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**with a foreword
by Cornel West**

Fires in the Mirror

Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities

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delicate set of issues but also responds to them with the kind of risk and sensitivity that sets Black people at ease. She lets Black people know that a fair treatment of all our faults will transpire—so we can confront, examine, parody, and maybe begin to overcome these faults. And she is keenly aware that these activities will never get off the ground without a clearing of the air so that bonds of trust can be forged.

As a citizen, Smith knows that there can be no grappling with Black anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-Black racism without a vital public sphere and that there can be no vital public sphere without genuine bonds of trust. As an artist, she knows that public performance has a unique capacity to bring us together—to take us out of our tribal mentalities—for self-critical examination and artistic pleasure. *Fires in the Mirror* is one sure sign, an oasis of hope, that human art can triumph in the face of a frightening urban crisis—a crisis symptomatic of a national tragedy. It provides us with a glimpse of what we need and what we must do if we are ever to overcome the xenophobic cancer that threatens to devour the soul of the precious yet precarious democratic experiment called America.

Introduction

Fires in the Mirror is a part of a series of theater (or performance) pieces called *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, which I create by interviewing people and later performing them using their own words. My goal has been to find American character in the ways that people speak. When I started this project, in the early 1980s, my simple introduction to anyone I interviewed was, “If you give me an hour of your time, I’ll invite you to see yourself performed.” At that time I was not as interested in performance or in social commentary as I was in experimenting with language and its relationship to character.

I was trained as an actress in a conservatory, which at the time placed emphasis on classical training. *On the Road* is about contemporary life. It’s ironic that it was inspired by classical training. Words have always held a particular power for me. I remember leafing through a book of Native American poems one morning while I was waiting for my Shakespeare class to begin and being struck by a phrase from the preface, “The word, the word above all, is truly magical, not only by its meaning, but by its artful manipulation.”

This quote, which I added to my journal, reminded me of something my grandfather had told me when I was a girl: “If you say a word often enough it becomes your own.” I added that phrase to my journal next to the quote about the magic of words. When I traveled home to Baltimore for my grandfather’s funeral a year after my journal

entry, I mentioned my grandfather's words to my father. He corrected me. He told me that my grandfather had actually said, "If you say a word often enough, it *becomes* you." I was still a student at the time, but I knew even then, even before I had made a conscious decision to teach as well as act, that my grandfather's words would be important.

I began a series of conversations with my Shakespeare teacher, Juanita Rice, who was brilliant and inspiring. In the first class she talked about speech as an action. She asked us to consider speech in Shakespeare as thought and stressed the importance of thinking on the word, rather than between the words in order to discover the character. She told us to take any fourteen lines of Shakespeare and to repeat the passage over and over again until something happened. No thinking. Just speaking. I chose a speech of Queen Margaret's from Richard III. The Queen says to the Duchess of York:

From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept
A hell hound that doth hunt us all to death
That dog that had its teeth before his eyes
To worry lambs and lap their gentle blood
That foul defacer of God's handiwork
That excellent grand tyrant of the earth
That reigns in galled eyes of weeping souls
Thy womb let loose to chase us to our graves.

I followed Juanita's instructions, saying the fourteen lines over and over well into the wee hours of the morning. I

didn't know enough at the time about Queen Margaret, or about Shakespeare to realize that what I had been repeating was very strong language, which was bound to evoke powerful images. In one evening I had traveled to a very dark and decadent world. The speed with which this happened had everything to do with the power of the words. It had everything to do with how the words themselves had worked on *me*. *I had not controlled the words. I had presented myself as an empty vessel, a repeater, and they had shown their power.* I was soon to learn about the power of rhythm and imagery to evoke the spirit of a character, of a play, of a time.

I then started thinking that if I listened carefully to people's words, and particularly to their rhythms, that I could use language to learn about my own time. If I could find a way to really inhabit the words of those around me, like I had inhabited those of Queen Margaret, that I could learn about the spirit, the imagination, and the challenges of my own time, firsthand.

Actors are very impressionable people, or some would say, suggestible people. We are trained to develop aspects of our memories that are more emotional and sensory than intellectual. The general public often wonders how actors remember their lines. What's more remarkable to me, is how actors remember, recall, and reiterate feelings and sensations. The body has a memory just as the mind does. The heart has a memory, just as the mind does. The act of speech is a physical act. It is powerful enough that it can create, with the rest of the body, a kind of cooperative dance. That dance is a sketch of something that is inside a

person, and not fully revealed by the words alone. I came to realize that if I were able to record part of the dance—that is, the spoken part—and reenact it, the rest of the body would follow. I could then create the illusion of being another person by reenacting something they had said *as they had said it*. Using my grandfather's idea that if I said a word often enough it would *become* me, the reenactment, or the reiteration of a person's words would also teach me about that person.

