

SONIA SANCHEZ

b. 1934

One of the most admired and respected poets of the Black Arts movement, Sonia Sanchez was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and was reared in Harlem. After graduating from Hunter College in 1955, she began work on behalf of the Congress of Racial Equality. Her early ideals were integrationist; however, after hearing a powerful speech by Malcolm X—on a rainy Sunday afternoon in New York during the early 1960s—she became a vernacular poet for the African American masses.

In the late sixties, Sanchez helped to forward the movement for black studies at San Francisco State College. There, the black studies movement met its first severe challenges: the administrators and board of trustees worked hard to discredit the program. Eventually, under the leadership of S. I. Hayakawa, black studies was eliminated—a whole department was closed down. Sanchez, Nathan Hare, and others were in the forefront of the resistance to such actions. The San Francisco State black studies model—with its strong and legitimate demands for departmental autonomy and nonstandardized curricula—was in some ways the diametrical opposite of Yale's more accommodationist black studies project.

In the 1970s, Sanchez headed the Afro-American Studies Program at Amherst College, frequently confronting the hostility or indifference of the college's president and deans. Later in the decade, she became a well-known spokesperson for the Nation of Islam. She was idealistic when she entered the Nation in 1972, but she was literally evicted from its Chicago offices in 1975. Afterward, she taught as a visiting professor in African American studies and English at the University of Pennsylvania.

Sanchez has never separated her work as an essayist, poet, short story writer, and dramatist from her life as an academic, teacher, and critic. Her extensive travels have included visits to Cuba, China, and Scandinavia. Certainly Sanchez's most remarkable quality is her dazzling performative style. She does not read her works in the manner of, say, a slow-paced professor of British literature. Rather, she invokes the vocal intonations of Africa and African America in performance, moving audiences to call/response interaction that can make the rafters of the largest auditoriums ring.

Beginning with the slim volume *Homecoming* (1969), her work has progressed through dozens of collections of verse, dramas, children's books, and critical and familiar essays. A more recent volume, *homegirls & handgrenades* (1984), received the American Book Award in 1985. Speaking in a voice that resounds with the blues beat of late-night worrying and the early-morning energy of revolution, Sanchez's poems maintain a freshness and attraction almost unmatched by those of any other poet of the Black Arts movement.

for our lady

yeh.

billie.¹

if someone

had loved u like u
shud have been loved
ain't no tellin what
kinds of songs

5

u wud have swung
gainst this country's wite mind.
or what kinds of lyrics

wud have pushed us from

10

our blue / nites.

yeh.

billie.

if some blk / man

had reallee

15

made u feel

permanentlee warm.

ain't no tellen

where the jazz of yo / songs.
wud have led us.

1969

1. Billie Holiday (1915–1959), jazz vocalist, was frequently referred to as Lady Day.

Introduction (Queens of the Universe)

We Black/woooomen have been called many things: foxes, matriarchs, whores, bougies, sweet mommas, gals, sapphires, sisters and recently Queens. i would say that Black/woooomen have been a combination of all these words because if we examine our past/history, at one time or another we've had to be like those words be saying.

but today, in spite of much vulgarity splattering us, there are many roles we can discard.

there are many we must discard for our own survival for our own sanity for the contributions we must make to our emerging Black nation.

and what/how we must moooooOOOVE to as the only QUEENS OF THE UNIVERSE to sustain/keep our sanity in this insane messed up/diet/conscious/pill taking/faggotty/masochistic/miss anne/orientated/society has got to be dealt with because that's us. You hear me? US.

Black/woooomen. the only QUEENS OF THE UNIVERSE, even though we be stepping unqueenly sometimes. like it ain't easy being a queen in this unrighteous world full of miss annes and mr. annes. but we steady trying.

for the thing that

From *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974).

Black/woooomen of today must understand
is that loooove/

peace/

contentment will never
be ours for this crackerized country has dealt
on us and colonized us body and soul and
the job of Black/woooomen is to deal with this
under the direction of Black men. We mussssST
absorb/mooovVVE on pass the waylaying whiteness
of our minds while never letting it keep us
from our men, children, naturrrals, long dresses,
morals and our humanity.

for Black/woooomen
are the key. and our reward will be
seeing our warrior sons and beautiful young
sisters moving in human/nationalistic/
revolutionary/ways toward each other. &
the enemy.

