

Review of I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue when I Ain't and Other Plays by Sonia Sanchez, (Jacqueline Wood, Ed.), Durham, Duke University Press, 2010

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I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't is the title of Sonia Sanchez's last produced play, written in 1982. It is also the title of this edited collection of her plays and essays, covering 40 years of Sanchez's career as a choreographer, poet, playwright and essayist. With an extensive introduction by Editor Jacqueline Wood, the collection serves as a history of Black Theatre, social and artistic commentary, and a collection of protest literature.

As the first collection of Sanchez's plays, this book is both a groundbreaking collection for the Theatre genre, but as well as an important contribution to the documentation of Sanchez's historical accomplishments as a playwright. As a poet, Sanchez is celebrated for her militant stance, recognition of and documentation of the truth. In the 2004 essay *Poetry Run Loose*, which serves as the first chapter, Sanchez explains her development as an artist, writer and director. She explains the process of grounding the theatrical works in multilayered messaging. Unlike in poetry, where the words direct the reader, plays allow words, actions, sounds, and sights to motivate the reader by addressing multiple senses. Messages are sent and received between and among the actors and audience. Sanchez shares that she thrives on the dialog of the play, both in writing and directing.

The three explanatory essays combined with Sanchez's seven plays serve to explicate the still necessary role of the protest artist and protest art. Although her plays span a period of forty years, they highlight the ahistorical position of the oppressed, the conundrum of revolution and revolutionaries, and the necessity of truth telling, no matter how ugly it is. Embracing her role as a militant poet, she is unafraid to take on multiple forms of oppression and categories of discrimination, from militarism, ageism, illiteracy, classism, mental illness, physical disability and social status. In her essays, she explains, throughout multiple points in her life and artistic development (the 1970's, 80's and 2000's) that she continues to write "because she has something to say" (Preface to *Uh Huh; But How Do It Free Us?* 1972, p. 19) and that 'something' is always reflective of the truth (*Ruminations/Reflections* 1984, p. 15).

Sanchez's plays explore resistance (*The Bronx Is Next*), attempting to make a new way through revolutionary acts (*Uh Huh; But How do It Free Us?*), and the pain and harsh realities of living a life of oppression in which resistance is the only choice (*Sister Son/ji, I'm Black when I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't*, and *2x2*). *Sister Son/ji, I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't* and *2x2* are all reflective pieces. In it, we see women protagonists travel back and forth through time and incarnations addressing the challenges life has handed them, and the difficulties they have encountered in their attempts to remain whole Black women in a society that makes them invisible, uses them as objects, takes advantage of them or actively works to destroy them. The women deal with intergenerational pain (*2x2*) mental illness (*I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't*) and the simple passage of time (*The Bronx is Next, Sister Son/ji*). Of course, Sanchez establishes all of her characters in the context of community, and society at large, weaving stories that reach well beyond the confines of each characters individual social position and location.

As a collection of plays and essays, this text serves multiple disciplines and audiences well. Sanchez's essays and plays along with Wood's introductory essay are accessible to various reading levels. This book appeals to casual readers, students, and academics. In the tradition of Sanchez's work, the book easily crosses social and intellectual boundaries. From high school classrooms to book clubs, readers will find various portions if not all of the text inviting and interesting. The introduction, although lengthy, can be used as a stand-alone history of Black Theatre. Use of the text in high school and college classrooms will introduce a new generation to Sanchez's work, while reuniting fans in book clubs or as individual adult readers. Academically, the text is interdisciplinary. It is useful in American Studies, Sociology or History courses to examine protest art (or in the case of sociology, the *role* of protest art) in modern America. As a Theatre or Communications course, Sanchez's reflective essays are useful in exploring the changing and

ongoing role of the artist and art, as well as the use of theatre and dance that is community based. Of course, the text can also be used as performance pieces as well. The discipline of Women's Studies will benefit from the text as Sanchez's work has historically been neglected in the discipline; the book can be used to examine Sanchez as an artist, an activist, an educator and explorer of multiple standpoints and voices, positions that are part of the foundation of Women's Studies. Finally, English Literature courses will find the text helpful as Sanchez uses many of the devices she is famous for in her poetry in her plays as well.

I'm Black When I'm Singing I'm Blue When I Ain't proves to be a useful and necessary collection. While Sanchez's plays have not seen the stage as often (and sometimes never) as they should, her work is valuable and this volume is long overdue. This text is not only timely, for readers have gone without a collection of Sanchez' works for too long, but also relevant, as 2011 witnessed the global fall of regimes in North Africa and the Middle East through revolutionary acts. The consequences, difficulty in readjusting, broken communities and struggle of putting things together again, have faded to the background. Sanchez's work calls us all to remember the difficulty of truth telling, and the stony path of the revolutionary.