**Karen Long:**

Hello, I'm Karen Long. And you're listening to The Asterisk\*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today, we're figuring out some holes in our knowledge with Sonia Sanchez — poet, playwright, and an activist who has lectured on more than 500 college campuses. She has spent most of her life calling people toward freedom and dignity with her pen and her voice. An architect of the Black Arts Movement, Sonia Sanchez won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for lifetime achievement in 2019. She is an ancestor to so much of what we enjoy in the world of literature today. We like on this podcast to get out of the way of the word. So professor Sanchez has kindly agreed to give us a sample of her work. Some haiku?

**Sonia Sanchez:**

It's a haiku sequence that I did for Harriet Tubman. And I began it with additional text from the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park and Visitor Center. And they have these people, these former slaves, I call their names and they say in the exhibit, we are free because of Harriet Tubman.

We are free because of Harriet Tubman, December, 1850, Kessiah Bowley, James Alfred Bowley, 6 years old, Araminta Bowley, baby, John Bowley (free). Early 1851, Moses Ross, brother. June, 1854 Winnebar Johnson. Christmas 1854, Robert Ross, alias John Stewart (brother), Henry Ross, alias William Henry Stewart (brother), Benjamin Ross Jr., alias James Stewart (brother), Jane Kane, alias Catherine Stewart (fiance of Ben Ross Jr.), Peter Jackson, John Chase, possibly George Ross, unidentified, possibly William Thompson.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Early 1855, Harriet Ann Parker Ross, alias Harriet Ann Stewart (free), wife of William Henry Ross Stewart Sr., William Henry Ross (free), son of William Ross Stewart Sr., John Isaiah Ross alias John James, Isaac Stewart free son of William Henry Ross Stewart Sr. December, 1855, Henry Hoopa. May, 1856, Ben Jackson, James Coleman, Henry Hopkins, William Conoway Cook. October, 1856, Tilly. November, 1856, Josiah Bailey, William Bailey, Peter Pennington, Eliza Manokey. May, 1857, Harriet “Rit” Green Ross, alias Harriet “Rit” Stewart (mother), Benjamin Ross, alias Benjamin Stewart (father). December, 1860, Stephen Ennals, Maria Ennals, Harriet Ennals, Amanda Ennals, baby Ennals. John Cornish alias John Wesley Reed. Likely unidentified woman unknown dates, Margaret Stewart, Ann Marie Stewart, Amelia Hollis alias Amelia Millie Hollis Stewart, Henry Carrol.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Haiku and Tanka for Harriet Tubman

Picture a woman

riding thunder on

the legs of slavery ...

Picture a woman

walking Southern landscapes

burning with moons...

Picture her kissing

our spines saying no

to the eyes of slavery…

Picture her rotating

the earth into a shape

of lives becoming ...

Picture her leaning

into the eyes of our

birth clouds   ...

Picture a woman

moving in winter black

bringing summer moons

Picture this woman

saying no to the constant

yes of slavery …

Picture a woman

jumping rivers her

legs inhaling moons...

Picture her ripe

with seasons of

legs ...running ...

Picture her tasting

the secret corners

of woods...

Imagine her words:

*Every great dream begins*

*with a dreamer  ...*

Picture her saying:

*You have within you the strength,*

*the patience, and the passion*

*to reach for the stars,*

*to change the world  ...*

Imagine her saying:

*I freed a thousand slaves,*

*could have freed*

*a thousand more if they*

*only knew they were slaves ...*

Imagine her humming:

*How many days we got*

*‘fore we taste freedom...*

Imagine a woman

asking: *How many workers*

*for this freedom quilt...*

 Picture her saying:

*A live runaway could do*

*great harm by going back*

*but a dead runaway*

*could tell no secrets  .*..

Picture the daylight

bringing her to woods

full of birth moons ...

Picture John Brown

shaking her hands three times saying:

General Tubman. General Tubman. General Tubman.

Picture her words:

*There’s two things I got a*

*right to: death or liberty* ...

