

Interview with Sonia Sanchez by Lynette Muse, Temple University, African American Migration to Philadelphia Oral History Project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 14, 1987.

LYNETTE MUSE: I am Lynette Muse, and I am here with Professor Sonia Sanchez, whose life and work embody the spirit, moving force and contribution of African American womanhood in our history. Through her work as an author of poetry, drama, fiction and prose, Professor Sanchez articulates and relates the concerns of women of color, be it the plight of women in Harlem, Philadelphia, Birmingham, Nicaragua or South Africa. A passionate fighter for social and political justice, Sonia has been a tireless advocate in activism communities across the nation.

She is a pioneer of the Black Studies movement in the nation. In the United States, co-founder of the Black Studies Program at San Francisco State College in 1967. She initiated and taught the first course in the country on black women at the University of Pittsburgh. She has prepared and taught black curricula at seven colleges and universities. A humanitarian, she also teaches writing to community groups and to prisons. Currently, she is professor at Temple University.

She is recipient of the 1979 NEA Fellowship for Creative Writing, the recipient of the 1984 Lucretia Mott Award, and the recipient of the American Book Award for *Homegirls and Handgrenades*. Professor Sanchez, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and raised in Harlem, will now talk about the migration of her family from the South to the North.

SONIA SANCHEZ: I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and when I was, I think, one year old, because my mother died in childbirth, my grandmother—I went to live with my grandmother. My grandmother came and got us. And we lived with her, my sister and I. It was quite an experience living with my grandmother, you see, because my grandmother was a grand, old black woman who was the pillar of her church; she was a deaconess. She was always in my head in church, saying—which meant that we were always in church. My sister and I went to church for Sunday school. We went for 11 o'clock services, and we went home and ate and came back for the evening services, so we were always sitting in church on Sundays.

But a very special thing was also the Saturday sojourns with the sisters who came to the house to cook, or to talk, or to plan things for the church. And I used to sneak into the house and listen to the conversations. A recent piece I did is a piece about my grandmother, named *Under a Soprano Sky*, which is a letter to her, simply called *Dear Mama*. And it came about because my father came down to Philadelphia from New York City with a picture of my grandmother, and he said to me, "Sonia, this is a picture of my mother, your grandmother. You know her name was Elizabeth, but we called her Lizzie." And I said, "Yes, but we called her Mama." But the picture did not look anything like what I had in my head over all of those years. My memories of my grandmother, I guess, were memories that I had walked with, but I had not seen a photo of her in so many years. So I took the photo upstairs and I wrote this piece.

[Reads] Dear Mama, It is Christmas Eve and the year is passing away with calloused feet. My father, your son, and I decorate the night with words. Sit ceremoniously in human song. Watch our blue sapphire words eclipse the night. We have come to this simplicity from afar.

He stirs, pulls from his pocket a faded picture of you. Blackwoman. Sitting in frigid peace. All of your biography preserved in your face. And my eyes draw up short as he says, “Her name was Elizabeth but we used to call her Lizzie.” And I hold your picture in my hands. But I know your name by heart. It’s Mama. I hold you in my hands and let time pass over my face: “Let my baby be. She ain’t like the others. She rough. She’ll stumble on gentleness later on.”

Ah, Mama. Gentleness ain’t never been no stranger to my genes. But I did like the roughness of running and swallowing the wind, diving in rivers I could barely swim, jumping from second story windows into a saving backyard bush. I did love you for loving me so hard until I slid inside your veins and sailed your blood to an uncrucified shore.

And I remember Saturday afternoons at our house. The old sister deaconesses sitting in sacred pain. Black cadavers burning with lost aromas. And I crawled behind the couch and listed to breaths I had never breathed. Tasted their enormous martyrdom. Lives spent on so many things. Heard their laughter at Sister Smith’s latest performance in church—her purse sailing toward Brother Thomas’s head again. And I hugged the laughter round my knees. Draped it round my shoulder like a Spanish shawl.

