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Discipline and Craft: An Interview with Sonia Sanchez

Best known as a poet and playwright, Sonia Sanchez has also written short stories, children's books, critical essays, and columns for various periodicals. Sanchez was born Wilsonia Benita Driver in Birmingham, Alabama, in September 1934, the daughter of Wilson L. Driver and Lena Jones Driver. Her bachelor of arts degree is from Hunter College, and she did graduate work at New York University. Wilberforce University awarded her an honorary doctorate in 1972. Divorced from Albert Sanchez, she has three children: Anita, Morani Neusi, and Mungu Neusi.

Sanchez's academic as well as literary career has been a long and distinguished one. She was a staff member at the Downtown School in New York from 1965 to 1967, an instructor at San Francisco State College from 1966 to 1968, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh from 1969 to 1970, an assistant professor at Rutgers University from 1970 to 1971, an assistant professor at Manhattan Community College from 1971 to 1973, and an associate professor at Amherst College and at the University of Pennsylvania. At present, she teaches at Temple University, where she is Laura H. Carnell Professor of English. She has also been a Distinguished Minority Fellow at the University of Delaware, Distinguished Poet-in-Residence at Spelman College, and Zale Writer in Residence at Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University.

The list of honors Sanchez has collected is equally long and impressive: a PEN Writing Award in 1969; a National Institute of the Arts and Letters grant in 1970; a National Endowment for the Arts Award for 1978-1979; a Tribute to Black Women Award from the Black Students of Smith College in 1982; a Lucretia Mott Award in 1984; an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1985; an International Women's Award from the Mayor's Commission for Women of Philadelphia in 1987; a Welcome Award from Boston's Museum of Afro-American History in 1990; an Oni Award from the International Black Women's Congress in 1992; a Women Pioneers Hall of Fame Citation from the Young Women's Christian Association, also in 1992; a Roots Award from the Pan-African Studies Community Education Program in 1993; a PEN fellowship in the arts for 1993-1994; and a Legacy Award from Jomandi Productions in 1995. She is an Honorary Citizen of Atlanta, Georgia.

Among Sanchez's books of poetry are *Homecoming* (1969), *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *Love Poems* (1973), *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1973), *I've Been a Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1978), *Homegirls & Handgrenades* (1984), *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), *Wounded in the House of a Friend*

Susan Kelly holds a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh and has taught at Harvard and Tufts Universities. She is the author of six novels, one non-fiction book, and numerous essays on writing and literature.

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(1995), and *Does Your House Have Lions* (1995). For Folkways Records she did an album in 1971, *A Sun Lady for All Seasons Reads Her Poetry*.

Her children's books include *It's a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistuhs* (1971); *The Adventures of Fat Head, Small Head, and Square Head* (1973); and *A Sound Investment and Other Stories* (1979). She has edited *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Blackness Comin' at You* (1971) and *We Be Word Sorcerers: 25 Stories by Black Americans* (1973). Her plays are *The Bronx is Next* (1970); *Sister Son/ji* (1972); *Dirty Hearts* (1973); *Uh Huh: But How Do It Free Us?* (1975); *Malcolm Man/Don't Live Here No More* (1979); *I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't* (1982); and *Black Cats Back and Uneasy Landings* (1995). She has contributed to numerous anthologies.

Sanchez and I spoke on an evening when she was, by her own admission, exhausted, worried, and sad: She had recently returned from a trip to New York to care for her ailing father, and was preparing to visit writer Margaret Walker, whom she had just learned was dying of the cancer that had invaded her brain and robbed her of speech.

Kelly: What moved you to begin writing?

Sanchez: I began writing when I was a little girl, after my grandmother died and I began stuttering and being tongue-tied. The loss of Mama, my grandmother, made me begin that whole process of writing things down.

Kelly: There was a lot of upheaval in your early life, wasn't there? And you were transplanted from Alabama to New York.