I had been trained in the tradition of acting called "psychological realism." A basic tenet of psychological realism is that characters live inside of you and that you create a character through a process of realizing your own similarity to the character. When I later became a teacher of acting, I began to become more and more troubled by the self-oriented method. I began to look for ways to engage my students in putting themselves in other people's shoes. This went against the grain of the tradition, which was to get the character to walk in the *actor's shoes*. It became less and less interesting intellectually to bring the dramatic literature of the world into a classroom of people in their late teens and twenties, and to explore it within the framework of their real lives. Aesthetically it seemed limited, because most of the times the characters all sounded the same. Most characters spoke somewhere inside the rhythmic range of the students. More troubling was that this method left an important bridge out of acting. The spirit of acting is the *travel* from the self to the other. This "self-based" method seemed to come to a spiritual halt. It saw the self as the ultimate home of the char-

acter. To me, the search for character is constantly in motion. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and the other.

I needed evidence that you could find a character's psychological reality by "inhabiting" that character's words. I needed evidence of the limitations of basing a character on a series of metaphors from an actor's real life. I wanted to develop an alternative to the self-based technique, a technique that would begin with the other and come to the self, a technique that would empower the other to find the actor rather than the other way around. I needed very graphic evidence that the manner of speech could be a mark of individuality. If we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally. I became increasingly convinced that the activity of reenactment could tell us as much, if not more, about another individual than the process of learning about the other by using the self as a frame of reference. The frame of reference for the other would *be* the other. Learning about the other by being the other requires the use of all aspects of memory, the memory of the body, mind, and heart, as well as the words.

The last fifteen to twenty years have given the public consciousness an extended vocabulary for the self. This vocabulary fed the popularity of self-oriented techniques. I think that a vocabulary which is at once political, intellectual, sentimental, visceral, and social would bring life to art. The creation of the On the Road project required that I have a way of thinking that involved multiple vocabularies.

Trying to do other-oriented work also raised some questions which may interest the general public. Any of us who engage in extroverted activities are aware of our inhibitions. I am interested in how inhibitions affect our ability to empathize. If I have an inhibition about *acting* like a man, it may also point to an inhibition I have about *seeing* a man or *hearing* a man. To develop a voice one must develop an ear. To complete an action, one must have a clear vision. Does the inability to empathize start with an inhibition, or a reluctance to see? Do racism and prejudice instruct those inhibitions? If I passed out a piece of poetry to be read by a racially mixed group and I asked them to read it with an English accent, most of them would try. If I passed out a piece of Black poetry written in dialect, many would be inhibited and fearful of offending others. In a playwriting class, I gave an exercise called "gang writing." Students were asked to write short scenes about gangs inspired by gang writing. A student raised the question, "Isn't it offensive for us, here in our privileged environment, to write about gangs?" Does privilege mean one shouldn't *see*? At the same time, the standard for excellence is still a Eurocentric theater written by and for white men. Who else can participate? How? Does it mean new plays? Does it mean rethinking old plays? The mirrors of society do not mirror society.

"Who has the right to see what?" "Who has the right to say what?" "Who has the right to speak for whom?" These questions have plagued the contemporary theater. These questions address both issues of employment equity and issues of *who is portrayed*. These questions are the

questions that unsettle and prohibit a democratic theater in America. If only a man can speak for a man, a woman for a woman, a Black person for all Black people, then we, once again, inhibit the *spirit* of theater, which lives in the *bridge* that makes unlikely aspects *seem* connected. The bridge doesn't make them the same, it merely *displays* how two unlikely *aspects* are *related*. These relationships of the *unlikely*, these connections of things that don't fit together are crucial to American theater and culture if theater and culture plan to help us assemble our obvious differences. The self-centered technique has taken the bridge out of the process of creating character, it has taken metaphor out of acting. It has made the heart smaller, the spirit less gregarious, and the mind less apt to be able to hold on to contradictions or opposition.

At the time that I began my work, celebrity interviews exploded in popular culture. *Interview* magazine began publication at the very moment that I was beginning to experiment with some of these ideas. There were more television talk shows being produced, and real-life drama seemed to be a definite point of fascination for the public. I watched talk shows, and read print interviews, and eventually started to transcribe the television talk shows, and use them along with print interviews as scripts. I staged many of these interviews, looking for the moment in the interview when the celebrity was struggling with the interviewer to free his or her identity from the perception that the interviewer had.