Picture her saying *no*

to a play called *Uncle Tom’s Cabin:*

*I am the real thing*...

Picture a Black woman:

could not read or write

trailing freedom refrains ...

Picture her face

turning southward walking

down a Southern road  ...

Picture this woman

freedom bound ... tasting a

people’s preserved breath  ...

Picture this woman

of royalty... wearing a crown

of morning air  ...

Picture her walking,

running, reviving

a country’s breath...

Picture her moon

bent, legs dancing

 inside freedoms  guitars

Picture black voices

leaving behind

lost tongues  …

Picture a woman

walking on freedom legs

a sea spray of life…

for Harriet Tubman

**Karen Long:**

Thank you so much. Well, you brought ancestors right into the space with us and I am reflecting on your cadence for the word “unidentified” because you slow it down to “un-i-dent-ify.” And it almost sounds like on “I,” the lacking of the I to be the self that is named. Is that kind of what you were driving at?

**Sonia Sanchez:**

What I was doing, I wanted to slow it down also just to show by stretching it out, we don't even talk about the real unidentified people. There are so many more. So you had to just stretch it out to remind people just how many people were unidentified. How many were not seen or heard or known or how many died. How many did not stay alive? How many escaped in the creases? What I call the creases of night, right? Never to be heard from again, period. So all of that. Yes.

**Karen Long:**

And it reminds me of you a year ago, at Kent State University, bringing the names forward of the wounded from the massacre there in 1970. So naming has an almost biblical level of importance in your work. It feels that this beautiful act, this essential act, could be something. I know your grandmother was a religious woman and that might be connecting back to her. I know so much does in your sense of language.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Very much so. My mother died giving birth to twins. And some years later I gave birth to twins and... yeah, that's an amazing thing about that. And Mama, my grandmother, came and picked me and my sister up and took us to live with her. And she was an amazing woman because I was the youngest — a child that I'm told, later on, was always in some kind of trouble. Meaning simply that they sent me outside to play, but they put all these little pretty dresses on and I would come back in with something torn, with dirt, hair out, braids out. We had these long braids and ribbons on it. My ribbons were gone, the braids were out, but my sister, Pat, would come back in looking the same way she looked from the morning. Clean, nothing torn, braids in place.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And my aunts who live with us, would say, "Oh, look at Patricia. Isn't she just perfect? Look how beautiful she looks." And then they turned and look at me and said, "And look at Sonia and look at her." I mean, everything was torn out of place. Because I ran, I went outside and played. But Mama, my grandmother, was saying, "Just let the girl be. She'll be all right." And there I was, with her, protected always.

**Karen Long:**

And seeing the irrepressibleness of you and letting you be.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Yes. And I used to run with the boys, which was the other thing….They played. My sister and the other girls would just stand and look pretty. They didn't move, they would move someplace gently and come back. But they were almost like posing for the day. And I ran and I climbed trees and jumped over stuff and whatever. And one day with them came this big argument — who's the leader? And it was never solved. So I said, come on. So we ran to my house and we went into the bedroom and we had this very high window. And then you could see the yard. And so I climbed up and I said, the one who jumps out of and lands on her feet or his feet will be the leader.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

They went and ran to get my grandmother. And everything else and my sister, but I got in the window. By that time I had to jump, you know how kids are, you lose face, right? And so I jumped, but I hadn't looked, there was a huge tree. And I knew I could hit the tree. I used to climb the tree and slide down the tree, but I jumped too hard and I hit the tree, fell down on my knees and of course my aunts came out, shaking their heads like *Uh-uh-uh*...And Mama came out and picked me up and said, "You all right, girl? Your knees hurt? Go get me some mercurochrome to put on her knees." You don't hear the word mercurochrome anymore, do you?

