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Victoria D. Gillon

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Augustana College
Rock Island, IL

The Killing of an 'Angry Black Woman':
Sandra Bland and the Politics of Respectability

Victoria Gillon
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The Killing of an 'Angry Black Woman': Sandra Bland and the Politics of Respectability

During his eulogy for Reverend Clementa Pinckney, who was one of the 9 killed in a church in Charleston, SC, President Obama said, "For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present."¹ This is very applicable to the case of Sandra Bland. On July 13th, 2015, 28-year-old Sandra Bland was pulled over by a police officer in Waller County, TX, for failure to signal a lane change. Around six minutes later, Bland was being slammed and handcuffed to the ground. What happened in these six minutes that caused a minor traffic violation to escalate to what would later be three days in jail, concluding with Bland's death? Hundreds of years of significations towards black women led to Sandra Bland's arrest. However, at a time when Bland was perceived to be at her most vulnerable, she resisted. By intentionally not putting out a cigarette, she took back more than 400 years' worth of agency for black women. Although the circumstances that led to her death in police custody are incredibly important, there will be more of a focus in this essay on the significations that resulted in her arrest and that were given to her after death, including the Black Church's responsibility in responding to actions of injustice.

According to Charles Long, author of the book *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, significations are linguistic expressions that demonstrate an arbitrary power dynamic between two groups of people. There are two main forms of significations that Long discusses: a clever word game used to disrupt power structures and manipulating words to perpetuate power structures. Long, who is a black American, identifies how the term "signification" comes out of the black community that he grew up in. Long states, "...my community was a community that knew that one of the important meanings of it was the fact that it was a community signified by another community. This signification constituted a subordinate relationship of power expressed through custom and legal structure."² Long goes on to say that the people of his community noticed this signification, and appropriated it to disrupt what was oppressing them. Black women, such as Sandra Bland, have succumbed to the signification that perpetuates power structures to

¹ Barack Obama, "Obama Delivers Eulogy in Charleston," *New York Times* video, 24:50, June 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000003767801/obama-delivers-eulogy-in-charleston.html>

² Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 2.

benefit society's value of whiteness. Nevertheless, Bland's actions on that day she was pulled over demonstrate a signification that disrupts the power structures deeming her inferior.

In a country where white normativity determines who is beautiful, feminine, and gentle, black women have been excluded from those definitions. Instead, black women have been defined as inherently hyper-sexual, belligerent, and masculine. Many of these stereotypes have historically belonged to black men as well. However, as Sandra Haley, a historian at UCLA states, "Black women have been seen as different than black men, certainly, but they have not always been seen as women either; to be a woman is to be seen as deserving of protection, and black women are not always seen that way."³ Historically black women have not had control of what they were being called. It the same type of "othering" that led abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth ask "Ain't I a Woman?"⁴ because she was excluded from the suffragists' definition of womanhood.

Black women have had to defend their humanity persistently. According to Melissa Harris-Perry, author of *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, the stereotype of the angry black women has not received much scholarship because it is simply accepted amongst researchers. Often named Sapphire, the stereotype of the angry black woman has had many characteristics and representations. Harris-Perry goes on to say that the Sapphire stereotype does not recognize a black woman's anger as legitimate⁵. Instead, it is seen as an irrational desire to be in control of black men, families, and communities. Black women cannot question the unequal circumstances they are in because their demands are not seen as legitimate.

"Black women's concerns can be ignored and their voices silenced in the name of maintaining calm and rational conversation," stated Harris-Perry.⁶

When Waller County police officer Brian Encinia approached Sandra Bland's car that hot summer afternoon, these significations were present. In a dash-cam video released in response to public suspicion of Bland's arrest and death, Encinia starts the interaction with the reason he pulled Bland over and requesting

³ Noliwe M. Rooks, "Renisha McBride and Evolution of Black-Female Stereotype." *Time Magazine*, November 3, 2013, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/11/14/renisha-mcbride-and-black-female-stereotype/>

⁴ Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I A Woman" (Akron, Ohio, May 29th, 1851)

⁵ Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 88.