As an exercise I had my students reenact these celebrity interviews. I was after more than mimicry. I was

using the interviews as a structure for the students to become the other. A character from a play does not have a visible identity until the actor creates a body for that character. The self-oriented technique involves rendering characters who looked and acted like the actors. What are the subtleties in real-life behavior that could be used in the creation of characters? There are linguistic as well as physical details that make a person unique. My overall goal was to show that no one acts like anyone else. No one speaks like anyone else. Identity, in fact, lives in the unique way that a person departs from the English language in a perfect state to create something that is individual. Ntozake Shange's selection in *Fires in the Mirror* speaks to this: "Identity is . . . it's a way of knowing that no matter where I put myself, that I am not necessarily what's around me. I am a part of my surroundings and I become separate from them, and it's being able to make those differentiations clearly that gives us an identity."

Ultimately I began to conduct my own interviews. Talk shows and print interviews of celebrities were often battles between what the interviewer wanted to pretend to be uncovering and what the subject was willing to reveal. Sometimes the battle was authentic, and sometimes it was that the interviewer and the celebrity were in cahoots to give the illusion that something new was on the brink of being uncovered. In fact, it's my experience now that public figures are frequently more difficult to use in my work, because it is less likely that they will say something that they have never said before. It is fully understandable that people who have a relationship to the media learn their

way around an interview. The act of speech, then, does become performance rather than discovery. On the other hand, occasionally, public figures are so expert at this kind of performance that they have a greater gift than actors for making what they have said before seem as though they are saying it for the first time. The Reverend Al Sharpton, in *Fires in the Mirror*, is an example of such a person. He is known as the thirty-second sound-bite king. His performance is so wonderful, however, that many actors would envy his ability to work a crowd. My interview with the Reverend Sharpton lasted little more than fifteen or twenty minutes, but his gifts of communication are so great that the material was as rich as material that I have gotten from people who I spoke with much longer. In other words, regardless of the Reverend Sharpton's sound-bite speech, *he* is completely present in the speech. That kind of presence is a gift.

My goal was to create an atmosphere in which the interviewee would experience his/her own authorship. Speaking teaches us what our natural "literature" is. In fact, everyone, in a given amount of time, will say something that is like poetry. The process of getting to that poetic moment is where "character" lives. If I were to reiterate the person's pursuit of that poetic moment, as well as the poetic moment itself, I could "go into character." The pursuit is frequently filled with *uhs* and *ums* and, in fact, the wrong words, if any words at all, and almost always what would be considered "bad grammar." I suppose much of communication could be narrowed down to "the point." This project is not about a point, it is about a

route. It is *on* the road. Character lives in the linguistic road as well as the destination.

In the midst of doing the original experiments with language I became very interested in performing. Some of my students were extremely receptive to this work, and very dedicated. Others didn't see its value, and were very committed to the discovery of themselves. They believed that they couldn't be someone else until they knew themselves. My argument was, and still is, that it doesn't have to be either/or, and that neither comes first. The discovery of human behavior can happen in motion. It can be a process of moving from the self to the other and the other to the self. Nevertheless, my argument didn't always sink in. For example, I arranged to have a student of mine meet a person I had interviewed for her to perform. My student spent the entire evening talking about herself. Ideally, she would have used the time to listen and learn everything she could about the woman she was going to portray. This actor, like others I worked with, was actually awkward when meeting the people she would later portray and frightened to have them come to the performance. Was her talking about herself to her subject a declaration of her own identity? Was it a last-ditch effort to say "I am" before saying "You are"?

I decided to abandon the experiment designed for the classroom, and to work out my hypotheses on myself as a performer. I knew that by using another person's language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual. It struck me that this could work on a social level as well as an individual level. Could language

also be a photograph of what was unseen about society just as it reflects what is unseen in an individual?

The project took shape during a time that many institutions were going through identity shifts with regard to gender and ethnicity. I had commissions to create pieces in some institutions that were in transformation. One of the people I interviewed early in the process was a Provost at Princeton University, who pointed out to me that there was a tension between the perception of a place, which is frequently embedded in traditions, and the moment-to-moment identity of a place. For me, the battle between those who prefer the perception of a place and those who claim to experience the reality as different from that, was dramatic. This battle adds up to an identity in motion, but a palpable identity nevertheless.