Sanchez: Well, I don't know if there was a lot of upheaval. My mother died when I was one, giving birth. My grandmother died when I was six years old. My sister and I lived with a number of people—my aunt, and a dear friend of my father's—until he could get a place for us to be together. On that level, probably the most traumatic thing that happened to me was the death of my grandmother. Transplanting does not necessarily mean upheaval; it just means another place. The "real" problem was the death of the woman who loved me very much.

Kelly: What were the main literary and cultural influences on your poetry?

Sanchez: The cultural thing, I think, was the existence of us as black folk in a place that did not speak well of us, a country that not only had enslaved us but afterward had ignored us—had segregated us and conspired to keep us from learning even the simplest things.

My literary influences came from watching a lot of people who were activists or established people in the black community: Jean Hudson, who was a curator at the Schomburg and gave me my first books to read; Mr. Micheaux, who owned a bookstore at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue; Richard Moore, who owned another bookstore and gave me my first books about black folk in the Caribbean; and then, of course, John Henrik Clarke, a man who began to teach me a lot about African history. And then Malcolm, whose influence on us all was great. Those were some of the first people who began, in a sense, to encourage us all. And, of course, I read Langston Hughes. And I read Countée Cullen, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, and then Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. There was a black woman who was a librarian at the library I went to at 145th Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway who gave me one of the major anthologies of African American poetry to read. And she gave me a book of poetry by Alexander Pushkin which I was fascinated by. I used to go into the library every day—*every day!* But I was going in and getting these little smutty books, novels. I'd take them home and read them in

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one sitting, right? And so one day she just decided to give me something beyond those novels: "Here, you might like this." That book was the poetry of Langston Hughes, so I'm forever grateful for her.

Kelly: I was re-reading today one of your early poems, "to CHucK," and it opens with a reference to e.e. cummings. Was he a stylistic influence?

Sanchez: That poem moves in a very humorous fashion. cummings wrote in free verse style, actually preceding the Beats and us. We eventually began to write the way he did, in terms of the spatial arrangement of the words on paper. That poem is laughing at some of the very sexual poems that he wrote; it's a slight takeoff on cummings. I'm laughing not only at him but also at myself. We *are* a funny people—all of us. We tend to take ourselves much too seriously.

Kelly: There's that bit in it about how "you're not physically here for me, Chuck, so I'm going to screw you on paper."

Sanchez: Right, yeah. I was mocking myself and cummings at the same time. And mocking the whole idea of love, too.

Kelly: Romantic love?

Sanchez: Mmm-hmmm.

Kelly: You organized a workshop in Greenwich Village. Can you tell me about that?

Sanchez: I was not the organizer, but I was a participant. We were studying with the poet Louise Bogan at N.Y.U., and after the course one of the students said, "Let's continue this workshop." About ten of us met in the Village for three years. It was during Louise Bogan's workshop that I published my first poem. I talked to her and asked her if I had any talent, if poetry was a worthwhile pursuit. [*Laughs.*] And she said, "Well, you know, a lot of people have talent. What are you going to do with yours?" And I said, "Well, I just want to know. I'm asking a question." And she said, in her very regal voice, "Yes, yes, yes, yes. You *do* know how to write; you show some promise here." That's all I needed to know; I figured I could work the rest of it out. But she taught us craft; she taught us form. And as a consequence we continued to work on our craft down in the Village. We met every Wednesday night to do our workshop; the only thing you had to do was bring a poem. So many a day I'd sit downstairs in my car to finish up a poem or start one in order to make my appearance. After the first year, I started to publish some things in *Transatlantic Review*, the *Massachusetts Review*, the *Paris Review*. The work that was accepted at the *Paris Review* was never published. I don't know why. It was never returned. They took two of my poems, but I never saw them in print.

Kelly: What years were the workshop held?

Sanchez: Let me see. The Bogan workshop had to have been in 1959, maybe, or 1960.

Kelly: There's a story about how you chose Broadside Press as the publisher for your first book. Can you tell me that?

