural course of events. Such a logic would assume that Sandra Bland failed herself multiple times. That she was headed toward death even before she was pulled over. This logic is gruesome. It is clear to me that the appropriate response to Bland's death is anger. It is the white imagination of our rage that justifies violence before it has occurred.⁵⁴ Black women have been particularly vocal about this vulnerability, about our

51. William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Company, 1903), 1.

52. Lowrey-Kinberg and Buker describe the encounter as follows: "Encinia establishes that he has the right to govern how the interaction unfolds." See Lowrey-Kinberg and Sullivan Buker, "I'm Giving You a Lawful Order," 392.

53. Telusma, "Ex-Cop on CNN."

54. Claudia Rankine aptly writes the lyric, "Because white men can't police their imaginations, black men are dying." Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*, 135.

anger, its feeling, its effects, and its consequences. By engaging Black women's anger and texts of rage, we can better understand how Black women are, in effect, providing ample material for understanding the contours of hatred: racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on. Let us put all of this to final rest: Sandra Bland was murdered by the hatred of Brian Encinia and the Waller County Police Department, and she told us as much during the stop.

As knowledge subjugated by stereotype, Black women's anger holds within it details of the function of hatred in the form of racism and sexism. Here, I have demonstrated how a methodology of anger can facilitate a reading of the events at the end of Bland's life that seem to be a mystery to some but are quite clear to so many Black folks. In recounting the development of *patient*, and its uses of anger, I demonstrate how interrogating the source of my own anger yielded felt knowledge of the legacy of medical experimentation. A methodology of anger also has the capacity to give Black-woman-centered insights into creative texts, particularly when they are self-conscious about anger. Applying anger as a trackable object in Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn" reveals the many layers of meaning the song may encompass: the stymied position of Simone as an artist, the stymied position of her people, and the inevitability of premature death for even the most gracious of Black leaders.

Luxuriating in the richness of Black women's inner lives provides so many possibilities for understanding the practice of being human. If we are to restructure knowledge in order to repair the grave rupture in the formulation of what it means to be human, the value by which felt experience is graded must, too, be restructured. Here, I draw attention to the usefulness of anger because of the particular ways that connotations of anger warp when inhabited by or projected on the bodies of Black women. This warping, made evident in the Sapphire stereotype, signals the function of feeling and emotion in producing difference. By beginning with Sapphire as a critical site of silencing and navigating such silences, we inevitably make ourselves available to otherwise ways of knowing. A byproduct of a methodology of anger is the revelation that anger is accompanied by many felt experiences answering to hatred. Pain, joy, shame, pleasure — all of these felt experiences provide information about the experience of hatred.

While anger in its many manifestations adds much-needed dimension to the ways that we look at Black feminist, intellectual, activist, and creative work, the expansiveness of the concept of anger can be explored beyond the fact of its existence and into further depths of its meaning, particularly in relation to its more amenable cousin, pleasure. Anger, and all of the ways in which anger manifests, or is misread, is a practice of being human, but what other rituals of knowing do we have to share with one another? What other ways of being? This push toward a methodology of anger is but a nudge in the expansive possibilities of luxuriating in the complexities of Black women's lives in Black and gender studies.

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