In America, identity is always being negotiated. To what extent do people who come to America have to give up something about their own identity to conform to an idea of what an American is? Crown Heights, Brooklyn, was the most graphic display I had witnessed of the negotiation of identity. No one in Crown Heights looked like a movie-star version of America. This was magnified by the fact that the overall picture of Crown Heights was black and white. The residents were, for the most part, Blacks and Whites. The Hasidim usually wore black and white. Identity was declared visibly. This was no Princeton University, where a Black student, wearing a Princeton jersey might be shocked when a guard stopped him to find out whether or not he belonged there. Everybody seemed to know who they were and how they were seen. Everyone

wore their roots on their heads. The Hasidic men wore yarmulkes and black hats, and women wore wigs. The African American and Caribbean Americans frequently had on hats with Afro-centric meaning, or dreadlocks and shells in their hair. The lines were so clearly drawn that at any moment they were ready to snap. The tension was not a tension that was moving an identity forward, it was a tension that threatened to explode. That tension did explode, when a car driven by a member of the entourage of a Jewish religious leader ran up onto a sidewalk and killed one Black child and seriously injured another. In the mist of the steam that blew out of the radiator of that car, twenty Black youths attack a Jewish man and stabbed him. He died in the same hospital where the young boy who had been run over died.

There is an inevitable tension in America. It is the tension of identity in motion, the tension of identity which is in contest with an old idea, but a resonant idea of America. It was developed initially, or so we are told, by men, by White men, but an idea which has in fact, been adapted by women and people of color. Can we guide that tension so that it is, in fact, identity in motion, identity, which like a train can pick up passengers and take them to their destination? Or is this tension always going to be derailed onto a sidewalk where some innocents are waiting to get struck down.

Seven-year-old Gavin Cato and his cousin Angela were playing with a bicycle on a hot summer night. Gavin didn't even know how to ride a bike yet; Angela was teaching him. He was practicing when the car came up on to the

sidewalk, smashing him into a wall and knocking down a cement pillar. Some say it was an accident, others call it a murder. To them, the swift motorcade of Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, which crossed that intersection every week, was bound to have killed someone.

They would ask why the Rebbe, with a police escort, was allowed to exceed the speed limit on a city street. To the members of the orthodox Hasidic sect known as the Lubavitchers, this treatment was taken for granted; the Rebbe was, after all, their spiritual leader. To the Black people who lived in the neighborhood, his traveling in an entourage was an intrusion; that this intrusion was protected by the police magnified the situation. Yet this story was not as black and white as I had thought. In fact, this story was also about the relationship of the police to the community: The police were seen as pervasive and oppressive by Black people, and often as ineffective and absent by the Lubavitchers.

On many occasions Black people who lived in Crown Heights had gathered to try to stop what they considered the special privileges that the Lubavitchers enjoyed. Whenever there were holidays or times of worship, the street in front of the synagogue was blocked off to traffic. An African American gynecologist who had offices on that street told me that one of his pregnant patients, on her way to see him after her water had broken, couldn't drive up to the office. "What if a woman is bleeding, or her water is broken, and she has to walk? . . . I don't know how far."

The Lubavitchers, who had come here to study and to

worship, were daily feeling more and more vulnerable to the amount of crime around them. And they would ultimately come to believe that the justice system had failed them. Hours after Gavin Cato's death, a young Jewish scholar, Yankel Rosenbaum, was fatally stabbed by a group of young Black men. When the case went to court, the young Caribbean American man accused of the stabbing was acquitted. The city then heard from the Lubavitchers the rhetoric and chanting that had been invoked by African Americans, including the slogan, "No Justice, No Peace." As a rabbi told me when I returned to Crown Heights after the verdict (and after *Fires in the Mirror* had closed in New York), "What the liberals have told us all these years, that the Blacks have their rage, well the Whites are getting it now; it's a two-way street."

On the surface this picture was Black and White. When one looks more closely, one sees something much more interesting than the stark lines of Black and White. One sees motion, and one hears multiple symphonies. The Black people didn't all come from one place, and neither do the Hasidim. One looks closely and one sees that not every hat is the same kind of black hat and not every yarmulke is the same kind of yarmulke. Multiple languages are being spoken. The Lubavitchers who walked along the short block (which came to be my favorite) of Kingston Avenue at Eastern Parkway, were from the Middle East, England, Australia, South Africa. The young Black men I talked to had accents which were a mixture of bold Brooklynese with rap hand gestures, and Caribbean lilt. Motion. Action. People from everywhere.