**Karen Long:**

No.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

"And alcohol," and they did that. And Mama looked at me and said, "You okay?" And she said, "Okay, go play." And I went and played. Now I'm the leader, but it didn't mean anything because the next day we came out to play. Nobody was the leader, we just played. Which tells you something about children — they're not that anxious always to be the leader. You know, if it gets solved one day, the next day is unimportant. I wish our leaders could deal like that also too. The adult ones understand that many people can be leaders just beside themselves. So that was Mama, a very religious woman. She was a head deaconess in our church. Every Saturday wherever I was out playing, I saw these women, these elderly women coming in their long dresses to prepare to cook food for the next day.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Wherever I would come in and mama would see me, I’d slide behind the couch just to listen to them. I mean, it was amazing what they talked about. I did a piece about that, about my grandmother. Every now and then they would say something funny. And so I would laugh and she’d shoot her eyes around the couch — you better keep quiet or you had to leave. So I would keep quiet and they would say things like, "You know, sister Jo, brother Thomas is beating his wife,” and there was a silence. You could hear the cracking, snapping of beans, you could just hear it.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And one of them said, "Well, we have to go over and talk to her and tell her what she has to do." And I was sitting there listening. And my grandmother, Mama, would say, "Well, take sister Louise's baby over to sister Brenda's baby because they both are nursing, for that baby to stay [there], and take sister Louise’s son over to sister Thomasina’s because she has a boy at the same age; they can play." And then there was a snapping of beans. I remember sitting there and saying, so thinking, okay, what is it? And then the snapping of beans stopped.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

They said, "And then we'll go over and tell her what she's supposed to do and what she's supposed to say to stop the beatings that some of these men give us." And then the snapping of the beans continued. And then you would hear them say, "We tell her to put the water on the stove until it got hot and then turn off the fire and then wake him up and point to the stove with the hot water and say, ‘You hit me again, the next time you go to sleep, I'm going to pour this water all over you.’”

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And one of them said, "It could be hot grits too." It's ingrained in my brain. And so they had no psychologists. They had probably not even the preacher to go to, who was a male, right? But they figured it out among themselves. And then of course they laughed and said, "They'll never hit them again” because they had experienced the same thing. There were no psychologists there telling them what to do, but they would tell each other what to do. I remembered that forever and ever.

**Karen Long:**

And I remember Toni Morrison talking about you and she doing something similar with childcare. You were all moms and you are all writers and you were all trying to bring up the children in New York and you figured it out amongst yourselves.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Yeah. My dear sister, by ourselves. And also feeling guilt most of the time, you know what I'm saying? Because you think you take away from them with the writing, but I would write with them around me when they were little. I would put them in the playpen and have my notebook, and I’d be stretched out on the couch watching them. And if they said something, needed something, I’d get up and get a bottle and come back and write or make an outline of what I really wanted to say at some particular point. I would go to the park with them in the stroller with a bottle and I'd be sitting there writing also. You wrote whenever you could write, but above all, what I did is I learned how to write between the teaching and taking care of the children.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

I would come home with them when they were in first, second grade. Give them something to eat, help them with the homework, feed them dinner, do the things you have to do. And then I would go and begin to grade papers or read papers. And then from about 1:00 until about 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning I wrote. I wrote in my study. I had a fire going in there. I turned down the thermostat, got all that done at some particular point. And then at 4:00 I had a little alarm in there. It was the old fashioned one, pulled the thing out so it would alarm at 6:30. And at 6:30, I got up, knocked on the doors, "Come on, get up. Get in the shower. Get dressed. I'm going to go downstairs."

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And they would say, “No oatmeal today, mom!" Because they hated oatmeal, right? And I would say, okay, cold cereal. And I get the juice and the cold cereal out. And I would make something for them to take with themselves. And while they were eating, I went upstairs and jumped in the shower and get dressed and get my briefcase (we didn't have the roller things) that was already packed from the night before and head out in the car to take them to school. And when I got to my class at 8:30, the class began at 8:40. When some of the students would come in at 8:50, who lived on campus, I said, "Look, if I can get here at 8:30 on time for an 8:40 am class. You live on campus, you can get here too. So let's not be late." And my day would begin at that particular point, my dear sister.

