This Is Not a Small Voice

SUMMARY

The speaker says that the collective voice you hear rising up out of our cities isn't some soft, quiet sound, but rather something loud and powerful. This voice belongs to people like LaTanya, Kadesha, Shaniqua, Antoine, Darryl, and Shaquille. This voice moves like a strong river, rushing through the school corridors and bursting into every nook and cranny of our cities. And this river of voices is doing more than just spilling out words of remembrance for the dead.

Black love isn't something minor or marginal; it's a big, intense love filled with passionate desire both to kiss and to learn. This love, the speaker says, makes hands and feet touch, nurtures, and perceives the surface it moves across. It heals children and tucks them into a shared past, where they celebrate more than just the body, where they ingest the skeleton of the alphabet and cough up any part of it that doesn't serve them. This love, the speaker continues, is made of both strong metal and beautifully delicate fabric. The name of this love is Black Genius.

The speaker reiterates: the voice you're hearing isn't soft, quiet, or trivial.

THEMES

THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF BLACK PEOPLE

"This Is Not a Small Voice" celebrates Black voices and Black communities. Rejoicing in Black pleasure, talent, and success, the poem's speaker makes it known that, despite the racism and oppression they've faced, Black people have a unique strength and beauty—and those qualities are built on a foundation of love and collaboration.

Black communities, the speaker declares, aren't just a "small voice" in a crowd but a powerful chorus. Being Black, the speaker suggests, means feeling like part of a tight-knit, affectionate, and proud community. The poem's references to "our schools" and "our cities" indicate that Black strength is built on solidarity and mutual support. That support becomes even clearer when the speaker lists the names of individual community members. Some of those names carry particular associations ("Shaquille," for instance, calls to mind the basketball star Shaquille O'Neal, whose success boosted the name's popularity), and all are names associated with Black American communities at the time the poet was writing. In this way, the poem implies that every Black person forms an important part of their community, and every one is part of a strong collective "voice."

The power of this collective Black voice, the poem goes on to suggest, stems from a legacy of love and connection. The speaker says that Black people's "passion for kissing" and "learning" is evidence of their love for each other, as is their commitment to "nourish[ing]" and "mending" their children, and "fold[ing]" those children "inside [their] history." In other words, Black people nurture each other out of a deep sense of community and a desire to help each other succeed. Their voice is strong because their love is.

Black love, the speaker concludes, is "colored with iron and lace," suggesting that it consists of both strength and beauty, persistence and grace. In this way, the poem argues that Black people aren't just defined by what they've survived (or haven't survived)—nor does their "voice" convey only the "epitaphs" of those they've lost to racist violence and oppression. Instead, they're part of a community that takes its identity from beauty, talent, aspiration, joy, and love. These are all aspects of "Black Genius," the brilliant spark that makes Black communities what they are.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

This is not ...
... of these cities.

The poem begins by contrasting two ideas (in an example of antithesis):

> This is not a small voice
> you hear this is a large
> voice coming out of these cities.

"These cities" doesn't specify a setting. However, the subsequent lines (containing names associated with Black American communities at the time the poet was writing), as well as the poet's history of affiliation with the Black Arts movement, strongly suggest a focus on Black populations within American cities. The parallel statements "This is not a small voice" and "this is a large / voice" imply that, while individual Black voices are often silenced or ignored, Black communities as a whole make themselves powerfully heard.

The caesura created by the gap in line 2 (between "hear" and "this") is less subtle than the pause that would exist after a comma or even a period. It compels the reader to actually consider that empty space, to *listen* to the voice the speaker is describing. And by pushing "you hear" to the second line and isolating it with a visual gap, the poem almost demands that the reader "hear" (i.e., acknowledge the "voice coming out of these cities"). In fact, "you hear" is often used colloquially to emphasize something one has just said. In all these ways, the speaker drives home the point that this collective "voice" is not to be ignored.

LINES 4-7

This is the ...
... Darryl. Shaquille.

To illustrate the power of a collective Black "voice," the speaker highlights various individual contributors to that voice.