And history began once again. I received it and let it circulate in my blood. I learned on those Saturday afternoons about women rooted in themselves, raising themselves in dark America, discharging their pain without ever stopping. I learned about women fighting men back when they hit them: “Don’t never let no mens hit you mo than once girl.” I learned about “womens waking up they mens” in the nite with pans of hot grease and the compromises reached after the smell of hot grease had penetrated their sleepy brains. I learned about loose women walking their abandoned walk down front in church, crossing their legs instead of their hands to God. And I crept into my eyes. Alone with my daydreams of being woman. Adult. Powerful. Loving. Like them. Allowing nobody to rule me if I didn’t want to be.

And when they left. When those old bodies had gathered up their sovereign smells. After they had kissed and packed up beans snapped and cakes cooked and laughter bagged. After they had called out their last goodbyes, I crawled out of my place. Surveyed the room. Then walked over to the couch where some had sat for hours and bent my head and smelled their evening smells. I screamed out loud, “Oooweeee! Ain’t that stinky!” and I laughed laughter from a thousand corridors. And you turned Mama, closed the door, chased me round the room until I crawled into a corner where your large body could not reach me. But your laughter pierced the little alcove where I sat laughing at the night. And your humming sprinkled my small space. Your humming about your Jesus and how one day he was going to take you home...

Because you died when I was six Mama, I never laughed like that again. Because you died without warning Mama, my sister and I moved from family to stepmother to friend of the family. I never felt your warmth again.

But I knew corners and alcoves and closets where I was pushed when some mad woman went out of control. Where I sat for days while some woman raved in rhymes about unwanted children. And work. And not enough money. Or love. And I sat out my childhood with stutters and poems gathered in my head like some winter storm. And the poems erased the stutters and pain. And the words loved me and I loved them in return.

My first real poem was about you Mama and death. My first real poem recited an alphabet of spit splattering a white bus driver's face after he tried to push cousin Lucille off a bus and she left Birmingham under the cover of darkness. Forever. My first real poem was about your Charles White arms holding me up against death.

My life flows from you Mama. My style comes from a long line of Louises who picked me up in the nite to keep me from wetting the bed. A long line of Sarahs who fed me and my sister and fourteen other children from watery soups and beans and a lot of imagination. A long line of Lizzies who made me understand love. Sharing. Holding a child up to the stars. Holding your tribe in a grip of love. A long line of Black people holding each other up against silence.

I still hear your humming Mama. The color of your song calls me home. The color of your words saying, "Let her be. She got a

right to be different. She gonna stumble on herself one of these days. Just let the child be.”

And I be Mama.

And that’s a piece that I did for my grandmother which conjured up all kinds of remembrances about her, who she was and what she had done, and how she had raised me and my sister for those—for six years, and her influence on me also, too. In the same fashion, I remember my childhood. I write in *A Blues Book for a Blue Black Magical Women* about that period in the South when I grew up, when I was what they call a tomboy, when I ran outside with the brothers, ran and jumped over fences, and got scars on my arms that lasted forever. Jumped from a second-story window, as I said in the piece, and landed in a saving backyard bush. Who was always outside torn up. You know how you have members of the families, and they go out and play and they come back all clean and pretty, and whatever? I would go out in my little dress and would come back with the dress torn, the lace torn, the braids out, the hair out.

LM: Sounds familiar. No, go on. [Laughs]

SS: I mean really, that’s how I came back, and everyone would just cluck their tongue, “That girl just ain’t going to be. She ain’t going to grow up at all.” But Mama used to just say, “Let her be. The girl will be all right. She rough, but she’ll be all right.” And I am eternally grateful for her understanding of me as a child at that time, the need that she allowed to express herself, and to just run. I used to love to race the wind, and to go outside and just be turned loose.

Coming to New York City, however, there was no space. We moved to New York City when I was eight years old, and we moved into an apartment where there was no space, a small apartment. There was no green grass to run on, no trees to climb, no going out back doors, slamming back doors, coming in front doors, slamming front doors, and announcing you're there, saying you're hungry and then grabbing some food. Not that fullness, nor that lushness that was there in the South. You came to a starkness of Harlem, a starkness of the North, a starkness of classrooms where people did not really appreciate your blackness.

I had gone to school in the South, in elementary school, and the teachers were all black. The teachers encouraged you to learn. They insisted that you learn. If you didn't learn they would call your parents up and tell your father, you know, "Your child didn't do her homework," whatever. And then the parents got directly on you and said, "Look, get to this work."

