



City of Philadelphia

City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107

RESOLUTION NO. 210873

Introduced October 28, 2021

Councilmember Parker

RESOLUTION

Congratulating Sonia Sanchez on winning the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, one of the country's most prestigious and generous arts honors.

WHEREAS, Sonia Sanchez was born Wilsonia Benita Driver on September 9, 1934 in Birmingham, Alabama. From an early age, she developed a passion for observing and listening to the way people spoke. She loved to listen to the voices and sounds of her grandmother and aunts in the kitchen preparing meals; and

WHEREAS, Sanchez developed a stutter after the devastating loss of her beloved grandmother when she was six. While the stutter caused her to become introverted, it also led her to read more and to pay close attention to language and its sounds; and

WHEREAS, Sanchez found a new sonic experience when her father moved the family to Harlem in New York City in 1943, when she was nine. She says there was a fast-paced rhythm to the city – everything from groups of girls on playgrounds jumping double-dutch rope, to the rapid clip of New York speech. She would later adopt such patterns to her poems; and

WHEREAS, When in Harlem, she overcame her stutter and excelled in school, finding her poetic voice which later emerged during her studies at Hunter College. Sanchez focuses on the sound of her poetry, admitting to always reading her poetry aloud, receiving praise for her use of the full range of African and African-American vocal resources. She is known for her sonic range and dynamic public readings. She now terms herself an "ordained stutterer"; and

WHEREAS, Sanchez earned a B.A. in political science in 1955 from Hunter College. After, she pursued post-graduate studies at New York University (NYU), working closely with Louise Bogan, the first woman to hold the title of Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress. During her time at NYU, Sanchez formed a writers' workshop in Greenwich Village. From this group, the "Broadside Quartet" was born, and it included other prominent artists of the Black Arts Movement; and

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WHEREAS, Sonia Sanchez is a teacher. She taught 5th Grade in NYC at the Downtown Community School. She has taught as a professor at eight universities, including the University of Pennsylvania, Amherst College, and the University of Pittsburgh, has lectured at over 500 universities and colleges in the United States, and has traveled extensively, reading her poetry throughout the continent of Africa, Cuba, Nicaragua, England, France, Norway, Australia, China, Brazil, Guiana, Scotland, and Canada. She was also a leader in the effort to establish the discipline of Black Studies at the university level. In 1966, while teaching at San Francisco State University she introduced Black Studies courses. Sanchez was the first Presidential Fellow at Temple University, where she began working in 1977. There, she held the Laura Carnell chair until her retirement in 1999. She is currently a poet-in-residence at Temple University; and

WHEREAS, Sonia Sanchez is an activist. She was a very influential part of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement, and she supports the National Black United Front. She also continues to advocate for the rights of oppressed women and minority groups; and

WHEREAS, Sonia Sanchez is a poet. She is known for her innovative melding of musical formats—such as the blues—and traditional poetic formats like haiku and tanka. She also uses spelling to celebrate the unique sound of black English. Her first collection of poems, *Home Coming* (1969), is known for its blues influences in both form and content. The collection describes both the struggle of defining black identity in the United States as well as the many causes for celebration Sanchez sees in black culture. Her second book, *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), solidifies her contribution to the Black Arts Movement aesthetic by focusing on the everyday lives of black men and women. These poems make use of urban black vernacular, experimental punctuation, spelling, and spacing, and the performative quality of jazz. Sanchez's later works, such as *I've Been a Woman* (1978), *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984), and *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987) focus on themes of love, community, and empowerment. Later works continue her experiments with forms such as the epic in *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997) and the haiku in *Morning Haiku* (2010); and

WHEREAS, Sanchez winning the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize follows a long career of other awards and accolades. In 1969, Sanchez was awarded the P.E.N. Writing Award. She was awarded the National Education Association Award from 1977–1988. She won the National Academy and Arts Award and the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Award in 1978–79. In 1985, she received the American Book Award for *Homegirls and Handgrenades*. She has also been awarded the Community Service Award from the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, the Lucretia Mott Award, the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Humanities, and the Peace and Freedom Award from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, as well as the 1999 Langston Hughes Poetry Award, the 2004 Harper Lee Award, and the 2006 National Visionary Leadership Award; and

WHEREAS, In 2009, Sanchez received the Robert Creeley Award, from the Robert Creeley Foundation. Sanchez became Philadelphia's first Poet Laureate, after being appointed by Mayor Michael Nutter. She served in that position from 2012 to 2014. In 2017, Sanchez was honored at the 16th Annual Dr. Betty Shabazz Awards, in 2018, she won the Wallace Stevens Award from

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the Academy of American Poets for proven mastery in the art of poetry, and in 2019, she was honored with the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award; and

WHEREAS, Sanchez was selected for the \$250,000 Gish Prize “in recognition of her ongoing achievements in inspiring change through the power of the word.” The late actress Lillian Gish wrote in her will that this honor should be given to people who “made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind’s enjoyment and understanding of life”; and

WHEREAS, “What an honor it is to receive this award, most especially since we as a country are attempting to answer the most important question facing us: what does it mean to be human?” Sanchez said in a statement. “I promise, as other artists do, that I will continue to write and talk about the importance of answering this question — the importance of celebrating the beauty of the world and its people”; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby congratulates Sonia Sanchez on winning the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, one of the country’s most prestigious and generous arts honors.

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