These are names primarily associated with Black American communities at the time the poet was writing; they are meant to be read as proudly, culturally Black. A few names might partly allude to notable people (e.g., "Shaquille" is widely associated with basketball star Shaquille O'Neal; "LaTanya" might call to mind the well-known American actress LaTanya Richardson Jackson, and so on). However, the speaker is celebrating members of Black communities in general, not just famous figures. This collective Black "voice" is made up of countless individuals who have achieved excellence, whether they've gained fame or not.

The asyndeton in this list—the lack of conjunctions such as "and" between any of the names—helps stress the importance of each Black person in this chorus of voices. Each name is given the weight of its own sentence fragment, punctuated by an emphatic period. Anaphora (the repetition of "This is the voice of" in lines 4 and 5-6) helps suggest that this list of accomplished Black individuals could go on and on; countless other people have contributed to this powerful "voice," and the speaker could keep naming them indefinitely.

LINES 8-12

Running over waters ...
... their river mouths.

Lines 8-12 suggest that these individual Black voices combine into something much more powerful: an urgent, collective force. In a vivid metaphor, the speaker says that Black people's combined voices are as beautiful and unstoppable as a mighty river, surging out of the "schools" and into every "corner[] of our cities."

This power and urgency is reflected in the enjambment of these lines, which seem to "spill[]" across line breaks:

> Running over waters
> navigating the hallways
> of our schools spilling out
> on the corners of our cities and
> no [...]

The lengthening lines suggest the "river" flowing more freely, the chorus of Black voices getting stronger, and Black communities experiencing more freedom, love, and joy.

Asyndeton adds to this feeling of joy and liberation: the lack of conjunctions (such as "and") between "navigating the hallways of our schools" and "spilling out / on the corners of our cities" adds to the lines' momentum, implying that this empowerment can't be slowed or stopped. By the time the stanza arrives at the image of "river mouths" that contain "no epitaphs," the finality of end-stopping feels like an expression of confidence. Black communities will know joy and freedom; they won't be forever subjected to violence and oppression.

The "river mouths" metaphor also suggests that, like a river opening and emptying into the sea, Black communities won't be contained or silenced. They will open their mouths and, rather than sorrow, pour forth joy.

LINES 13-16

This is not ...
... on its face.

After the stanza break, the poem repeats the parallel statements from lines 1-3—except this time, instead of a "small" and "large" *voice*, it contrasts a "small" and "large" *love:*

> This is not a small love
> you hear this is a large
> love, a passion for kissing learning
> on its face.

Through these parallel antitheses, both of which begin their respective stanzas, the poem suggests a deep connection between the "voice" and the "love" the speaker describes. In other words, the *voice* of Black ambition and success originates in the *love* Black people have for each other—the "passion" they share.

Line 3 also contains more asyndeton, as the speaker omits a coordinating conjunction between "kissing" and "learning." This device does a few different things at once. First, it speeds up the poem, making its lines feel more "passion[ate]." Second, it equates "kissing" and "learning" by mashing them together, suggesting that physical and mental passion aren't totally separate—that loving and learning are all part of the same process. Third, using two gerunds (verbs that function as nouns) in a row suggests the versatility of this love, which does and *is* many things at once.

The speaker even briefly personifies this love by referring to its "face," implying that it's not just a passive emotion but its own

powerful force—maybe even an expression of divine power. The love that holds Black people is "large," possibly so large that it encompasses everything.

LINES 17-19

This is a ...
... mends the children,

Lines 17-19 further describe the powerful love in Black communities.

This love, the speaker says, "crowns the feet with hands." This imagery suggests the holding or washing of feet; it may allude to Jesus washing his disciples' feet by hand (a ritual that survives in some Christian denominations and symbolizes Christian humility and love). The speaker says that this love also:

> [...] nourishes, conceives, feels the water sails
> mends the children,

In other words, Black communities are beautiful, nurturing, and healing. These communities lift their children up, "mend[ing]" whatever ails them and giving them everything they can to succeed in the world. The imagery of Black children "feel[ing] the water" echoes the metaphor of the collective Black voice as a river, suggesting that children who grow up surrounded by powerful Black voices will themselves become powerful Black voices.