There was that separation for teachers, a non-interest, actually, I would say. We didn't see ourselves in the classroom anymore. In the South I had seen, indeed, Langston Hughes. I had heard him—not him; I had heard the poetry of Langston Hughes. I had heard the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. I knew that they existed. There were things that we had assemblies where black people talked. So you knew that black people did things in power.

You get turned on here in the North, and in the classrooms you never see anything that reminds you of anything that's black. You never saw anything that said that we had, that we were. There was a

complete denial of self, and of black people, Hispanics, anybody, third-world people, period.

And so, my association, I think, being [unclear] that all things European began in New York City—all things, all education.

LM: Outside the classroom?

SS: Outside the classroom, the only thing that happened to me was that I was a reader, an avid reader, and one of the librarians at 145<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, between Broadway and Amsterdam, saw me coming in. And she presented me—said, “Why don’t you take these books out and read these?” And they were black authors. It was Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, and people like that to read. And that’s fascinating, because she recognized that I should be reading. She even gave me a book about Pushkin and his poetry, but it was much too difficult for me to understand. But still, I took it home and looked through it, and I loved the poetry. But she presented me with all of these people who were black writers, and I am very grateful for her at that particular point.

But I am saying in the academic arena there was nothing that spoke to us, although we had to read Dumas in high school, but they never said that this was this African, this Franco—this French-African, this man who lived in France. Or Pushkin, never said that he was an Afro-Russian at all, period. There was just—it was if these people just existed outside of us. So of course in our history classes we came across ourselves always as aberrations, only as the slave, shucking-and-jiving, and not even hard-working, but always watermelon kind of eating person. And so you immediately would

shy away from this kind of sense of yourself because you didn't see yourself just as that. So you denied that part of you.

Also, we went to movies—the outside part, on movies on Saturdays. The movies we were inundated with, the messages we were inundated with, were messages that came from the movie houses that most of the black men were scared, would say things like, “Feets get moving. Hoo, hoo, hoo.” Or, the black women were like big, fat mammies, or whores, the ones who wore tight dresses and they would always be house wreckers, home breakers, the Lena Horne-type character we saw in the movies and all the—

LM: Diana Ross?

SS: No, the big, fat mammy, like in *Gone with the Wind*, kind of thing.

LM: Aunt Jemima.

SS: Aunt Jemima kind of syndrome. I abhorred the Aunt Jemima kind of syndrome. They would say things like, “Sure, Miss Lucy May, honey child. Sure, Miss Oak. Honey, of course I'm going to take care of you and your little crumb crushers, 'cause I loves you so much. You're just my little sugarbum.” All kinds of words like that.

LM: What did the people in the community offer?

SS: Well, I'm giving you a picture of the times, the contrast to the South in the North, I was trying to talk about. Of course there were positives in our community. We spent most of our times in school. The contrast with the community, it was not the South, but we did have people—I didn't appreciate it at the time, a woman by the name of Miss Craig. I was trying to think of her name the other day, and I'm glad I just said it now, because I just thought of her name, Miss Craig, who used to sit out, and she had the front apartment. And Miss Craig

used to sit at her window, on her windowsill. And everything that we did that was wrong she would report to our fathers and our mothers, and whatever. But the good thing about Miss Craig is that if a stranger came into the community she would call the police right away. Or, you know, she would follow the stranger, or look at him, whatever, and she called and would make sure that we were indeed taken care of, you see. So I didn't understand what a protector she was of us all.

Once we went up on the roof with a cat, and we were going to drop this cat off the roof. But in order to do that, we had to lean over the roof, which means you were really in peril of death, of falling from that roof. And I leaned over the roof and who did I see looking up from the first floor? Miss Craig. And she said, "Get down from that roof!" Because it was dangerous being up there. It was dangerous. Anyone could have been up there. It just so happened the door was open; we got on the roof, you see. It was very dangerous, what we were doing. "I'm going to tell your father! You get down from that roof, Sonia. You hear me?" And we said, "Oh, Miss Craig, whatever." But we ran down from that roof, and I was hoping she wouldn't tell, but she never forgot. And of course, we never went on that roof again. "I'll spank you if you go up on that roof again."

