

## Assertion of Ethnical Identity through Sonia Sanchez's " This is Not a Small Voice"

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### ABSTRACT

*The poem "This Is Not a Small Voice" by Sonia Sanchez is a moving examination of how ethnic identity is asserted within the American community. Sanchez captures the voice and experiences of African Americans collectively through vivid imagery and evocative language, highlighting the importance of group membership in forming both individual and collective identity. This analysis explores how Sanchez's poem serves as an example of the processes of self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction within the context of ethnic identity, drawing on social identity theory's emphasis on self-categorization and intergroup dynamics. By emphasizing their beauty, skill, aspirations, joy, and love, the poem goes beyond the common narrative of trauma and oppression, highlighting the diverse and multifaceted aspects of their identity. Further, the poem shows how people can assert their ethnic identity to combat harmful stereotypes and promote a sense of belonging by celebrating the strength and love of the African American community. It also provides insights into the varied ways in which ethnic identity is affirmed and communicated. The investigation offers a powerful message of solidarity and pride, reinforcing the idea that every voice within the community contributes to its strength and effect*

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### 1. Introduction

Blacks in America have gone through a long process of identity quest often in a hostile environment. Throughout their American experience, they have been successively referred to as "Negro," "New Negro," "Blacks" and finally "African Americans." These different referents traced the change in their identity according to the reality they were faced with at specific periods. Indeed, such periods as the 1920s, the 1960s and the 1980s were important landmarks that characterized this change. Thus, the expression of cultural heritage, the feeling of racial pride, the expression of a double identity (African and American), were in turn developed as the passage from slavery to freedom and self-assertion or from rejection to recognition (N'guessan, 2012, p. 223)

This has quoted from Kouadio Germain N'guessan's article "From "NEGRO" To "AFRICAN AMERICAN": The quote provides a brief review of the black community's identity journey in America, as it adapts in the face of obstacles. It highlights terms whose evolution reflects the varying circumstances of various historical periods. Notably, the 1920s, 1960s, and 1980s were characterized by cultural transformations, civil rights advances, and an increase in black pride and assertiveness. These eras influenced the identity evolution of African Americans.

Importantly, the complexities of black identity are recognizes, encompassing elements of cultural heritage, racial pride, and a dual African and American identity. Also they acknowledge that challenges faced by Black Americans as they transitioned from slavery to freedom, and from rejection to recognition (Pastrana, 2004, p. 67). It is significant to recognize that the Black American experience is multifaceted and diverse. Individuals within the black community have had varied experiences and perspectives on their identity. Nonetheless, the quotation captures the overarching trajectory of the black community's journey in seeking recognition, equality, and a sense of self amidst a changing social landscape in America.

The idiom "African American" therefore came out to define their double identity. It refers to both their "Africanity" and their "Americanity." By choosing to analyze the shift from "Negro" to "African American," this process intends to demonstrate the evolution of the Blacks' identity referent all along their American history, from pejorative to recognition (N'guessan, 2012, p.228). This objective will focus on a constructivist understanding of identity, a dynamic, constant

process through which blacks demolished stereotypes and created their identity by confronting dominant cultural norms. This will show that their struggles understudy are aimed at improving their image, Langston Hughes, poet and writer says:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. ...We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (1926, p.693)

mic racism and inequality affect African Americans' belonging in education, jobs, housing, criminal justice, and healthcare. Community organizations, advocacy groups, and cultural institutions have helped them to gain empowerment and to reduce social and economic inequality (Mulligan, 2021; Rahman, 2019; Asha et al., 2022). African Americans' experiences and perspectives vary by socioeconomic level, area, generational differences, and personal identities.

This analysis utilizes social identity theory to explore Sonia Sanchez's poem, revealing its potent examination of African American ethnical identity. The poem vividly illustrates self-enhancement, uncertainty reduction, challenges to stereotypes, and the promotion of belonging. Overall, it underscores the complexity and dynamism of ethnical identity within a social identity theory framework.