⁶ Harris-Perry, 95.

her license and registration. After he is done checking her information, he asks, “Are you okay?” “I’m waiting on you...this is your job,” Bland replies. “You seem very irritated,” says Encinia. After Bland explains the reason she is irritated, Encinia retorts with, “Are you done?” At this point in the exchange, the tension is rising between Bland and Encinia. After Bland responds that she is indeed done explaining herself, Encinia asks her to put out her lit cigarette. Bland responds by saying, “I’m in my car, why do I have to put out my cigarette?” Bland is immediately asked to get out of her car by Encinia. “I don’t have to step out of my car,” responds Bland. Encinia and Bland proceed to go back and forth multiple times until Encinia opens the car door and orders her to get out. Bland continues to refuse to leave saying Encinia does not have the right to remove her. The situation gets physical as Encinia reaches inside of the car yelling at her to get out as Bland seems to stay rooted to her seat. The struggle leads Encinia to pull out his taser and aim it at Bland shouting, “I will light you up!”⁷

In the *New York Times* article titled “Assessing the Legality of Sandra Bland’s Arrest”, Robert Weisberg, criminal procedure expert and law professor at Stanford University, weighs in on the legality of the arrest. Weisberg says Encinia would have to argue that his safety was threatened when he asked her to put out her cigarette. Furthermore, Encinia has to argue that Ms. Bland’s refusal to put the cigarette out gave him the impression that she was violent.⁸ This idea of Bland being a threatening individual already existed because of the significations that said black women are inherently belligerent. It is an expectation that black women will be harder to control. The most prominent critique that Sandra Bland has gotten is that by doing all of the things Encinia wanted her to do, she would not have been arrested in the first place. CNN news anchor Don Lemon criticized Sandra Bland saying she should have done what she was told and then pursued justice

⁷ “Dashcam footage of Sandra Bland's arrest during a traffic stop before her death in police custody,” *The Guardian* video, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2015/jul/22/dash-cam-sandra-bland-arrest-video>.

⁸ K.K. Rebecca Lai, Haeyoun Park, Larry Buchanan and Wilson Andrews, “Assessing the Legality of Sandra Bland’s Arrest,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/20/us/sandra-bland-arrest-death-videos-maps.html?_r=0

afterward.⁹ Retired police officer Harry Houck described Sandra Bland as being “arrogant from the beginning”.¹⁰ This rhetoric takes blame away from Encinia and undeservingly puts it onto Bland.

Sandra Bland’s resistance disrupted the power structure towards black American women. Bland did not adhere to the politics of respectability that was expected of her. Abolitionist David Walker said, “But O, my God! --in sorrow I must say it, that my colour, all over the world, have a mean, servile spirit. They yield in a moment to the whites, let them be right or wrong--the reason they are able to keep their feet on our throats.”¹¹ Walker wanted black Americans to stand up against white supremacy’s need to keep them complicit in the system that repressed them. Bland withstood this need to remain content. She was not afraid to speak her mind when Encinia asked her something, and she was not willing to corporate when she knew what was happening was unjust.

At a time when the Black Church’s voice is needed to assist black women in their fight against white supremacist, patriarchal standards, it has remained overwhelmingly quiet. In fact, the Black Church has historically not supported black women’s quest for freedom. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, author of *Blues Bodies and the Black Church*, the Black Church has been a place of rejection towards black women who did not follow the rules that white culture places upon them. The white gaze, which is the concept the white culture is always watching, instilled “body-denying/body-phobic values” within the Black Church.¹² Douglas goes on to argue that whiteness has become so internalized within the Black Church that black Christians are repressing black women. It has religiously justified the policing of black bodies. Although the Black Church has been a place for uplifting and restoring black lives within the United States, it has fallen short on focusing on black women.

⁹ Larry Wilmore, “The Nightly Show - Mess Within Texas - Sandra Bland's Arrest” Youtube video, 3:40. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgP_U4SzYd4.

¹⁰ “CNN's Harry Houck: Sandra Bland was 'arrogant from the very beginning',” Youtube video, 2:15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCYfQIgfCQw>.

¹¹ David Walker, eds., *David Walker's Appeal*, accessed October 25, 2015, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abesdwa2t.html>.

¹² Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*. (New York City: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

For the Black Church to stand up for the lives of black women, they have to stop looking back in the past. According to Eddie Glaude, author of “The Black Church is Dead”, the Black Church has remained stagnant on social issues about the Black Church because they continue to look in the past.¹³ They have lost the power and influence that they once had in during the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Church must also create a space for uplifting the beauty and significance of black women. Because the Black Church has historically been the center of black communities in the United States, it is time for black Christians to be accepting of all that come through their doors and to radically fight for black women like Sandra Bland.

Despite what has been told about Bland, she remained a strong black woman in the eyes of so many within the United States. Soon after her death, #SayHerName became the number one trending topic on social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. This hashtag was created to signify that Sandra Bland would not be forgotten like so many other black women abused by white supremacy in the United States. #SayHerName was also created to demonstrate that Sandra was more than an “Angry Black Woman,” she was someone who stood up for herself when she was at her most vulnerable. Bland was able to signify through resistance by not complying with the politics of respectability. Not only that, but she challenged the Black Church, a historical epicenter for the black community, to stand up for the lives of black women.

¹³ Eddie Glaude, “The Black Church is Dead,” *Huffington Post*, August 23, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html

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