Within that whole black community that we lived in there was the candy store, with a black man who would give us credit, and sell us stuff at the corner store—pickles, sour pickles, and potato chips, and junk that we ate. And we hung out in front of his candy store, too, and feel secure there. There were the parents, of course, many of them first generation from the South, who lived there. There was a

community that watched out for you—not only Miss Craig in her very nosy fashion, but also the other people who would look out for you, who would watch you and make sure that the neighborhood was secure. Those are the kinds of things that we all played together in that neighborhood, and we very much protected each other. We were protected there.

So there was a sense of community, but not as much, as I said, as one felt in the South.

LM: Well, most of the family members, did they move to New York with you? Just you and your sister—?

SS: And my father.

LM: Okay, and your father.

SS: And my stepmother.

LM: Okay. What about, were there any members that were still left in Birmingham?

SS: Yeah, there was my aunt, and I guess an uncle. I think they're dead now. My aunt and her children, and a lot of cousins there, and my brother who came north when he was—my brother from my father's, another marriage of my father's—who came north when he was about sixteen or eighteen to New York City, and lived by father. I have a poem to my brother on the occasion of his death. He died in 1981.

LM: Okay. Could you give me the name of your father and your sister, and then your brother, and then maybe read the poem about your brother, the death of your brother?

SS: Right. And then I'll maybe read some sections about coming from the South, if that's okay, going to the North.

LM: Okay, that's fine.

SS: My father's name is—the book is dedicated to my father and my brother, Wilson L. Driver, and Wilson L. Driver, Junior. My sister's name is Patricia Nelson. And not a particularly large family. My stepmother, the one who moved to New York with us, her name is Gerrie. She died in 1977 in Detroit, Michigan of cancer. A very nice woman, a very creative woman. A very unrealized woman, I think, a would-be idol.

The poem to my brother—my brother died in 1981 of AIDS, though they had not identified AIDS at that time. All we know is he was in the hospital. All the doctors said is his immune system had broken down, that he had a fever that he had diarrhea; that he had symptoms that ranged from pneumonia all the way to cancer. And we were always very pleased when they kept saying, “Okay, we've found this is not cancer.” So we were all very relieved, except we saw this man deteriorate right before our eyes.

Of course, some years later when I was reading in papers about this “new” thing that was not that new—they had found out that there were people dying of this, but quietly in these hospitals, and they had no name for them. They realized now that it was AIDs. And the poem that I wrote for him is a poem that talks about reflections on death. I was here in Philadelphia. I was not—I was sick, actually, the day he died. And I'm reflecting on his death, my recovery, and how I thought about it, the wake that I went to, and the burial. And then since being on the road again, I had to travel because I was going out of the country right afterwards then, and what that was about.

*A poem for my brother reflections on his death from  
AIDS: June 8, 1981*

1. death

The day you died  
a fever starched my bones.  
within the slurred  
sheets, i hoarded my legs  
while you rowed out among the boulevards  
balancing your veins on sails.  
easy the eye of hunger  
as i peeled the sharp  
sweat and swallowed wholesale molds.

2. recovery (a)

What comes after  
is consciousness of the morning  
of the licensed sun that subdues  
immoderate elements.  
there is a kindness in illness  
the indulgence of discrepancies.  
reduced to the ménage of houses  
and green drapes that puff their seasons  
towards the face.  
i wonder what to do now.  
i am afraid  
i remember a childhood that cried  
after extinguished lights  
when only the coated banners answered.

## 3. recovery (b)

There is a savior in these buds  
look how the phallic stems distend  
in welcome.  
O copper flowerheads  
confine my womb that i may dwell within.  
i see these gardens, whom i love  
i feel the sky's sweat on my face  
now that these robes no longer bark  
i praise abandonment.

## 4. wake

i have not come for summary.  
must i renounce all babylons?  
here, without psalms,  
these leaves grow white  
and burn the bones with dance.  
here, without surfs,  
young panicles bloom on the clouds and fly  
while myths tick grey as thunder.

## 5. burial

you in the crow's rain  
rusting amid ribs  
my mouth spills your birth  
i have named you prince of boards  
stretching with the tides.  
you in the toad's tongue  
peeling on nerves

look. look. the earth is running palms.

