



**SINGING HISTORY WITH SONIA SANCHEZ:
AN UNFINISHED AND UNFINISHABLE POEM**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

At the heart of our shared history as a people and as Black women and men is this need and search for a way to live and love fully and freely and create the conditions under which we can do both. In the poetic visions and voice of Sonia Sanchez, we see that history is not only the struggle and record of a people in the process of shaping their world in their own image and interest, but it is also the unending song of love, life and struggle they sing personally and collectively for celebration, self-consciousness, comfort and courage.

So I sit down and read her collection of poems of love, life and struggle, *I've Been A Woman: New and Selected Poems*, The Black Scholar Press, 1979. And I recognize the awesome insight of our ancestors that we are history, i.e., that we are the subject and substance of history, its essential meaning and motive force. Thus, they tell us in the *Husia* "every day is a donation to eternity and even one hour is a contribution to the future." And how we relate to and love each other is an indispensable part of our contribution to history and the world.

Sonia sees this and crafts songs of love, life and struggle that expand the horizon of her self-understanding and allow her to share her gift with us and the world. Speaking to our people and the world using the metaphor of "earth mother" in her poem "Woman", she says "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* (italics mine) O' earth mother . . . / tell me. / tellLLLLL 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."

It is her being self-consciously woman and valuing her and other women's voice and experience that gives her a special insight and authority. For she says, "i've been a woman / with my legs stretched by the wind / rushing the day . . ." Thus, she is not only rough and resistant with "razor blades between (her) teeth," ready to cut thru the paper-thin and thick lies and illusions which surround her, but also a wide-strider, riding the wind to leap over the obstacles that would injure and impede her.

But even as she is a warrior, wide-strider and wind-rider, she is a legendary lover who knows how to walk on water for her beloved, write and talk with age-resistant beauty, add insight into surviving and being strengthened by what she calls "the higher prayer of pain" and then turn it all into an unfinished and unfinishable poem of ongoing and endless goodness.

Since the Sixties, I've read and enjoyed the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, often quoting it in words of war and letters of love or in situations that call for something special a brother might not ordinarily say. Like when she says. "don't go if you do / i won't hear me. morning will / walk from me with life." And woman, "you have stamped your hour on me, tattooed yourself on me like sheets of silk." That's why "away from you these sheets are mummy tapes i twist and turn myself in."

But she also warns us against unwise and unwanted love. She asks "What is it about / me that i claim all the wrong / lives, the same endings?" Of lost love she says, "If i had known, if / i had known you, i would have / left my love at home." She longs for

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the times when she and he made morning rain and she recalls in longing that “his voice used to sing / when he talked to me, used to / smile rivers.” And perhaps too late, she wonders “what do i know of / you? You smile little round moon / smiles from square corners”—a kind of magic if it’s real but deceptive and disastrous if it’s not. So, she asks what must be asked at the beginning of all relationships “who are you / iden. / tify yourself. Tell me your worth amid women.”

Resilient and resistant, she is not easily undone; and says to the Black man, come home to love and life. “Here is my hand i’m not afraid of the night.” And to both men and women, she says, “familiarize your / self with strength, hold each other up against the silence.” Indeed, let each say to the other, “let me be your flute / fashioning laughter from this / bamboo wilderness.”

Finally, Sonia teaches us to love and to embody love, to be it so that when we give it we give ourselves. For we give so little and less than our beloved ones deserve, if we don’t give ourselves and of ourselves. So she says “love. you are. you are / love. i am in, we are in / love. you are. we are.” Indeed,

“you have pierced me so /deeply i cannot turn a / round without bleeding.” It is with this love we share, need and know is possible, “we be. gonna be / even after being.” For we are “blessed and strong. moving beside each other.”

This means we must speak truth, do justice, be faithful, firm and steadfast, caring for and valuing each other in unique and special ways. Thus, she says, “i guess. This is what / i want from you. a promise / made me that no one be allowed in the space that / i have occupied with you.” With such righteous love, even in old age we can in ever youthful love ask “was it yesterday / love we shifted the air and / made it blossom Black?” Accordingly, we honor the name and history African and “bear the rhythm of your name and mine wide on green rivers of change.” And so, let us together sing Sonia’s song, her history of love, life and struggle, hear and see ourselves in it, ride the wind of victorious struggle and together in joy and in the midst of “green rivers of change” create the good relationships and world we long and live for in our time and as a model and mirror for those who come after us.

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