**Karen Long:**

And as I hear you recount it now, there's such a lilt. There's no complaining. You just put your shoulders into the work.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

I should tell my friends — if someone would just give me something, so I could write for a year. No, because I taught a lot of politics in my class, my dear sister. So I wasn't always kept at a university. After years I was out of there again, looking for a place. So I just would say, "Oh, just this teaching." But you know what I found out about my teaching? My teaching made me much more human. Some of the ideas I brought to a classroom dissipated when you looked at a classroom of black, whites, browns, Latino students...Asian students — you came in and your scenario had to change, you had to explain things.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

You had to bring them within that circle of what it means to be human. Teaching made my writing better, made me as a human being better. Although I complain about, "Oh, why can't I get this and that and stay home for a year and do nothing” because I was always tired, granted. But being in the classroom made me truly understand why I taught and also why I wrote.

**Karen Long:**

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk\* is a project of The Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

**Karen Long:**

We now return to the conversation. This reminds me of three lines that you wrote that are among my favorites and these lines are, *let me wear the day/well so when it reaches you/you will enjoy it*.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

I wrote that to my twins. In 1973, culture workers, people who dealt with culture, were invited to China after Nixon had gone to China at that time. Candice Bergen, Shirley McLean, John Killens, oh, I forget the sister, who's a fascinating playwright, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, we all went there about 26 of us strong, went to be what they call culture workers in 1973. When I say it, I look at the audience and say to the students, "Many of you were not born or even a thought any time at that particular point." But we went there and it was just an amazing moment for me.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

We got off in Hong Kong. We took a train into the southern part of China. We saw where the chairman grew up, where he lived, where he was born, and then we came to Peking [now Beijing]. And I decided we were gone for two weeks by then. So I got on the telephone. I remember getting through to the operator, I don't have the money to pay collect. And so finally it went through, it was so clear. My aunt Sarah answered the phone and said, "Oh, Sonia, are you back in the States?" I said, "No, I'm in Peking. But let me speak to the children. I don't know how much this call is going to cost me by the time I get home." But I need to talk. So we had the extensions.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And so they got an extension saying, "Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy. Did you get our swords?" They wanted these wooden swords and a cap and a jacket. And we hadn't had time to shop but I lied and said, "Yes." I finally got them in Shanghai. I said, "Yes." They said, "Oh, Oh." And I said, "But it's Monday. And I just wanted to tell you how much I love you. And I'll be home in another two weeks." And I said, "It's Monday morning." Then I heard this sound, they called Aunt Sarah, saying "Aunt Sarah, Mommy thinks it's Monday, but it's really Sunday, huh?" It was so funny.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And I said, "I don't have time to try to explain this to these little ones, right?" And on the way to climb the Great Wall of China I wrote the haiku, *let me wear the day/ well so when it reaches you/ you will enjoy it*. Said with one breath as the haiku is said with one breath. And I realized that I was greeting the day before my children greeted the day. And if I wore the day well, that day in Beijing, by the time they got the day at home, they would be obliged, my children and Aunt Sarah, to wear the day well. So when I did a reading at the University of Beijing, I said, "I want to end with the only poem I've written so far." I made lots of notes and that was the poem I read. And one of the officials stood up and said, "Ah, Professor Sanchez, if we here in the East, learn how to wear our days well, perhaps by the time you get the day in your country in the West, perhaps we will have peace." That is the beauty of the haiku.

**Karen Long:**

I love knowing the origin of that and the reciprocity. It's so interesting to me that haiku just made you fall out when you first discovered it in the New York 8th Street Bookshop.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

8th Street Bookstore, right. I was studying with a woman by the name of Louise Bogan, the great writer. I had been searching for some workshops and every time I went to a workshop after I was out of Hunter College for the free education. I tell the students, we only paid a hundred dollars a semester to get a free education, can you imagine? I went to some of these other workshops taught by really well-known people. And they were like all men. I walked in, I was the only female and the only black sitting there, and I would sit there and sometimes I would raise my hand. Every now and then I was recognized; most times I was ignored. And after a couple of sessions, I dropped out.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