6. (on) (the) (road). again.

somewhere a flower walks in mass  
 purchasing wholesale christs  
 sealing white-willow sacraments.

naked on steeples  
 where trappist idioms sail  
 an atom peels the air.

O i will gather my pulse  
 muffled by sibilants  
 and follow disposable dreams.

That's a poem that I did for my brother, and a piece that talks about the movement from the South to the North, where I began the section, it's called *Past*, from *A Blues Book for a Blue Black Magical Women*.

Come into Black geography  
 you, seated like Manzu's cardinal,  
 come up through tongues  
 multiplying memories  
 and to avoid descent  
 among wounds  
 cruising like ships,

climb into these sockets  
golden with brine.

Because i was born  
musician to two  
black braids, i  
cut a blue  
song for america.  
and you, cushioned  
by middleclass springs  
saw ghettos  
that stretched  
voices into dust  
turned corners  
where people walked  
on their faces.  
i sang unbending  
songs and gathered gods  
convenient as christ.  
i am the frozen face,  
here my face  
marches toward new myths  
while spring runs green with ghosts.  
i am the living mask,  
here my skin worn with adolescence  
peels like apostles picasso's praying planes  
and the earth in one fold of permanence stares at the skies.  
if I had a big piece of dust to ride on,

i would gather up my pulse  
and follow disposable dreams  
and all things being equal  
they would pass into butterflies  
& quiver in sprawling yellow.

1. 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. tellLLLLLL 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  
dance dancing a windless dance  
come phantom mother  
dance me a breakfast of births  
let your mouth spill me forth  
i creak with your mornings.  
come old mother, light up my mind  
with a story bright as the sun.

2. earth mother

(low singing is heard)  
old woman's voice  
Bells. bells. bells.  
let the bells ring.  
BELLS. BELLS. BELLS  
ring the bells to announce this your earth mother.  
for the day is turning in my thighs  
And you are born, BLACK GIRL.  
come, i am calling to you.  
this old mother of the elaborate dreams  
come. come nearer. girl. NEARER.  
i can almost see your face  
now. COME CLOSER.  
yes. there you are.  
i have stuffed your whole history in my mouth.  
i. your earth mother was that hungry once.  
for knowledge.  
come closer. ah little Black girl.

i see you.

i can see you coming towards me little girl  
running from seven to thirty-five in one day.

i can see you coming  
girl made of black braids

i can see you coming  
in the arena of youth

girl shaking your butt to double dutch days

i can see you coming  
girl racing dawns

i can see you coming  
girl made of black rain.

i can see you coming.

3. young/black/ girl

five, ten,

fifteen, twenty

twenty-five, thirty

thirty-five, forty

forty-five, fifty

fifty-five, sixty

sixty-five, seventy

seventy-five, eighty

eighty-five, ninety

ninety-five, one hundred

ready or not, here I come

ready or not, here I come

Fivetenfifteentwentytwentyfivethirtythirtyfivefourtyfourtyfivefi  
ftyfiftyfivesixtysixtyfiveseventyseventyfiveeightyeightyfivenint  
ynintyfiveonehundredreadyornothere i come

REAdyornothereicome!

one two three.

i see you. and you. and you YOU. AND YOU.

AND YOU UUUUUU

-step/mother. woman of my father's youth

who stands at a mirror elaborate with smells

all shiny like my new copper penny

telling me through a parade of smiles

you are to be my new mother.

and your painted lips outlined

against time become time

and i look on time and hear you

who threw me in angry afternoon closets

til i slipped beneath the cracks like light.

and time stopped.

and I turned into myself

a young girl

breathing in crusts

and listened to those calling me.

no matter what they do

they won't find me

no matter what they say

i won't come out.

i have hidden myself  
behind black braids and stutters  
and cannot be seen.  
no matter what they do  
they won't find me  
no matter what they say  
i won't come out  
i listen to words asking  
what did she say?  
why can't she talk normal talk?  
there's something wrong with that one!  
she got the demon inside of her or something!  
strange one!!  
"too quiet!!!  
no matter what they say  
they won't find me  
no matter what they say  
i won't come out...

