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I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't: And Other Plays

Sonia Sanchez
Jacqueline Wood, editor
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"[L]onliness selects the sensitive people." All of the Sonia Sanchez plays collected in this volume reflect this feeling of being lost, lonely, shouting in alter-nate bursts of anger, despair, and a type of maniacal, make-believe joy.

As editor Jacqueline Wood writes in her lengthy introduction, "Known for her work as a major poet, teacher, and champion of and for black culture, Sonia Sanchez is regarded world-wide as a living legend, a revered female writer of the black community."

The first part of this volume contains Sanchez's essays, written from 1974 to 2004. In these essays, Sanchez explains that as a poet, she noticed how much attention is paid to her words. She found that so many voices emerged in her poems that the poem could not contain them. "I saw a really kindred kind of spirit going from poetry to the play." After moving dialogue from a working poem to a dramatic work, *The Bronx is Next*, she found that the new genre worked, and began a trilogy of plays which dramatize the exodus of blacks moving from Harlem, returning home to the South.

Written sporadically from 1968 to 2009, the plays use various dramatic presentations and tools: characters as representatives, not names; times and settings that shift city to city with generations; monologues, which are dissertations on the problems they address; and Greek choruses who observe and comment on the action and actors.

In the title play, *I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't*, a riff from an old blues song, Sanchez writes her main character, Reena, as a black inmate in an institution. Reena suffers from a multiple personality disorder caused by abuse and self-loathing; her characters present the personalities of four black female singers who represent historical eras with all of their upheavals: Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Dianne Reeves.

Through this play, as with the others, Sanchez shows the political and personal avenues from the past to a hopeful present. Her art is activism, and her activism is aimed at social justice. Sanchez—professor, lecturer, and poet, is winner of the P.E.N. Writing Award, the American Book Award and the Community Service Award from the National Black Caucus of State Legislators. She also received the Peace and Freedom Award from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. This book is designed as a resource for "…teaching, particularly in terms of revisiting the feminist dramatic voice in black revolutionary art."
MARY POPHAM (August 16, 2010)

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