## **2. Methodology**

The research uses a qualitative literary analysis approach to investigate the themes and literary devices found in Sonia Sanchez's poem "This Is Not a Small Voice." The study focuses on the ways in which the poem depicts self-enhancement and uncertainty-reduction processes in relation to ethnic identity. This theory offers a useful foundation for comprehending how people get a sense of self and belonging from being a part of a community. Social identity theory provides a lens through which to look at how group identity is asserted, reinforced, and used to combat harmful stereotypes and face societal injustices in the context of Sonia Sanchez's poem, which celebrates the collective voice and experiences of African Americans.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### **3.1. African- American Endurance to Assert their Humanity**

One way to make sense of the determination with which African Americans in the United States have defended their humanity is via the perspective of uncertainty reduction. African Americans attempt to eliminate ambiguity, assert their humanity, and fight towards a society that is more just and equitable by finding belonging in their collective identity, identifying with significant "others," and questioning the current quo.

Despite adversity, African Americans have persevered, forging a shared identity and drawing strength from connections with influential figures. These figures encompass community members, leaders, activists, and artists who have provided solidarity, support, and a sense of shared experience. Through this unity, African Americans have confronted uncertainty, asserted their identities, and challenged the status quo. Notable individuals like Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, and grassroots activists have played pivotal roles in advocating for justice and equality.

A Francophone Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, political philosopher (1925-1961) Fanon, states that: "I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me" (2016, p.201). The comment demonstrates a will to overcome the repressive conditions that white people have placed black in. It reflects the belief that people may transcend the constraints of a created story and recover their own freedom.

Historical neglect of Black writers and their works, especially in Black literary criticism. In the late 20th century, revolutionary Black poets pushed for change. Emergence of revolutionary poets blurred this divide, prioritizing societal change over internal conflicts. According to Gunnar Myrdal:

Black writers often criticize American literary criticism for the diminutive and inadequate attention given to black writers and their literature. This issue became more problematic in the last decades of the twentieth century. The emergence of the contemporary black revolutionary poets who "dared to protest for change" added an even greater dimension to this problem; for, throughout literary history, "black writers have been torn between conflicting loyalties of race and art." On one hand, the black

writer sought to be a spokesperson for his people; on another, the reading public hoped to be accepted on their merits as artists. The revolutionary black poet disregarded that internal conflict in favour of a unified political, social, and moral aim of their race. (2017)

Through his words, Myrdal tried to give a view of the contradictions of American democracy and recommended the need to study the people within the society in which they live to understand their needs and demands.

La Donna (2021), States that: "Baraka believed the Black aesthetic could galvanize the Black community to kill their oppressors and reclaim their power" (p. 468). Despite the acknowledgment of the absence of justice, Amiri Baraka (1934-2014), African-American writer and critic, highlights the significance of the fight for justice itself. He believes "There is no justice in America, but it is the fight for justice that sustains you" (Baraka, 2008). He makes references to the persistent systemic injustices and inequality in the nation. The comments of Baraka emphasize the necessity of ongoing advocacy and the battle against these injustices. Baraka wrote in his landmark Black Art manifesto published in 1965, Poem titled "Black Art," the year he helped found the Black Arts Movement, he says:

We want poems that kill  
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot guns  
Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
and take their weapons leaving them dead. (Baraka, 2008)

In the passage, social identity processes that are motivated by self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction are examined. These processes cause people and groups to pursue individuality while defending their position as a collective. This endeavor develops a strong sense of social identity since it is based on the universal human yearning for self-actualization and respect. Hogg et al., declare that: "Social identity processes are guided by two basic motivations: self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction. These motivations are cued by the inter-group social comparison idea, that groups strive to be both better and distinct" (2004, p.255).