Coming out from Alabama  
to the island city of corner store jews  
patting bigbuttedblack women in tune to  
girlie can i help ya?  
girlie what you want today?  
a good sale on pork today.  
girlie. girlie. girlie.

coming out from Alabama  
to the island city of perpetual adolescence  
where i drink my young breasts  
and stay thirsty  
always hungry  
for more than the  
georgewashingtonhighschoolhuntercollegedays] of america.  
remember parties where we'd grinddddDDDD and  
grinddddDDDD  
but not too close  
cuz if you gave it up everybody would know. and tell.  
and grindddding was enough.  
the closeness of bodies in project basement recreation rooms  
[End Part 1 / Begin Part 2]  
was enough to satisfy the platter's sounds  
spinning you into body after body  
then walking across the room  
where young girls watch each other  
like black vultures  
pretending nothing had happened  
leaving young brothers in conditions  
they satisfied with out of the neighborhood girls...

coming out from Alabama  
into smells i could not smell  
into nites that corner lights lit dimly.

i walked into young womanhood.  
could not hear my footsteps in the streets  
could not hear the rhythm of young Black womanhood.

That poem, that is about, a great deal about, my emotions that we talked about of coming from the South, North. You didn't have a sense of yourself in this Harlem, although there was a sense of family there, a strong family, a family that supported you. But I mean, there is not that sense of being able to touch and do the things you did in the South. There was not the sense of a large family either, because that was nonexistent at this particular point. So what we're talking about is simply a whole different experience, a whole different urban experience that developed, from subways, to buses, to small apartments, to a room that I shared with my sister where you could barely breathe, to apartment living, to sometimes not enough food until your father got home from work, to junior high and high school where you did not see yourself, and you were not reflective of anyone's books or anything, to a strange kind of alienation in Hunter College, where certainly you saw the aberrated black in sociology classes and history classes, on to all of this writing, however.

I was very much involved in writing, very much involved in stuttering, because I started to stutter after my grandmother died. And being very conscious of speech and what you are saying, and conscious of people laughing at you because you would go, "I-I-I-I-I," and having a tongue that tied, and all the funny things that happen in terms of speech I guess I had at that particular point.

All of those things, and then beginning to write as a consequence of that, always very much introverted, and keeping journals and little notebooks, and writing poems that expressed what you were feeling, how you felt, and what you were about, also.

LM: Was Philadelphia an in-between point between the South and the North, whereas it wasn't as congested as New York, but yet—?

SS: Well, no, I had another period in there. I went from New York—we were very political people in the '60s and early '70s, and some of us were disbursed out of New York. I went to Amherst; I went to Amherst College and taught at Amherst College with my twins, my children. And I stayed for two years, and from Amherst I came here, via Chicago. I went to Chicago for six months and came here to Philadelphia. With my children, I have been living here in Philadelphia for eleven years now. They were eight when they moved, and they're now nineteen.

LM: What are their names?

SS: Mungu Neuse and Morani Neuse. Morani Neuse means black warrior, and Mungu Neuse means black god. They came here when they were eight, so they are truly what I call Philadelphians, because they spent maybe three years in New York, the next three years—three or four years in New York, and the next three or four years in Amherst, and then the rest of their time has been spent here in Philadelphia. And they moved here, as I said, they were eight then.

I think Philadelphia has been very important to me because my children have grown up here. It's been very important because I've been teaching here at Temple University, and I am very much enamored of my students and what they bring to my life experiences

and what happens in a classroom, a classroom where you try to teach all that you know, hopefully a learning experience there. You were in my Black Women Writers class, weren't you?

LM: Your most intelligent—

SS: I looked forward to them, to that class.

LM: Your most intelligent class.

SS: I always say that my class, like, 10:30 is my most intelligent, but you were in my most intelligent 10:30 am class. I have a poem that I wrote; I don't know if you've seen that poem as yet?

LM: I saw it, but I would like you to read it. It's very, very good.

SS: I said to the class one day, "I am going to write a poem for you because you are indeed my most intelligent 10:30 am class."

LM: When I saw that poem, I said, "Wait a minute. I was in her most intelligent 7 pm class."