Black/woooomen must embrace
Blackness as a religion/husband. Blackness
mussssST sustain us through all these coming
hard years for sisters they are coming. & we
have to be strooong, strooonNGER

than our

yesteryears. our

tomorrows. we must be prepared for all:
gaming, rhetoric. poverty. empty beds.
death. sisters calling in the nite screeeeamen
an arethasong.

save me. somebody saaaAVVE
me. yeh. we be crying together from coast to
coast saying

somebody savvvvVVVE me.
yeh, save us.

savvvvVVVE us all.

did you hear us?

yeh. us. sisters.

your sisters. we be steady
calling each other and Black/woooomen
must organize/reorganize their groups to meet
answer these needs/screeeeams of living.
i mean. sisters must be prepared to go out
to sisters homes to keep them out of bars,
off of quick relationships that will
eventually destroy them and their families.

& our nation.

we must preserve. prolong our
lives. we have to stop eating unhealthy foods/
smoking/drinking/leaning over bars elbowing
away our lives because we blue over some maaaAANN.
sisters. we beautifully Black. not blue.
ain't no time for tears shed for one/single
maaaAAN.

yeh. life's somethingelse. but our
children's lives can't

won't/mussSN'T be like
ours. & their lives will be like ours if we don't
mooooVVVE awaaaAAY from slave actions.
slave mentalities. the only tears to be shed
must be for our nation as we fight a
lonnng fight for freedom. sisters. some
of us Black woowomen who have to move in
the nation without men can have looooOOVE.
it can be the love of/for freedom. we can get
high off the knowledge that one day our
children will mooovVE like free menNNN/woowomen.
can't you see them, sisters? there they be.
walking. moving in freedom. strutting a
high/walk of freedom. runnnnNNING in their
Black air. holding their free/land/nation
up with their laughter. listen to em.
watch em. yeh. do it young brothers.
sisters. doooooooo it.
we Black/woowomen

are the first teachers.
nurses, givers of life. teachers of all
human things.

we must be about building
a strong nation since we are a nation.
loooven. teaching our children. loooven.
teaching our brothers. sisters. loooven.
teaching them so they will be able to
looovve/livvvVVE when their time comes
generations removed from whiteness. we
have to be the guerilla/

fighters for our
children's minds. we musssSSST begin
basement schools in our homes or support
existing Black schools.

white schools teach

Black children to hate themselves, each other
and their parents.

white schools teach our
children tomish ways.

white schools bring
our children in contact with unholy people
who contaminate not only their minds but
their bodies as well.

& if we are committed &
not jiving then our children's minds must be
upmost in OUR minds. are we brothers. sisters
gonna change the world then later on find
out because we didn't educate our children
in our ideology that we have children who are
only part/time/Black children. or would
be hippies? we need young Black minds.
and public schools/catholic schools do
not turn out what we need. & those of us
moving in a warrior's

strength must support.
loooVVVE our warrior/Kings/Gods.
mussSST bear children.

mussSST teach them
their fathers are warriors

among white
faggotry. that we are his core his base
for him to move out against the white men
who plot & connive our destruction each &
every day.

for we must return to Black men
his children full of our women/love/tenderness/
sweet/Blackness full of pride/so they can
shape the male children into young warriors
who will stand alongside them.

so that young
sisters will know the strength. majesty of
Black fathers and smile.

feel warmed by this
strength and mooooVVE

on to their husbands
with these feelings. It has be done.

sisters. because Black men and Black
woomen have a history of alienation in
this country. the devil has superimposed
on our minds myths about ourselves.

we are busy calling each other matriarchs
or no good bums

because the devil has
identified us as such. listen, sisters. i'm not
saying that some of that might not be. we know
it exists. & requires work. new ideas. new thoughts
but it's an easy way out too.

i mean there are
reasons for brothers not able to support their
families. like no gigs. There are reasons for
ago brothers living their lives in bars.
or riding majestic/white

horses in a machine
age. they couldn't see a win nohow.

or there are reasons
for woomen being the head of families.
like brothers cutting out because this
was the cooooolLLL thing to do or because
the sisters made more money than the
brothers and put them out.

we must loook
at our past. not be angered at it. nor upset.
nor reinstigating a hate/name/calling/contest.
we must loooOK.

learnNNN.

moove on passSST. because
waiting for us all if we begin to deal
honestly with each other.

in love ways. in trust.
there's waiting for us.

a Nation. a place for our
BLACKNESS.

if we are about freedom then we must
start talking. moving. towards

an organization
that will sustain us & moooooVVE us
awaaaay from white values & a hollywood/
directed/revolutionary change.

if we are about
just rapping/jiving/gaming

then our life
styles will continue as they are now.
& that means our destruction.

a continuation

of our slave/culture.

sisters.

like that song

be saying. it ain't easy.

it won't be easy a-tall.

because since we are the moral keepers/
teachers/nurses/civilizers/

we must move always in loving ways
toward each other & our brothers.

there must be no
competition between us. no hatred.

