

Performing Race: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*

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Note: This essay, for the performance analysis working group of the FIRT/IFTR conference (1995), focused on the video of *Fires in the Mirror*, which is a produced-for-television version of Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman live performance. I have also seen the performance live, and refer to that occasion and other instances of live performances in this essay.

Since 1992, Anna Deavere Smith has come to public prominence in the United States as a result of two shows she has conceived and performed about events of extreme national importance involving issues of race. One event took place on the east coast, the other on the west coast, and her first performances of the respective plays opened in the geographic location of these events within a year of their origin. Thus, Smith's work has contributed to a local as well as a national dialogue and reflection on race relations in the troubled present.¹

Beyond the sociopolitical thematics of her work, Smith has been incorporated into public discourses on race because her dramaturgical techniques have aligned her with other types of public discourses such as oral histories, documentary reportage, television talk shows, and network news broadcasts. Smith constructs her plays from interviews with persons directly or indirectly involved in the historical events in question and delivers, verbatim, their words and the essence of their physical beings in characterizations which fall somewhere between caricature, Brechtian epic gestus, and mimicry. This imbrication in the cultural codes of news and history has magnified the authority of Smith's work beyond representation toward an always elusive horizon of "Truth," and has constructed her as a privileged voice who may speak for others across race, class, and gender boundaries.

As a solo performer, Smith also invokes discourses of performance theory and virtuosity, both of which have shaped her reception by academic and

popular critics. For academics, she is most often studied for her innovative practices of acting and playwriting. For the popular press, her many talents and wide-ranging flexibility as a performer have led to her construction as celebrity.² These theatrical discussions, however, are inevitably tied up with the claims of authority and historical truth which I wish to examine here.

FIRES IN THE MIRROR; CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN AND OTHER
IDENTITIES

The Crown Heights section of Brooklyn is inhabited by two primary communities, African-American and the Lubavitcher sect of Hasidic Jews. Both of these groups have suffered historic discrimination; they have also experienced inter-group tensions, misunderstanding and alienation in Crown Heights for over twenty years. In August of 1991, racial violence exploded in the wake of the death of Guyanese-American Gavin Cato, aged seven, and the injury of his cousin Angela. A car traveling in the cavalcade of Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, driven by Yosef Lifsh, ran a red light, went out of control, and hit the two children. Three hours later, a group of black youth attacked Yankel Rosenbaum, a twenty-nine year old Hasidic student, visiting from Australia. He died of stab wounds. Lemrik Nelson, Jr., a sixteen year old Trinidadian-American, was arrested. Four nights of serious rioting followed. Throughout 1991 and into 1992 these incidents continued to divide Crown Heights and to command national newspaper headlines. Lemrick Nelson, Jr. was acquitted of second-degree murder charges; Yosef Lifsh was not indicted for the death of Gavin Cato.

Anna Deavere Smith's interviews in Crown Heights were conducted over approximately eight days in the fall of 1991.³ The published version of her script features twenty-nine vignettes constructed primarily from tapes of the interviews. Smith has said that she "went to various people in the mayor's office and asked them for ideas for people to interview. People lead to more people" (46). These interviews were combined with others of well-known intellectuals and artists such as Angela Davis, Ntozake Shange, and George C. Wolfe. Her performances have not always included all twenty-nine, and the order of characters has varied. Smith learned about interviewing and embodying people by experimenting with various popular culture forms: "I watched talk shows, 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."⁴ Although critics often describe Smith's stage transcriptions as "verbatim," stressing her ability to capture the rhythm and verbal style of people (indeed the video includes a statement at the beginning that "these portraits are based on verbatim excerpts from interviews

conducted by Anna Deavere Smith”), a comparison of the video of *Fires in the Mirror* to the published script reveals that she does not quite perform “verbatim” texts. She does vary the occasional word, or engage in some repetition – which, of course, does alter rhythm. I point this out not to detract from Smith’s enormous accomplishment, but rather to underscore the critical rhetoric with which she has been constructed to be a bearer of truth, accuracy, and validity.

THE VIDEO PERFORMANCE

The *Fires in the Mirror* video was produced for American Playhouse, a weekly program shown on public television affiliates, which televises successful theatrical productions from Broadway and the regional theatres. The broadcast is framed by an introductory self-interview in which Smith talks in her own persona before the performance and, at the end, by an advertisement for her play about the Los Angeles riots which occurred in the wake of the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police. This frame is the first important element in any performance analysis, and it operates in several discrete ways to contextualize the performance.