SS: Right. [Laughs] Right, you were. And this isn't the Women Studies class, this was the Black Women Writers class, that I wrote this poem for that group in 1985.

*A Poem for My Most Intelligent 10:30 am Class, Fall[Class/Fall]  
1985*

it was autumn.

the day insistent as rust.

the city standing at the edge of confessionals.

i had come to this room from other rooms.

footsteps walking from under my feet.

and i saw your faces eavesdropping on shadows

rinsing the assassins from your eyes.

and our legs genuflected  
beyond pain. incest. rage.  
and we turned corners where the scare  
crow smiles of priapus would never dominate.  
and we braided our tongues with sequins gathered  
up our mothers' veins in skirts of incense.  
what we know now is that the coming spring  
will not satisfy this thirst.

LM: Fantastic. The more that I think about it, I was in that class, because the Black Women's course was only taught during interim months.

SS: You were in that class. I remember you, yeah. It was a big class there, and it was also the Fall right after I moved. That's why I remember we were all in there together. That's why the poem, in the poem it says the date. And also, we talked about so many things in that classroom.

LM: Yes, I also remember at that time you had at least one black male that—

SS: You remember?

LM: Yeah, you can't take a course entitled Black Women Writers.

SS: And not be threatened.

LM: That's right.

SS: That was—

LM: Your grandmother—you talked about her. She was a sweet lady, sounds very much like a sweet lady. But what was her name, again? I didn't get her name.

SS: Elizabeth.

LM: Elizabeth, okay.

SS: Driver. My father would say, “We called her Lizzie,” and I say, “Yeah, we called her Mama.” But I mentioned to you that there was another—that sense of community. There was a woman by the name of Mama Dixon in New York City who was like a friend of my stepmothers. She was a hard-drinking woman. I think we’d probably call her a blues kind of character. Do you know what I’m saying? In retrospect, almost like a Bessie Smith kind of woman, that kind of hard blues woman. And I used to walk her dog. Also, when I went to pick up her dog—I got paid for doing it; I’d go and get the dog. She introduced me to friends of hers who were like drinkers, you know? She would tell me, “Now, when I introduce you to people I want you to tell me what you saw about them, your impression of them.” And I would come back, and she was like, “What did you think about Mr. Jones,” who was a male friend of hers. And I would tell her. “What do you think about Mr. Smith,” and I would tell her.

She said, “Yeah, but also look for this the next time. Look for—see how he talks. See if he extends his hands. See how his eyes look,” whatever. And as a consequence, I began to look very carefully at people as to what their eyes and bodies said. Before people started talking about body language she used to tell me about things that I would look out for in people. As I said, she was a hard-drinking woman.

She also was a woman who cursed very readily. So my father could not stand her, whatever. But I remember being a child and my stepmother talking to her about her problems, and listening, because I always was a listener. I guess because I had some problems with

speech, I was a listener. But I remember listening to her talk to my stepmother, and also listening to her talk about people.

And I remember like always remembering her curses. It was as if I danced outside her curses. You see, of course, we weren't allowed to curse, but I remember what she said, and as I walked the dog I would bounce the curses off to the dog, right? And I thought they were the funniest things, most interesting kinds of things, because this was not allowed in our home, but here was this person who was saying those things. And so I listened to her, and in some very interesting fashion was able to listen and curse via her.

So I was at a meeting at City Hall, and had come out of that meeting. This was up at Market Street, right? And this man in his car drove his car almost all the way up on the sidewalk, and he was going to pick you up for a lift, right? He was picking me up, because sometimes in that area we have ladies of the night, etcetera. But I had on my good coat and my boots, my fur-lined boots, and my briefcase, and my hat and my pocketbook. I didn't look like a lady of the night, but I tell women though, however, it's very obvious—I mean, I read this piece in the class, actually. It's very obvious that I was not— [Interruption, pause in recording]—it was obvious that I was not a woman of the night. But the point is, if you are black and female, or female sometimes, you know, people do not look at you and see you, how you look, how you dress, whatever, but just see available.