I tried a couple of them. At some point I was taking grad courses at NYU and I looked through the bulletin and there was a poetry course taught by Louise Bogan, who was the poetry editor of the *New Yorker*. And so I said, "Go in, sit by the door, don't register for this and see what happens." I sit by the door, right? And just watched her. And there were 45 people in there, all men, except for one other woman. Only two women in there because poetry was about men, not about women at that time. And I sat there and Louise Bogan was a fascinating woman.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

She said, "Does anyone here have a poem to read on this first day?" And all the hands went up. And I said, "Okay, Sonia, now's the time." And I raised my hand and she asked my name and I went up front. I read the poem. And the amazing thing that happened for the first time in my life, hands went up and that class could comment on what I had written. But above all the teacher, the professor commented on it. And I sat down and said, "You're going to register for this class." And I did.

**Karen Long:**

What a profound thing that you were seeing because this was the same era of Ruth Bader Ginsburg where women students weren't seen, they were oddities, they were annoying in their intelligence.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

One of the people became a renowned writer. And I was invited to go to town hall to lead. We were doing poems against the war in Vietnam. And I turned around and I was with someone, I won't mention her name, and she said, "Here comes that guy who you told me about that didn't respond to you in the classroom." And he came up to me and says, "Sonia, Sonia. Oh, it's so good having you here. I requested that you come and be a part of this reading” and we hugged. And I said, “Thank you, my brother and it's an honor to be here."

**Sonia Sanchez:**

But then my friend said, "Why didn't you curse them out, Sonia? What are you telling them? You oughta *blah, blah, blah*." And I said, "Do you know how many years have passed since then? If I were to do that, then I would think no one can change." I've changed. You've changed, he's changed. But I'm going to put him in the state of stasis to go back 20 years and say, "You haven't changed"? That's madness. He had changed, if you understand. And that's the joy about this. Is it not, my dear sister, is that we all have the ability to change, to evolve, you know? And so I hugged and thanked him for inviting me, although he didn't remember me from the years from before. But the point is that it was unnecessary to remember me then. He knew me then at that time, and we were all engaged with doing a huge, huge poetry reading against the war in Vietnam.

**Karen Long:**

And your generosity increased the peace, the peace in the space, the peace in his heart, so that he could be a better version of who he was meant to become?

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Better self too. Try to evolve, to be more. We tend to carry sometimes such pain in our bodies because of what someone said. I mean everyone knows, but when I first started to write and we discovered, I mean, we've discovered we had been enslaved. So we didn't come out saying “By golly, by gee,we were enslaved.” We came out [makes fighting noise]. You were like slapping everybody you could slap, because you of course were enslaved. But to think if you had continued writing like that, that was like madness. And you saw people who were stretching for peace, stretching for, how do you walk upright as a human being? We were all stretching for that here in a place called America.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And so you had to open up and receive people when you realize that's what they were doing at some particular point. And it was difficult because in many of our sessions, you heard things that made you break down and cry. Or you heard a woman say that she took care of the newborn babies and every now and then you drop the baby and she dropped one of the babies. She didn't even report it; she just kind of wiped the baby off and put it back in the bassinet. As she was in tears about what she had done and we were all in tears, but what we were doing is that we were trying to say, "No, this is not what we do today. This is not what anyone will do today." We have learned from some of these mistakes but as women we've got to understand the need to come and process what it is that we're trying to do. Trying to walk upright as human beings, which is very difficult in this time.