Once again, these long, enjambed lines mimic the river's free-flowing movement. The piling up of verbs ("feels the water sails / mends the children") also evokes motion and freedom, as one image spills into the next. Asyndeton reinforces this sense of freedom and connection: the lack of coordinating conjunctions between clauses suggests that love in Black communities takes many forms, and that these forms are inseparable from one another.

Finally, the use of asyndeton, enjambment, and long lines suggests a rising urgency or gathering momentum. The speaker believes that Black people are growing more empowered, more secure in their love, and more courageous in their ambitions. Like a river mouth opening into the sea, the poem seems to argue, the future for Black people is opening up into vaster possibilities.

LINES 20-23

folds them inside ...
... out closed vowels.

Lines 20-23 continue to describe the "large / love" in Black communities. The enjambment in these lines keeps the poem flowing at a fast, free pace; the "river" of voices is going strong, powered by love.

Not only does this love give Black children all they need to flourish—"nourish[ing]" and "mend[ing]" them—it also "folds them inside [Black] history." The speaker sees Black community as a nurturing, generous space in which Black children can learn the truth about their history, identity, and culture. In this setting, the speaker says, these children "toast more than the flesh"—that is, celebrate more than just physical desires and surface pleasures. Held by Black community, these kids:

> [...] suck the bones of the alphabet
> and spit out closed vowels.

Metaphorically, these lines compare the English language to a piece of meat. These children will consume it, break it down, and spit out anything that doesn't nourish them—anything they can't use to lift up themselves and others in their communities.

Line 23 is end-stopped, lending stronger emphasis to the image of children "spit[ting] out closed vowels." Closed vowels are vowel sounds that end in a narrowing of the lips, but metaphorically, these children seem to be rejecting *silence* (or language that's "closed" as in limiting, exclusionary, etc.). These children demand to be heard. In refusing "closed vowels," they seem to desire a more "open" speech—perhaps suggesting pride in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and/or in voices that are loud and unapologetic.

LINES 24-27

This is a ...
... you hear.

After a long stanza of mostly enjambed lines, lines 24 and 25 are end-stopped:

> This is a love colored with iron and lace.
> This is a love initialed Black Genius.

The end stops make these lines feel more emphatic, as does the use of anaphora (the repetition of "This is a love"). Anaphora also ties these statements back to the poem's earlier declarations: that "this is a large voice" and "a large love." The collective voice that emerges from Black communities, the speaker suggests, is not only emotionally grounded but brilliantly insightful. It's a product of heart and mind alike.

According to the speaker, this love contains elements of both "iron and lace." Iron suggests great strength and resilience: qualities Black communities have developed in response to centuries of oppression and suffering. But that isn't their whole story; Black love is also beautiful, delicate, and intricate, like lace. It's something to be admired, something that brings joy.

This love is "initialed," according to the speaker, with the phrase "Black Genius." In other words, the creative brilliance of Black communities—born of resourcefulness and resilience—leaves its mark on the *love* in those communities. It's like an identifying signature.

Finally, the poem circles back to its opening statement: "This is not a small voice / you hear." This repetition underlines the poem's central message: that Black voices make a resounding contribution to society as a whole.

SYMBOLS

THE RIVER

Lines 8-12 use a river to symbolize the powerful, collective "voice" of Black communities.

In the speaker's description, these "Running over" (or overflowing) "waters" pass through the schools where Black children learn and into the farthest "corners" of the cities where they live. This suggests that the voice coming out of these communities is unstoppable; like a river connecting the disparate places it passes through, this unified voice is made of countless incredible individuals from all over, each of them contributing to a powerful flow that's only gaining strength.

The speaker also says that "no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths." A "river mouth" is the part of the river that opens into the sea or some other large, open body of water. By describing the mouths of Black people as "river mouths," the speaker suggests that the collective voice of Black people is moving towards something bigger and better; it's building a future marked by joy and success rather than sorrow and mourning.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-12:** "Running over waters / navigating the hallways / of our schools spilling out / on the corners of our cities and / no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths."

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The poem uses a lot of parallelism (and, more specifically, anaphora) to build rhythm and momentum and also to draw attention to certain ideas.

Take a look at the first stanza. First of all, there's anaphora with the repetition of "This is" and "This is the voice of":

> This is not a small voice
> you hear this is a large
> voice coming out of these cities.
> This is the voice of LaTanya.
> Kadesha. Shaniqua. This
> is the voice of Antoine.