Sanchez: Many of us chose Dudley Randall because he was opening up a black press at the time. We thought it would be very important to begin our own institution and support our own institution. So that's what we did. Many of us turned our royalties back in to that company so they could then continue to publish and survive, and also publish younger writers. I think Dudley wrote me and asked for a manuscript because he had done a collection of Malcolm's and of a poet out of Chicago, Margaret Burroughs. Dudley asked for poems on Malcolm's life and death. So we sent the poetry in.

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Broadside Press was a very powerful press for a while, because it had Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Etheridge Knight. That's a very powerful group of people to have, with poetry. We sold hundreds of thousands of books.

Kelly: In 1971, a record of you reading your poetry was produced. Have you always thought of poetry as performance art?

Sanchez: No, I don't think of it as performance art. I've gone places to read my poetry and the host would introduce me as a performance poet, which is *fascinating*. The person who read before me, who was a white poet, was *not* introduced as a performance poet, you know? So I understand the language of it; I've been around a long time. I just go on and do what I do.

I wish people in this country would begin at some point to deal with people on an equal basis. We do the work. If you learn your craft and you do the work . . . there *are* performance poets, and they go out into the world and *perform*. And they write their poems for an audience. I get some of those poets as students at Temple. I teach them that poets do not gear their poems up for an audience; you write poetry for yourself. You learn your craft for yourself, in a voice that exists in the world, and you realize you're part of a continuum. You're part of a great tradition of people who began this whole process, all the way from Phillis Wheatley up to the present.

Kelly: When I was reading over some of the critical commentary on your work, I noticed that you've been called the writer most responsible for making urban black English a vehicle for poetic expression.

Sanchez: Well, that comes out of a tradition that had come before me. I'll just explain: Sterling Brown, who is a fine poet . . . during his time, nobody studied him. When we got into the university, we made Brown worthy of study. No one had thought this man was worthy of any kind of serious consideration, because he wrote in black English. He took what I call poor Southern black men and women, who sat on porches and smoked their corncob pipes, and smiled their purple-red gum smiles . . . he put them in poetry and made them worthy of being poetic. You know what I'm saying? He celebrated their lives with dignity. Well, no one thought that was necessarily great.

It is that love of language that has propelled me.

So what I did, then, was I took the whole idea of using black English and dealing with it in an urban setting, incorporating the hipness that was in that black urban setting, which means that the English is going to change, right? Langston Hughes did a similar thing via the jazz idiom that he employed. This urban thing is a smart, take-no-prisoners kind of language, right? It has its own cadence and rhythm. It has its own way of looking at the world. It goes out and says simply that "I am here. Deal with me." The interesting thing that I learned from this was that it also said: "I come as an equal. And I appreciate the language that I speak here in this urban setting." We made this poetic, which is fascinating to me, still, today.

Kelly: It's a very widespread poetic idiom, now.

Sanchez: Exactly.

Kelly: Another comment that I came across is that you're often described as one of the premier exponents of black nationalism.

Sanchez: [*Laughs.*] Well, *I* didn't call myself that.

Kelly: No, this is other people putting that tag on you.

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Sanchez: People always say what they have to say. I call them "CRY-tics" rather than critics.

Kelly: [*Laughs.*] That's good.

Sanchez: But I guess what they're pinpointing is that so many of us listened to Malcolm and began to talk about doing for self, and so many people also talked about the idea of beginning the process of loving our black selves and about taking control of the schools in New York City, and teaching black history and black English and black sociology. I was in the Nation of Islam for a while, too, which was the premier nationalist group in America. That was part of it. I was *never* called a black nationalist in a friendly way. I was certainly attacked by whites and blacks for being that.

Kelly: You left the Nation of Islam after a few years.

Sanchez: I joined in 1972 and was gone in 1975.

Kelly: Was it over feminist issues?