**Karen Long:**

There are so many headwinds, and yet here we stand 100 years past the 19th Amendment. And here we hold in our hands as women, the opportunity to set the course, as you said, a year ago in Cleveland, when you showed up on the stage and called us to vote, and you told us to resist.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Yes, my dear sister, I remember someone said to me years ago, “Well, my husband votes for this person. So I have to vote for that person.” I turned around. I said, "Why? He's not in the voting booth with you. How would he ever know how you voted?" And you realize sometimes just how the suppression that's put on women and how some women are frightened to veer off the beaten path. The path that has been laid out for them along the way. But yes, we do. We do have to know at some particular point that all of us here on this earth are put here for a reason. We come out sometimes crying and someone said to me once long time ago, crying and screaming, because we were saying, I was so warm inside, now you've given me this cold world to look at.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And then we laughed and said together and it gets colder even as we move on. But the point is for us as we move in churches and mosques and synagogues, and in freedom houses. In places where you just go and sit and don't say anything for the whole sermon, but you think about your own thoughts. You hope that your thoughts are being purified and cleansed by the building, right?

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Could I share something with you that I’ve only shared with my family? There's a big Quaker center downtown, and I was invited by one of the brothers who worked there at the center to come and give a talk and I was coming off of a three-day fast.So I was saying, "Okay." So I was very clear, but also a little woozy. I hadn't eaten. So I only took something to drink and I got into the house where they had just the benches and I'm getting ready to read. And as I began to read, I read a poem that I read 20 million times. I began to make mistakes from the beginning. I mean, I made a mistake on every line and I turned to the audience there and said, "That's unusual. I know this poem almost by heart. And I don't memorize poems. Let me try that again." And I stood up straight and I started to read the poem and I'm making mistakes after mistakes and finally, the brother who had invited me said, "Yes, you are making mistakes, professor Sanchez."

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And I looked up in the audience and I saw a person all covered up, long and white. And I actually heard the person say, "Help me, help me, help me." And I put my head down like this. I'm saying, "My golly, by gee Sonia like you came in for a poetry reading.” I looked up again and she was there, saying "Help me." I could tell, I didn't know if she was white, black. No, I didn't know. All I could see was the white thing over her head and her fair skin.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Something said, "Say, ‘all right, I will.’" And I said, "I will. I will help you." And then some other people turned and one of the young women said, "I see her." And I remember getting down, falling down on my knees actually. And the man who ran the program helped me up. And I looked up, everything had dissipated. It was gone. And I said, "Let me do the reading." And I started to read and no mistakes.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And I said, "Let me explain to you that I saw some apparition. I saw someone who was asking for help." I said, "Did anything ever happen in this building?" And one of the archivers said, "Well, in this building, there was a long discussion about whether the Quakers should keep their slaves." And I said, "Oh, okay. Can I meet with you later?" So I like to write something on this. But every now and then I remember that, especially on days like today, when we understand at some point that there's so much that we must see that we've got to advance. This country that has come through enslavement. This country that has come through indentured service. This country that's come through children being burned up in factories because they were paid so little money, but they were worked. This country that has strikes where people were beaten and killed. This country where they would burn people up in houses if you understand.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

When our soldiers just came back from World War I and it seemed as if these Negroes were getting out of control. People in St. Louis would burn them up. When you had black men and women becoming millionaires in Tulsa, Oklahoma? And people were coming into that place and couldn't understand how Negroes, former enslaved people, could be rich with all these houses and fancy stuff that they had. And all of a sudden, someone calls out that they think a white woman is being attacked and all hell breaks loose, the Tulsa so-called riot there. And where for the first time, bombs are dropped on an American city by Americans? That's Tulsa. And then coming full circle here in Philadelphia, a bomb was dropped on MOVE.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

What I'm saying is at some point, if we don't talk about this, these things will be repeated time and time again. If we don't say to people at some point, via our poetry, via our teachings.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

I had gone to Tulsa, Oklahoma two years after I moved here to Philadelphia, to give a talk. And the mayor gave a reception for me at his house. I didn't know the person, but I walked in and I told him I'm a vegetarian. So they had a salad for me. I had been salad out on the road, you know? And I was so hungry saying, "Oh gosh, is there rice?" There was no rice, there were potatoes and stuff. And so there was this old black man sitting by himself. And I walked over and said, "Have you been served?"