& that will

be hard because some sisters are still
moving in negative.

peculiar ways toward
themselves and others. they still believe
what the devil has told them about
themselves.

so we must, those who are wise
enough to belong to an organization

MOOOVVE toward

these sisters and run down their white ways
that define them, make them move as
whores and not as QUEENS.
that's what they are if they could only see
their beauty.

& know that Black/mennNNN
must be left alone to TCB for the nation
for our children for our people.

but after

many talks if they don't listen

then they must be expelled

from the nation/builders

& turned loose

to runNNNN with all the other white/cavish
whores running/polluting the land.

because we are about
keeping to our morals
about building an everlasting nation.

we are about education our children.
moving in non/competitive/ways.

loving each

other.

we are about WORK. CONSTANT. TCBING

on seeing pharaoh sanders blowing

(for chuck)

set 1.

listen
listen
listen

to me.
to me.

a
black
man

with
eyeballs
white.
staring

at your honky faces

listen
listen
listen.

hear
the
cowbells
ring out
my hate.

hear
my
sax
burping
your
shit.

death.

it's black music/magic

u hear. yeah. i'm fucking
u white whore.

From *Journal of Black Poetry*, Summer/Fall 1969.

america. while
i slit your honky throat.

set 2.

split.

you honkies.

move
your slow asses.

get out now

no seconds
on living.

split

now.

man. i'm coming
for u

now with my
blood filled

sax.

calling
all bloods.

beep.
beep.

mary
had
a
little
lamb.

until
she

got
her

throat
cut.

see what i mean?

set 3.

ah ah ah

oh
aah aah aah

ooh
aaah aaah aaah
ooh.

hee hee haa
ho ho hee

a bitch

u white son of

america.

u dead.

woman

COME ride my birth, earth mother
tell me how i have become, became
this woman with razor blades between
her teeth.

 sing me my history O earth mother
about tongues multiplying memories
about breaths contained in straw.
pull me from the throat of mankind

where worms eat, O earth mother.
come to this Black woman. you.
rider of earth pilgrimages.
tell me how i have held five bodies
in one large cocktail of love
and still have the thirst of the beginning sip.
tell me. tellLLLLLLL me, earth mother
for i want to rediscover me. the secret of me
the river of me. the morning ease of me.
i want my body to carry my words like aqueducts.
i want to make the world my diary
and speak rivers.

rise up earth mother
out of rope-strung-trees
dancing a windless dance
come phantom mother
dance me a breakfast of births
let your mouth spill me forth
so i creak with your mornings.
come old mother, light up my mind
with a story bright as the sun.

From Sonia Sanchez, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974).

Sonia Sanchez, selected poems

Haiku

we are sudden stars
you and i exploding in
our blue black skins

Morning Haiku

Let me wear the day
Well so that when it reaches you
You will enjoy it

Poem #3

I gather up
each sound
you left behind
and stretch them
on our bed.
each nite
I breathe you
and become high.

Ballad

(after the spanish)

forgive me if i laugh
you are so sure of love
you are so young
and i too old to learn of love.

the rain exploding
in the air is love
the grass excreting her
green wax is love
and stones remembering
past steps is love,
but you. you are too young
for love
and i too old.

once. what does it matter
when or who, i knew
of love.
i fixed my body
under his and went
to sleep in love
all trace of me
was wiped away

forgive me if i smile
young heiress of a naked dream
you are so young
and i too old to learn of love.

A Poem for My Father (96 years old on Feb. 29, 2000)

With exact wings
Your words sailed back
into your throat. Could
not fly forward.
Your mouth face
startled by this autumn
Thunder went south again.
I had forgotten the salute
of death, how it waits Militarily
on the outskirts of our skin.
I had forgotten how death
howls inside our veins.
O father, how much like a child
again I felt as I ran down doctors
painted on porcelain corridors.
O My father, as I breathed
inhaled for us both,
I began to sing a song
you sang when I was little
without a poet's name,
Afraid of all the shadows
cremating my bones,

Remember the nite,
The nite you said
I love you
remember...

I remembered your voice swollen
in a ritual of words on
152nd Street and St. Nicholas Place.
Now I, daughter of applause,
hands waterlogged with memory,
asked for nothing more
as I circled your hospital room,
sequined with our breaths
in an hour-glass of sound.