After the American Playhouse logo, to which I will return, Smith appears in an armchair and directly addresses the television audience: “My name is Anna Deavere Smith and I’m an actress and a playwright. Some people call what I do journalism, but I haven’t been trained that way, so I’d never call myself one.” This statement is followed by a male voice over a series of black and white images from Crown Heights, featuring the two cultures, Hasidic and Black, which describes what happened in Crown Heights in August 1991 and what Smith is about to perform. This opening sequence establishes Smith as an entity separate from the characters she will be performing, sets up the discourse of journalism even as she denies it, and also the discourse of documentaries through the black and white photos and the detached male description of the cultures of Crown Heights. The statement about the verbatim excerpts, printed in type on the TV screen, also strengthens this documentary allusion. Thus the opening trailer contextualizes the “play,” making implicit claims to journalistic and documentary truth, and also posits Smith herself as discriminating authority (not a journalist by training and, therefore, reluctant to claim the title, but legitimizing herself by that very disclaimer). Since the rest of Smith’s television performance will show her always already in character, this beginning glimpse of her is very important for this construction. In live performances, watching the actress add a costume piece or change a prop gives the audience a flash of the work, the labor, involved in her acting and inserts her individual subjectivity into the performance as an element of the spectacle. Because the video cuts from one portrait to another, that aspect of Smith the actress is missing, but is compensated by the opening framing device. Pro-

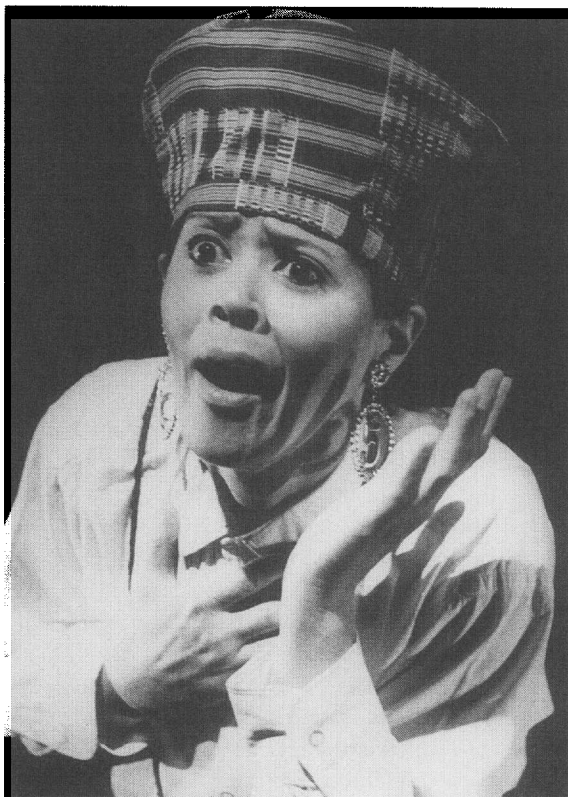


PLATE 4. Ann Deavere Smith in a scene from *Fires in the Mirror*, directed by Christopher Ashley in 1992 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater – Photo by William Gibson, Martha Swope Studios

grams of live performances can also provide additional materials equivalent to this trailer: Berkeley Repertory Theatre's program, for example, included two essays by Smith in which she talks in first person about her theatrical process and about racial and cultural identity in America, in addition to a chronology of events in Crown Heights, and two other supporting essays.

Nevertheless, codes specifically identified with television dominate the video by structuring the authority of the performer as similar to a journalist or documentary film-maker. Smith's role might be likened to that of an "anchor person" who reports the news in a mixture of subjective and objective relationships to "reading the news." Describing the increasing shift away from objectivity in the construction of the news on television, Margaret Morse writes, "Today it seems as though the anchor speaks on his own authority as an overarching presence, as a subject of the news who vouches for its truth."⁵

It is useful to think of Smith as occupying a position analogous to a news anchor at the beginning of *Fires in the Mirror*.

Morse makes another point about the use of space in telecast production which applies to Smith's performance: that the "newscaster's direct gaze and lips talk to a position which is not anchored in material space ... but in a virtual relation in discourse. ... The stare of the newscaster is directed at the position which can be filled by any viewer."⁶ At first, Smith sets up this strong face-to-face situation between herself and her television audience. Later, she often portrays characters speaking directly to the audience, placing the audience as stand-ins for herself in the interview (a kind of "you are there" technique). Sometimes, however, she reminds us of her own status by having the character not look at the TV audience, but relate to an absent Smith – Letty Cottin Pogrebin appears, for example, to be giving the interview to Smith on the phone; she never looks full front to the viewing audience, but relates to Smith on the phone, as her focus. The structure of the televised performance thus exerts a powerful invitation to spectators to relate to Smith in a personal and trusting manner as a knowledgeable expert and, simultaneously, to accept her portraits of people as vivid and truthful revelations of their subjectivities.