During the performance of *Fires in the Mirror*, one major concern audiences have voiced is whether or not I am creating caricatures or stereotypes. This concern has been expressed in many different ways. Some Black people would say that I was "easier" on Jewish people. Some Jewish people would say that I'd gone too far. For example, when I interviewed Rabbi Shea Hecht, he had several crisp dollar bills in the pocket of his shirt. The money came from the Grand Rebbe, who regularly gives out new dollar bills. Some people read this as a comment about Jewish people and affluence. There was a similar concern about a sweater I wore for one of the characters I portrayed, Roz Malamud. The costume designer had chosen a very flashy sequined sweater. Some Jewish (and non-Jewish) members of the audience reacted to the sweater by saying it was *perfect*, others felt it was stereotyping Jewish people as affluent. In reality, according to the costumer, the outfit Roz *really* wore was much more flashy and expensive than the sweater. Likewise, there were a few Black people who reacted to the Sharpton "Me and James's Thing" section, by saying, "Why did you have to make a big thing about a Black person's hair?" Others felt that the piece told them something about Sharpton's hair that they *didn't* know, which in a way, *broadened* their idea of Sharpton.

These questions, this uneasiness, are sometimes judgments about performance, but they are also indications of the uneasiness we have about seeing difference displayed. Mimicry is *not* character. Character lives in the obvious gap between the real person and my *attempt* to seem like

them. I try to close the gap between us, but I applaud the gap between us. I am willing to display my own *unlikeness*.

Post-play discussions were very important. It is part of the idea behind *On the Road* to 1) bring people together into the same room (the theater) who would normally not be together, and 2) attract people to the theater who don't usually come to the theater. It was important, then, to hear what people said about the experience and important to have them know more about each other than they could gather from responses. On various occasions there were Black people in the audience who gave verbal feedback during the show, saying things like, "Yes," "All right," "Teach," et cetera. Once I heard a woman saying throughout the show, "Oy." I wish her "Oy" had been in the same audience as a "Teach." When the audience talks, they are talking as much to each other as to me.

There is a gap between the perception of a place and the individuals who are responsible for keeping that perception alive. The individuals inside are frequently fighting that their individual voices be heard, while the walls of the place, which are the mask, and the perception, are reluctant to give over to the voices of the individuals. Those in the margins are always trying to get to the center, and those at the center, frequently in the name of tradition, are trying to keep the margins at a distance. Part of the identity of a place is the tension between those in the margins, and those in the center, and they all live behind the walls which wear the tradition. I have been going to the places where this tension is evident to find American character. Can this tension be productive, or will it explode

and in the process kill and maim those who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? How can some of us intervene? My answer to the first question is yes, this tension can be productive, in so far as it causes motion, and that we watch and document that motion. To do that, we have to interest those people around us in motion, in moving from one side to the other, in experiencing one hand and the other hand, and to building bridges *between* places. My answer to the second question is that one kind of intervention is the intervention of listening. We can listen for what is inconsistent as well as for what is consistent. We can listen to what the dominant pattern of speech is, and we can listen for the break from that pattern of speech. This applies to individuals, and this applies to groups. The break from the pattern is where character lives, and where dialogue, ironically begins, in the *uh*, in the pause, in the thought as captured for the first time in a moment of speech, rather than in the rehearsed, the proven. Although this is a book, I must conclude by remarking that this project is at its heart, about the act of speech, the physical action of dialogue, and was not originally intended for the printed word. Our effort has been to try to document it in such a way that the act of speech is evident.

When I started *On the Road*, I asked a linguist for ways to listen for the breakdown of syntax. She gave me a set of questions to ask: 1) Have you ever come close to death?; 2) Have you ever been accused of something that you did not do?; 3) Do you remember the circumstances of your birth? I used the questions as a structure for all of my interviews. Indeed, those questions, and the answers

taught me how to listen. I then discarded those questions. They served their purpose. When I was in Crown Heights, I interviewed Mr. Carmel Cato, the father of Gavin Cato. His interview is one of the most remarkable interviews I have collected. His language is completely distinct, poetic, and rich. When I was going back to Manhattan from Crown Heights on the subway, my head was racing with excitement about how he had spoken. I suddenly realized that he had answered all three of those questions. I hadn't asked them, and frankly I hadn't thought of those questions in a long time. Yes, he came close to death, the death of his son. Yes, he was accused of something he did not do, the police were beating him on the back while he was trying to lift the car off of his son. Yes, he remembered the circumstances of his birth, he gives an account of them. Mr. Cato's interview was a signal to me of something happening in America right now. In the year since Crown Heights, I have been interviewing people about the civil disturbance in Los Angeles in 1992 following the Rodney King verdict. Many people are answering one, if not all, of those questions. I don't ask those questions, but it comes up in many interviews. People have come close to death; they do feel accused of something that they didn't do, whether it's to be apprehended by the police for no other reason than being the wrong color in the wrong neighborhood, or because of the fear people have of being in any neighborhood at any time. Many people do remark on the circumstances of their "cultural" birth, their original nationality, their ethnicity. American character is alive inside of syntactical breaks.