For African Americans, social categorization and group identities strengthen belonging and explain society's responsibilities by reducing confusion. Historical issues brought on by uncertain identities with roots in the heritage of slavery have raised concerns about social standing and cultural acceptance. In extreme circumstances, people take positions of inadequacy to deal with self-conceptual ambiguity. This dynamic shows how some African Americans could consent to systematic racism in order to integrate into society. African Americans have also been at the forefront of challenging and changing the status quo; thus, it is important to recognize that this is not the complete answer. Hogg et al., states that:

Positive distinctiveness is driven by a concern for evaluatively positive social identity. People strive to promote or protect the prestige and status of their own group relative to other groups because group evaluation is self-evaluation. People do this because one of the most basic human motives is for self-enhancement and self-esteem and in salient group contexts, the self in self-enhancement and self-esteem is the collective self, social identity although possession of a devalued or stigmatized social identity can depress self-esteem, people have an enormous capacity to buffer themselves from this consequence. (2004, p. 256)

African-Americans confidently assert themselves, advocating for rights and expressing their beliefs through activism, identity assertion, and challenging social norms. This action illuminates overlooked perspectives, attracting support and media attention. By articulating their concerns, they stimulate discussions that result in cultural shifts and increased social recognition.

### **3.2. Sonia Sanchez: Philosophy and Carrier**

"Sonia Sanchez is a lion in literature's forest. When she writes she roars, and when she sleeps other creatures walk gingerly.

Maya Angelou

Sonia Sanchez, was born in 1939, American writer, and professor. She is most known for her work as a poet and playwright, but she has also contributed to several publications with short stories, picture books, critical essays, and articles. She was a leading figure in the Black Arts Movement. Iron (2007) raises that Sanchez was the first to develop and teach a course centered on Black Women and literature in the United States.

Sonia Sanchez initial published book of poems, *Homecoming* (1969), is known for its blues structure and subject matter. Both the battle to define black identity in the United States and the many reasons for joy that Sanchez sees in Black culture are discussed in the book. By concentrating on the daily lives of Black men and women, her second book, *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), strengthens her contribution to the aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement. Sanchez utilizes jazz's structure, innovative punctuation, spelling, and urban slang in her poems, earning recognition for merging experimental forms with themes of Black Nationalism and identity development. In an interview, Sanchez answered the reason for her talent, saying:

To answer the question of how I write, we must look also to why I write. I write to tell the truth about the Black condition as I see it. Therefore, I write to offer a Black woman's view of the world. How I tell the truth is part of the truth itself. I've always believed that the truth concealed or clouded is a partial lie. So when I decide to tell the truth about an event/happening, it must be clear and understandable for those who need to understand the lie/lies being told. What I learned in deciding "how" to write was simply that most folks tend to think that you're lying or jiving them if you have to spice things up just to get a point across. I decided along with a number of other Black poets to tell the truth in poetry by using the language, dialect, idioms, of the folks we believed our audience to be. (Wood, & Sanchez, 2005, p.121)

Sanchez's writing style derives from her desire to convey the truth about the Black experience and from her own unique perspective. She believes in harmonizing the truth with its presentation and uses poetry to authentically convey this belief. She is considered by many to be the most influential female voice of the Black Revolution. Her writing has a deep sense of the past and a visionary aspect. She frequently uses positive role models and severely realistic events to encourage her readers to make positive changes in their lives. According to Regina B. Jennings "Creating a protective matriarchal persona, Sonia Sanchez has inscribed the humanity of black people through versification, plays, and children's books," (Jennings, 1992, p.24). This means that writing is a significant way for self-assertion and also through it a person can communicate his voice to the world to prove his existence and spread the culture of his people.