Sanchez: No. I had gone into the Nation because I was raising my children by myself, and the public school situation was really pathetic. The Nation was one of the places to receive a good education at the time; it was a place to go for some kind of protection. It was also doing some very interesting things in terms of attempting to build businesses and schools. So I thought that would be a place for me to go. But I was not greeted well in the Nation, because they said I was a Pan-Africanist, a *revolutionary* Pan-Africanist and socialist. That was told to me point-blank. So I understood, truly, that my days in the Nation were numbered.

Kelly: What you said about education leads me to something else. You were the first college professor to offer a seminar on literature by African American women.

Sanchez: Mmm-hmm. That was at the University of Pittsburgh, a course called "The Black Woman." That was in 1969, right before I came back home to New York City. That course came about because I found myself sitting in my office one night at 9 p.m., and my children were at home with a babysitter. I just looked up and said, "I have to go. I have children. I've been in this office, I've been on this campus since 9 o'clock in the morning, and it's twelve hours later." And I said jokingly, "What we need"—I was talking to all women, who had settled in my office—"what we need is a course on black women." And they said, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! God, yes! Would you teach it?" So I said, "Uh-huh, yeah, right." The next day, there they were, in my office again, saying, "Why don't you write that up?" So I wrote up a course description and sent it upstairs to the powers-that-be. And they sent it back down saying, "What? A course on the black woman?" [*Laughs.*] "There's never been any such course. What books would you use?" And then of course I went through the whole list. Interestingly enough, there were a number of articles in *The Black Scholar*. There weren't a great deal of books out there, right?

Kelly: No, not at the time.

Sanchez: You're right. I moved to use some of the novels that were around about black women. When that course rolled in '69, I had about seventy people in there, about thirty-five men and thirty-five women, and they were sitting across from each other and looking at each other in a very antagonistic way. And there were the administrators who came and sat in to see what they had approved, to make sure this was going to work. I held to the syllabus; I did not veer from that syllabus, right? And here *I* am, in the middle of this. And a young woman jumps up and says, "I hate all men." She didn't have to say "black men," because it was almost a given, in that course. The

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men froze. The women froze. I froze. In the midst of this, the subject of incest came up, because she had been sexually abused by her stepfather. You know, there was *nothing* is my syllabus about incest. What was on my syllabus was the African experience, the movement to the Americas, the Middle Passage, the plantation, and all that—all up to the Civil Rights days, the Black Power days. I didn't have anything called "incest" there. I went over to her and hugged her. The whole class actually held their tears. After class, I helped her get some help and also went in the library that weekend to look for information on incest, which was sparse. So I had to begin to make up my own terms for stuff, at that point. Because if you can't find stuff in the library, you have to become creative, right?

I developed this thing I called "secondary consciousness," which means that black women began to look at black men secondarily during the period of our enslavement, right? I got through all the psychological stuff that was out there on incest. And *then*, one of the young men in the class, maybe three weeks later, jumps up and says, "I hate women." I held him, and he talked about his mother, who had kept him from becoming a man. So *that* whole discussion came down, too, about the "hatred" for black women.

It was an interesting course. After that, I came back to New York City, and I taught in New York City, at Manhattan Community College. And then I left there and went to Amherst College, and was up there for three years, and went from there to work for the newspaper *Muhammed Speaks*. I was the Director of Culture in the Nation. I wrote a women's page and a children's page. *Fascinating* stuff in there. That's how I started writing children's stories.

Kelly: I was going to ask about that. Was that newspaper experience the impetus behind writing children's stories?

Sanchez: Yes, except for the one I had done before that called *The Adventures of Fat Head, Small Head, and Square Head*. That was because my children had asked me to make up a story one night in New York City before we moved to Amherst. They would always say, "Read, read, read!" So I would read to them. And one night, they said, "Don't read; make up a story." So I started by saying, "Once upon a time, there were three friends named Fat Head . . . ." They laughed and giggled, so I got sillier and sillier. Fat Head, Square Head, and I think I had Pin Head in there, but I changed that to Small Head. The next night, they asked for the same story, and I didn't remember it, because I had gone to sleep on the bed telling that story. And when I woke up they were playing with blocks on the floor, and I shooed them off to bed and covered them, and mopped up the bathroom floor where they had flooded the place.