During my search for character, I have learned much more than I set out to learn. I am still in the process of learning how the language of groups reflects the character of the group. Some of the same signals that apply with individuals may apply. In these times when we are rethinking cultural identity I am interested in the difficulty people have in talking about race and talking about difference. This difficulty goes across race, class, and political lines. I am interested in the lack of words and mistrustful of the ease with which some people seem to pick up new words and mix them in with the old. The new words seem to get old quickly. This means to me that we do not have a language that serves us as a group. I think that there is a gap between those who are heard and those who speak. Those who really speak in their own communities, to their own people, are not heard as frequently as those who speak on a regular basis with authority. The media most often goes to experts to learn about difference. My sense is that American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences. It lives not in what has been fully articulated, but in what is in the process of being articulated, not in the smooth-sounding words, but in the very moment that the smooth-sounding words fail us. It is alive right now. We might not like what we see, but in order to change it, we have to see it clearly.

On August 19, 1991, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, one of the cars in a three-car procession carrying the Lubavitcher Hasidic rebbe (spiritual leader) ran a red light, hit another car, and swerved onto the sidewalk. The car struck and killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old Black boy from Guyana, and seriously injured his cousin Angela.

As rumors spread that a Hasidic-run ambulance service helped the driver and his passengers while the children lay bleeding, members of the district's Black community reacted with violence against the police and the Lubavitchers. That evening, a group of young Black men fatally stabbed Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old Hasidic scholar from Australia. For three days, Black people fought police, attacked Lubavitcher headquarters, and torched businesses while Hasidic patrols responded with their own violence.

The conflict reflected long-standing tensions within Crown Heights between Lubavitchers and Blacks, as well as the pain, oppression, and discrimination these groups have historically experienced outside their own communities. Members of the Crown Heights Black community, many of them Caribbean immigrants without U.S. citizenship from Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti,

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and other countries, face discrimination both on the basis of their color and their national origin. And the Lubavitchers—members of an Orthodox Jewish sect that fled the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe during World War II—are particularly vulnerable to anti-Jewish stereotyping because of their religious style of dress and insular community.

Many Blacks and others have said that White racism plays a critical role in Crown Heights. Black leaders have charged that the Lubavitchers have enjoyed “preferential treatment” in the community from police and other city agencies, including permission to close off major city streets during Jewish holidays. Blacks also report that some Lubavitchers have threatened and harassed them when buying area buildings for the expanding Lubavitcher community. Hasidic crime patrols, Blacks say, have indiscriminately targeted members of the Black community.

According to Jews and others, Black anti-Semitism has also played a significant role in the conflict. In addition to reporting that they are the frequent victims of Black street crime, Lubavitchers point to the August fighting that included calls to “Kill the Jews,” “Get the Jews out,” and chants of “Heil Hitler.” Other statements during the conflict by some Black spokespeople about Hasidic “diamond merchants” and Jews as the “devil leaders” of White people evoked old stereotypes of a sinister conspiracy by rich Jews controlling things behind the scenes.

Many young Blacks who took to the streets in August 1991 were less interested in targeting Jews than in fighting the police, whom many in New York City’s Black commu-

nity regard as an occupying army. During the conflict, police beat up Black reporters and arrested between 150 and 300 young Blacks as a “preventive measure” in what witnesses described as indiscriminate “sweeps.” Many of those arrested were held for days without any word to their families.

Like the Black community, the Lubavitchers have also felt victimized during the conflict by the legal system and view the jury acquittal of Yankel Rosenbaum’s accused murderer as the most stark example of this mistreatment.

Media coverage of the Crown Heights conflict has intensified misunderstanding and hatred. Black media reports generally presented the conflict as an anti-racist struggle and dismissed or trivialized charges of anti-Semitism. Jewish newspapers often blamed “black agitators” and spoke of “pogroms” (organized massacres of Jews). The mainstream media, criticized by both Blacks and Lubavitchers, tended to focus on Whites as victims and Blacks as victimizers. This kind of media polarization has made it extremely difficult for people to develop an understanding of the Crown Heights situation that acknowledges the experiences of all people involved.

