

INTRODUCTION

“Step out of the car!”

1.

In July 2015, a young African American woman named Sandra Bland drove from her hometown of Chicago to a little town an hour west of Houston, Texas. She was interviewing for a job at Prairie View A&M University, the school she'd graduated from a few years before. She was tall and striking, with a personality to match. She belonged to the Sigma Gamma Rho sorority in college, and played in the marching band. She volunteered with a seniors group. She regularly posted short, inspirational videos on YouTube, under the handle “Sandy Speaks,” that often began, “Good morning, my beautiful Kings and Queens.”

I am up today just praising God, thanking His name.
Definitely thanking Him not just because it's my

birthday, but thanking Him for growth, thanking Him for the different things that He has done in my life over this past year. Just looking back at the twenty-eight years I have been on this earth, and all that He has shown me. Even though I have made some mistakes, I have definitely messed up, He still loves me, and I want to let my Kings and Queens know out there to that He still loves you too.

Bland got the job at Prairie View. She was elated. Her plan was to get a master's degree in political science on the side. On the afternoon of July 10 she left the university to get groceries, and as she made a right turn onto the highway that rings the Prairie View campus, she was pulled over by a police officer. His name was Brian Encinia: white, short dark hair, thirty years old. He was courteous—at least at first. He told her that she had failed to signal a lane change. He asked her questions. She answered them. Then Bland lit a cigarette, and Encinia asked her to put it out.

Their subsequent interaction was recorded by the video camera on his dashboard, and has been viewed in one form or another several million times on YouTube.

Bland: I'm in my car, why do I have to put out my cigarette?

Encinia: Well, you can step on out now.

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

Encinia: Step out of the car.

Bland: Why am I...

Encinia: Step out of the car!

Bland: No, you don't have the right. No, you don't have the right.

Encinia: Step out of the car.

Bland: You do not have the right. You do not have the right to do this.

Encinia: I do have the right, now step out or I will remove you.

Bland: I refuse to talk to you other than to identify myself. [*crosstalk*] I am getting removed for a failure to signal?

Encinia: Step out or I will remove you. I'm giving you a lawful order. Get out of the car now or I'm going to remove you.

Bland: And I'm calling my lawyer.

Bland and Encinia continue on for an uncomfortably long time. Emotions escalate.

Encinia: I'm going to yank you out of here. [*Reaches inside the car.*]

Bland: OK, you're going to yank me out of my car? OK, all right.

Encinia: [*calling in backup*] 2547.

Bland: Let's do this.

Encinia: Yeah, we're going to. [*Grabs for Bland.*]

Bland: Don't touch me!

Encinia: Get out of the car!

Bland: Don't touch me. Don't touch me! I'm not under arrest—you don't have the right to take me out of the car.

Encinia: You are under arrest!

Bland: I'm under arrest? For what? For what? For what?

Encinia: [*To dispatch*] 2547 County FM 1098. [*inaudible*] Send me another unit. [*To Bland*] Get out of the car! Get out of the car now!

Bland: Why am I being apprehended? You're trying to give me a ticket for failure...

Encinia: I said get out of the car!

Bland: Why am I being apprehended? You just opened my—

Encinia: I'm giving you a lawful order. I'm going to drag you out of here.

Bland: So you're threatening to drag me out of my own car?

Encinia: Get out of the car!

Bland: And then you're going to [*crosstalk*] me?

Encinia: I will light you up! Get out! Now! [*Draws stun gun and points it at Bland.*]

Bland: Wow. Wow. [*Bland exits car.*]

Encinia: Get out. Now. Get out of the car!

Bland: For a failure to signal? You're doing all of this for a failure to signal?

Bland was arrested and jailed. Three days later, she committed suicide in her cell.

2.

The Sandra Bland case came in the middle of a strange interlude in American public life. The interlude began in

the late summer of 2014, when an eighteen-year-old black man named Michael Brown was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. He had just, allegedly, shoplifted a pack of cigars from a convenience store. The next several years saw one high-profile case after another involving police violence against black people. There were riots and protests around the country. A civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, was born. For a time, this was what Americans talked about. Perhaps you remember some of the names of those in the news. In Baltimore, a young black man named Freddie Gray was arrested for carrying a pocket knife and fell into a coma in the back of a police van. Outside Minneapolis, a young black man named Philando Castile was pulled over by a police officer and inexplicably shot seven times after handing over his proof of insurance. In New York City, a black man named Eric Garner was approached by a group of police officers on suspicion that he was illegally selling cigarettes, and was choked to death in the ensuing struggle. In North Charleston, South Carolina, a black man named Walter Scott was stopped for a nonfunctioning taillight, ran from his car, and was shot to death from behind by a white police officer. Scott was killed on April 4, 2015. Sandra Bland gave him his own episode of “Sandy Speaks.”