The one time I could rest was when I put the kids in the bathtub. I had a little washing machine—gee, I'd forgotten about that. I put the clothes in the washing machine . . . mm-mmmm . . . and went up on Broadway at night to dry those clothes while the kids were sleeping. I washed the dishes, then sat down to start grading papers. Then, after I did that, I did my *own* writing, and would get to bed most of the time around three o'clock and then get up at six before the kids got up, to fix their breakfast. They were little. Aaaah, jeez. I don't know how you have the energy to do that.

Once the door to the sitter's room was half-open, and I had kicked off my shoes; I guess she didn't hear me. I heard her conversation, and I said, "Why are you saying what I'm doing? Where I went to? Whatever?" It hit me that she was *reporting* on me. At that time, we began to recognize that writers were very much suspect on some levels. So were entertainers like Harry Belafonte, all those people in the Civil Rights Movement. I'd been in the New York CORE [Congress of Racial

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Equality]. I helped to get black studies instituted. Before that point we didn't recognize that they were actually keeping records on us. We thought we were doing . . . jeez.

Kelly: Cultural things?

Sanchez: [*Laughs.*] I thought, "Well, to go to San Francisco State College, and to teach W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* and Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand . . .*" I thought I was doing a literary thing. To teach Marcus Garvey, to teach Franz Fanon, to teach Phillis Wheatley, to teach Ralph Ellison, to teach Richard Wright . . . I didn't realize that would cause someone to come into my classroom. They thought that Du Bois was seditious, and they thought that Robeson was seditious. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Kelly: Sure.

Sanchez: And I was teaching *only* literature, period. I guess I was so naïve, when I look back on it. How could I possibly teach literature without including Du Bois and Booker T. Washington? You couldn't teach it without including Wright. You could not do that. But the point is, the country was so paranoid, I guess. *We* were not. The *country* was paranoid. Then I recognized the fact that any time you begin to teach that which is banned, or not taught on the university level, then there's a question of how authentic it is, but also that perhaps it is not what people should be teaching—what people want to hear, you know? So that's what I discovered at that point.

You know, this country would be much further ahead, toward being human, if they would not assassinate the people who are trying to bring us to a very human stage, a very human point. It's not going to be easy, doing that. We're not talking about Pollyanna kinds of stuff. We're talking about really examining the psyche of America, and talking about what slavery was all about, what indentured servitude was all about, what it meant to force Native Americans on marches, about the Japanese interment camps during World War II.

When I began to search for myself in this thing called black studies, I found other cultures and their secrets. So in my lit class, there were two Asian Americans, and I had come across this reproduction of a poster which said "JAPANESE REPORT TO CAMPS." I didn't know what it was; I'd heard some vague stuff. I brought it into class, and I showed it to the students, and they got very angry at me. They didn't know what it was, either. They came back and said, out loud, with tears in their eyes, that their parents had been put in these camps during World War II. And they had never, never told them of it. And so the secret came out. And one of those young women in that class went on to make a first-class film about people in these camps. Then I discovered all these other people—Chinese who had been building railroads in the West. I discovered Chicanos symbolized by sombreros, and people saying that they were indeed lazy and fat and not ones to work. You know? All these stereotypes.

The amazing thing is that, when you go searching for yourself, you find others, other selves who are similar to you, and who are also there with their own secrets. The point of *my* motion and movement has been to embrace these secrets and make them public knowledge so that they are not secrets anymore. People can't repeat these atrocities *if* you make them public.

Kelly: Has your focus changed, or your perspective, in all the years you've been writing? You've been such a presence on the literary stage for so long.