These repetitions are bold and insistent, much like the collective voice the speaker is describing. They also add a noticeable rhythm to the poem, giving it musicality and momentum, much like the powerful river the speaker uses to symbolize the voice of Black communities in lines 8-12 ("Running over waters [...] their river mouths.") The anaphora in lines 17, 24, and 25 ("This is a love") is again insistent, impressing upon the reader the importance that love plays in Black communities.

Parallelism can also draw attention to the connection (or contrast) between images and ideas. Take the phrase "This is not a small voice" vs. "this is a large voice." This is an example of antithesis, and the parallel structure of these two phrases adds emphasis to the speaker's point: that this voice is decidedly *not* soft and quiet, but rather loud and bold.

Meanwhile, the parallelism of the phrase "This is not a small love / you hear" at the beginning of stanza 2, which mirrors the lines "This is not a small voice / you hear" at the beginnings of stanzas 1 and 3, suggests that the "voice" and "love" of Black communities are inextricably intertwined.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "This is not a small voice"
- **Line 2:** "you hear," "this is"
- **Lines 2-3:** " a large / voice"
- **Line 4:** "This is the voice of"
- **Lines 4-7:** " LaTanya. / Kadesha. Shaniqua. This / is the voice of Antoine. / Darryl. Shaquille."
- **Line 13:** "This is not a small love"
- **Line 14:** "you hear," "this is a"
- **Lines 14-15:** " large / love"
- **Line 17:** "This is a love"
- **Line 24:** "This is a love"
- **Line 25:** "This is a love"
- **Line 26:** "This is not a small voice"
- **Line 27:** "you hear."

ENJAMBMENT

"This Is Not a Small Voice" features lots of enjambment, which lends the poem a sense of intensity and momentum. The poem flows smoothly and swiftly down the page, and in doing so evokes the powerful "river" of voices it describes.

Listen, for example, to the enjambment of lines 8-12:

> Running over waters
> navigating the hallways
> of our schools spilling out
> on the corners of our cities and
> no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths.

Just as the river "Run[s] over" and "spill[s] out," these lines

themselves spill right over the line breaks, making the stanza feel intense and urgent. The end-stop after "mouths" feels all the more solid and firm coming on the heels of so much enjambment, which adds force to the speaker's declaration—that this "river" of voices is not just speaking of the dead.

The second stanza then begins with another long passage of enjambed lines, the flow of which suggests that the "love" the speaker describes is powerful and free.

At the end of the second stanza, however, there are a few end-stopped lines in a row:

> and spit out closed vowels.
> This is a love colored with iron and lace.
> This is a love initialed Black Genius.

After a stanza of mostly enjambed, free-flowing lines, having three end-stopped lines in a row feels very emphatic. The speaker is confident that the momentum created by these Black communities loving and supporting each other will only continue to result in more successful Black people—more loving, "learning," and "nourish[ing]," more "Black Genius."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "voice / you"
- **Lines 2-3:** "large / voice"
- **Lines 5-6:** "This / is"
- **Lines 8-9:** "waters / navigating"
- **Lines 9-10:** "hallways / of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "out / on"
- **Lines 11-12:** "and / no"
- **Lines 13-14:** "love / you"
- **Lines 14-15:** "large / love"
- **Lines 15-16:** "learning / on"
- **Lines 17-18:** "hands / that"
- **Lines 18-19:** "sails / mends"
- **Lines 20-21:** "they / toast"
- **Lines 21-22:** "flesh / where"
- **Lines 22-23:** "alphabet / and"
- **Lines 26-27:** "voice / you"

CAESURA

Caesura adds variation to the rhythm of lines, slowing them down and sometimes drawing the reader's attention to specific words. In the opening lines, caesura created by a visual gap between words seems to encourage the reader to really *listen* to what they just read. The caesura between "hear" and "this" also draws attention to both of these words on either side of it, suggesting that the poem itself is a manifestation of this "large / voice."

In lines 5 and 9, caesura created by the use of periods within the line lends emphasis and gravity to each name being spoken:

> Kadesha. Shaniqua. This
> is the voice of Antoine.
> Darryl. Shaquille.