Good morning, my beautiful Kings and Queens....I am not a racist. I grew up in Villa Park, Illinois. I was the only black girl on an all-white cheerleading squad....Black people, you will not be successful in this world until you learn how to work with white

people. I want the white folks to really understand out there that black people are doing as much as we can...and we can't help but get pissed off when we see situations where it's clear that the black life didn't matter. For those of you who question why he was running away, well goddamn, in the news that we've seen of late, you can stand there and surrender to the cops and still be killed.

Three months later, she too was dead.

Talking to Strangers is an attempt to understand what really happened by the side of the highway that day in rural Texas.

Why write a book about a traffic stop gone awry? Because the debate spawned by that string of cases was deeply unsatisfying. One side made the discussion about racism—looking down at the case from ten thousand feet. The other side examined each detail of each case with a magnifying glass. What was the police officer *like*? What did he do, precisely? One side saw a forest, but no trees. The other side saw trees and no forest.

Each side was right, in its own way. Prejudice and incompetence go a long way toward explaining social dysfunction in the United States. But what do you do with either of those diagnoses aside from vowing, in full earnestness, to try harder next time? There are bad cops. There are biased cops. Conservatives prefer the former interpretation, liberals the latter. In the end the two sides canceled each other out. Police officers still kill people in this country, but those deaths no longer command the news. I suspect that you may have had to pause for a

moment to remember who Sandra Bland was. We put aside these controversies after a decent interval and moved on to other things.

I don't want to move on to other things.

3.

In the sixteenth century, there were close to seventy wars involving the nations and states of Europe. The Danes fought the Swedes. The Poles fought the Teutonic Knights. The Ottomans fought the Venetians. The Spanish fought the French—and on and on. If there was a pattern to the endless conflict, it was that battles overwhelmingly involved neighbors. You fought the person directly across the border, who had always been directly across your border. Or you fought someone inside your own borders: the Ottoman War of 1509 was between two brothers. Throughout the majority of human history, encounters—hostile or otherwise—were rarely between strangers. The people you met and fought often believed in the same God as you, built their buildings and organized their cities in the same way you did, fought their wars with the same weapons according to the same rules.

But the sixteenth century's bloodiest conflict fit none of those patterns. When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés met the Aztec ruler Montezuma II, neither side knew anything about the other at all.

Cortés landed in Mexico in February of 1519 and slowly made his way inland, advancing on the Aztec capital of

Tenochtitlán. When Cortés and his army arrived, they were in awe. Tenochtitlán was an extraordinary sight—far larger and more impressive than any of the cities Cortés and his men would have known back in Spain. It was a city on an island, linked to the mainland with bridges and crossed by canals. It had grand boulevards, elaborate aqueducts, thriving marketplaces, temples built in brilliant white stucco, public gardens, and even a zoo. It was spotlessly clean—which, to someone raised in the filth of medieval European cities, would have seemed almost miraculous.

“When we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments,” one of Cortés’s officers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, recalled. “And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream?...I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about.”

The Spanish were greeted at the gates of Tenochtitlán by an assembly of Aztec chiefs, then taken to Montezuma. He was a figure of almost surreal grandeur, carried on a litter embroidered with gold and silver and festooned with flowers and precious stones. One of his courtiers advanced before the procession, sweeping the ground. Cortés dismounted from his horse. Montezuma was lowered from his litter. Cortés, like the Spaniard he was, moved to embrace the Aztec leader—only to be restrained by Montezuma’s attendants. No one *embraced* Montezuma. Instead, the two men bowed to each other.

“Art thou not he? Art thou Montezuma?”

Montezuma answered: “Yes, I am he.”

No European had ever set foot in Mexico. No Aztec had ever met a European. Cortés knew nothing about the Aztecs, except to be in awe of their wealth and the extraordinary city they had built. Montezuma knew nothing of Cortés, except that he had approached the Aztec kingdom with great audacity, armed with strange weapons and large, mysterious animals—horses—that the Aztecs had never seen before.

Is it any wonder why the meeting between Cortés and Montezuma has fascinated historians for so many centuries? That moment—500 years ago—when explorers began traveling across oceans and undertaking bold expeditions in previously unknown territory, an entirely new kind of encounter emerged. Cortés and Montezuma wanted to have a conversation, even though they knew nothing about the other. When Cortés asked Montezuma, “Art thou he?,” he didn’t say those words directly. Cortés spoke only Spanish. He had to bring two translators with him. One was an Indian woman named Malinche, who had been captured by the Spanish some months before. She knew the Aztec language Nahuatl and Mayan, the language of the Mexican territory where Cortés had begun his journey. Cortés also had with him a Spanish priest named Gerónimo del Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked in the Yucatán and learned Mayan during his sojourn there. So Cortés spoke to Aguilar in Spanish. Aguilar translated into Mayan for Malinche. And Malinche translated the Mayan into Nahuatl for Montezuma—and when Montezuma replied, “Yes, I am,” the long translation chain ran in reverse. The kind of easy face-to-face interaction that each had