The poetry of Sanchez has a nationalistic tone, combining politics and history to discuss intergroup harmony and Black Nationalism. "Morning Song and Evening Walk," is a poem written in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, recounting his message and teachings. It reflects the Sanchez's engagement with socio-political issues and her commitment to advocating for justice and equality:

And you told us: the storm is rising against the  
privileged minority of the earth, from which there is no  
shelter in isolation or armament  
and you told us: the storm will  
not abate until a just distribution of the fruits of  
the earth enables men (and women) everywhere to live  
in dignity and human decency. (Sanchez, 1999)

In fact, her poems demonstrated the spiritual link between art and politics. Sanchez attacks Euro-American political, social, and aesthetic institutions. In his essays *Birthing Orality in Mother Tongue Ebonics: Sistah Sonia Speaks*, Diedre, L. Badejo, explains his opinion towards Sonia Sanche poetry saying:

In such works as *I've Been a Woman*, *Under a Soprano Sky*, and *Wounded in the House of a Friend*, Professor Sonia Sanchez weaves the oral literary heritage of African Americans through an exquisite poetic tapestry. Mirroring the word-speak techniques and multi-layered imagery found in such traditions as Yoruba orature and African American Ebonics, her works take responsibility for articulating the vagaries of living in America with the third eye of the griot as chronicler and social critic. (2020, p.91)

The idea that poetry functions as a subliminal conversation implies that, it may access deeper feelings and thoughts, allowing for a profound and oblique interchange of thoughts and experiences between the poet and the readers (Kim, 2018).

Sanchez's poetry fuses artistic inspiration and activism, depicting the African American struggle in an authentic manner. She advocates for her identity by using poetry to communicate and commemorate her community's history, demonstrating the resilience and strength of African Americans.

### **3.3. Assertiveness of Cultural Heritage in Sonia Sanchez's "This is not a Small Voice"**

Published in Sonia Sanchez's 1995 book *Wounded at the House of a Friend*, Sonia Sanchez's poem "This is Not a Small Voice" is a stunning celebration of the fortitude and resiliency of Black people and communities. The poem recognizes the enormous significance and impact of their united voice. Sanchez highlights the power and capacity of the black voice by comparing it to a "mighty river," emphasizing how it can convey qualities like healing, and creative brilliance to everyone who hear it. Although "these cities" makes no mention of a particular setting, it certainly suggests a concentration on Black people in American cities. This visual representation emphasizes how the Black voice has the ability to raise and inspire. The collective voice, which speaks for individuals with names, is shown as a loud force coming from urban areas. Strong rivers are metaphors for this collective voice's unstoppable and dynamic character, which carries tremendous power and effect.

Indeed, the deliberate pause between "hear" and "this" in the second line's caesura invites the reader to participate in the passage and pay attention to the voice the speaker is describing. The caesura heightens the reader's consciousness and forces them to think about the emptiness and anticipation of what is to come by establishing a brief period of stillness and isolation. In Addition, "You hear" repeated three times in lines; 2, 14, and 27, is a phrase that is used to support a point or to elicit agreement and confirmation from the listener. It serves to highlight the point being made and promotes the listener's active participation. The speaker wants to make sure that their remarks are heard, understood, and taken seriously.

In her statement, "The Spoken Word is Born; I See It in Our Eyes Dancing" (Wood, & Sanchez 2005, p. 126), Sonia Sanchez as emphasizes the importance and influence of spoken language. It implies that ideas and emotions are brought to life through speech, and a link is made between the speaker and the listener by the intense resonance and involvement that can result from meaningful spoken communication. Dorothy J. Hale has expressed the importance of language in transmitting the voices of others to achieve their demands. He stresses the importance of language by saying the following words:

What do we call a subject who is both more and less than an individual and stronger and weaker than a free agent? For many cultural critics over the past two decades, the answer is a "voice." Voice has become the metaphor that best accommodates the conflicting desires of critics and theorists who want to have their cultural subject and de-essentialize it, too. Fluid and evanescent yet also substantial and distinct, voice appeals to scholars as a critical term because it seems to provide a way of eliding the paralyzing dualisms that plague philosophical accounts of subjectivity. Thanks to its metaphoric flexibility, the term can describe human identity as unproblematically both self-selected and socially determined, both individual and collective, natural and cultural, corporeal and mental, oral and nonverbal. (Hale, 1994, p.445)

By referring to human identity as having a "voice," writers may acknowledge that it is both self-selected and socially determined, acknowledging both the agency of the person in forming their identity as well as the impact of social and cultural forces.