These names all add up, contributing to the collective "voice" the speaker describes, but the full stops in between each name also remind that these voices are each *individual*—that individual Black people matter, accomplish great things.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "hear this"
- **Line 5:** "Kadesha. Shaniqua. This"
- **Line 7:** "Darryl. Shaquille."
- **Line 14:** "you hear this is a large"
- **Line 15:** "love, a"
- **Line 18:** "nourishes, conceives, feels"

ALLUSION

The poem contains what is likely a list of allusions to specific Black individuals who have significantly impacted the world, or at least their "corners" of it:

> This is the voice of LaTanya.
> Kadesha. Shaniqua. This
> is the voice of Antoine.
> Darryl. Shaquille.

First, it's entirely possible to not read any of these as true allusions—that is, to read the poem as simply listing out various names to illustrate some of the many voices being talked about. That said, there are some possible real-life people that the poem might be nodding to.

The most overt of these allusions is "Shaquille," or Shaquille O'Neil, a very famous basketball player whose name contemporary readers are almost guaranteed to recognize. "Antoine" might refer to legendary rock and roll musician Fats Domino, whose given name was Antoine Dominique Domino Jr. And based on when the poem was written (1995), "LaTanya" perhaps alludes to LaTanya Richardson Jackson, a distinguished actress (other Black women named LaTanya have since risen to prominence, adding resonance to the list in retrospect).

Some of these allusions are less obvious, and perhaps even intentionally obscure. "Shaniqua" was the name used by professional wrestler Linda M. Miles, while "Darryl" might refer to any number of professional athletes or musicians. The varying degrees to which these names are recognizable suggests that regardless of what these individuals accomplished—whether it was acknowledged by the whole world or just the people around them—each of these people

are a valuable part of the growing tide of Black voices, of "Black Genius."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-7:** "This is the voice of LaTanya. / Kadesha. Shaniqua. This / is the voice of Antoine. / Darryl. Shaquille."

IMAGERY

The poem uses imagery to help illustrate its concepts. In lines 8-12, for example, the speaker uses the metaphor of a river to bring to life the powerful "voice" of Black communities. The speaker describes this river as:

> Running over waters
> navigating the hallways
> of our schools spilling out
> on the corners of our cities and
> no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths.

The imagery here focuses on the force and movement of the river, how it "Run[s]" and "spill[s]" from the "schools" to the "corners of [the] cities." This voice, then, is a powerful current that will take Black people into the future where "no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths." In other words, a future where their lives aren't defined by oppression, sorrow, and senseless death.

Later, in lines 22-25, the speaker uses more powerful imagery to describe the love that holds Black children, and the children themselves, who will:

> [...] suck the bones of the alphabet
> and spit out closed vowels.

A closed vowel is a vowel sound that involves a narrowing of the lips. Taken metaphorically, the speaker might be saying that these children spit out *silence* or language that's "closed" in the sense of being exclusionary or limiting in some way. To "spit out" these vowels suggests a more open vernacular, perhaps indicating pride in Black rhythms of speech, African American Vernacular English, and Black literature and culture. In other words, Black children are being empowered to celebrate their own heritage, to break the language of their oppressors into whatever they need it to be in order to free themselves and make themselves heard.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-12:** "Running over waters / navigating the hallways / of our schools spilling out / on the corners of our cities and / no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths."
- **Line 17:** "This is a love that crowns the feet with hands"
- **Line 18:** "feels the water sails"
- **Lines 22-23:** "where they suck the bones of the alphabet / and spit out closed vowels."

METAPHOR

Much of the poem's imagery is also directly tied to its many metaphors. In lines 8-12, for example, the poem uses the vivid metaphor of a surging river to depict the powerful tide of Black voices rising up:

> Running over waters
> navigating the hallways
> of our schools spilling out
> on the corners of our cities and
> no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths.

Like a river, the poem suggests, these voices make up a sweeping force that can reach across cities, states, and even continents. Being a part of this collective "voice" connects Black people to each other, so no matter where they are, they can "feel[] the water" and know that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Like a roaring river, their voices are loud and cannot be ignored or turned aside.