**Sonia Sanchez:**

He said, "No, I haven't, daughter." I said, "Would you like to get some food?" "Yes, daughter." So I went and got him food and brought it there and put it down. And he said, "Could I have something to drink?" And I went and got something to drink and brought it back. And I brought dessert. And I'm sitting, he said, "Aren't you going to eat, daughter?" I said, "Well, there's only lettuce and tomatoes there. I'd had enough lettuce and tomatoes on my trip. I'll get something later on." And then he looked at me with this very sly smile, "I bet you don't know what happened here, do you?" And I looked at him, sizing him up in terms of his age. Whatever it was had to be in the early 20th century, maybe the late '19, '18, 1920s.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

And I lean forward. He said, "You have a paper and pencil?" So I went in my purse, we carry a little notebooks. He said, "Write down this number." And he gave me the numbers and said, “Write down this name, ‘Mr. Jones’." I said, "Aha! I wrote it down." And I put it away. I said, "Lead me to see what happened." He said, "You go home and you call me when you find out what happened, call me." I'm thinking I've fed this man. I've conversed with him. I've gotten him seconds on stuff. I've gotten him soda, you're supposed to tell me what happened here. And now you're telling me when you go home and you find out what happened, right. Call me.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

So I got home and I remember calling a young grad assistant. I said, go to the library, tell me what happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1917, '18, '19, or the early '20s. She went there, she says there's nothing. There's nothing in newspapers even, professor Sanchez. And I thought it was a library! So I went in there and I pull it and there it was — Tulsa, Oklahoma. That every now and then when we talked about the '20s, I would say the so-called riots happened. I never mentioned Tulsa because I mentioned the other places where children coming home from school had gotten inside and they had been burned.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

The house had been nailed, shut and burnt whatever. So this is the kind of thing that I am looking at at this particular point. The funny thing is that the next day I will call him, "Mr. Jones, this is Sonia Sanchez, remember? I met..." "Yes daughter. How are you today?" I said, "I found out what happened." And before I could tell, he said, "Good. Well, that's good for you. Good. Now you tell people about it. Goodbye." I thought we were going to have a great conversation all our lives together, right? And he said, "Thank you. That's it. Goodbye."

**Karen Long:**

That fits so beautifully with the poem you read at the beginning, with the incantation of names and the unidentified, right?

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Unidentified. Right. And now they're finding bodies there, you know? But the thing about that, I came back and put it into my curriculum when I taught. And when the bombing happened here in Philadelphia, the newscast had said, “This is the first time a bomb has been dropped on…” And my students called the radio stations and the TV stations saying, "Oh, no, no, no. This is the second time." Do you know they didn't believe them? When I got home, I checked my messages on my answering service. And there was a call from NBC, CBS, whatever the other station is, “Professor Sanchez. We got some calls from your students that said, this was not the first time. And to our knowledge, this is the first time this has happened."

**Sonia Sanchez:**

They said it's the second time. And we want to verify this." So I actually had to verify with them and told them. And so the next semester, when I got some of the same students, they said, "You see, you think we don't listen, professor Sanchez?" And I said, "No, you listen. And I'm so grateful that you listen because you corrected a city at some point about the information that they have."

**Karen Long:**

And the observation you made that we're all here to do something. We want to say you are here to teach and I feel braver. And your listeners and readers feel braver when we are with your words. Thank you so much.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

I feel braver when I meet women like you and the work that you do. And how you organize and bring all of us together. I'm so grateful for your bringing me there for that award. I'm so grateful for the care that you gave all of us, all the writers as we came together and looked at each other and read our work and talked to that grand audience that you've been doing that for years and years and years, and it became for me a holy place. And that's what you do. That's work you're doing when you give those awards to those people who try to effect change, who try to make us all human walk up right as human beings, you are doing holy work. And it was such a joy to be a part of that holy work with you there in Ohio.

**Karen Long:**

Thank you because it was a sacrament to be together and we will be together again.

**Sonia Sanchez:**

Thank you. My dear sister.

**Karen Long:**

The Asterisk\* is brought to you by The Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby and the producer is Jay Williams of WOVU Radio. I'm Karen Long who manages the prizes. Thank you for listening.