August 19, 1991

8:20 P.M. A station wagon from a police-escorted entourage bearing Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson careens into two Guyanese American children at the intersection of Utica Avenue and President Street. Seven-year-old Gavin Cato is killed, and his cousin Angela suffers a broken leg. As an angry crowd gathers, the twenty-two-year-old Hasidic driver, Yosef Lifsh, and his two Hasidic passengers are taken from the scene by a private Jewish ambulance.

11:30 P.M. Three hours later and five blocks from the car accident, Yankel Rosenbaum, a visiting twenty-nine-year-old Hasidic history professor from Melbourne, Australia, is stabbed. Just after the incident, sixteen-year-old Lemrick Nelson, Jr., a Trinidadian American from Brooklyn, is arrested in connection with the stabbing.

August 20

2:00 A.M. Yankel Rosenbaum dies at Kings County Hospital.

PRE-DAWN Rioting begins on the streets, as Blacks and Lubavitchers set fires, throw stones and bottles, and unleash insults at each other and at the police. The rioting continues throughout the day.

Yosef Lifsh leaves the United States for Israel.



By the end of the day, police report sixteen arrests and twenty policemen injured.

August 21

8:15 A.M. Yankel Rosenbaum's funeral held at Lubavitch World Headquarters in Crown Heights. Afterward, Rosenbaum's body is flown back to Australia for burial.

Rioting continues and several stores are looted.

Before leading a march of nearly two hundred Blacks down Eastern Parkway, the Reverend Al Sharpton and Alton Maddox hold a news conference demanding Yosef Lifsh's arrest.

New York mayor David Dinkins and New York police Com-

missioner Lee Brown visit Crown Heights to urge peace, but both are silenced by rocks and bottles and insults.

Lemrick Nelson, Jr., is charged with the second-degree murder of Yankel Rosenbaum.

August 22

Rioting continues.

Police presence in Crown Heights is increased to over fifteen hundred officers. By the end of the day, police report 107 arrests overall.

August 24

Led by the Reverend Al Sharpton and Alton Maddox, approximately fifteen hundred protesters march through Crown Heights, while nearly as many police officers patrol the immediate area.

August 26

Gavin Cato's funeral is held in Brooklyn. The Reverend Al Sharpton delivers the eulogy.

September 5

The Brooklyn grand jury does not indict Yosef Lifsh in the death of Gavin Cato.

September 17

The Reverend Al Sharpton flies to Israel to notify Yosef Lifsh of a civil suit brought against him by the Cato family. The day is the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur.

January 26, 1992

The Cato apartment is destroyed by fire. Fire officials determine the fire resulted from children playing with matches.

April 5

Lubavitchers demonstrate outside City Hall to mourn Yankel Rosenbaum and demand more arrests in connection with his slaying.

April 13

Brooklyn district attorney Charles Hynes says that it is



unlikely there will be more arrests in connection with the death of Yankel Rosenbaum.

October 29

5:20 P.M. Lemrick Nelson, Jr., is acquitted of all four counts charged against him in the killing of Yankel Rosenbaum.

8:40 P.M. More than one thousand Hasidic Jews rally outside Lubavitch headquarters in Crown Heights. Some bottle throwing and shouting matches ensue. Police report one arrest.

Mayor Dinkins offers a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of Yankel Rosenbaum's murderer.

October 30

New York governor Mario Cuomo orders a state review of the case.

New York police commissioner Raymond Kelly asks his chief of detectives, Joseph R. Borrelli, to review the entire case from the scene of the accident to the announcement of the verdict.

November 15

Despite Governor Cuomo's assertion that Mayor Dinkins



is being unfairly blamed for Rosenbaum's death and the unrest in Crown Heights, the Hasidic community continues to harshly criticize the mayor for his handling of the riots.

November 17

The Lubavitch community files a federal class-action lawsuit alleging that the Dinkins administration and police department refused to conduct "any meaningful investigation" into the rioting and failed to "seek out perpetrators aggressively."

III

November 25

In a locally televised speech, Mayor Dinkins defends his role in the Crown Heights disturbances.

December 3

Mayor Dinkins is heckled and called a "Jew Hater" at a Democratic club meeting in Queens.