The arrangements of the episodes and editing choices also align *Fires in the Mirror* with TV documentaries. Rather than starting her performance with a character from Crown Heights, Smith begins with an "expert" commenting from a distance: Robert Sherman, from the Commission on Human Rights who, by speaking about race and bias in society generally, again evokes a documentary style featuring an authoritative overview. Significantly, the Berkeley performance and the printed script feature Sherman's segment about halfway through the portraits rather than at the beginning. The black and white photos document the historical event and link *Fires in the Mirror* to other TV documentaries. The footage of the actual riots, in color, appear mid-video and seem like newscast footage from the 6:00 news (which they probably were). At the end, the black and white photos reappear, concluding with photos of Yankel Rosenbaum and Gavin Cato. These styles, borrowed from newscast and documentary vocabularies, establish the authoritativeness of the presentation while simultaneously serving a dramaturgic function of breaking up the performance into consumable structural bites suitable for television's typical structuring episodes and all-encompassing flow.

On the other hand, many things about the video serve to heighten the specifically theatrical and, therefore, fictional aspects of *Fires in the Mirror*. At the same time that a claim for objectivity, truth in reporting, and Smith's personal integrity is woven into the performance, other television codes are reducing the performance to an entertainment. The opening logo for American Playhouse, with its familiar red and gold format, places the play within the context of the series of fictions shown on that series slot on a weekly basis. Sophisticated technical effects and accompanying music also mark it as very

“produced” (in contrast to the relatively simple stage mounting which requires almost nothing except costume piece additions, although projections have frequently been used as well). In the trailer, a series of short clips of Smith in her various costumes and characters come very quickly, forcefully staging the element of virtuosity, but also the fiction of theatre. Each individual scene has its own environment and realistic props as well as costume and hair changes for Smith; these excursions into a kind of theatrical realism claim traditional dramatic status for the performance.

The ambiguity of the status of the performance results from the collision of these somewhat opposed signifying systems of television news and theatricalized fiction. While critics cannot decide whether Smith is a mimic, impressionist, or a shaman, what she does seems to “tell it like it is.” She possesses this authority, in part, because the performance itself constructs authority alongside virtuosity. Writing about performance art’s relationship to television culture, Philip Auslander sums up this effect: “The blending of real and fabricated personae and situations that occurs when performance personae assume the same functions as ‘real’ people in the media has much the same disorienting effect as the flowing together of various levels and types of meanings on television, but on a larger scale.”⁷ Smith benefits from this confusion by establishing her ethical and political credentials while simultaneously displaying her acting talents.

This simultaneity may account for Smith’s ability to be accepted “speaking for” others – whites, Jews, men, and so forth. Her objectivity and fairness is noted in almost every review; she earns the right to speak for others because the performance creates the impression of fidelity and fairness to the interviewees and also because Smith does not disappear into the portraits, thus presuming identification with widely different individuals. It probably helps that she is a light-skinned black woman: her light skin makes her specularly mobile, while her own African-American heritage makes legitimate her participation as an insider-among-the-outsiders, although she is not positioned as identical to those interviewed who are members of her own ethnic group, either. Smith is herself acutely aware of the problems of representing race and other differences. In the introduction to the printed text of *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith writes:

“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 the 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*.⁸

I have quoted Smith at length because I think this passage characterizes Smith's performance technique as a bridge that makes the unlikely seem connected. She ghosts her portraits with her own persona, signifying sympathy, fairness, and also her own subject position as a specific black woman with specific identity markers (class, education, style, and so forth) of her own. She is able to "get away with" criticizing others – even Hasidic Jews – because she also criticizes members of her own groups. I would argue that her portrayal of Minister Conrad Mohammed, for example, undercuts his sincerity by foregrounding his own "performance." The gestures of tugging at his cuff links, of tapping his packet of sugar rhythmically as he speaks, of the slightly stressed precise cadences of his speech all serve to set up a distance between Smith and her character. This, in turn, allows us to accept her portrayal of Roslyn Malamud even though it has marks of satire or stereotype in its send-up of class privilege. Smith specifies in the written text what is captured on the screen: an affluent, well-equipped kitchen; a woman who is carefully put together in terms of hair and nails, dressed in a casual top adorned by sequins. While this portrait can seem satirical and rather sharp, it can be construed as allowable – within just limits – because Smith has demonstrated willingness to criticize her own culture as well.