This is the voice of LaTanya.  
Kadesha. Shaniqua. This  
is the voice of Antoine.  
Darryl. Shaquille.  
Running over waters  
navigating the hallways. (Sanchez, 1995, p. 65 )

Consequently, the poem makes the implication that each and every black individual contributes significantly to their community and helps create a powerful collective "voice." Every person is viewed as a crucial component of the bigger total, and each one's own experiences, viewpoints, and contributions strengthen and amplify the voice of the group as a whole. By identifying each African American, the poem emphasizes their significance, symbolizing their united "voice" and shared experiences.

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory examines how people identify themselves in relation to social groupings and how belonging to a group affects their attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. It places emphasis on how social categorization affects intergroup relations and social identity (1982, p.18). In this sense, social identity theory is in keeping with the first lines of the poem "This is Not a Small Voice," which emphasize enabling one's voice to be heard and rejecting marginalization. It acknowledges the significance of group affiliation as well as the effects of social categorization on people's experiences within society and their sense of self. According to Hogg, & Smith individuals strive to question and disrupt the prevalent narratives and stereotypes that have been imposed upon them by speaking up and highlighting their significance and this is called self-enhancement (2007, p. 124).

This is a love that crowns the feet with hands  
that nourishes, conceives, feels the water sails  
mends the children,  
folds them inside our history where they. (Sanchez, 1995, p.65)

The poem goes on to say that the legacy of love and connection is what gives this collective black voice its strength. In addition to their dedication to "nourish" and "mend" their children, the speaker claims that Black people's "passion for kissing" and "learning" is proof of their love for one another (Mottram, 2021). To put it another way, Black people support one another because they have a strong sense of community and want to see one another flourish. Their voice is powerful because it is fueled by love. It is implied by the statement "folds them inside our history" that love not only affects the present but also ties people to their ancestry, and collective history.

Sonia Sanchez's poem "This is not a Small Voice" highlights the complexity of black love as well as the larger identity of black people and communities. According to Sanchez's words, black love is "coloured with iron and lace," which implies that it combines resilience and elegance as well as power and beauty. The image illustrates how complicated and strong black love is, demonstrating how it can survive and triumph while still being graceful and gentle.

In his article "Twelve Million Black Voices," Richard Wright makes a powerful statement about the integral role of Black Americans in shaping the history and identity of America. He emphasizes that the experiences of Black people in the country are a reflection of the diverse and complex tapestry of American life. He declares:

We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish. If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the living past living in the present, for our memories go back, through our black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us black or white, lived in this fertile land. (1941, p.165)

Additionally, The poem, claims that their voices transmit more than simply the epitaphs of those lost as a result of racist tyranny and brutality. Instead, it promotes the diversity and complexity of black communities by highlighting their beauty, skill, aspirations, joy, and love as essential components of their identity. The poem's reference to "Black Genius" captures the intellect and inventiveness that distinguish Black communities. The phrase "This is not a Small Voice" is repeated initially of each three stanzas reveals that the voice you're hearing is not faint, or unimportant.

Instead of engaging in inter-group comparisons or unfavorable judgments of an out-group, the poem largely focuses on honoring the voice of the Black people and its vast effect. Similar to social identity theory, which emphasizes the interactions between groups, the poem concentrates on the power of the black community, its voice, and its identity to validate its lost self. this strategy emphasizes building up one's own community and taking pride in that community.

#### 4. Conclusion

Sonia Sanchez's influence transcends her literary work, as she has served as a catalyst for driving social transformation and framing dialogues concerning matters of race and justice. In her poem "This Is Not a Small Voice," she vividly demonstrates the potency of asserting one's ethnic identity, a concept that aligns seamlessly with social identity theory. The poem serves as a compelling illustration of how marginalized communities can harness their collective strength to challenge stereotypes and confront injustices. Within the context of ethnic identity, Sanchez's verses beautifully illuminate the intricate dynamics that exist between one's heritage, self-perception, and the broader societal representations that shape our sense of self and belonging.

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