April 30, 1993

United States District Court Judge Reena Raggi refuses to dismiss a lawsuit filed by the Lubavitch community that charges that city and police officials discriminated against Jews during the 1991 riots.

July 21

New York State Director of Criminal Justice Richard Girgenti releases a six-hundred-page report on the Crown Heights disturbances. The report is critical of both Mayor Dinkins's and former Police Commissioner Lee Brown's management and leadership during the disturbances, as well as the police investigation into Yankel Rosenbaum's death and the judge's conduct of the ensuing trial of Lemrick Nelson, Jr. The report is sent to United States Attorney General Janet Reno, whose department is investigating possible civil rights violations.

IIII

The Characters

Ntozake Shange

Playwright, poet, novelist.

Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman

Preschool teacher.

George C. Wolfe

Playwright, director, producing director of the New York Shakespeare Festival.

Aaron M. Bernstein

Physicist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Anonymous Girl

Junior high school black girl of Haitian descent. Lives in Brooklyn near Crown Heights.

The Reverend Al Sharpton

Well-known New York activist, minister.

Rivkah Siegal

Lubavitcher woman, graphic designer.

Angela Davis

Author, orator, activist, scholar. Professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Monique “Big Mo” Matthews

Los Angeles rapper.

Leonard Jeffries

Professor of African American Studies at City University of New York, former head of the department.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin

Author *Deborah, Golda, and Me*. One of the founding editors of *Ms.* magazine.

Minister Conrad Mohammed

New York minister for the Honorable Louis Farrakhan.

Robert Sherman

Director, Mayor of the City of New York’s Increase the Peace Corps.

Rabbi Joseph Spielman

Spokesperson in the Lubavitch community.

The Reverend Canon Doctor Heron Sam

Pastor, St. Mark’s, Crown Heights Church.

Anonymous Young Man #1

Crown Heights resident.

Michael S. Miller

Executive Director at the Jewish Community Relations Council.

Henry Rice

Crown Heights resident.

Norman Rosenbaum

Brother of Yankel Rosenbaum. A barrister from Australia.

Anonymous Young Man #2

African American young man, late teens, early twenties. Resident of Crown Heights.

Sonny Carson

Activist.

Rabbi Shea Hecht

Lubavitcher rabbi, spokesperson.

Richard Green

Director, Crown Heights Youth Collective. Codirector Project CURE, a Black-Hasidic basketball team that developed after the riots.

Roslyn Malamud

Lubavitcher resident of Crown Heights.

Reuven Ostrov

Lubavitcher youth, member, project CURE; at the time of the riot, was seventeen years old. Worked as assistant chaplain at Kings County Hospital.

Carmel Cato

Father of Gavin Cato. Crown Heights resident, originally from Guyana.

Production History

Fires in the Mirror had its world premiere at the New York Shakespeare Festival in New York City on May 1, 1992, with an official press opening on May 12.

The production closed in New York City on August 16, 1992, and, subsequently has been presented by the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey; Brown University; Stanford University; the Brooklyn Academy of Music; and the Royal Court Theatre in London, among others.

The piece was conceived, written, and performed by Anna Deavere Smith and directed by Christopher Ashley.

All material is taken from interviews conducted by Anna Deavere Smith except: Angela Davis's "Rope," which is taken from an interview by Anna Deavere Smith and Thulani Davis; and Norman Rosenbaum's "My Brother's Blood," which is extracted from his speech at a rally, with the permission of Norman Rosenbaum and Beth Galinsky.

James Youmans designed the set; Candice Donnelly, the costumes; Debra J. Kletter, the lighting; Wendall K. Harrington and Emmanuelle Krebs, the projections; Brian Palmer, Linda Rosier, and Jim Tynan, the photographs; Joseph Jarman, the original musical score. Thulani Davis was the Dramaturg. Karen Moore was the Production Stage Manager.

Fires in the Mirror is part of a series of solo pieces cre-

ated and performed by Ms. Smith called "On the Road: A Search for American Character," which includes pieces created for the Eureka Theatre, San Francisco, 1990 (*From the Outside Looking In*); the Rockefeller Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy (*Fragments: On the Intercultural Performance*); Crossroads Theatre (*Black Identity and Black Theatre*); Princeton University, New Jersey, (*Gender Bending*); and others.

The Crown Heights material in *Fires in the Mirror* was first created by George C. Wolfe's Festival of New Voices at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in December 1991.

An adapted version of the play was filmed by "American Playhouse" under the direction of George C. Wolfe and starring Ms. Smith. It was produced by Cherie Fortis.

Fires in the Mirror