Coming out on—I was walking on Market Street at 9 pm; I was walking to the garage. A guy pulled the car over, leaned over, and pulled out his penis. And for a moment I stopped and just looked. I used to say to the class, “At some point you have to understand those

kinds of things that happen.” One of the ways I handled it is Mama Dixon started to dance in my head, and I said, “You know, let me tell this guy off. I’m going about my business.” It’s a mean piece, has some curse words in here, because I got to talk about her, you know? And it starts off:

*Style No. 1*

i come from a long line of rough mamas.

so here i was walking down market street. coming out of a city hall meeting. night wind at my back, dressed in my finest. black cashmere coat caressing the rim of my gray suede boots. hat sitting acey duecy. anointing the avenue with my black smell.

and this old dude. red as his car inching its way on the sidewalk. honked his horn. slid his body almost out of his skin. towards me. psst. psst. hey. let’s you and me have some fun. psst. psst. c’mon babe. don’t you want some of this? and he pulled his penis out of his pants. held the temporal wonder of men in his hands.

i stopped. looked at him. a memory from deep in the eye. a memory of saturday afternoon moviehouses where knowledge comes with a tremulous cry. old white men. spiderlike. spinning their webs towards young girls legs and out budabbot and loucostello smiles melted. and we moved in the high noon walk of black girls. smelling the breath of an old undertow.

And i saw mama Dixon. dancing on his head. mama Dixon. big loud friend of the family. who stunned us with her

curses and liquor. being herself. whose skin breathed hilarious breaths. and] i greased my words on her tongue. and she gave them back to me like newly tasted wine.

motha fucka. you even offend the night i said. you look like an old mole coming out of its hole. take yo slimy fat ole ass home. fo you get what's coming to you. and yo generation. ask yo mama to skin you. that is if you ever have had one cuz anybody ugly as you couldna been born.

and i turned my eyes eastward. toward the garage.  
waking up the incipient night with my steps. ready for the short day. the wind singing in my veins.

It's a piece that, at some point, you just have to tell people, "Go to hell," you know.

LM: Well, and you used exactly what she had taught you, and the things that, the way she taught you to look at people and their movements.

SS: And how you answer people sometimes, also, too. Also, just the sense of not crumbling, because it was totally unexpected. You know what I'm saying? Not only unexpected, but all of the sudden you wanted to say, for a quick minute, "Come on! Look at me. Here I am. There's no way on this earth you can think that this is what I am, except that you don't, people don't see you."

LM: How dare you invade my privacy?

SS: And people don't see you. If you're a black woman walking outside, people don't see you. They see a black woman whore, black woman easy, black woman, what are you doing out here, anyway? Not business, not briefcase black woman, but black woman, period. Okay.

And so therefore, hey, and even if you do have a briefcase it means—it doesn't mean anything. Okay, it's probably just a prop, whatever.

And so I remember what she said; it was so funny. It was such a funny thing. And there she was saying, you know, "Tell this dude off and keep on stepping, keep on going." And so I did. It was such fun! And he was so utterly surprised and shocked. As soon as I said it, I just walked on. I kept on going. I was smiling, the night wind sitting in my veins. I got in my car and drove off on home, singing. But even I said that sucker will think twice about stopping someone else again with his suburban self. [Laughs]

LM: Someone that he sees, just because you're a black woman.

SS: That's right, yeah.

LM: Thank you so much.

SS: I remember reading that in that class. I don't know if you were there one day, but I remember when I did it, and the students fell out laughing.

LM: [Laughs] Okay.

SS: Because it was that kind of class where people just say, "Yeah, that's right. Come on with you."

LM: The class that I was taking with you was very good, very inspirational. It was a learning experience, something that you don't get outside somewhere else, or outside the university, or inside the university. It was something when you'd get a class like that. I had to—in order to survive in the university, at least every other semester I had to take a course with you to get it back off further where I could keep pushing, I could keep going. So these courses inspired me to keep going, so at least every other semester I had to do that.

SS: Well, I am so glad.

LM: Push it to the limits, closer to the man [?]. I said, “She’s really going to give it to me now.”

SS: We should talk about wipeout time. You know what I mean?

LM: Yes.

SS: You were having a real wipeout time, and I thank you for that. Things like that make me realize that all the stuff that you do is worthwhile, and is meaningful. You know what I mean?

LM: Yes, thank you very much. It was a good interview.

SS: You’re more than welcome.

[End of Interview]