This kind of reasoning, however, goes only so far. If we agree with Smith that people are not completely trapped by their differences, then this *quid pro quo* is not enough. It is the bridging of difference which must be enacted, displayed, performed in order to make visible the possibility of replicating it in ordinary life. Smith needs the authority of the discourses of news and documentary combined with the liberal humanist view of the artist's empathetic capacities in order to produce this bridging. Describing her performative technique, Charles and James Lyons write, "While the performance is verbally polyphonic, it is acoustically and materially unified in the presence of Anna Deavere Smith whose voice assumes the characters of the other figures but retains her own unmistakable individuality and, blends, curiously the idiosyncrasies of her own voice and speech with that of the person interviewed."⁹ Smith needs to have it both ways in order to produce this effect of oscillating between identification and difference; she needs to be identified as both journalist and artist. In a sense, Smith dares to speak for the Hasidim as well as for her own ethnic group *not* because she is objective, fair minded, and even-handed, but because she demonstrates the process of bridging difference, seeking information and understanding, and finessing questions of identity. The relationship between interviewer and speaker is mobile – it changes – and since the audience is positioned in the direct address sequences to "be" Smith, they are positioned to experience the activity of bridging, working with difference. This effect is the most radical element of Smith's work – it engages the spectator in radical political activity to the extent that the spectator grapples with this epistemological process.

For the video viewer, this experience may not be as powerful as for the live performance spectator who comes together in temporary community with other spectators to experience this activity, but in a way the video is strangely suitable to make an intervention into mass culture. Philip Auslander, writing about the relationship of performance art and television culture, comments: "The mass media create collectives in the form of audiences, but the relation of each member of these collectives to each other is a relation of absence rather than presence, despite their common participation in the collective. ... Just as the relationships among the individuals who make up the media audience will always be defined by separation, so the relation of any individual to the medium itself is one of alterity, regardless of whether or not she or he agrees with the message being conveyed."¹⁰

Since the fundamental structural feature of Smith's work is the relationship of alterity under negotiation, television offers a fitting site for an exploration of this experience. This way of analyzing *Fires in the Mirror* avoids essentializing identity, while retaining an emphasis on cultural and racial differences. Or, to quote Angela Davis's comments to Smith, "I feel very anchored in ... my various communities, but I think that...the rope attached to that anchor should be long enough to allow us to move into other communities to understand and learn. I've been thinking a lot about the need to make more intimate these connections and associations and to really take on the responsibility of learning."¹¹ This idea is dramatized, performed, modeled, and elicited in *Fires in the Mirror*.

NOTES

- 1 Reviews of both *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* often mark the local geography involved. See, for example, Melanie Kirkpatrick's closing paragraph joining the performance to her location: "As I left the theatre and ventured out in the city ...," *Wall Street Journal*, 27 May 1992; see also Clive Barnes who personalizes his own experience of 19 August 1991 (at the time of the riots he was in Europe where the Gorbachev coup was the front page story): "When I returned, their significance [events in Crown Heights] caught at my lungs like a whiff of gunpowder," *New York Post*, 13 May 1992.
- 2 For a discussion of the reception of *Twilight L.A., 1992* and its relationship to Smith's celebrity, see my "Tracking Twilight: The Politics of Location," *Theatre Forum* 6 (Winter/Spring 1995).
- 3 Carol Martin, "Anna Deavere Smith The Word Becomes You," (Interview) *The Drama Review* 37:4 (Winter 1993), 46, 48.
- 4 Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (New York, 1993), xxix.
- 5 Margaret Morse, "The Television News Personality and Credibility: Reflections on the News in Transition," in *Studies in Entertainment; Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed., Tania Modleski (Bloomington IN, 1986), 58.

- 6 Ibid., 62.
- 7 Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance; Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor, 1992), 78.
- 8 Smith, xxviii–xxix. See note 4.
- 9 Charles R. and James C. Lyons, “Anna Deavere Smith: Perspectives on her Performance within the Context of Critical Theory,” unpublished manuscript. Published version appears in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 9 (1994), 6.
- 10 Auslander, 79. See note 7.
- 11 Smith, 32. See note 4.