lived with his entire life had suddenly become hopelessly complicated.*

Cortés was taken to one of Montezuma's palaces—a place that Aguilar described later as having “innumerable rooms inside, antechambers, splendid halls, mattresses of large cloaks, pillows of leather and tree fibre, good eider-downs, and admirable white fur robes.” After dinner, Montezuma rejoined Cortés and his men and gave a speech. Immediately, the confusion began. The way the Spanish interpreted Montezuma's remarks, the Aztec king was making an astonishing concession: he believed Cortés to be a god, the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy that said an exiled deity would one day return from the east. And he was, as a result, surrendering to Cortés. You can imagine Cortés's reaction: this magnificent city was now effectively his.

But is that really what Montezuma meant? Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, had a reverential mode. A royal figure such as Montezuma would speak in a kind of code, according to a cultural tradition in which the powerful projected their status through an elaborate false humility. The word in Nahuatl for a *noble*, the historian Matthew

* The idea that Montezuma considered Cortés a god has been soundly debunked by the historian Camilla Townsend, among others. Townsend argues that it was probably just a misunderstanding, following from the fact that the Nahua used the word *teotl* to refer to Cortés and his men, which the Spanish translated as *god*. But Townsend argues that they used that word only because they “had to call the Spaniards something, and it was not at all clear what that something should be.... In the Nahua universe as it had existed up until this point, a person was always labeled as being from a particular village or city-state, or, more specifically, as one who filled a given social role (a tribute collector, prince, servant). These new people fit nowhere.”

Restall points out, is all but identical to the word for *child*. When a ruler such as Montezuma spoke of himself as small and weak, in other words, he was actually subtly drawing attention to the fact that he was esteemed and powerful.

“The impossibility of adequately translating such language is obvious,” Restall writes:

The speaker was often obliged to say the opposite of what was really meant. True meaning was embedded in the use of reverential language. Stripped of these nuances in translation, and distorted through the use of multiple interpreters...not only was it unlikely that a speech such as Montezuma’s would be accurately understood, but it was probable that its meaning would be turned upside down. In that case, Montezuma’s speech was not his surrender; it was his acceptance of a Spanish surrender.

You probably remember from high-school history how the encounter between Cortés and Montezuma ended. Montezuma was taken hostage by Cortés, then murdered. The two sides went to war. As many as twenty million Aztecs perished, either directly at the hands of the Spanish or indirectly from the diseases they had brought with them. Tenochtitlán was destroyed. Cortés’s foray into Mexico ushered in the era of catastrophic colonial expansion. And it also introduced a new and distinctly modern pattern of social interaction. Today we are now thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own. The modern world is not two brothers feuding for control of the

Ottoman Empire. It is Cortés and Montezuma struggling to understand each other through multiple layers of translators. *Talking to Strangers* is about why we are so bad at that act of translation.

Each of the chapters that follows is devoted to understanding a different aspect of the stranger problem. You will have heard of many of the examples—they are taken from the news. At Stanford University in northern California, a first-year student named Brock Turner meets a woman at a party, and by the end of the evening he is in police custody. At Pennsylvania State University, the former assistant coach of the school's football team, Jerry Sandusky, is found guilty of pedophilia, and the president of the school and two of his top aides are found to be complicit in his crimes. You will read about a spy who spent years undetected at the highest levels of the Pentagon, about the man who brought down hedge-fund manager Bernie Madoff, about the false conviction of the American exchange student Amanda Knox, and about the suicide of the poet Sylvia Plath.

In all of these cases, the parties involved relied on a set of strategies to translate one another's words and intentions. And in each case, something went very wrong. In *Talking to Strangers*, I want to understand those strategies—analyze them, critique them, figure out where they came from, find out how to fix them. At the end of the book I will come back to Sandra Bland, because there is something about the encounter by the side of the road that ought to haunt us. Think about how *hard* it was. Sandra Bland was not someone Brian Encinia knew from the neighborhood or down the street. That would have been easy: *Sandy!*

How are you? Be a little more careful next time. Instead you have Bland from Chicago and Encinia from Texas, one a man and the other a woman, one white and one black, one a police officer and one a civilian, one armed and the other unarmed. They were strangers to each other. If we were more thoughtful as a society—if we were willing to engage in some soul-searching about how we approach and make sense of strangers—she would not have ended up dead in a Texas jail cell.

But to start, I have two questions—two puzzles about strangers—beginning with a story told by a man named Florentino Aspillaga years ago in a German debriefing room.