The poem also uses a metaphor in lines 22 and 23. The speaker describes the children who have been "fold[ed] inside" Black people's shared "history," saying that these children "suck the bones of the alphabet / and spit out closed vowels." This metaphor seems to depict language as something to be devoured and made into fuel, sustenance. In other words, the speaker sees Black love as something capable of disarming the very weapons that have been used to oppress Black people and turning them into something they can use.

Finally, the speaker goes on to say that Black love is "colored with iron and lace." This metaphor suggests both the struggles Black communities have faced, which have forced Black people to be stronger than anyone should have to be (strong as "iron"), as well as the beauty of Black people and culture, an intricate "lace" that ought to be appreciated and celebrated.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-12:** "Running over waters / navigating the hallways / of our schools spilling out / on the corners of our cities and / no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths."
- **Lines 20-23:** "folds them inside our history where they / toast more than the flesh / where they suck the bones of the alphabet / and spit out closed vowels."
- **Line 24:** "This is a love colored with iron and lace."

ASYNDETON

The speaker uses asyndeton throughout the poem, which lends the language intensity, urgency, and fluidity. In the opening stanza, for example, the speaker lists out the various names that this "voice" belongs to, separating each with a period rather than any coordinating conjunction. As a result, readers get the sense that this list is not definitive—that there's no end to it, because the speaker could go on and on naming valuable Black voices.

There's more asyndeton throughout the rest of the stanza, as the speaker describes the "river" of voices:

> Running over waters
> navigating the hallways
> of our schools spilling out
> on the corners of our cities

Think how differently these lines might sound had the speaker chosen to insert some "ands" in there. Instead, the lines flow rapidly down the page without stopping, which evokes the powerful sound of that river of voices.

The next stanza turns to asyndeton as well, in phrases like:

> [...] this is a large
> love, a passion for kissing learning
> on its face.

And:

> This is a love that crowns the feet with hands
> that nourishes, conceives, feels the water sails
> mends the children,

Again, the fact that the speaker doesn't pause for any coordinating conjunctions here makes the poem feel intense, quick, and urgent.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-11
- Lines 14-16
- Lines 17-22

VOCABULARY

Navigating (Line 9) - Traveling carefully; negotiating.

Epitaphs (Line 12) - Words written in remembrance of someone who has died.

Closed vowels (Lines 22-23) - In linguistics, a closed vowel is any vowel sound that involves a narrowing of the lips as one pronounces it—a long /oh/ or /oo/ sound in English, for example.Also worth noting: a closed *syllable* is when a vowel is followed by a consonant, thus "closing" (or shortening) the vowel sound. An example of this would be the /o/ vowel in the word "not" as opposed to "no." The /o/ in "no" is open, and therefore pronounced in its long form, while the /o/ in "not" is closed by a consonant, and so is pronounced in its short form.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of three stanzas of varying lengths. Like many contemporary poems, it doesn't take a traditional form and instead moves more organically and freely.

Visually, the poem undulates between shorter and longer lines. The second stanza is generally quite a bit wider than the first; the movement from narrow lines in the first stanza to the more swollen second stanza echoes some of the poem's metaphors. For instance, the speaker's description of Black peoples' "river mouths" in line 12 and their "spit[ting] out closed vowels" in line 23 both suggest a widening of the mouth that correlates with the "large" voice the speaker is describing. The poem's widening form is thus another, subtle way of evoking the immensity of this collective voice.

METER

The poem is written in free verse and therefore doesn't stick to any regular metrical pattern. Instead, lines vary in length, and, as a result, the poem's rhythm feels more intimate conversational.

While most contemporary poetry tends to be written in free verse, it's worth noting the specific reasons free verse feels like an appropriate choice here. This particular poem is celebrating the rise of a "voice" that has been historically silenced. It alludes to the fact that Black people have historically been spoken *over* or spoken *on behalf of* rather than given the chance to speak for themselves. The poem's lack of traditional meter might subtly suggest that the rules and conventions of the past no longer apply; just as the poem is free to take whatever shape and rhythm it pleases, so too are Black people making themselves heard in ways that feel authentic to who they are.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't use a regular rhyme scheme. This lack of rhyme scheme adds to the poem's direct and conversational tone. It also helps the poem feel more authentic and intimate—unadorned with rhymes that might feel too cutesy or strict. The directness of the poem's language speaks to the intensity and urgency of the message "coming out of these cities."