Sanchez: I think that you grow. My first books were about being very aggressive, very confrontational. They were books that said, "By golly, by gee, I didn't know all this had happened to us as a people. Now I'm going to put it right up in your face, and tell you what

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it's all about." But you don't keep writing the same book. If you are truly a writer, or truly an artist, your writing evolves and changes. You begin to understand the world.

The *Blues* book was a book that I researched before I started to write. I had wanted to do a book that spoke to the evolution of black women, to speak about how black women in this country had come through. That book *talked* about a young Southern girl and her evolving and moving to the north and her movement in the schools there and her meeting political people and her life changing. So it was really about a woman and her personal and political life. I studied *The Book of the Dead*; I studied Masonry; I studied the Holy Koran also, and some parts of the Bible, in order to construct that book.

I had begun to write plays when I was at San Francisco State. My first play was called *The Bronx is Next*. Its point was to talk about how destructive Harlem was. Harlem had had its moments, but the kind of Harlem I was beginning to see . . . the change was coming through drugs and decimation. That was part of the trilogy of plays I was going to do about the burning down of Harlem and the movement of people back south. Dr. Arthur P. Davis, that grand old man of letters down at Howard University, called it one of the great plays of the 1960s. I forever am grateful to him for putting that play into perspective for me.

I wrote *The Bronx is Next* when Ed Bullins called me and said, "Do you write plays?" Without missing a beat, I said, "Yes!" I had never written a play in my life. We were so brash. But it reflected the times. You could never say no, you didn't do something. You said, "Yes!" And you went home and did it. What I did was to sit down for about two days and read. I just saturated myself with plays. I said: "I can do that. Right."

Kelly: We've been talking about playwriting and all sorts of different literary movements. Are there any current literary trends that you particularly like or dislike?

Sanchez: I don't dislike any literary trends. I support a lot of what the young people are doing. I always just say you should learn the craft. You know, we are learning the craft till we take our last breath. That's what we do. I don't particularly care for slams because of what I've seen happen. I've seen some slams that people have done where it's a friendly kind of atmosphere. But then I've seen people just stand and listen to someone read and make it a competition. Poetry is not competition. It's about listening to your colleagues, your comrades, your fellow poets, and enjoying it—and then getting up on stage and complementing that, you know, not besting it. When you get up there and have to best someone, that means you really don't listen to what they do, or what they say. You really don't grow, in that sense. It means also you're listening to an audience, and *not* the audience that's within your bones and your marrow.

Kelly: That sounds like a lesson you try to impart to your students.

Sanchez: It is.

Kelly: What's the most important lesson you want your students to walk away having learned?

Sanchez: Discipline. That you don't really do this stuff unless you are disciplined. I could not have done sixteen books without some discipline. It was a hard thing to learn, but I had to learn how to discipline my life in order to write. And, also, learning the craft. Poetry is a craft that one has to learn. When I was doing the long poem *Does Your House Have Lions*, it was a hard poem to write. Many nights I threw my notebook across the room, along with the rhyming dictionary, when I couldn't quite get what I was searching for. But ten minutes later I was picking it up and brushing it off, apologizing for

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that outburst. And I put it on the next pillow and slept with it and got up the next morning and was appreciative of what I'd written the night before, whether it worked or not.

It is that love of language that has propelled me, that love of language that came from listening to my grandmother speak black English. I would repeat what she said and fall out of the bed and fall down on the floor and laugh, and she knew that I was enjoying her language, because she knew that I didn't speak black English. But I *did* speak hers, you know. It is that love of language that, when you have written a poem that you know works, then you stand up and you dance around, or you open your door and go out on the porch and let out a loud laugh, you know. Or you go walking down the hallway and you dance on the chandeliers. It is that love of language that says, simply, to the ancestors who have done this before you, "I am keeping the love of life alive, the love of language alive. I am keeping words that are spinning on my tongue and getting them transferred on paper. I'm keeping this great tradition of American poetry alive."

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