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem identifies as part of the collective Black "voice" being described. They see themselves reflected in the talent and ambition of other Black people, as well as in the shared "history" of Black communities Most importantly, the speaker feels the same "love" felt by other Black people, a "love colored with iron and lace"—in other words, a love that is not only strong and resilient but also intricate and beautiful.

The speaker of this poem doesn't need to be interpreted as the poet herself, though it's certainly inspired by Sanchez's own experiences as a Black activist and professor.

SETTING

There isn't a particular setting for "This Is Not a Small Voice." The poem celebrates Black talent, community, love, and "Genius" any and everywhere, and it isn't bound to any one specific place. In fact, the metaphorical description of Black voices as a river that "spill[s] out" in every direction suggests that Black brilliance can't be contained. It connects what's happening within the "schools" with what's happening in every "corner[]" of the cities.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"This Is Not a Small Voice" was first published in Sonia Sanchez's 1995 collection, *Wounded in the House of a Friend*. As the title suggests, the poems deal largely with emotional wounds and betrayals, exploring experiences as devastating as rape, infidelity, and racism with an eye towards personal growth and liberation.

In the 1950s, when Sanchez was earning a post-graduate degree at New York University, she founded the "Broadside Quartet," a poetry group whose members would go on to become important figures of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s. Among them were Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, and Etheridge Knight (whom Sanchez would later marry and have two children with). Born out of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement more or less began with the murder of Malcolm X in February of 1965. Politically inspired, the movement stressed the importance of Black autonomy and promoted the preservation and celebration of Black culture in the face of rising pressure to integrate. Poets of this movement crafted language informed by Black music and vernacular, experimenting with forms and rhythms to better exemplify a growing sense of pride in their Black identity.

In other words, Sanchez wanted to replicate the voices of real Black people in her poetry. In doing so, she secured her place as one of the pre-eminent voices of the Black Arts movement. She has won countless awards for her work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sanchez (1934-present) is known for directly addressing the United States' history of racial and gendered oppression in her poetry. This poem works on the associations that lists of Black names may have for American media consumers; for example, in the United States, such lists have often commemorated Black individuals killed by police or subjected to racist hate crimes. Large swaths of America—and white Americans in particular—are more likely to hear about what's *happened to* Black people than about what Black people themselves have accomplished. They may also consume media that covers Black individuals and communities through a condescending or racist lens. This poem seeks to correct that imbalance, celebrating the significance of brilliant Black individuals as well as the inherent worth of every Black voice.

Sanchez herself was inspired by the voices of Black people in her community. For example, she was influenced by the love she felt listening to her grandmother speak "Black English." This love for people who talked and looked like her, and who had experienced similar forms of oppression, led her to join the mid-20th-century civil rights movement, in which she became an important figure.

Initially, she joined the Congress for Racial Equality (a group that used nonviolent methods to support the fight for equal rights); later, she was persuaded by Malcolm X's more radical and confrontational activism to join the Nation of Islam (which she later left due to its poor treatment of women). By the time she published "This Is Not a Small Voice" in 1995, Sanchez had spearheaded a Black Studies curriculum at various universities and created the first course on Black women and literature in the United States. She is considered a major figure of Black intersectional feminism, which views all forms of oppression (racist, sexist, classist, etc.) as inextricably intertwined.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet "Uncensored" — A 1991 episode of Writers Uncensored that features Sonia Sanchez and fellow poet Lucille Clifton. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkDOT-I2oDU)
- Interview with the Poet — A 2021 Boston Review interview with Sanchez. (https://bostonreview.net/arts-society/sonia-sanchez-christina-knight-straight-down-bones)
- The Poem Aloud — A reading of the poem by Peyton Ball. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4r4mZbC6mg)

- Video Q&A with the Poet — A video interview with Sanchez, courtesy of Stony Brook University. (https://www.stonybrook.edu/5questions/people/sonia-sanchez)
- An Introduction to the Poet — An introduction to the life and work of Sonia Sanchez, via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sonia-sanchez)

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